

# 3 Towards a framework for food systems transformation

Deep structural changes will be required in societal attitudes, economic incentives, power relations and political processes if food systems are to be transformed. To respond effectively to the challenges of bringing about a food systems transformation, donors and their partners will need to think more deeply about how change can be facilitated and catalysed (in other words, articulate their theory of change). Intervening to bring about positive change in complex adaptive systems, which is what food systems are, is not a linear or technical process.

Drawing on the many different topics, actions, levers and priorities raised by the FSS, this section offers a framework (FIGURE 4) for thinking about change, structured around the **why, what and how of food systems transformation**. To date, much of the dialogue, debate and analysis around food systems has been on why and what changes are needed in food systems. The focus now needs to shift towards **how such changes can be achieved**.

The FSS identified four levers of change, defined as an area of work that has the potential to deliver wide-ranging positive change beyond its immediate focus. These are gender, human rights, finance and innovation. These elements are acknowledged as being critical and are embedded across the **what** and the **how of this framework**. Among these levers, gender is particularly important to make explicit in terms of how food systems are assessed and in changes needed to improve gender equality. Women and girls are often more severely affected by the failings of food systems, while at the same time, improving their economic empowerment and decision-making in food systems can have profound benefits for families, communities and society at large.

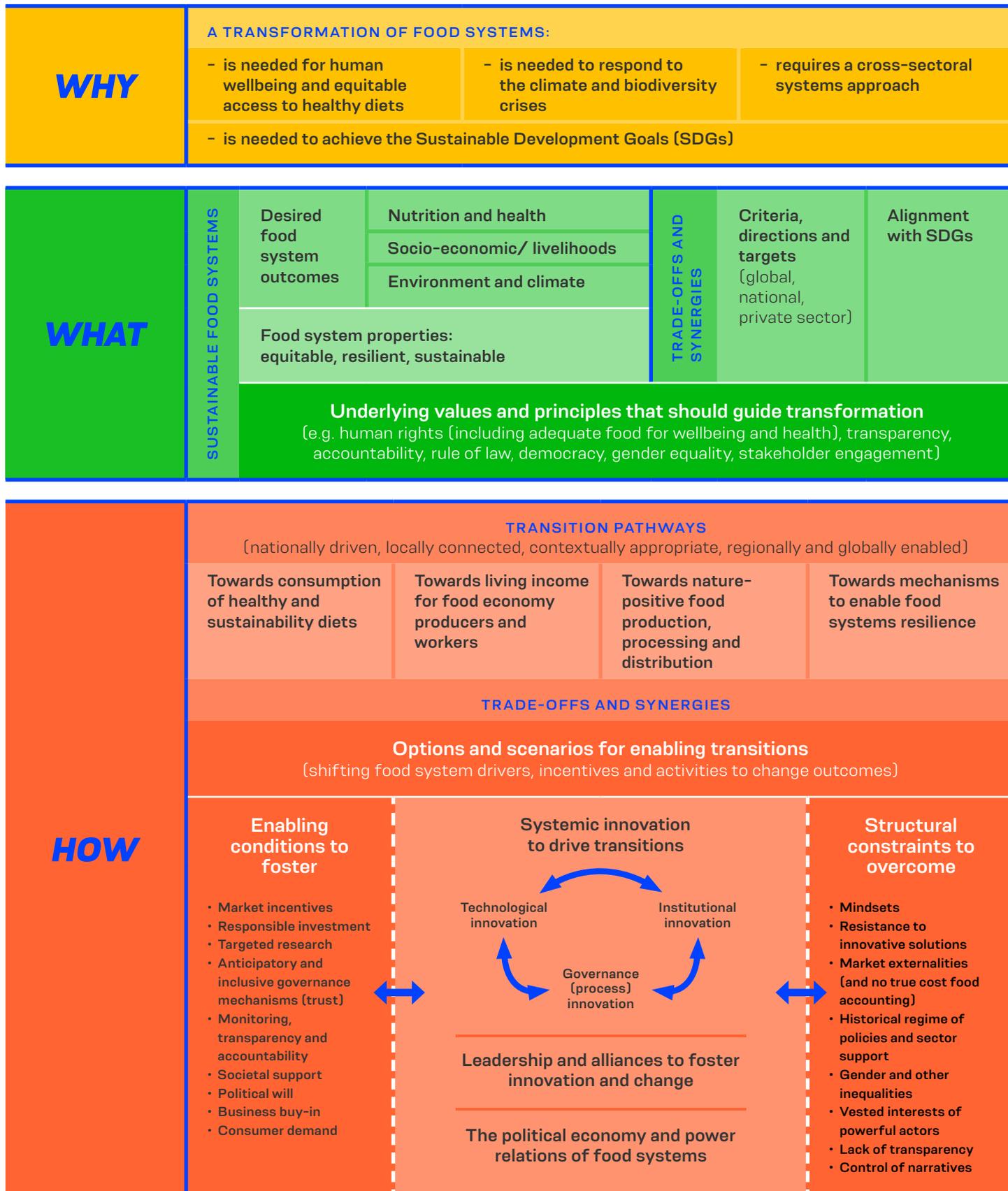
This framework is not intended to be a “theory of change” in itself. Rather, it offers an organized overview of the different aspects of food systems transformation

## FOCUS ON LEVERING AND CATALYSING CHANGE

“ Donors should not focus on specific outcome areas. They should focus on the levers and the capabilities for using the levers. The outcome areas almost would take care of themselves, or you’ll get the scientists to come in and advise. But that’s never what the problem is. The problem is the levers. And then the governance to make sure that there’s transparency on the levers and then the skill to deal with the explicit trade-offs that are necessary if governance is going to be done in a fair way.”

*FSS organizer*

FIGURE 4  
Framework for food systems transformation



Source: Adapted from draft of "Framework for Food Systems Transformation", Jim Woodhill, Nov 2021.

that have been raised by the dialogues and analysis associated with the FSS. An important role for donors can be to support the thinking and analysis needed at national and local levels, within sectors or across the public-private split, to support the “theory of change thinking” needed to develop technically and politically feasible transformation pathways. This requires a strong policy, society, business and science interface and engagement that has been promoted by the FSS.

### 3.1 The why of food systems transformation

Why food systems transformation is needed has become widely analysed, clear to most stakeholder groups, and consistently articulated by political leaders. The current problems and longer-term impacts and risks of how food is currently consumed and produced is well evidenced in terms of health, the environment, climate and equitable economic development. The central role of food systems in achieving the SDGs, and in particular SDG 1 – no poverty – and SDG 2 – zero hunger – is clear. The food “systems” framing of the Summit has underscored the need for a cross-sectoral and systems approach to bring about the needed change.



**WHY**

### 3.2 The what of food systems transformation

The desired **outcomes** from food systems have also been relatively well articulated in terms of ensuring food security and optimal nutrition for all while meeting socio-economic goals (reduced poverty and inequalities) and enabling humanity’s food needs to be met within planetary environmental and climate boundaries.

Overall, food systems are recognized as needing to function with the properties of being **resilient** to **shocks**, **sustainable** over the long term and **equitable** in terms of the costs and benefits to different groups in society.

Across these food system outcomes and properties, there are inevitable **trade-offs** and **synergies**, which bring with them the potential for both conflict and collaboration between different interest groups. While the broad directions for desired food system outcomes and properties are relatively well established, the nature and extent of these synergies and trade-offs are less well understood. Much more work is also needed to establish specific **criteria**, **directions for change** and **targets** for food system outcomes, which will be necessary to guide transformation at national or local levels, within sectors or across business operations. There is also a need to align criteria and targets used to inform food systems transformation with the SDGs.

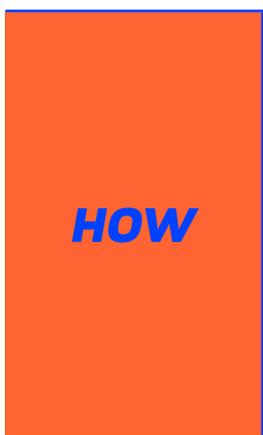


**WHAT**

The FSS and the work of the CFS – in particular its recently adopted Voluntary Guidelines of Food Systems and Nutrition – have identified **underlying values and principles** that should guide the processes and outcomes of food systems transformation. These include human rights (which includes “the right to a standard of living adequate for health and wellbeing...including adequate food”<sup>2</sup>), sustainability, resilience, transparency, accountability, adherence to the rule of law, stakeholder engagement, gender equality and inclusivity, including of indigenous groups, women, youth and family farmers.

In alignment with the SDGs, food systems that meet desired outcomes and properties, and function in adherence with underlying values and principles, can be considered **sustainable food systems**, an overall encompassing term.

### 3.3 The how of food systems transformation



The transformation of food systems will require a focus on transition pathways, largely driven at the national level but connected with more local processes and enabled by larger-scale system shifts at regional and global scales. Four main **transitions** can be identified from the FSS outcomes: a **consumption shift** to sustainable and healthy diets; **equitable economic opportunity** for food economy producers and workers, including the ability to afford healthy diets; highly **climate-resilient and low-carbon food production**, processing and distribution; and implementation of mechanisms to ensure food systems **resilience**.

Desired food system outcomes can potentially be achieved through multiple different pathways and scenarios with numerous different trade-offs and synergies. For example, consumption shifts could be influenced by food prices and taxes, public education, product labelling or shifts in food marketing practices. Resource efficiency could be achieved by a number of measures, including consuming (at a global level) less animal protein, adopting agroecological and other innovative approaches, energy efficiency, water

management, reducing waste, or new technologies that reduce methane emissions from cattle farming. Equity for those working in the sector could be improved through increased food prices, implementation of labour rights and land tenure rights, various forms of support mechanisms or social protection, improving overall rural economic development or creating more opportunities outside the food sector.

Developing and assessing the **options and scenarios** to enable transitions is where a vast amount of investment and work is needed if food systems are to be sustainably transformed. The FSS process identified a significant number of “game-changing solutions” – ideas that could contribute to developing viable transition pathways but which may need to be further assessed or refined. Further assessment and work will be needed to refine, prioritize and build on

#### SUPPORTING ACTIONS AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

“ The Summit unleashed lots of energy, opened lots of doors and has made the ground fertile. Now donors need to support action at the local level with a pivot to country pathways to tackle the challenges.”

*FSS contributor*

<sup>2</sup> United Nations General Assembly (1948), Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Paragraph 25.

this contribution from the Summit. Scenarios can help identify potential trade-offs and co-benefits of those solutions across intended food system outcomes. The principles of equity and inclusion are especially important to consider when analysing options and trade-offs. For example, gender equality is not guaranteed to improve with increased income from food systems activities, and attention must be paid to gender-transformative and inclusive value chain development.

Forms of **systemic innovation** that connect technological, institutional/social and political/governance (process) innovation will be required to develop viable transition pathways. Insights from systems theory and transition theory have much to offer in terms of how to guide and broker change in complex (food) systems. In particular, encouraging, supporting, linking and scaling up “niche” innovations that respond to new needs, challenges and opportunities is vital. This requires adaptation to local contexts and can be supported by territorial approaches to development. Over time, such innovations can help to disrupt existing and unsustainable food systems “regimes” (attitudes, policies, power relations, market relations) and enable more sustainable alternatives to become embedded.

The FSS has helped to identify numerous factors that can be considered **enabling conditions** or **structural constraints** for food systems transformation. Systems change involves “nudging” systems in desirable directions by working to amplify enabling conditions and dampening structural constraints. This requires attention to the underlying political economy. Transformation can be impeded or enhanced depending on the constellation of power relations across societies and food systems. This is particularly salient where influential actors are prepared to defend vested interests at the cost of needed changes to food systems. Mapping and understanding existing interests, incentives and power relations is key to tackling structural constraints and creating enabling conditions for change. Strategic alliances and political leadership are needed to help shift understandings, narratives and power dynamics.

### 3.4 Implications for donors

For donors to engage and contribute effectively to transforming food systems, adopting a systemic approach to their programming will be critical. This means supporting partners to work from a whole-system perspective and overcome traditional disciplinary and sectoral barriers and silos. It also means paying more attention to the processes of how systems change can be inspired, brokered and led across the spheres of government, civil society and business. This requires investing in:

- New institutional arrangements to support integrated cross-sector planning and policy
- Processes of systems analysis, and informed stakeholder engagement, dialogue and collective problem-solving
- Enhancing the capacity of stakeholders, and in particular government ministry and agency staff to broker systems approaches to change.

Food systems, and the wider social, economic, political and natural conditions within which they are nested, are complex adaptive systems. Such systems are self-organizing but also behave in highly complex, unpredictable and at times chaotic ways, with tipping points which, once crossed, can shift the dynamics and stability of an entire system. Linear, highly pre-planned, narrowly target-driven and hierarchically controlled approaches to policy and programming do not align well with the challenges of effecting change in such complex adaptive systems.

To be effective in transforming food systems and tackling the underlying structural constraints that hinder change, donor-supported programmes and projects will need to be designed, managed and evaluated with much more attention to the dynamics of complex adaptive systems. This implies developing processes and capacities within donor agencies and partners to:

- Develop a deeper understanding of the intervention context from a systems perspective through dialogue with partner governments and other key stakeholders
- Create shared theories of change (intervention strategies/plans) that are flexible, to adapt to changing circumstances, and that align with the dynamics of how complex systems behave
- Engage in rapid experimentation to test what does and does not work, responding quickly to lessons and accepting that learning from failure is key to systems change
- Enhance territorial approaches which tailor investments and interventions to the context and needs of specific geographic localities and their peoples
- Strengthen foresight and scenario processes to better understand the longer-term implications of current trends and future uncertainties for different stakeholder interests
- Manage interventions, projects and programmes in more learning-oriented and adaptive ways, being optimally responsive to successes, failures and unexpected changes in circumstances.

In summary, the overall implication for donors is a need to pay as much attention to the processes of change they are supporting as to the specific topics of concern, be it improved nutrition, improving incomes for small-scale agriculture or women's empowerment.

