

Food systems Community of Practice meeting “Research meets practice”

*“Everyone is interested in sustainable food systems,
but effort is needed to make this concrete and tangible”*



Tuesday June 18, 2019, 9:30-11:30h
New Babylon Meeting Center, The Hague



Introduction

Food Systems Approaches continue to be a key area of interest for Dutch knowledge institutions, Ministries and other stakeholders, as is reflected in the high number of events and publications referring to food systems or to food systems transitions. The recent policy letter “[Op weg naar een wereld zonder honger in 2030: de Nederlandse inzet](#)”, as well as the [EAT-Lancet report](#) are among the most relevant new papers.

To explore how this translates into practice this meeting brought together a group of about 25 professionals from research, policy and practice to discuss and exchange on the basis of practical experiences with applying Food Systems Approaches for practice and policy.

The meeting built on the results of earlier activities, including: The session “[A Food Systems Approach to Food and Nutrition Security: From theory to practice](#)” at the Wageningen UR SDG conference; the conference “[Monitoring and Evaluation for Inclusive and Sustainable Food Systems](#)”; and [several other meetings in 2018](#).

Using three particular cases as entry point, the following questions were leading in the exchanges:

- How have Food Systems Approaches been applied in practice so far?
- What can a Food Systems Approaches add to the existing approaches and models of practitioners?
- What are lessons learnt in applying Food Systems Approaches for decision-making?

Case 1 - “Zero Food Waste Lab”

Testing a food systems intervention to address food waste.

By Frederike Praasterink, Lector Future Food Systems, HAS University of Applied Sciences.

HAS University of Applied Sciences has piloted the Food Systems Approach in a masterclass, with students from different disciplines and together with the Foundation “[United Against Food Waste](#)”. The objective was to test the Food Systems Approach in order to develop an intervention strategy based on a system analysis. Several steps were followed to develop insights in the food system. First, describing the food system on basis of a number of food system frameworks and identifying the most urgent issues related to food waste. Secondly, further understanding why a certain symptom occurs: exploring underlying patterns, structures and mental models that cause food waste to happen again and again, and do causal-loop mappings. Third, to identify possible interventions and assessing impact on both food waste and on the system.

It appeared very important to understand the dynamics of the system, including positive and negative feedback loops. This provided a basis to understand the feasibility, effectiveness and sustainability of possible interventions and of related business models. Looking at the mental models, which unravel the deeper norms that influence system outcomes, appeared to be of key relevance. Various student groups, exploring the food system with different assignments, identified similar paradigms that may be a root cause for the unsustainability of the system. Some of those were further studied, and clustered, leading to for example paradigms such as productionism; profit maximalization; a disconnect between people, food and nature. This was followed by a brainstorm how these could be changed, including about how to develop new narratives. Several students were so impressed by the findings that they decided to change their own food consumption behavior immediately. They also worked on creative public awareness products, e.g. memes as output of the project.

Insights from this work are that interventions are only effective if these are part of a set of interventions, that feedback loops can be tricky, and that involving all stakeholders is key. In current practice, most agrofood interventions tackle the symptoms, not the underlying structure. Therefore, looking at and intervening in mental models is expected to be more transformative than current practice. This is about paradigm shifts!

Discussion

- Participants appreciated the practical application of the FSA through this model and found it inspirational, and they saw opportunities for applying it in different countries. Especially the participatory and holistic approach appealed. They encouraged HAS/Frederike to continue with this important work and advised on a number of people and organizations to discuss these findings with.

- HAS clarified that they will further validate their FSA through applying it on other cases; this is assumed to be a step towards a broader food system analysis and interventions. And in future scaling the approach to an international change agenda may be possible.
- The discussion centered around what is necessary to turn the analysis and explorative work into action, both on the short term and on the long term. Participants agreed leadership for change is necessary, and working with the right alliances that can contribute bringing various levels and issues together. Also, some discussion took place around whether certain underlying paradigms are typically Dutch, and whether these would be different for e.g. LMICs.
- A question that came up is how the principle of circular agriculture is related to the Food Systems Approach, and whether the latter could be a guiding approach for the former. Another question is how to change mental models.
- In conclusion: the systems approach is a means, not an end. It is a tool for several transition pathways.

Read further

- [Masterclass “Zero food waste lab” test food system intervention strategy on food waste](#) - HAS University of Applied Sciences.

Background reading

- [System Thinking Resources](#) – The Donella Meadows Project, Academy for Systems Change.

Case 2 - “Sustainable Diets 4 All”

Applying a Food Systems Approach in an advocacy programme to improve access of low-income communities to sustainable, diverse and nutritious food.

By Nout van der Vaart, Advocacy Officer Sustainable Food, Hivos.

Hivos, together with partner IIED and partners in focal countries Bolivia, Indonesia, Uganda, Kenya and Zambia, implements a five year programme (2016-2020) taking a Food Systems Approach to policy making around food and agriculture. It aims to change policies to deliver better food systems outcomes for the health and diets of low-income consumers. It improves food utilization by advocating for better diets and improves sustainability by promoting the sustainable production of food through agro-ecological methods. In this way it increases the availability of local crops and varieties while preserving local food cultural heritage. Three core strategies are employed to achieve this: the organization of ‘food change labs’, the generation of citizen evidence, and lobby & advocacy activities. The main reason why Hivos started using a Food Systems Approach is because it wanted to look beyond the linear model of increasing productivity per hectare and instead address all activities and elements that contribute to food systems outcomes.

Because of the different contexts and actors addressed and included the Food Systems Approach taken is not very stringent, it forms the narrative within which activities are framed and take place. The primary method in which this is applied is in the food change labs where actors from local food systems jointly map the system and then start addressing identified issues. In Zambia 80 actors including civil society, informal food vendor groups, policymakers, politicians, business groups and others held meetings and set up working groups related to amongst others youth inclusion and the diversification of food production. In Uganda, after the food system was mapped, citizens started producing food diaries to involve them in the production of data and formulation of policy recommendations. In Colombia a food policy council was set up. In Zambia this process for instance led to the legalization of stigmatized informal street vendors which played a crucial role in providing food to commuters.

Discussion

- For Hivos, the added value of using a Food Systems Approach lies for an important part in the way it changes the narrative. The organization understood that 3000 calories per day are available currently to feed all, yet undernutrition and obesity are still widespread. Beyond a focus on production, a focus on health, nutrition, and environmental outcomes is thus needed. However this is challenging on the operational level. A need exists to make it effective. Health ministries should be looking at agriculture and food policies to improve health outcomes for instance. Local authorities understand the idea of this

holistic approach but need concrete examples on what needs to be changed where. Trade-offs have become clearer, but it is difficult to address these.

- Hivos found that local people responded positively to participating in the food system mapping. Especially when disempowered people were invited to participate in multi-stakeholder meetings. However working groups created as part of the food change labs were in need of additional funding to ensure continuity, because at least one actor needs to coordinate the process. With only volunteers the process fizzles out. In La Paz, Colombia, this was done successfully with the food policy council. In this way a Food Systems Approach facilitates the inclusion of local and new voices, rather than just implementing a value chain programme.
- Applying a Food Systems Approach was deemed a promising way to reach scale with this programme, though it is early days currently. There is a promising trend, also on the international level with UN Environment, linked to the international lobby & advocacy aspects of the programme. A change in narrative can be seen where the paradigm is shifting from linear to circular models.
- The risk of applying a Food Systems Approach however is that it can become too broad. If it is taken to be all-encompassing it risks becoming shallow, where no real change can be made with the limited resources available to such a programme. Focus is needed to achieve results, and vagueness or broadness also means a process is susceptible to co-optation by various different interests. Everyone is interested in sustainable food systems, but effort is needed to make this concrete and tangible. However focusing on too small areas risks falling back into current silo's, especially when working with policymakers.
- A term coined by PBL was deemed useful: food system conscious policy. This means that it is not necessary to understand an entire system before acting, but that when you take action awareness is needed of the system and that awareness must be included in intervention design. As systems are complex it is necessary to monitor feedback loops, look at consequences of actions. Improving feedback loops in systems is part of a systems approach, therefore improved monitoring is needed for programmes applying systems approaches. This could work especially when local government takes up such monitoring. A framework is needed that elaborates what a sustainable food system is and how you can get there.

Read further

- [Sustainable diets for all](#) – Hivos.
- [Sustainable Diets for All, Reframing the Food System Debate](#) – Hivos and the International Institute for Environment and Development.

Case 3 - Food Systems Decision-Support Tool

Feedback mechanisms, archetypes and leverage points for intervention.

By Just Dengerink, impact analyst, Wageningen Economic Research, and Helena Posthumus, senior advisor KIT.

WEcR and KIT have developed a food systems decision-support tool that applies food systems thinking to policy. This tool was used to support the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in shaping strategies for food and nutrition security programming in [Ethiopia](#), [the Sahel](#) and [Nigeria](#). The tool builds on the food systems framework developed by [Van Berkum et al.](#), taking a more dynamic approach that looks at systems dynamics (feedback loops, trade-offs, synergies) and aims to identify leverage points that policymakers can use to facilitate systems transformation. The tool takes a seven-step approach to identify trends, underlying systems structures and patterns to map what shapes a system and how policymakers and other stakeholders can achieve maximum effect with the limited resources available to them. After an initial mapping of causal processes in the system [archetypes of systems behaviour](#) (e.g. tragedy of the commons) are used for simplification and identification of leverage points. An analysis of the sphere of influence of an actor is then defined after which a programming strategy can be developed.

After piloting this tool a number of lessons were identified from this early application, which can be described as a relatively 'quick and dirty' process. It was challenging to set boundaries during the exercise as in theory these are very extensive. The causal mapping of system dynamics is done in discussions with interviewed stakeholders, though this leads to subjectivity: who you engage with also determines what problems are identified and subsequent solutions developed. Identifying leverage points is key to effectively applying this

systems approach, to find and address bottlenecks that prevent achievement of desired intervention outcomes. This also sets boundaries for possible actions. These are then further narrowed down by examining the position of an embassy in the field, existing partnerships, who you can work with. In this way concrete recommendations can be provided. However, power dynamics and inclusion (of youth, gender dynamics, etc.) require more attention in this approach. Stakeholder and political economy analysis is needed which requires more time. Moreover, due to production paradigms present a focus on consumption and food and nutrition security is difficult to maintain during the analysis.

Discussion

- The added value of this tool was demonstrated by the specific tips it generated to shift resources slightly to increase impact. Discussing the value of this process over directly asking policymakers at embassy level for intervention priorities participants further concluded that writing down notions that might already be known to be an issue and then framing this in a certain context is also part of its added value, it helps understanding the challenge more clearly. For example the complex challenges of Nigeria, where the dependence on imported food hinders agrofood sector transformation.
- There are different ways in which stakeholder involvement can be organized to support this. First starting with leverage points, then going to actors for instance. Or starting with multi-stakeholder partnerships, or focusing on power with a political economy analysis. Following this (technocratic) process to help see the embassy what their sphere of influence is, is what justifies this exercise.
- More inclusion of local stakeholders in the process could be an interesting way to expand on the current pilots. This relates to the scale at which the tool would be used. Is it meant to describe the big picture nationally or give more granular local level insights? At a lower level stakeholders can be involved more directly. Likewise a perspective from local policy processes or research can be taken to see how ongoing processes can be shifted. Adapting it for use with local policymakers could be useful. However when taking this approach, identifying systems archetypes, at the local level you enter the political arena and engage in a wider policy dialogue. The process has the potential to shift the narrative in multi-stakeholder dialogue, but care should be taken to see if you can manage the political economy informed dialogue.
- Reflecting on how the process for this tool could be changed or added to participants discussed that it would be interesting to see how it can elaborate on monitoring of feedback loops to facilitate systems change. How do you assess the systems changes that an intervention brings, what indicators, what framework can be used? Including a process for such monitoring can help analyse how actors interact with feedback loops, which so far has not been part of the analyses. Interaction between formal and informal processes are an interesting example of where this can be useful, for example in the dairy value chain, or in vegetables sector. Exploring whether changing the system would really be beneficial here or if systems should rather be left as they are. Identify what you are actually able to change.
- Defining the boundaries of a food systems analysis should be the first step in the process. In this case the starting point was the policy objectives of embassies and the intervention level was national. But this can also be a certain district of particular target group. Providing insight into problems and solutions requires a practical approach to setting these boundaries.

Read further

- [A decision-support tool for the design of food & nutrition security programming](#) – Wageningen UR and KIT Royal Tropical Institute.
- [Food system decision support tool: feedback mechanisms, archetypes and leverage points for intervention](#) – Wageningen UR and KIT Royal Tropical Institute.

Plenary discussion and conclusions

Based on the conversations in the three groups, the following elements were identified about the added value of the Food Systems Approach:

- It helps understanding a range of factors influencing progress on food and nutrition security targets and the relations between those, beyond the factors that some actors would normally have taken into consideration.
- It helps formulating the narrative of how a specific programme fits into the bigger food systems picture

- It provides a basis for programming, and provides opportunities to work on multiple factors, exploring underlying causes of symptoms and addressing those. This includes the various mental models / paradigms which are at the basis of certain behavior patterns.
- It helps to justify and strengthen multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary collaboration.
- There are many occasions where the food systems frame could be used to put a particular action or conversation into perspective (e.g. using the food systems frame for the World Food Day event).

A number of questions still remain:

- What's new in the FSA, as compared to other approaches?
- What are the boundaries of a food system?
- How to involve stakeholders in the food systems' analysis, for example local stakeholders; and if a certain mechanism or council is created, how to ensure the right (a/o financial) conditions are in place?
- How to make it work in local contexts?
- How to make it operational for policy makers at various levels?
- Dealing with trade-offs, a/o how to address these at the local level?
- How to assess which intervention is most effective (M&E)?
- Impact at scale is a challenge.
- Feasibility/accessibility (long term – short term)?

These questions could be the agenda for further knowledge activities and exchanges.

Several ideas were shared for further work & exchanges:

- Try tools in different contexts & with different actors.
- Try tool developed by HAS for different specific food systems challenges.
- Clarify what it means: FSA at the organization level.
- Improve on the method used, e.g. on the various steps.
- Develop a framework that elaborates what a sustainable food system is and how you can get there.

The meeting concluded with a call to all participants to keep sharing their experiences and insights in using the Food Systems Approach; and to take the initiative to call this community of practice together if they have particular ideas. Food & Business Knowledge Platform is available to facilitate this joint knowledge process and the knowledge sharing with the broader food and nutrition security community.

Participants list

Name	Organization
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