

FOOD SYSTEMS

Promoting equitable, sustainable, and resilient food systems



Abstract

The world is producing more food than ever. However, the current global food system is failing to provide healthy, sustainable, and affordable choices for everyone, contributing to food insecurity, obesity and related diseases, and environmental problems, and violating the right to adequate food and nutrition. Welthungerhilfe's vision is a world in which everyone has the chance and the right to lead a self-determined life in dignity and justice, free from hunger and poverty. To achieve this, governments must transform current food systems in the public interest, so that they connect the well-being of the people to the well-being of our planet. This transition must be centered on the fulfillment of the human right to food and on the understanding that human and planetary health are interdependent

Food systems encompass the various activities, people, and places that relate to the production, processing, distribution, preparation, and consumption of food, as well as to the output of these activities, including socioeconomic and environmental outcomes. Food systems are influenced by a variety of drivers: demographic development such as population growth and urbanization; biophysical and environmental drivers like the loss of biodiversity, climate change, and soil degradation; technological development, including new food processing methods; economic drivers such as trade patterns; political drivers like means of political participation, governance, wars, and conflicts; and socio-cultural drivers, including education, health, social norms, and values.

Sustainable food systems have a long-term potential to provide food security and nutrition in a way that does not compromise the economic, social, and environmental bases for future generations. But current food systems are far from being sustainable. This starts with the very basis of food systems – the millions of smallholder farmers who have neither secured access to land nor to capital for seeds, fertilizers, machinery, or irrigation systems (cf. Section Agriculture). Moreover, they cannot access healthy

diets, which contributes to rising levels of malnutrition with all its negative consequences (cf. Section Nutrition), and socio-economic and gender inequalities that are preventing access to healthy nutrition (cf. Section Gender). Food insecure and other marginalized groups are poorly represented in policy decision-making and food governance bodies at the local, national, and international level, resulting in policies that are often ignoring their needs.

Locally and regionally anchored food systems which place a focus on the needs of both local small-scale producers and poor consumers can have advantages. Here, local markets and processing play a crucial role, for they not only contribute to adding value to the food produced by local communities, but they also create agricultural and non-agricultural job opportunities for youth in rural areas (cf. Section Rural Economy).

Fair prices for producers and at least living wages that provide a decent life for food systems workers are needed. Food prices must also reflect the social and environmental costs of food production, distribution, retailing and consumption, and should, on the other hand, not deter poor people from opting for healthy food.

Smallholder farmers need access to land, water, and seeds, information, agricultural inputs, financing, extension services, digital services, transport, and markets in order to have the possibility to make best choices for their production, diversification, and to manage sustainably in their contexts (cf. Section Agriculture). The participation of women and girls in policy decision-making processes must be ensured, as must their rights in terms of land tenure and access to knowledge, inputs, financing, dignified work, natural resources, and markets (cf. Section Gender). Only this does justice to the important role they play in food systems, particularly in rural settings.

Unfortunately, the current global food system is undermining its own resource base – through unsustainable agricultural practices, conversion of natural ecosystems to croplands and pastures, the loss of species diversity and genetic diversity, overfishing, chemical pollution, and the emission of greenhouse gases. Population growth, urbanization, and shifts

in diets increase pressure on already scarce and degraded natural resources. Therefore, sustainable site-specific farming strategies (integrated farming systems, agroecology, climate-smart agriculture, regenerative agriculture, landscape approaches) with attention to appropriate plant nutrition, soil management, and sustainable animal production should be promoted, as they have positive impacts on biodiversity and ecosystems and are adapted to the sociocultural context. They should be supported by research and education also addressing food processing and the prevention of food loss and waste. Public investments such as agricultural subsidies ought to be reoriented in a manner enabling them to promote diversified, sustainable agricultural systems which mitigate climate change and regenerate and conserve the natural resource base. Circular food economies which are based on the continuous reuse of materials and products and the elimination of waste are the means of choice. The food systems of smallholders also can and must serve the large and growing urban populations. Urban and peri-urban food systems need to be part of the overall food system transformations and innovations.

Many food systems are not resilient – they lack preventive measures to reduce the impact of external shocks on food and nutrition security and livelihoods. Such shocks include violent conflicts, extreme weather events like drought or floods often exacerbated by climate change (cf. Section Climate change), market fluctuations and disruptions, and pandemics. Poor people in the Global South are hit hardest, with small-scale farmers and pastoralists especially at great risk (cf. Section Pastoralism). They should be supported in climate resilience and adaptation.

Changing environmental conditions and competition for key resources such as land and water have played a significant role in provoking violence and armed conflicts, exacerbating the vicious circle of hunger and poverty. These conflicts impair food security, and when protracted often undermine the resilience of even well-functioning food systems. People forced to leave their homes cannot cultivate their fields, and often lose all their possessions. Likewise, displacement can bring food insecurity to

host populations, particularly if humanitarian assistance is lacking or inadequate. In many contexts, conflict and food insecurity are both causes and consequences of food systems' fragility. Efforts and support for the prevention and resolution of violent conflicts are therefore important and have to be backed by humanitarian assistance to improve the long-term food security and resilience of vulnerable communities. Clarity of land use rights of farmers and pastoralists are a key aspect of conflict prevention.

Current (food) governance mechanisms tend to be siloed, often with limited participation, transparency and accountability in decision-making processes. Policy coherence and coordination is lacking at national and international levels, and global food governance is skewed against low-income countries. In many countries, basic public services such as health and social security are still not recognized as legal entitlements on which citizens could hold their governments accountable (cf. Section Social Security). Funding of food and nutrition programs by governments is frequently inadequate, while corruption often adversely affects planning and implementation of supporting programs. Land-grabbing is rampant particularly where governance regarding land rights is weak (cf. Section Land).

Governments and continental unions such as the European and the African Union have the prime responsibility of putting policies and legal frameworks in place to lead the transformation towards equitable, sustainable, and resilient food systems. Other actors, for instance donors, the private sector academia and civil society, should support processes according to their respective roles. This transition must be centered on the fulfillment of the human right to food and on the understanding that human and planetary health are interdependent. Therefore, governments need to respect, protect, and fulfill the obligations of the existing human rights frameworks and international standards (such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals, ILO Conventions and others) as well as actively promoting new ones when needed. Governments must ensure policy coherence between the agriculture, trade, health, development, environmental, and climate policies.

Welthungerhilfe's involvement in promoting sustainable food systems:

- Transforming food systems to be more equitable and inclusive, sustainable, and resilient is at the core of Welthungerhilfe's current strategy. Welthungerhilfe works to support this transformation from the local up to the global level, while tailoring its interventions to different contexts, and basing them on human rights.
- Working on Food Systems Welthungerhilfe builds on its long-term engagement and expertise in agriculture and nutrition as well as WASH, natural resource management, economic development, and civil society empowerment to support the transformation pathways to equitable, sustainable, and resilient food systems.
- We are doing so both by implementing pilot initiatives that take up a food systems approach and by advocating for the creation of necessary framework conditions, e.g. coherent national policies, which require strategic alliances with other civil society organizations focusing on peace, governance, trade, and other relevant sectors.
- Together with its partners, Welthungerhilfe supports local communities to hold their governments accountable and demand the implementation of the right to food. Welthungerhilfe works to improve public procurement, e.g. for school meals, by promoting food from local sustainable small-scale production.
- People are at the center of Welthungerhilfe's work, and the needs and rights of those most affected by hunger and poverty must be addressed to ensure that food systems benefit even the most vulnerable communities.

Welthungerhilfe's demands in relation to food systems:

- Governments, donors, the private sector, and civil society must drive the transformation towards food systems that are resilient and regenerate their natural resource base. Measures here include the implementation of circular food economies, instruments such as taxes and subsidies that encourage sustainable production and consumption, and more public investment for research and innovation as well as the development of technological (digital), social, and policy innovations with the local communities while respecting their traditional knowledge systems.
- Governments and donors should strengthen and support inclusive and legally enshrined social protection systems that boost the resilience of vulnerable groups. Governments should promote the purchase of food from local and environmentally sustainable farm production for the provision of school meals in rural and urban areas.
- Governments, including local governments, should put in place and enforce legal frameworks to ensure that private businesses respect human rights and apply environmental due diligence throughout their value chains. They should also promote sustainability certification of agricultural production that includes the Food Security Standard (FSS), which contributes to the realization of the right to food of farmers, workers, and nearby communities.
- Governments should step up their engagement with existing multilateral food governance systems anchored in human rights and the agencies of food producers such as the Committee on World Food Security (CFS). Governments should promote the CFS in such a way that it can live up to its expectations and should see its policy recommendations as clearly informing policy actions in their respective countries.
- Governments should promote more inclusive multi-actor platforms at the local and national level, taking into consideration existing power imbalances and the need to ensure the voice and participation of vulnerable groups. Inclusive food governance bodies such as food policy

councils should be supported to a greater extent.

- Governments should continue promoting an enabling environment which provides free and democratic civic spaces, allowing for civil society actors to shape decision-making processes and hold relevant parties accountable. This also includes oversight institutions to monitor and report on the right to adequate food, avenues for inclusive and participatory legal reform, ca-

capacity development, safeguards against rights violations, and inclusive and effective political, economic, and social institutions.

- The UN system, governments and donors must increase efforts and support for the prevention and resolution of violent conflicts and contribute with humanitarian assistance to improving the long-term food security and resilience of vulnerable communities.

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