



# National and Sub-national Food Systems Multi-Stakeholder Mechanisms: An Assessment of Experiences

# Executive Summary

One of our leading global challenges is providing healthy diets to the world's population while staying within planetary boundaries. The task is immense and even more daunting in the context of fast population growth, urbanization, changing consumption patterns, climate change and the depletion of natural resources. In the past, interventions in our food systems led to some positive results but also resulted in negative trends, such as an increase in unhealthy diets with low nutritional value, limited access of small-scale producers to viable markets, food loss and waste, food safety hazards, health issues, and an increased ecological footprint and natural resources depletion.

There is an increasing consensus within the international community that countries need to adopt a systems approach to food policies if they are to be successful in tackling intertwined, persistent and worsening problems of food insecurity, climate change, resource use, poverty and health. A food systems approach broadens the viewpoint and includes the integrative nature of the food system rather than looking at it as separate pieces or sectors. It promotes integrated and coherent policy-making to align different policy agendas and cross-cutting issues (e.g. agriculture, environment, trade, health, food safety) to better meet the needs of food systems actors and support multiple sustainable food systems outcomes (environmental, socio-economic and health).

To apply a food systems lens to their policies, governments must rethink food systems governance and institutional arrangements to promote inclusive collaboration, embracing a variety of voices (from different types of actors and agendas) instead of individual and sectoral perspectives. In addition to bringing all relevant actors together, various levels of governance need to be involved (from national to sub-national, cutting across administrative borders).

Governments also need to increase their capacity to undertake holistic assessments of food systems issues and engage in strategic decision-making, acknowledging interlinkages between various sustainability interventions along the entire value chain (from food production to consumption and to waste issues) and balancing the inevitable trade-offs between outcome goals.

In this context, multi-stakeholder mechanisms (MSMs) constitute an important element for embedding collaborative and coordinated food systems approaches in policies. In this report, the term “sustainable food systems multi-stakeholder mechanism” (SFS MSM) refers to a formal or informal participatory governance mechanism or collaborative arrangement that brings together diverse food systems actors (e.g. government, private sector, NGOs, farmers) with different food-related agendas (e.g. environment, health, trade, agriculture), from all stages of the value chain (from production to consumption), in an inclusive way to collaborate in pursuit of sustainable food systems.

In practice, SFS MSMs vary in their forms (e.g. food policy councils, food security committees, sustainable food labs), their durability (permanent or ad hoc), legal status (whether or not they are created by a governmental decree) and representativeness (level of government and stakeholder participation). They can also operate at different scales (e.g. municipality/ county, department/province, multiple departments/ provinces, national), and their roles and mandates remain diverse. These groups usually convene stakeholders to share perspectives on food systems challenges, develop innovative solutions and influence food-related policy-making and planning. They are also increasingly involved in policy implementation.



In recent years, food councils or similar structures have emerged at sub-national level. This has been followed by a rise in the importance of the urban food agenda and supported by the work of many international initiatives.<sup>4</sup> At national level, there is less evidence of how such mechanisms are emerging to complement efforts made by governments to decouple economic development from environmental degradation while ensuring the provision of and access to nutritious and sustainable food for their populations. The emergence of SFS MSMs raises questions regarding the extent of

their benefits, limitations and performance. They are a means rather than an end to achieve sustainable food systems. Evidence and data about their characteristics, effectiveness and results remain vague and fragmented.

Against this backdrop, this study sought to identify, study and analyse national and sub-national SFS MSMs to understand and share their contribution to embedding a food systems approach in policy-making processes that support the transition toward sustainable food systems.

### This report on SFS MSMs intends to:

- ▶ Fill the aforementioned knowledge gaps to contribute to the aim of the One Planet network's SFS Programme to support the shift toward sustainable food systems through a holistic approach;
- ▶ Contribute to the efforts made by the Community of Practice on Food Systems Approach on the Ground (CoP-FSAG) to translate food systems approach theory into practice;
- ▶ Contribute to the UN Food Systems Summit 2021 and other relevant multilateral forums, at the sub-national, national and international level, by providing important insights on how multi-stakeholder governance can support the five defined action tracks;
- ▶ Provide a knowledge product and a technical tool with important lessons learned from the 10 SFS MSMs studied, which can be used to inform and encourage countries and cities to advance MSMs as an element of sustainable food systems;
- ▶ Provide an increased knowledge base regarding SFS MSMs and the broader governance structures and arrangements in which they operate.

Ten outstanding cases were selected and studied, three at national level: **France, Denmark and India**; and seven at sub-national level: **Ghent, London, Montreal, Los Angeles, Quito, La Paz and Antananarivo**. The individual summaries of the case studies can be found in Chapter 3.

The research also included a comparative analysis on the structures and governance models, policy formulation and implementation processes, and effectiveness of the 10 SFS MSMs. The complete comparative analysis can be found in Chapter 2.

The study's findings are based on secondary data from a literature review, and primary data coming from

semi-structured interviews and two surveys.<sup>5</sup> The first survey, conducted with the SFS MSMs' representative (focal points), gathered key and basic information about the selected SFS MSM (e.g. structure, governance). The second survey, conducted with stakeholders, captured the perceptions of different stakeholders about various aspects of the selected SFS MSMs, such as the quality of dialogue and leadership, the capacity to foster participatory and inclusive processes and perceived achievements and challenges. A total of 121 stakeholders – from 10 countries, 102 organizations and 7 constituencies (types of organizations) – completed the surveys.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Examples include the New Urban Agenda, the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact, FAO-RUAF partnership, C40 and the ICLEI network.

<sup>5</sup>See Annex 1 for a detailed description of the study's methodology.

<sup>6</sup>See Annex 4 for a detailed analysis of the survey's participants.



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## Main findings

### 1. Foundational and structural factors

**It takes more than political will to create an effective SFS MSM.** In the majority of the cases studied, it was the convergence of several factors that led to the creation of the SFS MSM: political will; the passage of a policy, law or regulation stipulating the creation of a food multi-stakeholder platform; the presence of a perceived food insecurity problem in the country or city; and/or a strong social movement advocating for improvements in food-related issues. There was usually a “champion”, generally a member of the government, advocating for the creation of the SFS MSM.

**Building successful collaboration takes time.** It took from one to four years to establish the SFS MSM for the majority of the cases studied. A history of prior collaboration between the stakeholders seems to be a strong driver of successful SFS MSMs.

**Funding is crucial.** Most of the cases studied have a regular budget, which has undoubtedly been key to their success. There are notable funding differences between the North and the South, which might partially explain differences in achievements and results.

**Institutionalization is pivotal.** All the 10 cases studied reported some level of formalization in their legal status, and they all have structural autonomy, maintaining close collaboration with public officials.

**Connecting at different levels promotes a greater impact.** The national-level cases studied also operate at regional and city level in collaboration with municipalities, additional stakeholders and networks. Likewise, the majority of the sub-national cases have a geographical scope that goes beyond the limits of the city, to include a city-region or sub-regional focus. Additionally, the SFS MSMs establish connections with similar structures and networks at different levels. These connections seem to increase their outreach and impact.

### 2. SFS MSMs roles and thematic areas

**Key roles played.** The key roles played by the SFS MSMs studied for this report are networking, policy formulation, new collaborations and advocacy. In particular, lobbying and advocacy, aimed at influencing decision-makers in relation to food-related policies, are at the heart of an SFS MSMs work.

**SFS work still dominated by agriculture, but there are winds of change.** Key food systems priorities that have been addressed so far by the SFS MSMs studied are mostly agriculture-related, with local production and peri-urban farming being the most frequent “hot topics”. These are followed by sustainable diets, food diversification, food environments, food security and poverty. Although environmental and nutrition/health-related topics have not yet featured prominently, they are mentioned in most food policy documents developed by the SFS MSMs, and in the issues that stakeholders think should be prioritized in the coming years.

**Growing uptake of the food systems approach.** The food systems approach (see definition in Section 2.1) is the main conceptual framework used by the SFS MSMs studied. Participants believe that this approach is understood by the majority of stakeholders and that its uptake is high, in particular with regard to the level of inclusion of the environmental angle in the SFS MSMs’ work.

### 3. The “rules of the game”: governance and dialogue

**A wide spectrum of stakeholders and strong government support.** A large majority of the SFS MSMs studied include more than 16 stakeholders, with half of them having over 31 participants. In general, all food systems actors (sectors, constituencies, activities) are represented. Nevertheless, participants are usually selected by the focal point or coordinator, which might entail a bias in deciding who will be part of the mechanism. Some stakeholders argue that it is still necessary to include the voices of more disadvantaged and informal actors at the grassroots level for increased representativeness and legitimacy.

**Relevant goals, plans and strategies.** In general, the cases studied clearly identify and articulate their vision, mission and goals; they have well-defined policy and advocacy priorities, either as part of a plan or as an overall strategy. This is considered an important element for their effectiveness and the achievement of results.

**Principles for democratic multi-stakeholder governance.** The vast majority of the SFS MSMs studied have adopted multiple good governance principles, and most participants believe these principles are applied and respected.

**The balance of power: the elephant in the room?** Although all the SFS MSMs studied have established mechanisms to put their good governance principles into practice, only a few have established procedures to address power relations and power imbalances, and

to manage conflicts of interest. The inability to manage power imbalances is one of the main challenges and criticisms of multistakeholderism, questioning its legitimacy for good governance. This seems to be a pending task for the majority of SFS MSMs in question.

**Procedures to collaborate and navigate difficult dialogue.** In addition to formal meetings, interaction between stakeholders happens in all kinds of formal and informal settings and ways, following a complex pattern of personal and professional relations and networks. In order to have inclusive and constructive dialogue, a facilitator is appointed for each meeting in almost all the SFS MSMs studied. The overall perception of the quality, inclusiveness and effectiveness of meetings and dialogue is positive.

### 4. Stakeholder engagement

**High level of participation, diverse forms of engagement.** The stakeholders are highly engaged, and plenary meetings are the preferred way to participate in the SFS MSM. Additionally, the public and private sector representatives engage more frequently than the other stakeholders in verbal exchanges. This could reflect a more active use of (informal) lobbying and information collection and exchange to advance their interests and influence the agenda and the priorities of the SFS MSM.

**Participation influenced by the power of money.** In most cases, stakeholders’ participation is financially supported by the organization to which they belong, which may deter the participation of groups with limited financial resources. This finding suggests it would be beneficial to put in place funding mechanisms to support the participation of disadvantaged groups, who tend to have less power and influence in decision-making.

**Strong motivations and political buy-in.** The stakeholders’ main motivations for participating in the SFS MSM are networking, being updated on food-related topics in their city/country, and learning. In general, stakeholders feel that their involvement in the SFS MSM is worth the time and effort, and they perceive a good level of participation, endorsement and support from the government, including from high-level representatives. The general level of stakeholder engagement is high, with a lower perceived level of engagement and a higher perceived resistance to transformative change in the case of the private sector and farming representatives.

**Effective collaborative leadership is paramount.** Stakeholders’ perceptions regarding leadership of the SFS MSMs are generally positive, with the exception of the leadership’s perceived ability to manage



disagreements and power relations. This suggests that even successful SFS MSMs can still improve their leadership and governance arrangements to level the playing field for all participants, create safe spaces for disadvantaged groups and avoid replicating unequal power relations in the food systems they aim to transform.

## 5. Lessons learned from policy formulation and implementation

**A twofold success in embedding the SFS approach in policy processes.** All the SFS MSMs studied, with the exception of Eat Right India and the Antananarivo Food Policy Council, have led and/or informed the formulation of at least one key food policy, regulation, strategy, action plan or roadmap for sustainable food systems. In the majority of cases, this policy has been enacted by public authorities and thus recognized as the official policy document for sustainable food systems development in the country or city. In addition to their contribution to food policy formulation, the SFS MSMs have also contributed to and/or included food topics in other related agendas and policy processes, in particular those related to climate change, environmental issues, and territorial and urban development. This is what “adopting a food systems approach” is about: not only formulating a sustainable food policy, but also having policies in different areas (e.g. agriculture, fisheries, environment, public health) that take a more holistic view and are better coordinated to avoid incoherent policies.

**The first step: a holistic participatory food systems diagnosis.** In the majority of the cases studied, a participatory assessment was conducted to understand the functioning of the food system in the given geographical context, in particular to inform food policy-making.

**A whole-of-society approach advanced through innovations in policy formulation.** All SFS MSMs engaged in policy development use a blended approach to inform food policy formulation, combining deliberative and participatory democracy methods. The first phase of the process usually includes broad public consultations through open, self-selected participation. In a second phase, the SFS MSM stakeholders engage in internal deliberation to develop final policy proposals and recommendations. The methodologies and tools used to foster participation show a high level of innovation, varying from case to case and depending on the policy at hand.

**SFS policy priorities and management of trade-offs.** Policy priorities are usually based on the food systems diagnosis, while government concerns are also taken into account. Differences in stakeholders’

representation and power seem to affect the levels of influence when defining the policy focus areas. Dialogue to find common ground, compromise, negotiation and consensus are used to navigate controversial and complex topics, and to manage trade-offs between the different sustainability dimensions of the food system. When win-win decisions are not possible, economic interests seem to prevail over other aspects such as the environment and people’s health. The private sector is usually blamed for this, and also perceived as the stakeholder group with the strongest agenda-setting influence and the highest resistance to transformative change.

**Key topics addressed and main characteristics of the SFS policies.** The main topics prioritized in the food policies are “sustainable diets, food diversification and food environments” and “local food production and (peri-)urban farming”. These two priority issues are followed by “nutrition and health”, “sustainable food production”, “food loss and waste”, “environmental degradation and climate change” and “food security and poverty”. The SFS policies are perceived as holistic and acknowledge the full spectrum of food systems issues at stake. Environmental sustainability has been integrated in the majority of the cases studied, and the policies reflect the jointly identified priorities and establish adequate objectives, activities and expected results.

**Implementation of the SFS policies.** The 10 cases participate to some extent in the implementation phase of food policies. The level of engagement varies greatly, from an active role in coordinating activities and managing the budget (as in the case of Ghent), to only implementing some communication activities and occasionally conducting monitoring and evaluation (as in the case of Quito). The most common roles played by the SFS MSMs in relation to policy implementation are communication, implementation of activities, and monitoring and evaluation, followed by project management and coordination of activities.

## 6. Perceived achievements and challenges

**Perceived achievements.** Participants indicate that “networking of food stakeholders” is the key achievement of their SFS MSM. Networking increases connectivity among food systems actors and their capacity for action. In recent assessments of the impacts of COVID-19 responses, this networking facilitated swift action and was important in achieving immediate food distribution, local marketing and other related measures. “Policy formulation” follows as a key achievement, both in terms of “formulating an SFS policy” as well as in “providing input for the mainstreaming of food into other related policy

processes”. Not surprisingly, “addressing food systems trade-offs” is not recognized as a key achievement of the SFS MSMs. Stakeholders believe that their SFS MSM has been successful in terms of meeting the health and nutrition needs of the most vulnerable, but perceptions are mixed when it comes to the responsiveness of the SFS MSMs in supporting effective decisions and interventions in the context of COVID-19.

**Perceived drivers of collaboration and success.**

Four key elements are perceived as key drivers of successful multi-stakeholder collaboration: the

balanced representation of all food systems actors; the conducive leadership and governance; the trust built upon many years of networking and collaboration; and the perceived political support.

**Perceived challenges.** The main challenge reported by SFS MSMs is ensuring financial stability. Additionally, participants identified low political support and the limited time to engage in additional activities as major obstacles faced by their SFS MSM. Frequent changes in the SFS MSMs participants could also hinder progress.





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