

FOOD SYSTEM PATHWAYS: IMPROVING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF SUPPORT TO GOVERNMENTS



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SUMMARY

As part of the 2021 United Nations Food System Summit, many countries crafted strategic pathways for the transformation of their national food systems. A range of organisations have since taken on roles to support governments in the implementation of these pathways. Collectively referred to as the Ecosystem of Support (EoS), these organisations can play an instrumental role in helping to progress the food systems transformation agenda.

This paper analyses how transformation is progressing in different countries and the means through which it is being both led and supported. It explores how the support for transformation could be made more effective by reviewing the ways in which national EoS function. It also proposes guiding principles for EoS members to adopt wide-angle approaches to food systems while fostering respectful interactions, coordination, and inclusivity.

These principles advocate for respecting the leadership role of national governments as expressed through the office of the national convenors, with all relevant stakeholders included in the membership of the EoS and with working practices that are transparent and accountable. It also recommends establishing communities of practice to facilitate learning, collaboration, and reflection on ways in which entities can respond to the full range of national needs and stakeholders' interests, offer support at subnational and national levels, link technical assistance to investment opportunities, assist with acquiring the data needed to monitor progress, and support transparent decision-making. However, there is no suggestion that the structure and function of each EoS should be standardised. Instead, flexibility is encouraged, allowing for adaptation to specific contexts.

KEY MESSAGES

- The transformation of national food systems is supported by different entities collectively referred to as the national Ecosystem of Support (EoS), but the principles and mode of operation of an effective EoS have yet to be developed.
- Based on an assessment of emerging EoS, this paper suggests principles for interaction and coordination that are respectful of different interests, providing support through predictable processes.
- Principles for optimising the relevance, quality, and coherence of support provided by members of each national EoS include respect for the leadership role of the national governments; a shared narrative; continuous review and adaptation; clear roles and engagement; agreed ways of working; and transparent functioning.

INTRODUCTION

Food Systems are generally defined as 'the range of actors and their interlinked activities involved in the production, aggregation, processing, distribution, consumption and disposal of food products, and parts of the broader economic, societal and natural environments in which they are embedded' (1). While developments in these systems have delivered significant increases in the availability of food staples, feeding billions more people than they did even a few decades ago, they have increasingly come under scrutiny for the environmental degradation that has resulted from their overuse of chemical inputs and from extensification onto fragile or forested land; for their focus on increased calorie intake as opposed to balanced nutrition, which has had negative health impacts; and for inappropriate policy and institutional interventions that have increased the marginalisation of asset-poor populations, leaving many hungry or malnourished.

We have known for some time that a transformation to more sustainable, resilient, and equitable food systems holds one of the keys to addressing these societal costs and to putting us on track to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (2). The critical role that food systems must play in delivering the SDGs was recognised in the United Nations Secretary-General's decision to convene a Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) in 2021 (3). The Summit was used to galvanise political support for change, with over 110 countries submitting pathways that set out their country's objectives and actions for transforming their food systems. These pathways were the culmination of agreements reached between diverse groups of stakeholders through an extensive set of consultative food systems dialogues during 2020-21.

The year 2023 offers several important opportunities to build upon the progress made during the United Nations Food System Summit (UNFSS) process by strengthening support for implementing food system transformation in countries worldwide.

This paper focuses on ways of supporting the transformation of national food systems so that they align with the SDGs. It includes analyses of how transformation is progressing in different countries and of the means through which it is being both led and supported. In particular, we note that in the lead up to and following the UNFSS, a range of organisations have taken on roles supporting governments in the implementation of food system transformation pathways. Collectively referred to as the Ecosystem of Support (EoS), these organisations can play an instrumental role in helping progress the food systems transformation agenda. However, in many countries, the support for transformation would be more effective were some modifications to the EoS made. Ensuring that governments get the right kind of support is essential (4).

Section 1 of this paper reflects on countries' experiences in advancing food system transformation since 2021 and the demands placed on national EoS. Section 2 analyses how transformation is progressing in selected countries. Section 3 examines opportunities and challenges associated with improving the effectiveness of each EoS. Section 4 contains propositions for optimising this effectiveness, and Section 5 proposes ways to implement improvements. If these improvements are followed, they

should result in better connections with and collaborative support for the national convenor, improving the overall impact of the national EoS.

The propositions in this paper will be tested during upcoming global and regional events that take stock of progress on food systems transformation. This will be done through discussions with national convenors and the teams with whom they work as well as participants from entities within national EoS including UN system entities, donor agencies, financial institutions, regional organisations, civil society groups, businesses, and coalitions.

SECTION 1: CONTEXT SETTING: EXPERIENCES WITH ADVANCING AND SUPPORTING THE FOOD SYSTEM TRANSFORMATION AGENDA FOLLOWING THE 2021 UNFSS

This section reviews (i) the experience of countries in taking forward the food system transformation agenda post UNFSS; (ii) the experience of organisations supporting national governments as they advance food systems transformation; and (iii) opportunities in 2023 for governments to intensify transformation and the implications for the EoS.

1.1 EXPERIENCE OF COUNTRIES IN TAKING FORWARD THE FOOD SYSTEM TRANSFORMATION

AGENDA

More than 110 countries developed and uploaded strategic pathways for transformation of their national food systems in advance of the 2021 UNFSS. Some pathways have subsequently been treated as living documents and have been updated since the summit. Other countries have advanced food systems transformation without the use of a pathway. Nigeria and Bangladesh provide examples of countries in which explicit steps have been taken to develop the Pathway into action plans. Pakistan, by contrast, has used the Pathway-creation process to identify key policy gaps; addressing these will provide a basis for progressing on food systems outcomes. The different approaches adopted reflect different national objectives, starting points, and political economy realities. Occasionally a mix of documents is used in-country to guide the approach to transformation: this may result in some inconsistency. The analysis focuses on the documents that are seen, within countries, to best describe the vision and means for food systems transformation while taking account of any variances between them; we refer to these generally as 'pathways'.

In preparation for the 'stocktaking moment' held two years after the UNFSS (UNFSS+2) in July 2023, the UN Secretary-General launched a report highlighting the progress made on food systems transformation since the 2021 UNFSS (5). Based on an analysis of 101 country voluntary progress reports, the report indicated that (as of July 2023) two-thirds of the reporting countries had successfully integrated the priorities outlined in their national pathways into their relevant overarching national strategies and/or sectoral plans. Furthermore, one-quarter of the countries indicated that critical food systems issues such as the right to food and access to healthy diets had been incorporated into their national laws and regulations. Approximately 70% of the countries had made efforts to establish or strengthen platforms for governing national

food systems, demonstrating a commitment to better coordination and collaboration. Additionally, 38% of the countries had taken steps towards decentralisation and engagement at the sub-national level, recognising the importance of local involvement in achieving food systems transformation. Nearly half of the reporting countries had actively pursued food system dialogues¹ at both national and sub-national levels, fostering ongoing discussions to refine and improve their pathways for implementation.

1.2 EXPERIENCE OF ORGANISATIONS SUPPORTING NATIONAL GOVERNMENTS

A number of organisations, including UN entities, development agencies, and non-governmental organisations, have provided support to governments in advancing their pathways. Although the nature and focus of support differs, an important commonality is that these organisations have delivered their support to and in coordination with the countries' National Convenors². (National Convenors are the government officials initially appointed to coordinate the process of organising pre-UNFSS consultative dialogues in their countries, and subsequently to coordinate the further development and implementation of these pathways.)

Some of these organisations, including GAIN, GIZ, the Food Action Alliance, and AGRA, have initiated large-scale programmes covering multiple countries, from which initial experience can be drawn. For example, GAIN recognised the importance of supporting governments in developing their approach to food systems transformation during the preparatory process for the UNFSS. Policy Advisors were appointed in each of nine countries to support governments during the process of dialogue, with a focus on ensuring that nutritional/health outcomes were appropriately considered alongside other food systems priorities. Following the UNFSS, GAIN began to implement a large-scale, multi-donor-funded programme, Nourishing Food Pathways³, which is designed to encourage coordinated support to governments. The initiative supports the evolution and implementation of food systems pathways with specific focus on improved policy coherence, inclusion of youth and subnational governments, strengthening social protection, supporting financing, integrating environmental sustainability with nutritional objectives, and improving the evidence base to inform food systems transformation. It has allowed GAIN's Policy Advisors to continue to accompany governments in the further development and implementation of the pathways. Several examples illustrate the type of support that is being provided. In Nigeria, GAIN has supported a cross-ministry Technical Working Group in developing an implementation plan. In Bangladesh, GAIN, working with UN agencies, is playing a key role in convening government officials from different ministries, the private sector, and academia. In Pakistan, GAIN has been asked to support the development of key pieces of legislation (a Multisector National Nutrition Policy and the National Healthy Diet Policy) identified as a result of developing the

¹ An overview of the dialogue process can be found at: <https://summitdialogues.org/>

² A list of National Convenors can be found at: <https://www.unfoodsystemshub.org/member-state-dialogue/en>

³ More details on Nourishing Food Pathways can be found here: <https://www.gainhealth.org/impact/pathways>

pathway and which should provide a good basis for working towards improved coherence in food systems interventions. In Tanzania, GAIN is working with the government to develop an integrated implementation plan for the pathways. In Ethiopia, GAIN is a core member of a Secretariat led by the Agriculture Transformation Initiative (including the Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Commerce, and Ministry of Industry among others). In several countries (Bangladesh, Kenya, Mozambique, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Tanzania), GAIN has played a lead role in convening partners to support governments in the development of their voluntary reports to UNFSS+2 Stocktaking Moment.

GIZ's ongoing Global Programme on Food and Nutrition Security and Enhanced Resilience⁴ also provides direct support to governments in taking forward their food systems transformation agendas. It focuses on improved nutrition governance in 10 countries (India, Cambodia, Malawi, Zambia, Burkina Faso, Togo, Mali, Ethiopia, Madagascar, and Benin). Depending on the different country contexts, policy advisors have been appointed to work with sectoral or inter-sectoral government institutions at different levels (e.g., subnational or national) to support effective horizontal and vertical coordination and policy coherence for nutrition, including measures for capacity strengthening and data for decision-making processes. With the onset of the UNFSS dialogue process in 2021, these policy advisors were well positioned to support countries especially where policy advisors were working with the announced national convenors. Regular online exchanges between GIZ's policy advisors and global meetings between partners enabled sharing of relevant international developments and processes as well as discussions on success factors and challenges in endorsing or implementing national pathways. GIZ launched a new Global Programme on Food Systems Transformation in 2023 with the aim of supporting initiatives that catalyse food systems transformation towards healthy diets for all within planetary boundaries, starting in three countries (Zambia, Malawi, and India). Both programmes continue to support partners in advancing food systems governance. In Cambodia, GIZ continues to support the multi-sectoral, multi-level, and multi-stakeholder implementation of the national pathway. In Malawi, GIZ supports its partners within the Ministry of Health to review the current Food and Nutrition Security Strategy with a food systems perspective and promotes a more inclusive multi-stakeholder coordination for enabling healthy diets as one outcome of implementing the national pathways. In Zambia, GIZ supports the National Food and Nutrition Council (NFNC) under the Office of the President in operationalising the national pathway.

1.3 OPPORTUNITIES FOR STRENGTHENING SUPPORT TO GOVERNMENTS TO INTENSIFY TRANSFORMATION

A series of global events in 2023 provides opportunities for further focusing and strengthening the support provided to countries in advancing their pathways:

- In April 2023, the One Planet Network Sustainable Food Systems Programme's 4th Global Conference was held in Vietnam. It brought together several

⁴ <https://www.giz.de/en/worldwide/32194.html>

countries' national convenors, representatives of coalitions, and development partners, including the UN Food Systems Coordination Hub. The focus was on deepening collective efforts towards implementing food systems pathways.

- In July 2023, the UNFSS+2 Stocktaking Moment (building on regional preparatory meetings) provided a first comprehensive review of the progress that countries had made in implementing their food systems transformation agenda since the UNFSS. It was also an opportunity to examine how effectively the emerging EoS have been in supporting this process.
- In September 2023, discussions at the SDG Summit to be held in New York and marking the half-way point to the deadline set for achieving the SDGs, will be informed by the outcomes of the UNFSS+2⁵, with food systems identified as one of the six major SDG transitions.
- In September 2023, Africa's Food System Forum (AGRF) will examine Africa's solutions to food systems transformation. Structured around the themes of Recover, Regenerate, and Act, the Forum will focus on changes required to accelerate progress in pathway implementation.
- In December 2023, the 28th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP28) will be hosted by United Arab Emirates. COP28 has prioritised food systems transformation as one of its core pillars. A specific day will be dedicated to water and food systems, with a focus on fostering global partnerships to drive investments, technologies, and policies that facilitate the transition toward net-zero carbon emissions, nature-positive, and resilient food and water systems.

In addition to these global level events, national-level opportunities exist for strengthening the ecosystem of support. In Rwanda, for example the government has recently launched the process of preparing the 5th Strategic Plan for Agricultural Transformation. The development of this plan will be supported by development partners, and it will serve as a tool to align the sectoral and cross-sectoral policies and programmes related to food security, nutrition, and sustainable agriculture.

SECTION 2: EARLY PROGRESS IN IMPLEMENTING FOOD SYSTEM TRANSFORMATION SINCE THE UNFSS

This section examines progress in a selection of countries in which collaborating organisations are providing support to governments in the implementation of systems transformation since the UNFSS, using the national pathways. It is based on information provided by national convenors and their teams during a series of virtual events convened between October 2021 and December 2022, which brought together national convenors with other food systems actors to share their experiences and insights on progressing the food systems transformation agenda⁶. Observations from

⁵ <https://www.unfoodsystemshub.org/fs-stocktaking-moment/documentation/un-secretary-general-call-to-action/en>

⁶ These events include Convenor Connection Sessions, Food Systems Solutions Dialogues, and Regional Touchpoints. (More information available at <https://www.unfoodsystemshub.org/hub-solution/food-systems-solutions-dialogues/en>)

members of organisations supporting these countries were also used to supplement the analysis.⁷

2.1 LINKING POLICY AND POLITICAL PROCESSES

2.1.1 SETTING THE VISION FOR FOOD SYSTEMS TRANSFORMATION

The outcomes of national food systems dialogues, especially the pathways, set the vision for food system transformation. During the UNFSS, Heads of State and Government heavily referred to national pathways in their statements. The pathways are being adapted and updated at intervals to take account of changes in the context for implementation (e.g., unexpected weather patterns or increases in food import bills).

2.1.2 EMBEDDING THE PATHWAYS IN POLITICAL PROCESSES

In almost all countries analysed, the process and direction of national pathways are impacted by political processes. Elections, changes of government, and social unrest have affected implementation of actions. National elections have slowed progress in some countries (e.g., Pakistan, Kenya) and threaten to do so in others (e.g., Bangladesh). There is typically a lull in policymaking and policy delivery during the transition from one administration to the next, and it can be difficult to identify and support new food systems champions in government. In Colombia and Kenya, where new governments were established in 2022, convening teams used the national pathway to brief the new governments and ensure continuity of the ambition.

2.1.3 EMBEDDING PATHWAYS IN PLANNING PROCESSES

Convenors report that efforts have been made to better align the pathways with national planning processes, create enabling legislation for their action plans, and shift regulation. For example, in Colombia, pathway priorities were integrated into the National Development Plan 2022-26, which includes an action line dedicated to ensuring the Human Right to Food. The Plan mandates decentralised dialogues to support coordination at subnational levels, through departmental food and nutrition security committees. Regarding legislation, the Healthy Environments Act was approved at the end of 2022; it includes ensuring healthy foods in schools and their surroundings, as well as nutrition-related product labelling.

2.1.4 USING PATHWAYS TO MOBILISE FINANCE AND INVESTMENT

With regards to multisectoral efforts to mobilise financing and investment, co-convenors in Ghana developed an investment plan to provide guidance to government sectors on priority investments for food systems transformation. In Indonesia, the Ministry of National Development Planning (Bappenas), developed a sectoral integration model to support food production areas. The model tracks fiscal transfers from eight sectors (forestry, irrigation, road, environment, agriculture, marine and fishery, trade, and rural transportation) to support the regionalisation of food

⁷ GAIN's Policy Advisors provided additional insights on Bangladesh, Kenya, Nigeria, and Pakistan.

system transformation in six regions. Bappenas is also developing 'food systems dashboards' (6) that display data on various aspects of the food system and can be used to monitor the state of the food system and inform decision making and policy formulation. In Tanzania the Ministry of Finance has incorporated pathway priorities in the national budget. As a result, the budget for the agriculture sector tripled from 2022 to 2023. Tanzania also established an innovative procurement process where a percentage charge per metric ton goes to an Agriculture Development Fund Facility, which is then used to enable farmers to access fertilisers and other agricultural inputs.

2.1.5 USING PATHWAYS TO IDENTIFY DATA GAPS AND ESTABLISH MONITORING FRAMEWORKS

Several convening teams have indicated the need to address data gaps and to develop monitoring and evaluation frameworks. Technical expertise has been requested to support the gathering of baseline data, country mapping of initiatives, planning, reporting, and coordination tools. For example, in Colombia, the government, together with the UN Development Programme, UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), and the University of the Andes, is developing a monitoring dashboard for the implementation of the pathway and a financing model. In Nigeria, a costed implementation strategy and monitoring and evaluation framework are under development in collaboration with relevant government ministries, departments, and agencies, as well as with the EoS. The objective is to initiate joint monitoring by government, civil society organisations, and development partners on a geopolitical zonal basis under the supervision of the National Convenor.

2.2 LEADERSHIP AND COORDINATION BY GOVERNMENTS

Most countries are drawing on their Pathways when engaging with decision-makers on food systems issues to encourage more systematic cross-sector working and to guide food systems transformation within different settings at multiple levels.

2.2.1 COORDINATION UNITS

Countries have established different types of coordination units, some of which existed before the UNFSS. Almost all countries created inter-ministerial steering committees, some of which include non-government stakeholders (i.e., Colombia, Ethiopia, Kenya, Indonesia, Malawi, Mozambique, Nigeria, Rwanda, and Zambia). These coordination units are often convened by the Ministry of Agriculture. In Kenya, for instance, the Food System Summit National Secretariat was created under the auspices of the Agriculture Transformation Office, with representation from relevant line ministries, UN agencies, non-governmental organisations, development partners, academia, and the private sector. In Indonesia, the multistakeholder coordination unit is convened by Bappenas, while in Ethiopia the inter-ministerial coordinating committee is co-chaired by the Ministries of Agriculture and Health. In India, a government think-tank dedicated to economic development and sustainable development goals is coordinating initiatives across sectors and ministries.

However, some countries still lack clarity on which government entities are responsible for implementing food system transformation using the pathways. This is sometimes

due to a change in the national convenor or the emergence of new institutional structures that have left the distribution of responsibilities unclear.

The most appropriate configuration of coordination unit will be specific to the characteristics of each country and will need to reflect the required roles of key units, whether in advancing the agenda, financing key investments, or aligning actions. While many countries are conscious of the need to strengthen coordination to advance food systems transformation, recent disruptions to food markets and their impacts on immediate food security have been front of mind, hindering efforts to establish strengthened coordination.

2.2.2 DEVOLVED DECISION MAKING

Decisions that have an impact on the functioning of food systems are often taken at subnational levels — in provinces, counties, and so on. At these levels, there is generally less awareness of global initiatives for food systems transformation, and there is often limited capacity to reflect these initiatives in planning and policy processes.

In Nigeria, decentralised efforts to coordinate implementation at the state level started in 2022 in six geopolitical zones. The objective is to facilitate capacity building and reporting on implementation of priority actions of the food system pathway on a quarterly basis. This initiative has been supported by UN agencies, with the three Rome-Based Agencies (Food and Agriculture Organization, World Food Programme, and International Fund for Agricultural Development) co-chairing a Sub-National Implementation Steering Committee with the Minister of Budget and National Planning and development partners, including GAIN, AGRA, and the World Bank. In Ethiopia, the convenors from the Ministries of Health and Agriculture co-lead an inter-ministerial coordinating committee consisting of 14 institutions at the federal level. This coordinating committee is supported by a technical team composed of state and non-state actors. A similar coordination structure is planned to be rolled out at the 12 regional structures.

SECTION 3: ANALYSING ECOSYSTEMS OF SUPPORT

The in-country stakeholders and development partners who provide support to national food systems transformation processes are referred to by the generic term Ecosystem of Support (EoS). Members of each EoS assist with implementing priority actions set out in the national pathways. This section analyses the support that is provided by EoS. The next section proposes ways in which support can be optimised, and Section 5 proposes a way ahead.

3.1 THE SUPPORT PROVIDED THROUGH EACH ECOSYSTEM

In advance of the 4th Global Conference on Sustainable Food Systems in Hanoi in April 2023, the national EoS⁸ in Bangladesh, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Mozambique were

⁸ This analysis was informed by interviews between the authors and GAIN country offices in Bangladesh, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Mozambique.

analysed. The analysis indicated ways in which each EoS functions and some of the challenges being faced; it was used to develop an analytical framework.

Each EoS offers advice on policy design and implementation, and on the achievement of specific outcomes. Each EoS encourages stakeholder engagement, multisectoral consultations, and coordination among participating entities. Sometimes an EoS functions at sub-national levels. The composition of each EoS varies.

Challenges faced by each EoS include:

1. The membership of each EoS is not consistent
2. There are major differences in approach among members of each EoS
3. There is no common understanding of food systems approaches within each EoS
4. The members of each EoS use different approaches for supporting national convenors and convening teams
5. They have differing views on how decisions should be taken and the kinds of trade-offs to be made
6. There is a lack of adequate strategies for analysing different scenarios of future food systems and the implications for priority action areas, including nutrition and resilience
7. There is often a lack of coherence in identifying the lead government ministry, department, or agency to work with the United Nations Resident Coordinator and UN country team
8. EoS members have different approaches when engaging Coalitions of Action (the groups of organisations that have assembled to challenge 'business as usual' and champion an integrated, systemic approach at scale to address specific issues related to food systems)⁹

3.2 COMPOSITION OF THE EoS AND WAY OF WORKING

In the countries studied, EoS members generally interact with national governments through technical working groups and/or task teams that are convened by the national government. These structures serve as the main channels for communication between government and members of the EoS in country, and for coordination among EoS members. They are designed to encourage cross-sector working and, to some extent, multistakeholder engagement. They have different status across countries.¹⁰ Preparatory work within countries for the UNFSS+2 stocktaking moment in July 2023 stimulated interactions between each government and its EoS, with increasing requests for the EoS to assist the national government with production of voluntary reports on progress since the UNFSS.

⁹ A compendium of Coalitions of Action can be found here:

https://www.unfoodsystemshub.org/docs/unfoodsystemslibraries/default-document-library/compendium-of-food-systems-coalitions.pdf?sfvrsn=9ac3a9ef_9

¹⁰ In Nigeria the technical working group is made up of representatives of government departments. In Pakistan, a Food Systems Transformation Task team includes both government and other stakeholders, a Technical Working Group comprising the Director-General (Agriculture) from each Province under the chairmanship of PARC was constituted in May 2023 to prepare an action plan for pathway implementation.

The structures include members from the UN entities that focus on agriculture and food (FAO, the World Food Programme, and the International Fund for Agricultural Development), and GAIN. They may involve other UN entities (e.g., the World Health Organization, UNICEF), in-country focal points for the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement, and international development partners, including the German development organisation GIZ, AGRA, Nutrition International, and Hellen Keller International. In two of the countries, representatives of academia, the private sector, and civil society are included within the technical working groups. Participation by businesses is inconsistent from country to country.

The ways in which the national government interacts with the EoS varies from country to country. National convenors consistently request that members of the national EoS – including the UNFSS Coalitions of Actions – operate within the context of ongoing national government processes. They request that representatives of action coalitions respect the roles being played by national convenors and give priority to interacting with them.

National convenors request that different members of the EoS synergise the support they provide using a food systems perspective and take account of the national processes for food systems transformation and – where they exist – base their support on the vision, priorities, and implementation plans set out in national transformation pathways. Convenors request that members of the EoS focus on multiple factors that influence food systems, recognise the interconnections between these influences, and to always take these into account. This applies whether they are focused on supporting the over-arching food systems transformation agenda or on single issues (such as school feeding, ending malnutrition, nature-positive food production, or ending food loss and waste). As the EoS matures and relationships between its members evolve, it is expected that they will connect better with each other at international, national and local levels, thus reinforcing joined up working.

It is generally expected that the UN Resident Coordinators, the designated representative of the UN at country level responsible for coordinating operational activities of the UN in support of the country's efforts achieve the SDGs, will be central in partnering with national governments to encourage collective working among members of each EoS. For the countries analysed in Section 2, the importance of cross-sector and multi-stakeholder working for food systems transformation is identified in most UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks, which determine the UN system's contributions in the country.

SECTION 4: IMPROVING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE EOS IN EACH COUNTRY

The aim of a well-functioning EoS should be to assist a national government to advance food system transformation with a view to achieving sustainable food systems by 2030. This requires that the members of the EoS commit to supporting the nominated government authority tasked with driving the coordination of food systems transformation. This includes support for costing the pathways or implementation plans and developing investment and monitoring plans and processes to assess the

progress towards the pathway commitments in alignment with the SDGs. This section proposes principles for the operation of EoS and ways of improving that support.

National convenors are best served if they know which entities – and individuals – are members of the national EoS, who is the focal point for the EoS, and if encounters between each EoS and the national government take place at regular intervals with a predictable organisation and format.

The members of each EoS should use several guiding questions to organise their work. First, what are the support needs in relation to national food systems transformation strategies (e.g., technical assistance, help with monitoring and evaluation, consistent approaches to advocacy and communications)? Second, where is the support needed the most urgently? Third, who is offering support? (A mapping is often helpful; it should reflect the kind of support on offer and the manner in which it is provided). Finally, what resources are available to align members of the EoS – particularly funding, people, time, and opportunities?

4.1 PROPOSED PRINCIPLES FOR EoS OPERATION

Several principles emerge from an examination of national EoSs:

- **EoS members should adopt a systems approach.** Food systems are complex, and they are closely connected to, and significantly impact upon, human and animal health, land, water, climate, biodiversity, the economy, and other systems. They touch each of the SDGs. Their transformation thus requires EoS members to embrace a systems approach and reflect this in their priorities and actions.
- **Interactions and coordination procedures should be regular and respectful of different interests:** the practitioners that support government efforts to transform national food systems need safe spaces for regular interaction in which the focus is on expanding engagement and continuous improvement.
- **The process through which support is provided should be predictable.** Each EoS should seek to achieve agreed ambitious and measurable results, while encouraging bold and innovative thinking and processes that are able to deliver structural change in the ways that food systems function. Without a robust, transparent, and predictable process, the outcomes may be short-lived.
- **The EoS should take the lead from the national government, through the office of the national convenor.** The support provided by the EoS should be in line with the national authority's strategies and implemented through local and national entities. If a member of the EoS seeks an alternative to aligning with government priorities, pre-established channels and procedures should be used to challenge existing approaches and resolve any residual differences. There should be no surprises.
- **All relevant stakeholders should be included in the membership of the EoS.** The EoS should be designed to welcome diverse entities that are relevant to shaping transformed food systems.
- **There should be transparency and mutual accountability in the working of the EoS.** National authorities and members of the EoS are accountable to those they seek to support, to each other, and to the causes they serve. They are

jointly responsible for ensuring that their rationales and accounts are publicly available.

- **There should be clear guidance and coordination** on the generation of foresight scenarios, budget analyses, costing, and investment plans and processes to monitor progress.

4.2 PROCEDURES FOR OPTIMISING THE WORKING OF EACH EOS

To operationalise the principles set out in Section 4.1, with the objective of an optimised EoS, the following procedures, are suggested:

- 1 Maximise the relevance, quality, and synergy of support that is offered.
- 2 Ensure good coordination and inclusivity among EoS members.
- 3 Organise the EoS, with regular connections to the national convenor.
- 4 Maintain the EoS as a viable entity.

It is anticipated that the manner of optimisation will be adapted to the ways in which the convenor functions in each country. The value and cost of implementing these proposals, and means for initiating them, should first be explored with the national convenor.

4.2.1 MAXIMISING THE RELEVANCE AND INFLUENCE OF THE ECOSYSTEM OF SUPPORT

The analyses earlier in this paper suggest that if an EoS is to be effective, it will need to do several things. First, it must respond to the full range of national needs and stakeholder interests. The EoS should respond to national priorities in a transparent, clearly structured, and sequenced manner, and should make use of resources mobilised domestically and internationally, from development partners and the private sector. Second, it should offer support at subnational as well as national levels. It would be helpful if efforts to optimise each EoS are undertaken at subnational as well as national levels in ways that enable each EoS to access guidance and support regarding best practices for assisting governments as they lead food system transformation, and for coordinating this assistance.

Third, EoS should link technical assistance to investment by helping governments access both finance and know-how for investments in sustainable food systems. It would be extremely helpful if investing in sustainable food systems were a key element of standard financial institution portfolios, with national pathways used as a basis for anchoring investment expectations and enabling diversified financing mechanisms to support food systems transformation.

Fourth, EoS should assist with acquiring the data needed to monitor progress. The EoS will be called on to assist with developing metrics and tools for budgeting, measurement, assessing coherence, and reporting; displaying results on dashboards; and contributing to ongoing maps of policy, capacity, and action, especially at subnational levels.

Fifth, EoS should support transparent decision-making. Improved data are essential for identifying ways of advancing food systems transformation that better account for potential trade-offs and for increasing the transparency of decision-making. They are also critical for overcoming the political economy impediments to transformation

(which may include shifting priorities as a result of changes in government, levels of inclusivity in decision making, processes of budget disbursement, or the design of inter-ministerial coordination structures). Tools such as true cost accounting, an extended cost-benefit analysis where the economic, social and environmental impacts and externalities associated with an intervention are accounted for in decision making (7) are essential, but for them to be effective, the data and metrics on which they rely must be appropriate for the country in which they are being applied.

4.2.2 ORGANISING THE ECOSYSTEM OF SUPPORT AND ADAPTING IT TO COUNTRY CIRCUMSTANCES

Members of the EoS offer a combination of technical assistance, capabilities building, and financial support. For the support to be provided effectively the ecosystem needs to be organised as a collective entity. Its members will benefit from:

- Defined terms of reference of the national EoS and constituent working groups, as well as its membership, operating procedures, focal point, and means of communication among its members (including records of meetings, etc.)
- A shared narrative among members about the transformation process underway and of the ways in which it is being pursued (usually this would be based on the vision and priorities in the national pathway document)
- Agreed procedures for supporting and accompanying the national convenor and convening teams
- Regularly updated analysis of the technical and financial assistance on offer across the EoS
- Means for adapting the ways of working to evolving local contexts and changing circumstances.

For an EoS to function effectively as a predictable entity, it needs to be organised with an identified coordinator, a rhythm of regular meetings, and moments of dialogue during which members share views and seek convergence around: the priorities and support needs for national food systems transformation identified in Section 4.1; the procedures through which EoS members interact with government and stakeholders; the means they use for adapting to any changes in context; and their mechanisms for resolving any internal differences.

4.2.3 COORDINATING AMONG MEMBERS IN AN EoS

The coordination mechanisms used by the members of each EoS vary greatly. There may be more than one coordination process in a country. Not all EoS members will take part with the same intensity. Several of the national Food Systems Transformation Convenors have encouraged better coordination among members of the EoS so they can connect, access relevant information, and collaborate on specific initiatives around food systems transformation. These mechanisms can be structured as opportunities for dialogue, especially if they allow for diverse participation (sometimes restricted to technical issues, sometimes inviting wider engagement). There should be attention to a regular rhythm of exchanges that enable participation by all entities within the EoS.

4.2.4 MAINTAINING THE EoS AS A VIABLE ENTITY

i) **Contributions of development partners**

Since UNFSS, many development partners have encouraged the emergence of well-functioning EoS for food systems transformation at national level in ways that reflect national priorities and are aligned with in-country processes. Development partners in general should continue to invest in ways that encourage improvement in the functioning and adaptability of EoS and to avoid support for misaligned interventions that slow the functioning of the EoS and undermine good intentions.

ii) Integrated support from issue-based coalitions

As a result of the UNFSS, many coalitions and multi-organisation initiatives emerged to help countries implement their pathways. There are some notable successes among these, such as the work of the Zero-Hunger Coalition on costing pathways in a number of countries. It is important that objectives and strategies of these outcome-focused initiatives are aligned with priorities of the national government and that the initiatives are coordinated and complementary with each other.

4.3 HOW TO KNOW IF AN EoS IS WORKING EFFECTIVELY

A well-functioning EoS will have terms of reference, clarity on membership, operating procedures, focal points and means for communication among members (including records of meetings). It will have a defined relationship with the national convenor and convening team, function with a shared narrative about the transformation process and the support needed (usually based on the vision and priorities in the national pathway document) as well as agreed procedures for supporting and accompanying the national convenor and convening teams. It will have regularly updated analyses of the technical and financial assistance on offer from the EoS and defined processes for adapting its work to the evolving local context and any changes in circumstances.

SECTION 5: NEXT STEPS

Since the 2021 UNFSS both national governments and in-country stakeholders are treating food as a systems issue with links to all 17 Sustainable Development Goals. They seek to pursue policies and practices that reflect these multiple interconnections and demonstrate interdisciplinary, cross-sectoral, and multi-stakeholder ways of working at local and national levels. These ways of working challenge established practices.

Food systems transformation is a complex and non-linear process, and the entities within the EoS also have diverse interests. Divergence of views among EoS members is to be expected. Upgrading EoS requires an appreciation of how different EoS members perceive of food systems. For the EoS to function well its members need to be able to engage honestly with each other and have open processes for exploring difficult and contested issues. They need to move beyond a focus on specific details

of food systems transformation and look at ways for supporting shifts in the system as a whole.¹¹

Moving forward, the authors of this paper propose the establishment of communities of practice for practitioners both at national and supra-national levels to reflect on the usefulness of different types of supportive ecosystems, learn about how they respond to a range of complex challenges, share different strategies (including innovations and technologies) that can be adapted to specific contexts, and explore novel ways of exchanging and collaborating across countries and regions and with a global audience. The CoPs would focus on the challenges that are encountered by practitioners themselves: they would meet practitioners where they are, adapt to the rhythm and pace of their activity, and accompany them as they become better organised and coordinated. To achieve these important outcomes, GAIN and 4SD intend to work in close coordination with national food systems transformation convening teams and the UN Food Systems Coordination Hub.

¹¹ Builds on the Outcome Document of the 4th Global Conference of the One Planet network's Sustainable Food Systems Programme [\[here\]](#).

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