

POLITICAL ECONOMY DECISION TOOLKIT FOR FOOD SYSTEMS PATHWAYS – IN BRIEF



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SUMMARY

Political economy dynamics—that is, conflicts and trade-offs across different interest groups that play an important role in the food system—permeate many decisions about food systems policy and implementation. Development practitioners working in the food systems space—inclusive of agriculture, nutrition, and environment—need to be aware of these dynamics to be able to support policy advocacy, development, and implementation.

To assist in anticipating policy bottlenecks to food systems transformation, a toolkit was developed to examine six main domains within national policy systems. The six domains are: policy stability and inclusionary decision-making, stakeholder preferences, multi-sectoral coordination, multi-level coordination, financing, and administrative capacities.

After identifying why these are critical components for effective food systems policies, the toolkit describes subcomponents of each domain and offers metrics for assessing them. The toolkit provides examples of how to aggregate the metrics, with an application to Mozambique. It also shares examples of best practices for tackling political economy constraints, allowing practitioners to proactively address some of the bottlenecks that they uncover with the toolkit. The toolkit should offer users a practical way to understand and grapple with political economy dynamics as they work to further food systems transformation.

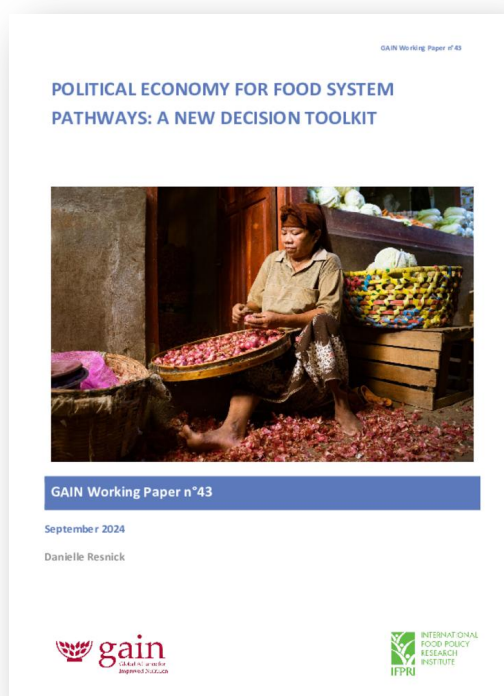
KEY MESSAGES

- Advancing food system transformation pathways requires understanding and navigating political economy dynamics that can derail progress towards a common policy agenda.
- The Political Economy Decision Toolkit identifies six domains where political economy factors are most likely to matter for food systems policy implementation.
- The toolkit helps practitioners to identify constraints ex-ante and to prioritise interventions for overcoming them.
- The toolkit's six different modules and corresponding metrics can be used in combination or separately.

BACKGROUND – ANTICIPATING POLICY BOTTLENECKS TO FOOD SYSTEMS TRANSFORMATION

Political economy dynamics play a central role in policy processes, and this is especially pronounced in complex policy arenas, such as food systems, where more interests, institutions, and goals are at stake. Advancing food system transformation pathways therefore requires strategic attention to underlying political economy dynamics that can derail progress towards a common policy agenda. Such dynamics often reflect conflicts and trade-offs across different interest groups that play an important role in the food system (1,2). Yet, which political economy factors act as constraints depends on country contexts and the specific food system interventions that governments want to pursue.

This Political Economy Decision Toolkit (3) (See Figure 1 for how to access the toolkit) aims to assist development practitioners and country partners to recognise these constraints ex-ante and prioritise required interventions to overcome them, thereby increasing the likelihood of successful food system policy implementation.



Political Economy for Food System Pathways: A New Decision Toolkit (pictured adjacent) is available for download on the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition website at:

<https://doi.org/10.36072/wp.43>

Figure 1: The toolkit is available for download from the GAIN website

The Toolkit identifies six domains where political economy factors are most likely to inhibit effective food systems policies. It describes subcomponents of each of these domains and offers metrics for assessing them. Table 1 lists the 32 questions covered by the toolkit. The toolkit also highlights examples of best practices for tackling political economy constraints, offering guidance to practitioners on where and how to target their 'politically smart' engagement strategies with country partners.

Table 1. Overview of political economy decision toolkit diagnostic questions by domain

Metric number	Domain and diagnostic questions
	<i>Stability and Inclusion domain</i>
1A	Are there institutionalised constraints on the executive's decision-making powers?
1B	What is the likelihood that the government will be destabilised?
1C	How frequently have ministers in the relevant food system policy domain changed, on average, in the last 5 years?
1D	What is the likelihood of upcoming electoral turnover?
1E	Are there restrictions on associational and organisational rights?
1F	Are there restrictions on freedom of expression and belief?
1G	Are there modalities for public participation in food system-related policies?
	<i>Stakeholder Preferences domain</i>
2A	Who has decision-making power with respect to the relevant food systems policy?
2B	Who has influential power with respect to the relevant food systems policy?
2C	What are the preferences of the stakeholders with decision making and influential powers?
	<i>Multi-sectoral Collaboration domain</i>
3A	Is there a coordinating body that has been established for the relevant food system policy?
3B	Where is the coordinating body for implementation housed?
3C	How many ministries belong to the coordinating body?
3D	Have clear functions been delineated among coordinating members for information exchange and reporting with regards to the relevant food system policy?
3E	Have clear functions been delineated among coordinating members for accountability for performance, with regards to the relevant food system policy?
3F	Is the body sufficiently financed and staffed?
3G	Are there well-recognised institutional hierarchies or conflicts across key agencies/ ministries?
3H	Are there divergent policy mandates / goals across key ministries / agencies that impede coordination?
	<i>Multi-level Collaboration domain</i>
4A	Are mandates clearly defined by tier for relevant food system responsibilities?
4B	Are there existing inter-governmental coordinating mechanisms
4C	Are there existing inter-governmental coordinating mechanisms related to the relevant food system policy?
4D	If federal, how pronounced is vertically divided authority at the state/ provincial level? If unitary, how pronounced is vertically divided authority at city level?
4E	Are there other related food system policies at the subnational tier?
	<i>Financing domain</i>

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5A	To what degree is the macroeconomic environment a concern for implementing the food systems policy?
5B	Are there diverging donor initiatives in the food system?
5C	To what degree is there transparency over the budget?
5D	Is the relevant food system policy costed with a clear plan for resource mobilisation?
5E	Is there a multi-sectoral budgeting mechanism in place
5F	Are there formula-based inter-governmental transfer rules?
	<i>Administrative Capacities domain</i>
6A	What is the overall level of skill and competency in the public sector?
6B	Are there enough existing staff, sufficiently trained in the appropriate skills, for implementation of the relevant food system policy?
6C	To what degree are staff insulated from political interference while performing their jobs?

Source: Compiled from (3)

The rest of this briefing paper introduces the six domains, providing some examples of the subcomponents and metrics used to assess them, and concludes with recommendations for operationalising the toolkit.

DOMAIN 1 – STABLE AND INCLUSIVE POLICY LANDSCAPE

Policy **stability**, as opposed to volatility, ensures a sufficient time horizon to allow stakeholders to engage in prospective planning and have confidence that their programmes and projects will retain momentum. Political institutions can affect policy stability in distinct ways since they shape intertemporal calculations by decisionmakers (4,5). They can compel decisionmakers to consider policy with a longer-term perspective, helping mitigate policy volatility. These institutions can include institutionalised constraints on the discretionary decision-making powers of the executive by the legislature or judiciary (4). Policy volatility tends to be much more pronounced, and government expenditures are more unstable, when legislative institutions are weak (6–8).

The toolkit introduces metrics to diagnose the degree of stability and inclusion in a particular country, indicating the data sources that can be used to address the corresponding diagnostic questions. The coding column indicates how the data can be translated into a three-part coding approach to facilitate comparisons across metrics and countries. One of seven metrics under this domain, metric 1A of the toolkit, examines the degree to which the political system limits concentrated decision-making (Table 2).

Several underlying policy system features are more likely to enhance the ability to engage in meaningful **inclusive** dialogue. These include a lack of restrictions on freedom of expression. Where such restrictions exist, there is likely to be much more selective engagement of participants and the exclusion of key perspectives. These restrictions tend to be more prominent in more autocratic settings where participation can be much more “gated.” Relatedly, inclusion is more likely where there are fewer legal restrictions on freedom of association, including by civil society groups and advocacy organisations. This is particularly critical considering that restrictions on civil society activities have become much more common across the globe over the last decade (31,32). Metric 1F provides an example of how inclusivity can be assessed (Table 2).

Table 2. Examples of metrics under the domain of ‘Stable and Inclusive Policy Landscape’

Metric number	Diagnostic questions	Operationalisation	Expectation	Coding
1A	Are there institutionalised constraints on the executive’s decision-making powers?	Determine the degree to which the political system limits concentrated decision-making. Secondary sources: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Varieties of Democracy database • Variable: <i>v2xnp_pres</i> (“To what extent is the regime characterised by presidentialism?”) • Captures respect for constitution, legislative controls, and judicial constraints. Index runs from 0 (best) to 1 (worst). 	The more constraints, the less likely policy volatility is expected	1: Index is greater than 0.6 2: Index is between 0.3 and 0.6 3: Index is 0.3 or lower
1F	Are there restrictions on freedom of expression and belief?	Extent of respect for press and media freedom, academic and cultural expression, and freedom of ordinary people to discuss political matters at home and in the public sphere. Secondary sources: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Freedom House Freedom in the World database • Variable Freedom of expression and belief (Category D) • Country scores run from 0 (worst) to 16 (best) 	More restrictions imply less inclusive dialogues on food system policies.	1: Scores of 0-5 2: Scores of 6-10 3: Scores of 11-16

Source: Extracted from (3)

DOMAIN 2 – STAKEHOLDER PREFERENCES

Powerful champions can be fundamental for achieving policy reform (9,10). At the same time, well-organised and financed actors in the food system may have strong incentives to stymie reform efforts (11–13).

Stakeholder groups do not necessarily shape policy decisions unless they hold some form of power to either directly make decisions or to influence those who do. Decision-making power typically refers to those who have either agenda-setting or veto power in a particular policy domain, and this often will refer to government stakeholders (14). Influential power captures the role played by other stakeholders who may be able to push for their preferences through different levers (14). For instance, the private sector may be able to use campaign contributions and lobbying resources to obtain their first-choice

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policy. Donors may allocate more financing or technical assistance if the government adopts their favoured policy. And civil society actors may be able to use the media, protests, and advocacy campaigns to gain their preferred policy.

Stakeholders' preferences vis-à-vis a policy issue often determine whether they are proponents, opponents, or neutral participants. Knowing this is critical to ensuring that opposition can be mitigated, or potential champions can be elevated. Uncovering preferences requires disentangling stakeholders' interests and ideas. Circle of influence graphics (Figure 2) are useful for helping to orient stakeholder preferences on a spectrum of support or opposition and for understanding who has decision-making and influencing power (15).

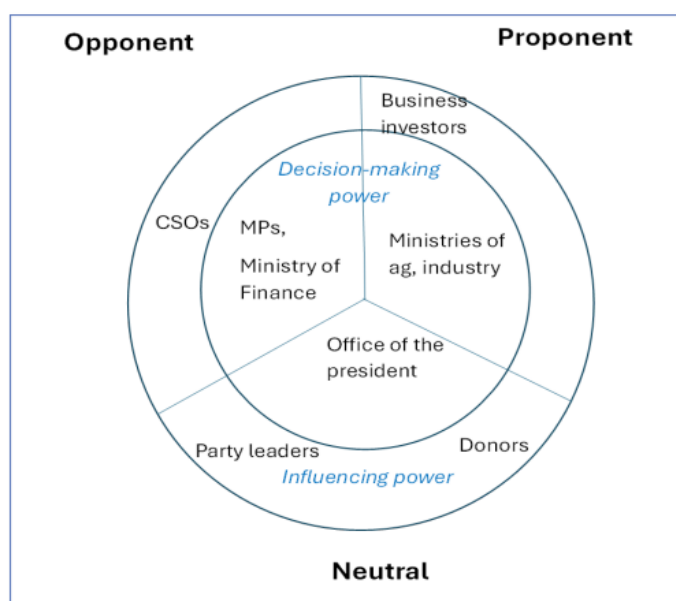


Figure 2. Example of a Circle of Influence Graphic

Source: Figure 1 in (3). Notes: CSOs = civil society organisations, MPs = members of parliament

These approaches can reveal where coalitions that enable (or inhibit) change might exist, thereby allowing practitioners to prioritise their activities to (de)mobilise these coalitions to achieve food system goals, as indicated in metric 2C (Table 3).

Table 3. Example of a metric under the domain of 'Stakeholder Preferences'

Metric number	Diagnostic questions	Operationalisation	Expectation	Coding
2C	What are the preferences of the stakeholders with decision making and influential powers?	Utilise circle of influence mapping to identify which stakeholder groups support or oppose the relevant food system policy and why Primary sources: Interviews with identified stakeholders from 2A	The more opposition from powerful stakeholders, the more likely to face resistance to change	1: Powerful stakeholders are mostly opposed 2: Some powerful stakeholders are opposed while others support 3: Powerful stakeholders are mostly supportive

Source: Extracted from (3)

DOMAIN 3 – MULTI-SECTORAL COORDINATION

A common lament is that policy is too fragmented and contributes to policy incoherence (16). In turn, multi-sectoral coordination is viewed as essential to achieve many complex development goals (17), and the only way to approach ‘functional dilemmas,’ or issues that are highly interconnected and require integrated solutions (18). Such coordination has been viewed as a way of ensuring that policy actions are not limited to ministerial siloes, improving cost sharing, and enhancing policy coherence (19).

Administrative structures and procedures between ministers or agencies have mainly been associated with three different approaches regarding where a coordinating body for multi-sectoral policy implementation is housed: within a sectoral ministry with technical expertise, within a finance or planning ministry, or within an executive office, such as the office of a president or prime minister. Sectoral ministries for multi-sectoral issues can be impeded by both a lack of sufficient authority vis-à-vis other sectoral ministries and insufficient financing for their activities. A finance or planning ministry that leads multi-sectoral activities is more likely to allocate sufficient resources to a multi-sectoral initiative and to ensure its visibility in broader development planning for a country. An executive office often has the most convening authority among ministries and therefore is likely to provide both a high-level political champion for the initiative/policy/strategy and to ensure greater compliance and accountability for outcomes.

Metric 3B, one of eight metrics that can be considered for identifying prospects for multi-sectoral collaboration, proposes a mechanism for assessing this subcomponent (Table 4).

Under multi-sectoral coordination, the toolkit also emphasises that political economy factors, including authority, interests, institutions, and ideas, can be major contributors to the success or lack thereof of coordinating bodies (20,21). Specifically, due to historical factors and the nature of public-sector governance in a particular country, certain ministries or agencies appear to have more authority than others. Such authority may be due to specialised knowledge, a reputation for delivering results, or from holding a position of influence (22).

Table 4. Example of a metric under the domain ‘Multi-sectoral Coordination’

Metric number	Diagnostic questions	Operationalisation	Expectation	Coding
3B	Where is the coordinating body for implementation housed?	Secondary sources: Analysis of relevant documents for the food system policy	Joint leadership by sectoral and planning/budgeting ministry will have the most impact	1: Within a sectoral ministry 2: Within a finance/planning/economy ministry 3: Within an executive office

Source: Extracted from (3)

DOMAIN 4 – MULTILEVEL COORDINATION

This refers to coordination between national governments and subnational tiers over responsibilities and objectives. The scale of coordination will vary significantly across tiers depending on underlying political institutions and distribution of functional mandates, extant coordinating mechanisms that can be leveraged, partisan (dis)incentives across government levels, and other ongoing efforts in the food system space and related domains at the subnational level.

The most significant degree of coordination occurs in federal countries, such as Ethiopia, India, Nigeria, and Pakistan. Federations are characterised by at least two territorial levels of government—usually national and state (or region, province, or canton)—having shared law-making powers and shared sovereignty or constitutional authority. Many unitary (non-federal) countries have moved toward greater decentralisation over the past few decades whereby administrative, fiscal, and political responsibilities are transferred to subnational tiers (e.g., counties, cities, districts) but are not constitutionally guaranteed.

Clear delineation of responsibilities across tiers is essential for effective policy implementation. Metric 4A, one of six different metrics to help consider whether the enabling conditions exist for multi-level collaboration, assesses this dimension (Table 5).

Table 5. Example of a metric under the domain of ‘Multilevel Coordination’

Metric number	Diagnostic questions	Operationalisation	Expectation	Coding
4A	Are mandates clearly defined by tier for relevant food system responsibilities ?	Analysis of legal documents specifying concurrent and exclusive responsibilities Secondary sources: Local Government Acts, Constitutions, <u>OECD/UCLG Database on Subnational Government</u>	Areas where there are more concurrent responsibilities pose greater coordination challenges	1: No 2: Mandates defined but most are concurrent 3: Mandates are defined and few are concurrent

Source: Extracted from (3)

Partisan competition is a genuine concern for multi-level coordination. Vertically divided authority—whereby control of a subnational entity is by a different party than that which governs at the centre—generates unique political economy dynamics. This is particularly so because opposition parties often use their experience governing cities or regions as a springboard for national office; therefore, there is an incentive for nationally governing parties to inhibit, rather than cooperate, with certain subnational entities. For instance, national governments can purposely undermine efficacy by withholding intergovernmental transfers to certain regions or cities, rescinding and recentralising certain powers, or overloading local governments with new responsibilities without equivalent financing (23–26).

DOMAIN 5 – FINANCING

The implementation of any food system policy ultimately requires financial resources. Policy documents without corresponding funding can, over time, undermine citizen trust in a government’s rhetorical commitments. Macroeconomic deterioration or instability can also affect food system investments if creditors have imposed conditionalities that limit the space for manoeuvre. Where financing is available, the source and proportions of such financing are equally important. Financing that is predominantly from donor, technical, or private-sector partners can potentially bias a policy’s activities towards those actors’ preferences. Regardless of whether financing is predominantly from external sources or from own-source revenue, budget transparency instruments are essential to mitigate corruption and increase citizen trust in whether and how finances are invested in food system policies. The existence of appropriate mechanisms of horizontal accountability can facilitate such transparency, including national audit offices, budget accountability offices, and appropriate legislative oversight (27).

Metric 5C provides an example of an approach to operationalising whether countries have sufficiently considered financing constraints and structures to support food system policy investments (Table 6).

Table 6. Example of a metric under the domain of ‘Financing’

Metric number	Diagnostic questions	Operationalisation	Expectation	Coding
5C	To what degree is there transparency over the budget?	<p>Assess degree to which public information on financing and budgets is made available to oversight bodies and the general public and opportunities for public participation in the national budget process</p> <p>Secondary sources:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open Budget Index (OBI) from the International Budget Partnership • Country scores run from 0 (worst) to 100 (best) 	More transparency and oversight ensure accountability for financial commitments to food system policy priorities	<p>1: Less than 40 on OBI</p> <p>2: Between 40 and 60 on OBI</p> <p>3: More than 60 on the OBI</p>

Source: Extracted from (3)

DOMAIN 6 – ADMINISTRATIVE CAPACITIES

Capacity constraints relate specifically to the lack of sufficient human resources to help oversee and implement food system transformation strategies. To determine whether this is a challenge in a particular country, the relevant types of administrative capacities need to be mapped to the food system strategy under consideration and the potential constraints identified.

Political interference in the bureaucracy is a particular vulnerability. On the one hand, politicians may interfere in the bureaucracy to ensure policies are implemented as intended (28). Otherwise, if bureaucrats are given too much discretion, or autonomy, they may pursue their own private goals, including leisure, budget maximisation, or shirking, and thereby undermine policy effectiveness on the ground (29–31). Since politicians are

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elected while bureaucrats are not, the latter cannot be held accountable for unpopular policies, thereby justifying political oversight of bureaucrats' actions.

On the other hand, bureaucrats need autonomy to perform the functions that were delegated to them. Political interference in bureaucratic autonomy can cause public expenditures to be targeted to narrow constituencies rather than to the broader community (32) or result in local politicians using state resources for private gain.

Several sets of databases can facilitate assessments of political interference. These include the Quality of Governance dataset, which uses survey vignettes to identify interference based on the frequency of unethical, unconstitutional, or illegal actions by politicians—either directly or through their staff—to influence bureaucratic decisions (33). The Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project considers the 'extent to which appointment decisions in the state administration are based on personal and political connections, as opposed to skills and merit?' (34). The Global Survey of Public Servants Indicators, which directly surveys public servants across 1,300 institutions in more than 30 countries, is another useful resource (35).¹ Metric 6C provides an example (Table 7).

Table 7. Example of a metric under the domain of 'Administrative Capacities'

Metric number	Diagnostic questions	Operationalisation	Expectation	Coding
6C	To what degree are staff insulated from political interference while performing their jobs?	<p>Identify the extent to which appointment decisions in the state administration are based on personal and political connections, as opposed to skills and merit</p> <p>Secondary sources:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Varieties of Democracy dataset</u> • Variable: Criteria for appointment decisions in the state administration (<i>v2stcritrecadm</i>) • Country scores go from 0 (worst) to 1 (best) 	More political interference in bureaucracy increases likelihood that policies are diverted from original intentions	<p>1: All or most of appointment decisions in state administration are based on personal or political connections (scores between 0 to 0.33)</p> <p>2: About half are based on personal and political connections (scores between 0.33 and 0.66)</p> <p>3: Only few or none of appointments are based on personal or political connections (scores between 0.66 and 1)</p>

Source: Extracted from (3)

OPERATIONALISING THE TOOLKIT – AGGREGATION

The six different modules and corresponding metrics can be used in combination to uncover the largest political economy constraints, or they can be used on their own if

¹ See <https://www.globalsurveyofpublicservants.org/>

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practitioners prefer to focus on a particular challenge. The coding guidelines in the last column of each metric table are based on a 1 to 3 scale whereby a score of 1 indicates a less enabling environment for food systems policy and a 3 indicates a more enabling environment. One advantage of this scoring approach is that it can highlight not only where bottlenecks are most pronounced across the six domains but also among the metrics within each domain. Another advantage of the toolkit is that, for some of the metrics, the domains cannot be scored before a particular analytical component is completed, such as a circle of influence graphic of stakeholder preferences (diagnostic question 2C) or a landscape mapping of relevant donor initiatives (diagnostic question 5B). As such, this leads to the production of additional outputs that can be used for policy planning and engagement as well as for identifying valuable partnerships to advance food systems policy implementation.

The full toolkit provides examples of how to aggregate the metrics, with an application to Mozambique. It also shares examples of best practices for tackling political economy constraints, allowing practitioners to proactively address some of the bottlenecks that they uncover with the toolkit. The toolkit should offer users a practical way to understand and grapple with political economy dynamics as they work to further food systems transformation.

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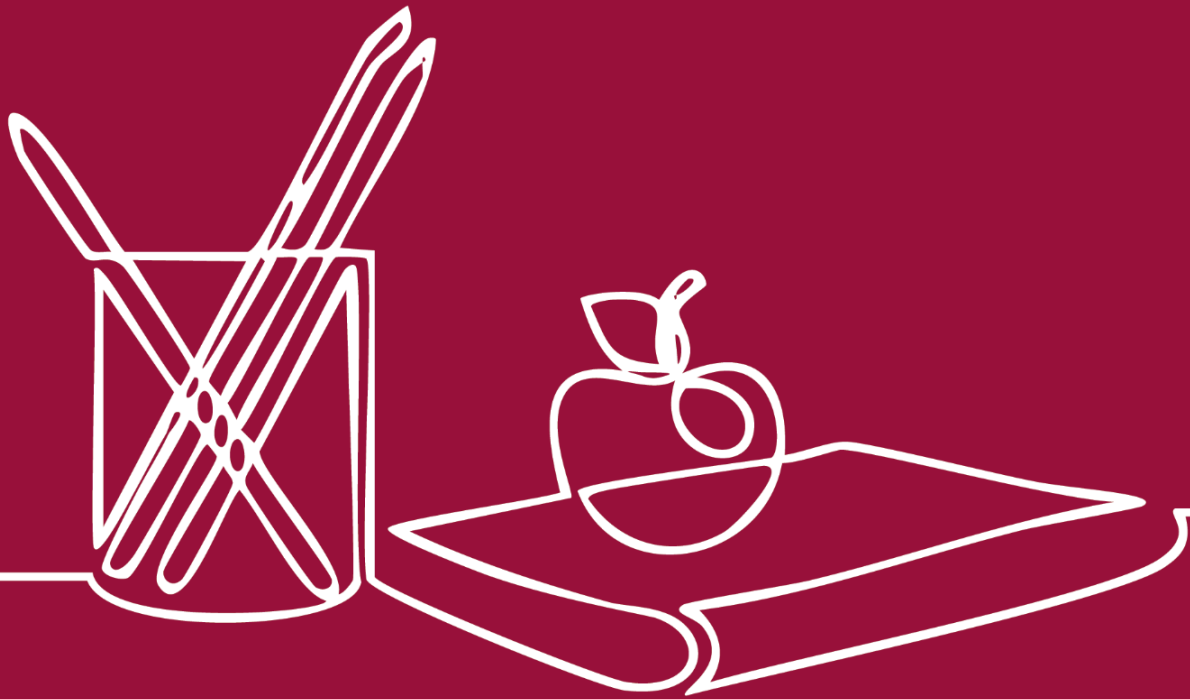
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ABOUT GAIN

The Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN) is a Swiss-based foundation launched at the UN in 2002 to tackle the human suffering caused by malnutrition. Working with governments, businesses and civil society, we aim to transform food systems so that they deliver more nutritious food for all people, especially the most vulnerable.

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