

# SUPPORTING TRANSFORMATION OF FOOD SYSTEMS TO NOURISH PEOPLE AND PLANET: OUR POLICY FOCUS

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## ABOUT THIS BRIEF

As part of our vision and mission at the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN), we are committed to providing **policy support**, as well as to participate in, facilitate and encourage partnerships and alliances to contribute to **food systems transformation**<sup>1</sup>. This brief describes how and why we take the approach we do at both national and global levels, including key features of the way we work. Some examples are shared.



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<sup>1</sup> *Food systems transformation* means radical shifts in the way our food systems function – including their purpose, rules, and power structures. Ideally, such transformation will improve food systems outcomes including: food and nutrition security, healthy diets, social and economic wellbeing, environmental health and sustainability.

## KEY MESSAGES

- In this **critical decade** for food systems transformation, the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition is focusing support to government-led processes driving transformational change in food systems in 12 countries in **Africa and Asia** with a combined population exceeding 2.7 billion.
- We are helping to strengthen policy decision-making processes based on evidence, to build and implement more **impactful and coherent** food systems policy frameworks, plans, and actions driving change to benefit people and planet.
- Four features of our work stand out. We support **country-led processes** for legitimacy and scale. We work on **capacity-building**, providing technical support to improve capacity and effectiveness, while driving sustainability and reach. We encourage **multi-stakeholder**, consultative processes to amplify underrepresented perspectives. We build in iterative, **continual learning**.
- For food systems transformation to achieve its promise – meaningful impacts on people’s wellbeing and the health of our natural world – requires an ambitious cultural shift. **We encourage partnerships and alliances – a steadfast ecosystem of support** – to work together on this crucial mandate.

### GAIN'S VISION

**Healthier diets for all people, especially the most vulnerable, from more sustainable food systems.**

### GAIN'S MISSION

**Improve the consumption of healthier diets for all, especially the most vulnerable, by improving the availability, affordability, desirability, and sustainability of nutritious and safe foods, and reducing the consumption of unhealthy and unsafe foods.**



## Figure 1: Where we work

Source: GAIN website [www.gainhealth.org](http://www.gainhealth.org)



## OUR COMMITMENT TO SUPPORT FOOD SYSTEMS TRANSFORMATION THROUGH POLICY

In a world where most people struggle to eat in a way that supports health and wellbeing, GAIN continues to strive for healthier diets.

GAIN celebrated 20 years of making a change in 2022, and we proceed with an even greater emphasis on transformation. Policy work is crucial to this, as reflected in our Strategy 2023-2027<sup>2</sup>.

Policy work has always been part of GAIN's portfolio, as a recognised way to achieve improvements in nutrition at scale, often focusing on specific topics such as food fortification legislation. Recent years have seen it integrated more rigorously throughout the organisation, as our approach to policy grows more holistic – not centred on specific topics, but considering policy dynamics across food systems and the way they interact.

A large body of policy work at GAIN in support of transformational changes in national food systems began in earnest at the start of this decade, in advance of the first United Nations Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) 2021. Before the summit, all countries were urged to organize national food systems dialogues. In alliance with other partners, we supported several countries to hold these multistakeholder meetings and develop their national food systems transformation pathways. The Summit concluded in 2021, but with a strong call for sustained action we are now supporting countries in the process of refining and implementing their food systems pathways and policies. In addition, we support countries to improve coherence and implementation of existing policies, so that statements and intentions translate to real action and impact.

1 For more on GAIN's strategy see <https://www.gainhealth.org/about/strategy>.

**Food systems**<sup>3</sup> have been climbing international and national agendas. If progress towards universally desirable objectives like the World Health Assembly **Global Targets 2025**, seeking to improve maternal, infant and young child nutrition, or the 2030 **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)** like *Zero Hunger* and *Sustainable Consumption and Production*, or indeed **climate** and **biodiversity** commitments set out in Conferences of the Parties is to accelerate, food systems cannot be left to business-as-usual.

**126 countries have submitted documents as ‘pathways’ to national food systems transformation as a result of the inaugural United Nations Food Systems Summit in 2021**

This is a **critical decade for food systems transformation**.

**HIGH AMBITION AND HIGH CHALLENGE**

The good news is that country commitment to transforming food systems is very high in most of the dozen countries where our efforts focus – these are **Bangladesh, Benin, Ethiopia, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Mozambique, Nigeria, Pakistan, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda**<sup>4</sup>. This has been spurred in large part by the UNFSS and reflects the growing recognition that transformed food systems have strong potential to accelerate progress on SDGs. **Nigeria**, for instance, produced a pathway document<sup>5</sup> highlighting seventy-eight actions to be taken in the short- and long-term to improve its food system; **Tanzania** held dialogues across all the agroecological zones of the country to diagnose and find solutions for food systems issues; while **Indonesia** convened around 1,500 people in diverse multi-stakeholder dialogues to identify key actions under five priority categories<sup>6</sup>.

Most of the countries where we work show similar high ambition for transformative change – emphasised at the stocktaking moment (UNFSS +2) which took place in July 2023 (Figure 2 shares some snapshots).

GAIN welcomes this type of ambition and seeks to find ways to assist those in decision-making positions to be able to deliver on it.



3 For a pamphlet describing food systems see <https://www.gainhealth.org/media/news/what-are-food-systems>  
 4 The combined population of these countries is estimated to exceed 2.7 billion in 2024 – comprising about a third of the 8.1 billion estimate for global population in 2024.  
 5 Nigeria National Pathways to Food Systems Transformation. Sep 2021. Available at: <https://www.unfoodsystemshub.org/member-state-dialogue/dialogues-and-pathways/en>  
 6 1) End hunger, improve diets, promote coastal and ocean-based food; 2) Protect and restore natural resources; 3) Inclusive business; 4) Resilient and local food systems; and 5) Inclusive governance

**Figure 2: Policy support in action – GAIN staff with teams from Bangladesh, Mozambique, and Nigeria**



GAIN staff standing with the Bangladesh delegation to the UNFSS 2023 stocktaking moment

GAIN Executive Director Lawrence Haddad meeting the Vice-President of Nigeria His Excellency The Honourable Kashim Shettima at the UNFSS 2023 stocktaking moment

Mozambique’s UNFSS team preparing for the stocktaking moment

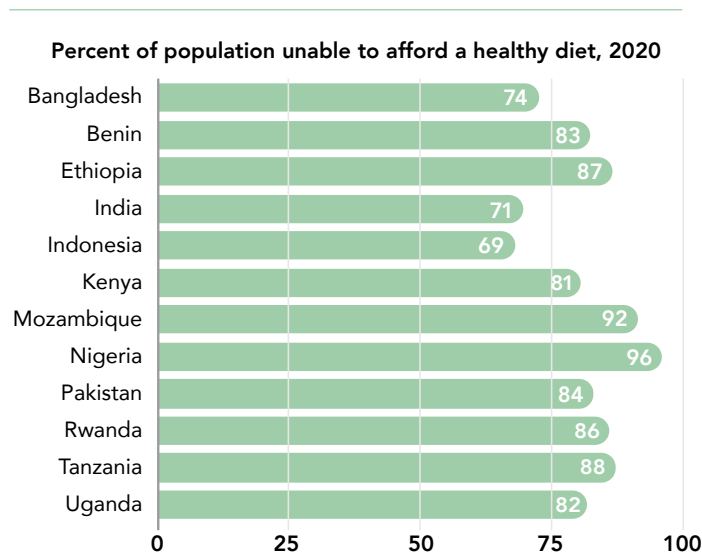
**Note:** Panel A: GAIN staff together with the Bangladesh delegation to the UNFSS 2023 stocktaking moment. Panel B: Mr. Vice President His Excellency The Honourable Kashim Shettima. Panel C: The UNFSS Committee for Mozambique (CINUSA) led by the National Convenor submitted its first voluntary progress report on the transformation of food systems, in preparation for the July 2023 Food Systems Stock-Taking Moment.

**Challenges remain.** A scan of the socio-political context in the countries where GAIN operates<sup>7</sup> shows that food systems transformation can be hindered by a range of political economy issues. Food is an economic, health, and environment issue. An emotional and cultural issue. **Four in ten people globally** can’t afford a healthy diet, but for the countries where GAIN operates, the figures are far starker (Figure 3) – **seven in ten; eight in ten; nine in ten.**

The task of transforming pathway documents and statements into effective, actionable, resourced, monitorable progress is no small feat. No country – including the rich and relatively well-resourced – has transformed its food system to meet the needs of the most vulnerable, while protecting and preserving the environment. This would need sizeable political, economic, and cultural shifts. There is thus no detailed blueprint to follow.

There is, however, a large body of thinking and doing around transformative change in food systems that we can draw upon in our approach.

**Figure 3: Healthy diets for all are a distant end-goal in these 12 countries**



**Note:** Estimate of % of population with food budget below the cost of a healthy diet in 2020. Food budget defined as 52% of household income, based on the average share of income that households in low-income countries spend on food.

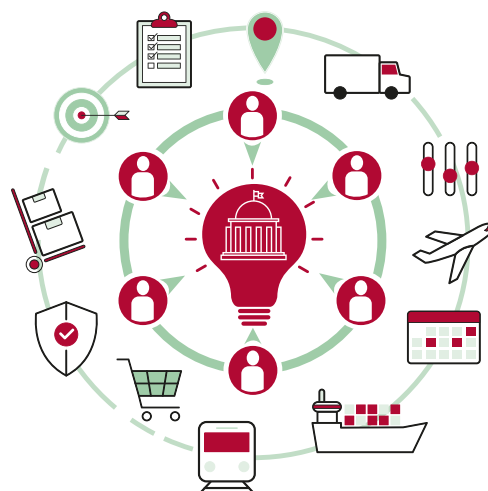
**Source:** Food Systems Dashboard

<sup>7</sup> A paper on this topic is forthcoming in 2024.

## NATIONAL POLICY SUPPORT AT GAIN: KEY FEATURES OF OUR WORK

Four key features underly our work:

1. Working with **government-led** processes;
2. Building government **capacity and effectiveness**, including through improving evidence-based policymaking;
3. Strengthening **multistakeholder engagement**; and
4. Continual **learning** and knowledge sharing



First, we are committed to supporting **government-led** initiatives and their vision around transforming food systems because this brings both legitimacy, and ultimately has a higher potential to scale up. The focus of our support is to strengthen food systems policy **decision making processes** including policy design and implementation to deliver more impactful, coherent, and meaningful transformation of food systems.

As part of this work, we nurture relationships with key government stakeholders including government convenors and civil servants in technical support roles, as well as representatives of the United Nations Rome Based Agencies<sup>8</sup> and other partners who work on the shared mandate of food systems transformation – members of the ecosystem of support (EoS – see Box A).

### Box A: Strong ecosystems of support are needed to drive systemic transformation

Since the UNFSS, a range of organisations have taken on roles to support governments in the implementation of their food systems transformation 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.

Recent principles and recommendations proposed regarding EoS include:

- Respecting the leadership role of national governments as expressed through the office of the national convenors while including all relevant stakeholders in the membership of the EoS.
- Working with practices that are transparent and accountable.
- 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.
- Flexibility in the structure and function of each EoS is encouraged to allow for adaptation to specific contexts.

**Note:** for more see <https://www.gainhealth.org/resources/reports-and-publications/gain-discussion-paper-series-15-food-system-pathways-improving>

Second, we look to **build capacity** to deliver on transformative change and sustain it. Building government **capacity**<sup>9</sup> to address food systems challenges is a route to greater impact and sustainability. This means building national and sub-national government capacity to effectively use evidence and tools (those now available and those still-to-be-generated) to inform realistic transformational planning, budgeting, and implementation. Evidence-based policymaking<sup>10</sup> is thus a key outcome of capacity building.

Can this approach help lower-income countries to side-step some of the mistakes their higher-income cousins have made, particularly with respect to food systems generating undesirable outcomes in health, climate, environment, and jobs? While GAIN follows a government-led approach, we also try to guide governments in areas where the evidence supports it (i.e. to strengthen the process of decision making, and to ultimately yield policy changes that lead to improvements in human and planetary health).

**“As evidence has driven the climate campaign, it will increasingly shape the food campaign.”**

**Lawrence Haddad,  
Executive Director, GAIN**

**“While the journey has been rewarding, it has also presented challenges, including limited access to resources and multilateral spaces for young people, especially in vulnerable, situations and remote areas.”**

**Azeez Salawu, youth stakeholder and Act4Food activist, Nigeria<sup>12</sup>**

Third is boosting **multistakeholder engagement** within government – to improve horizontal and vertical coordination – and beyond government and the usual suspects to a greater and wider cross-section of civil society, academic and progressive private sector stakeholders (Box B). Food systems transformation must put people at the centre – but it cannot be exclusive. This is a large part of what amplifying voices of marginalised people is about<sup>11</sup>.

### **Box B: The private sector in all its forms must participate, lead, and support food systems transformation**

At GAIN, we are committed to work with the private sector – to help curb negative actions while promoting positive ones. Businesses appear everywhere in food systems, and small and medium-scale enterprises are the suppliers, innovators, and deliverers of the food eaten by most people in the countries where GAIN works. Affordable, healthy diets for all cannot be achieved without actions by those that grow, manufacture, distribute and market food to people. GAIN supports private sector actors to align with the nutrition and health needs of consumers, pioneering sustainable production and distribution methods, and protecting the environment.

**Note:**<sup>13</sup>

9 Key areas of capacity-building include: a) working within governments to set up more integrated governance across departments or remits to build consensus across disparate agendas linked to food systems; b) helping to troubleshoot policy incoherence; c) helping with interpretation and action on evidence – e.g. as supplied by subnational food systems dashboards, or through tools like the Policy Coherence Diagnostic and I-CAN; and d) supporting to appropriately budget and finance transformation including through use of tools like 3FS.

10 This approach believes that better quality decisions can be taken when informed by robust evidence (including e.g. up-to-date data, academic studies,

11 Multi-stakeholder groups are often considered a strong means of promoting dialogue and building consensus [e.g. Truex, Rory and Sørveide, Tina, Why Multi-Stakeholder Groups Succeed and Fail (December 1, 2010). World Bank Policy Research Working Paper No. 5495, Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=1721333>]

12 Hear more reflections from Azeez on the Bite the Talk GAIN podcast here <https://www.gainhealth.org/media/podcasts/unfss-stocktaking-series-wrap-up>

13 For more on this subject see <https://www.gainhealth.org/media/news/engage-or-not-engage-private-sector-advance-nutrition> and Fanzo J, Shawar, YR, Shyam, T, Das, S and Shiffman, J. Food System PPPs: Can they Advance Public Health and Business Goals at the Same Time? Analysis and Ideas for Moving Forward. Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN). Discussion Paper #6. Geneva, Switzerland, 2020. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36072/dp.6>

**Figure 4: GAIN Policy meeting with representatives from over 10 GAIN country offices, Istanbul, 2022**

Fourth, we seek to generate and apply **cross-country learning**, to add to the public good of a high-quality evidence base, and to benefit from it as we proceed. Figure 4 shows GAIN's Policy teambuilding and cross-country learning group meeting in person in 2022. We aim to continually inform processes in one place where we work with lessons drawn from other work in progress.



Part of our strategy as an organisation involves learning what works for universal objectives of human and planetary health – to ensure GAIN lives up to the promise of being a beacon to others seeking to accelerate positive transformations in food systems; to allow us to spotlight progress, and to mirror in our own programming the successes observed elsewhere. We are building as we work as set of stories, case studies, and exemplars of change in this area.

## **GAIN'S TAILORED APPROACH**

So, what characterises GAIN's approach? We work at multiple levels – globally, to build partnerships with key stakeholders in or adjacent to the food systems community, and (sub)nationally to support country-led national transformation. Our national focus is on scaling and linking – making food systems policies more impactful and coherent, aiming to strengthen the food systems decision making process.

**“The focus of our support is to strengthen food systems policy decision making processes to deliver more impactful and coherent policies.”**

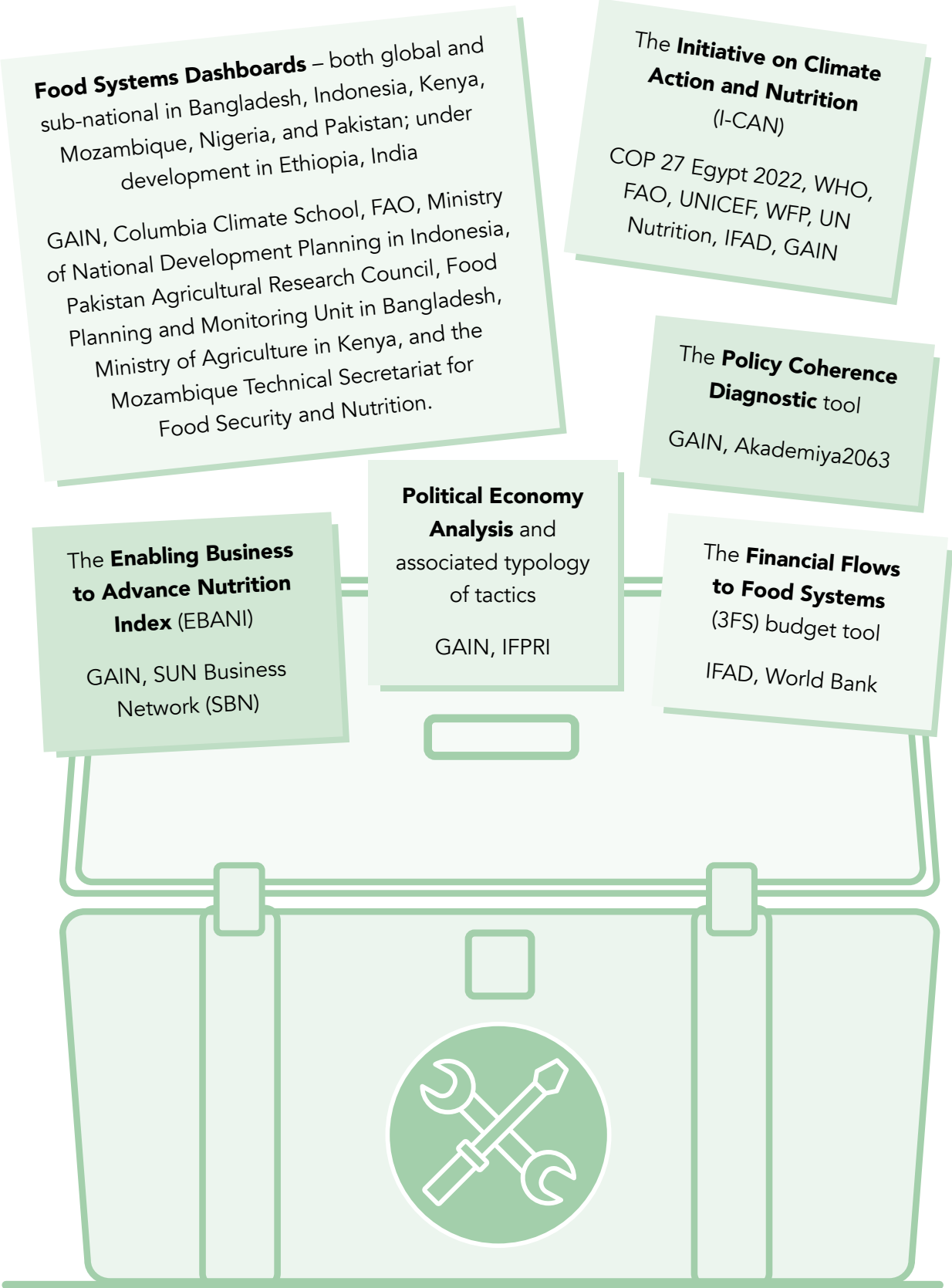
**Jamie Morrison, Senior Advisor, GAIN**

To help shape better implementation plans, we plan to participate in the development and the roll-out of several new support tools. Figure 5 catalogues those available or under development. These are tools which GAIN has committed to help develop, or which we are well-placed to help capacitate key decision-makers in governments to apply.





**Figure 5: Key tools for more coherent and impactful food systems policy that exist or are under development**



## WHAT TOOLS ARE IN THE BOX?

The **Policy Coherence Diagnostic** tool GAIN is developing with the support of Akademiya2063 will assess:

- a) whether the needed policy mechanisms and structures are in place to foster coherent policy processes,
- b) if existing food system policies address main desired outcomes and any conflicts; and
- c) how consistent food system policies are within the social and political context, including with stakeholders' interests and political power.

The **Food Systems Dashboard** (FSD) currently offers data for about 300 indicators at the national level, but more granular data is being added to empower country-level decisions, and prototype **subnational Food Systems Dashboards**, nationally owned<sup>14</sup>, are being rolled out in Bangladesh, Indonesia, Kenya, Mozambique, Nigeria<sup>15</sup>, and Pakistan. Subnational dashboards are also at an early stage in the development process for Ethiopia and India, with plans to extend to more countries soon. All subnational dashboards plan to develop 'diagnose and decide' functions. Moreover, the global FSD will include a special subset of indicators chosen in the Food Systems Countdown Initiative (FSCI) that provide a baseline for and track food systems change across five critical indicator themes: Diets, nutrition and health; Environment, natural resources, and production; Livelihoods, poverty, and equity; Governance; and Resilience<sup>16</sup>.

GAIN also recently conducted a **Political Economy Analysis** in nine of the focus countries to identify potential political economy challenges which may constrain the advancement of food systems transformation<sup>17</sup>. To assist development partners in navigating these challenges, a decision tool drawing on examples of what has worked/hasn't worked will be developed to propose a **typology of tactics**. In parallel we plan to use other strategies as well, such as but not limited to sensitize and build the capacity of new parliamentarians following regime change and to support budget tracking at national and subnational levels.

The **Initiative on Climate Action and Nutrition** (I-CAN) aims to support Member States in delivering climate change adaptation and mitigation policy which simultaneously improves nutrition and triggers transformative action to deliver healthy diets from sustainable food systems. The I-CAN baseline report<sup>18</sup> revealed the current state of integration between climate and nutrition is low; however, there are many opportunities where climate and nutrition can be integrated more closely to drive wins in both areas.

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14 For example, in Pakistan, the Pakistan Agricultural Research Council has established a dedicated office to oversee the development and maintenance of the Pakistan FSD, securing its long-term sustainability.

15 For example, Nigeria's launched in September 2023. It can be accessed under the Nigeria Country Profile on the FSD site (<https://www.foodsystemsdashboard.org/>).

16 For more information on the FSCI please visit <https://www.foodcountdown.org/>

17 Five categories of challenge were identified: 1. Institutional coherence – weak horizontal coordination due to positioning of coordination structure (balance of authority to convene ministries vs location of technical skills); lack of vertical coordination due to capacity limitations at subnational level, partisanship influencing budget distributions; 2. Policy coherence – misalignment due to layering of new policies on old; the exclusion of key outcomes including environment and social inclusion; 3. Political volatility – changes in government resulting in shifts in momentum and/or shifts in priorities; 4. Societal conflict around food systems, for example Large Scale Food Fortification in India; 5. Implementation issues including weak financing processes, high indebtedness limiting room for manoeuvre, capacity limitations.

18 Download the baseline I-CAN report here <https://www.gainhealth.org/sites/default/files/publications/documents/Accelerating-Action-and-Opening-Opportunities-A-Closer-Integration-of-Climate-and-Nutrition.pdf>

The **Enabling Business to Advance Nutrition Index** (EBANI)<sup>19</sup> is a tool to stimulate dialogue between government, business, and other actors to improve the enabling environment for nutrition. It measures the policy and legislative enablers for increasing private sector investment in safe, nutritious diets across the 30 countries. It has been envisaged as both a global and a national advocacy tool that can help to start conversations and spark ideas around key recommendations to make policy and legislative environments more enabling for businesses, SMEs in particular, to contribute to advancing positive nutrition outcomes.

The **Financial Flows to Food Systems** (3FS) budget tool, co-designed by IFAD and the World Bank, aims to provide evidence for smart investment decisions including: How much financing goes towards the food system? To which parts? Does it target areas and people most in need. What are the gaps and needs?

Throughout our work, we also aim to mainstream three crucial cross-cutting themes:

- 1) **gender**, with a focus on amplifying the voices and meeting the needs and priorities of women and girls (see Box B for an example in Pakistan);
- 2) **environment**, breaking down silos between 'food' and 'nature' communities and reflecting GAIN's ambition to become the greenest nutrition NGO in the world, and
- 3) protecting the **most vulnerable** and excluded, with a renewed emphasis on overcoming legislative and social barriers they face.

#### Box B: Gender mainstreaming our policy work in Pakistan

GAIN's policy team in Pakistan recently applied a framework developed in house – called the Gender Analysis for Policy (GAP) tool – to assess the gender responsiveness of food systems policy and recommend areas where changes can make policies and the National Pathways more gender responsive. This work is aligned to parallel efforts in Pakistan to improve nutrition-sensitivity and gender-transformative potential of Food Distribution Networks: the nation-wide system of non-governmental social protection mechanisms that provide hot meals to vulnerable beneficiaries.



19 EBANI resources are available at <https://sunbusinessnetwork.org/enabling-business-to-advance-nutrition-index-ebani/>

## PROGRESS BEING MADE BUT SUSTAINED EFFORT NEEDED

GAIN's commitment to food systems transformation continues to be strong after the UNFSS 2021, and beyond the 2023 Stocktaking Moment. Many national (and sub-national) governments we work with also display a strong, sustained commitment. But more countries, organisations, agencies, and other stakeholders need to come together; to work to make the ambitions a reality.

The task is monumental. Dedicated and sustained resourcing of plans is needed everywhere. GAIN's work focuses in just 12 countries, and the transformation task facing each requires far more support than is currently available. The **ecosystem of support** (Box A) must grow, coordinate, and collaborate better.

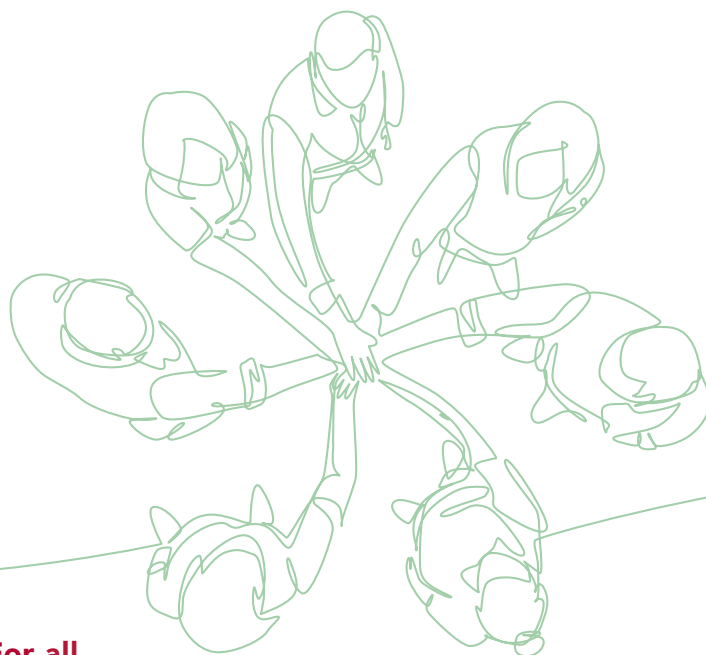
Support, including technical support and financing, must be adequately coordinated to resource the ambitious and challenging action plans.

Now we need to take plans and statements forward to drive progress in outcomes – particularly in terms of better decisions being made by policymakers. Only then will we start to see impacts accruing and scaling.

GAIN – through our programming in 12 countries and our wider support to the global efforts behind food systems transformation – is supporting positive change.

There is much work to do in this crucial decade for our health and wellbeing and the health of our planet and the creatures we share it with. As the UN Secretary-General *António Guterres* said at the UNFSS in 2021:

**“ Food is life – and food is hope. Change in food systems is not only possible, it is necessary. For people. For our planet. For prosperity. This is our moment. Let's get to work.”**



**Healthier diets. For all.**

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