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Advance Equitable Livelihoods - a paper on Food Systems Summit Action Track 4 -

Lynnette M. Neufeld, Jikun Huang, Ousmane
Badiane, Patrick Caron, Lisa Sennerby Forsse

A paper from the Scientific Group of the UN Food Systems Summit¹

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Mario Herrero Acosta (Costa Rica) Chief Research Scientist of Agriculture and Food, The Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO).

Ousmane Badiane (Senegal) Chairperson of Akademiya2063, former Africa Director for the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI).

Patrick Caron (France) Vice President of the University of Montpellier, President of Agropolis International and Director of the Montpellier Advanced Knowledge Institute on Transitions

Martin Cole (Australia) is Professor for Agriculture and Food within the Commonwealth Science and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO). Chairperson of the HLPE Steering Committee of CFS.

Ismahane Elouafi (Morocco) Chief Scientist, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO).

Frank A. Ewert (Germany) Scientific Director, Leibniz Centre for Agricultural Landscape Research (ZALF).

Sheryl L. Hendriks (South Africa) Professor of Food Security & Director, Institute for Food, Nutrition and Well-being, University of Pretoria.

Thomas W. Hertel (USA) Professor of Agricultural Economics at Purdue University and Executive Director of the Global Trade Analysis Project (GTAP).

Jikun Huang (China) Professor at School of Advanced Agricultural Sciences and Director of China Center for Agricultural Policy (CCAP), Peking University.

Marta Hugas (Spain) Chief Scientist at European Food Safety Authority (EFSA).

Elizabeth Hodson de Jaramillo (Colombia) Professor Em. School of Sciences of the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, and member of Inter American Network of Academies of Sciences (IANAS).

Andrew Kambugu (Uganda) Executive Director Infectious Diseases Institute (IDI), College of Health Sciences, Makerere University. Co-founder of the Researchers for Global Health (R4GH) initiative.

Kaoru Kitajima (Japan) Professor at Kyoto University Graduate School of Agriculture; a forest ecologist, especially in tropical America and Asia.

Rattan Lal (India) Professor of Soil Science, Director of the Carbon Management and Sequestration Center at Ohio State University. World Food Prize Laureate 2020.

Hoesung Lee (South Korea) Chair, Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), Professor at Korea University Graduate School of Energy and Environment, Seoul.

Uma Lele (India) is President of the International Association of Agricultural Economists (IAAE).

Lynnette M. Neufeld (Canada) incoming President of the International Union of Nutrition Scientists (IUNS), Director Knowledge Leadership, Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN).

Urs Niggli (Switzerland) Scientist focusing on sustainable farming systems, from 1990 to 2020 he led the Research Institute of Organic Agriculture (FiBL)

Claudia Sadoff (USA) Executive Management Team Convener and Managing Director, Research Delivery and Impact, of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research

Lisa Sennerby Forsse (Sweden) past President, Royal Swedish Academy of Agriculture and Forestry (KSLA) and was the vice-chancellor of the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences 2006-2015.

Jean-François Soussana (France) is Vice-President of International Policy at the Institute national de la recherche agronomique (INRAE).

Morakot Tanticharoen (Thailand) Professor and Senior Advisor to the President of the National Science and Technology Development Agency (NSTDA), research in microbiology and biotechnology.

Maximo Torero (Peru) ex-officio Member Chief Economist, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO).

Aman Wirakartakusumah (Indonesia) Professor Em. at Department of Food Science and Technology and Senior Scientist at SEAFast Center, Bogor Agricultural University (IPB), President-Elect, International Union of Food Science and Technology.

David Zilberman (Israel, USA) Professor in the Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics, University of California at Berkeley. One of the Founders of the International Consortium of Applied Bio-economy Research (ICABR).

ACTION TRACK 4: Advance equitable livelihoods

Lynnette M. Neufeld, Jikun Huang, Ousmane Badiane, Patrick Caron, Lisa Sennerby Forsse

Abstract

Food systems transformation provides the opportunity to shift current trends in all forms of malnutrition, prioritizing nutritious food availability and affordability for all – from shifting priorities in agricultural production, to improved food systems that favour nutrition and sustainability. The task of Action Track 4 is to explore approaches to doing so that will ensure equitable livelihoods for producers, businesses, workers across the food system and consumers, with particular emphasis on addressing inequalities and power imbalances. As the Science Group for AT 4, we explore the nature of these issues, using the drivers of food systems as articulated by the High Level Panel of Experts of the UN Committee on World Food Security¹ as framing. Small and medium sized producers and people living on the food system in rural and urban areas are disproportionately affected by all **biophysical and environmental drivers** including soil and water resources, and climate change. Unequal opportunity in access to all types of resources reduces overall production, resilience, rural transformation. Advances in **innovation, technology and infrastructure** have had important impacts on food production and sustainability, transportation and processing along food value chains, marketing, and ultimately diets, including consumption of both nutritious and unhealthy foods. But achievement of equitable livelihoods in food systems will require that issues of access to contextually suitable innovation and technology be substantially enhanced, and that such advances better build on and learn from indigenous knowledge. Many **economic and political factors** are essential causes of inequality and power imbalances at household, community, national and global levels, which constrain the ability of food systems transformation to deliver poverty reduction and sustainable, equitable livelihoods. Finally, vast evidence illustrates that several **socio-cultural and demographic drivers** underpin inequalities among and within societies and constrain the potential for some to benefit from actions to improve livelihoods, particularly women, youth, disabled, elderly, and indigenous peoples. These issues are exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic is having a significant impact on the global commodity markets and trading systems, economic growth, incomes, and poverty levels, with likely disproportionate burden on the vulnerable communities in both urban and rural areas. This is likely to worsen inequalities and undernutrition including child wasting. To address these issues, we must transform not only food systems, but the structures and systems that continue to enable and exacerbate inequities. Drivers of food systems inequities are highly interconnected and progress to address one will likely require change across several. For example, globalization and trade interact with other powerful drivers, especially technology resource mobilization, and demographic trends, which shape food production, distribution, and consumption. Drawing of this evidence review, in the final section we reflect on several factors that should be part of effective solutions, including grounding in rights-based approaches. We then share a series of recommendations aimed to enhance inclusive decision making, protect the livelihoods of those living in situations of vulnerability while creating opportunities, adapting institutions and policies to favour equitable food systems livelihoods, and increasing investment to realize the potential of improved institutional and policy actions. We invite governments, businesses, and organizations to hold themselves and others to account for ensuring equitable livelihoods, and open avenues to realize the potential of science, innovation, technology, and evidence to favour equitable livelihoods.

Introduction:

Food systems transformation provides the opportunity to shift current trends in all forms of malnutrition, prioritizing nutritious food availability and affordability for all – from shifting priorities in agricultural production, to improved food systems that favour nutrition and sustainability.

The purpose of the Action Track 4 science group is to provide the scientific basis for the work of the Action Track (AT). Our task as the science group encompasses reviewing the evidence that studies the nature of the issues and the evidence that underpins potential solutions. It also helps identifying uncertainty and gaps in knowledge. The central issue identified by the AT 4 team has been stated as:

Inequality and power imbalances – at household, community, national and global levels – are consistently constraining the ability of food systems to deliver poverty reduction and sustainable, equitable livelihoods.

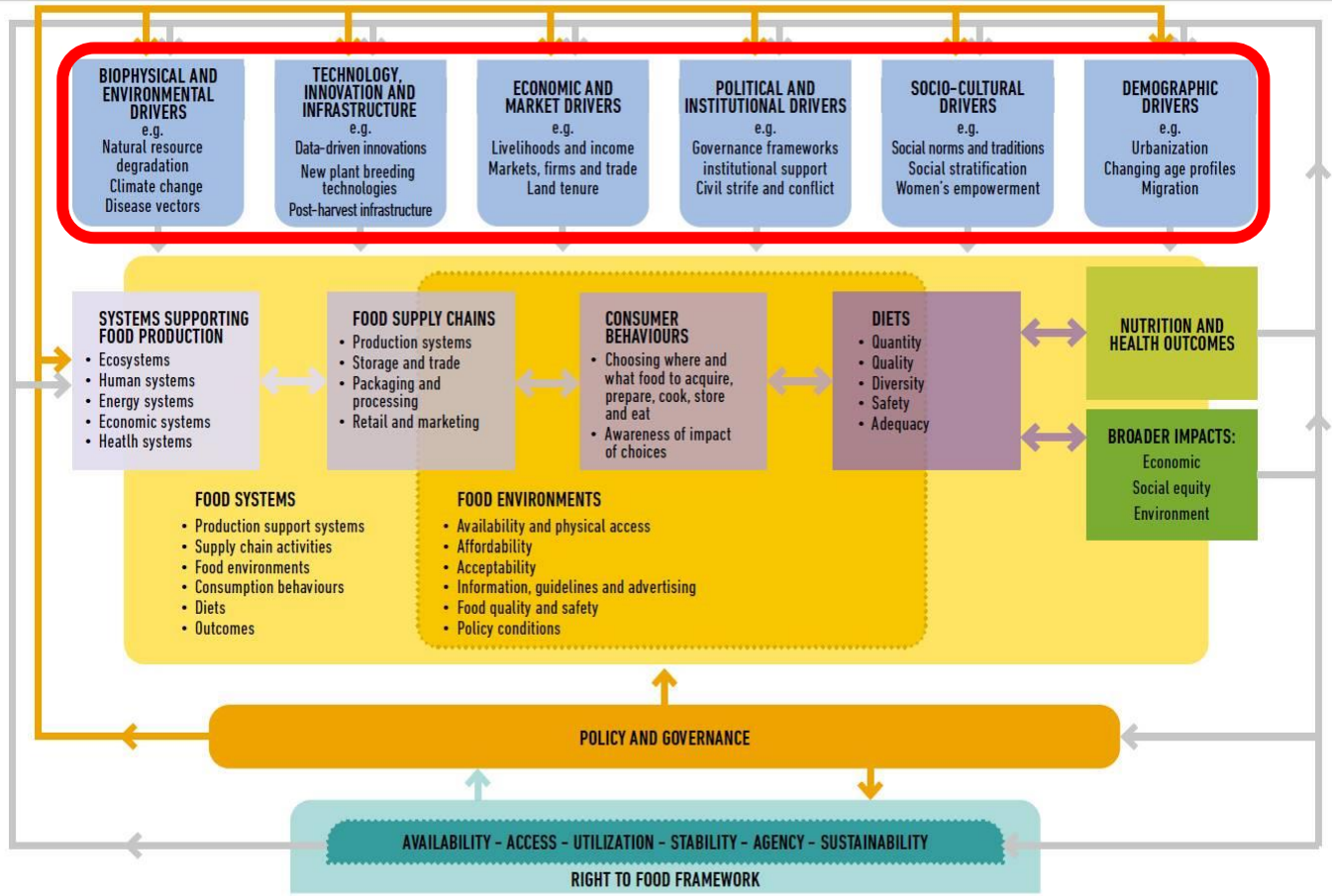
In developing solutions, AT 4 explicitly calls out inequities related to gender, youth, elderly, minority, migrant, and indigenous peoples. They focus on small and medium size enterprises (SMEs) across the food value chain, but also equitable access to employment and livelihoods for wage earners, extending the concerns of inequality to rural/ urban and other social and geographic divides. Efforts to address inequality and power imbalances must build agency, change relations, and transform the structures that underpin this imbalance of power and result in inequalities, as illustrated in the following figure (Figure credit: Action Track 4 Discussion Starter, October 2020):



The most effective way to sustainably eradicate poverty and inequality is to boost the opportunities and capacities of the poor and those living in situations of vulnerability, through redistributing resources more equitably (e.g., land, incomes, social protection), ensuing quality education, progressive and not regressive taxation, state infrastructure investments among other approaches. There is no linear relationship between productivity, production and income, food security, or reduced inequalities.² Decision-making must also become more equitable and accountable to those who are most negatively affected by our current food system and their outcomes. Progress in advancing equitable livelihoods and value distribution therefore involve several key areas ranging from expanding access to assets, infrastructure, and services as well as other required measures to enhance quality of living spaces. Interventions to produce real change on the ground need to empower the poor and those living situations of vulnerability.

To fulfil our task as the science group, we need to step back and consider the evidence related to the drivers of inequality and power imbalances as they relate to livelihoods *across* the food system. We use the conceptual framework of food systems developed by the High-Level Panel of Experts of the UN Committee on world Food Security in 2017,³ and updated in 2020,¹ and structure this review around the six drivers of food systems (as highlighted in the red box of Figure 1).

Figure 1. Conceptual framework of sustainable food systems (reduced from HLPE¹)



Framed around the drivers of sustainable food systems (combining them where the nature of the evidence warrants), the following sections provide an overview of the nature of the issue as it relates to drivers of inequality and power imbalances. Our intent is to explore these drivers as they relate to livelihoods among those living in situations of vulnerability, including consumers and producers and all types of workers across all food systems types and contexts (see⁴ for definitions and concepts related to food systems). In the final section, we provide examples from the literature that can inform potential solutions to address the issues.

1. Biophysical and environmental drivers, particularly soil, water, and climate change:

In rural areas of many low- and middle-income countries (LMIC), natural resources are an important source of food, both through direct consumption and through providing the basis for income generating activities (e.g., food and no-food cash crops, forest, and fishery products). Access to natural resources like land, water, forests, and fisheries is a key element of livelihood strategies (“natural capital”), together with other elements such as access to employment and/or credit (“financial capital”). Because of this, measures to improve access to resources are an important element of strategies for the realization of the right to food (see conclusion section below for further discussion).⁵ Small and medium sized producers and people living on the food system in rural and urban areas are disproportionately affected by all biophysical and environmental drivers including soil and water resources. Inequal opportunities to access all types of resources defers overall production, resilience, rural transformation, thus directly affecting the livelihoods of all actors across food value chains via diverse pathways.

The number of people whose livelihoods depends on degraded lands has been estimated to be about 1.5 billion worldwide.⁶ In India for example, 146.8 out of the estimated 329 million hectares of total geographical area is reported as degraded.⁷ People living in degraded areas depend directly on natural resources for subsistence, food security, and income. Women and youth often have limited options and are especially vulnerable to land degradation and climate change. Land degradation reduces productivity and increases the workload of managing the land, disproportionately affecting women in some regions.⁸ Land degradation and climate change act as threat multipliers for already precarious livelihoods, with consequences for increased risks of poverty, food insecurity, and in some cases migration, conflict and loss of cultural heritage.⁹ The major anthropogenic drivers of erosion are land use and climate change, in particular through a more intense hydrological cycle.¹⁰ While much research attention has focused on arable agriculture,¹¹ seminatural systems, such water may account for nearly half of global soil erosion.¹² There are many indications that water is becoming an increasingly scarce resource, a point often made over the last 10 years.^{13,14} Access to water is now recognised as a prerequisite for poverty reduction.¹⁵ Competition for water from many different sectors however, can divert attention from its role in the improvement of human livelihoods.¹⁶

Climate change is the defining issue of our time and we are at a defining moment. From shifting weather patterns that threaten food production, to rising sea levels that increase the risk of catastrophic flooding, the impacts of climate change are global in scope and unprecedented in scale. The adverse effect of climate change and variability has become an environmental and socio-economic problem which is increasingly causing climate-driven hazards to people around the world.¹⁷ The effects of climate change are likely to be more serious among countries with less capacities to respond and adapt and, within these countries, among the poorest and most vulnerable. Climate change serves as a serious inhibitor to the attainment of food security and also to the fulfilment of major development agendas in the majority of global economies. Climate change could undermine social welfare, equity, and the sustainability of future development. It is generally believed that LMICs, and disadvantaged groups within all countries are more vulnerable to the impacts of climate change as a result of limited resources and low adaptive capacity.¹⁸

2. Technology, Innovation, and infrastructure drivers:

For both short and long distances value chains, infrastructure strongly influences the way food is produced, processed, transported, distributed, sold, conserved, and ultimately consumed. Infrastructure is required for food to move long distances and to increase food security in areas of shortages, to stabilize food prices, to minimize food-borne disease and food waste. Roads, railroads, shipping, or cold chain facilities play an essential role. Poorly developed infrastructure impacts all dimensions of livelihoods for urban and rural populations. It affects the quality and safety of nutritious foods particularly, limits access to nutritious foods, and exacerbates issues of food loss and waste.¹⁹ In South Sudan and Somalia for example, poor road infrastructure is a major barrier to food access.²⁰ Infrastructure improvements, technological advances and mechanization in the food value chain may generate positive and negative externalities for production, trading and consumption with potential to generate off-farm employment in rural, and potentially in urban areas. Examples may include factories located near the farm where the technology will be used, technicians and mechanics to operate and repair machinery and devices, other business-related employment, such as bookkeepers, sales staff, and so on.

Innovation, technology and infrastructure improvements have been and will be major drivers for food system transformation.³ Advances in all three have had important impacts on food production and sustainability, transportation and processing along food value chains, marketing, and ultimately diets, including consumption of both nutritious and unhealthy foods.^{21,22} They can also generate risks to human and environmental health and may not yield equitable benefits for farmers or other food systems workers.³ This raises the questions of targeting technology policies and interventions according to their impact on improving livelihoods among the poor and those living in situations of

vulnerability. The need to produce healthier and accessible food and to address SDDG 2 and other SDGs through food systems transformation will thus require innovative, responsible, and targeted efforts by the actors in the world's food supply chains. Yet many breakthrough technologies spark disputes and sociotechnical controversies,²³ that more and more generate dual oppositions and polarized polemics. For example, the livelihood and equity impacts generated using modern biotechnology vary considerably according to socio-ecological context.²⁴ In some contexts such technology may result in market concentration in the industries that provide inputs to agriculture, reduced farmer participation in breeding and higher seed prices. The technology may also favour larger farm economic units with likely displacement of smallholder farmers.²⁵⁻²⁸ These socio-economic trends then directly affect livelihoods, equity, knowledge, and culture. Whatever the controversial issue, evidence highlights how institutional environments are essential to direct technology and innovation impact. Ultimately, the potential for impact depends not only on characteristics of the technological advancement itself, but on access patterns, arrangements, and governance about who controls it.²⁴

Innovations in breeding methods, chemical synthetic inputs, and food processing have changed the way food is produced, stored, distributed, consumed. Many agricultural innovations have prioritized yield and productivity, with many disproportionately favouring high income country food systems, but some notable exceptions exist. Since 2004, HarvestPlus in collaboration with CGIAR Centres, have facilitated the release of 211 crop varieties in 30 countries that have been bred with increased content of one or more nutrients. An estimated 7.6 million farming households are now growing these crops, estimated to be benefiting some 38 million rural consumers.²⁹ This number will be enhanced as crops and sold purchased in urban markets, and used in various processed or pre-prepared foods. Another example promotes the better incorporation of fruit into local food systems, meeting the challenge of seasonal availability. McMullin et al³⁰ developed a methodology based on 'fruit-tree portfolios', which selects in partnership with farmers, the fruit-tree species for production that both socio-ecologically suitable, and nutrient-rich. Both examples have the dual advantage of potentially improving livelihoods and favouring nutrition outcomes through enhanced production and access to nutritious foods. Modern biotechnology can also improve livelihoods through increased crop production for smallholder farmers. Millions of small farmers in many LMIC (e.g., China and India) have benefited from adoption of Bt cotton after this technology has been approved for commercialization since the late 1990s.³¹⁻³⁴ Yet, the impact of such technology on livelihoods, particularly for farmers in situations of vulnerability is disputed and has been shown to depend on differentiated practices.³⁵ Among the issues to resolve in this regard is the on-going debate related to access to seeds, and mechanisms to ensure that commercial interests in seed-line access do not negatively affects producers and consumers livelihood.^{36,37}

According to the CGIAR Research Program on Climate Change, Agriculture and Food Security³⁸, some of the most promising innovations in rural agriculture are technology- and service-based. With access to data, markets, and financial services, farmers can plant, fertilize, harvest, and sell products more effectively. These approaches are gradually gaining favour as more people in emerging economies connect to mobile networks,³⁹ and applications designed to collect and share agricultural information become increasingly accessible.⁴⁰ Of course, the mere existence of this technology will not generate better livelihoods. Access to such technology has been highly constrained and must be resolved, before this potential can be realized.⁴¹⁻⁴⁴ Similarly, tools must meet the needs of the farmers who use them and expectations towards improving livelihood, including addressing power asymmetries. This demands that mobile technologies take into account differences in gender, education, and resource levels among farmers and consumers,⁴⁵ and are responsive to changing circumstances. The impact and success of these tools and programs should be monitored and evaluated,⁴⁶ with ineffective approaches being improved or replaced.⁴⁷ Capacitated endogenous institutions are vital to achieving an inclusive approach.

3. Economic and political drivers:

Many economic and political factors are essential causes of inequality and power imbalances at household, community, national and global levels, which constrain the ability of food systems transformation to deliver poverty reduction and sustainable, equitable livelihoods.^{48,49} Improving education and literacy levels, access to public services and infrastructure and among others helps to address the issue.^{50,51}

Social protection is a menu of policy instruments to address poverty and vulnerability, through social assistance, social insurance and efforts at social inclusion, with a role to address both long standing and crisis-induced poverty.⁵² The precarity of the food system in most countries, and particularly food systems workers living in situations of vulnerability is illustrated by the current COVID-19 crisis (Box 1). The lessons and experience from global efforts fighting the COVID-19 pandemic show the importance of developing a strong social network in coping with fragility of food system.

Conflicts and crises, usually resulting from an unstable political system and uncertain property right arrangements, damage trust and social cohesion among the stakeholders throughout the food systems, discourage public and private investment and cause slowdown in economic growth and less inclusive rural and structural transformations.^{53,54} This does harm to vulnerable smallholder farmers, consumers and to those engaged in micro and SMEs along food value chains, and particularly those run by and employing youth, women, disabled, and indigenous peoples.

Inclusive development of food systems is also constrained by lack of representative **leadership**, reflected in inequality in access to productive resources, working opportunities, market participation rights and public services. Studies in almost all LMIC contexts, except Latin America and the Caribbean, indicate a large proportion of total farmland belongs to small holders (less than 2 ha),⁵⁵ and that here and for all food systems workers, resources and public services are unequally allocated.⁵⁶ Barriers to active participation in leadership and decision-making must be broken down.⁵⁷

Livelihood inequalities across the food system, including among smallholder farmers, small business, and workers across the food value chain can be reduced only if inequalities in **access to land, water, employment**, financial services, infrastructure, technology, markets, and other economic opportunities are resolved. Food system transformation that does not address these inequalities and specific vulnerabilities runs the risk of reinforcing and deepening inequalities into the future and undermining the resilience of food systems. Inequitable economic opportunities are usually caused by rigid institutional arrangements in land, water, credit, and labour markets, lack of information, market segregation/ monopoly, discriminative treatment, and distorted policies, among others.⁵⁷ Subdivision among siblings make it harder for rural youth to obtain as much land as their parents had; in many contexts youth have historically marginalized economically, socially and politically.⁵⁸ Research shows that respecting/upholding collective forms of land ownership and customary property regimes has important positive implications for livelihood equity^{59,60} The nature of public goods such as water resources however, makes fair allocation difficult. Removing barriers to employment and other economic opportunities in addition to various actions to reduce discrimination towards migrant workers also work to increase income and improve livelihoods.⁸⁷

As pointed out by the HLPE,³ **globalization and trade** have a critical role to play in ensuring food security and nutrition (FSN) and reducing inequalities. Trade can positively and negatively affect all four pillars of FSN (availability, access, utilization, stability). Evidence suggests that globalization and international trade may help to extend the value chain and generate opportunities to create wealth and equitable livelihoods among countries.^{50,61,62} International trade and financial flows are also associated with changes in production and consumption patterns that require taking into account the way livelihood is affected, in particular through employment access, incomes and wealth distribution. Measures are needed to avoid unwanted outcomes, including increases in income inequality.^{63,64} While some farmers can improve their livelihoods by tapping into exportable agricultural production, considerable research shows that becoming part of export markets can make farmers, particularly small-scale farmers more vulnerable to shocks in global commodity markets.^{65,66} These risks can be

mitigated through collective action and policy support to soften the impact of such shocks among smallholders and other actors in the food system that lack the capacity to respond adequately.

Stabilizing food prices will help to reduce the risk of all stakeholders along the food supply chains and will bring benefits to the small holders who are more vulnerable in the production system and consumers in rural and urban. In general, food supply is much more stable at the regional and global levels than it is within a given country.⁶⁷ This is because an efficient market provides the opportunity to supplement supplies in cases of domestic production shortfall or rapidly expanding demand and thereby help prevent sharp prices increases that would affect access to food negatively. Inversely, in cases where rising domestic supplies threaten to depress local prices, an appropriate political regulation and management of stocks (at both national and international dimension), plus a transparent trade mechanism, calling for an appropriate political regulation and management of stocks, for which a regional and/or global dimension is appropriate.

The informal food processing sector has grown significantly over the last decade, thanks to rapid urbanization and growing middle class, and has become one of the most dynamic segments of food staples value chains.⁶⁸ In Africa, it is currently the fastest growing export sector, both to regional and outside markets.⁶⁹ It is estimated that upward of two thirds of staples food consumed in Africa by 2040 will be in processed form.⁷⁰ The emerging staples food processing sector is currently characterized by a large and growing number of primarily female headed small enterprises. Future strategies to promote equitable livelihoods and value distribution in domestic food systems will need to reverse the current formality and size bias in order to tap into the employment and income opportunities resulting from the rapidly transforming staples value chains for the benefits of farmers, unskilled workers, and consumers in urban centres and rural towns.

These political and economic factors may cause inequality and imbalances through a complex mechanism but may also be the consequence of such inequality and imbalance. On one hand, both political instability and poor economic performance are believed contributing to rural poverty and inequality of livelihood in rural sectors of many LMICs in all regions.^{71,72} On the other hand, a burgeoning literature illustrates that rapid economic growth is not a sufficient condition for inclusive development.^{53,54,73} In addition, the political and economic drivers may also interact with innovation, technology and infrastructure to influence food systems as well as inequality and power imbalances related to gender, youth, smallholders and indigenous people. Consequently, the question is not only *whether* but also *how* economic growth and institutional/policy arrangements may affect inequality in access to production, employment and fair share opportunity.^{8,74-76} This calls for considering the way agency conditions or prevents the development of inclusive, equitable livelihoods,⁷⁷ in particular through access to the public services, before proper decision making and agenda setting could be made.

The pace of future improvement in livelihoods will depend on the ability of governments to find ways to maximize the impact of economic growth and investments in social sectors, such as health, education, social protection on enhancing capacities among the poor and vulnerable. This not only calls for better coordination of interventions across government but also recognition and effective exploitation of that fact that differences in services and how they are bundled produce different impact on livelihood of the poor and those living in vulnerable situations. For instance, the impact of a given dollar amount spent on education services on smallholder and low skilled off-farm and urban labour productivity will depend on the extent to which it targets vocational training and other efforts to upgrade and develop skills in the relevant sectors.⁷⁸ Against the background of the current COVID-19 pandemic, the same concept can be illustrated using the example of health services (Box 1). Furthermore, there is evidence that morbidity has a bigger impact on productivity of the poor and vulnerable than among better off segments of the population.⁷⁹ It has also been shown that different types of health services have different impact on disease prevalence and morbidity.⁸⁰ It is therefore possible to allocate public investment in health services such as to target diseases that have the largest effects on the productivity of smallholders and low skilled laborers and excluded communities. Allen

and co-authors⁸¹ show that morbidity does not only affect labour availability and productivity, it also affects the choice of technologies and returns to use of fertilizers and mechanization. More importantly, different health services have different impact on disease prevalence which affects efficiency and thus livelihoods differently even among the poor, those living in vulnerable situations, and across gender.^{79,82} The current COVID-19 pandemic illustrates the need and opportunity to rethink the delivery of social services in order to maximize their benefit and impact among the poor and vulnerable (Box 1). This applies equally to social protection policies where the experience of productive safety nets in Ethiopia offers valuable lessons in designing programs that work for the poor and vulnerable.⁸³

4. Socio-cultural and Demographic drivers:

Vast evidence illustrates that several socio-cultural drivers underpin inequalities among and within societies and constrain the potential for some to benefit from actions to improve livelihoods, particularly women, youth, disabled, elderly, and indigenous peoples.^{57,84,85} For example, there are approximately 185 million indigenous women in the world, belonging to more than 5000 different indigenous peoples. Despite the broad international consensus about the important role indigenous women play in eradicating hunger and malnutrition, there are still limitations in the recognition and exercise of their rights.⁸⁶ Due to the long-term and ongoing impacts of colonialism and environmental degradation, many Indigenous peoples, regardless of their geographic location, face high levels of obesity and chronic disease and are disproportionately affected by poverty and food insecurity.⁸⁷⁻⁹⁰ Past and present social and environmental injustices have led to the loss of food sovereignty, through dispossessing Indigenous peoples from their traditional territories and undermining intergenerational knowledge transmission of cultural practices related to their food systems^{91,92} and have been linked, as in the case of the experience of hunger in residential schools in Canada, to the rise of diabetes in these populations.⁹³

Socio-cultural drivers also impact and set the norms for the dynamics of the other drivers, including political and economic drivers, demography, innovation/technology, among others. As such, structural barriers for several groups particularly women and youth include land rights, access to financial services, among others. In addition, inequality of opportunity is an important constraint. Social protection has an important role to play in protecting those living in vulnerable situations, and depending on the nature of that action, seeking to address the underlying causes of poverty and exclusion.⁹⁴ Programs that direct resources to women, have shown greater impact on food security and other household-linked benefits.⁵² However, social and structural barriers may limit women's access to several types of social protection programs, including public works and agricultural input and support.⁵² In addition to these considerations, language, culture and tradition may influence willingness to participate and potential to benefit from social protection programs, unless national programs are adequately adapted to such sub-national contexts.⁹⁵

Few, if any, economic or social transformations over the past decades can be brought into focus without explicit attention being paid to the demographic transition, inextricably linked to several socio-cultural drivers. The growth of the urban sector, driven by both natural increase (fertility exceeding mortality) and rural-to-urban migration,^{96,97} helps to fuel agricultural transformation. The proportion of the population living in rural areas is declining in many countries, yet numbers are increasing in some, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. Both fertility and mortality have been falling in rural areas, converging from levels higher than urban areas towards urban levels. Pressure and opportunity lead parts of growing rural cohorts to migrate to cities or to seek diversified livelihoods within the rural sector. This raises concerns, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa where urban growth and the economic sectors are not in a position to cope with such a rapid transition and offer employment to rural dwellers as has occurred historically in other continents.⁷⁴

Predominantly male migration among youths and young adults over the course of the urban transition may have additional impacts on the gendered nature of economic roles and overall status of

women.^{98,99} Increased urbanization means a growing gap between the location of food production and food consumption. It may also mean a change in lifestyle including dietary changes. As a result, there is a growing need for food processing, transportation, and transformation beyond the farm level, providing opportunities for jobs and entrepreneurship. In Ethiopia, Malawi, Mozambique, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia, the transformation of the food system is forecast to add more jobs than any other sector of the economy by 2025.¹⁰⁰ This is an opportunity to see that these jobs are accessible also to rural women and youth who may disproportionately live in vulnerable situations. Yet evidence suggests that women entrepreneurs face many additional barriers compared to their male counterparts including lack of mobility, access to finance, access to business networks and mentors, limited leadership experience, lower literacy and numeracy, discriminatory gender norms and stereotypes.¹⁰¹ Experience from other regions, also illustrates the risks to nutrition as dietary traditions are lost, and reliance on processed – often highly unhealthy food increases.¹⁰²

Today there are significant knowledge gaps on rural outmigration trends, which need to be tackled. This is particularly the case for migration driven by distress, when people do not perceive there is any other viable livelihood option except to migrate. Reliable data, disaggregated by sex, age, origin and destination are necessary to understand socio-economic conditions associated with migration. At the moment, these data are scarce.¹⁰³

Box 1: *The unprecedented range of COVID-19 disruptions to the food system and livelihoods*

The breadth and reach of the complex ramifications and disruptions from the COVID-19 pandemic are unprecedented.¹⁰⁴ The impact from the pandemic parallels or exceeds the impact of major shocks over the past few decades, whether caused by natural disasters, disruption of financial and commodity markets, or conflict and civil strife. More challenging is the fact that, under Covid-19, all of these various shocks happen concurrently and engulf the entire globe, with no regions left untouched and thus poised to help fuel a possible recovery.¹⁰⁵ There are therefore important lessons to be learned from the current pandemic to help shape more effective strategies to managing future shocks and their impact on the livelihood of the excluded and marginalised.

The Effects of Covid on marginalized communities: Income, poverty, and nutrition

Policies of social distancing and other measures adopted by governments to contain the spread of the pandemic have drastically affected food supply chains, with serious repercussions for the poor and vulnerable, particularly in LMICs.^{106–110} There is evidence that disruptions are more serious for the operation of informal market networks which dominate supply chains for traditional food staples that people living in poverty and situations of vulnerability depend on more heavily.¹¹¹ Prices in these markets have reacted sharply to measures undertaken to control the pandemic.^{112,113} Moreover, higher food prices, the closing of informal markets and other disruptions to staple foods supply chains have been shown to impact on micronutrient intake and nutritional status of the poor.¹¹⁴ Finally, the effects of the pandemic on global commodity markets and trading systems are shown to have significant impact on economic growth and thus incomes and poverty levels, with likely disproportionate burden on the same vulnerable communities in both urban and rural areas.¹¹⁵ This is likely to worsen inequalities, food insecurity, and undernutrition including child wasting.¹¹⁶ COVID-19 therefore will likely have substantial implications for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals in LMICs, in particular SDG 2 (End Hunger) and SDG 12 (Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns).¹¹⁷

Equity and policy responses to Covid and similar shocks

The Covid-19 crisis has particularly impacted already-marginalised segments of the population such as indigenous peoples, migrant workers, and informal sector employees.^{118–120} High vulnerability to changing economic conditions linked partly to a host of pre-existing barriers ranging from weak legal status, racism and lack of access to health, social security and education services all lead to disproportional impacts of the pandemic among the poor and disadvantaged.

Persistent and chronic vulnerability, a major manifestation of marginalization and exclusion, does not only exacerbate the human cost of shocks, it also complicates the search for effective responses. Resistance to confinement, curfews and other mitigation measures reported in the media across the world arise often from the considerable threat to livelihoods among the poorest and those living in situations of vulnerability.¹¹¹ Successful strategies to deal with future shocks require having a better handle on equity and vulnerability before shocks strike.

Lessons for managing future shocks to protect livelihoods

Just like pre-existing conditions among humans raise the risk of serious consequences, chronic vulnerability patterns also raise the risk of exposure and extent of damage among excluded and marginalized communities in case of shocks such as Covid-19. Community vulnerability is determined by factors ranging from pre-existing levels of poverty, food insecurity, malnutrition, disease prevalence, poor health and education services to high population density.¹²¹ Investment in the capacity for good understanding of the patterns of vulnerability across various communities is therefore a major need for future preparedness, especially among LMIC.

For example, a report from the Indigenous Navigator,¹²² highlights the impact of Covid-19 on indigenous communities in 11 countries (Africa and Asia). On the one hand, the report identifies how pre-existing barriers in access to health, social security and education are fuelling disproportional impacts of the pandemic on indigenous peoples. It also indicates a rise in food insecurity, related to loss of livelihoods and lack of access to land and natural resources. On the other hand, it underlines the central role played by communities in building the response and recovery to the global crisis resulting from the pandemic. The emphasis on Covid-19 response and recovery measures is that it needs to be respectful of the rights of indigenous peoples and support their livelihoods, economies, and resilience.

Equally important is a good understanding of the nature of operation of local food systems. Control measures that are not aligned with the basic features of food systems along complete value chains are certain to create second generation disruptions, with more serious impacts on livelihoods.¹²³

Finally, boosting preparedness capacities will require investment in a minimum infrastructure for real time data access and management. New development in remote sensing and machine learning offer real opportunities for better targeting and tracking in order to raise the effectiveness of response and mitigation measures to protect the poor and vulnerable.¹²⁴

Conclusions and implications for the development of game-changing solutions to enhance equitable livelihoods in food systems

The growth of the food systems presents enormous employment opportunities,¹⁰⁰ but achievement of equitable livelihoods in food systems and resulting from changes in food systems will require that substantial progress be made to address the drivers of inequality. Food system transformation must also find the balance of food systems that favour and support healthy diets (i.e., those that minimize risk of both undernutrition and overweight and obesity),¹²⁵ and do so in ways that are sustainable for the planet. We must transform not only the food system, but the structures and systems that continue to enable and exacerbate inequities. While we have reviewed and discussed the evidence related to drivers of inequitable livelihoods in relation with food system transformation within their respective categories, they are interconnected and progress to address one driver will likely require change across several. For example, globalization and trade interact with other powerful drivers, especially technology resource mobilization, and demographic trends, which shape food production, distribution and consumption.³

We believe therefore, that enhancing equitable livelihoods will require solutions that:

1. **Are rights-based:** Solutions must recognize and hold stakeholders to account for human rights including living wage and the right to food,¹²⁶ and advance the agenda toward the *right to a healthy diet*. Implications include not only a shift in policy and programmatic action, but increasing public pressure, and creating monitoring and accountability mechanisms that hold governments, businesses, and all stakeholders to account to uphold rights.
2. **Ensure long-term investment for structural changes:** Dismantling inequitable systems and structures that enable and exacerbate inequalities for food systems workers and consumers requires long-term investment, while achieving short term gains. Long-term vision should inform investment priorities in needed structural changes across the food system including those that will result in:
 - Dismantling barriers to expanded access to resources, technology, infrastructure and productive services among smallholders and other less powerful actors along the food system,
 - Policies and institutions that make sure that markets and trading regimes work for producers and consumers, including raising agricultural incomes and improving food access,
 - Regulatory and administrative arrangements and other instruments to ensure equitable access to productive assets.
3. **Directly inform local and national policy and programmes:** Transformational change towards healthy, sustainable, and equitable food systems will require a breaking down of current policy silos in favour of coordinated policy agendas that permit the mapping and balancing of trade-off, benefits, and harms to human and planetary health. Including but not limited to agriculture, trade and food policies that simultaneously foster healthy diets, equitable opportunity and fair pay, and protect the environment, complemented with strengthened and well-targeted social protection.
4. **Enhance the development of and equitable deployment of contextually relevant innovation and technology:** The potential of innovation and technology to do good to human and planetary health is vast, but systems must be strengthened to ensure it does not exacerbate inequalities, and to ensure that the balance of potential benefits and harms can be assessed. Research, development, and deployment of innovation and technology must meet the needs of smallholder producers and small businesses across the food value chains and of vulnerable consumers. Doing so requires enhanced processes and investments to develop such innovations and technologies drawing on all forms of scientific evidence and indigenous, local, and contextual knowledge.

In the following section we provide several general and more specific recommendations that can inform priorities for the game-changing solutions, bearing in mind the four criteria above. This list is not intended to be comprehensive, but rather to focus priorities that surface from the evidence review. Where feasible, we have included specific examples that illustrate the potential gains and pitfalls.

Alter power structures to enhance inclusive decision-making:

- At global and regional level, strengthen and enhance the existing institutional architecture to generate recommendations, good practice models, and technical support guidance for enhanced inclusive decision-making processes related to food systems within governments and organizations. Examples of key international organizations include FAO, IFAD, WFP, the World Bank Group, CGIAR, among others.

- Engage a coalition of local, regional, and international research institutions to generate and test a framework and parsimonious set of indicators that can be used to track progress towards inclusive decision-making processes and to monitor livelihood improvements within international, national, regional, and local governments and organizations.
- Create or build on an existing accountability mechanism with mandate and resources to track progress towards and hold to account inclusive decision-making related to food systems transformations and their impacts within governments and organizations.
- Strengthen producer, venter, market and consumers organizations and other forms of collection action across the food system to enhance effective, non-tokenistic participation in decision-making processes related to rural and food systems transformation.
- Through all of these processes explore demographic, social, and cultural aspects that may influence participation in decision-making¹⁰⁰ (e.g., gender, indigenous peoples, age), and ensure mechanisms are developed to address and track progress responsive to these unique contextual factors.
 - Dimitra Clubs seek to transform gender relations bringing women and men together to become more aware of gender inequalities in households and communities and working together to transform gender relations. Over 3400 clubs existing reaching an estimated 2 million rural people. Examples of success include fighting malnutrition by challenging dietary taboos, reconciling long-standing political disputes, mobilizing to meet environmental challenges and establishing a credit cooperative to avoid debt.¹²⁷
 - The model of mutual accountability developed by the African Union as part of its Comprehensive African Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP) is an innovative and effective approach to promoting transparency, participation, and accountability for results. It involves two main components:
 - Country level Joint Sector Reviews (JSR) that allow government, farmer organizations, private sector, civil society organizations and development partner organizations, at least once a year, to collectively review policy and program implementation performance as well as progress towards outcomes for the agricultural sector. The outcome is an action plan to deal with any major issues that emerge.
 - The continental level Biennial Review (BR) based on formally agreed target commitments related to agricultural sector investment, hunger and poverty, gender, youth, intra-African trade, and climate smart agriculture. Every two years, a report is prepared by each member state and submitted to the African Union Commission which uses it to rate each country on each of the target commitments. The report is submitted to Heads of State at their January Summit to debate the findings.¹²⁸

Protect the livelihoods of those living in situations of vulnerability, while creating opportunities:

- Expand the effective coverage of well-targeted social protection systems that uphold the livelihoods of those living in situations of vulnerability, using social protection instruments that can alleviate short term crises, but go beyond sheer poverty reduction to enhance opportunities to build assets and create wealth.
 - A promising model of boosting productivity and improving livelihoods through skills development, advisory services financial transfer is the FOMENTO model from Brazil. Research looking into the impact of its transfer to the African setting have provided solid evidence on its effectiveness to raise assets and increase earning potential of beneficiary farmers. This approach holds promise as a scalable approach to

empowering and equipping the poor and those living in situations of vulnerability to integrate into the higher value segments of the food system value chains.¹²⁹

- Using existing or enhanced technology, develop and deploy better models to predict climate and other agricultural risks and use this data effectively to pre-empt and mitigate the impact of such risks on the production and livelihoods of small-scale agriculture and other producers in situations of vulnerability.
 - o Climate Information Services (CIS) involve the production, translation (e.g., advisories, decision support), and communication and use of climate information. Appropriate information enables farmers to understand the role of climate vs. other drivers in perceived productivity changes and to manage climate-related risks throughout the agricultural calendar. Econometric studies highlight CIS as one of the most important factors influencing adaptation and transformation of farming systems. For example, an analysis across more than 5000 households in East and West Africa, South Asia, and Central America found access to CIS is a positive determinant of adaptation through agricultural diversification, and of agricultural intensification in Bangladesh and India.¹³⁰

Adapt institutions and policies to favour equitable food systems livelihoods:

- At global, national, sub-national and local level, develop and implement a cohesive set of policy actions that will enable sequential food systems transformations that favour the production, distribution, and consumption of nutritious over unhealthy foods, produced with territorial approaches that favour planetary health, and ensure equitable livelihoods for producers and wage-earners across the food system.¹³¹
 - o Africa's Regional Economic Communities (RECs) are key actors working in collaboration with the African Union (AU), in ensuring peace and stability in their regions.¹³² The RECs have been central to various transformative programs of the continent, including the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) adopted in 2001. RECs have the immense challenge of working with governments, civil society, and the AU Commission in raising the standard of living of the people of Africa and contributing towards the progress and development of the continent through economic growth and social development.¹³³
- Adapt institutions and adopt policies that eliminate barriers in access to the fundamental services needed to enable those living in situations of vulnerability to take advantage of opportunities, ensuring for example the right to food, shelter, and health. Enhance more and better education investments that enable and empower youth as part of the productive rural and urban labour force.^{134,135}
 - o The German dual training system for agricultural and horticultural professions is a good model for an institutional infrastructure that creates a path to good paying jobs and better livelihoods. It is a country wide system that offers a mixture of practical, multi-year on the job training of apprentices by "master-farmers", ongoing theoretical training for active and aspiring farmers, as well as modular, usually short term courses on specific skills and good practices.¹³⁶
- Adapt institutions and adopt policies that eliminate barriers in access to the natural (e.g., land,¹³⁷ water, forests), economic (e.g., credit, business planning), and technological resources (e.g., digital, appropriate modern biotechnology) needed to enhance and ensure equitable livelihoods for producers and SMEs across the food value chain. Such policy and institutional arrangements should explicitly favour those who have been traditionally excluded, particularly women, youth, and indigenous peoples.

- The Land Matrix Initiative¹³⁸ is an independent global land monitoring initiative made up of a number of global and regional partners, originally established in 2009 to address the lack of robust data on large scale land acquisitions and investments. The initiative now covers almost 100 countries. It captures intended and failed attempts to acquire land through purchase, lease or concession and demonstrates the complexity and political dimension of land acquisition.
- Enhance the effectiveness of international organizations to facilitate global trade arrangements that promote and protect livelihoods and the right to food. An enhanced role of the World Trade Organization is particularly salient.

Increase investment to realize the potential of improved institutional and policy actions:

- More coordination among government entities would internalize externalities across sectors and address trade-offs such as to deliver the most impactful and site adapted interventions for the poor and those living in vulnerable situations.^{139–141} Increasing investment in public infrastructure (e.g., roads, markets, irrigation etc.) also helps to enhance the liveability of communities, while favouring the production, sale, and consumption of nutritious food.
- Expand and use innovative financial mechanisms (e.g., impact investment) for small and medium-sized farmers and businesses along the food value chains to expand and intensify their production, and improve safety, quality, and sustainability, prioritizing nutritious over unhealthy foods.
 - Two models to nurture and support the development of the emerging processing processor and other segments of food system value chain to boost profits and employment for low skilled workers. The first, with well-documented impact,¹⁴² is the model of Cluster based industrialization which provide a critical mass of infrastructure, services, and networking opportunities. The second is the Kaizen model from Japan, which has been recently tested in Africa with promising results.¹⁴³

Hold governments, businesses, and organizations to account for ensuring equitable livelihoods:

- Engage a coalition of local, regional, and international research institutions to generate and test a framework and parsimonious set of indicators and metrics that can be used to track progress towards equitable livelihoods within business, international, national, regional, and local governments, and organizations.
- Create or build on an existing accountability mechanism with mandate and resources to track progress towards and hold to account equitable livelihoods in food systems across all businesses, governments, and organizations, ensuring data can and are presented disaggregated for women, youth, indigenous peoples, migrant workers, and others as appropriate.

Realize the potential of science, innovation, technology, and evidence to favour equitable livelihoods:

- Develop and use creative approaches to learn, build on, and document indigenous knowledge related to food production, processing, consumption, and natural resource management in ways that such knowledge can be shared, adapted, and adopted and tested in new contexts if appropriate, and drawn on in the establishment of recommendations, guidance, and good practice.^{144–146} New approaches are instrumental to revitalize Indigenous food systems and to produce, process, and consume food in culturally relevant¹⁴⁷ and ecologically sustainable ways.¹⁴⁸
 - Several examples exist illustrating the potential and power of mobilizing available indigenous knowledge for the establishment of policy recommendations,^{149–152} guidance,¹⁵³ and good practice.^{154,155}
 - With the threat of climate change and the need to adapt to its adverse effects, indigenous peoples' communities are proving to be an important source of climate

history and baseline data and are already playing a valuable role by providing local-scale expertise, monitoring impacts, and implementing adaptive responses at the local level. For example, on-farm conservation of crops is a dynamic process, in which varieties managed by indigenous farmers continue to evolve in response to natural and human selection, leading to crops with better adaptive potential. For instance, “kreb” is a mixture of wild and cultivated species (such as *Digitaria exilis* or “fonio”) which is traditionally used in the Sahel by pastoralists. The latter harvest these seeds from the open grasslands and manage the wild species to ensure sustainable seed production for human consumption and fodder.¹⁵⁶

- Rapid dietary change of indigenous peoples worldwide is posing threats to the use of traditional food and the traditional knowledge required for the traditional food system maintenance.¹⁵⁷ Several foods and combinations have illustrated potential to decrease risk of micronutrient deficiencies.¹⁵⁸ Such traditions may be fundamental for slowing the nutrition transition and accompanying increasing preventable diet-related non-communicable diseases
- Assess deployment pathways (e.g., extension services, farmer schools, etc.), and potential for those traditionally excluded (e.g., women, youth, small-holders, indigenous peoples) to benefit when setting priorities for and making investment decisions related to the development of innovations and new technologies for food systems.
 - For example, new technologies are being used to very positive effect to ensure that nutrition does not “exit” the food supply chain.¹⁵⁹ Improving traditional products and processes by reengineering the unit operations can be an efficient way both to generate rural employment in SMEs and incomes for family farmers, and to increase the safety and nutritional quality of foods while maintaining or improving the organoleptic characteristics of traditional products.^{160,161} Yet, evaluation has also shown that several “good ideas” may have harmful side effects when a comprehensive approach to understanding all different pathways leading from agricultural interventions towards nutrition of individuals are insufficiently considered.¹⁶²
- Improve the availability, quality, accessibility, and use of data that can map and inform actions to reduce inequalities in the food systems.
 - The newly developed food systems dashboard¹⁶³ is an important advance in this regard. The dashboard consolidates existing data from multiple sources, provides useful tools to visualize and understand the data, and are developing a set of diagnostics that will permit the identification of potential policy and program priorities. That said many data gaps, particularly at national and sub-national level and the full potential of such tools will be realized only once such data gaps are filled.¹⁶⁴

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