

Catalyzing a systemic shift towards healthy and sustainable food systems and diets to achieve the SDGs

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An ambitious and strategic approach is needed to drive the **systemic shift in food systems¹ and diets** necessary to achieve good health and nutrition, climate and environmental sustainability, sustainable economic growth and the SDGs¹ more broadly. Success requires a **coalition of partners, strong global and local movements raising the sense of urgency and accountability** and the **right field of institutions and actors** to address the key challenges of such a transformation. Success also requires **fundamentally shifting the market incentives** so that sustainably produced, healthy, and nutritious foods become the key drivers of industry competitive advantage and profit and unhealthy foods become a liability or risk. Catalyzing this transformation of food systems requires **strategic planning** and purposefully **shaping the institutions and movements** that will carry forward the transformation.

THE ISSUE

One in three people globally are malnourished. This number is expected to increase to one in two by 2030 and continue growing thereafter, reversing the past downward trends.¹ No country is spared, afflicted by undernutrition, micronutrient deficiencies, overnutrition - or a combination of them³.

While there is increasing focus and knowledge on the health interventions that help prevent or mitigate malnutrition, the largest driver of good or bad nutrition - **diets - continues to deteriorate due to trends in food systems and consumer behaviors.** Food systems are complex, reflecting food environments, supply chains, consumer behaviors, and many influencing factors ranging from political to cultural to demographic (see graph in Annex 1 for a detailed conceptual framework of food systems). Food systems are deeply

influenced by trends such as the growing consolidation of the food industry; the drive towards higher productivity at the expense of diversity; and evolving preferences of consumers towards processed food. At the same time, these trends are further impacted by broader megatrends like demography, climate change, urbanization, and globalization, limiting the perceived ability of individual actors to make a meaningful shift in the market dynamics driving food systems.

As a result, we live in a **world dominated by poorly nutritious (empty calories) or plainly unhealthy food choices making a balanced, diverse and nutritious diet unaffordable, unattainable or inconvenient** for the average citizen across the world. Poor diets are now the number one driver of disease globally, linked to six of nine lead causes of disease⁴. Diets are also the second leading

factor for early death after smoking⁵ and have an impact on at least 12 of the SDGs.⁴

In addition, food systems, largely through agriculture, have now become the **second largest emitter of greenhouse gasses⁶** and a key driver of climate change and natural resources depletion (water, land)³.

This means that **food systems are now a major impediment to both human capital development and environmental sustainability** and one of the “greatest challenges facing humanity”⁷. Urgent action

is needed to support a radical shift in food systems.

The challenge may seem daunting, but **successes in driving other major and complex systems transformation in short periods of time provide both inspiration and learnings**. The energy system, for instance, has fundamentally shifted in the past 25 years, moving from a quasi-exclusive reliance on fossil fuels to a place where fossil fuels increasingly are considered as stranded assets and renewables as the future.

THE STATE OF PLAY

A **growing and diverse number of actors are focusing on improving diets and food systems** at the global and local level, working from different angles: productivity (i.e. how to feed a growing world population), sustainability (how to reduce emissions, or water consumption), forms of malnutrition (obesity, micronutrient deficiencies) or increasing or decreasing the consumptions of specific types of foods/nutrients (e.g. organic foods, salt, sugar, proteins). There is also a **growing focus on food systems as a whole and emerging recommendations on how to improve them**:

- The **Eat Lancet Commission on Food, Planet, Health** is the most ambitious effort so far to bring together the nutrition, food systems, and sustainability agenda together. It aims to answer the following key questions in its report that will be launched in June 2018: What is a healthy diet? What is a sustainable food system? What are the trends shaping diets today? Can we achieve healthy diets from sustainable food systems? How? What are the solutions and policies we can apply?⁸
- On the nutrition side, the **World Committee on Food Security (CFS)** has taken up the issue, and both the CFS High Level Panel of Experts (HLPE) and the Global Panel on Agriculture and Nutrition (GLOPAN) have recently produced seminal reports about the key challenges of food systems and recommendations on how to address them, although largely from a nutrition standpoint.
- On the sustainability side, sustainable agricultural systems have now become a major priority area of the **UNFCCC and climate COPs**, and organizations such as **the World Bank** or **the World Economic Forum**. But their primary focus on *sustainable* agriculture creates a substantial risk of lost opportunity should the new directions underprioritize the health and nutrition angles.
- The **Business and Sustainable Development Commission (BSDC)** has looked at the 14 biggest business opportunities in the implementation of the SDGs related to food and estimated they could be worth over US\$2.3 trillion annually for the private sector by 2030, with investment required to achieve these opportunities estimated at approximately US\$320 billion per year.⁹ The **Food and Land Use Coalition** initiated with BSDC leadership brings together players from across the public, private and civil society sectors to develop global

and national targets and pathways towards sustainable land-use and food systems, identify and support business solutions, and implement national and local solutions.

All these efforts are key steps to **start setting the common goals and outlining what pathways and specific actions and interventions may look like**. Given the urgency of acting on these existing or forthcoming scientific and policy recommendations, there is an **immediate need to start organizing partners and shaping the field with an ambition commensurate to the challenge and the opportunity**.

Continuing with the energy systems analogy, the dramatic shift seen in the past 25 years was achieved through a phenomenal collective effort that combined, amongst other things, significant investments in R&D by businesses and governments; the imposition of standards; taxes; regulations; cap and trade systems; large subsidies to new cleaner technologies

THE SOLUTION

There is an urgent need to develop **the field of institutions and initiatives and strong global and local movements to support a systemic shift in food systems** such that (i) **empty calories and unhealthy foods are tantamount to the fossil fuels of food systems, with nutritious foods taking over as the renewable energy equivalent and becoming the key drivers of competitive advantage and profit for market actors** and (ii) at the same time, **food systems become environmentally sustainable**. This requires a **major shift in incentives** across the system, which is predominantly market-based.

Some of the **building blocks of such a collective approach and movement do already exist**: (i) a diverse group of

such as solar panels; efforts to shift consumer behavior through tax credits and price subsidies; major citizen awareness and advocacy efforts; and significant investments in the science of climate change. A comprehensive multi-sectoral approach to energy systems reform was needed to identify the pathways and build consensus on a way forward. A field of critical institutions and actors was supported by a relatively small group of influential backers. And the climate change “movement” played a key role to raise the urgency, fuel the momentum, push the ambition, and increase accountability. Initially a limited and uncoordinated group of actors working on different issues in different geographies, the movement became increasingly organized into formal or informal country and global networks and gained great voice and influence.

stakeholders, as yet working in an uncoordinated fashion towards similar or connected goals. This includes the climate change movement itself, with its networks, convening power, and momentum as well as the myriad of global and local businesses, public and civil society actors working on agriculture, health and diets; (ii) growing knowledge and awareness about the magnitude of the challenges posed by food systems and diets and initial action to better define the problems, the available solutions and recommendations for action¹⁰.

Targeted and strategic efforts are now needed to support and accelerate the growth of the field required for the food systems transformation. No single

organization or strategy can resolve such complex challenges alone. However, lessons from successful experiences of fundamentally shifting systems (e.g. the energy system) or tackling complex issues (e.g. malaria, HIV, vaccines) shows that success is more likely to occur, or to occur

faster, if galvanizing organizations sometimes referred to as field catalysts creatively shape how their field can achieve systemic change, what the pathways and roadmap for change could be, and how to marshal stakeholders' efforts and address key bottlenecks.¹¹

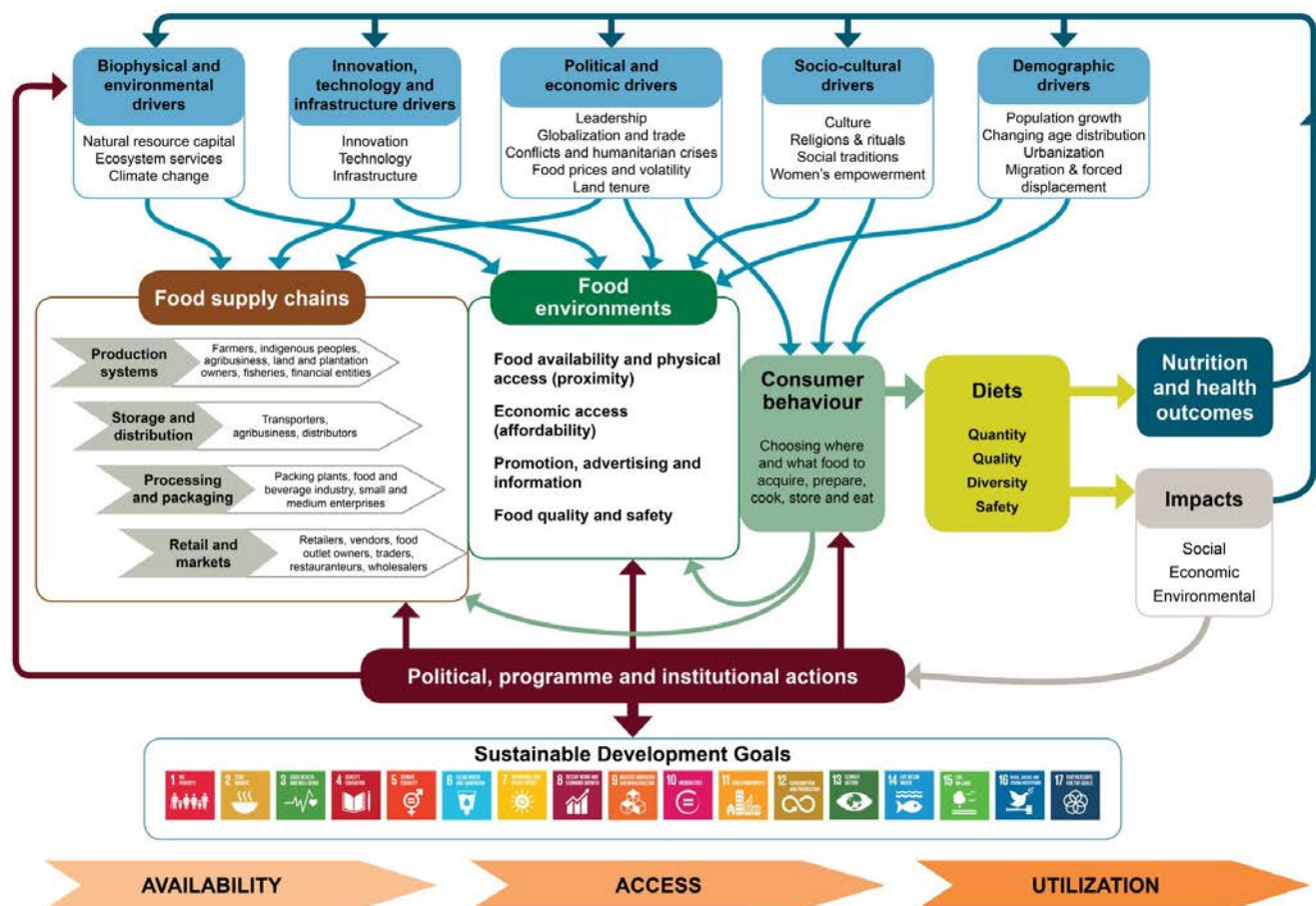
Where to start for food systems and diets transformation? **A few initial components**, globally and/or in key geographies, seem essential:

- **An initial coalition of the willing**, comprising an initial group of key governments, funders/donors, business leaders, and non-state/civil society champions. A center of gravity of key institutional backers is needed for efforts to take off.
- **A collective vision** of what success looks like, i.e. a compelling alternative vision for food systems that address the environmental, health and nutrition and economic dimensions, with a clear analysis of the benefits to different stakeholders, and the key levers available to deliver the vision. This is essential to inspire and start an informed discussion about where to go, why and with whom. The Eat Lancet Commission report is expected to lay the scientific foundations for this vision in June 2018 and the Food and Land Use Coalition aims to define global targets and global and national pathways to achieve them, but it is likely that more work will be needed to turn these scientific recommendations into a collective vision shared by the various stakeholders.
- **A strategic roadmap to support the transformation process**: we can learn from the climate change and other experiences that have successfully driven systemic industry shifts, to map out the key building blocks, the pathways for building the field, the actors that need to be involved and plan the different phases of engagement.
- **Embedding nutrition in sustainable food systems agenda**: This is an urgent priority given the increased momentum behind the sustainable food systems agenda following the COP23.
- **Capturing the imagination**: we need to develop narratives that draw attention to role of diets, and the opportunity to improve health, nutrition, livelihoods, and economies by transforming food systems while addressing climate change and sustainability issues, appealing to different audiences and mobilizing champions.

These components are interconnected and necessary to lay the foundations of long-term efforts likely to take several decades to succeed. The processes and journey to achieve the vision is as important as the outcome – to raise awareness, mobilize champions, and build consensus.

Key global events in the next 12 months could serve as forcing moments to mobilize partners / and launch initiatives around this agenda (e.g Eat Forum, June 2018; Launch of the Eat Lancet Report (date TBD); G20 leaders meeting, Nov 2018; COP 24, Dec 2018; WEF Davos, Jan 2019.)

Annex 1: Conceptual framework of food systems for diets and nutrition¹



1. *Nutrition and Food Systems*, HLPE, September 2017;
2. *Healthy Diets for All: a key to meeting the SDGs*, GLOPAN Policy Brief N.10, November 2017; *Global Nutrition Report 2017*
3. *Global Nutrition Report, 2017*
4. GLOPAN Policy brief N.10
5. *Global Burden of Disease, 2016*
6. *Climate Change 2014: Mitigation of Climate Change*, IPCC (2014).
7. <http://www.eatforum.org/programmes/#the-eat-lancet-commission-for-food-planet-and-health>
8. <http://eatforum.org/article/eat-lancet-commission-on-healthy-diets-from-sustainable-food-systems/>
9. *Valuing the SDG Prize in Food and Agriculture, Unlocking Business Opportunities to Accelerate Sustainable and Inclusive Growth*, Business and Sustainable Development Commission, October 2016
10. Cf HLPE report, GLOPAN report, and the ongoing work of the Eat Lancet commission on Food, Planet and Health
11. *How Field Catalysts Galvanize Social Change*: Stanford Social Innovation Review, Winter 2018