

# Meeting Community of Practice on Food Systems: Feedback on improved version Food Systems Decision Support tool

6 October 2020, held via zoom | Minutes

## Introduction

This meeting was part of a series of meetings of the Community of Practice on Food systems. Participants were about 35 food and nutrition security professionals, primarily from the Netherlands, many of whom had been involved in some form in previous assignments related to the Food System Decision-Support Tool. The meeting specifically dealt with acquiring input for the second version of this toolkit that was made by KIT and WUR. Conversations were meant to provide the developers team with necessary input, which will enable them to finalise the tool.

At the same time, the meeting also dealt with informing and inspiring everyone on how the Food Systems Approach (FSA) can be applied in participants' own work. This is an exciting challenge: what does the FSA do in practice, how does it make a difference, and how can we make it more useful? The meeting was expected to foster building some common perspectives, amongst others in view of preparing for the upcoming Food Systems Summit (2021) and formed part of the evolving agenda of the NFP.

The meeting was organized as a multi-stakeholder conversation: participants included practitioners, representatives of a number of research institutions, and representatives of embassies and Ministries. Private sector participants had been invited but did not attend.

# The Food Systems Decision-Support Tool

## *Presentation by Helena Posthumus, KIT*

The Food Systems Decision-Support Tool was developed by KIT and WUR to support decision-making based on a food system analysis. [This presentation](#) provided some background on the tool and the process of its development, to which several of CoP participants have contributed.

### ❖ Introduction to the Food System Decision Support Tool version 2.0

This work started in 2018, after DGIS and LNV commissioned KIT and WUR to jointly develop a process for food system analysis that can feed evidence into decision making on policies and strategies. WUR and KIT used Ethiopia as a case study to develop a tool that could guide decisions. Two other case studies followed, one about the Sahel and one about Nigeria. [These experiences](#), and reflections on the approach, have now resulted in this Food Systems Decision-Support Tool 2.0.

In the tool the diagram from [Van Berkum \(2018\)](#) is still the basic framework to look at the food system. However, through the reflection and discussions the KIT/WUR team learned:

- It is important to also look at the system behaviour underneath the food system. Namely, what happens in the interface between the different spaces within the system?
- System thinking and system dynamics had to be introduced. These were specifically applied to the case studies.
- Dynamics around power, inclusion and exclusion were missing in previous assignments. The current version pays more attention to this.

The Food Systems Decision-Support Tool 2.0 still has a similar process as before, where one asks a broad policy question or objective to define the boundaries, target groups, etc. These could for instance be defined by the person who is commissioning the Food System analysis.

The analysis that follows has **three components**, which can be implemented iteratively, or at the same time and continuously:

- Actors: important to take into account the political economy of and the stakeholders within the system.
- System characteristics: the food system outcomes, what does the food system give in terms of food security, well-being, positive or negative environmental outcomes. Here one maps the food system where one looks at the activities, the value chain, the drivers, etc.



- System behaviour: this is about the causal relationships that drive the food system, the archetype/pattern that the system seems to have (can be read up on in the tool guide) and ultimately the leverage points which can be used for change.

Ultimately the aim of the food system analysis is to find leverage points which can be used for change. Once these have been identified one can move to step 5, which are the recommendations to move towards action, which can be communicated to (the) decision maker(s).

The tool is guided by **three quality principles**:

- System thinking, which deals with the connections between food systems elements and the interaction effects. One looks at the larger picture. Specifically, the iceberg model is a useful concept in system thinking: we tend to observe what is above the surface, and what is easy to measure and observe. It generally takes more effort to observe patterns and trends, such as food availability over time. This is more difficult to measure, but does give more information about the functioning of the food system itself. However, what is really interesting in terms of opportunities for change are the mental models and the structures underneath the surface. These are more difficult to measure or to change, but are essential for system change.
- Stakeholder involvement: involve diverse stakeholders to get more perspectives and joint understanding. Involve as many local stakeholders as possible. This can be across sectors, social markers, etc. Get clarity about the potential benefits for different stakeholders of being involved. This requires stakeholder analysis and asking 'what's in it for them?'
- Equity and inclusion: at all times when doing the analysis, ask questions about who has access, who benefits, who has decision-making power. An important question in this context is how institutions drive equity or inequity, inclusion or exclusion. These may be important elements to explore pathways to (better) reach people, benefit people, empower people, etc.

In the tool box, one can find a collection of the tools that can be used for different components and levels of the analysis. It is also indicated how these tools can be applied.

#### ❖ The challenge of turning analysis into action

The key remaining difficulty is how to go from analysis to action, the main discussion point of this CoP meeting. The tool's rationale is to identify leverage points, at which a solution could have a large effect on system behaviour. But a decision maker is not operating in a vacuum, they have their own mechanisms of influence to take into account. Is the orientation towards policy advocacy or towards investment decisions? Each decision maker needs to take into account other policy objectives, of their own organisation or company, and those of national policies for example. Pulling those things together, one can come to an intervention area. The current draft Decision Support Tool includes some



questions for the process of developing recommendations. But KIT/WUR were not yet entirely happy with this and would appreciate input for improvements, for example:

- For effective decision-making, it would be good to understand which options are available, which are most effective and efficient depending on available resources; and to understand the impact of different leverage points; to understand how this fits with the policies and projects of development partners. A risk is that one may end up doing the same things one has always been doing, which may not lead to the required transformative change.

External reviewers who looked at the guide had important questions, which will be used to guide the discussion later on:

- When should you do this food system analysis. Where in the decision-making process does it come in?
- How do you use the analysis to inform the strategy?
- What about the tension where one is looking at overall change, while one is also still working on current challenges. Is there tension or not?
- How do you decide on an effective strategy?

## Comments and Q&A

Based on the presentation, the participants provided a series of comments and questions in plenary:

- Tool looks promising. It provides many ingredients, which seem useful for decision support.
- *Applicability of the tool in humanitarian circumstances, or when food system changes occur?* The tool assumes that the food system is fairly stable. All case studies done so far were implemented in a development setting. Of course in humanitarian settings the food system would be more unstable. However, one can still use system thinking, but would maybe need to look at shorter time frames or use a smaller scale to adequately understand the system.
- *Ultimately, the selection of the focus in the food system analysis is a political choice. One should give the least food secure more power than the multinational companies, who have different objectives, capture commodities and markets.*

*What is the level of the food system analysis: are we looking at policy coherence, the right to food for people, and how that is often undermined by the need to export raw commodities. For instance, Dutch support to flower farms was expected to lead to higher incomes for women, with which they could buy food; but in practice the prices for food went up in those areas. In the agricultural sector and in the global economy at large, there are frictions and competing claims.*

The scope of the Food System Analysis would then definitely be of influence, your analysis will



be influenced by the objectives and level that you have in mind. The questions raised are important to keep in mind when doing the analysis and when you are engaging the stakeholders. This is also why the concepts of political economy, power and equity are included. These parts are important to understand, but the answer depends on who is doing the analysis and with what coalition of stakeholders. There are no clear answers to it, but this is a discussion throughout the whole process.

- *What various levels of scale was the tool applied to?* The case studies were applied to the nation scale. However, in the application of the tool kit, there is no limit to the scale. This completely depends on the objectives of the food systems analysis.
- *Do you already have results that show that by using this tool a different kind of decision was made or a different intervention was designed that would have been decided/designed if one didn't have this tool?* The case studies that were done, were done to understand the food system better. However, it is still unclear whether it has led to different policies. There is not yet a good example where we did a case study and we have the results and impacts of the actions taken after using the tool.
- *A question about analysing the food system outcome. For the environmental segment you chose the doughnut analysis as developed by Kate Raworth. Why is it that you chose it to look at environmental outcomes, when it is also useful for social economic outcomes?*  
The analysis had to be put somewhere, for now we put it into the 'environmental outcomes' box although we realise the doughnut covers both environmental aspects and social economical aspects. This is the key benefit of this tool.

## Comments gathered in two discussion rounds

In two discussion rounds, participants shared their further comments on the tool.

The first round concentrated on the issues of relevance, applicability, and helpful and missing elements.

- Many participants confirmed the tool is relevant for their work on food systems, and saw opportunities to use elements of the tool in their work. The tool is very rich, there are many resources.
- This tool fits in the programming processes in which organisations are involved. It could support discussions about tensions within food systems. Using the tool, going through its process, could help establish common ground. It is especially useful as a middle space between the stage of serious research and modelling of the food system, and the stage of negotiations about interventions.



- The tool could be useful for national analysis and for people to identify why and how their project activity fits in the broader system. An interesting discussion could be held on whether this means that the tool can be best used for orienting to transformation or to check programme effectiveness.
- Aspects that were still missing according to participants, included more guidance on where to focus and how to handle issues concerning climate change. An explanation of what the goal of the tool is was missing; there should maybe be a bigger focus on equity as a goal. Thereby, interaction effects are still missing.
- There is a need for particular tools that various stakeholders could use without expert facilitation. Or is it assumed one would always need an expert to facilitate the process? Another question that arose was whether the tool is applicable for policy makers in the global south and how they can be engaged. Should they for instance be taken along? And how can the tool be translated to fit their contexts.

### **Comments about moving from analysis to decision making**

In the second round of breakout group discussions, participants concentrated on the challenge of how to effectively move from the phase of food systems analysis to decision making.

Key elements for success in this process, based on practical experience from group participants, include the following:

- Define a clear joint vision about the future you want to achieve, as a group. Make a Theory of Change. Fill in steps after making a common vision, a more concrete goal that you want to reach. Then look at conditions. Integrate values in the discussion
- Having sufficient basic knowledge about the food system, food, nutrition; and data about trade-offs.
- Ownership from the start
- Interpretation of the analysis is key to define action

### **What does this process need to enhance actionability of the -food systems- recommendations, which can lead to system change?**

- Effectively involving the right stakeholders who can help incentivizing change. Include a diverse range of stakeholders in the analysis including local actors. Conduct a proper power analysis of the real actors that drive food system transformations, and use that as a basis to have the 'right' people around the table while prioritising and ranking the ideas generated by the analysis; and for formulating and undersigning the recommendations for action. Local lead



actors and legitimate local lead organization(s) should be empowered in this role. Further, it is important to show the possible benefits for stakeholders: many companies and entrepreneurs just want to solve a problem.

- Facilitate effective pathways to transformation. Find a good balance between short term actions and wins, and longer term orientation directed to the lower level of the systems 'iceberg'. Design "triple duty" interventions. Create space for breaking taboos. Show deadlocks, if business as usual continues.
- Building on practice and use good data. Work with labs which try alternatives at a small scale. This may include policy experiments exploring different options. Use lived experience of people, which can be very convincing both to show problems as well as alternatives. Include local level analysis, beyond national level.
- Pay due attention to and deepen understanding of the trade-offs in the food system, especially local challenges vs overall/global, immediate vs long term.
- Encourage trust and an enabling environment for people to contribute effectively and creatively to food systems analysis and decision making. Use visual tools. Get out of one's thinking groove.
- Have an action plan with roles, responsibilities, timeline; and with space for flexibility and uncertainty. Have a long-term vision, but also short-term action. Prioritization

## Food Systems Analysis – examples

Participants in the Community of Practice meeting mentioned the following examples:

- Masterclass 'Zero Food Waste Lab' tested a food system intervention strategy focusing on food waste. By HAS. See [link](#).
- Frank Mechielsen (Hivos) Hivos will publish at WFD an [analysis of the food systems approach](#) in the local food change lab in Uganda and at national level in Zambia with recommendations how to improve.
- Ruerd Ruben (WER): A4NH published food system analysis of Ethiopia, Nigeria, Vietnam and Bangladesh.



# Final reflections

Following appreciative remarks for the group's inputs, the floor was opened for a last round of comments and reflections from participants.

- Today we spoke a lot about how and whether to involve all stakeholders. The system wide approach might be too big. Hence, if you know what your objectives and goals are, you can work towards these, and you might find that it is not always necessary to involve all the stakeholders.
- For policy makers, it could be adequate to use the food system approach as a Theory of Change, as it gives a wider framework to work with. When applying it, some questions need to be addressed, for example how to address specificities within the bigger framework. The leverage points that this process identifies can help to identify stakeholders with whom partnership could be established. At the national level the food system can be analysed with the bigger framework, but afterwards it needs to be divided or identified in different subsystems and through that the leverage points can be addressed.
- If you aim for system change, you have to do a mapping of the stakeholders. It is very important to identify the front runners respectively the brokers of vested interest; and to realize that you may work with either of those. In addition, it is important to find a balance between strategies to achieve a long term vision (e.g. 5 to 10 years) and short term actions. The latter have a higher likelihood of success and will help keep people motivated. Further, one should also be mindful of the donor of the analysis. And finally, use a lot of visual tools and make things more collaborative.

The meeting was concluded with closing remarks by the project team of KIT and WUR, who thanked the participants for their useful ideas and inputs. This provides many insights, which can be used to finish the tool in the near future. The feedback shows this tool is filling a need and people see a place for it. This is very encouraging. Nicole Metz, NFP: Thank you to everyone who has participated and the team of KIT/WUR who has worked on this. The work will be continued and a report will be published with all the information from the break out groups and plenary. The report will be especially for KIT/WUR and those working on the tool, but also for all of CoP. It will be shared later.

Participants can use the food systems page of the [Food & Business Knowledge Platform](#), which contains more publications of earlier meetings. F&BKP transitions into the [Netherlands Food Partnership](#) and future updates on the Food Systems CoP will be published [here](#).

