

Global Food Systems

Building the common ground

This Consultation aims to tackle the critical barriers to collective impact and to focus on shared solutions that mutually reinforce the case for change and calls to action.

It forms part of a developing process of cross-sector collaboration, and it follows recognition by a group of civil society leaders that food and agricultural systems are core to all their organisations' strategies, and that the scale of change needed will only be achieved by working together.

Food systems need joint action at a higher level. However, there are many presenting problems that fully absorb the capacity of many organisations today – but unless the root causes are tackled together, these issues will simply get worse tomorrow.

Food systems are both strategically important and urgent.

Globally, the food system is broken. We produce more food than ever before; yet more people are hungry. In a world of plenty, we have unacceptable levels of suffering. Food systems are at the crossroads of pathways for net zero climate goals, a nature-positive future, and combatting the related and growing global inequalities in poverty and human health. Increasingly, organisations are making food and agricultural systems a core part of their strategies and a central political issue.

Real-world transformation of food systems will have to happen at global scale, in this decade, for any transition pathways to avoid a reasonable likelihood of disruptive tipping points towards planetary and societal breakdown. For instance, global land-sector emissions must be net-zero by 2030, then become negative by 10 bn t/annum by 2050 to keep within 1.5C.

This is why a growing cross-sector conversation began in 2020 between global organisations concerned with climate, development, faith, biodiversity, health and animal welfare to explore how greater collective impact might be achieved.

The agenda for the future – who is setting it?

Despite an overwhelming rational case for change, civil society is failing to counter the entrenched narratives which reinforce vested interests and incumbent power.



The case for a positive transformation of food systems is based on stronger evidence and deeper scientific insight but is difficult to get it established and recognised. This requires cross-sectoral alignment within civil society on food systems, and the development of effective frames and narratives, in order to lead the conversation on global food system transformation.

The compartmentalised processes of the UN and other multi-lateral bodies soak up the policy and advocacy capacity of many civil society organisations, which lack the space to enable the development of new, emergent and bottom-up narratives. These processes also create sectoral silos in which policy communities lack a common language, and there are large knowledge gaps between, for example, health professionals, environmentalists and local food systems actors.

As in climate change, to have impact together on the global agenda, civil society organisations need to combine their strength to have enough power to shift attitudes and social norms. This requires sustained civil society campaigning, advocacy and education, based on shared, overarching narratives.

Narratives and power – a strategic programme for action

The main power asset of this leadership network is the ability to shift attitudes and social norms through civil society campaigning, advocacy and education.

Cross-sectoral collaboration on food system change is less mature than some other agendas. It is also more complex. The debate is at a much earlier stage in the journey compared to the UNFCCC and UNCBD; the climate change movement has taken decades to develop, and global narrative-building for biodiversity has taken even longer.

There are many points of difference between civil society organisations, which can easily derail debate, and these need to be acknowledged and managed. The focus should be on the common ground.

There is an urgent need to build alignment between organisations, and to identify and manage the tensions between different strategic goals to enable impact on food systems that leads to deep, lasting and effective change.

Collaboration for Collective Impact

Social change at a systems-level depends on a commitment of intellectual and practical resources to enable effective collaboration. This requires leaders to build trust between organisations and to develop understanding and alignment at a strategic level, with co-creation and commitment best done through in-person meetings.

A series of discussions have been held with the support of CIWFI and St George's House, as well as previously the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew. As constraints from Covid-19 eased, a significant step in this process was a Consultation on 'Global Food Systems – The Next Decade', in May 2022. Some 25 leaders across civil society engaged with sustainable food systems met to discuss the case for change, a future vision for regenerative and just food systems, and how to build strategic alignment and collaborative action for collective impact.

Participants highlighted the challenge that points of difference between civil society organisations can all too easily derail debate. While these may be more perceived than real, they must be clearly defined and managed to develop more effective narratives. It is clear that we know much of what works - local, diverse, resilient food systems, shorter supply chains, and regenerative agricultural practices – but what is needed is to define the zone of possible agreement.

At an online review before COP27 last autumn, it was agreed to hold a second in-person meeting to address this agenda and how it can be turned into a programme for action. The aim of the meeting is to support the design of frames and building shared narratives. There was a desire also to discuss how to work together to better take advantage of the UN formal review of the Food Systems Summit, the UNGA/HLPF agenda and the 2023 multilateral processes, as well as the emerging sustainable food systems strategy of the EU, which is likely to be of global significance.

There was recognition and discussion of the current acute pressures and constraints on many CSOs to invest proactively in collaboration.

A Review of Alignment

To enable the meeting to be more productive, it was recommended to carry out, in advance, a review of published strategies and policy positions on future food systems advocated by a cross-section of policy and advocacy organisations engaged in this process.

Information from the websites of 14 organisations (see Appendix) was brought together to establish, as far as possible, how their respective positions on future food systems related to (i) organisational mission and purpose, (ii) objectives for food systems transformation, and the policy asks and outcomes they were advocating.

This was collated by an intern (funded by CIWFI) and synthesised for analysis by Prof Mike Clarke, in an independent capacity, who was supported by a small oversight group of other participants in the network (Lancet-Countdown, WRI/FOLU and Practical Action).

More in Common

The review found that there is:

- Virtually universal agreement on the **scale of change** needed at a whole systems level, and that climate-nature-pollution-health nexus is an **existential crisis**.
- Broad recognition of that **agriculture and food systems are part of the problem**, and that they must be transformed **to become part of the solution**.
- General consensus (implicit in many cases) that the global agenda should not treat food as a commodity and governed multilaterally principally under traditional trade agreements but, rather, it should be regarded as a **universal public good**, within the context of the SDGs and a **rights-based approach**.
- Following on from this, there is general agreement that the objectives for food systems transformation need to address both **social equity** (eg inclusion, just transition, intergenerational equity) and the **natural environment** (eg safe planetary boundaries, co-existence and respect for nature).

There were a number of key shared themes:

- i. Many organisations are explicitly aligned with agro-ecology (or regenerative agriculture) and Nature-Based Solutions
- ii. Inclusion of smallholder farmers in governance processes, and empowerment through education and training
- iii. Redefining measures of policy success from production to rights-based metrics – ie nutrition, health, sustainability, biodiversity
- iv. Importance of transparency and democratization of information - including scalability of data and reporting standards, and accessible and appropriate monitoring and dissemination
- v. Governance and need for controls on power and capital – including conflicts of interest, regulation of finance, policy capture by powerful vested interests, accountability and independent oversight
- vi. The systemic and binding reform of perverse finance - ie subsidies/incentives/trade tariffs and barriers, financial investment vehicles - and the need to couple these to the SDGs and a rights-based framework

It is clear we know what works – local, diverse, resilient food systems, shorter supply chains, regenerative agricultural practices– but sustained effort is needed to scale them up. There is huge potential to leverage positive stories of change, based on the diversity of good practice by local communities around the world, that can resonate with different stakeholders from local to global levels. Investment of effort is also needed to create a more common language, and to frame the evidence base in ways that are more relevant to wider socio-economic measures, such as jobs, productivity, social and environmental justice, and health.

Apparent points of difference

The diversity of civil society is reflected in the range of organisational priorities and emphasis - the most substantive of which are the speed of transition, the scope and scale of power re-distribution, the role of markets and corporates, and theories of change. This can be better managed by recognising systemic and structural differences in organisational strategy:

Frames – According to the mission of respective organisations, the focus for food systems transformation and measures of success are framed differently. This contrasts between food systems inputs (eg land-use for biomass, social inclusion, intensive animal rearing) and food systems outputs (eg health outcomes, poverty alleviation, equity).

Theories of change and positioning – There is a wide range positioning in terms of working, on the one hand, with existing governance structures and decision-makers, businesses and financial interests and, on the other hand, seeking to challenge incumbent power and redistribute resources and control. Similarly, organisations differ over the relative importance of a range of financial mechanisms, and the role of regulation and legally binding targets.

Means not ends – While there is much consensus on the case for change and the objectives of food systems transformation, there is a wide diversity of organisational priorities in relation to mechanisms. This is possibly the source of the most problematic sticking points, notably:

- i. The future role of intensive, industrialised farming, in terms of principle, scale and speed of transition
- ii. Meat reduction (in principle v scale, quality and scope): Elimination of industrial production methods -v- Elimination of meat in general - v- Retention of intensive systems on more sustainable basis
- iii. Genetic engineering – a range of positions from positive to negative.
- iv. The role and control of highly-capitalised and advanced technology and innovation
- v. Regulation and oversight of aid, finance and centralisation, especially in relation to the Global South

Towards the Common Ground

The review demonstrates there is potential for much more powerful consensus over the desired destination for food systems transformation, and the vision for the future articulated by civil society.

However, there are many confounding factors which are operating at different levels. Firstly, there are higher levels issues beyond the immediate influence of civil society regarding multi-lateral governance and global geopolitical power. Secondly, there are many 2nd order issues regarding the mechanisms for transforming food systems, which often provide the day-day focus for organisations' impact through policy advocacy, campaigning and stakeholder engagement.

This Consultation will focus on where the combined voice of civil society can be most effective, on what actions together will make the biggest impact, and on how we can catalyse others to join a call to action.

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Appendix

Organisations included in open-source review of alignment on food systems change

Greenpeace UK

WWF International and WWF-UK

Christian Aid

Fairtrade Foundation

CAFOD

Birdlife International

CIWFI

Oxfam

Practical Action

World Resources Inst.

World Obesity Federation

International Institute for Sustainable Development

Save the Children International

E3G