

ADOPTING A FOOD SYSTEMS APPROACH TO REDUCING HUNGER AND MALNUTRITION: LESSONS FROM BENIN, DR CONGO, AND MADAGASCAR

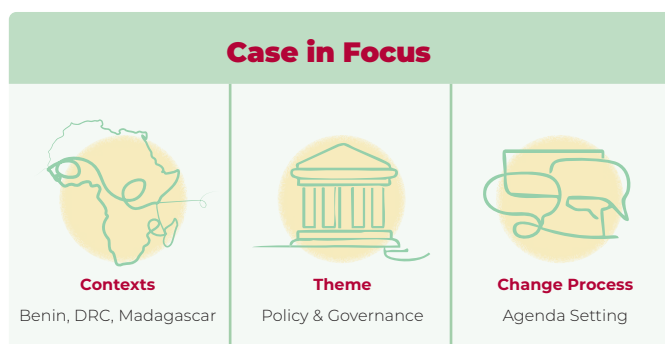


Adopting food-related policies, governance approaches, and action plans that cut across sectors is key to food systems transformation – but how to do so is not always clear. This case study examines how policy stakeholders in three African countries were able to adopt food systems thinking, adapt their governance approaches to enable cross-sectoral food systems approaches, and start to move towards action.

Motivation

In recent years, consensus has grown on the importance of taking a 'food systems approach' to transforming the way we produce and consume food in order to better achieve interlinked social, health, and environmental goals. While there are opportunities for doing this through grassroots citizen-led approaches, civil society-led programmes, and private-sector actions, policymaking remains one of the most potentially impactful spheres for food systems action. The 2021 United Nations Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) galvanised attention to the urgency of doing so and helped spark country-level efforts to develop plans or 'pathways'

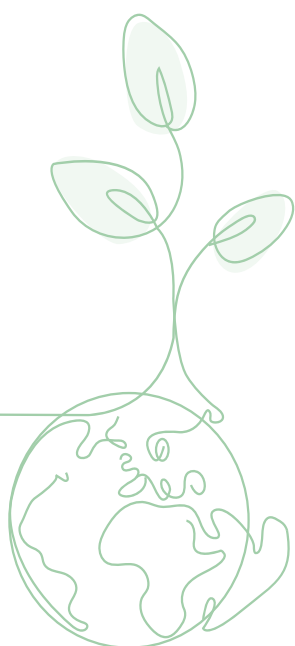
for doing so. But 'food systems' remains a relatively new concept, and there are limited examples of operationalising these approaches in practice. This case study examines the process of adopting 'food systems' thinking and operationalising it into specific policies, strategies, and actions, drawing on three lower/lower-middle-income African countries: Benin, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and Madagascar. It reflects on the shared and differing experiences of these three countries – and what they have been able to learn from one another.



Case Study Context

The case study was conducted alongside a 'South-South Learning' workshop that brought together stakeholders from Benin, DRC, and Madagascar to learn about approaches to food systems transformation used in the three countries. Six interviews, two per country, were conducted in late 2024 and 2025. Five interviewees were with their national governments, while the sixth worked for a UN agency. All interviews were transcribed, translated into English, and analysed thematically.

As shown in the table below, the three countries face persistent challenges with undernutrition and food insecurity alongside increasing environmental pressures on food production; all have an acute need to improve the resilience of their food systems while working towards larger poverty reduction and development goals. As one interviewee put it, '[we] need to find the right balance between feeding the population and preserving resources so that future generations can feed themselves'.



| | Benin | DRC | Madagascar |
|--|--------------|------------|-------------------|
| Child stunting rates | 32% | 42% | 40% |
| Pct. of population that can't afford a healthy diet | 53% | 89% | 94% |
| Share of employment in agriculture | 28% | 55% | 69% |
| Projected impact of climate change on yields of maize (low emissions scenario) | -4.7% | -4.8% | -2.5% |

All data from the Food Systems Dashboard

This case study was developed as part of the 'Exemplars of Food System Change' project of the Nourishing Food Pathways programme, which seeks to document examples of food system transformation in action and explore what enables and holds back change. You can access all the case studies here: <https://www.gainhealth.org/exemplars>

RESULTS

Thinking of the Whole Food System

Scientific definitions of food systems focus on their broad scope – from input provision or primary production through to food consumption or waste management – as well as their interlinked nature, with one element of the system influencing others and coherent action across sectors necessary for achieving change. Similarly, FAO (2025) describes a food systems approach as ‘a way of thinking, acting, and working together that considers the interconnections among components and outcomes across agrifood systems and interrelated systems’.

Interviewees’ conceptions largely aligned with this, with them noting multiple sectors, inclusion of all steps in the food supply chain, and the diversity of outcomes that depend on food systems. Multiple interviewees acknowledged that, when the UNFSS process began, there was limited understanding of food systems, with one interviewee from DRC noting that ‘it was something that just fell out of the sky, we didn’t know where it had come from’. They thus had to begin the process of adopting systems thinking and making food systems plans while simultaneously trying to understand what food systems were. In some cases, this led to challenges or delays. All agreed, however, that understanding had grown over time and that ‘food systems’ was now widely understood and adopted within their contexts. There was also widespread awareness of the importance (or ‘the stakes’) of food system transformation.



Joining Efforts towards 'Systems Governance'

Across all three countries, dialogue and obtaining and including diverse views were seen as essential to getting food systems transformation right, with interviewees from Madagascar proudly noting how over 700 people had been involved in creating their food systems pathway through dialogues. For DRC and Madagascar, the UNFSS served as an important triggering moment: both countries organised multiple participatory dialogues and submitted roadmaps before the Summit. Each of these aligned to the general cross-cutting goals of UNFSS (e.g., Zero Hunger, Equitable Livelihoods) while reflecting local priorities. For example, DRC’s roadmap included five domains and was built upon an existing national food and nutrition security policy, with particularly strong emphasis on food and nutrition security, while Madagascar’s was organised around three ‘axes’, with strong emphasis on climate change resilience. In Benin, in contrast, the process was slower, with no pathway developed in the run-up to the Summit and this being pursued and finalised in 2024-26, instead. Benin opted for a national strategy rather than a roadmap; while more time-consuming, this approach was intended to ensure more comprehensive results by incorporating input from all stakeholders.

All three countries found that new governance mechanisms were essential for making progress and set up national taskforces, made up of diverse actors, to guide their food systems process.



We have built the architecture of our states on sectoral development, even though we are facing a cross-cutting problem across sectors. So the big challenge is how these sectors work together... This is why a national working group is essential. We bring together all the sectors involved in the issue so that they can work together with a holistic view, rather than a segmented one, taking into account complementarities and synergies, and ensuring that roles are clearly defined.



Moving beyond sectoral silos was recognised as essential—but also challenging.



Between us, the different ministries, when we have these meetings there are often these frustrations that never fail. You'll see people complaining that their activities or recommendations have not been taken into account in an action plan that has been drawn up, or that their activities have been entrusted to another sector. We try to manage them and see how we can keep them under control.



Interviewees noted the importance of high-level commitment to food systems approaches, with one explaining, 'if the leaders aren't committed, it's hard to get the players to commit'. Indeed, high-level leadership proved essential in all countries for getting different sectors on board and ensuring that all felt a shared commitment to the approach. As one interviewee explained, 'A minister can't summon his ministerial colleague... But if it's the Prime Minister who invites, everyone has to show up.' When food systems issues were elevated to be cross-sectoral, government-wide concerns, this could unlock new ways of doing things:



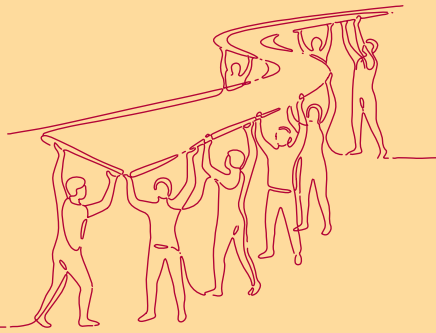
The challenge is to mobilise the players... The Ministry of Agriculture is a gateway, but the vacuum is very quickly perceived as a problem of the Ministry of Agriculture. Some of the other sectors felt more involved, while others felt left out. When we started the activities, getting the other sectors involved was a big challenge. But then we succeeded in promoting it, because at some point the roadmap was officially promoted at government level and passed through the Council of Ministers. It has become a national reference document.



All countries noted strong involvement of civil society and international organisations in their processes, which was generally valued as strengthening them and helping to sustain momentum. In contrast, the private sector tended to be underrepresented in most of the governance approaches – as one interviewee from Madagascar noted, 'We're also trying to get the private sector on board, because it's really the working arms that can implement the guidelines for transforming food systems'.

While the high-level visions developed for UNFSS proved helpful, most stakeholders recognised that more specific, concrete, and costed action plans were needed to translate these into something closer to real-world action. Importantly, a new approach was not needed in all cases: in DRC, for example, the country already had a budgeted action plan covering food and nutrition security, so they chose to adapt this to their food systems roadmap rather than creating something wholly new.

Across all countries, it was clear that there had been a need for a mindset shift in moving beyond sectoral approaches and in seeing and understanding linkages across sectors. But that, when this occurred, new insight and action could be unlocked:



There was a sectoral awareness of environmental degradation, with people feeling left out of the development process, and regions affected by the food security problem. But the key was to bring all these different concerns and questions together, to get a systemic view of the fact that everything is linked, with several drivers influencing the environment as well. So, there was more awareness at sectoral level, but then there was this opportunity to bring it all together, to consolidate it with a food system view.



Learning from Others

Representatives from the three countries all noted benefits of learning from one another's experiences. This included specific technical approaches (e.g., 'agricultural development poles' for specific crops in Benin, or forest conservation approaches in DRC) as well as governance structures (e.g., the placement of a nutrition unit at the presidential level in Benin, or the use of digitised food systems monitoring systems in Madagascar). This was particularly the case for Benin: as the country was several steps behind in the process of developing a food systems transformation strategy, they were able to learn from the experiences of DRC and Madagascar and, as one interviewee noted, identify 'mistakes that we were not going to make'. Learning from countries with similar contexts and similar levels of development was noted as particularly valuable. As one interviewee explained, 'In South-South cooperation, all countries are on an equal footing: they share the same problems and realities, and seek concerted solutions together.'



Challenges to Implementation – but Also Optimism

Challenges remain across all countries, including incentivising ongoing participation in taskforces and planning processes, cascading planning and implementation from national to provincial and local government levels, getting actors to deliver on their commitments, developing monitoring systems and indicators, moving from plans to action, and finding the resources to support those actions in an increasingly constrained development sector.

Indeed, funding challenges were cited as a consistent barrier to implementing transformative actions across all countries, and one that was hardly unique to 'food systems' approaches:



Most of the food policies we develop, it's very difficult to execute or implement all the activities that have been listed, and that's a challenge. You end up with a five-year policy, and at the end of the five years, you haven't implemented half the activities listed in the policy... most of the time it's linked to a lack of funding.



One interviewee noted that there could be disjoints between what was in the action plan and what could actually be funded and implemented, as development partners usually had a 'predefined programme'. Contextual issues like insecurity, geopolitical shifts, and climate change also complicated progress. Indeed, some interviewees recognised that food system transformation might not succeed, should resources not become consistently available to support it. 'Even if it ['food systems'] has become a reference word,' one interviewee opined, 'the big question is whether it's something that's empty as long as there's no support, no funding, no commitment from the players...'. However, most interviewees were positive about the future prospects, with one noting, '[food system transformation] is really a colossal amount of work, but there's no fear that it won't come to fruition.'

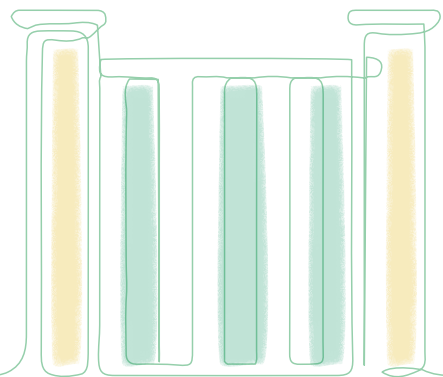
BARRIERS AND ENABLERS TO CHANGE

The adoption of food systems approaches to policymaking in these three countries was facilitated by:

- *Commitment of high-level leadership*
- *Governance structures that were supra-ministerial (as opposed to run by sectoral ministries)*
- *Inclusive dialogue processes*
- *Collaboration among sectors and different types of actors*
- *The UNFSS, which represented a 'triggering moment'*

Barriers it faced included:

- *Ways of thinking and doing that were framed around specific sectors*
- *Unclear incentives for cross-sectoral collaboration*
- *The perception that 'food systems' was a buzzword or imposed from outside*
- *Initial lack of understanding of what 'food systems' meant*
- *Persistent resource constraints*
- *Limited engagement of private-sector actors*

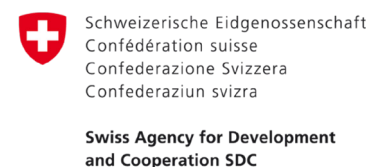
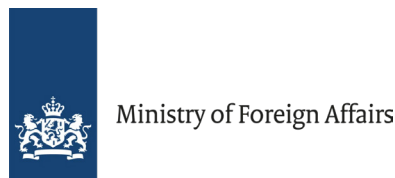


Conclusion

Adopting policies, governance approaches, and action plans that cut across sectors is key to food systems transformation. This case study showed how stakeholders in Benin, DRC, and Madagascar were able to adopt a new 'food systems' way of thinking and doing by bringing together actors from different sectors in joint taskforces to develop action plans or strategies for food system transformation. This new way of framing food-related challenges as being systems issues, as opposed to sectoral ones, represented an important change in setting the national policy agenda. While all three countries have faced challenges in getting those involved to work across sectoral silos, high-level leadership, elevating governance structures to cut across sectoral ministries, and inclusive dialogue helped to facilitate progress. Ongoing resource constraints, however, remain the main barrier to moving the strong plans that have been made into on-the-ground action that shifts food systems towards being more health-supporting, sustainable, and equitable.



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The findings, ideas, and conclusions presented in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of GAIN or any of the agencies mentioned above.

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