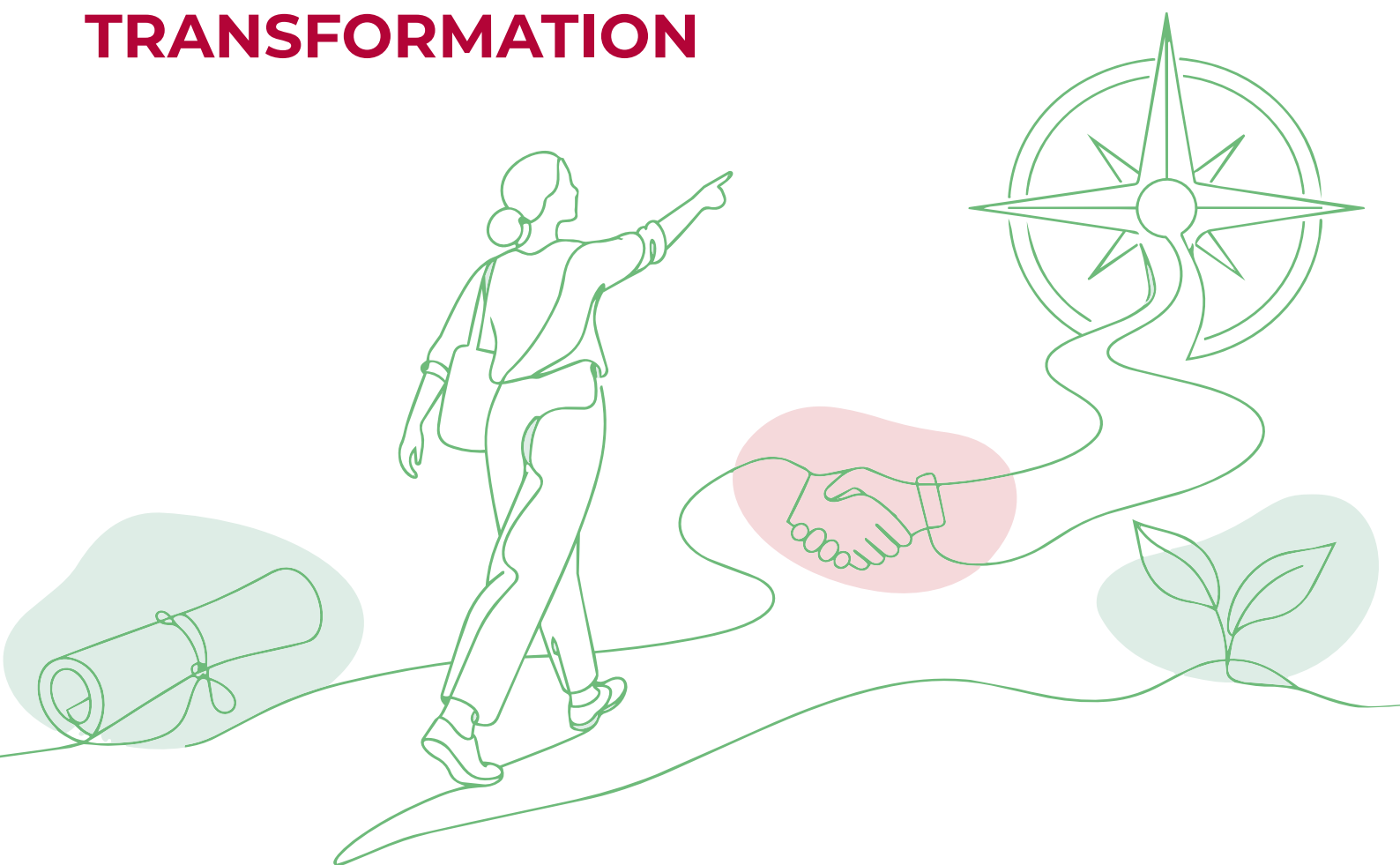




# FROM A ROADMAP TO A COMPASS: BENIN'S NATIONAL STRATEGY FOR ACCELERATING FOOD SYSTEMS TRANSFORMATION

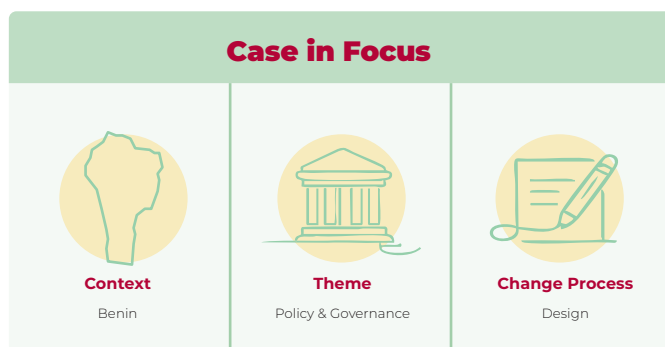


*Cross-sectoral approaches are needed for food systems transformation—but how can countries move from systems thinking and visioning to actual coordinated action? This case study examines Benin's development of a costed National Strategy for Accelerating Food Systems Transformation.*

## Motivation

The 2021 United Nations Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) galvanised attention to the urgency of addressing food-related issues for the health of both people and planet and doing so in an integrated way. Running up to and since then, the term ‘food systems’ has seen widespread uptake in rhetoric—but changes in language are not the same as substantive changes in government policies and strategies. Benin sought to change this by developing a national food systems strategy with a costed action plan, going beyond the visionary but non-binding ‘transformation pathways’

that many countries had articulated prior to UNFSS. The case study examines the process of developing that strategy and what it might mean for accelerating food system transformation in Benin.



## Case Study Context

Benin, a lower-middle-income country in coastal West Africa, has made considerable progress in reducing food insecurity and undernutrition, but still faces challenges on both fronts—as well as a growing burden of overweight and related non-communicable diseases. Alongside these nutrition issues, there are also challenges with increasing food system resilience to climate change, ensuring high-quality livelihoods for food system workers, and ensuring that the food and agriculture sector can leverage its natural potential to become an engine for economic growth and improved wellbeing.

The case study is based on 12 interviews conducted in early 2026 with those involved in the process of developing the National Strategy for Accelerating Food Systems Transformation. Interviewees covered two government agencies, UN and international organisations, and academia. Of note, all those interviewed were insiders to the process, so this case study does not represent potentially conflicting views of those who were not part of developing the strategy. Apart from one interview for which only notes were available, interviews were transcribed verbatim, coded, and analysed thematically; the draft strategy text was also consulted.



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

### *Motivated to Take a Food Systems Approach*

Like most countries, Benin's approach to food policy has historically been sectoral, with separate policies for agriculture, health, and other sectors largely developed in parallel. Benin's Permanent Secretariat of the National Council for Food and Nutrition (SP-CAN) (now replaced by the National Agency for Food and Nutrition, ANAN) served an essential role in coordinating on food and nutrition topics—but its mandate did not extend to other food systems issues, like employment or climate change adaptation. As one interviewee noted, 'traditionally, public action in Benin was segmented, that is, on one side agriculture was treated through a lens of productivity and value chains. On the other side, nutrition was perceived as a public health and hygiene issue'. Another noted how this was reflected in policy documents 'that allow each actor to stay in his own lane.'

The seeds of adopting a food systems approach in Benin were planted by the 2021 UNFSS: while Benin did not submit a pathway prior to the Summit, it did conduct a national dialogue and, as one interviewee noted, the process 'served as a genuine trigger by putting all the actors around the table.' However, once work began on developing a pathway document post-Summit, it was soon stalled due to a lack of funding and unclear leadership during the transition from SP-CAN to ANAN. The work was left unfinished, but the ambition remained.



### *Re-Launching a Stalled Process—with a Shift*

In 2023, the work was relaunched with two key changes. First, it was now under the purview of a National Food Systems Coordinator within the Ministry for Agriculture, Livestock, and Fisheries (MALF), who convened a dedicated Task Force. Second, funding and technical support were made available through GAIN's Nourishing Food Pathways programme and the Shamba Centre for Food and Climate. After completion of a Dialogue Report drawing on work done prior to UNFSS, stakeholders began developing a 'roadmap', as recommended under the UNFSS process and undertaken by several other countries.

However, they soon realised they might be going down the wrong path: as one government interviewee noted, 'there is no document in the nomenclature, no policy document in Benin called a roadmap'. This was not just an

issue of nomenclature: an unclassifiable document would have limited weight and an unclear future—it could not be formally adopted or enter the register of national reference instruments; it would not be circulated to all ministries; and, most damningly, it would create no expectation of actually being used in decision-making. As such, the group decided to target a more ambitious output: a strategy, aiming for it to not be ‘just one more document in Benin.’



*Those were really moments of decision where everyone realised that, in our country's context, this document must not remain just one more document; for it to serve as a compass, it has to be turned into a strategy.*



This was not a cost-less decision: the process of developing a strategy in Benin is structured, long, and resource intensive. Desired deadlines would be missed due to the shift. But moving from a “Roadmap” to a “Strategy” was transformative, shifting the target from an internationally legible deliverable to a nationally binding policy instrument with the power to command attention and drive action. And with the Planning Ministry—the national expert in strategy development—at the table, the Task Force’s way forward was clear.

### **An Inclusive Drafting Process**

The process thus began in detail, with working groups organised, workshops held, and drafting soon underway. Over more than a year, the Task Force worked diligently on drafting and redrafting. While earlier documents and other countries’ roadmaps could focus more on the big-picture vision, the challenge (and reward) of pursuing a strategy was that this vision needed to be paired with detailed, practical analysis and decision-making. As one participant noted, ‘taking each activity and budgeting it against the indicator and over the five years [...] it was really very laborious’. It was also essential to take account of, build upon, and ensure synergies with existing policies and strategies, such as the national food and nutrition policy and agricultural sector plan.

Strong government leadership by MALF, with the Coordinator serving as the champion, was essential in moving the effort forward. As one interviewee acknowledged, ‘if he had not been available to accompany the process, we would have stopped it long ago.’

Another respondent confirmed that the ministry was the real ‘carpenters’ of the document. But they were adamant about not doing so alone:



*This is not a document drafted by the Ministry of Agriculture alone in its room somewhere. No, no, no. We made sure the process was inclusive and participatory.*



However, a necessary result of working multi-sectorally was a need for alignment and the inclusion of many different issues – as one interviewee noted, ‘everyone wants to see everything in it’. In addition, with many competing draws on participants’ time and attention, it could prove difficult to get everyone in the same room—limited availability led to further delays and, in some cases, patchy participation. As one government interviewee described, ‘we invited all the ministries; six ministries were absent’. Changes in which specific representatives of a given organisation attended each meeting also caused some delays, as new attendees would need to be brought up to speed before the process could move forward.



Participants in a workshop on budgeting as part of the strategy development process.

## A Strong Result

By early 2026, a draft was completed of the National Strategy for Accelerating Food Systems Transformation, with the objective to accelerate the structural and sustainable transformation of Benin's food systems. The strategy opens with an extensive and well-evidenced problem analysis, identifying five main challenges: low agricultural productivity and heavy import dependence; post-harvest losses and unsecured value chains; climate vulnerability, limited access to clean and reliable energy, and insufficient water infrastructure; insufficient governance, financing, and value-chain structuring; and limited access to nutritional and socio-community services. It then lays out three pillars to address these: safe and nutritious food; sustainable production and consumption; and livelihoods and governance. The scope extends beyond any sectoral policy to include multiple inherently multisectoral actions, such as school food programmes, clean energy for agrifood, and food waste reduction. The strategy is complemented by an indicator framework and a detailed costing analysis.

All respondents felt that the strategy was a document with strong potential for impact. Coherence and coordination were common themes across several interviewees:



*I think it is a major step forward that proposes an integrated vision going beyond mere agricultural production... I already anticipate better coherence of interventions, given the integrated vision.*



*This strategy is based on synergy of actions. It will produce savings in energy and in resources, and will also allow a result to be achieved.*





*'...every ministry has its policy and strategy document. But this strategy will now be a mirror in which everyone can see themselves reflected.'*



*'...it is a document belonging to the nation, not to a government... we will have a compass that will guide and direct, and that will be a reference for all national policies and all activities linked to the transformation of food systems.'*



The strategy has now been validated but awaits its presentation for adoption by the Council of Ministers. While some interviewees noted that there was a risk of electoral campaigns leading to disruptions in this, all expected the process to move forward and the strategy to be formally adopted.

### **Potential for Transformative Impact—with open questions**

Respondents saw the strategy, once implemented, as being a key contributor to reducing hunger, fuelling economic growth, and improving the health and wellbeing of the people of Benin. However, most were also clear that adopting a strategy does not, in itself, guarantee implementation.

Financing, including for the human resources needed for implementation, was the main barrier cited by interviewees. As one explained 'it is one thing to dream, another to have the means for one's dreams.' The strategy's costed action plan is heavily dependent on donor funding, with over half of funding expected to come from outside the national budget at a time when donors are generally reducing their development funding. There are also gaps where activity lines are not costed, and the costed lines are nearly all devoted to the second and third programmes, with only a small fraction going to the 'safe and healthy diets' programme. There is thus a risk that some activities may be underfunded while an inability to raise sufficient donor funds could pose a real risk to the strategy's effective implementation.

An additional challenge is that there remains an unclear mandate for implementation of the strategy, with different agencies named as responsible by different actors and sources. The strategy's broad scope is also a challenge in this way, as it is unclear which organisation has the technical capacity and resources to carry it forward. Specific reporting and accountability mechanisms remain to be elaborated.

Finally, supporting coordination, integration, and true systems thinking will require further capacity building at all levels of government and among partners. While food systems approaches have strong champions in Benin, some of those involved in food policy and programming remain unfamiliar with the concept. As one interviewee noted, '[food systems] is not yet in people's vocabulary'. Indeed, one interviewee admitted that, before participating in developing the strategy, 'I myself had no precise idea what a food system is'. Thus both financial capacity and technical capacity will need to be bolstered to ensure 'food systems thinking' is translated from documents to reality.

## ENABLERS AND BARRIERS TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF BENIN'S STRATEGY

### Enablers included:

- *Shifting the target output to a document type with actual national weight*
- *Catalytic donor funding and technical support that made drafting feasible*
- *Inclusion of the Planning Ministry, which had the procedural knowledge to recognise the need to shift to a strategy and to support the process*
- *Leadership and championing of the process by the National Coordinator*
- *Strong engagement of Task Force members in the drafting process*

### Barriers included:

- *Early pauses in the work due to stalled financing*
- *A time-consuming process of development*
- *Uneven participation across ministries*
- *Uncertainties about implementation feasibility, given reliance on external donor funding*
- *An unclear institutional mandate for long-term ownership, implementation, and ensuring accountability*

## Conclusion

While implementation challenges remain, Benin has taken a major step forward in developing the National Strategy for Accelerating Food Systems Transformation. The process leveraged strong government leadership, essential partner contributions, and an inclusive process to deliver a pioneering policy document. The shift from a roadmap to a strategy is likely to be a consequential one: while requiring a more onerous and time-consuming process. It resulted in a document that could be adopted by the Council of Ministers, be resilient to changes in administration, and serve as a key plan for food system actions going forward. Benin's ambitious approach, if followed up by strategy adoption and solid implementation, can serve as a lighthouse for other countries to follow in their food system transformation journeys.





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