Diagnosing Food Systems Policy Coherence

How do food policies reinforce or conflict with food systems outcomes in Africa?

What is the tool and why is it needed?

Food systems policy coherence is the alignment of policies that affect the food system with the aim of achieving socio-economic and environmental goals. Coherence ensures that policies designed to improve one food system outcome do not undermine others and that synergies across policy areas are taken advantage of to achieve better outcomes for all.

Without coherent approaches, even well-intentioned policies may undermine one another, diluting their collective impact and squandering limited resources. Yet examples of incoherence are not uncommon. Governments often have health sector policies that promote increased consumption of healthy foods to reduce levels of diet-related diseases such as diabetes, while also subsidising the production of ingredients, such as sugar, edible oils, and refined grains often used to produce unhealthy foods.

But assessing the extent of coherence in a country's food policy landscape is challenging, with no standardised or easy-to-use empirical approaches. A Food Systems Policy Coherence Diagnostic Toolkit developed by the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition, in collaboration with AKADEMIYA2063, addresses this gap. The toolkit, which has been tested in multiple countries in Africa and Asia, offers a practical methodology to assess food systems policy coherence and to provide actionable recommendations for enhancing it.

In this brief, we introduce the Toolkit and illustrate findings from its application in five African countries – Benin, Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria and Tanzania.

USER TIPS

Insights from the application of the PCT can help policymakers and other food systems stakeholders to:

- Understand the extent to which current governance structures and mechanisms are supportive of policy coherence and identify aspects that require strengthening

- Assess the level of coherence between existing sectoral policies in support of food systems goals

- Observe recommendations for strengthening policy coherence

- Track improvements in policy coherence over time.

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How does the Toolkit work?

The Food Systems Policy Coherence Diagnostic Toolkit consists of two modules.

Module 1 examines whether there are structures and mechanisms in place that would increase the likelihood of achieving policy coherence, such as whether a country has a cross-sectoral food systems policy or pathway and ongoing mechanisms for cross-sectoral coordination on food related issues. It comprises a series of questions relating to each of the dimensions illustrated in **Figure 1** to assess the extent to which these structures and mechanisms are supportive of improved coherence.

Module 2 considers the actual conflicts and synergies between existing agriculture, health, environment, social, trade and industrial policies in relation to the achievement of ten key outcomes of food system transformation as set out in **Figure 2**.

Figure 1. Structures and mechanisms examined in the tool

Figure 2. Food Systems goals

Zero Hunger	Climate & Disaster Resilience	Healthy Diets	Reduction of Food Loss & Waste	Decent Work for Food Systems Workers	Inclusion & Empowerment of Women & Girls
Increased supply of main staple foods	Climate change mitigation via food systems	Increased consumption of nutritious food		Adequate wages for workers	
Affordable prices for main staple	Food systems better adapted to climate change	Less unhealthy food consumption		More effective nutrition-sensitive social protection	

While achieving perfect coherence among all food-related policies across all goals is unlikely – and potentially undesirable given the costs associated with coordination and alignment – by identifying and managing critical synergies and trade-offs, governments can better align efforts towards achieving key goals.

Insights from African countries

To inform the development of the toolkit, the two modules were applied in five African countries – Benin, Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria and Tanzania. Noting that the Policy Coherence Diagnostic Toolkit is not designed to compare or to rank countries in terms of levels of coherence achieved, given the differences in both policy context and in socio-economic objectives across the countries, we identify a number of patterns that suggest where attention can be focused to improve the overall coherence of food systems policies[1].

Structures and mechanisms

Most countries were evaluated as having **framework documents** that are highly supportive of policy coherence, developed with broad stakeholder input and covering multiple sectors. In most cases clear priorities are identified, although generally these are not associated with specific targets. Although one country did not submit a formal pathway document to the UNFSS, the ongoing development of a national food systems transformation strategy in that country reflects many of the elements recommended in the Toolkit.

In the majority of countries, **political commitment** is moderately supportive of policy coherence, with greater attention needed to ensuring that sustained commitment is ensured beyond electoral cycles or government terms.

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1   More detailed analyses for each country are available at: https://www.gainhealth.org/policy-coherence-toolkit

Although evaluated as highly supportive in two countries, **capacity and implementation** was found to be only somewhat supportive in other countries, with limitations including the absence of costed roadmaps and insufficient capacity development for government staff.

Coordination structures were evaluated as moderately supportive in all countries. While lead institutions to steer food systems transformation have largely been identified, weaknesses in both horizontal and vertical coordination mechanisms were noted. In some countries these weaknesses could potentially be overcome by establishing a cross-ministerial position within the Prime Minister's Office.

A much more mixed picture was observed in relation to **inclusivity and engagement**. In higher-scoring countries, mechanisms for expert consultation on food systems policies, and including the voices of non-technical, non-government stakeholders in policy decision-making have been established but these are lacking, or not cross sectoral, in less-well-performing countries.

A key distinction between countries with moderately supportive **monitoring and accountability** systems and those that have less supportive systems is the existence of key performance indicators, although even where they do exist, they tend not to be as comprehensive as they could be. In general, responsibilities for tracking are not clear – and very few countries have reported publicly on indicators showing progress towards target results.

Policy conflicts and synergies

The application of Module 2 reveals that although there is significant variability in the results across the five African countries, there are also some broad patterns that emerge as indicative of policy/goal associations that are likely to require greatest attention.

Table 1 provides a snapshot of areas where sectoral policies tend to be highly supportive of certain policy outcomes and areas where they are less supportive, or coherent. The table illustrates the average scaled scores by sectoral policy and goal across the five countries.

Areas where policy tends to be supportive of food systems outcomes

Reassuringly, **agriculture policies** tend to be highly supportive of the goals of increased food staples supply and of more affordable prices for staples, but also of adaptation to climate change. **Health policies** were found to be highly supportive of affordable prices for food staples, reductions in food loss and waste and effective nutrition sensitive social protection. **Environment policies** tend to be highly or somewhat supportive of a range of food systems outcomes including climate change adaptation, climate change mitigation and reduction in food loss and waste, but also encouragingly, effective nutrition sensitive social protection and empowerment of women and girls. **Social affairs policies** tend to be highly supportive of the goals of climate change adaptation, reduction of food loss and waste and empowerment of women and girls. **Industrial**, **Economic** and **Monetary policies** tend to be supportive of the goals of increased food staples supply, more affordable food staples, and food loss and waste reduction.

Table 1. Identifying Policy Incoherence Hotspots

Goal/Policy	Agriculture	Health	Environment	Trade	Social	Industrial/ Economic
1.1 Increased supply	green	yellow	yellow	red	yellow	green
1.2 Affordable prices	green	green	yellow	red	green	green
2.1 Climate change adaption	green	yellow	green	green	green	yellow
2.2 Climate change mitigation	red	red	green	red	red	yellow
3.1 More nutritious food	yellow	yellow	red	yellow	red	yellow
3.2 Less unhealthy food	red	red	yellow	yellow	yellow	red
4.1 Reduction of FLW	yellow	green	green	yellow	green	green
5.1 Adequate/living wages	green	yellow	red	green	yellow	red
5.2 Social protection	not assessed	green	green	yellow	green	green
6.1 Women's empowerment	green	yellow	yellow	green	yellow	yellow

Note: Based on average scaled scores across five African countries

Key: [green] tend to be highly reinforcing   [yellow] tend to be neutral/mixed   [red] tend to be conflicting   [white] not assessed

Areas where policies tend to be incoherent with food systems goals

Several hotspots of potential incoherence are identified in **Table 1.**

The goals of climate change mitigation and reduction in unhealthy food consumption were found to be somewhat undermined by both current *agricultural policies* and *health policies*. For example, agricultural policies that promote increasing agricultural mechanisation without accompanying this with strong efforts to mitigate the resulting greenhouse gas emissions; or subsidies for producers of oilseeds and/or sugar crops that lead to overproduction and artificially low prices for consumers and processors. Similarly, many health policies do not actively promote demand-side dietary shifts towards lower-emissions foods. Health policies could do more to reduce unhealthy food consumption by including mandatory nutrition labels on foods, particularly 'front of pack' labels; regulating food advertising; and enacting mandatory standards for food served in schools

By contrast *environment policies* tended to be incoherent with the goals of more nutritious food consumption, for example by limiting access to fruits and vegetables due to limits on water use for their production. They could do more by banning single-use plastic packaging to help to reduce consumption of unhealthy foods, which tend to rely on these types of packaging.

Trade policies tended to demonstrate the highest level of incoherence with food systems goals, particularly undermining goals of affordable prices of food staples, for example through the imposition of tariffs and non-tariff barriers on imports of staple crops and agricultural inputs; this may hinder efforts to achieve Zero Hunger. Similarly, barriers to the import of highly nutritious foods could limit achievement of more nutritious food consumption. Adequate wages could be better supported through ratifying trade agreements that have provisions protecting worker's rights and that oblige ratifying countries to align with guidelines of the International Labour Organization.

Interestingly, *social affairs policies* were found to be incoherent with goals of more nutritious food and less unhealthy food. They could do more to support these goals if they required supplying highly nutritious foods, potentially including biofortified or fortified foods, though social protection programmes or included requirements for nutritious meals in workplace canteens.

Industrial policies were identified as incoherent with the goals of less unhealthy food and adequate wages for food systems workers and could do more by ensuring food system workers are compensated with living wages. Policy coherence with the goal of reducing unhealthy food consumption could be improved by introducing taxes on unhealthy foods or companies that produce them or providing incentives for companies producing nutritious foods.

Summary

The Policy Coherence Diagnostic Toolkit provides a relatively easy-to-use approach for identifying food systems policies and related structures and mechanisms that are likely to require attention if government objectives of improving policy coherence in support of food systems transformation are to be achieved. Often, adjustments to policies can be win-win in terms of boosting both the generation of improved outcomes under the mandate of the implementing sectoral ministry and improving other food systems outcomes. The Tool can also alert policymakers to key trade-offs, where there is a risk of undermining one food systems outcome in pursuit of another. The structures and mechanisms assessed in Module 1 are critically important for ensuring that such risks are mitigated.

There are, of course, some caveats to the analysis. First, the applications were conducted at the national level. Potentially relevant sub-national level policies and initiatives are not reflected, which may under- or overestimate the level of coherence. Second, policy is complex and dynamic, and the goals of food system transformation are numerous; this analysis considers only a limited number of food systems goals and policies at one point in time. In addition, is not necessarily the case that areas of incoherence in policies should be seen as 'bad'; there are some cases where incoherence may make sense due to prioritisation across goals or political economy necessities.