



***Recommendations to the United Nations’
Food Systems Summit Scientific Group
from the European Commission’s High-Level Expert Group
to assess needs and options to strengthen the international
Science Policy Interface for Food Systems Governance***

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Research and
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The experts are part of this group in their individual capacity and hence their views do not represent the views of the organisations of which they are employed.

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SUMMARY

A high-level group of experts has been brought together by the European Commission to explore needs and viable institutional and cooperative options for enhanced Science-Policy Interfaces (SPIs) relating to food systems. The group has explored a range of data, evidence and other information gaps currently affecting user groups - from policymakers and scientists to civil society groups and businesses. The broad conclusion is that while exemplar initiatives do exist, such as the High Level Panel of Experts of the Committee on World Food Security, significant gaps remain in terms of the interoperability of existing data systems, inadequate transparency on sources, methods and interpretations, limited translation of scientific outputs into user options, and inadequate legitimacy in terms of the spread of geographic engagement and interaction with local knowledge and concerns. The United Nations Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) offers a unique opportunity to address limitations that currently hamper integrated action across food systems, sectors, and scales. The Scientific Group should promote consideration by the UNFSS of ways to better support evidence-based policymaking at national and global levels.

Specifically, we recommend that the UNFSS: i) explore practical options for improving SPIs relating to, and needed for, transformative food systems actions; ii) propose language that would entail a commitment to urgently establish enhanced SPI mechanisms post-Summit; and iii) identify adequate funding targets and mechanisms to allow for long-term functionality of enhanced SPI activities.

BACKGROUND

Our food systems must become more sustainable, environmentally friendly, healthy, resilient, and inclusive. The investments, policy changes and structural and behavioural shifts required to achieve transformative change must be based on sound evidence, a deep understanding of local as well as global challenges, concerns, and potential solutions, and calibrated to the demands for a range of evidence from diverse food system stakeholders. To support the European Commission (EC) in its deliberations on such important issues, a High-Level Expert Group (HLEG) was assembled in February 2021 to advise on the need, potential, feasibility, options, and appropriate approaches for new or reinforced international science-policy interface(s) (SPIs) to support food systems-related policies.¹

MAPPING AND ASSESSING SCIENCE POLICY INTERFACES

Today, there are many organisations that generate, analyse and/or share data relating to different parts of food systems, at various levels of granularity, and for different purposes. While many existing initiatives and networks contribute excellent work, six important weaknesses identified in the current state of play are as follows:

- i. *A lack of connectivity across types and sources of information.* There is a great need to better integrate evidence from local to global scales and vice versa, linking food production all the way to post-consumption, covering relevant natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities (including agriculture and food sciences, economics, political and behavioural sciences, nutritional and health sciences, climate, and planetary systems sciences).
- ii. *Significant gaps in understanding at policy levels of the need for connectivity and coherence across government policies, problem analyses and investment strategies*

¹ The term 'Science-Policy Interface' refers to any mechanism that facilitates interaction among scientific, policymaker, business, and community stakeholders, and is thus not limited to the idea of an institution.

- at national and global levels. Systemic approaches are too often hampered by siloed thinking.
- iii. *Important gaps in evidence*, including comparable and detailed information on who eats what where, relative prices of foods over time, costed policy options for addressing multiple food system goals simultaneously, policy trade-offs and co-benefits, drivers of the concentration of economic power at different segments of food value chains, and public or private sector investment strategies, to name a few.
 - iv. *A lack of focus on* the underlying causes or drivers of (un)sustainability and on the innovation options available and/or needed to realize food system transformation.
 - v. *A lack of connectivity across the work of the many institutions and networks that generate and use evidence*. Enhancing the interoperability of the activities and outputs of scientific panels, intergovernmental networks and impactful institutions is key to supporting food system transformation.
 - vi. *A lack of ground-truthing of global analyses* and proposed solutions to local levels in ways that incorporates the needs, values and evidence associated with diverse food systems.

CURRENT EVIDENCE NEEDS

The scale of UNFSS' transformative ambitions requires countries to identify and take-up evidence-supported approaches that go well beyond technology fixes and legislative action to include social and behavioral insights and profound societal engagement, while taking economic considerations into account. As a result, evidence stemming from a systemic approach must go beyond sectors, silos, disciplines, authorities, and regions. The HLEG has established that any new mechanism should at a minimum be able to:

1. inform a range of user audiences about food system-wide patterns, trends, and possible future outcomes;
2. curate and analyse different forms of evidence to guide policy, behavioural and technological pathways that lead to change;
3. explore scenarios, national and sub-national visions, policy trade-offs, political disagreements, and divergent economic interests that underpin different perspectives of what is feasible and what is not; and
4. establish appropriate metrics and guidance on methods for harmonised food systems-wide data collection to support global and local understandings of status, progress, drivers, and outcomes of actions taken across food systems.

Meeting these objectives will facilitate dialogues and decisions to be made towards a common future by a whole spectrum of stakeholders (at the local, national, and international levels) with often diverging views and interests. Overall, the 'needs' therefore fall into three main categories:

- a) stakeholder engagement beyond data-based sciences;
- b) wide access to appropriate categories of integrated information to support policy and investment decisions; and
- c) filling gaps in knowledge by defining priority information needs and policy-relevant insights and ensuring that evidence generated more effectively supports policy decisions.

KEY ISSUES TO BE CONSIDERED AT THE UNFSS PRE-SUMMIT

How to best meet evidence needs that are currently not being adequately addressed? There have been many calls over the past decade for establishing new forms of SPI, be they entirely new inter-governmental bodies or international panels of scientists, re-mandated and expanded functions of existing organisations, and/or enhanced mechanisms for connecting ongoing institutional functions relevant to different facets of food systems activities. While there is limited appetite for the creation and funding of entirely new globally relevant institutions, there is also limited support for the view that what we have today will suffice. More than a dozen past and existing SPIs were examined by the HLEG, confirming that there are many options to draw upon and many experiences to learn from in seeking to better link scientific activity to the needs of policymakers and other users. For example, novel platforms for dialogue and information exchange could be linked to enhanced information systems that collectively identify information gaps, integrate existing data sources, and establish standards for data quality assurance, data collection, use, handling, aggregation, and integration. Existing institutional set-ups could be tasked with new/additional mandates that build out their current data collection, sharing, or analytical functions and enhance knowledge mobilization. To be effective, enhanced SPIs must employ a range of tools for wider stakeholder engagement such that all user communities (consumers of evidence and insights) can interpret their knowledge outputs.

Legitimacy. Any novel and effective SPI for food systems must put legitimacy and diversity of representation at the heart of the design process and in the way it works. Any approach must ensure the empowerment and the participation of a wide range of stakeholders, respect different perspectives and worldviews, and encourage debates and the formulation of agreements over solutions. Legitimacy will be underpinned by a transparent process: agreed mandates, sound methodological approaches, open participation, broadening worldviews and connecting traditionally powerful voices with groups that have often been marginalised. In this process, new mechanisms will need to discuss what constitutes evidence (including controversies and uncertainties), its usefulness for decision-making, and what defined rigour in data. One challenge is to connect actors at different scales and address uneven power relations between them. This means that there must be a commitment to providing the global community with access to data and knowledge in an open fashion, ensuring access for a wide range of stakeholders – especially including disadvantaged and equity-seeking communities.

Governance. To survive longer-term, any SPI considered should be explicitly and deliberately linked to existing political processes. Knowledge-sharing and data deliberation platforms will need to be integrated with existing institutions that will commit to providing core funding over the long term. At the same time, connecting scales (local through to global) and avoiding the exclusion of food system stakeholders will be necessary to develop a transdisciplinary and holistic approach that can identify, test, implement and measure the effects of important levers of change. An important aspect of governance is accountability. As part of the UNFSS process, nations should discuss what country-specific SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound) commitments would allow stakeholders to monitor their own national-level investments, actions, and resulting impacts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The HLEG recommends that the Scientific Group should promote the need for the UNFSS to:

- i) explore practical options for improving SPIs relating to, and needed for, transformative food systems actions;
- ii) propose language that would entail a commitment to urgently establish enhanced SPI mechanisms post-Summit; and
- iii) identify adequate funding targets and mechanisms to allow for long-term functionality of enhanced SPI activities.