



Nutritional education empowers individuals to make informed dietary choices.

Photo: Jörg Böhling

People-centred collaboration – four key principles for equity and sustainability in the food systems transformation

Launched in 2010, the Scaling Up Nutrition Movement (SUN) set itself the goal of bringing together a wide range of stakeholders and harnessing their collective power to overcome global malnutrition. It is precisely these joint efforts that are needed to create a transformative impact on the global food system, our author maintains.

By Barbara Rehbinder

Global food production could feed everyone, yet equitable distribution, waste, and access persist as challenges. The 2023 *State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World* report shows that in 2022, 30 per cent of the world's population faced moderate to severe food insecurity. A staggering 3.1 billion people cannot afford a healthy diet, while a third of all the food we produce goes to waste, squandering precious resources. This not only raises ethical concerns but also propels us towards an unsustainable future. One key underlying problem is an agricultural focus on quantity over quality, based on industrial-scale monocrop farming. This approach depletes resources and harms ecosystems, intensifying global warming and extreme weather events that in turn harm nutrition. A shift needs to happen towards holistic agroecological practices that nourish people and the planet, promoting resilient ecosystems and mitigating climate risks. As advocates of the Scaling Up Nutrition Civil So-

ciety Network, a global alliance of over 4,500 organisations working for better nutrition and food systems, we are committed to integrating these practices. Crucially, SUN's mandate to bring together all stakeholders and sectors in the fight against malnutrition aligns with the goal of fostering strong, inclusive and fair food systems. By uniting diverse perspectives, we aim to drive the required transformation in the global food system, recognising that addressing malnutrition is a critical pillar of this endeavour.

Below are some principles that we think are crucial to implement in this regard. They are aimed at a wide spectrum of stakeholders, including governments, international organisations, civil society groups, the private sector and donors. The required changes need to be initiated and driven collectively by this diverse range of actors in order to create a transformative impact on the global food systems.

1. Investing in local food systems

Supporting local food production, processing and consumption is essential for many reasons. Firstly, it enhances food security by reducing reliance on distant sources, ensuring a consistent food supply, especially during crises. Local foods are often fresher and more nutritious, improving diets and community health. Economically, it stimulates growth by creating jobs and supporting local businesses, leading to a resilient economy. Additionally, local production typically has a smaller carbon footprint, reducing greenhouse gas emissions and promoting sustainability. It also preserves cultural heritage, values traditional practices, and empowers small-scale farmers while reducing food waste through shorter supply chains. Overall, supporting local food systems contributes to a more sustainable, resilient and equitable food system benefiting communities, individuals and the environment alike.

The shift towards supporting local food systems involves a collaborative effort from a variety of stakeholders. Governments must play a pivotal role by re-evaluating trade regulations that may disadvantage local produce. Ensuring convenient transportation and storage of local goods is a shared responsibility, involving both public and private sectors. Additionally, community empowerment is essential, necessitating the involvement of civil society organisations to advocate for and work with local communities. Recognising the intrinsic value of local cultures and crops requires a collective mindset shift, fostered through educational initiatives and awareness campaigns. At the implementation level, practices like agroecology and indigenous farming methods should be promoted, benefiting from the expertise of both local communities and agricultural experts. This multifaceted approach contributes not only to economic growth and the well-being of people, but also to the preservation of our environment.

2. Making nutrition central to food environments

Making nutrition central to food environments, rather than prioritising profit, has a range of essential impacts. First and foremost, it prioritises the health and well-being of individuals and communities, aiming to reduce the risk of diet-related diseases and promote overall quality of life. It aligns with long-term sustainability goals by emphasising diverse, balanced diets that are less resource-intensive and reducing the environmental impact of food production. It also fosters nutritional education and awareness, empowering individuals to make informed dietary choices, and promotes a culture of health-conscious decision-making. Nutrition-centric food environments strengthen communities, encourage social initiatives like community gardens, and address food insecurity. Additionally, this approach ensures that vulnerable populations have access to nutritious food and can lead healthy lives, potentially reducing healthcare costs while reflecting ethical considerations by valuing people's health over profit motives in the food industry.

This principle underscores the importance of nutritional education within food systems approaches and countering unhealthy food marketing and advertising. At the implementation level, this involves incentivising and enabling breastfeeding among mothers. It also entails disseminating nutritional information through various channels like advertisements,

school programmes, and workplace initiatives. Equally important is the need for transparent food labelling. The principle also highlights the significance of ensuring access to nutritious food for economically disadvantaged individuals, especially mothers and children, through mechanisms such as financial support and food vouchers.

3. Empowering civil society

Civil society organisations play a crucial role in food systems transformation. They represent marginalised voices, leverage local expertise and engage with communities to ensure that solutions align with local needs and inclusivity. They serve as accountability watchdogs, advocating for policies prioritising people's well-being. Civil society brings innovation, acting as a bridge between diverse stakeholders, responding effectively to food crises, and championing social and environmental justice. Empowering civil society might entail providing funding and resources for community-driven initiatives, facilitating training programmes to enhance their advocacy and leadership skills, and involving them in policy-making processes.

To make this happen, it is essential to recognise and support civil society's capacity to drive local solutions and amplify marginalised voices. Governments and donors should actively empower it to bridge gaps and advocate for holistic, context-specific solutions. This approach promotes community-led, locally relevant transformative changes, creating more equitable, effective and sustainable food systems that embrace ethical, inclusive and environmentally responsible practices.

4. Ensuring accountability and fulfilment of commitments

Ambitious pledges are easy to make, but upholding these promises requires vigilant oversight and data-driven evaluation of progress. Transparency and integrity lie at the core of this endeavour, necessitating alignment between commitments and actions. Robust monitoring of countries' adherence to their promises, in alignment with strategic frameworks such as the food systems transformation pathways stemming from the national dialogues held in the lead up to the UN Food Systems Summit, serves as a compass. The Nutrition Accountability Framework, a comprehensive tracking mechanism endorsed by the government of Japan, UN agencies, the SUN Movement and others, to hold all data on commitments made

for the Tokyo Nutrition for Growth (N4G) Summit 2021, empowers stakeholders to track progress made and turn commitments into transformative actions in nutrition and food systems. These platforms thus ensure accountability and progress towards a healthier and more sustainable future.

Likewise, vigilant oversight of corporate conduct is essential. While encouraging ethical practices is crucial, placing sole reliance on the goodwill of the private sector is insufficient. Instead, a comprehensive approach is required to ensure that commercial interests align harmoniously with the broader objectives of equitable and sustainable food systems. Robust frameworks for corporate accountability can act as a safeguard, preventing the undue concentration of power and mitigating the potential for conflicts of interest. They create an environment where companies are incentivised to prioritise long-term sustainability over short-term gains, acknowledging their role as critical stakeholders in the pursuit of a nourished and resilient global population.

One common thread that becomes unmistakably clear in this transformative journey is the profound significance of collaboration. While civil society undoubtedly emerges as a formidable driving force, it is vital to recognise that the sheer scale and complexity of the task at hand extend far beyond the realm of any singular entity. Governments, with their regulatory powers and policy-making capabilities, wield a central role in steering the transformation. International organisations bring expertise, resources and a global perspective that are essential for coordinating efforts across borders. Donors play a pivotal role by providing financial support to catalyse change and propel initiatives forward. The private sector's innovation, investment and technological advancements can reshape industries and practices. Within this context, the beauty of the SUN Movement lies precisely in its ability to harness the collective power of these diverse stakeholders – governments, international organisations, donors, the private sector and civil society – all converging with a shared resolve. This convergence is what enables equitable and sustainable food systems, ultimately leading to a thriving global population and a sustainable planet.

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