

REPAIRING FOOD SYSTEMS FAILURES : POLICIES, INNOVATIONS & PARTNERSHIPS

Contribution to WEF Event “Accelerating the End of Hunger and Malnutrition”

World Economic Forum, SDG Tent (in front of Hotel Derby), January 24 2019, 17.45-19.00

Ruerd Ruben, Wageningen University & Research (WUR), The Netherlands

KEY MESSAGES

1. *The current food system is failing us*

Current food systems are not capable for reducing hunger and malnutrition. In fact, hunger is increasing again and overweight is sharply rising (particularly in urban areas). In addition, changes in income and settlement lead to adjustments in nutrition patterns that generate increasing demands for nutrient-dense foods like fruits & vegetables, pulses, and dairy, poultry and aquaculture products) that are more perishable and relatively expensive.

Critical food systems failures thus include:

- *insufficient supply* of food from agricultural production (yield gaps) to feed to growing world population,
- *inefficient delivery* of foods from farmers to consumers (food losses & waste),
- *unequitable access* to sufficiently healthy and diversified diets,
- *unaffordable* opportunities for poor peoples’ consumption of healthier foods for poor people (healthy food is too expensive)
- *unsustainable* food supply due to negative *environmental impacts* (in terms of land and water use, biodiversity and energy intensity of greenhouse gas emissions).

2. *Deep food system reforms are required*

To repair these systematic failures, it is not sufficient to only ‘fix’ the problem at the level of particular stages of the food system (such as input supply, farm production, processing, transport, retail, household consumption and waste disposal). Instead, we need to use a more integrated systems perspective where potential trade-offs and synergies between the dimension of healthy, inclusive and sustainable diets can be effectively addressed.

Such deep food systems reform needs to be based on three interconnected fields of action:

- Combination of technological innovations with *institutional redesign* (e.g. reducing post-harvest losses supported by longer term delivery contracts),
- Simultaneous support to interventions that strengthen the *food environment* (supply side) and nudge consumer food choice preferences (demand-side),
- Interactive engagement of *public sector investment* (agro-logistics for reducing market risks) with private sector *business innovation* (for product & system upgrading).

3. Better public policies for ending malnutrition

We need substantial changes in public policy to shape a more conducive environment for healthier and sustainable food systems. Individual food choices are – to a great extent – influenced and determined by the complex and layered food environment, that includes multiple horizontal linkages between (legal, institutional, commercial) agents and vertical engagements between food supply chain stakeholders.

Key improvements in food policy that are considered particularly helpful and effective for reducing hunger and malnutrition are:

- Shifting focus from agricultural (sector) policy to *food policies*, with greater attention for citizen-led demand side performance criteria,
- Deliberate attention for *policy coherence*, paying attention to health and environment benefits from investments in improved food systems,
- Recognizing the asymmetric market structure in food production and distribution that requires (spatially & socially) *targeted interventions* towards vulnerable groups.

4. Incentives for business co-innovation

Changes in food systems cannot be effectively reached without active involvement of private sector agents at different stages. Since food systems change requires simultaneous interventions at different system levels, it is crucially important to create suitable incentives for co-innovation.

Co-innovation initiatives for healthier diets can be particularly useful to support:

- Agro-food supply chain upgrading and integration towards circular food systems,
- Shortening the supply chains of foods, e.g. home delivery of fresh vegetables portions) and enhancing *convenience & affordability* of healthier foods,
- Creating spill-overs from institutional consumption (schoolsmeals, hospital and factory canteen) towards improved household practices and habits.

New alliances for policy & practice partnerships can provide vital building blocks for accelerating the common challenge of Zero Hunger (SDG2)

References:

- Béné, C., P. Oosterveer, L. Lamotte, I.D. Brouwer, S. de Haan, S.D. Prager, E.F. Talsma, C. K. Khoury (2019). When food systems meet sustainability – Current narratives and implications for actions. *World Development* (113): 116-130.
- Ruben, R., J. Verhagen & C. Plaisier (2018). The Challenge of Food Systems Research: What Difference Does It Make?," *Sustainability*, MDPI, Open vol. 11(1), pages 1-14, December
- Fresco, L.O., Ruben, R., Herens, M. (2017) Challenges and perspectives for supporting sustainable and inclusive food systems. *GREAT Insights Magazine*, Volume 6, Issue 4. September/October.