

# Institutional/policy barriers and drivers for food system change: learning from the Healthy Food Africa Food System Labs

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**This article presents some of the lessons and insights on working with living labs to realize food system change. It especially focuses on barriers and drivers represented by institutional and policy factors and how these can be strategically addressed the Healthy Food Africa Food System Labs (FSLs)<sup>1</sup>.**

The methodology that was designed and co-created with the FSLs for their stakeholder engagement processes is based on the Theory of Change (ToC) approach. ToC is a specific methodology for project planning, participation, and evaluation, in order to promote social change. It involves defining long-term goals and then mapping backward and identifying necessary preconditions. The FSLs were encouraged to execute the ToC in their various initiatives. The first important part of the ToC was for the FSLs to identify key actors to target and engage.

## Stakeholder engagement under a ToC

In the initial task of stakeholder engagement, it was observed that those FSLs that could draw on pre-existing stakeholder platforms had a head-start over FSLs that had to build such platforms afresh. For example, members of the Lusaka Food Policy Council (developed with support from the Sustainable Diets for All programme, see article by Chongo, p. 45) were invited to the launch of the HFA project, and could be engaged in subsequent activities. Similarly in Nairobi the FSL is aligned to the Nairobi County Agriculture programme and to the FLAG (Food Liaison Advisory Group), meaning that a wide network of stakeholders is already collaborating on food systems transformation. This eased participation and these stakeholders became the backbone of the new multi-sector advisory group for the HFA project.

Secondly, the importance of meaningful engagement with policy-makers at an early stage of the stakeholder consultation for greater outcomes and policy uptake is evident. For example, the Fort Portal FSL reported that local government stakeholders have been involved in actions such as: the development and review of ordinances; approval of implementation of activities;

dissemination of the programme outputs; joint activity implementation; and authorization of work plans. As a result of this early engagement, the local government picked up interest in the establishment of the food safety committee and is now pushing for a food safety ordinance. The City of Fort Portal Council is also advocating formation of a Fort Portal Nutrition Action Plan and City Nutrition Coordination Committee. The Rwamwanja FSL, meanwhile, reported that local policymakers participated in the project launch activities, where the project concept was explained, along with the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders, and where project plans were conceived and reviewed. This participation was expected to enhance ownership of the project activities and results. Consequently, some of these policy-makers – such as the local district officials – even spearheaded the establishment of the multistakeholder platforms.

Furthermore, in the early consultation process, the importance of early consultation was emphasized, along with the need for it to be a two-way process that not only informs policymakers about the wishes of the FSL actors but also pays attention to what the policy-makers want to achieve. Aligning aims and objectives between policy-makers and FSLs, through the lens of the ToC, leads to positive outcomes. For instance, in the case of Fort Portal FSL, alignment of objectives between the FSL and policy-makers in a two-way communication process has led to a more effective co-creation process, with increased government involvement and ownership of the work of the FSL.

## Policy and institutional barriers to operationalization of the ToC

The process of stakeholder engagement guided by the

ToC also highlighted certain policy and institutional barriers that impede transformational pathways. The main barriers are: lack of political will; absence of adequate infrastructure to facilitate change; and political instability.

### Lack of political will

Although there are advantages to policymakers enhancing communication through collaboration with the FSLs, their engagement has not been optimal in all cases. In Lusaka, the ToC assessment showed that many issues are, in fact, policy related (e.g., vending, infrastructure, middlemen etc.). However, engaging and influencing policy has proven difficult. For instance, the FSL facilitators feel they do not have enough power to bring the right people to the table or ensure they are more engaged in activities. The FSLs in both Lusaka and Chongwe aim to enhance the organic vegetable value chain and seek to influence and change policy to support its development. However, this has been difficult to achieve because the policy stakeholders who attended these consultation meetings are not the ultimate decision-makers. According to an FSL representative:

*‘The policymakers who attend stakeholder consultation meetings promise to relay information on from the stakeholder meetings to relevant authorities. We do not have the muscle to compel institutional heads who have the power to make the decisions. They always send representatives who are expected to take back reports to influence policymakers.’*

In some FSLs, policymakers were only consulted after the FSLs had fully developed their objectives. In such cases, the lack of meaningful engagement of policymakers or their unwillingness to cooperate was a result of the initial co-creation process taking place without policymakers. This was the case in both the Lusaka and Chongwe FSLs. Though the FSLs presented their desired work plan to key stakeholders, the project goals had been decided prior to the stakeholder consultation. Therefore, co-creation did not really materialize. Although currently the FSL collaborates well with local policymakers, as they are successfully working with local councils and the Ministry of Agriculture, the FSLs highlight that they need more support in engaging other influential policymakers in the change process.

Another factor is the lack of political will to enforce regulations or agreements. In the case of Nairobi, the FSL lead signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with local policymakers (County Government and Metropolitan Services), which stipulates the role of each stakeholder. By signing this agreement, policymakers are obliged to support the activities of the FSL and live up to their responsibilities, at least in principle. However, in practice that is often not the case. The FSL coordinator for FSL Nairobi:

*‘The power/political dynamics surrounding the County*

*Government and Metropolitan Services have slowed down the process of enforcing the MoU to guide our partnership with this stakeholder. Some county officials have not been open to further engagement with us before the completion of this MoU process.’*

For the Lusaka FSL, the inability of the local city council to enforce legislation on food sanitation in the city has been a problem. There is a public health guide in Zambia that regulates sanitation standards in food being sold in the city. While in theory this would greatly facilitate the FSL’s ambitions, it is not enforced by local public health authorities. This has been a major institutional barrier that the FSL does not have law enforcement capabilities to overcome.

## Absence of adequate infrastructure to facilitate change

Another form of institutional/policy barrier is ineffective governance, which leads to inadequate development of infrastructure needed to sustain or enable food system transformation. Such issues with enabling infrastructures have been experienced across several FSLs, especially in the domain of farm to market transport. Generally, transport issues impede value chain functioning, and enhancing transportation can maintain the current food system as well as facilitate food system transformation. Farm to market transport is a significant challenge in many regions, and hence also for most value chains that the HFA FSLs work on. In some cases, farmers make losses from their vegetable production not only as a result of the high cost of inputs but also because of issues such as: transportation costs to city markets; levies paid to local authorities to transport their produce; and middlemen involved in the delivery chain. Despite the presence of food processing plants in most city regions in the HFA project, the majority of products from smallholder farmers in rural areas are sold raw because a significant part of the harvests do not reach the urban markets. This results in important levels of food loss and waste, especially of fresh vegetables. The rural-urban transport network, which is the responsibility of state institutions in most of the FSL contexts, appears to be underdeveloped. Problems occur particularly in the rainy season, when rural roads are difficult to traverse, and are compounded by poor storage facilities.

## Political instability

The past thirty years have witnessed several positive changes with respect to democratization in Africa. Participatory politics has grown since the 1990s and the percentage of African countries holding democratic elections increased from 7 to 40 percent<sup>2</sup>. In these new or emerging African democracies, there should be greater accountability of political leaders, with their domestic legitimacy linked to the means through which they attain and maintain power. Yet, greater democratization can also pose problems to the continuity of FSL activities, as new

elections might usher in new leaders who do not share the same interest in the aims of the FSLs as the previous leaders. Sometimes, agreements made with one governing party by an FSL are at risk of being nullified by another political party following a post-election change of power. This was a real concern for the Chongwe and Lusaka FSLs. A representative of the latter said, 'We are having elections in August 2022. We do not know what the outcome will be and with change of government how policies concerning our work might be affected'. Although past public office holders have changed in the past without having any drastic effect on the multi-stakeholder platform, change of policy influencers they work with is a looming concern.

Furthermore, there is the ever-present threat of election and post-election violence, which could inhibit transformational impact of certain FSL initiatives. In the case of FSL Nairobi, Kenya has experienced various forms of political and social unrest since independence, the post-election unrest of 2007/2008 being the worst, following the standoff between Moi Kibaki and Raila Odinga. It was reported that, approximately 1,300 people lost their lives and hundreds of thousands were displaced with widespread sexual violence against women<sup>3</sup>. The FSL representative for Nairobi FSL said:

*'Yes, we have upcoming elections (August 2022) and there is potential for instability during that period that could threaten achieving our goals. Informal settlements are hotspots for election violence.'*

Although William Ruto won the race to be the fifth president of Kenya, according to results announced by the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC), rival Raila Odinga's rejection and contestation of the decision of the electoral commission revealed the potential for instability that could derail the activities of Nairobi FSL. Such post-election instability is common across the countries in which the 10 FSLs are situated, and could pose serious barriers to food system transformation.

Furthermore, political instability also manifests as strikes, which can inhibit the realization of certain FSL goals. This was the case with FSLs that were most involved with schools. For example, one of the key objectives of the Tamale FSL in Ghana is promoting vegetable consumption in a School Feeding Program through the establishment of vegetable gardens in schools. Any strike action in the educational sector can negatively impact the execution of the activities of the FSL. As recently as May 2022 it was reported that striking school cooks in Ghana want the government to pay them a year's backdated salary and boost their food grant. Likewise, one of the main objectives of Cotonou FSL in Benin is improving child nutrition through school gardens and urban farming in peri-urban Cotonou. However, strikes occur in Benin almost every school year. Most of these strikes are coordinated by the powerful teachers' unions which are a legacy of the



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1972-1989 period when Marxism-Leninism was adopted as the national ideology. Although this kind of strike action did not affect primary schools (the area of operation of Cotonou FSL) it shows the vulnerability of working with schools to promote food system transformation in an environment in which strikes are common.

**Next steps**

In this article we presented some of the lessons and experiences of working with living labs to realize food system change in the context of African cities in the HFA project. The experience shows that institutional and policy factors frequently emerge as bottlenecks for realizing planned innovations towards food system transformation. In the coming time, these policy and institutional factors, as well as possible steps and strategies to resolve the barriers that they present, will be addressed in foresight workshops. These workshops will also engage key stakeholders from policy at different levels, food supply chain actors and representatives from engaged communities.

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