



POLICY BRIEF



Kampala Market. Source: Lora Forsythe

Moving beyond industrialized food systems to build a just and resilient future

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Food systems thinking often does not address issues of unequal labour and power. To tackle inequalities and strengthen actions to achieve just and resilient food systems, a holistic approach centered on work and care relations is proposed.

WHAT'S AT STAKE?

The pandemic has put into focus how much food systems rely on un(der)paid, exploited and invisible work. Despite their raised “essential” status, poorly paid workers in the agriculture and food sector who are disproportionately from low-income, gendered and racialized groups, have continued to face discriminatory treatment as expendable labour (Stevano et al., 2020). While COVID-19 cases and deaths are frequently reported, policies have not adequately taken account of the risks and impacts stemming from these embedded structural inequalities.

KEY RESULTS

- The sustainable food systems approach (HLPE, 2020) offers a significant advancement from previous dominant discourses, but it remains apolitical and does not account for unequal labour and power structures.
- Dominant agri-food systems discourses deal with inequitable labour, gender, and care relations as functional to increasing food production. Structural issues of unequal access to food are not acknowledged.
- Top-down policies and stand-alone interventions have fallen short in addressing local food systems failures and claims from grassroots civil society groups. These claims should be central to policies aimed at food systems transformation.

For example, around the world, migrant seasonal workers were restricted from crossing borders for agricultural work (FAO, 2020); and, more frequently in the global South, itinerant and market food vendors were forcibly relocated to minimize disease transmission (De Lovie, 2020). Yet again, there is minimal action on explicitly tackling inequality within food systems to strengthen resilience to, and reduce risks of, future shocks. An approach centered on collective social and economic justice through a lens of work and care, allows decision-makers to account for linkages from national to individual levels and cascading impacts that span within and beyond the agri-food system.

To this end, researchers Fiorella Picchioni, June Po and Lora Forsythe from the National Resources Institute at the University of Greenwich adopt an integrated approach drawing on social reproduction (the analysis of the generational reproductive and productive labour that sustains societies (Bakker, 2007)) and geography of care (an ethical, social justice lens on the relationship between people, place and care across a range of spatial scales (Milligan et al., 2007; Lawson, 2007)). Illustrating experiences from food markets in Nigeria, they outline a call for a renewed focus on inequitable labour relations and collective agency in food systems research and policy.

KEY FINDINGS

The sustainable food systems approach (HLPE, 2020) is a significant advancement from previous dominant discourses, but it remains an apolitical framework that does not account for unequal labour and power structures.

Dominant food systems approach remains silent on international trade imbalances, the financialisation of food value chains and poor labour conditions. Importantly, some of the proposed solutions deriving from this approach are likely to perpetuate the same political and economic issues responsible for current socio-economic crises. For example, indiscriminate lockdown measures to control the spread of COVID-19 implemented without adequate social safety nets and employment support, are likely to have deepened economic inequalities and hampered access to food and nutritious diets (Picchioni, Goulao, and Roberfroid, n.d.).

Dominant agri-food systems discourses only deal with inequitable labour, gender, and care relations when it is related to increasing food production. They do not tackle issues of unequal access to food.

This means that labour, gender, and care implications are considered when they are conducive to agricultural productivity or nutritional outcomes and not as issues of (in)justice in their own right. This approach remains ambiguous about poor labour conditions and oppression. Therefore, when inequality is not fundamentally addressed in food systems programming and policy design, economic gains are inevitably prioritized over societal consequences. An integrated approach that focuses on the interplay between work and care in food systems connects the processes of food production to who produces food in global food value chains. Crucially, this approach makes visible how workers within food systems sustain themselves and their households and how socio-economic inequalities and relations shape their living conditions.

Top-down policies and stand-alone interventions have fallen short in addressing local food systems failures and claims from grassroot civil society groups. These claims should be central to policy aimed at food systems transformation.

Top-down policies or stand-alone interventions risk further deepening gender, racial and global inequalities. Around the world, food markets have been severely disrupted by measures to contain COVID-19. In some contexts, markets have also become the site of violence that has worsened with policing measures aimed to control people and movement. Food markets are not only spaces of food exchange, but rich networks of care. Food producers, processing and trading associations in southern Nigeria can function as attentive, responsive, and respectful networks that provide financial, care and social support. The fluidity and responsiveness of food spaces in Lagos is also reflective of Nigeria's rich history of women's social activism, where they represented organizing catalysts for protest against oppressive actors. Grassroot claims and actions should be at the heart of food systems transformation policies.

POLICY INSIGHTS

The COVID-19 crisis has revealed the need for strong public policies with equity and people's wellbeing at its core. After decades of "small state" neoliberal thinking, the pandemic has made it impossible to defend austerity-style policies (Mazzucato and Kattel, 2020) and calls for debt relief and restructuring have gained momentum (Ghosh, 2020).

Complex food systems problems require multisectoral interventions that support all workers

Interventions that tend to devise individualized solutions and fail to appreciate systemic issues (living conditions, lack of land and other productive resources) are destined to have limited impact. Invisible un(der)paid work in food systems or care settings have played a central role in coping with this crisis. It is undoubtable that States need to: 1) invest in well-functioning systems of social and health care provision; and 2) enforce legislation to protect unionization and livelihoods of low-paid and precarious workers. As the pandemic has shown, without these crucial support mechanisms many more food systems would have failed.

Support for partnerships with bottom-up multi-stakeholder platforms should be strengthened in the design and implementation of contextual policy packages

In policy decisions, one size does not fit all. Civil society-led political spaces are fundamental to providing context-specific advice and solutions. These spaces can also scrutinize social, environmental and labour standards in food systems and provide support in contexts of state failure or poor reach. Therefore, encouraging and engaging with these platforms should be central to development interventions and in food systems programming. Local collective actions in food movements, and solidarity across geographies, are the foundation on which to shape resilient and caring food systems.

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This brief was authored by Picchioni, F., Po, J. Y. T., and L., Forsythe. It draws on key findings of the journal article:

Picchioni, F., Po, J. Y. T., and L., Forsythe. 2021. "Strengthening resilience in response to COVID-19: a call to integrate social reproduction in sustainable food systems." *Canadian Journal of Development Studies*. 42:1-2: 28-36. (DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02255189.2020.1858761>).

Cite as:

Picchioni, F., Po, J. Y. T., and L., Forsythe. 2021. "Moving beyond productivism and instrumental arguments to increase food systems resilience" CJDS Policy Brief Series. *Canadian Journal of Development Studies*, Canada.

This policy brief was undertaken with the financial support of the Government of Canada provided through Global Affairs Canada, and from the Canadian Association for the Study of International Development. This publication's content in no way reflects Global Affairs Canada's official position or policies. The accuracy of the information and comments are solely the responsibility of the author(s). Please note that some resources cited in this policy brief may not be available in both official languages.

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