

Food systems are complex, with a wide range of actors involved in production, processing and services in both the upstream and downstream parts of value chains.

Aerial view of a market in Cape Verde - Paolo Motta FAO

Food systems in Sub-Saharan Africa: overview and specific features

Food systems in Sub-Saharan Africa are highly diversified at all levels, from production and processing, to distribution. Despite an increase in imports for certain products, those systems satisfy the lion's share of internal demand and are one of the largest sources of jobs and income for a major part of the population. What are the specific features of these food systems?

Under what conditions can they help achieve more equitable and sustainable development?

Food systems (FS) are often broken down into “traditional” systems, “modern” systems, and “temporary” or “transitional” systems. Those different classifications arose from the observation that certain sectors bring together operators that have the same dominant approaches: family farmers sell their crops to artisans, who process them to sell at markets or in the street; industrial farms have their crops processed by large industrial firms and either sell their products at supermarkets and hypermarkets, or export them.

Traditional systems in theory

According to a 2018 report by SWAC/OECD, in West Africa 82 million people (two-thirds of the population) and two-thirds of employed women depend on food systems for their livelihood. Most of those jobs are in the primary sector (agriculture, livestock farming and fishing) and on family farms, 95% of which are less than 5 hectares. Post-harvest activities represent 20% of FS jobs (12 million in marketing, and 4 million in processing) and 68% of the GDP generated within those systems. Most of those jobs are informal, and 80% are done by women. As such, they are not very visible and receive little direct economic support.

It is also estimated that 90% of the calories

consumed in West Africa are produced in the region. The internal market is therefore the main outlet for the agricultural sector. Although food imports are relatively low (13% on average in Sub-Saharan Africa) and vary significantly from country to country, they are increasing for rice, wheat, sugar, meat, dairy products and oils, making consumers vulnerable to price fluctuations on international markets. Population growth, sustained urbanisation, export-focused strategies and an increase in the effects of climate change on African agriculture have raised fears that deficits could worsen.

Hybrid food systems in reality

The different classifications do not reflect the diversity of combinations within a given locality, over a given period of time, involving multiple actors (p. 9). Within FS, there are many different types of farms, production methods and strategies for organising work: family farms, entrepreneurial farms and capitalist farms of various sizes, some diversified and others practising monoculture. One thing they all have in common is that they are connected to the upstream part of the market through input suppliers, and to the downstream part of the market through marketing. Each link in the chain (transport, collection, processing, distribution, funding, training, etc.) plays an important role in the

structuring of value chains. Likewise, micro, small, mid-size and large companies all operate in the food-processing segment, depending on the product (p. 12-13). For example, artisanal processors position themselves in traditional grains, while canned goods tend to be produced by large companies. Markets, street vendors and neighbourhood shops have a dominant position in distribution channels alongside a handful of international supermarket chains. Companies that provide food-related services (restaurant, home delivery, online sales) are growing, driven by digitalisation. Long marketing channels (in terms of distance and number of intermediaries) also exist alongside short ones. Long channels involve products traded at regional or international level, such as Sahel livestock sold on the coast of the Gulf of Guinea and rice imported from Asia. Short channels include self-consumption, urban production and direct sales to consumers (p. 25).

Asymmetric combinations

Some sectors bring together operators that have very different approaches: family groundnut and palm farms sell to industrial oil factories; micro or small companies may seek distant funding from the diaspora, mobilise multinational resources for packaging, energy or communication, or export to industrialised countries through Asian intermediaries, as is the case with red palm oil; multinationals may have their products (sodas, aromatic cubes, powdered milk, biscuits) distributed by street vendors or other distributors in the informal sector.

The participation of all those private-sector actors is essential to building local food systems that are sustainable. But the objectives, values and functions of those actors must be examined, as well as the nature and balance of their relationships in terms of sharing information and risks. After all, they do not all have the same powers or the same abilities when it comes to negotiation, risk management and funding. In Sub-Saharan Africa, actors and circuits are often atomised and coordinate with one another through changes in market prices and informal loyalties based on trust. Formal contractual arrangements were encouraged by agribusiness, small companies, NGOs, research-action projects and apex farmers' organisations. Those partnerships between businesses and farmers could help make FS more sustainable by boosting productivity (e.g. when companies prefinance inputs and provide agricultural advisory services), improving logistics and reducing transaction costs, providing stable and lucrative outlets for farms, securing decent working conditions, and making products healthier and more nutritious.

AFRICA HAS A VAST DIVERSITY OF FOOD SYSTEMS

Promoting food systems that are sustainable and inclusive

To do so, it is necessary to include young people and vulnerable actors, promote equity between the different actors, make sure the public sector and local authorities are proactive, and ensure that models are flexible and adapted to the local context. The right conditions must be found for establishing attractive partnerships that are able to guarantee the quantity and quality of the

products traded while limiting the risk of excluding the weakest and youngest stakeholders. It is therefore important to consider, for each type of partnership, the principles of equity which must be guaranteed between the different segments of the value chains and between localities (urban and rural). Sharing value added, maintaining a balance of power, ensuring consistency between social and environmental values—these are all issues that can be improved through dialogue and the creation of a shared set of rules. The public sector plays a role here at different levels. FS can be a first step towards operationalising decentralisation and ensuring consistency between sectoral policies (agriculture, jobs, environment, health, etc.). In Africa, as elsewhere, towns and localities are taking on agricultural and food-related challenges, as evidenced by the 33 cities that signed the Milan Pact. These new actors in the governance of agricultural and food systems, working alongside the national authorities (p. 26-27), will help drive transformation and will encourage and supervise private

sector involvement in building FS that are more sustainable. The diversity of national and subnational situations calls for solutions and partnerships based on collaboration at local level, as the demographic, socio-economic, political and environmental factors that speed up or slow down transformation within Sub-Saharan FS are unique to each locality. ■

Socio-demographic changes and new challenges for food systems

In just 25 years, from 1993 to 2018, Africa's population increased by a factor of 1.9, and the urban population by a factor of 2.4. Demand for food is therefore increasing, especially in urban areas, which is creating major challenges when it comes to centralising the region's fragmented supply and transporting it from production zones to cities. In places where poor road infrastructure is an obstacle to trade, the concentration of demand in large cities may further marginalise certain areas that are unable to access those new markets. Urban lifestyles and higher income levels are changing the way people eat, and new nutritional problems are emerging as a result of higher consumption of processed, animal, fatty and sugary products. Sub-Saharan Africa – and its cities in particular – is seeing a rapid increase in overweight and obesity levels and related conditions, such as type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease. The growing use of chemical products and plastics in agriculture and food processing is creating new health risks linked to poisoning. The industrialisation of the food system with the development of supermarkets and highly mechanised processing industries also calls into question whether food systems can preserve and create decent jobs for women and young people. Between now and 2050, 730 million people will join the workforce. What decent jobs will food systems be able to offer?

Climate change and natural-resource degradation are also creating risks. In addition to the region's structural constraints, Africa, and particularly the Sahel, will bear the brunt of the direct and indirect consequences of these phenomena (increase in the frequency and magnitude of shocks, expansion of arid zones), all of which pose a threat to national production. Down the road, there could be a higher risk of supply shocks and therefore greater volatility in agricultural prices. Migration, insecurity and conflict over the use of resources are also major factors that are causing undernourishment in the region to increase.

Lastly, the digitalisation of agriculture is another important trend that should be taken into account when transforming food systems. It creates a number of opportunities, such as precision agriculture, online sales, nutritional advice, aggregation of supply, delivery, etc.

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FOR MORE INFORMATION:

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