

# Food systems don't exist!

The term “food system” is a convenient way of referring to all the actors and processes directly or indirectly related to feeding people – which could potentially include all of society! While the term is useful in that it reminds us of what these systems are trying to achieve, it must not lead us to believe that their driving forces are internal.

**F**ood systems (FS) don't exist! They are only intellectual constructions, representations of reality. The High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition defines FS as referring to all the elements (environment, people, inputs, processes, infrastructures, institutions, etc.) and activities that relate to the production, processing, distribution, preparation and consumption of food, and the outputs of these activities, including socio-economic and environmental outcomes. But why do all of the different elements interactively involved in feeding people need to be grouped together in a single expression?

## Where to start? Where to draw the line?

In addition to the farmers, fishermen, processors, traders, restaurateurs, consumers, etc. who are directly involved in feeding people, should the term also cover all the activities that make it possible for those actors to operate: input producers and suppliers (seeds, fertiliser, machines, packaging, etc.), transporters, researchers, advisors, training instructors, insurers, bankers, politicians, etc.? After all, they also contribute more or less directly to providing food for people, and they too are in turn affected by other actors not directly involved in agriculture or food.

If the term did encompass all those other activities, then a “food system” would include virtually all of society! Where, then, are the boundaries? Where should we draw the line? To answer that question, we first need to understand what we mean when we use this term.

## Expanding for greater legitimacy

The expression first of all responds to the need of an entire economic sector to legitimise and defend itself. The primary sector – or agriculture – tends to be overshadowed by the secondary sector (manufacturing) and the tertiary sector (services), and is therefore neglected in public policies and cooperation policies. The sector wants to defend the importance of its role in terms of providing jobs and income, and achieving environmental and health objectives. But many of those objectives also concern food processing, marketing and consumption. That expanded whole, grouped together within FS, now needs to draw society's attention back to the importance of its contributions. We could refer to it as the agricultural and food sector! Why, then, do we prefer the term “food system”? Because all of those activities interact with one another, and we can't change one of them without affecting the others. The idea of a system reflects the interrelations between the different elements. But such a represen-

tation risks suggesting that the entire dynamic of the FS derives from its own activities. To be sure, some transformations are specific to the system itself: the integration of crop and livestock farming, or the concentration of companies. But the drivers that have truly changed the system are external: the price of fossil energy and labour, progress in chemistry, engineering, and now electronics, IT and cognitive science, trade globalisation, financialisation; lifestyle changes spurred by urbanisation, monetarisation, individualisation, etc.

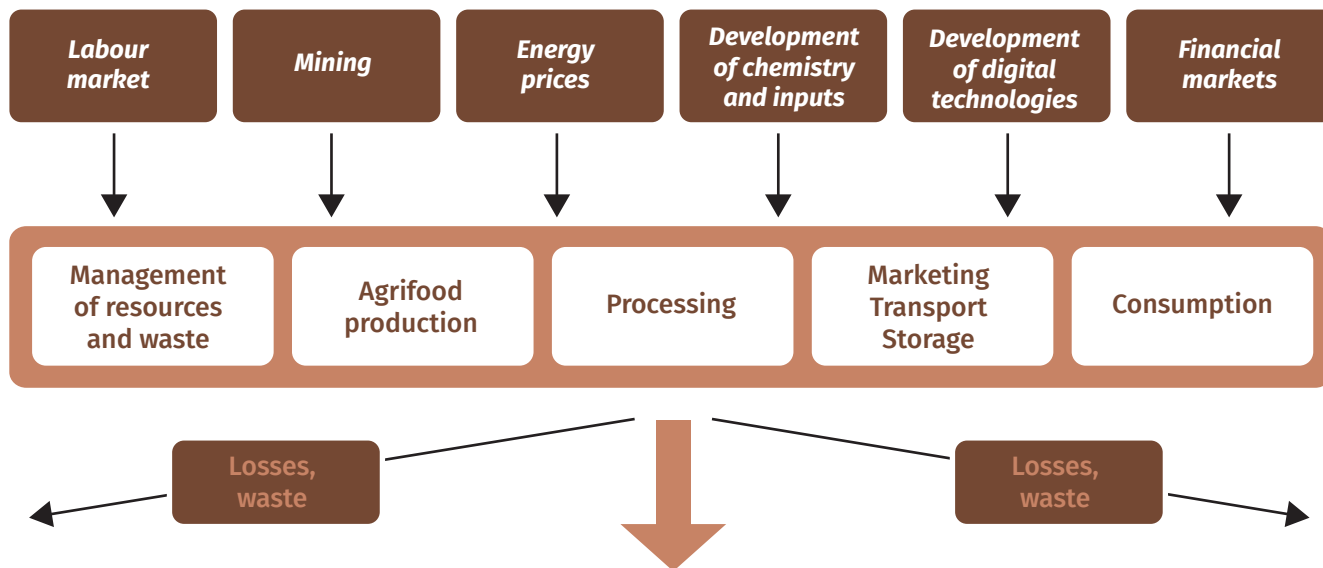
## A complex and changing reality

When using this term, we need to remember two things. The first is that FS drivers are not all internal. FS are affected to a large degree by external factors. The concept should not become an intellectual fortress making it impossible to conceive of FS interactions with the rest of the economy and society. The second thing to keep in mind is that FS performance should not be assessed solely based on their ability to provide a certain quantity and quality of food for people. FS are also a source of jobs and income for a large part of the population. Farmers, processors and food traders alone represent two-thirds of all jobs in West Africa, and women hold most of the jobs in food services, processing and marketing (88%, 83% and 72%, respectively). FS therefore contribute more broadly to economic development. They are also essential to the health of humans and ecosystems. And lastly, they are central to social interactions, vectors of culture and a source of pleasure, and therefore play an essential role in society. These aspects must also be taken into account when assessing FS and adapting them for the future. ■

**FOOD SYSTEMS ARE AFFECTED BY EXTERNAL FACTORS,  
AND THEIR PERFORMANCE SHOULD NOT BE ASSESSED SOLELY  
BASED ON THEIR ABILITY TO PROVIDE FOOD**

Food systems are influenced by other sectors and contribute to many of the Sustainable Development Goals

### Sectors that influence food systems



Sustainable Development Goals contributing to food and nutritional security, socio-economic development and environmental sustainability



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