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.

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 representation 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 of food. 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.

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**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:
- Labour market
- Mining
- Energy prices
- Development of chemistry and inputs
- Development of digital technologies
- Financial markets
- Management of resources and waste
- Agrifood production
- Processing
- Marketing Transport Storage
- Consumption
- Losses, waste
- Losses, waste

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

1. No poverty
2. Zero hunger
3. Good health and well-being
4. Quality education
5. Gender equality
6. Clean water and sanitation
7. Affordable and clean energy
8. Decent work and economic growth
9. Industry, innovation and infrastructure
10. Reduced inequalities
11. Sustainable cities and communities
12. Responsible consumption and production
13. Climate action
14. Life below water
15. Life on land

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