Highlight 3: Multistakeholder Platforms and Social Network Analysis

Low- and middle-income countries are struggling under a growing triple burden of malnutrition, threatened by chronic undernutrition, micronutrient deficiencies related to low dietary diversity, and rapidly rising rates of overweight and obesity resulting from poor diets.

Understanding where and how to intervene in transforming food systems to ensure access to healthy diets is major task, and unlikely to be accomplished by one organization alone. To better address complex problems and achieve common goals such as improving diets, stakeholders are increasingly turning to collaborative arrangements, such as platforms.

Researchers from Wageningen University and Research, working as part of A4NH’s Food Systems for Healthier Diets (FSHD) flagship, set out in 2017 to study networks for multistakeholder collaboration on food systems in two priority countries, Bangladesh and Nigeria. The goal was to better understand what platforms already exist, how they are organized and function, who the key players are, and what role platforms could play in ensuring that food system transformations promote healthier diets. Researchers looked at existing platforms and linkages, with an eye toward opportunities to engage and connect, and at where scaling-up strategies exist and where they might be able to help strengthen those strategies.

To identify pathways for intervention, existing networks were “mapped” according to a set of key characteristics:

- main themes and shared aims around which platforms have been initiated;
- clusters that have developed around issues and links between them;
- channels of communication;
- approaches to addressing problems; and
- major connectors at different levels.

The exercise provided insight into the effectiveness of different platform approaches to ensuring and scaling-up healthy diet interventions in the course of food system transformations. For example, important distinctions can be drawn between platform strategies that focus on advocacy and those that focus on research and innovation. The findings, to be published in 2018, will provide guidance for further FSHD research. With the information gained during the study, researchers can identify platforms that are likely to align well with their interventions or activities, as well as shared goals and partners with common aims. Lessons learned from the study process in Bangladesh and Nigeria could inform similar studies to be undertaken elsewhere, including Ethiopia and Viet Nam, FSHD’s other focus countries, as well as what lessons learned in other studies might support the next steps for the first study countries.