Highlight 3: Health and Sustainability: Assessing Food Systems

How do we create sustainable food systems? Ensuring that people all over the world have access to a nutritious diet will require looking beyond simply growing more food, and should include all actors, processes, and policies involved in getting a full range of foods from where they are grown to where they will be eaten, providing a healthy diet of foods that are safe and contain a variety of essential nutrients. It will also involve awareness and understanding about why to avoid foods that could have negative health consequences, including those that are overprocessed and high in salt, sugar, oils, or fat.

The answer to this question will vary by place and context, though there are lessons that stakeholders in one place can learn from the experiences of those in another. To set the stage for this learning, researchers from A4NH’s Food Systems for Healthier Diets (FSHD) research flagship have undertaken an overall review of ideas about global food systems and proposed a framework for transitioning to sustainable food systems that provide healthy diets and limit overprocessed and unhealthy foods. The proposal, outlined in the 2018 World Development article “When Food Systems Meet Sustainability: Current Narratives and Implications for Action,” details several points stakeholders should consider in the context of evolving food systems:

◆ Be clear about what is meant by sustainable food systems. Without this clarity, one cannot get a full picture of the impacts and trade-offs.

◆ Recognize that trade-offs will be inevitable. In order to understand these trade-offs, better assess the true impacts of actions, and make decisions about how to move forward, pay attention to all dimensions of our interconnected food systems and to feedback from different parts of those systems.

◆ Some of this feedback will be positive and some will be negative, and it will be necessary to see how to transform negative impacts into positive, or at least neutral, ones.

◆ Understand that diets have a cultural component, and cultural changes take time.

◆ Issues of equity in access to food and benefits of food system activities require attention and include the questions of who benefits and how much, and who does not benefit.

◆ Look ahead to future challenges to build resilience to global and local impacts and events.

Researchers are combining this broader work with more localized and intensive evaluations of food systems. In 2018, they published a baseline assessment of food systems in Viet Nam, which included results from an online survey and face-to-face interviews with stakeholders on food systems issues identified during a preliminary workshop: urbanization, climate change, food safety, food trade policy, and agrobiodiversity. The assessment provides a snapshot of stakeholder knowledge and perceptions about key food systems issues and will be used to measure the impact of food systems work being carried out through FSHD.

Also in 2018, researchers published a discussion paper outlining a food systems research agenda for Ethiopia, as the government calls for sustainable food systems approaches that aim to achieve better nutrition for all. They developed a food systems profile and identified 25 priority research questions, working closely with policymakers and other stakeholders to ensure the plan and recommendations were grounded in national settings, while incorporating global thinking into concrete and country-specific actions.

We would like to thank all funders who supported this research through their contributions to the CGIAR Trust Fund. Specific contributions to A4NH come from: Australia, Ireland, The Netherlands, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States.