Flagship 1: Food Systems for Healthier Diets

Highlight 1: Promoting Food Systems Research across CGIAR

Global attention to food system transformation is intensifying, and A4NH researchers in the Food Systems for Healthier Diets (FSHD) flagship have been on the forefront of CGIAR work in this area. Ensuring food systems transform toward healthy and sustainable diets for all requires collaboration across disciplines and from a variety of stakeholders. In 2019, A4NH fostered such collaboration through meetings and research outputs designed to build capacity and identify actionable solutions at regional, national, and global levels. Over the next two years, CGIAR will consider how to reshape its research portfolio to better address the world’s key development challenges. FSHD’s research and collaborative efforts, along with partnerships and deep involvement in focus countries to build learning that can be applied and shared elsewhere, should prove instrumental in guiding CGIAR research on food systems in this next phase of work.

In 2019, A4NH convened two consultations, in Bangladesh and Ethiopia, bringing together around 80 participants from CGIAR Centers, agrifood systems CRPs, global integrating CRPs, and local partners to discuss joint food systems research narratives and agendas and to develop specific research actions. The two-day meetings aimed to identify greater linkages in addressing drivers of and interventions for food systems across the CGIAR system. Through presentations, panel discussions, interactive working group activities, plenary working group results presentations, and formal and informal sharing of experiences, participants identified four thematic priority areas for future collaborative work:

- Reverse thinking: focusing on consumer behavior and drivers
- Food environment and making markets work for diets
- From considering single foods to whole diets
- Bottom-up meets top-down approaches

The momentum from these sessions grew throughout the year and manifested itself in collaborations and demand for new research tools. FSHD researchers met with the CGIAR Research Program on Forests, Trees and Agroforestry and WorldFish, at the request of those organizations, to help develop nutrition policy strategies. They presented on food systems and led stakeholder consultations and workshops to develop plans and activities for the strategies.

These discussions made it clear that the food environment—where the consumer meets the food to be consumed—is a critical yet poorly understood element of the food systems framework. Moreover, researchers studying food environments are using a wide variety of indicators and metrics, making harmonization difficult. These indicators are largely still in a development phase, and often focus on a single food or group of foods, rather than the larger system. Late in 2019, FSHD researchers held a three-day workshop in Ethiopia to bring together approximately 30 nutrition experts from across CGIAR and food environment facilitators to explore the role the food environment plays, identify gaps in knowledge, and target ways to work together to move research in this area forward. They were joined on the final day by Ethiopian partners to discuss opportunities for collaboration at the national level.

A4NH has proven particularly adept at filling critical knowledge gaps such as these. Its new compendium of indicators for food systems research brings together the wide variety of metrics and indicators available, with definitions, purposes, guidance, and examples. It enables researchers, policymakers, NGOs, the private sector, and others working in food systems to operate from the same basis of understanding, which is critically important when so many actors are working on so many different aspects of this field. Taking this one step farther, FSHD is establishing the Food Systems Resource Center, to be housed on the A4NH website. The Resource Center will provide a central place to find A4NH research outputs and other key food systems resources, no matter the user’s point of entry, along with guidance on what the resources are, how they can be used, and how they connect to the wider body of food systems research.

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