Flagship 1: Food Systems for Healthier Diets

Highlight 3: Promoting Transformation through National Information Systems

As food systems transform globally, understanding what tools and indicators already exist can help researchers pinpoint data gaps and identify areas where cross-country comparisons and learning can already take place. With this knowledge as a foundation, innovations can be developed, tested, and scaled up to help address issues in the food system preventing people from accessing a safe, healthy, and sustainable diet. A4NH researchers are working across the Food Systems for Healthier Diets (FSHD) flagship on both parts of this process. Implementing a food systems approach requires using a comprehensive set of indicators to measure both the current state of food systems and the direction they are moving. These metrics can be used to measure progress on key goals, evaluate impacts of system transitions and proposed changes, gauge efficacy of interventions, and ultimately facilitate the scaling up of successful interventions. They can also help structure high-level debates and communicate the system’s complexity to policymakers or the general public.

A4NH research published in 2019 from scientists at the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), the International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT), and Wageningen University & Research (WUR) shows that the availability of such indicators is uneven in FSHD’s four focus countries: Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Nigeria, and Viet Nam. Laid out in a framework that illustrates the food system, the analysis reveals a general need for more micro-level data to explore and help trace the path of food as it moves from producers to consumers. Researchers found limited information on food processing and the food environment, as well as various other food system components depending on the country.

Ideally, a common set of indicators used across countries and over time would allow for comparison and shared learning. New research from A4NH scientists at CIAT, published in Scientific Data by Nature in 2019, showed what can happen when this is possible. Their work, which measured the sustainability of food systems, involved scouiring almost two decades of scientific literature related to food systems to build a map rating the sustainability of food systems in 97 countries based on 20 indicators from four dimensions: environmental, economic, social, and food and nutrition. The indicators cover a broad range of factors including greenhouse gas emissions from agriculture, size of the female labor force, fair trade, food price volatility, and food loss and waste. The map was the first of its kind to provide a global food system sustainability assessment based on a holistic set of indicators. A4NH researchers are also working to fill in knowledge and information gaps to better ensure food system transformation for healthy diets. In Viet Nam, researchers at CIAT, in collaboration with local authorities, profiled existing situations, highlighted key challenges, and provided a baseline for measuring and monitoring future changes in food systems along a rural–urban transect. They held validation workshops for stakeholders in the three benchmark sites to share results and get feedback from different sectors, which is now being used to revise the profiles and better define ways forward. Final versions will be published in 2020.

In Ethiopia, work continued on the development of food-based dietary guidelines (FBDGs), with a workshop of the multidisciplinary National Technical Working Group (NTW) to draft technical guidelines and general messages held at the Ethiopian Public Health Institute (EPHI). This follows evidence reviews conducted by teams commissioned by the NTW, which identified multiple burdens of nutrition-related problems and related dietary gaps to be addressed by the FBDGs, taking into account local food habits; availability, accessibility, and seasonality of foods, including traditional foods; and existing evidence on effective behavioral change communication. When completed, the guidelines will provide dietary recommendations for Ethiopians two years and older for increased diet quality, including diversity and food safety. The project is a collaboration between A4NH (led by WUR), EPHI, and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. The draft guidelines will be refined through a consultative process with key stakeholders and tested under different settings to support contextualization to different parts of the country. Based on this process, communication materials will be developed for release in 2020. The project has been adopted as a Governmental Flagship project, necessitating quarterly reporting in Parliament.

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.