

A call to action for transformation towards nutritious food systems

Article

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1 **A Call to Action for Transformation Towards Nutritious Food Systems**

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9 Food systems are a powerful lever to improve nutrition and global health; however, they are not
10 delivering on this potential.

11 The U.K. Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) and the Bill & Melinda Gates
12 Foundation (BMGF) have partnered over the past decade to support a broad-based portfolio of
13 research and programs oriented toward food systems transformation. In March 2023, FCDO and
14 BMGF convened 170 grantees to take stock of the state of research on Nutritious Food Systems
15 (NFS) and to forge consensus on the next steps needed to inform practice, policy, and future
16 strategies. Participants from across the globe, around half from sub-Saharan Africa and South
17 Asia, came together from research/academia; non-governmental implementing organisations;
18 the private sector; and funding agencies. A follow-up consultation took place at the 2023
19 Agriculture, Nutrition and Health Academy Week in Lilongwe, Malawi to incorporate broader
20 NFS community views. This commentary outlines key themes identified in these dialogues,
21 including a vision for transformation and critical elements for achieving such change (Figure 1).

22 This call to action envisions NFS where everyone enjoys an adequate, healthy diet with
23 nutritious foods that are widely available, affordable, safe and demanded, and the food system is
24 resilient to economic and environmental volatility and does not contribute to environmental
25 pressure and climate change.

26 Numerous areas for intervention and pathways to NFS have been articulated in published
27 articles and reports^{1,2}. The convening and consultation surfaced nine priority areas in particular
28 need of greater attention.

29 *Improved data availability and access* are crucial for progress towards NFS. Priorities in this area
30 include investments in systematic and wide-ranging food systems data collection, free and
31 prompt access to data, improved citizen participation and monitoring of data ethics, and
32 innovation in data and analysis tools.

33 *Industry and retail food markets* play a critical role in delivering nutritious food to all. Priorities
34 in this area include disincentivizing production and restricting marketing of unhealthy foods,
35 promoting healthy alternatives, and curtailing negative political and economic influence of the
36 food industry³.

37 *Market infrastructure and governance* also need attention to address issues such as inaccessible
38 markets, inefficient and inequitable food distribution, market concentration, food loss, and
39 unsafe diets. Priorities include studying, designing and investing in improved market
40 infrastructure and governance in the formal and informal sector.

41 *Trade policies* are likewise instrumental for achieving NFS. Governments should enhance trade
42 for healthy diets through tariff reductions on nutritious food imports, support for local food
43 production, and establishment of regulatory frameworks that limit speculation and prioritise
44 nutritional quality and the right to food.

45 Making nutritious food available and affordable is necessary but not sufficient, as consumption
46 is also constrained by inadequate knowledge and low demand driven by preferences,
47 convenience and culture. More research, investment and action are required in innovative
48 *demand creation and behaviour change* strategies.

49 *Food safety and hygiene* prevent contamination and foodborne illnesses and increase consumer
50 confidence. Areas for renewed focus include improved surveillance systems to monitor current
51 and emerging diseases, food safety technological and behavioural innovations, promotion and
52 enforcement of safety standards, and bolstering of public awareness.

53 *Reducing food loss and waste* improves availability and affordability of nutrient-dense foods,
54 increasing farmers' incomes while reducing environmental pressures. There is a need for
55 innovation in storage and transport, and promotion of best practices to mitigate loss and waste.

56 *Micronutrient interventions* can alleviate acute deficiencies or maintain micronutrient
57 sufficiency in low-income communities. It is necessary to design and deliver context-specific
58 micronutrient interventions through shifts in the agricultural landscape, diet diversification,
59 food fortification, and supplementation.

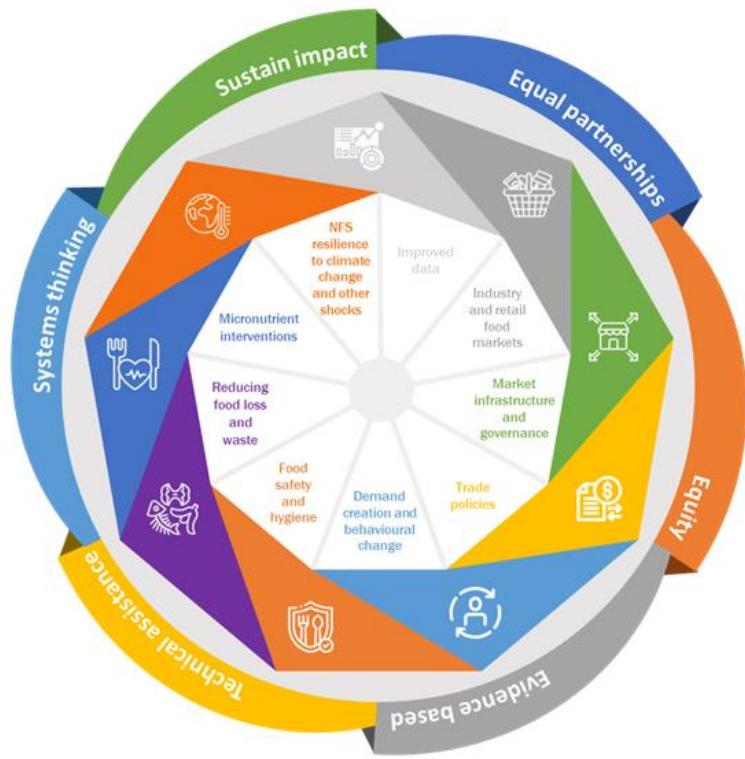
60 NFS *resilience to climate change* and other shocks is essential as food systems contribute to, and
61 are also profoundly influenced by, climate change, environmental pressure, loss of biodiversity,
62 and shocks from economic and conflict sources. Priorities include developing metrics to monitor
63 environmental impacts and other disruptions of food systems, innovating mitigation and
64 adaptation actions, supporting agroecological transitions and ensuring NFS are at the heart of
65 climate change and crisis-related frameworks.

66 The priorities identified above cannot be pursued in isolation but require a transformational yet
67 principled approach to shape food systems that live up to their potential. Central to
68 transformational NFS change is fostering *equal partnerships built on co-creation*, ensuring all
69 partners are valued and actively involved in defining engagement processes⁴. *Equity* must
70 underpin the transformation process, with fair distribution of representation, opportunities,
71 and resources. To be effective, NFS actions must address and confront power imbalances⁵.

72 It is crucial that NFS policies and interventions are grounded on a *robust evidence base involving*
73 *both formative and evaluative research*. Transparency about the evidence needed and possessed
74 by policy makers and industry is key, with donor support for data sharing and evidence
75 translation. *Technical assistance and capacity exchange* must be demand-driven and context-
76 specific, promoting local buy-in and ownership.

77 *Systems thinking* is required for systemic change, enabling a holistic understanding of cross-
78 cutting interactions and relationships within and between systems. Finally, to *sustain impact*
79 with *scaling-up*, governments and donors must resource medium- and long-term programmes
80 proven effective, and piloting and scaling should be built into program design.

81 The members of the NFS Consortium commit to pursuing and supporting these priorities and
82 building movements to bring about transformational change in NFS in accordance with this call
83 to action.



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Fig 1: Priorities and Principles/Processes for Nutritious Food Systems.

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130 **Ethics declarations**

131 *Competing interests*

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