



ECDPM's sustainable food systems approach

Making food systems more sustainable is urgent but complicated

Making our food systems more sustainable is crucial for the health of our planet and its inhabitants. Action is needed across a range of policy areas, including agriculture, trade, health and the environment, and at multiple levels, from local to global. However, the complex interactions that shape our food systems, and the feedback loops these create, mean that actions in one area risk creating or worsening problems in others. For this reason, efforts to improve the sustainability of a food system need to be coordinated and based on a solid understanding of the different elements, sustainability challenges and power dynamics in that food system, and how these interact.

Using a food systems approach can help

A 'food systems approach' is a way of thinking and acting that considers the whole food system, including the actors, activities and regulations that characterise the system, the way these 'elements' interact and the outcomes these interactions generate. Policymakers and practitioners can use a food systems approach to [identify and address trade-offs between different policy objectives](#), and to capitalise on opportunities to accomplish multiple objectives simultaneously. By providing a big picture view, a food systems approach can inform better policies and facilitate improved policy coordination and more effective collaboration with food system stakeholders.

Our sustainable food systems approach: better policies in four steps

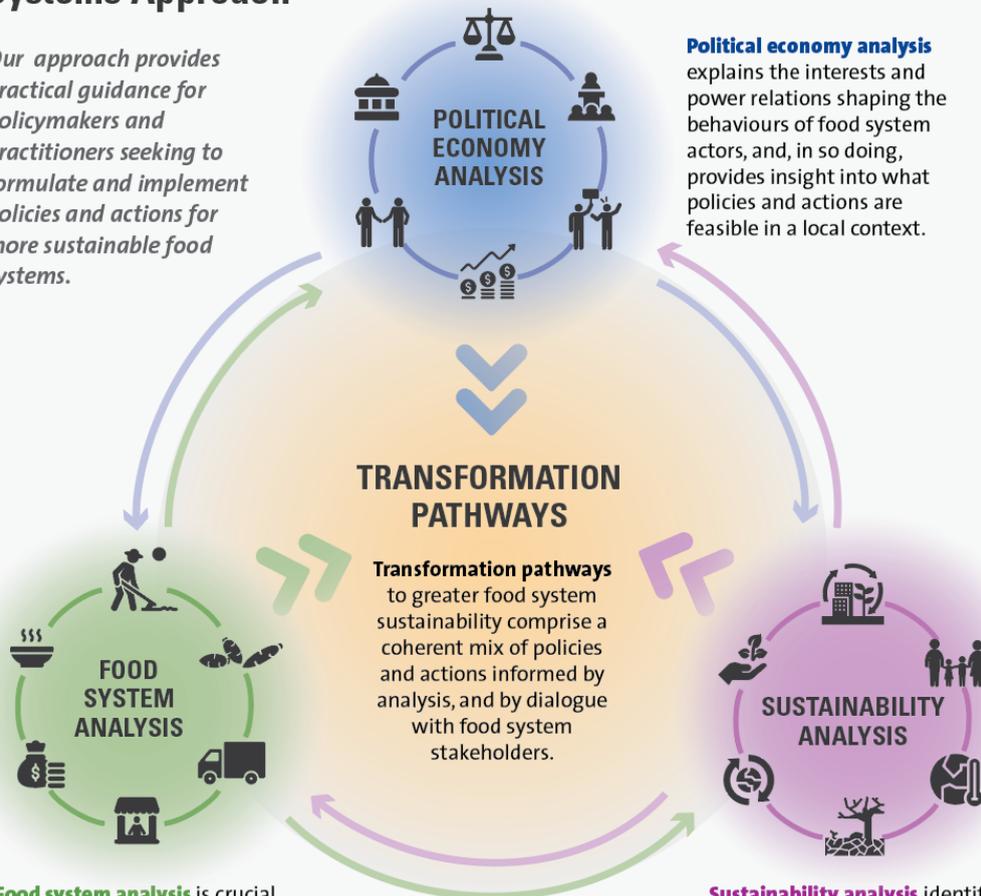
ECDPM has developed a [sustainable food systems approach](#) to help policymakers and practitioners [formulate coherent and context-appropriate policies and actions for more sustainable food systems](#).

Our approach comprises four steps. Three involve analysis: to understand a food system; to assess its sustainability; and to recognise the implications of interests, politics and power relations for food system transformations. The fourth step is to design or revise 'transformation pathways' to greater sustainability. These steps can be done in parallel or iteratively. The analytical steps enrich one another and can be used to prepare new transformation pathways or to test, adapt or refine proposed or existing pathways. The approach can be used in a light way or more rigorously, depending on needs and resources. Involving stakeholders is crucial for developing a shared understanding of sustainability challenges, and for co-creating transformation pathways adapted to their needs and capabilities.

Our Sustainable Food Systems Approach

ecdpm

Our approach provides practical guidance for policymakers and practitioners seeking to formulate and implement policies and actions for more sustainable food systems.



Graphic design: Yaseena Chiu - van 't Hoff

Understand the food system

Food systems are complex and diverse. **Food system analysis** provides insight into the different elements of a food system (e.g. farmers, food distribution), their interactions (e.g. how trade policy impacts production practices) and the outcomes these interactions generate (e.g. diets, incomes). Mapping a food system - including relevant actors, activities and regulations - clarifies how these different elements interact and influence each other, including through feedback loops, and how these interactions impact the food system. Understanding these elements, interactions and outcomes is crucial for identifying promising opportunities to improve the sustainability of a food system.

Assess sustainability

Sustainability analysis integrates indicators of economic, social and environmental sustainability to assess the sustainability of current food system outcomes and identify critical sustainability challenges, their causes and how they relate to one another. Such analysis can be used to better understand how different policies or actions might address specific sustainability challenges and to identify trade-offs these policies and actions might entail across different sustainability objectives. Such insights are crucial in order to prioritise actions for greater sustainability.

Recognise the implications of interests, politics and power relations

An array of interests, politics and power relations lie behind the formal and informal 'rules of the game' that shape the decisions and behaviours of actors in a food system. **Political economy analysis** is used to better understand these dynamics and their impact on food systems. This understanding is necessary for designing policies and actions that are feasible in the local context, and which avoid reinforcing existing inequalities. It is also useful for identifying who would support changes in the food system, as well as those who might attempt to thwart such change.

Design or revise transformation pathways to greater sustainability

The analytical steps above provide the basis (and insight) for effective collaboration with food system stakeholders to design inclusive, context-appropriate and politically feasible '**transformation pathways**' - i.e. coherent mixes of policies and actions for improved food system sustainability. The insights derived from the analytical steps can also be used to revise existing or proposed policy and action mixes, including to (re-)assess the appropriateness of ambitions and activities. The design (or revision) process should be based on iteration, experimentation and learning and should aim to stimulate the creation or harnessing of a coalition of supporters to drive implementation.

Working together for more sustainable food systems

ECDPM developed its sustainable food systems approach to support policymakers and practitioners working to make food systems more sustainable. At the UN Food Systems Summit of 2021, policymakers and other food system stakeholders will commit to a range of principles, policies and actions for more sustainable food systems. ECDPM is keen to work with African, European and international policymakers and practitioners to explore how a food systems approach can be used to turn these commitments into transformative change. To find out more about our work visit ecdpm.org/programmes/sustainable-food-systems or contact Koen Dekeyser at kde@ecdpm.org.