



Achieving better policies for food systems

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- › Better policies are needed to meet the triple challenge facing food systems: ensuring food security and nutrition for all, providing livelihoods along the food chain, and improving the environmental sustainability of the sector.
- › However, achieving better policies for food systems is difficult due to disagreements over facts, diverging interests, and differences over values.
- › *Facts*: On many policy issues, there is a lack of evidence about the extent and nature of problems; the magnitude of trade-offs and synergies; and the effectiveness, costs and benefits of various policy options. In other cases, there are gaps between the available scientific evidence and public perceptions.
- › *Interests*: Policy reforms can create winners and losers, so groups with diverging interests try to influence the policy process. Avoiding policy capture by special interests is critical for better policy-making.
- › *Values*: People can differ in the values they emphasise, and such differences over values can make it difficult to achieve societal consensus on policy priorities.
- › Frictions in any one of these areas can also reinforce frictions in another, creating particularly difficult challenges for policy-making.
- › Robust, inclusive, transparent and evidence-based policy processes can help to prevent or manage these frictions and are essential to achieve better policies for food systems.

What's the issue?

Food systems around the world are expected to simultaneously provide food security and nutrition for a growing population; livelihoods for millions of farmers and others actors along the food chain; and improve the environmental sustainability of the sector. Better policies are urgently needed to address this “triple challenge” (see Policy Brief N°1). The complexity of food systems and the various synergies and trade-offs across different dimensions of the triple challenge means that effective policies need to be coherent across the three dimensions (Brief N°2). Yet reaching agreement on coherent policies across different dimensions and stakeholders is not easy.

Agriculture and food policies have often proven difficult to reform and policy-makers can expect to encounter frictions on the path to better policies for food systems. The most common sources of frictions are disagreements over facts, diverging interests, and differences over values. Many policy questions related to food systems encounter frictions in one or more of these dimensions.

- **Disagreements over facts**: for many policy issues facing food systems, developing an effective policy response is difficult due to the lack of data or evidence about the extent, causes and nature of a





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policy issue; about synergies and trade-offs with other policy issues; and about the effectiveness and distributional consequences of different policy options. For example, the necessary evidence base to design policies for healthier food choices needs to combine information on the food environment (e.g. the availability of healthier and less healthy food options in different areas), on food products, and on consumers' food choices and the determinants of these choices. However, information on these elements is not always available, or exists in disparate databases with inconsistent definitions and methodologies.

- **Diverging interests:** policies can create winners and losers, leading to political frictions. Groups with a strong stake in a policy outcome may organise to try to influence the policy process. This engagement may be a constructive input into the policy making process: interest groups can provide valuable information to policymakers, and the political system can act as a mechanism to balance diverging interests. But problems arise when some interest groups gain a disproportionate influence, leading to policy capture. In the context of food systems, interest groups such as farm lobby groups, agricultural input suppliers, food processing companies, and NGOs, may all seek to influence policies. When these groups achieve disproportionate influence in the policy making process, the resulting policies may risk favouring special interests at the expense of the public interest.
- **Differences over values:** values associated with food and agriculture can vary widely within and across countries. Many food system issues involve powerful values such as fairness, naturalness, health, freedom, tradition, or progress. For example, measures to limit the sale of sugar-sweetened beverages may be seen by some as a reasonable action to improve public health, but may be criticised by others as an unreasonable restriction on freedom of choice. As there is rarely unanimity in a society on how values should be prioritised, the design of policies for food systems is likely to encounter difficulties associated with value conflicts.

The most sensitive issues related to food systems combine disagreements over facts, interests and values. For example, controversies over the role of animal agriculture involve values such as ethical aspects of eating animals or the humane treatment of animals; interests, such as those of farmers and industry; and facts, such as the contested health effects of eating red meat or the precise contribution of ruminant livestock to global warming. Moreover, with such policy controversies, frictions in one area (e.g. diverging interests) can reinforce frictions in another area (e.g. disagreement over facts). Some interest

groups can, for example, spread misleading information to influence public opinion and the policy process. Interest groups may also refer to broader values when advocating their preferred policy position, and not rely only on arguments related to their expected gains from certain policies. Simultaneous frictions on facts, interests, and values make such policy controversies particularly difficult to resolve.

What should policy makers do?

First, policy makers need to be mindful of the different sources of frictions, and their interactions, in order to anticipate risks and develop ways forward in policy processes. They also need to invest in robust institutions and policy processes to prevent or manage such frictions. A number of practical approaches exist, as set out in the table and described in more detail below.

Building a shared understanding of the facts

Policy makers need to invest in generating and communicating trustworthy and policy-relevant evidence that can serve as the basis for building a shared understanding of the facts by all stakeholders. Several good practices exist to ensure that policies are based on the best available evidence.

Regulatory impact assessments (RIA) can help generate the necessary information about potential synergies and trade-offs with other policy issues. RIAs can also compare different policy options while taking into account these interaction effects. To be effective, these assessments should cover economic, social and environmental impacts, ideally in a quantified form. Several methods can be used to collect evidence and information, such as using insights from scientific advisory bodies. Stakeholder consultation can be another important source of information: this approach is particularly effective when stakeholders are asked to reflect on data and evidence gathered during a RIA to ensure evidence-based discussions. Other methods include experimental approaches, such as the use of pilot projects.

While a shared understanding of the facts is an important precondition to develop effective policies, it is rarely sufficient to enable policy choices, which almost always also involve some trade-off between competing interests and values. Thus, on top of ensuring the availability of policy-relevant evidence, policy makers usually need to balance diverging interests and deal with differences in values, too.

Balancing diverging interests

If frictions are mainly due to conflicts between different interests, then policy makers will need to

Table. Three sources of friction and potential policy approaches

	Types of friction	Potential policy approaches
Facts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Lack of data/evidence about the extent, causes and characteristics of policy issues; about the synergies and trade-offs with other issues; and about the effectiveness of different policy options · Gaps between public perception and scientific evidence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Build a shared understanding of the facts through the use of Regulatory Impact Assessments, incorporating insights from scientific advisory bodies etc. · Stakeholders can be a source of information, but not all stakeholders are equally well represented, and stakeholders' views are not necessarily evidence-based; therefore good to use regulatory impact assessment as input into stakeholder consultation
Interests	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Policies can create winners and losers, leading to political frictions · Interest groups can provide valuable information to policy makers, and the political system can act as a mechanism to balance diverging interests · However, there is a risk that special interests capture policy processes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Institutions and policy processes should promote transparency, accountability and a level playing field to minimise the risk of policy capture · In cases of powerful interests and the risk of policy capture, it may be necessary to mobilise a countervailing coalition
Values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Many food system issues are marked by differences over values (e.g. genetically engineered organisms, animal welfare). In contrast with interests, it is hard to "buy off" value-based opposition with compensation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Creative problem solving: policies can sometimes be adjusted so they are acceptable to people with different values (i.e. focus on actions, not values) · Making difficult decisions through deliberative processes so that choices have legitimacy; ideally, this builds societal consensus or at least widespread support or acceptance
All of the above	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · A <i>policy controversy</i> combines all of the above and is difficult to resolve due to incompatible worldviews 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Difficult to resolve, although some approaches can help (e.g. ensure communication by experts with diverse values to reduce polarisation) · Important to prevent the emergence of policy controversies by embedding the best practices for facts, interests and values into institutions and policy processes, thus building trust

search for compromise or bargain to reconcile different interests in society. Conflicts between interests become particularly problematic when one interest group has a disproportionate influence over the political decision making process. In these cases, achieving better policies will also require efforts to improve public sector processes or integrity.

Several practical approaches can help to strengthen the integrity of public decision making. First, policy makers should actively engage stakeholders with diverging interests to ensure an inclusive decision making process and limit the potential for disproportionate influence by specific interests. Other methods to reduce the risk of policy capture include ensuring transparency about how policy decisions are made and who was consulted during the policy process, and promoting accountability through independent oversight and control bodies.

While the above strategies can help limit undue influence, they may not always be sufficient to enable reform. In some cases, it might also be necessary to compensate those who stand to lose, for example by providing adjustment assistance, long transition periods, concessions on the nature or extent of reforms, or even exemption of some groups from the reforms.

Dealing with differences over values

Conflicts over values can be harder to resolve than situations where interests diverge. As noted above, when interests are at stake, it might be possible to design compensation measures for those who stand to lose from a policy reform. By contrast, people who feel that a policy change is inconsistent with their values may consider that no measure would compensate for the impact of the policy change. This makes value differences potentially





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much harder to resolve; yet, there are several practical approaches which could provide a way forward.

Policies can sometimes be adjusted so they are acceptable to groups with different values. For example, evidence shows that many voters are opposed to free trade because of concerns about labour and environmental conditions abroad. If opposition to free trade is motivated by such values, conventional approaches to provide compensation (e.g. job training, a stronger welfare state) will not be effective. Alternative policy solutions, however, can reduce voters' opposition, including greater support for development programmes aimed at improving labour conditions, or including labour or environmental provisions in, or attached to, trade agreements.

Where such adjustments are not possible, deliberative mechanisms may help policy makers navigate difficult societal decisions in a way that generates public support for, or acceptance of, the outcome. Several deliberative initiatives have covered food and agricultural policies. In France, for example, the *Convention Citoyenne pour le Climat* used random selection to bring together 150 citizens to define initiatives to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Several of the resulting decisions were related to food systems, such as encouraging a shift towards a diet with less meat and dairy and more fruits and vegetables, and providing consumers with information on the environmental impacts of food products.

Managing policy controversies

The most difficult policy issues encounter frictions across all three areas. Mutually reinforcing positions in terms of facts, interests and values can create incompatible world views. Even here, some approaches have been found to help reduce polarisation. One approach is presenting information in a way that affirms the values held by the audience. For example, differences in views on new technologies might be bridged if information is provided on how these technologies could benefit the environment, and not only on their potential use in reducing costs. Another approach is to ensure that information is communicated by experts with diverse values; this increases the probability that people will hear the message from someone they identify as a trusted source. However, it is better to prevent polarisation from emerging in the first place. Policy controversies may be avoided by embedding the best practices for facts, interests and values described above into institutions and policy processes in order to build trust.

Conclusion

Making better policies requires building a shared understanding of the facts, balancing diverging interests (or finding ways to compensate those who stand to lose

from a policy reform), and resolving differences over values. Good practices identified by the OECD can help with each of these tasks. For example, rigorous ex ante Regulatory Impact Assessments should bring together the best available scientific and technical information to inform policy decisions. These assessments can then be used as input in stakeholder consultations to gather further insights. To prevent policy capture by special interests, governments need to ensure all interests have the opportunity to voice their views and promote transparency and accountability. Differences over values can sometimes be resolved by adjustments to specific policies. In other cases, deliberative approaches can help to find a way through thorny societal dilemmas. Ideally, deliberative approaches can help to build societal consensus or at least find compromises with widespread support or acceptance. Embedding good practices into institutions and policy processes can help avoid or manage frictions related to facts, interests, and values and is indispensable for making better policies for food systems.



Further reading

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