

New report: Inclusive food systems needed to boost development, resilience

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The rapid spread of COVID-19 and efforts to contain it are generating growing concerns that food insecurity, malnutrition, and poverty may escalate, particularly among marginalized people in the developing

world. To build more resilient, climate-smart, and healthy food systems that help people withstand these types of shocks policymakers must prioritize making them inclusive, according to the 2020 Global Food Policy Report, released earlier this month by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI).

"Food systems provide opportunities to improve [food](#) and nutrition security, generate income, and drive inclusive economic growth, but even in prosperous times too many people are excluded from fully participating in them and securing these benefits," said Johan Swinnen, director general of IFPRI. "In times of crisis like today, inclusion is an even greater imperative for protecting the most vulnerable."

The report highlights the central role that inclusive food systems play in meeting global goals to end poverty, hunger, and malnutrition, and offers recommendations for making food systems more inclusive for four marginalized groups—smallholders, women, youth, and conflict-affected people—as well as analysis on transforming national food system.

More than 60% of people in low income countries are employed in agriculture and smallholders comprise more than 70% of farm units in Africa south of the Sahara and 85% of farms in South Asia. The rapid expansion of food markets across Africa and Asia offers tremendous potential for many of these smallholders to benefit if they can increase farm production or engage themselves in food distribution, processing and other parts of the supply chain where ample well-paying employment opportunities will emerge.

Currently, many smallholders lack the means and kind of support to gain from growing food demand. "Initiating and sustaining a process of inclusive transformation requires supporting smallholders' market access by investing in basic infrastructure, creating market incentives, and promoting inclusive agribusiness models. But it is as important to invest

in the 'hidden middle' of supply chains where millions of small- and medium-scale enterprises already operate in food processing, storage, logistics and distribution. Getting this right will be essential to lift smallholders from poverty and [food insecurity](#)," said Rob Vos director of IFPRI's Markets, Trade and Institutions Division.

Women are already making significant contributions throughout food systems, but these contributions are often not formally recognized, and women often face constraints that prevent them from engaging on equitable terms. Increasing women's decision-making power and control over resources and assets such as credit, land, and training helps empower them to contribute to food systems in ways that benefit both men and women. "Women's empowerment can spur a wide range of improvements that often reverberate throughout households and societies—from agricultural productivity, to household food security and dietary quality, to maternal and child nutrition," said Hazel Malapit, senior research coordinator at IFPRI.

In Africa south of the Sahara, youth are expected to play a growing role in food systems but their role in driving growth is often misunderstood. Projections show Africa south of the Sahara will add 30 million people to its working age population each year by 2050, and that much of this growth will be in rural areas. "Africa's [rural areas](#) will need to play a major role in providing employment opportunities for young people, but focusing on broad-based rural growth to create thriving economic environments for food system business will likely do more to support these growing youth populations than policies narrowly focused on youth," said James Thurlow, senior research fellow at IFPRI.

Political instability and conflict have been fundamental drivers to the recent surge in global hunger numbers, with more than half of all undernourished people living in conflict-affected countries. "Integrating conflict-affected people into food systems—either in their places of

origin or the locales to which they have fled—can substantially help them rebuild their lives," said Vos. Providing long-term refugees with access to land and means to build secure livelihoods can support their own food security while also contributing to local economies. Rebuilding local agriculture and food value chains for conflict-affected people will bolster resilience thereby reducing the risk of further conflict and sowing the seeds for last peace.

Across the developing world national food systems are already transforming rapidly, creating challenges and opportunities to make them more inclusive to all these groups. Case studies of these transformations in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Nigeria, and Viet Nam provide useful examples of the drivers and components of change, as well as the promising entry points for actions that can increase inclusion.

"Approaches to food system transformation must be country specific, as each country's food system is unique," said John McDermott, director of the CGIAR Research Program on Agriculture for Nutrition and Health.

Governments can foster these inclusive food systems by enacting laws, policies, and regulations that provide basic infrastructure, create the right market incentives, promote inclusive agribusiness models and leverage the potential of digital technology. Additionally, investments in human capital in areas such as secure land tenure rights, improved access to information, and stronger social protections can lower the barriers to participation that many marginalized groups face.

"The spread of COVID-19 has highlighted how vulnerable we all can be to global shocks," said Swinnen. "Greater inclusivity in food systems is not a panacea for this or any other crisis, but it is a critical part of strengthening our resilience. Times of crises also offer opportunities for change and it is essential that we act now so that everyone, especially the most vulnerable, can recover from the COVID-19 shock and be prepared to withstand future shocks."

The report also features chapters analyzing developments in agri-[food systems](#) in Africa south of the Sahara, the Middle East and North Africa, Central Asia, South Asia, East and Southeast Asia, and Latin America and the Caribbean.

More information: International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), 2020 Global Food Policy Report: Building Inclusive Food Systems, (2020). [DOI: 10.2499/9780896293670](https://doi.org/10.2499/9780896293670)

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