

Transforming Food Systems:
Potential Role of TRADE
Programme



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ACRONYM

IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development
MBC	Milk Bulking Centre
MDG	Millennium Development Goals
MGDS	Malawi Growth and Development Strategy
NSSP	Malawi National Social Support Policy
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
TRADE	Transforming Agriculture through Diversification and Entrepreneurship
VC	Value Chain

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TRANSFORMING FOOD SYSTEMS: DISCOURSING APPROPRIATE INTERVENTIONS NECESSARY TO BE IMPLEMENTED

1 Introduction



Food systems is located directly at the knot of several supreme objectives of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The food systems lie at the core of eliminating poverty, hunger, and malnutrition in all its forms, achieving good health and well-being, while promoting environmental sustainability. Food systems encompass all the ways in which food is produced, distributed, and consumed. However, a food systems perspective encompasses much more than the pathways from farm to plate. It also embraces activities upstream of farms (such as research, plant breeding and the supply of agricultural inputs), downstream of consumers (including the disposal of waste and recirculation of nutrients), and everything in between (including governance, institutions, policy and regulation) (IFAD, 2021). Food systems needs some game-changing strategies for a dramatic transformation of food systems to achieve healthy, sustainable diets that are produced with equitable access and will preserve or regenerate the natural environment. The overall goals of a food system's transformation are to ensure people are able to consume diets that are healthy, to produce food within planetary boundaries and to earn a decent living from their work in the food system. Livelihoods, nutrition and environmental goals are interlinked. Central to the desired outcomes is the need to ensure that food systems are resilient to shocks from weather extremes, pest and disease outbreaks, climate change and market anomalies.

2 Key Factors to be Considered when Transforming Food Systems



Transformation of food systems can be done through drivers, components, and outcomes of food systems. Food System drivers include biophysical and environmental factors (e.g., local agro-ecologies that shape farming systems), technologies and infrastructures (e.g., farm machinery and road networks), political and economic factors (e.g., policies, regulations and markets), socio-cultural norms and practices (e.g., dietary customs), and demographic change (e.g., population growth, migration and urbanization). On the other side, food systems components comprise the productive, reproductive and economic activities and functions that produce, process and distribute food. The outcomes of food systems are facilitated by food environments that influence consumer choices and behavior, individually and in groups. Outcomes include effects on the nutrition, health and well-being of food consumers and an arrangement of social, economic and political effects,



as well as environmental impacts such as wastage and pollution. The drivers, components, and outcomes of food systems are determined by a number of factors namely:

2.1 Biophysical and Environmental Factors

Biophysical objectives and interests that are linked to food systems include basic food and nutrition security, as well as the energetic and health effects that are associated with eating particular types of foods and diets. As food consumers, people have interests in food safety (e.g., chemical composition and contamination of foodstuffs; toxicity, etc.) and nutritional quality, are motivated by the sensory properties of foods, such as their flavors, aromas and textures, and are also concerned about the freshness and decay of edible food. The public at large are directly and indirectly affected by the impacts of agri-food systems on the natural environment and ecosystem services, such as air and water quality and safety. Finally, people who work in food systems industry, have interests in the effects of their working conditions on their physical and psychological health, safety and well-being.

2.2 Political and Economic Factors

People across the world are engaged in food systems for economic motives, such as generating an income or otherwise pursuing a livelihood (e.g., subsistence farming or cultivation for a market). Food producers and workers in food value chains may be concerned about issues of inequity and inequality in the distribution of costs, benefits and risks arising from food systems. Consumers and society at large are concerned with the regularity and adequacy of food supplies, including the price of food in general and of particular commodities, especially staple foods, and with the stability or instability of food prices.

The nature and dynamics of both rural and urban peoples' engagement in food system-related economic activities differs between rural and urban areas, and between male and female. Within rural areas, the type of food system-related activity in which people may be involved is shaped by the mixture of agricultural and non-agricultural livelihood opportunities that confront a given household. According to the 2021 Rural Development Report, the great majority of rural people belong to households that are in transition from, or have already moved out of farming. In those rural households that are still involved in farming, it is common for their children to help on the family farm, and this engagement often continues and expands as they grow older. In these households, the great majority of youth work on the family farm or earn a wage on other farms. In rural households that are less oriented toward agricultural livelihoods, only a very small minority of youth are involved in family farming, and hardly they engage in wage labor on other farms (IFAD, 2021).

Nonetheless, there are still many young people in rural areas who do engage in some kind of agriculture and/or livestock production, even while they are in school, whether primarily for consumption or for sale, on their own account or working with or for others. For many people, engagement in agricultural production comes and goes in different forms at different points during the life course. Leaving agriculture or migrating to an urban area are not necessarily permanent, irreversible transitions. Many young people who migrate away for school or whose primary work is outside agriculture will nevertheless keep a hand in farming, or will at some later point re-engage with agriculture or live again in a rural area. Some young people may aspire to work in farming, even though they may be obliged to seek work in other sectors while they try to gather the resources they need to do so. Some young men may see farming as a



practical and accessible way to build a viable economic livelihood in settings where other opportunities are scarce or unappealing.

The types of agricultural livelihood opportunities that are open to particular rural men and women will be determined partly by the agricultural and economic geographies in which they live, and partly by their access to productive assets and resources, particularly land, but also capital and technology, as well as output markets (IFAD, 2021). About two thirds of rural youth in developing countries live in areas of high potential for agricultural production, and about one third in areas that have access to potential markets for agricultural products; however, about one third live in areas where agricultural potential is medium or low, and one third in areas with limited opportunities for commercial production (IFAD, 2021). Around 43 per cent of rural youth live in areas where the agricultural potential is good but access to markets is poor, or where agricultural potential and market access are moderate (IFAD, 2021). In Malawi where we experience low levels of both rural transformation and structural transformation, over 50 per cent of rural youth live in regions where the agricultural potential is good but the opportunities to produce for the market are poor.

2.3 Social and Cultural Factor

Food is important to people and social groups for symbolic and spiritual reasons, as an indication of cultural status, identity and belonging, and as a central feature of many traditional practices, rituals and celebrations. Ethnic, cultural and religious meanings, norms and values are attached to many foodstuffs, dishes, beverages and styles of food preparation, and to the places, occasions and peoples with which they are associated. Symbolic catalogues and cultural statuses are often displayed through food consumption practices (e.g. modernity and tradition, wealth and poverty). These practices are sometimes understood as a method for a whole lifestyle and set of values (e.g. vegetarianism or religious avoidance of foods). Iconic cultural and traditional roles are often attributed to work that is connected to food and food systems, where gender is often an important dimension (e.g. in some societies, professional chefs are predominantly male, while domestic cooks are typically thought of as housewives).

Many social roles, relationships and statuses are expressed through food and engagement in food systems, such as professional and artisanal work (e.g. baker, butcher, food safety inspector), reproductive roles (e.g. motherhood, breadwinner, provider) and types of traditional livelihood (e.g. herder, forester, hunter, fisher). Food consumption practices are very often connected to social relationships and commitments (e.g. caring for family members) and emotional and affective states. Gender is a very important feature of many domestic and social relationships that are expressed through food provision and food-related work.

For most people, home is where food consumption habits are formed. The influence of family and home continues during youth, but it also changes in character and intensity. Younger members of a household typically take on increasing responsibilities for domestic work and tasks associated with care and social reproduction around the home. These would generally include helping to procure food items, prepare and cook ingredients, serve meals, and feed infants, young children, and household-members who are sick or physically disabled. Very often the distribution of these tasks is gendered, with girls and young women more likely to be responsible for food preparation and family care work.



Young women who are mothers and carers may apply a strong influence over the food consumption and nutrition of other household members, especially children, and will themselves be influenced by prevailing social norms; for example, a bias in some societies that favors feeding boys before girls.

Migration is likely to have large effects on food practices and habits. Migration for work, education or other purposes will separate a person from their home environment, exposing them to different foods and food-ways, as well as unique health risks and hazards. Migrant people are likely to become more responsible for themselves, which might include sourcing food from markets, street vendors and fast food retailers; cooking or sharing cooking responsibilities with other people in shared accommodation; and/or making food choices daily in school dining halls and workplace cafeterias. While migrants may mix with people from different cultural backgrounds, they often live and socialize with members of their own family or diaspora community. Either way, the social networks of migrant person are liable to expand significantly, and they are likely to be exposed to unfamiliar foods, cookeries and consumption practices, often while also trying to maintain some familiar food habits in a new setting.

Marriage and parenthood will provide people with new domestic relations and caring responsibilities. Relocation to join a spouse's household could also entail changes in dietary habits and practices to accommodate the habits, preferences and routines of the spouse's family.

Potential Role of TRADE Programme in Transforming Food Systems



The need for fundamental transformation of current food systems is inevitable if Malawi is to achieve one, let alone all, of these goals. Meeting the food system transformation will certainly be disturbing based on critical climatic conditions, transportation costs, and other socio-economic challenges. But the anticipated benefits far compensate these difficulties. Some of the critical domains that must be addressed for the successful transformation of food systems are like: enhancing improved agriculture, transforming food environments for healthy diets, mitigating climate change, productively engaging the private sector, influencing public policy priorities, and establishing true cost accounting of food. Malawi continues to face persistent rural poverty, deepening food insecurity, and declining natural resource base and associated ecosystems services. According to National Statistics Office, 52% of Malawians are food insecure, and 70% of dietary energy comes from cereals, roots and tubers with limited consumption of more nutritious foods such as legumes and animal source foods. These trends continue to undermine the ability of the rural poor to adapt varying and changing climatic conditions. These inclinations may be of concern today and perhaps into the far future unless governments and other partners in the country adopt more aggressive food security enhancement innovations based on existing opportunities. Such opportunities would include the presence of large pool of diversity agricultural crops, agricultural innovations that may include technologies and management practices, and diversity of ecosystems and associated services.



TRADE Programme intends to implement tailor interventions to the needs of different groups of the poor as categorized by the Malawi National Social Support Policy (NSSP). The primary target groups for TRADE are Transient poor households (25%) who are economically active, produce some surplus for market, often food secure and have ability to move out of poverty but at risk of slipping back into the lower ranks of poverty due to economic or climate shocks; ultra-poor, non-labour constrained households (50%) with potential to graduate to higher poverty ranks; who are dominantly subsistence producers, often foods insecure, own small land holdings, more vulnerable to impacts of climate change; and ultra-poorhouse holds (25%) living under extreme/severe poverty, unable to meet basic food needs, resource constrained, with limited access to land. Some of the interventions that will contribute to the transformation of food systems in Malawi include:

3.1 Social Inclusion and Environmental Resilience

TRADE will focus its support to households who are actively engaged in production of the priority commodities, or have the potential to become engaged, and are located in areas where production of the priority commodities is concentrated. Malawi has had food insecurity leading to wider spread chronic hunger among the rural poor for several decades, a situation that seems to be worsening due to climate change. Gender inequalities also play a significant role in accounting for the countries' poor agricultural growth and poverty reduction performance. Majority (50-70%) of Malawians live under the poverty line with female led households typically poorer. Malawians are consuming cheaper, less nutritious meals contributing to high rate of undernourishment. It is worthwhile noting that depending on the type of crop to address food security vulnerability under climate change stress may also have its own risks. Almost annual occurrence of floods or droughts combined with overdependence on maize, a drought sensitive crop grown by 70% of Malawians, resulting in high levels of food insecurity. This is the critical deficiency that TRADE programme intends to address by supporting the diversification of the crops that rural poor may depend on. The programme is targeting rural smallholder farmers that include women and youth who meet unfavourable conditions when involved in various agricultural commercialisation activities. Studies have shown that malnutrition and stunted children under the age of five is on the increase. This is directly attributed to inadequate supply of and access to foods of high nutritional value. It is important to recognize that food insecurity in most parts of Malawi is in most times localized either by geographic locations, by community or even by social groups within a given community. For example, the growing food insecurity in southern part of Malawi, is partly attributable to dynamic changes in the ecological system, and is largely localized to these areas. It is according to this background that TRADE Programme is targeting rural communities which comprises of both transient and ultra poor households, to let them be provided by an enabling environment that can allow them be involved in commodity commercialisation. Sometimes food insecurity challenges are intensified by widespread gender inequalities that disadvantage specific segments of the population such as women and children. Besides that, food insecurity is heightened by limited local processing, storage and transportation infrastructure, especially for perishable products like milk, results in low availability in local markets and high food loss and waste. It is in this line that TRADE programme will assist in reducing infrastructure bottlenecks of identified commodities through the development of: road infrastructure (rehabilitation including drainage, construction of structures and set up of Road Management Clubs); buildings to support commodities (warehouses, Milk Bulking Centres – MBCs –,

Livestock/cattle markets and honey storage centres); livestock water points (homestead/community and livestock drinking points)

3.2 Increasing Agricultural Production and Productivity

TRADE Programme will develop some successful innovations and technologies in agriculture that will likely transform the food system. There is a broad agreement that improving agricultural productivity is crucial in resolving food crises, enhancing food security and accelerating pro-poor growth. The programme will increase commercial farming & put measures in place to enhance commodity commercialisation; promote commodity storage facilities to limit food loss & waste; and improve effectiveness of farmer based organisation such as cooperatives, through capacity building. TRADE programme will promote some of the technologies and innovations to reach and empower poor farmers and women to access and utilize their resources for them to be fully accommodated into emerging market opportunities. The challenge is on, how to harness such agricultural and technology initiatives to reach even the hardest to reach. TRADE programme will among others strengthen market linkages and infrastructure to facilitate local trade; develop and implement strategy to promote Producer Public Private Partnerships(4Ps); enhance access to knowledge on Good Agriculture Practices(GAPs) and Climate Smart Agriculture (CSAs) that have potential for improving agricultural productivity and food security with sound environmental management.

While recognizing the complexity of food systems challenges, TRADE Programme will prioritise drought & flood resistant crops and animal breeds; and increase awareness among farmers on the importance of conservation agriculture. The majority of food security initiatives that includes research and development efforts tend to focus on promoting new technologies in high potential areas. Yet, resource-poor farmers are often found in large numbers in pockets of low potential areas (that are largely ecologically degraded, lacking basic infrastructure and services, and are poorly linked to markets with little opportunities for value chain development and upgrading). These areas and the associated populations therein have long been left behind in mainstream developmental projects, and continue to be bypassed by current initiatives in many parts of the country. TRADE programme is therefore positioned to learn from what works in some areas, and to test and adapt agricultural technology and institutional innovations so that would facilitate the reaching of even 'the hardest to reach' in marginal areas, and to harness their food security and resilience to vulnerabilities and food shortage. These lessons drawn from RLEEP are necessary as they are helping TRADE programme on how best it can scale up and apply technologies and innovations that are relevant in low potential areas. TRADE Programme is ready to work in areas selected based on their vulnerability to food crises and agricultural potential. These include the lands characterised by light rainfall, Medium to high potential areas with declining potential and those with unexploited high potential.

3.3 Thematic Studies

Even in high potential areas, large-scale existing food security initiatives are likely to be captured by the well being of farmers who have resources to access improved inputs, markets and information. The poorest of the poor, women and the vulnerable, often lack the prerequisites underlying participation, which include education, income and market access. In the face of food crises and other vulnerabilities,



these communities have often had coping strategies to adapt and respond to potential crises. However, most projects' initiatives tend to neglect local innovations and adaptation strategies used by men and women. TRADE programme would like to understand through different studies on why communities are unable to adopt measures and strategies to mitigate the impacts of food insecurity at scale. A central focus of TRADE Programme is to deepen understanding of the drivers and dynamics of vulnerability, and the adaptation strategies and local innovations used by poor men and women farmers to cope with recurrent food crises and food insecurity. TRADE Programme therefore aims at identifying and testing strategies for food security and agricultural growth based on local innovations and strategies that really work well for the poor.

3.4 Effective Partnerships & Nutrition Sensitive Production

As one way of expanding the pathways out of food insecurity TRADE programme will be supporting rural smallholder farmers to invest in agriculture commercialization and access extension services for a path out of poverty. The programme will facilitate effective private sector partnerships with smallholder farmers and particularly link these farmers to social and financial support that can maximize synergies. Poor rural women and youth will have to increase agricultural productivity and increase their income. Such segments of society need to take advantage of opportunities that may exist in local agribusiness opportunities that can rise in farmer based organisations that will be revamped through TRADE programme interventions.

TRADE programme is aiming at strengthen end to end planning for nutrition sensitive production that include use of improved inputs for nutrient rich foods, sustainable farming, community seeds development and strategies for behavior change (i.e. through advocacy and effective communication) to boost healthy foods consumption. However, most food security initiatives tend to focus on a narrow base of key major crops such as maize, cassava, rice and bananas among others. For example, Malawi's green revolution Project has focused on maize, ignoring other crops. Some projects focused efforts on better-known crops such as legumes and rice as well as smallholder dairy. However, it is possible that the fight for food security can be enhanced on neglected commodities like Honey, Irish Potato and sunflower which are locally important for income, food security and nutrition and resistant to climatic shocks. What is now required is to broaden options starting with what farmers do in order to diversify their crop varieties and livelihoods. In the context of TRADE programme, neglected crops are a diverse set of minor crops like Honey, Irish Potato and sunflower that tend to be locally important but receive little or no attention by mainstream extension players, policy and donor support. With the growing food crisis and high prices of mainstream food crops, there is a growing recognition of the importance of these neglected crops in supporting livelihoods for the poor. TRADE Programme has demonstrated that these crops have the potential to diversify the farming systems, spread risks, contribute to food security, and provide income opportunities for the most vulnerable groups in particular. TRADE Programme is supporting farmer experimentation in adapting and scaling up sustainable innovations for promoting neglected high value crops.

3.5 Policy Engagement

TRADE programme is recognising the need to design and implement specific policies and governance



mechanisms that must be community-driven. TRADE programme is set to enhance governance structures of farmer based organisations which are notably absent in most initiatives and narratives on food security. In Malawi, the food crisis has led to the formulation of several policies and establishment of several institutions and food security initiatives. However, important questions remain on the extent of participation of local communities and small scale, resource poor farmers and women, in decision-making processes to voice their interests, needs and concerns in the formulation and implementation of these initiatives. Questions remain on the extent to which these institutions, policies and initiatives respond to the real needs and interests of the poor farmers, and the extent to which they are accountable to local communities. There are also questions on the extent to which these policies, programmes and special initiatives reflect a broader, long term vision and perspectives on agri-food systems.

Conclusion

A key element of all food systems falls under improved agricultural commercialisation. Improved commodity commercialisation enhances the availability of food and non-food product, distribution, marketing of commodities, and livestock. It is inline with this purpose that TRADE Programme is aiming at yielding key outputs like: win-win partnerships that will be achieved through the adoption of the 4Ps approach; enhancing business skills among smallholder farmers; Increasing smallholder farmers' production skills; enhancing the capacity of policy lobbying as part of contributing to improved sustainable livelihoods among rural people in Malawi. To achieve successful agricultural commercialisation that can transform food systems, agricultural policies must be able to accommodate all actors of the value chain. The agriculture sector can contribute to the transformation of the food systems if rural farmers will be able to increase output (quantity and quality) on the same amount of land and to do so in an environmentally sensitive manner. To identify and promote local innovations and adaptation strategies that work for the poor rural people to cope with food security vulnerabilities. TRADE programme will adapt and scale up technology and market innovations that can promote neglected crops that enhance food security, increase incomes and ecosystem integrity in selected areas of Malawi. TRADE Programme will analyze and promote specific policies and governance mechanisms for sustainable agri-food systems and determine mechanisms for scaling up agri-food systems and sustainable agriculture.





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