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# Multisectoral aspirations for food systems governance and the enduring dominance of agriculture

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Transforming food systems to be healthier, more sustainable and more equitable will require coordinated efforts across diverse sectors. The agricultural sector typically dominates food system governance, potentially risking imbalance in the food systems space and sustaining an emphasis on food availability and agricultural production over more integrated solutions to food system challenges. We examine contemporary food systems governance, with a focus on the UN Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) and on the Pacific and East and Southeast Asian regions. We reflect on the implications of agricultural dominance in the food system space and identify opportunities to support multisectoral food system governance to facilitate positive food system change.

## KEYWORDS

Pacific, Southeast and East Asia, transformation, health, sustainability

## Governance and food system change

Global agricultural production has continued to increase since the 1960s (Ritchie et al., 2023) while global poverty has declined since the 1990s (Hasell et al., 2023). Despite these successes, almost 30% of the population are food insecure (FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP, and WHO, 2023) and malnutrition in all its forms remains an ongoing burden, characterized by a high prevalence of undernutrition, especially among children, coexisting with a rising trend of overweight and obesity (Gillespie et al., 2019). While global food availability has improved, as a result of the sustained increases in food production, access to food remains inequitable and a key challenge for many people, in particular access to food for a healthy diet (Hirvonen et al., 2020). The production and consumption of food has also resulted in environmental impacts that are unsustainable at a global level (Springmann et al., 2018). Ensuring equitable food and nutrition security of a growing global population, through the provision of sustainable and healthy diets, is an immediate challenge (Willett et al., 2019). There is now widespread interest in the idea of “transforming” food systems to be healthier, more sustainable and more equitable, as a strategy to realize a variety of development objectives (Leeuwis et al., 2021).

Approaches to addressing food-related challenges have evolved over time, from a narrow focus on food production for increased calorie intake, to greater awareness of the need for a systems approach to address the linked challenges of health, inequality

and sustainability. However, questions remain on the best approaches to anticipate and proactively manage future change, and who should lead these. It is generally agreed that multisectoral collaboration will be required to “transform” food systems (HLPE, 2017; Singh et al., 2021). Multisectoral approaches to complex issues, such as nutrition, have been advocated for a long time. For example, the “food, health, and care” framework for the causes of malnutrition, in the UNICEF Conceptual Framework of Malnutrition, provides the basic rationale for taking a multisectoral approach (UNICEF, 1991). While applying a multisectoral approach to complex issues is not new, and relationships within the political economy of food systems have been investigated widely (Resnick and Swinnen, 2023), much less is known about effective multisectoral food system governance in general, or in different contexts. There is a critical need to better understand what makes multisectoral food system governance work well, and how it can facilitate positive food system transformation (Leeuwis et al., 2021). This perspective provides a brief analysis of contemporary food systems governance, drawing on the UN Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) process, which engaged countries to deliver progress on all 17 SDGs through improved food systems. It draws on the experience of countries who have committed to the UNFSS transformation process in the Pacific and in Southeast and East Asia (SE and E Asia), regions that are at the forefront of food system challenges including population growth, climate change and diet transition.

## Multisectoral food systems governance in action

Addressing food-related challenges requires a systems approach and solutions will need to be multisectoral in nature (Brouwer et al., 2020). This approach requires coordination of efforts by different sectors to achieve shared goals, as well as individual sectors integrating concerns of other sectors into their planning process. However, different sectors have traditionally been responsible for delivering on individual aspects of food systems. For example, the effective utilization of nutrient content is the remit of health sectors, while agriculture has focussed on increasing production, with investment in agriculture largely focussed on staple crops and oil crops, rather than on commodities rich in micronutrients (Haddad et al., 2016). This focus on individual aspects was the genesis of the “sectors” concept to specifically manage particular focus areas (Degeling, 1995). While useful for progressing these focus areas, sector-specific approaches, or silos, can create challenges to implementing and achieving multisectoral results, including nutrition-sensitive food security strategies (Clark, 2017). The current dominance of the agricultural sector in food systems governance, therefore, requires further examination to better understand if it is negatively influencing progress toward multisectoral goals. A classic example is the continued elevation of food availability, from agricultural production, above other food systems components or sectors as the main solution to food security problems (Fouilleux and Bricas, 2019; Hasegawa et al., 2019). The FAO, despite adopting a “food systems” approach, still focusses the bulk of its work on raising agricultural productivity, as demonstrated through the allocation of its regular programme budget (Emadi and Rahmanian, 2020).

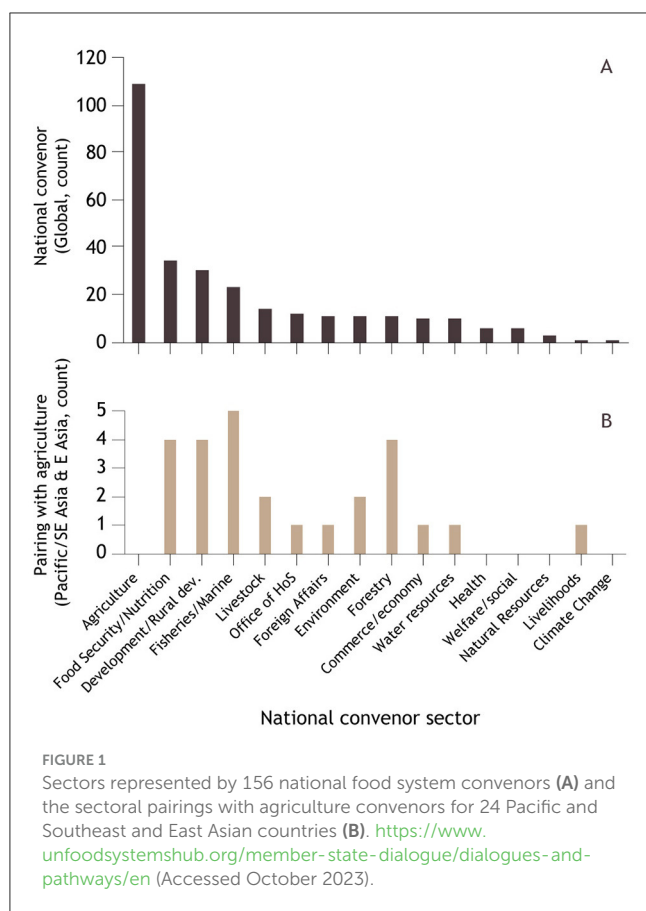
Examining the institutions through which food system negotiations take place may help to understand the challenge of overcoming entrenched silos and support more effective governance of multisectoral action in this field (Bennett et al., 2018). We explore the UNFSS process as a case study to understand the priorities of national agencies engaged in food system governance and their influence on approaches to food system improvement. Countries engaging in food systems approaches to governance often have arrangements established outside, or in addition to, the UNFSS process. However, the UNFSS process provides an important window into national governance arrangements. In 2021, over 100 Member States nominated a high-level individual from within Government to convene a series of national UNFSS dialogues (UN Food Systems Coordination Hub, 2024). Convening organizations were given responsibility for organizing national summit dialogues and developing pathways describing the country’s current situation, where they wanted to be and how they would get there. The convenor was tasked with moving the national pathway from a plan into action. While the UNFSS process is unique, the convenor’s role is central to coordinating a food system approach across the government and the success of the UNFSS agenda (Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition, 2021).

We examined the UNFSS website between July and October 2023 to, firstly, identify national organizations nominated as convenors and the sectors they represent. Secondly, we focussed on 24 countries from the Pacific and SE and E Asia to identify partnerships between different sectors within convening organizations, and thirdly to examine differences between food system themes addressed in pathway documents prepared by agriculture and non-agriculture convenors. Globally, most countries nominated a single government ministry as convenor, with eight identifying multiple co-convenors i.e. more than one ministry. We identified that the agriculture sector plays a disproportionate role in the UNFSS process, a finding supported by previous reports (UN, 2021), with 70% of convenors including agricultural ministries (Figure 1A). The next most represented sector was food, nutrition and health. The sectors engaged the least as convenors were natural resources and climate change, as well as livelihoods, health and welfare.

While the agriculture sector plays a disproportionate role in the UNFSS process, more often than not it is merged with other sectors through a joint ministry, such as Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries. In our analysis of 24 countries from the Pacific and SE and E Asia, national convenors that included the agriculture sector (referred to from here as agricultural convenors) most frequently partnered with fisheries followed by forestry, food and nutrition and rural development. Agricultural convenors were least likely to be paired with climate change, natural resources, health and welfare sectors (Figure 1B).

## Influence of agricultural dominance in national pathways

National convenors, predominantly agricultural ministries, are now charged with the challenge of expanding from their historical mandates linked to ensuring adequate quantities of food, to consider and collaborate on broader food system issues such as



social aspects of diet transition and nutrition challenges (Pingali, 2015). Individual ministries have different mandates, interests, and priorities. They also have varied capacity and power that they bring to negotiations over multisectoral issues (Leeuwis et al., 2021). These ministries must also address tensions when stakeholders cannot agree on which objectives to prioritize, as well as cope with incompatibilities between the economic, environmental, and human dimensions of food systems sustainability (UN, 2021).

Following our examination of food system convenors (Figure 1), we undertook a simple thematic analysis of the pathway documents prepared by national convenors, focussed on the Pacific and SE and E Asian regions, where most countries nominated a convenor that included the agriculture sector: 10 of 12 in SE and E Asia and 9 of 12 in the Pacific. Through the analysis we identified priorities between countries with an agricultural convenor and compared these with countries with a non-agricultural convenor, to better understand how agriculture is approaching food system challenges outside its traditional production remit, and the extent to which different food system priorities are addressed when agriculture is the lead. Food system priorities identified in the Pacific pathways were categorized as themes based on a food systems framework that aligned with UNFSS “Action tracks.” Countries were assessed as to how comprehensively they addressed the themes, where “comprehensive” indicates that pathways included a broad set of specific actions to address a specific theme (Figure 2; SPC, 2022). This method was replicated for SE and E Asia countries (Figure 2).

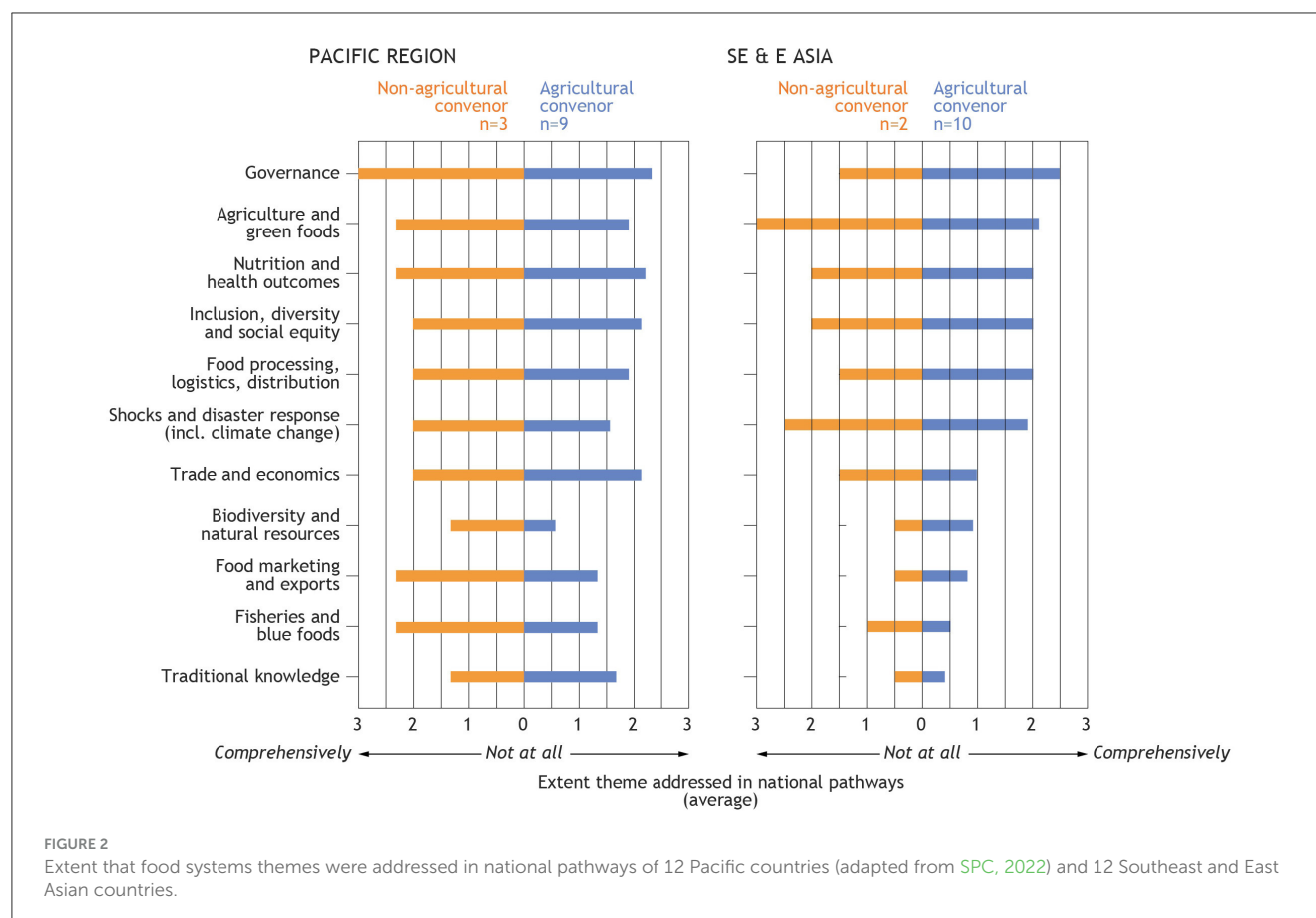
The Pacific region is exposed to extreme events, such as cyclones, which are occurring with intensifying frequency, as well as earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. However, the shocks and disasters (including climate change) theme was not comprehensively addressed by Pacific agriculture convenors pathways. Fisheries and blue foods, which are a major source of food and nutrition security and livelihoods in the region, was also under-addressed by Pacific agriculture convenors (Figure 2). Non-agriculture convenors more comprehensively addressed the range of food system themes, other than trade, traditional knowledge, and inclusion, however, biodiversity and natural resources was poorly addressed by all convenors.

For the SE and E Asian region, agriculture convenors most comprehensively addressed the governance and agriculture and themes (Figure 2), although the agriculture theme was more comprehensively addressed by non-agricultural convenors. Biodiversity and natural resources were not well covered by either group of convenors, neither were traditional knowledge, food marketing and exports, or fisheries and blue foods.

These results indicate that, through the UNFSS process at least, individual convenors, regardless of sector, did not comprehensively address all the food system themes identified in this perspective. Agriculture convenors in both regions less comprehensively covered the shocks and disasters and fisheries themes, than non-agricultural convenors. Results also indicated a strong focus on agriculture regardless of convenor sector, with non-agricultural convenors more comprehensively addressing agriculture than agriculture convenors. Our analysis did not extend to examining the extent to which other ministries and actors were engaged in national pathway development processes, however, our findings reflect the fact that multisectoral governance can be challenging (Aoki et al., 2023). Agriculture, as the main sector of convenors for the UNFSS multisectoral process, faces the task of effectively consolidating conflicting mandates and interests, and norms and paradigms, when bringing multiple stakeholders together to align decisions and activities (Patay et al., 2023a).

## Approaches to multisectoral food systems governance

Institutional arrangements, such as multisectoral committees and working groups, have been recommended to create greater coherence between sectors, including private sector actors, but if poorly designed, these mechanisms may exacerbate existing power imbalances (Patay et al., 2023b). While 70% of all pathways included plans for establishing multisectoral governance bodies for food systems transformation, just three included plans to manage conflicts of interest (Pullar et al., 2022). There is potential for imbalance to emerge in the food systems space where an ongoing emphasis on food availability and agricultural production has been identified as the key solution to food security problems, and where this solution is supported by large private sector actors with ample resources and capacity (Leeuwis et al., 2021). In addition, there will likely be implications of an agriculture-dominant narrative for power and motivations, particularly where a production narrative conflicts with other food system priorities (Montenegro De Wit et al., 2021), such as biodiversity or social equity.



At the same time, our analysis identified that the agriculture sector is focussing on a range of issues beyond production and food availability. In SE and E Asia, for example, all agricultural convenors addressed nutrition and health themes to some extent and all, but one, addressed shocks and disasters (including climate change) to some extent. In the Pacific, all agricultural convenors addressed inclusion and diversity, nutrition and health, trade and economics and food processing. Outside of the UNFSS process, support for the food systems approach by agriculture was evident at the Pacific Week of Agriculture in 2023 where Agriculture Ministers regularly mentioned this approach was needed given the combined non-communicable diseases and climate change crises. Nutrition is also a shared priority across National Agriculture Sector Plans in the Pacific. While these are positive examples, the ability of the agriculture sector to deliver on challenges such as nutrition in the Pacific, and more broadly, is uncertain given there may not be sufficient understanding of nutrition among policymakers within agriculture (Van Den Bold et al., 2015).

While the available evidence on successful multisectoral approaches to food system governance is limited to date, some lessons from relevant fields might be transferrable to the food systems context. For example, multisectoral committees with the aim for non-communicable disease prevention include many of the same sectors and actors that have a stake in food systems, such as agriculture, trade, industry, health, and education. Experience has shown that mandating one of the relevant sectors to lead multisectoral committees is unlikely to work, particularly when that

convening agency is not recognized as having influence over the other agencies—as is often the case with agriculture (Patay et al., 2024b). Instead, mechanisms such as multisectoral committees need to be lifted above the sectoral silos, to supra-ministerial levels.

This approach is being taken in Timor-Leste, where the government has established the National Council for Sovereignty, Food Security and Nutrition in Timor-Leste (CONSSAN-TL) to ensure a coordinated and efficient approach to policy implementation across multiple sectors (Government of Timor Leste, 2024). While originally housed in the Ministry of Agriculture, CONSSAN-TL now sits under the Vice Prime Minister's Office for greater visibility and support. In addition to increasing food production, which is a key target for agriculture and fisheries in Timor-Leste where low production, hunger, and persistent stunting are significant challenges, CONSSAN-TL emphasizes the importance of adopting a food systems approach to improve outcomes in food security and nutrition. It calls for the consolidation of resources and efforts toward a unified objective and goal. CONSSAN-TL also aims to measure its success by establishing an independent Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) working group. This group will develop detailed frameworks for each line ministry to focus on and collect evidence to inform decision-makers. CONSSAN-TL aims to enhance its coordination at the national level but also to decentralize its cross-sectoral coordination and collaboration to address food security and nutrition at the municipal level (De Sousa, 2024). While elevating multisectoral platforms to supra-ministerial levels can help validate



their role, more research is needed to understand potential trade-offs, for example the risk of bureaucratic complexity.

Lessons from relevant fields also suggest multisectoral mechanisms need to be directly connected to national development goals (Patay et al., 2024a). For example, in the Philippines, the government has positioned food security and nutrition as one of its national development priorities outlined in the Philippine Development Plan (PDP) 2023–2028. The PDP banners a “whole-of-government” and “whole-of-society” approach that emphasizes collaboration across sectors at all levels, while calling on individual sectoral agencies to deliver their various commitments and targets indicated in the Plan (NEDA, 2022). One of the component sectoral plans of the PDP is the National Agriculture and Fisheries Modernization and Industrialization Plan (NAFMIP) 2021–2030 led by the Philippines’ Department of Agriculture (DA). The NAFMIP outlines the actions of the agriculture sector toward food systems transformation and attempts to account for other food system areas such as climate change adaptation and mitigation, and nutrition (Philippines Department of Agriculture, 2022). Apart from overseeing the NAFMIP, the DA participates and holds leadership roles in other multisectoral coordinating bodies on food security and nutrition. The agriculture department serves as a Vice Chair in both the Interagency Task Force on Zero Hunger (IATF-ZH) led by the Secretary of Social Welfare and Development and the National Nutrition Council (NNC) led by the Secretary of Health. However, despite the presence of such platforms, agencies remain limited in integrating concerns of other sectors in their individual sectoral plans and budgets, leading to poor synergy, unchanged priorities, and fragmentation of investments in achieving common goals, such as for nutrition (Galang, 2022; Briones et al., 2017).

Connecting to regional goals will also be important and is an approach that has been taken by the Pacific Community (SPC) through their strategic plan with the *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent*. This approach is founded on the challenges the region faces, building on the basis of food from the ocean being central to Pacific identities, cultures, and economies. The *2050 Strategy* presents commitments for a shared stewardship of the Pacific Ocean. The SPC, alongside key national Ministries, leaders and decision makers, are working to ground interventions for food system transformation in Pacific ownership and accountability.

## Toward effective food systems governance

The implications of agriculture-led food system governance are not straightforward. While there are examples of agriculture being proactive and taking an integrated approach, this perspective indicates that agricultural dominance in food system governance potentially overshadows other key areas such as biodiversity, fisheries and traditional knowledge. More work is, therefore, needed to ensure that “food systems” approaches are truly multisectoral, and result in positive holistic change, while still allowing sectors to achieve their own goals. We propose three main areas for research and policy focus, based on the Pacific and SE and E Asia, to guide food system governance in supporting

existing positive food system activities, or transformation process where needed.

## Addressing capacity gaps across all levels of governance

While there is evidence of the agriculture sector embracing a broad food systems agenda, agriculture departments may be limited in their ability and capacity to deliver on a broad range of areas outside their technical areas of expertise, requiring capacity support in systems integration and cross-sectoral planning. Capacity building is needed across all levels of food system governance to overcome challenges related to slow information flows, inadequate human resourcing and skills gaps (Mauli et al., 2023). Strengthening engagements (i.e., through governance interactions) between and across sectors, and between multi-levels of governance, can help build capacity. Increased dialogue through both formal and informal channels can help to raise awareness of what different food system sectors are trying to achieve and where synergies between sectors can be exploited for shared goals (Patay et al., 2024a).

## Ensuring the composition of governance bodies reflects the food system it governs

Representation from a wide range of stakeholders in decision-making processes surrounding food systems should be enabled (UNEP, FAO, and UNDP, 2023). Policy makers must carefully consider the type of food system actors to be involved in multistakeholder engagement by evaluating their interests, influence, and power, and the potential risks of engagement (Patay et al., 2023b; Montenegro De Wit et al., 2021). Multistakeholder food system mechanisms, where established, must help elevate the voice of less influential but important players representing small-scale local business and communities, and limit potential negative influence of large corporations (Patay et al., 2023b). Active community participation in the decision-making process is a key ingredient for achieving improved management and development outcomes (Mauli et al., 2023) and can enable community priorities to be better reflected at sub-national and national government levels.

## Ensuring all dimensions of food systems are considered equally

Not all components of food systems appear to be equally represented or addressed in current governance arrangements. Biodiversity and natural resources, for example, are underrepresented, despite the established links between health, equity, and sustainability challenges. The reason behind this underrepresentation may lie in national political economic

factors or resource allocation biases (Baynham-Herd et al., 2018). It may also reflect the UNFSS process itself which has been criticized for limited inclusion of social and ecological solutions in favor of market-oriented and technologically-driven approaches to food and agricultural systems (Montenegro De Wit et al., 2021). Encouraging intersectoral cooperation can provide a mechanism for generating solutions to complex problems; however, it is not an end in itself and must be embedded in a clear set of interconnected ideals, goals and objectives (Von Braun et al., 2011). Engaging national planning agencies could help align food system actions with national development goals that span environmental, social and economic outcomes.

## Data availability statement

Publicly available datasets were analyzed in this study. This data can be found at: <https://www.unfoodsystemshub.org/member-state-dialogue/dialogues-and-pathways/en>.

## Author contributions

AFa: Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. RC: Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Validation, Writing – review & editing. AFi: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. SM: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. DP: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. AS: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. AB: Data curation, Methodology, Writing – review & editing. FD: Data curation, Methodology, Writing – review & editing. FB: Data curation, Methodology, Writing – review & editing. AT: Writing – review & editing.

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