

Strategies for Accelerating Malawi's Food Systems Transformation

Anderson Gondwe, Dinah T. Salonga, & Levison Chiwaula

Key Messages:

- Malawi has yet to make progress toward achieving food and nutritional security, highlighting the urgent need to transform its food systems.
- The key challenges hindering the acceleration of food systems transformation include poor coordination, lack of monitoring and evaluation framework, and lack of shared understanding of food systems and the roles of all players in food systems transformation.
- In the context of decentralization, district councils in Malawi should be capacitated to enhance their skills to develop and implement district-level food systems transformation plans.
- Strengthening the coordination structure of food systems by moving the convening role into the Office of the President and Cabinet would also signal that food systems transformation needs broader systemic solutions that go beyond agriculture.

Introduction

In 2019, the United Nations Secretary-General called for the United Nations Food Systems Summit to reignite actions toward achieving the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). All Member States were required to conduct national dialogues before the summit, which was held in Rome in September 2021. The President of the Republic of Malawi appointed the Minister of Agriculture as the National Convenor of Food Systems in Malawi, responsible for organizing and leading food systems dialogues in the country.

Subsequently, the Ministry of Agriculture embarked on a transformation journey through national, regional, and district dialogues involving various stakeholders across the country's food systems. The dialogues were aligned with Malawi's long-term agenda of inclusive wealth creation and self-reliance, as espoused in the Malawi 2063.

These dialogues led to the development of the National Food Systems Transformation Synthesis Report.

The report was presented at the UN Summit, highlighting medium- and long-term action plans to operationalize the transformation of food systems in Malawi. Specifically, the report identifies five areas or action tracks for prioritization, namely: Ensuring Safe and Nutritious Food for All; Shifting to Sustainable Consumption Patterns; Boosting Nature Positive Food Production; Advancing Equitable Livelihoods of People Involved in Food Systems; and Building Resilience to Vulnerabilities, Shocks, and Stress.

However, after the presentation of the report at the UN Summit in 2021, there has been little progress in the implementation of the outlined action plans in the national food systems synthesis report.

This policy brief highlights the current challenges, draws some lessons, and identifies areas for accelerating food systems transformation in Malawi.

Contextualising Malawi's food systems

Food systems involve a web of interactions amongst diverse actors from various sectors, each playing a role and shaping outcomes¹. A food system includes all the steps and all actors involved in nourishing a population, from production to consumption. It comprises the entire spectrum of activities such as production, harvesting, processing, packaging, transporting, selling, and disposing waste. It also reflects the economic, social, and environmental factors that shape the food environment and determine how and whether consumption occurs². Malawi's agri-food system plays an important role in the country's economy. In 2019, it accounted to 44.1 percent of Malawi's GDP and 77.0 percent of employment³.

The country's food systems transformation agenda faces several challenges. These include food waste and post-harvest losses, seasonal availability of food, insufficient capacity in agro-processing and value addition, consumption of unsafe foods, and inadequate dietary diversity^{4,5}. Limited access to nutrient-rich foods, such as animal products, vegetables, fruits, and legumes, leads to diets dominated by cereals and starchy roots⁶. Production and productivity are negatively affected by climate change (droughts, floods, and erratic rainfall patterns), resulting in high levels of food insecurity and malnutrition^{7,8}.

Based on the preceding, Malawi's food systems need transformation to become resilient, inclusive, and sustainable and to improve livelihoods, ensure food security, and foster environmental stewardship.

Data sources

This policy brief examines the ongoing efforts to transform Malawi's food systems. Information for this policy brief was gathered through a series of dialogues and meetings organized by the Ministry of Agriculture in partnership with the National Planning Commission and several development partners, including GIZ. Additionally, the MwAPATA Institute hosted the 2024 Malawi Agricultural Productivity and Commercialisation Conference, centred on the theme "Transforming Agri-food Systems to Generate Wealth for All". These events, held between April 2024 and October 2024, brought together diverse stakeholders engaged in food systems initiatives in Malawi. Participants included representatives from various Government ministries, district councils, private sector, academia, development partners, and media.

The policy brief also incorporates lessons and voices from communities in Mzimba, Chikwawa, and Dedza districts collected by the Food Systems Transformation Initiative Project, implemented by CSONA, CISANET, and MwAPATA Institute with support from GIZ. The project has been engaging stakeholders to envision an ideal and functional food system and develop local solutions to the associated challenges.

Key challenges and lessons

The dialogues from the series of events revealed several challenges and barriers to achieving food systems transformation in Malawi.

Poor coordination among stakeholders

Poor coordination among key stakeholders was highlighted as one of the key challenges hindering the effectiveness of Malawi's food systems transformation. This challenge manifests in the form of inter-ministerial silos and fragmented development partner initiatives. There is a need for enhanced collaboration and information sharing between ministries, departments, and agencies. Poor coordination limits the potential for integrated policy and program implementation.

One contributing factor to poor coordination is the absence of a comprehensive mapping of stakeholders involved in various food systems projects at both the district and national levels. This challenge makes it difficult to understand the full scope of activities taking place in the country, resulting in knowledge gaps about the involvement of other stakeholders in food systems and their activities, limited harmonization of development efforts, and duplication, ultimately diminishing the impact of development assistance.

Furthermore, having the Ministry of Agriculture as the primary convenor of food systems has resulted in the current food systems transformation efforts being largely focused on the agricultural sector (especially production), though the cross-sectoral nature of food systems extends beyond agriculture to areas such as health, nutrition, environment, and trade.

Lack of a monitoring and evaluation framework

A monitoring and evaluation framework is needed to strengthen the implementation and tracking of the National Food Systems Strategy. The lack of such a framework makes it difficult to measure transformation and the impact of reforms. Addressing this challenge is critical for tracking implementation progress and transformation in food systems.

Lack of shared understanding of food systems

Our study found that there is a lack of a shared understanding of food systems concepts, and there is a need for better contextualization of food systems challenges and solutions. Stakeholders also noted that there is a lack of understanding of specific individual roles that different stakeholders should play in the food system. This lack of shared understanding hinders coordinated action and collaboration among stakeholders.

Recommendations

Three key recommendations emerge from the study. Firstly, there is a need to conduct a comprehensive mapping of existing food systems initiatives at the national, district, and community levels. This mapping should be centrally organized and easily accessible, allowing actors to identify key stakeholder and their roles.

Secondly, there is a need to strengthen the coordination structure of food systems by moving the convening role of the food systems into the Office of the President and Cabinet. A steering committee should be formed comprising representatives from all key Ministries, development partners, the private sector, civil society organizations, faith-based organizations, and communities. This committee should be supported by a technical coordination committee comprising Government Ministries, Departments and Agencies, and development partners.

At the district level, a similar structure should be created, with the district council playing a convening role and holding actors accountable. The National Planning Commission should continue supporting food systems transformation implementation, ensuring alignment with broader development goals, and facilitating the integration of food systems into the national development agenda, namely Malawi 2063.

Thirdly, there is a need to develop a robust monitoring and evaluation framework for tracking progress that includes clear indicators and benchmarks for measuring progress toward food system transformation goals, including regular and continuous reporting on progress, challenges being faced, and lessons learned. The monitoring and evaluation system should be hosted and managed by the National Planning Commission. District councils should be capacitated with skills to

cascade the national food systems strategies into actionable district-level food systems plans.

References

1. von Braun, J., Afsana, K., Fresco, L. O., Hassan, M. H. A., & Torero, M. (2023). Food system concepts and definitions for science and political action. *Science and innovations for food systems transformation*, 11-17.
2. Okpala C.O.R., (2020). Towards Sustaining Global Food Systems for the Future. *Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems*, 4,3. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fsufs.2020.00003>.
3. De Weerd, J., Diao, X., Duchoslav, J., Ellis, M., Pauw, K., Thurlow, J. (2023). Malawi's Agrifood System Structure and Drivers of Transformation. International Food Policy Research Institute, Washington DC, USA. <https://ebrary.ifpri.org/digital/api/collection/p15738coll2/id/136801/download#:~:text=Primary%20agriculture%20alone%20contributed%20on e,and%2013.5%20percent%20to%20employment.>
4. Government of Malawi (2021). Building healthier, sustainable and equitable food systems for a better Malawi: National pathways for food systems transformation in support of the 2030 agenda. Lilongwe, Malawi. <https://summitdialogues.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/National-Pathway-Report-Malawi.pdf>.
5. The Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN) (2023): The Food Systems Dashboard. Geneva, Switzerland. <https://www.foodsystemsdashboard.org>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36072/db>.

This Policy Brief should be cited as:

Gondwe, A., Salonga, D.T. & Chiwaula, L. (2025). Strategies for Accelerating Malawi's Food Systems Transformation. Policy Brief No. 39 Lilongwe: MwAPATA Institute.

6. FAO, European Union and CIRAD (2023). Food Systems Profile-Malawi. Catalyzing the sustainable and inclusive transformation of food systems. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cc4237en>.
7. African Food Systems (2023). African food systems. Nature Food 4, 733 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s43016-023-00855-1>.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15487733.2013.1190811>
1.
8. Reisch, L., Eberle, U., & Lorek, S. (2013). Sustainable food consumption: an overview of contemporary issues and policies. Sustainability: Science, Practice and Policy, 9(2), 7–25.

Implemented by



This research is made possible by the generous support of the GIZ. The contents are the responsibility of study authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the funders.

Copyright © 2025, MwAPATA Institute. All rights reserved. This material may be reproduced for personal and not-for-profit use without permission from but with acknowledgement to MwAPATA Institute and MSU.

Published by MwAPATA Institute, Tobacco Loop, Lundu Street, Area 10/386, P.O Box 30883, Capital City, Lilongwe 3, Malawi