

UNDERSTANDING INCLUSIVE , HEALTHY, AND SUSTAINABLE FOOD SYSTEMS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE IN MYANMAR

FOOD SYSTEM-RELATED INITIATIVES IN MYANMAR

The transition towards sustainable food systems has become a major new area of attention globally. However, countries are at different stages of progress and there is currently a gap between the knowledge of food system issues and key leverage points in Myanmar.

Food system is a web of activities and interactions revolving around food. There are multiple opportunities within the food system to innovate - from upgrading food supply to creating an enabling food environment, changing consumer food choices, and optimizing diets. Policy makers can shape the food system through regulations and by democratizing food system governance.

KEY MESSAGES

These are drawn from the second online conference series on Understanding Inclusive, Healthy, and Sustainable Food Systems for Policy and Practice in Myanmar held on 3 July 2020. Recording can be accessed [here](#).

- 1. The current global food system needs fixing.** Food system is a complex system of interactions that affect people's nutrition, health, livelihoods, and communities. In general, the quantity of food being produced is relatively on track though people's accessibility to them is off track. There is enough food to feed people but it is not equally distributed nor equally available. With the Covid-19 crisis, the stress on food systems is apparent, especially in the production and consumer ends. Production is unsustainable due to issues around climate change, weather variability, pollution, and non-sustainable farming practices. Consumers active in the informal parts of the economy are significantly limited, putting negative implications on their food security and nutrition.
- 2. It is important to shift the focus from food security in terms of calorie intake to nutrition security in terms of nutritious diets.** Global food systems are transitioning from a traditional pattern (smallholder farmers, low diversity of food sources, labor-intensive agriculture, short commercial linkages) to a mix of modernized food systems. Rural areas are now more linked with urban consumption hubs. There are more diversity of crops but also an introduction and increasing consumption of processed food. This is where nutrition and health issues emerge. Another critical aspect to look at is the food behavior of consumers; sometimes there is enough nutritious food available but people choose to consume food with lesser nutrients. There needs to be an understanding of why people choose to eat what they eat, whether it's an issue of access, affordability, culture, etc. so that we can help nudge consumers to eat nutritious food and be healthier.
- 3. There are four lenses in understanding food system functions: social inclusion, resilience, sustainability, and healthy diets.** Social inclusion refers to the involvement of farmers and managers in the production system and employment and economic opportunities for women and youth. It also includes questions around the inclusion of consumers, such as who has access to quality food, at what price, at what time during the year, etc. Resilience underscores the capacity of food systems and its multiple actors to respond to shocks, such as those brought by Covid-19. Sustainability looks at issues around environmental costs of diets, carbon footprints, water efficiency, and others related to biodiversity. And finally, healthy diets looks into the diets provided by food systems. All these analyses are only useful when put into context and into the hands of decision makers who can decide how to improve the functionality of food systems.
- 4. Food systems have inevitable tradeoffs.** Actors need to have data to understand what the tradeoffs are and agree which priorities will be set. There is no one-size-fits-all answer to food systems. Collaboration and cooperation among actors are needed.
- 5. Influencing Myanmar farmers to diversify their produce can contribute to their**

KEY MESSAGES

food security, better nutrition outcomes, and diverse source of income. Currently, they mostly consume cereals, oils, and vegetables but don't eat enough meat and legumes. Most of the food they eat are also purchased, thereby their food security is influenced by how much money they have. There is opportunity to introduce new food crops to reduce their independence on climate sensitive food crops and address gaps in household diet. .

- 6. Homesteads can be a domain for women empowerment in Myanmar.** They can serve as areas for women to gain and control assets. Women play a big role in securing food and managing diet in households. Therefore, it is very important that they are able to cope with different stresses, including climate change. One way they can cope is by having a small livestock or a small enterprise. Another is by having small assets like jewelry.
- 7. Higher education institutions (HEI) in Myanmar have a unique role as intellectual and scientific leaders to facilitate research, academic programs, and extension services to support a sustainable agri-food system.** While improving the quality and relevance of research and learning, especially for rural youth and small farm families with training, HEIs can create decent green jobs/business opportunities. The Yezin Agricultural University offers agriculture extension courses and curriculum in line with nutrition sensitive agriculture, food and nutrition security, and food safety concerns. There are also academic researches related to food science, post-harvest, and food engineering. The current pattern of learning that mostly involves memorization of information must change into a method where students can be job-ready. In pursuing such shift, the government can a) ensure food security and reduce dependency on imports; b) make the country a net exporter of products and new solutions; and c) increase productivity and support the shift towards an innovation- and knowledge-based economy.
- 8. While Myanmar has potential to a progressive food value chain, it is currently confronted with many challenges.** Right now, the country has limited supply of skilled labor, including farmers and those involved in the food value chain. Food value chains could expand significantly and employ more people if greater effort is committed to marketing. Farmers must understand their valuable role in the food value chain. The country also lacks basic food hygiene standards at all stages of processing. Myanmar's health system is still at its infancy and farmers, including some consumers, are still unaware of what food safety is and what good quality food is. Myanmar's supply chain management is also weak due to lack of coordination between stakeholders. The Covid-19 pandemic showed the lack of logistics in stores and warehouses and transport. Another challenge is the lack of market infrastructures and weak information dissemination to farmers. There is also a lack of financial technological for farmers (loans and payment) and management capabilities in the food supply chains.
- 9. Despite challenges, there are ways to make food value chains work efficiently in Myanmar.** One, farmer associations or groups need to be formed across the country to help them gain better negotiating power with middlemen and wholesalers. Two, the government (public sector) must lead in setting the direction for the transformation and creation of the right environment to achieve value chain. Other stakeholders that are part of the value chain should be involved and do their part. Three, traditional farmers should transform into 'agripreneurs' – people who are not just skillful in farming but are also business-minded. Four, civil society organizations and non government organizations should work hand-in-hand with the government, farmers, and others in building local capacity and bridging gaps in the value chain. Five, farming standards should conform with International standards to lead to increased income. And six, women should be involved in value chain activities.

RESOURCE PERSONS

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