

IPES-Food: 10 Principles to guide the transition to Sustainable Food Systems

The International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems, IPES-Food, is a new initiative aimed at informing the debate on how to reform food systems. IPES-Food has identified 10 key principles to guide the urgently-needed transition to sustainable food systems. They include principles to shape the sustainable food systems of the future, as well as principles for the types of knowledge and analysis that are required to support this transition. These principles will underpin the work of IPES-Food over the coming years.

What types of knowledge and analysis are needed to support the transition?

- **Holistic & systemic.** Hunger, obesity, environmental degradation, biodiversity loss, the pressures on smallholder livelihoods, cultural erosion, workforce exploitation and other problems in food systems are deeply inter-connected. Holistic thinking is needed in order to identify systemic ‘lock-ins’, and to find integrated solutions and potential levers of change.
- **Power-sensitive.** Analysis of food systems must not ignore the differential power of actors to influence decision-making and to set the terms of debate for reform. Power relations and the political economy of food systems must take center-stage.
- **Transdisciplinary.** Knowledge must be co-produced with farmers, food industry workers, consumers, entrepreneurs, and other social actors and movements who hold unique understanding of food systems. Actors from fields such as public health, environment and rural development also have much to contribute to the debate on food systems reform.
- **Critically engaged.** Producer organizations, retailers and other actors in food chains must be fully engaged in defining and developing sustainable food systems. The interests of some private sector actors, in particular multinational agribusiness firms, have typically been aligned with existing political arrangements, e.g. policies favoring export-led production systems for bulk commodities and processed foods. This makes it all the more challenging, and all the more necessary, to critically engage agribusiness firms in the debate.
- **Independent.** Science and knowledge cannot be made to fit within the parameters set by dominant actors: IPES-Food is a fully independent panel, without financial or organizational ties to any corporations, governments, intergovernmental agencies or advocacy groupsⁱ.

ⁱ IPES-Food is fully funded by the Daniel and Nina Carasso Foundation, a philanthropic body. For more on donor relations, see the [IPES-Food governance principles](#).

What principles and values should underpin the sustainable food systems of the future?

- **Sustainable in all dimensions.** Sustainability must be the benchmark of food systems reform, and must include environmental, health, social, cultural and economic dimensions. Sustainable food systems must deliver diets that are nutritious, affordable and culturally acceptableⁱⁱ, and must provide food security without compromising the ability of future generations to do soⁱⁱⁱ.
- **Diverse & resilient.** Food systems must be fundamentally reoriented around principles of diversity, multi-functionality and resilience. This shift is required in agriculture in order to sustain yields and agro-ecosystems in the longer-term, and must be complemented by diversity in supply chains and markets in order to support diverse and nutritious diets. As an embodiment of these principles, agroecology must be fully supported.
- **Democratic & empowering.** Decision-making in food systems must be democratized in ways that empower disadvantaged actors and help to realize the human rights of all, including the right to food. Access to these processes must not depend on gender, age, ethnicity or wealth. The needs and perspectives of small-scale farmers, indigenous communities, disadvantaged consumers and other groups must not be drowned out by more powerful and visible actors.
- **Socially & technologically innovative.** The transition to sustainable food systems requires complex and holistic change processes in which social innovation plays as big a role as technological innovation, and extends to food distribution and retail practices, as well as modes of production. The impacts of innovation pathways should not be assumed to be only benevolent, and should be continually assessed.
- **Adequately measured.** New indicators of progress must be developed in order to capture the benefits of equitable, resilient, diverse, nutrient-rich food systems in ways that productivity growth, net calorie availability and other existing measures do not. Efforts and initiatives to improve the sustainability of food systems should be assessed with a view to seeing continuous improvement; accountability must be clearly assigned in order to hold actors to their commitments.

ⁱⁱⁱ At the International Scientific Symposium, Biodiversity and Sustainable Diets, organized by Bioversity International and FAO on 3-5 November 2010 at the FAO Headquarters, sustainable diets were defined as “diets with low environmental impacts which contribute to food and nutrition security and to healthy life for present and future generations. Sustainable diets are protective and respectful of biodiversity and ecosystems, culturally acceptable, accessible, economically fair and affordable; nutritionally adequate, safe and healthy; while optimizing natural and human resources”.

ⁱⁱⁱ As defined by the High Level Panel of Experts on food security and nutrition (HLPE) “a sustainable food system (SFS) is a food system that delivers food security and nutrition for all in such a way that the economic, social and environmental bases to generate food security and nutrition for future generations are not compromised”.