

# Food policies matter

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**Well-designed policies can catalyse food systems transformation, whereas poorly designed ones may perpetuate and even aggravate the food crisis.**

**T**he transformation of the food system is imperative and requires urgent action as the average global temperature and the number of people facing hunger continue to rise. According to the United Nations (UN) Food and Agriculture Organization (*The State of Food and Agriculture 2023*), about 735 million people faced hunger in 2022, while 2.4 billion people are currently estimated to be moderately or severely food insecure.

Individuals play a very important role in promoting more resilient, inclusive and sustainable food systems through their dietary choices, consumption practices and political and societal pressure. Yet, this is not an individual fight. Governments, the private sector and other stakeholders must engage in it too – ideally because they share a similar vision for food systems, but at a minimum in recognition of their shared responsibility for the current food crisis. Well-designed policies and institutional support are necessary enablers of change, while feeble or ill-targeted initiatives may worsen food systems problems.

Although the best strategy to make food systems move in the right direction can be much debated, the need to redirect and enhance financing sources for food system investments is consensual within the food community. As stated in a Comment (E. Diaz-Bonilla et al. *Nat. Food* **4**, 531–533; 2023) published in *Nature Food* last year on the five financial imperatives posited by the Financial Lever Group at the 2021 UN Food Systems Summit, “current public support for the agriculture sector, estimated to value over US\$800 billion per year globally, is largely used for measures that distort markets and promote unsustainable practices. There is thus enormous potential of

financing investments and realigning market incentives for food system transformation by repurposing this support once political hurdles are overcome”. Identifying and measuring this potential requires further research on policy impacts (both potential and actual), implementation hurdles, and synergies and trade-offs between these policies and other measures in specific contexts.

This issue of *Nature Food* features three interesting pieces directly relevant to this debate. The first, an [Analysis](#) by David Wuepper et al., presents a new database with 6,124 agri-environmental policies implemented between 1960 and 2022 in about 200 countries. Different policy types (including regulations and payment schemes) and 30 goals (such as biodiversity conservation, safer pesticide use and reducing nutrient pollution) were considered in the study. The compilation allows for easy comparison and helps to address the lack of systematized information on existing agri-environmental policies that had posed challenges for research and practice to date.

The second piece, a [Brief Communication](#) by Anniek J. Kortleve et al., examines how public funds support and/or promote animal

agriculture by tracking Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) subsidies flow across the global food supply chain in the 27 European Union (EU) members in 2020 + the UK. By coupling the physical-flow Food and Agriculture Biomass Input–Output database with EU CAP subsidies, the authors trace upstream subsidies embodied in products sold domestically, imported by other EU countries or exported to non-EU countries – concluding that over 80% of the EU’s CAP supports emissions-intensive animal products, despite European countries’ intentions to shift away from meat and towards more plant-based diets.

Finally, an [opinion piece](#) by Cleo Verkuijl et al. argues that the first of three parts of the FAO food systems roadmap, released in 2023 at COP28 in Dubai, represents a crucial step in identifying zero-hunger pathways consistent with the Paris Agreement 1.5°C target and might guide a lot of countries’ policies – but would ideally be more methodologically transparent, emphasize the need to reduce animal-sourced food consumption and better align with a holistic One Health approach.

Enjoy!

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