

Comparative Policy Lessons: What Works, Where, and Under What Conditions in Food System Governance

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Abstract

Drawing on comparative experiences from developing countries, this chapter examines how food system governance shapes food security and why policy outcomes depend on the interaction of institutions, markets, political economy, and environmental conditions rather than agricultural production alone. It presents a conceptual framework linking policy instruments, intermediary systems, and structural constraints to key food security outcomes, including availability, access, nutrition, stability, and resilience. Evidence from initiatives such as Brazil's *Bolsa Familia*, Indonesia's subsidy reforms, Vietnam's trade liberalization, and climate-smart agricultural practices demonstrates that policy success is highly context dependent and closely tied to institutional capacity and adaptive governance. The chapter identifies policy coherence, strong institutions, political feasibility, integrated planning, and continuous learning as the principal drivers of effective food system transformation. It further highlights the need to balance critical trade-offs between efficiency and equity, productivity and sustainability, and short-term relief and long-term resilience. The chapter concludes that there is no universal blueprint for achieving food security; instead, durable progress requires context-specific, flexible, and evidence-based policy frameworks that treat food systems as interconnected and dynamic systems.

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1. Introduction

In the past few decades, food security policy in developing countries has evolved. Initial approaches largely emphasized national food self-sufficiency, input intensification and increases. While these methods assisted in increasing aggregate food supply, they did not address the problems of chronic hunger, malnutrition, inequity and vulnerability (Barrett, 2010; Pinstrip-Andersen, 2013). This limitation promoted a gradual shift towards a broader understanding of food security as a complex outcome encompassing access, consumption, stability, and resilience.

Food security thought evolution has been influenced by core concepts such as Sen's entitlement approach, which emphasized that food security depends not only on availability, but also people's ability to command resources (Sen, 1983). The concept has been further broadened to include nutrition, sustainability, and food systems transformation in subsequent research by the High-Level Panel of Experts (HLPE, 2020) and international organizations such as the Food and Agriculture Organization. This development reflects an increasing recognition that the determinants of food security outcomes are a complex interaction of environmental, institutional and finance factors. New challenges exist in contemporary food networks.

Climate change is making extreme weather events more frequent and intense, so it is affecting supply chains and production (IPCC, 2022). Scarcities of resources, notably water and energy, are becoming critical issues in many regions. At the same time, patterns of demand and market structures are being transformed through rapid urbanization, population growth and globalization. Flexibility and adaptability are also highlighted by

In this environment, food security has evolved from being a sectoral issue limited to agriculture to a system governance problem that requires multiple policy areas and levels of government collaborations. This chapter examines the success, location and circumstances of food system management. It aims to provide a basis for developing effective and context-specific policies through a synthesis of various countrywide experiences and policy developments.

2. Unified Analytical Framework for Comparative Analysis

Understanding the differences in policy results across countries requires the application of a systems-based analysis approach that records the interactions between institutions, policies, and situational limitations. Fundamentally, food system performance may be seen as:

Food System Outcomes = f (Policy Mix × Institutions × Incentives × Resources × Climate × Capacity)

This formulation builds on institutional economics (North, 1990) and political economy perspectives (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012), emphasizing that policy effectiveness depends not only on design but also on the systems through which policies are implemented.

The framework can be understood as a multi-layered system as depicted in figure 15.1. At the top of figure 15.1 is the policy mix, which includes subsidies, trade, social protection and climate policies. These mechanisms reflect the priorities of government that affect various aspects of food systems. But policies don't work in a vacuum or independently. Rather, policies are delivered through mediated systems such as data systems, markets, political economy and institutions. Institutions determine how well policies can be implemented and held accountable; markets influence resource allocation and price signals; political economy factors shape policy development and continuity; and data systems support targeting, monitoring and learning. These systems significantly affect policy effectiveness.

The constraints of this layer include financial constraints, resource interdependencies (water-energy-food nexus) and climate risks. These restrictions influence the feasibility, sustainability and trade-offs associated with policy measures. For example, water shortage may restrict efforts to boost agricultural productivity; financial constraints may limit the size of subsidies. The interaction of these elements produces outcomes in food systems which are complex. They include availability (supply), access (affordability), nutrition (diet quality), stability (consistency over time) and resilience (ability to withstand shocks). This multidimensionality is a reminder that it is important to employ integrated policy instruments.



Figure 15.1 Conceptual Structure of the Framework
Source: FAO (2021), HLPE (2020), and IFPRI frameworks.

The central implication of this framework is that policy effectiveness is conditional. Identical policy instruments can produce very different outcomes depending on institutional capacity, market conditions, and contextual constraints. This insight provides the foundation for the comparative analysis that follows.

3. Comparative Policy Patterns Across Domains

There are several key themes that cut across policies and sectors across the Globe described as follows:

3.1. Policy Coherence and Coordination

Policy harmony is a common finding. Fractured rules often create conflicting incentives, causing efficiency loss. Subsidies, for example, may encourage production growth; but tariffs distort price signals and efficiency. Integrated approaches which combine agricultural, trade, social protection and environment policy objectives are thus more likely to deliver sustainable outcomes (FAO, 2021).

3.2. Organizations and Political Economy

The capacity of institutions is an important component of politics. Inefficient implementation, corruption and wastage are associated with weak institutions even when policy intentions are good. This result is consistent with the broader literature on institutions and growth emphasizing the role of the political system in explaining economic performance (North, 1990). The political economy even influences policy choices and persistence. Surviving policies are oftentimes not efficient but politically expedient. Therefore, reform processes need to consider interests and distributions (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012).

3.3. Markets and Motivations

Market structure and functioning are key to policy outcomes. Efficient markets facilitate price signaling, investment and resource allocation. In turn, market distortions (like export bans or price controls) can worsen fluctuations and incentives for suppliers (Anderson & Martin, 2012).

Limits on Resources and Climate Resources and climate change are increasingly important in food security policy. The growing importance of the water-energy-food nexus highlights the importance of integrated planning that accounts for resource interdependencies (FAO, 2016). At the same time, climate change requires flexible, rather than fixed, policies.

4. Evidence from Access, Nutrition, and Social Protection

One key finding from the studies is that food security can't be achieved simply by boosting food supply. Access, diet and equity are also important aspects. Social protection programs have been relatively successful in improving food access. Brazil's Bolsa Família is an example of how effective cash transfer programs can reduce poverty and enhance food security outcomes when supported by strong administrative and communications systems (Lindert *et al.*, 2007; World Bank, 2018).

The other major area of innovation is nutrition-sensitive policies. These policies connect food production to nutrition outcomes, thus fostering various food systems and improved nutrition. There is evidence that such integrated approaches are more effective than production-focused approaches (HLPE, 2020).

5. Policy Variation and Contextual Diversity

Cross-country studies reveal that policies have differential outcomes. Differences in institutional strength, resource endowments and vulnerability to risks across countries lead to differences in policy needs and outcomes. For instance, market-oriented policy reforms have been very effective in countries like Vietnam where strong institutions and integration in the global market have led to agricultural growth and export competitiveness. On the other hand, vulnerable settings like South Sudan have significant disruption in governance and markets and require hybrid strategies that combine long-term strategies to build resilience with humanitarian aid (World Bank, 2022). These differences underscore the importance of customizing approaches to match specific local contexts rather than adopting one-size-fits-all approaches.

6. What Works: Comparative Evidence

As presented in Table 15.1, the comparative evidence reveals that a range of policy options have been successful in specific contexts. Cash transfer programs have consistently increased food supply in countries with good governance and information systems. Brazil's Bolsa Familia is a case study; failure in less well-off countries highlight the need for governance and IT infrastructure (Gentilini, 2014).

Table 15.1 Policy Effectiveness Across Contexts

Policy Type	Works Where	Example	Fails Where	Key Conditions
Cash Transfers	Strong data systems	Brazil	Weak systems	Digital infrastructure
Subsidy Reform	Political commitment	Indonesia	Political resistance	Gradual reform
Trade Liberalization	Integrated markets	Vietnams	Fragile systems	Institutional regulation
Climate-Smart Agriculture	Strong support systems	Kenya	Resource-poor areas	Extension services
Adaptive Policies	Flexible systems	Bangladesh	Rigid systems	Learning capacity

Source: Gentilini (2014); FAO (2016); Anderson & Martin (2012); World Bank (2016, 2018); IPCC (2022).

Subsidy reforms have been most successful with gradual changes and political consensus, as in Indonesia. However, interest groups have blocked change in other cases, such as India (Gulati & Banerjee, 2015). In countries with well-developed markets, such as Vietnam, trade liberalization has improved agricultural productivity; but it has posed a risk in less developed settings. In countries such as Kenya, climate-smart agriculture has boosted resilience; however, adoption is still limited in resource poor settings such as Niger (Bryan *et al.*, 2013; FAO, 2016). Adaptive policy has been particularly effective in climate risky settings. Bangladesh's investments in early warning systems and adaptable planning demonstrate how adaptive governance can reduce vulnerability (Saha *et al.*, 2016).

7. Where Policies Work: Context Typology

One must have a contextual view to grasp where policies fit. Table 15.2 offers a classification connecting policy appropriateness to various situations. Though they present coordination issues, high-capacity systems can carry out sophisticated, combined plans. Though they may be subject to inefficiencies, low-capacity systems call for easier treatments. Adaptive policies help climate-vulnerable systems; resource-limited ones need integrated strategies to control the water–energy–food nexus. Hybrid approaches combining humanitarian and development efforts are called for in fragile situations.

Table 15.2 Context-Based Policy Suitability

Context Type	Example Country	Suitable Policy	Risk
High Capacity	Brazil	Integrated reforms	Complexity
Low Capacity	Afghanistan	Simple transfers	Leakage
Climate Vulnerable	Bangladesh	Adaptive policies	Data gaps
Resource-Constrained	Jordan	Nexus planning	Coordination failure
Fragile State	South Sudan	Hybrid models	Governance breakdown

Source: FAO (2016, 2021); World Bank (2022); Saha *et al.* (2016).

8. Conditions for Policy Success

This chapter identifies several key factors for policy success. Key elements include capabilities, political economy, finances, markets, climate risks, and data. Rwanda, Indonesia, Vietnam, Ethiopia and India's experiences illustrate the impact of these factors (Gilligan *et al.*, 2009; Muralidharan *et al.*, 2016; World Bank, 2019).

9. Cross-Cutting Insights

The synthesis of country experiences offers several cross-country insights about the nature of food systems and policy. These insights capture general principles in the way food systems operate and form the basis for designing more effective and tailored policies.

First, policy coherence is critical to success. The policy spaces for food systems are the connected policy domains of agriculture, trade, health, environment and social protection. Separate policy design and implementation in these spaces can result in conflicting priorities. For example, agricultural input subsidies to stimulate production can increase supply, but when combined with trade distortions or market inefficiencies, this can lead to distortions and inefficiencies. Similarly, agricultural policies cannot improve nutrition outcomes without health, education and food market policies. For instance, evidence from Brazil highlights the impact of integrated policies (social protection, agriculture and nutrition) in delivering more sustainable and inclusive outcomes which leads to the conclusion that food security requires integrated rather than agricultural-only policies (HLPE, 2020; FAO, 2021).

The second lesson is that the design of policies is constrained by the capacity of institutions. Across contexts, the effectiveness of policy is more about the institutional capacity to implement, monitor and adjust to policy initiatives. Good institutions can focus on policies, reduce leakages and enhance accountability, while bad institutions can cause inefficiencies and unintentional consequences. The agricultural revolution in Rwanda, for example, illustrates how improved management capacity and governance play a key role in achieving policy goals, while similar policies have failed in other less institutionalized countries. This finding is consistent with the recent institutional economics literature that emphasizes the importance of "rules of the game" (North, 1990).

Third, political economy factors play a key role in policy choices and outcomes. Policies are not delivered in a vacuum but are influenced by the interests of various stakeholders, elections and egalitarian considerations. For instance, subsidies are inefficient but are implemented due to their benefits for politically influential groups. Attempts to reform such policies can be difficult, as with India's fertilizer subsidy. By comparison, Indonesia's reforms highlight the need to enhance political acceptance through gradual reforms and compensation measures (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012). These examples show that policy formulation needs to consider political incentives and building support, not simply technical considerations.

Fourth, research shows integrated policies are more effective than isolated policies. There are many determinants of food security, including production, marketing, income and nutrition. Stand-alone interventions are likely to be short-lived. For example, increased productivity without improved market access may not necessarily lead to higher incomes, while more social protection without addressing productivity bottlenecks can lead to inflation. Countries that have adopted a more comprehensive approach that also includes agriculture, social protection and market reforms have done better. An example of such a program is the Productive Safety Net Program in Ethiopia that links social protection with developing assets and climate resilience within the program (Gilligan *et al.*, 2009). This suggests the need for integrated policy design to identify the connections within food systems.

Finally, we need flexible governance in uncertain times. Increasing shocks and uncertainties, such as climate change and market volatility, mean food systems are becoming more vulnerable. Static policy settings, which are designed for a stable world, are not suitable. We need responsive and adaptive governance. Adaptive governance in Bangladesh for flood management and early warning systems demonstrates the success of these strategies in enhancing resilience and reducing vulnerability (Saha *et al.*, 2016). Adaptive governance hinges on good data collection and feedback mechanisms, so that policy can respond to emerging risks. In this regard, the role of digital technologies and information systems is increasing.

These cross-cutting ideas highlight the fact that food security policy is about managing a complex system, not individual interventions. As a result, we need consistent, effective, politically sensitive, integrated and adaptive policies.

10. Policy Trade-offs

Dilemmas are a natural part of food security policy. These arise because of scarcity, the multiple objectives of policy and the positive and negative effects of policy. Recognizing and managing these trade-offs is essential in designing sound policies.

One such dilemma is the efficiency-versus-equity trade-off. Policies that prioritize efficiency, such as market liberalization and removal of subsidies, can improve efficiency and fiscal balance. However, they can also adversely affect the poor via food price increases or reduced access to essential inputs. Alternatively, equity-oriented policies, such as universal food subsidy programs, can raise food access for the poor but can also have negative impacts on fiscal budgets and markets. For example, Egypt's food subsidy program has played a vital role in assisting food access, but has also generated significant budgetary pressures, prompting recent reforms efforts (World Bank, 2022). This trade-off calls for policies that fulfil efficiency and social protection objectives.

The second trade-off is between productivity and the environment. Efforts to enhance productivity, using fertilizers, irrigation and land clearing, can raise food production in the short term, but in the long term could reduce natural resource endowments, such as soil fertility, water and lead to greenhouse gas emissions. The notion of a water-energy-food nexus emphasizes the inter-relationship between these. For instance, irrigation increases production but also consumes water and energy. In water-scarce countries such as Jordan, productivity and water efficiency are favored over production. This suggests policies should emphasize sustainable intensification and climate-smart agriculture, as well as a trade-off between increased production and conservation. (FAO, 2016; IPCC, 2022).

The third trade-off relates to short- versus long-term priorities. In response to crises, such as food price shocks or natural disasters, governments tend to focus on short-term responses such as price controls, food assistance or emergency subsidies. These interventions can offer immediate relief but may hinder long-term food security by distorting markets or taking resources away from investments in infrastructure, research and institutions. The Productive Safety Net Program in Ethiopia is an example of trying to address this trade-off by providing short-term food security and building long-term assets and capacity (Gilligan *et al.*, 2009). This case study illustrates the need for policy measures to focus on the short term but also increases the resilience of food systems in the long run (Gilligan *et al.*, 2009).

A second key trade-off is between policy stability and flexibility. Policy stability is crucial to stimulate investment and ensure predictability for stakeholders. But too much stability can hamper the responsiveness of governments to changing circumstances, especially in the face of climate change and market uncertainty. Flexible policy designs attempt to balance these needs by preserving the design principles of policy while enabling policy design to be responsive to new information and changing conditions. This is achieved through effective monitoring and learning mechanisms.

The last trade-off is between self-sufficiency and globalization. Measures to enhance self-sufficiency can minimize reliance on global markets and improve food security but can also introduce inefficiencies and increase costs. On the other hand, global market integration can enhance efficiency and access but is exposed to risks. Vietnam's participation in world markets has aided agricultural development and exports, while other nations have taken a more measured approach to ensure domestic stability and participation in world markets (Anderson & Martin, 2012).

In sum, these trade-offs underline that designing food security policy is best understood not in terms of achieving one goal but managing multiple, sometimes conflicting goals. Good policy making should be transparent, well-informed and explicitly acknowledge trade-offs. Governments can balance such trade-offs by tailoring policies to institutional and contextual constraints to achieve more effective and inclusive outcomes.

11. Forward-Looking Lessons: Governing Food Systems Under Uncertainty

Developing country food security policy is transitioning to a new era of complexity, uncertainty and interdependence. The cross-case evidence in this chapter suggests that the key to effective policy in the future will not be the selection of specific policy instruments but rather the capacity of governments to develop and implement integrated, adaptable, and resilient food system governance platforms.

Climate variability is one of the key factors of change. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change predicts that extreme climatic events will be more frequent and intense, with impacts on food production,

supply chains, employment and food security. This suggests that a static policy framework (designed for a stable environment) will become increasingly out of date. Rather, governments will need to shift towards flexible policy approaches that account for uncertainty, allow for continuous learning, and establish swift response mechanisms. Early warning systems, climate information services and contingency funds will be key elements of food security planning.

Meanwhile, the rise of digital technology is revolutionizing food governance. The development of digital identification, mobile payments, remote sensing and big data analytics are allowing for more targeted interventions, monitoring in real time, and institutional alignment. The cases of India's Aadhaar program and Brazil's integrated social registries show how digital technologies can improve the effectiveness of policy response (Muralidharan *et al.*, 2016; Lindert *et al.*, 2007). But the benefits of digitalization are not guaranteed; they require institutional and data governance arrangements, as well as strategies to address exclusion of vulnerable groups.

Budgetary constraints are also driving policy changes. Debt constraints and other demands on the public purse restrict the ability to implement large and distorting policies, such as universal subsidies. Therefore, there is an increasing focus on efficiency- and targeted interventions such as conditional cash transfers and investments in public goods, like infrastructure, research and extension. This shift needs to be politically managed as changes can encounter opposition.

A further trend is a shift towards nutrition-sensitive and equitable policies. Malnutrition and, in some cases, obesity, raise the need to focus on more than simply energy. Policies should consider the quality of food and diets, food diversity, and health, while also addressing structural inequality based on income, gender and place (HLPE, 2020).

The increasing prominence of the water-energy-food nexus also points to the need for holistic approaches. Water scarcity is an increasingly critical resource in many developing countries. Failure to consider these linkages could lead to unanticipated policy outcomes such as environmental damage or resource depletion. We see the need to balance trade-offs between sectors and policy instruments in countries like Jordan.

Lastly, the growing complexity of food systems requires more inclusive and participatory governance. Decentralization and stakeholder participation, as well as public-private partnerships, can improve responsiveness and innovation, but also require effective coordination to ensure policy consistency.

Overall, these developments suggest a paradigm shift towards more flexible, integrated, efficient, inclusive and data-driven food system governance. The challenge for policy makers is no longer just finding the right policies but building the institutional capacity to manage complex systems in a world of uncertainty.

12. Conclusions

This chapter has drawn on comparative evidence to answer the questions of what works, where, and under what conditions in food system governance. This chapter shows that food security outcomes cannot be attributed to specific policy instruments. Rather, they result from the interplay between policies, institutions, markets, political economy and environmental factors. An important implication is that there is no "one size fits all" approach to food security policy. What works in one setting may not in another, depending on the level of institutional and governance capacity, resource constraints, and socio-economic characteristics. This underscores the importance of context-sensitive and flexible policy development, rather than "one-size-fits-all" approaches.

The chapter also highlights a range of general principles for policy design. Policy coherence is key to the alignment of incentives and avoidance of conflicting policy outcomes. Capacity is a key limiting factor for implementation and impact. The political economy of policymaking affects policy sustainability, and reforms need to be technically and politically feasible. Multifaceted policies that link production, market, social protection and environmental policies are more effective than single policies. Lastly, adaptive governance is essential for dealing with uncertainties and changing circumstances.

The chapter also emphasizes the need to balance competing objectives such as efficiency versus equity, productivity versus sustainability, and short- versus long-term food security. These are inevitable in food system governance and must be made in a transparent and evidence-informed manner. The next key challenge for emerging economies is to shift from policy tweaks to system-wide change. This means creating learning and adaptive institutions, establishing data and digital platforms, and facilitating multi-sector and multi-stakeholder cooperation. It also involves a change in approach from considering food security as a sector to seeing it as a system. In the end, the key to sustainable food security will be for governments to manage food systems holistically, and to balance multiple objectives while responding to various challenges.

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