

Food & Power: Scoping Phase

Brief

Photo: UNDP Benin

Zero draft. Version – February 2025

Introduction

The time is now for the transformation of food systems. Addressing climate change, biodiversity loss, health and inequality requires a radical overhaul of how we produce and consume foods. In 2023, between 713 and 757 million people continue to face hunger, while 2.8 billion people cannot afford a healthy diet. At the same time, food systems account for 31 percent of human generated GHG emissions, and 70 percent of global biodiversity loss. Climate shocks, conflicts and economic slowdowns continue to cause food shortages, supply chain disruptions and volatility in food and fertilizer prices, laying bare food systems' lack of resilience.

The challenges for transformation are immense. Food systems are highly interconnected across various sectors and are linked to all the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Consequently, transforming them requires integrated, multidimensional solutions that seek to influence change through a systems lens targeting both short-term needs and structural flaws to build greater resilience, sustainability and equity. The recently published UNDP White Paper "Supporting Food Systems Transformation Towards Sustainability and Resilience", identifies six structural drivers that need to be addressed: poverty & inequality, health, gender, environment, climate change and energy.

However, the potential for technological, institutional, policy or other changes in those areas to positively impact food systems depends on governance and the creation of inclusive, participatory processes to identify, adopt and implement priorities. The outcomes of such mechanisms are not only driven by evidence, but also strongly influenced by political and economic factors. Power asymmetries – whether between nations, corporations, (small-scale) producers, or communities- play a crucial role in determining who has access to resources, who makes decisions, and ultimately, who benefits. Therefore, to truly transform food systems, navigating and addressing power is essential. However, the political economy of food systems transformation is complex and often not sufficiently incorporated into intervention and support strategies.

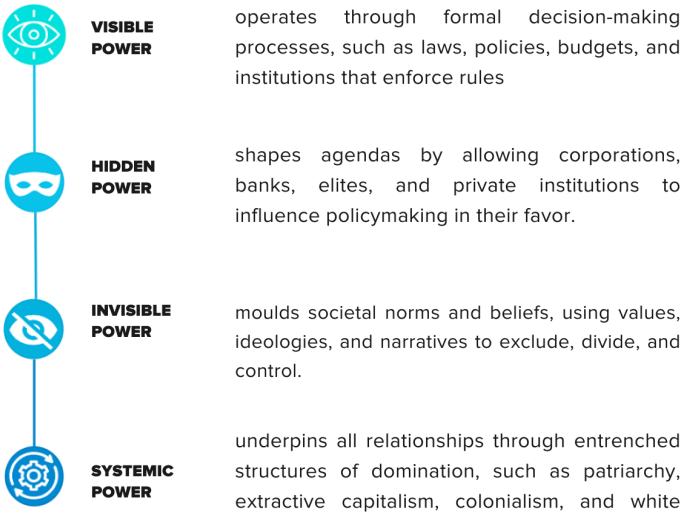
Why power asymmetries are of critical importance for food systems transformation

To gain deeper insight into the importance of power dynamics in food systems transformation, UNDP's Food and Agricultural Commodity Systems team carried out an initial analysis on food & power to identify the most critical areas of power asymmetries, and potential opportunities to navigate or address them. This work built on other work done by UNDP on political economy and power issues, such as the 2022 co-inquiry into how international development practitioners can work more effectively with power in multi-stakeholder processes for food systems transformation[1]. Although by no means comprehensive, the analysis serves to provide an entry-point for further engagement.

Power is often defined as the ability of individuals, groups, or institutions to shape actions, beliefs, and behaviors through means like authority, knowledge, wealth, social norms, or even physical force. However, power can also be understood as a structural force that defines what is possible or not, setting the boundaries of action. It not only reinforces existing systems but can also be a tool for creating change by challenging and reshaping these boundaries. Power asymmetries on the other hand, refer to disproportionate power relationships between entities or across different levels. This scoping exercise focuses on those asymmetries, as they are clearly reflected in our food systems, affecting who has control over resources, decision-making, and the distribution of benefits within the system. These imbalances influence the outcomes of food systems at every level, from local to global, and have profound implications for food security, equity, sustainability, and resilience.

To identify potential power asymmetries in food systems, UNDP has carried out an exploratory analysis based on the four arenas of power (see Just Associates, 2024)[2]. This framework is particularly suited for examining power asymmetries in food systems as it integrates actor dynamics and agency, addresses governance and collective action issues, and analyzes structural and systemic power, which often remains more hidden. The framework allows to assess power dynamics along four dimensions:

FOUR DIMENSIONS OF POWER



Based on this framework, UNDP then analyzed power asymmetries in three core areas, namely corporate concentration, access to resources, and governance mechanisms at global, regional and national levels.

Corporate Concentration

A few companies dominate nearly all stages of global food supply chains. This concentration results from horizontal and vertical mergers, which increase market share or control over related markets and reduce competition. Financial incentives, technological changes, and a relaxed regulatory environment entrench these processes. This dominance enables corporations to effectively lobby, limiting governments' and stakeholders' ability to implement necessary changes for sustainable food systems. Key areas of corporate concentration include:

[1] See https://www.undp.org/publications/working-power-multi-stakeholder-processes-insights-undp-co-inquiry-accelerating-progress-towards-more-sustainable-food-system

[2] Lisa VeneKlasen, Alexa Bradley and Jethro Pettit (2024), Just Power: A Guide for Activists and Changemakers, Just Associates (Washington DC). Accessible online : https://pressbooks.pub/jass-power-guide/.

Agricultural Inputs: A few multinational corporations most of the global market for seeds, fertilizers, and pesticides, leading to high costs for smallholder farmers, reduced autonomy, loss of local food sovereignty, and increased economic disparities.

Retail: Major supermarket chains dominate food retail, squeezing small producers' profit margins, limiting market access, influencing prices and product availability, and shaping policies to favor their business models.

Ultra-Processed Food and Beverages: Large corporations control significant portions of this market, impacting consumer preferences through marketing and lobbying, contributing to public health issues, and undermining local food systems.

Access to Resources

Power asymmetries in food systems, particularly regarding access to resources, create significant disparities that shape agricultural practices and impact food security and livelihoods. These asymmetries are often rooted in the unequal distribution of land, water, energy, financial capital, infrastructure, information technology, and knowledge, which in turn influence production capabilities and market access. Key power asymmetries associated with natural, financial, and non-material resources include:

Land Access: Few wealthy individuals and corporations often own large tracts of agricultural land, limiting smallholder farmers' access. This concentration exacerbates inequalities, alters traditional livelihoods, and threatens food security, while promoting monoculture farming that depletes soil fertility and biodiversity.

Financial Capital: Large agribusinesses have better access to credit and subsidies, allowing investment in advanced technologies. In contrast, small-scale farmers face high-interest rates and strict borrowing conditions, hindering innovation and expansion. This perpetuates poverty, economic inequality, and food insecurity.

Information Technology: Major corporations dominate agricultural R&D, focusing on technologies that benefit their interests. Small-scale farmers often lack access to digital tools and agricultural information, leading to the loss of traditional knowledge, reduced agricultural diversity, and decreased resilience.

Geopolitical, global and regional governance, national and local policies and multi stakeholders' initiatives

Global and national policies significantly influence food systems, shaping resource distribution, market access, and resilience, often disadvantaging less powerful countries and small-scale producers.

Trade agreements tend to favor large economies and multinational corporations, creating barriers for developing countries and small-scale producers.

Geopolitical power asymmetries also shape responses to climate change or environmental policies, with developed nations better able to invest in climate resilience, while developing countries struggle to secure funding and support.

National and local policies often favor large-scale commercial agriculture over smallholder farming, leading to the marginalization of local communities.


Photo: UNDP Peru

Addressing power asymmetries can have transformative effects on the adoption and implementation of policies that enable food systems change. For example, they can:

- Promote more competition, guaranteeing fairer prices for smallholder farmers and consumers. This could include reforms in anti-trust rules, with stronger competition laws that discourage excessive consolidation;
- Repurpose agricultural subsidies from production models posing health and environmental risks and exacerbating inequality, towards more sustainable production models;
- Strengthen environmental regulations and their enforcement, through regulatory frameworks that curb environmentally harmful practices and that ensure adherence to sustainable practices, accountability and fair competition;
- Promote improvements in land tenure;
- Strengthen the regulation of financial markets and increase access to finance;
- Increase public and private investment flows to research, development and innovation, in particular towards knowledge and technologies that benefit climate change mitigation and adaptation, environment, health and inclusion.

Supporting stakeholders to understand, navigate and address power asymmetries: the opportunities

If we agree that power asymmetries hold back change in food systems, it is imperative that we include actions to "work with power" in food systems projects, programmes and strategies. However, this is not the current practice; many interventions continue to focus on technical solutions without considering the political economy at play, making them ineffective. Including actions to understand, navigate and address power asymmetries could help to remove such barriers.
UNDP, in collaboration with other UN agencies and global and national stakeholders, has the potential to play a fundamental role in this transformation by raising awareness, reshaping narratives, empowering individuals and communities to act on their own behalf, and by supporting policymakers to better navigate power dynamics to adopted and implement public policies that accelerate food systems transformation.

The opportunities to address power asymmetries in food systems can potentially be many: they could be geared towards altering perspectives on food and power by **raising awareness and changing mindsets**, for example by supporting immersive programs for policy-makers and other stakeholders to share experiences and best practices on navigating power asymmetries in food and agriculture, or the organization of policy dialogues to shine light on the extent of power asymmetries on specific topics, such as access to inputs or environmental regulations.

They could also help to unveil and **redefine narratives for transformation and increase transparency**, for example by supporting increased cooperation between independent policy researchers and decision-makers to increase the availability of unbiased, evidence-based analysis to inform food and agricultural policy reform, or dedicated capacity building to encourage collective action and empower key groups in their efforts to engage more deeply in policy-making at different levels.

Activities can also focus on **empowering stakeholders** to participate more successfully in decision-making processes, at both global, regional and national levels. More example, this can take the form of capacity building in areas such as leadership, negotiation and advocacy, to help associations and collectives increase their influence over policymaking for the food and agricultural sectors.

Finally, integrated country support projects, could be rolled out in partnership with national governments to **increase multi-stakeholder collaboration** in policy processes, strengthen transparency mechanisms **and promote integrated governance** combining land, environmental, and food systems policies to empower local communities.

Engaging with partners to explore potential for collective action

As one of the leading organizations working to fulfill the SDGs, and building on its country presence and experience in whole-of-society approaches to change in food systems, the Food and Agricultural Commodity Systems team in UNDP has launched an exploratory and participatory process to better understand the power dynamics of food systems transformation, and identify potential areas for collective action, recognizing that addressing the broader political economy of food systems transformation is a sensitive subject.

We are inviting interested stakeholders from development organizations, governments, civil society, academia and the business community to engage with us to explore questions such as:

- How should we further unpack and raise awareness on power asymmetries? Which areas and levels (global, regional, national, community) should be prioritized?
- What are different stakeholders already doing on power and political economy of food systems transformation? To what extentare those interventions effective, and how can we learn from success and failures?
- Which support do national governments need to become more effective in navigating power asymmetries to adopt and implement food and agricultural policy changes?
- Who are the most important partners that should be engaged? And to what extent are organizations interested in working with UNDP on this?

Furthermore, after this scoping phase, UNDP plans to organize a global, 3-day, in-residency dialogue to bring together fifty leading experts and practitioners from development, government, civil society, academia and the business community at UK-based Wilton Park on **23-25 June 2025**. Besides diving deeper into the impact of power asymmetries in specific policy areas, this dialogue is also expected to provide guidance on the potential for, and scope of, collective action on the power dynamics of food systems transformation. UNDP has already launched discussions with interested partners to support or be involved in this event.

For more information:

UNDP Food & Agricultural Commodity Systems
Christian Derlagen, Senior Advisor Food Systems
christian.derlagen@undp.org





Copyright © UNDP 2024 All rights reserved. The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations, including UNDP, or UN Member States.