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Learning Module on Ecosystem Engagement

Understanding the Ecosystem



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Preface

This module brings together two connected products on ecosystem engagement within food systems transformation.

- The first product, Mapping the Ecosystem: Actors, Institutions and Entry Points, supports practitioners to understand the terrain in which engagement takes place. It focuses on actor categories, government institutions, policy pathways, implementation structures, and practical entry points for non-state actors.

- The second product, Framing the Engagement: Narrative, Messaging and Practitioner Action, builds on this analysis. It supports practitioners to translate their understanding of the ecosystem into coherent narrative, audience-specific messaging, and structured engagement.

The two products are designed to be read together, but they can also be used separately depending on need. Practitioners who are still clarifying who to engage and where to enter the system may begin with Product 1. Practitioners who already have a clear engagement target and need to sharpen what to say, how to frame it, and how to follow through may begin with Product 2.

Together, the products are intended to support more deliberate engagement – moving from broad awareness of the food systems ecosystem to clearer choices about actors, messages, timing, and action.

Mapping the Ecosystem: Actors, Institutions and Entry Points

Introduction

This module is part of a capacity-building series for organisations working on food systems transformation in India. It focuses on the terrain where that work actually happens – the actors, institutions, and processes that determine what is possible.

Food systems are inherently cross-sectoral. Most organisations working within them engage intensively within one domain – a thematic area, a geography, or a particular level of government – and have limited sight of what is happening in adjacent spaces. Yet decisions made elsewhere in the system regularly shape what is achievable within one's own area of work. For example, a procurement policy set at the centre affects what reaches a district-level Anganwadi; or, a research institution's framing of a problem determines which solutions are even tabled in a policy consultation. Knowing who the actors are, what drives them, and how to time an engagement matters as much as technical expertise in any given area.

This module is designed to build exactly this capacity. It introduces practical tools that practitioners can apply directly within their own contexts, including a stakeholder mapping template and a power–interest–influence matrix for assessing and prioritising actors.

A note on coalition membership: Working within a coalition – such as the Coalition for Food Transformation in India (CoFTI), for whom this series was developed – changes the nature of ecosystem engagement in important ways. A coalition can reach actors and processes that its individual members cannot access alone. It can present evidence with a breadth and geographic spread that single organisations cannot match, and act in concert when coordinated pressure is more useful than separate institutional asks. It can also build relationships with institutions whose mandate is national in scope, where bilateral engagement by a single organisation may carry limited weight.

Readers working within a coalition context will find that many of the frameworks in this module apply with particular force to collective strategy – not only to the engagement choices of their individual organisation.

By the end of this module, you will be able to:

- Map and prioritise actors across India's food systems ecosystem – spanning government, research, civil society, the private sector, international agencies, and media
- Understand how policy is made and implemented in India, and identify realistic entry points for engagement
- Analyse actors through the dimensions of power, interest, and influence – and use that analysis to make deliberate choices about where to focus

The module is organised into three sections. Section 1 covers stakeholder mapping – building a structured picture of who is in the ecosystem and what drives them. Section 2 traces India's policy landscape and where non-state actors can realistically engage. Section 3 provides a brief introduction to the power, interest, and influence framework, and guides you toward a first-draft action plan for engagement.

Readers working on external communications alongside this mapping work may find it useful to read this module alongside Product 2, which covers narrative, audience-specific messaging, and practical guidance for translating actor analysis into communication.

CHAPTER 1

Stakeholder Mapping

1.1 Why a Broad Actor Scan Comes First

The starting instinct when building an ecosystem engagement plan is to engage with the actors one already knows – departments previously approached, civil society organisations in one's network, or the ministries most obviously connected to one's thematic area. That instinct is understandable, but it is also a constraint.

Food systems are cross-sectoral by nature, which means the decisions that shape nutritional outcomes, agricultural livelihoods, and access to food are rarely made in one place. A company's sourcing decisions affect what farmers choose to grow. A research institution's framing of a nutrition problem influences which solutions are considered when a government consultation is convened. A district administration's interpretation of scheme guidelines can determine how entitlements are delivered on the ground. These connections are not incidental – they are how the food system functions. An organisation that maps only the actors immediately visible from its own thematic vantage point will routinely miss the actors who are actually shaping outcomes.

A broad actor scan does not mean mapping everyone. It means ensuring that the picture is wide enough before it is narrowed. A well-constructed scan surfaces actors that were not previously considered relevant, reveals relationships and rivalries that affect what is achievable, and guards against a common error: building a strategy around an incomplete picture of who matters.

The sections that follow provide a structured way to conduct that scan – first by category, then with a closer look at the government institutions most directly relevant to food systems work in India.

1.2 The Landscape of Actor Categories

India's food systems ecosystem spans six broad categories of actors. These categories are a starting point for one's own scan, not an exhaustive register. Within each category, the actors that matter will vary depending on the thematic focus, geography, and specific change being pursued.

- **Government** actors span union ministries, state departments, district administration, and regulatory bodies. They hold formal authority over policy design, budget allocation, programme implementation, and the regulatory environment. Their level of decision-making power and proximity to implementation vary considerably across levels of government, and this variation matters for engagement strategy.

- **Research and academic institutions** generate the evidence base on which policy and programme design draws. This category includes publicly funded agricultural research bodies such as the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR), nutrition research institutions such as the National Institute of Nutrition (NIN), independent policy think tanks, and university departments whose work shapes how problems are framed in government and public discourse. These actors rarely implement programmes, but they

influence what decision-makers understand about a problem – which makes them consequential well before formal policy processes begin.

- **Civil society** encompasses national advocacy networks, state-level organisations, federations of community groups, and grassroots implementation partners. These actors bring different but complementary capacities: policy accountability, field-level evidence, and direct engagement with communities most affected by food systems failures. They are potential partners for organisations working on food systems transformation, but their own priorities and constituencies need to be understood independently. Alignment should not be assumed.

- **Private sector** actors include agri-input companies, food processors, retailers, food aggregators, and mission-driven or impact-oriented enterprises. Farmer Producer Organisations (FPOs) often straddle categories: they are market-facing producer collectives, but many also work closely with civil society organisations, government programmes, and community institutions. Their placement in a stakeholder map should therefore depend on the engagement question being asked. For. e.g., the private sector's role in shaping the food environment is substantial and, in several areas, faster-moving than government programmes. Engagement is most productive where commercial interests and food systems outcomes genuinely converge; where they diverge or cause harm, accountability mechanisms become the relevant entry point. Section 2.4 discusses these entry points in greater detail.

- **International agencies** include United Nations agencies, bilateral development partners, and philanthropic foundations. They bring financial resources, technical expertise, and convening capacity – the ability to bring government and non-government actors into the same room around a shared agenda. Understanding which international actors are currently active, in which states and thematic areas, helps identify genuine partnership opportunities and avoid duplication of effort. Coalitions with diverse membership are often better positioned to engage international agencies than individual organisations, because they can offer broader reach and more robust evidence.

- **Media** actors shape the environment in which advocacy operates. Specialist agricultural, nutrition, and public health journalists often understand the policy and technical detail behind an issue. Mainstream print, broadcast, and digital newsrooms usually require simpler framing, sharper public relevance, and clearer links to current events. When food systems concerns enter wider public coverage – whether through a food safety incident, a drought, or a policy controversy – they acquire political salience that sustained direct advocacy rarely achieves on its own. Media actors are not traditional stakeholders in the way that government or civil society are, but they are significant influences on what is possible.

Table 1: Actor Categories in India's Food Systems Ecosystem

Actor Category	Key Sub-types	Primary Function in the Food System	Relevance to Engagement
Government	Union ministries; state departments; district administration; regulatory bodies such as FSSAI, DCGI, BIS, WDRA, and APEDA	Policy design, budget allocation, programme implementation, regulation	Highest formal authority; engagement requires understanding of mandate boundaries, political priorities, and inter-ministerial dynamics
Research and academia	ICAR and its institute network; NIN; IFPRI India; CPR; NIPFP; state agricultural universities	Evidence generation, problem framing, technical standard-setting	Shapes the knowledge environment in which policy is made; institutional credibility is partly built through engagement with recognised research actors
Civil society	National advocacy networks; state-level organisations; grassroots implementation partners; community-based monitoring groups	Policy accountability, evidence generation, community-level delivery intelligence	Potential partners and sources of ground-level evidence; their constituencies and positions should be mapped independently, as alignment cannot be assumed
Private sector	Agri-input companies; food processors; retailers; impact enterprises; FPOs	Production, processing, distribution, and retail across the food value chain	Selective engagement where business practices intersect with food systems outcomes; accountability mechanisms where practices cause harm. FPOs may need to be read differently depending on whether they are functioning primarily as market actors, community institutions, or implementation partners
International agencies	UN agencies such as FAO, WFP, UNICEF, and WHO; bilateral partners such as GIZ, FCDO, and USAID; philanthropic foundations	Resource mobilisation, technical assistance, convening, and global norm-setting	Useful for co-convening, funding alignment, and access to comparative evidence; important to understand their current country and state-level priorities
Media	Specialist agriculture, nutrition, and health journalists; mainstream print and broadcast media; digital and social media platforms	Narrative framing, public agenda-setting, accountability journalism	Significant influence on the political environment; engagement requires different messaging from direct policy communication, and should distinguish between specialist and mainstream media needs

1.3 Key Government Institutions Relevant to Food Systems Work in India

Section 1.2 established who operates in the ecosystem and in what capacity. This section goes deeper into one actor category – government – because it is where formal decision-making authority sits for most of the policy and programme outcomes that food systems organisations seek to influence.

The institutions profiled here are those whose mandates most directly intersect with food systems transformation in India, from Union ministries through to state-level departments

and the implementing frameworks through which programmes reach people. The table includes both institutions and key legislative or programme frameworks, because in practice, civil society engagement often happens not only with a ministry, but also through the rules, schemes, missions, and accountability mechanisms that give that ministry's mandate operational form.

The profiles below are not a directory. They are a reading of what each institution controls, what currently drives its priorities, and where its work is most relevant to food systems concerns. This contextual knowledge – understanding not just who an institution is, but what it is currently focused on and why – is the foundation for the power-interest-influence analysis in Chapter 3.

A note on scope: the table focuses on ministries, authorities, and frameworks with a direct food systems mandate. Adjacent ministries – including environment, water, tribal affairs, and urban development – may become important depending on the issue. State governments also hold substantial implementation authority. In many cases, state-level engagement is the more accessible and productive path for organisations working at district or community level. Section 2.2 explains this centre-state dynamic in more detail.

Description and current priorities	Relevance to food systems engagement	State-level counterpart
Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare (MoA&FW): Apex body for agricultural policy and farmer welfare. Flagship schemes include PM-KISAN (direct income support to farmers), the Digital Agriculture Mission, and PM Fasal Bima Yojana (crop insurance).		
Current priorities: Farmer income, productivity, natural farming scale-up, agricultural targets under Viksit Bharat 2047. Does not hold a nutrition mandate – its remit is production and farmer welfare, not what people eat.	Shapes the policy environment for organisations working on farmer livelihoods, crop diversification, and nutrition-sensitive agriculture. Engagement framed around farmer income and productivity tends to find more traction than engagement framed primarily around nutrition.	State Departments of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare
Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW): National health and nutrition policy; FSSAI oversight; epidemiological evidence through National Family Health Survey (NFHS) data.		
Current priorities: Non-communicable disease (NCD) prevention, obesity and diabetes, Eat Right India initiative, regulation of High Fat Salt Sugar (HFSS) foods.	Primary ministry for nutrition outcome data and food quality standards. Key interlocutor on food labelling, fortification, and food environments – the spaces where people access and consume food. Relevant particularly to demand-side food systems work, i.e. what people eat and why.	State Departments of Health and Family Welfare
Ministry of Women and Child Development (MoWCD): Programme delivery authority for POSHAN 2.0 (see below) and Saksham Anganwadi; oversees approximately 1.4 million Anganwadi centres across India.		

Description and current priorities	Relevance to food systems engagement	State-level counterpart
Current priorities: reducing stunting, wasting, and anaemia; improving data quality through the POSHAN Tracker platform; fund utilisation at state level.	Most direct entry point for organisations working on early childhood nutrition, maternal health, anaemia, and supplementary food quality. Field-level evidence documenting implementation gaps – who is being reached, what is being served, where coverage is falling short – is relevant to how the programme is reviewed and revised.	State Departments of Women and Child Development
POSHAN 2.0: India's unified nutrition delivery framework, consolidating the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), POSHAN Abhiyaan (National Nutrition Mission), anaemia management, and adolescent health under a single umbrella.		
Implemented through state governments. Current priorities: Convergence across health, agriculture, water and sanitation sectors; POSHAN Tracker utilisation and data quality; fund absorption at state and district level. POSHAN 2.0 is a programme framework, not a standalone ministry – it is delivered through MoWCD, with states holding significant implementation discretion.	POSHAN 2.0 is especially relevant because of its convergence mandate and its reliance on the POSHAN Tracker. The framework requires coordination across health, agriculture, water, sanitation, and education systems, while the Tracker creates a data architecture through which service delivery, beneficiary coverage, and state-level performance can be reviewed. For organisations working at district and block level, evidence on convergence gaps, data quality, and implementation bottlenecks can provide a practical basis for engagement.	State Nutrition Mission / State Programme Management Units under MoWCD
Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI): A statutory body under MoHFW responsible for food safety and nutritional standards across both formal and informal food sectors – including labelling, fortification requirements, licensing of food businesses, and standards for specific food categories.		
Current priorities: Front-of-pack nutrition labelling, regulation of HFSS foods, expansion of the Eat Right India initiative into schools, institutions, and street food hubs.	Central to food environments work. FSSAI's standards-setting process formally requires public consultation – stakeholder comment before a standard is notified – making it one of the most structurally accessible entry points in food policy. Relevant to street food regulation, product labelling, fortification standards, and the informal food sector. A coalition submitting technical comments on a draft standard carries more weight than an individual organisation, because it signals broader legitimacy.	State Food Safety Commissioners and Designated Officers implement and enforce food safety standards at state and district levels, including licensing, inspections, and local enforcement of FSSAI regulations.

Description and current priorities	Relevance to food systems engagement	State-level counterpart
NITI Aayog: The Union government's apex policy planning body. Functions include inter-ministerial coordination, state benchmarking through the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) India Index, and coordinating technical inputs for major policy decisions.		
Unlike a ministry, NITI Aayog does not administer programmes or release funds – it advises, coordinates, and convenes. Current priorities: technology-led agricultural transformation, Viksit Bharat 2047 goals, SDG monitoring on nutrition and food security.	Relevant to cross-sectoral food systems agendas that require coordination across ministries. Because NITI Aayog convenes spaces where ministry positions are formed informally, and because its SDG monitoring architecture tracks nutrition and food security indicators, it is a relevant actor for coalitions seeking to raise the profile of issues that cut across ministerial boundaries.	State Planning Departments and State SDG Monitoring Units do not mirror NITI Aayog's authority exactly, but they play a comparable coordination and monitoring role within state governments, especially where food systems concerns intersect with SDG indicators, state development plans, and cross-departmental priorities.
Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution: Administers the Public Distribution System (PDS) – India's subsidised food grain delivery system – under the National Food Security Act (NFSA), 2013; approximately 478,000 fair price shops.		
Current priorities: PDS digitisation, Aadhaar-linked beneficiary reform, price stabilisation, Simplified and Modernised Administration of Ration Through Technology (SMART-PDS) infrastructure.	Often underweighted in advocacy strategies despite holding the delivery mandate for India's largest food entitlement programme. The State Ranking Index for NFSA – which measures how well states are implementing the Act – is a formal accountability mechanism that civil society can engage with, contribute evidence to, and use publicly. Relevant to any organisation working on food access, food security, or the right to food.	State Food and Civil Supplies Departments; State Food Commissions
Ministry of Food Processing Industries (MoFPI): Promotes food processing across the value chain, from micro-enterprises to large manufacturers. Key schemes include PM Kisan SAMPADA Yojana (supply chain infrastructure), PM Formalization of Micro Food Processing Enterprises (PM FME), and the Production Linked Incentive (PLI) scheme for food processing.		

Description and current priorities	Relevance to food systems engagement	State-level counterpart
Current priorities: post-harvest loss reduction, formalisation of micro-enterprises, export expansion, rural employment.	Relevant to food value chain work, post-harvest loss, and small producer livelihoods. The PM FME scheme reaches Self Help Groups (SHGs) and FPO-run enterprises, creating overlap with organisations working on community-level food production and processing – particularly where women's groups are involved in food businesses.	State food processing departments; State Horticulture and Agri-Processing Departments
National Food Security Act (NFSA), 2013: The primary legislative framework for food entitlements in India, covering the PDS, Midday Meal Scheme (now PM POSHAN), and the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS).		
Implemented by the Ministry of Consumer Affairs. The NFSA establishes legal entitlements – not just programme targets – for food access, which gives civil society a rights-based basis for accountability.	Foundational reference for organisations working on food access, food security, and the right to food. There is an established civil society precedent of NFSA accountability work – identifying exclusion errors (eligible households left off beneficiary lists), monitoring PDS delivery, and engaging State Food Commissions – that newer organisations can build on.	State Food Commissions (formal grievance bodies established under NFSA)
Midday Meal Scheme (PM POSHAN): A centrally sponsored scheme providing cooked meals to children in government and government-aided schools.		
Administered through state education departments. Current priorities: dietary diversification, inclusion of locally grown and millets-based foods, kitchen garden integration, hygiene and food safety standards in school kitchens.	Direct intersection with child nutrition, local food procurement, and school food environments. State education departments hold significant discretion over menu design and procurement. For organisations working on school food, millets, or child nutrition, state-level engagement with education departments and School Management Committees is a productive and accessible entry point.	State Departments of School Education; District Education Offices
Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and Ministry of Rural Development: A rights-based employment guarantee for rural households – 100 days of unskilled manual work per year.		
Implemented through gram panchayats. Relevant to food systems through its effect on rural household income and food purchasing capacity, and through its land and water work components (bunds, ponds, watershed work) that affect agricultural productivity.	Relevant to organisations working on rural livelihoods, food access, and water security. Social audits – mandatory under MGNREGA and conducted by independent gram sabhas – are one of the best-established civil society accountability mechanisms in India and have direct applicability as a model for other programme monitoring contexts.	State Rural Development Departments; State Employment Guarantee Councils

1.4 Using the Stakeholder Mapping Template

The actor categories in Section 1.2 and the government institution profiles in Section 1.3 are reference material – a broad sweep of who operates in the ecosystem and what drives them. They are not themselves a map for your organisation or coalition.

This section introduces a template for building that map. It is a practical tool for translating the broad landscape into a structured, working picture of the actors most relevant to a specific thematic focus, geography, or engagement goal.

Stakeholder/ Actor	Role in the Food System	Level of Influence	Interest in Food Systems Change	Current Relationship with you	Possible ways of engagement
		Low/Medium /High	Low/Medium/ High	None/Limited /Ongoing	

1.4.1 When to use this template – and why

The template is most useful when:

- You are preparing to engage on a specific policy or programme and need to identify who the relevant actors are, where they sit relative to each other, and where to focus attention first.
- Your organisation or coalition is entering a new geography or thematic area and needs to build a shared picture of the landscape.
- You want to pool intelligence across a coalition – each member's knowledge of actors in their geography or thematic area, aggregated, produces a picture that no single organisation can construct alone. This is one of the concrete advantages of working in a coalition: the collective map is substantially richer than any individual contribution to it.

1.4.2 How to use this template

Complete one row per actor. Where possible, name the relevant unit within an institution rather than the institution as a whole – the specific programme division within a ministry, the state-level affiliate of a national network, or the relevant desk within a bilateral agency. The institution as a whole is rarely the actor that matters for a specific engagement.

The template is a living document, not a one-time exercise. Actors' priorities shift with political cycles, budget decisions, and leadership changes. An assessment that was accurate six months ago may need revision. Building in periodic review – even informally – is as important as the initial mapping.

Guidance on each column:

- Stakeholder / Actor – Where possible, name the relevant unit within an institution rather than the institution alone. This applies across actor categories: the relevant desk within a bilateral agency, the specific programme team within a foundation, the state-level affiliate of a national network. The ministry or organisation as a whole is rarely the actor that matters for a specific engagement.

- Role in the food system – Describe what the actor actually does, not what they stand for. The useful entry is operational: what decisions a government actor makes, what a research institution produces and who draws on it, what a civil society organisation delivers and at which level, or how a private sector actor's decisions shape what farmers grow or what consumers can access.

- Level of influence – Formal authority and practical influence do not always align. A research institution with no programme mandate may carry significant weight over how a problem is framed before formal processes begin. A civil society network with strong field presence may shape what a state government understands about implementation quality in ways that official monitoring does not. Where formal authority and practical influence diverge, note both. This distinction – between formal authority and practical influence – is developed further in Chapter 3, which provides a framework for systematically assessing and comparing actors across these dimensions.

- Interest in food systems change – Stated positions and operational behaviour are not always the same. Budget allocations, staffing decisions, and what appears on review or board agendas are more reliable signals of genuine interest than mission statements or public commitments – whether the actor is a ministry, a foundation, or a research institution.

- Current relationship with your organisation or coalition – Where a relationship exists through a member organisation rather than the coalition directly, that distinction is worth recording. It affects the pace and nature of how the relationship can be developed, and it is particularly relevant for civil society and research actors where members may hold strong bilateral relationships the coalition has not yet drawn on.

- Possible modes of engagement – Entries are most useful when they are specific enough to act on. Naming a mode of engagement – technical submission, joint convening, media engagement – is a starting point; noting the timing, level, and any prerequisites is what makes it actionable. The illustrative example in Section 1.4.3 shows how this column can be populated. The last two columns are intentionally left blank to show where your organisation's direct knowledge is required.

Where an assessment is uncertain, note the uncertainty rather than leaving the cell blank. Gaps in the map are as informative as what is known – they identify where more intelligence is needed before a strategy is finalised.

1.4.3 Illustrative example – Urban food environment, low-income settlement

Mapped from the perspective of an organisation working on healthy eating habits and food access among urban low-income communities.

Stakeholder /Actor	Role in the Food System	Level of Influence	Interest in Food Systems Change	Current Relationship with you	Possible Modes of Engage-ment
Municipal Health Officer, Ward [X], [City] Municipal Corporation	Responsible for public health services within the ward, including nutrition surveillance, oversight of licensed food vendors, and coordination with ASHA workers and Urban Health Centres. Receives and acts on complaints related to food safety and hygiene in the ward. Controls what health and nutrition priorities are surfaced to the municipal commissioner's office.	Medium – no independent policy authority, but exercises meaningful discretion over how municipal health guidelines are applied locally, which vendors are inspected, and what nutrition messaging is carried through frontline health workers in the ward	Low to medium. Institutional mandate is primarily communicable disease and sanitation. Diet-related NCDs (obesity, diabetes, anaemia) are a growing part of urban health caseloads but are not yet consistently treated as a programme priority at ward level. Individual officers vary significantly in their awareness of and interest in food environment issues		
Street food vendors and informal food stalls, [settlement area]	Primary source of daily meals for a significant proportion of low-income urban households, particularly for working adults and school-age children who eat outside the home. Determine – through what they stock, prepare, and price – the practical food choices available in the immediate environment. Often operate outside formal regulatory oversight, though FSSAI's Eat Right India initiative is extending licensing and hygiene standards into this sector.	High in practice – the food environment of a low-income settlement is largely constituted by what these vendors sell and at what price. Formal authority or influence over policy: low. Influence over community food norms and daily dietary patterns: high	Low in terms of awareness of food systems change as a concept. However, interest in business stability, food safety compliance (to avoid penalty or closure), and customer loyalty creates practical entry points. Vendors who have engaged with Eat Right India certification or received hygiene training have shown interest in recognition and differentiation		

ASHA (Accredited Social Health Activist) workers, [Ward]	Community-level frontline workers under the National Health Mission (NHM), responsible for linking households to health services, conducting awareness sessions on maternal and child nutrition, and tracking beneficiaries of national health programmes. In urban low-income settlements, ASHAs are often the most consistent point of contact between households and the public health system.	Medium in practice – ASHAs shape what households understand about nutrition and health-seeking behaviour. What they communicate, and how, directly influences dietary and care practices among women and young children. Formal authority: none.	Medium. Nutrition and diet are formally part of the ASHA role, but training tends to focus on maternal and child health rather than broader household dietary patterns or food environment awareness. Interest in additional training and community health tools is generally high, where these are practically usable given the volumes of households they manage		

The last two columns are left blank for your organisation to complete based on direct knowledge of these actors in your specific context.

The example works at ward and settlement level – the scale at which urban food environment decisions actually play out for low-income communities. The Interest column reflects realistic variation rather than uniform engagement, which is what a credible assessment looks like in practice.

CHAPTER 2

The Policy Landscape in India

2.1 How Policy is Made

The word "policy" is used loosely to refer to a range of instruments: legislation passed by Parliament, executive notifications issued by a ministry, scheme guidelines that govern how a programme is run, or standards set by a regulatory body like FSSAI. These are different in nature. Legislation is the hardest to change once tabled. Scheme guidelines and regulatory standards are considerably more amenable to revision – and many of the instruments most relevant to food systems work fall into this category.

Policy in India does not begin with a draft. It begins with a problem being recognised as one that the government must address. That recognition can emerge from many directions – political commitments made during elections, judicial orders, Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) audit findings, evidence of failure at scale, or sustained pressure from civil society and the media. Understanding this starting point matters because it tells us something important: the agenda is not set by the government alone, and non-state actors can and do shape what gets treated as a problem worth addressing.

The stages that follow the recognition of a problem – agenda-setting, formulation, decision and notification, and evaluation and revision – each carry different opportunities for external engagement.

[To be added: Visual image of a simple policy cycle diagram showing four stages – 1. Agenda-setting; 2. Policy formulation; 3. Decision and notification; 4. Evaluation and revision.]

- Agenda-settingis where an issue earns government attention. Civil society, the judiciary, media, and research institutions all shape what gets treated as a problem worth solving. Influencing the agenda requires sustained effort and credible evidence, and is strongest when multiple pressure points – a court case, an audit report, media coverage, and a parliamentary question – align at the same moment. No single organisation reliably achieves this alone, which is one reason coalition work changes what is possible at this stage. Where an organisation is not positioned to generate several pressure points at once, it can still contribute by building one part of the evidence or relationship base that later becomes useful. Section 2.4 outlines specific entry points through which such contributions can be made.

- Policy formulation is where the design work happens. The lead ministry drafts a policy note or scheme proposal, drawing on internal technical capacity, commissioned research, and inter-departmental consultation. Expert committees are convened; the Cabinet Secretariat coordinates across ministries before Cabinet consideration. Technical inputs matter most at this stage. The window for non-state actors to influence design is not always formally announced – it often operates through working relationships with senior officials, participation in technical working groups, and informal engagement during the drafting period. Organisations with an established track record with a ministry are better positioned here than those attempting to engage for the first time once a draft has been circulated.

- Decision and notification follows Cabinet approval. As noted above, whether an instrument takes the form of legislation or an executive notification matters enormously for subsequent engagement. Legislation, once passed, is difficult to alter, while notifications and scheme guidelines can be revised without parliamentary process. The distinction is worth checking for any specific instrument one is seeking to influence.

- Evaluation and revision is a recurring but underused entry point. Most centrally sponsored schemes have annual review processes built into their structure. Review is also triggered by CAG audit findings, parliamentary scrutiny, and evidence of implementation failure. Mechanisms such as the NFSA's State Ranking Index and the POSHAN Tracker create recurring moments when implementation evidence is formally considered. Feeding specific evidence into these mechanisms – for example, a district-level analysis of POSHAN Tracker data, cross-referenced with field observations on service delivery – is one of the most direct routes to influencing how programmes evolve.

*Product 2, Chapter 3 translates these stages into a step-by-step engagement sequence for practitioners.

This description of the policy cycle draws on the Ministry of Law and Justice's legislative drafting guidelines (Government of India, Ministry of Law and Justice, 2020), the PRS Legislative Research overview of the legislative process in India (PRS Legislative Research, 2023), and the NITI Aayog's guidance on policy formulation and consultation (NITI Aayog, 2017). Practitioners seeking more detailed accounts of how specific schemes are designed and revised may refer to the scheme guidelines published by the nodal ministry, which typically describe the review architecture.

2.2 How Policy is Implemented

Once a policy or scheme is approved, responsibility for delivery passes through a layered system of government structures. At the central level, the nodal ministry issues implementation guidelines, releases funds to states, and monitors progress through reporting mechanisms. State governments then translate these guidelines into operational orders, constitute programme management structures, and allocate resources to districts. Districts, in turn, coordinate delivery through block and gram panchayat administrations, frontline workers – Anganwadi workers, ASHAs, agricultural extension officers – and, in many programmes, community-based institutions such as self-help groups and Farmer Producer Organisations.

[To be added: Visual representation of a simple implementation flow diagram – Centre - State - District - Block / Gram Panchayat - Frontline workers and community institutions.]

This chain is long. Each link involves interpretation, prioritisation, and resource allocation decisions that are not centrally controlled. A scheme designed with a particular intent at the national level will be shaped, sometimes significantly, by the administrative and political choices made at every level below it. For a coalition seeking to influence outcomes, this means that understanding where in this chain a particular problem originates is as important as understanding the policy itself.

Coalition members are frequently not external to this chain. Organisations working through Anganwadi networks, self-help groups, community-based monitoring mechanisms, or farmer collectives are active participants in how programmes reach people. This matters because their evidence is not only observational; it is often grounded in direct experience of implementation. It also means that engagement with government can be framed not only as advocacy from outside the system, but as feedback from actors who are already helping the system function.

2.2.1 The Centre-State Dynamic

India's federal structure is not a background condition – it is central to how food policy works. The Constitution distributes legislative authority across three lists. International trade and food safety standards sit on the Union List, meaning only Parliament can legislate on them. Agriculture, animal husbandry, irrigation, land, and markets sit on the State List, meaning states hold primary authority. Food trade and social security – the domains most directly relevant to food access and nutrition – sit on the Concurrent List, where both the centre and states hold authority and central law prevails in cases of conflict.

Why does this matter in practice?

For most food-related schemes, the practical consequence is this: the centre designs and funds; the state implements and adapts. The centre determines programme parameters, eligibility criteria, and per-unit allocations. States issue government orders, constitute delivery structures, and exercise discretion in areas the central guidelines leave open. That discretion is real. States can go beyond the minimum requirements set by the centre, adapt schemes to local conditions, and in some cases design entirely new interventions that the centre later draws on as models. This is the logic behind the demo-to-policy approach discussed in Section 2.4.

This creates significant variation in outcomes across states implementing nominally the same programme – variation that is both a challenge to document and an opportunity to point to. A state that has implemented POSHAN 2.0 with strong convergence between its health and agriculture departments will show materially different outcomes from one where ministries are operating entirely in silos. Documenting that variation, and being able to explain what drove it, is precisely the kind of evidence that feeds into national programme reviews.

For organisations with strong state-level presence, engagement at the state level is not a second-best option. It is frequently the most direct path to change, and the access is often more realistic. State government officials are closer to implementation, more responsive to local evidence, and more willing to pilot approaches that the centre may later consider at scale.

Exercise: Trace Where the Decision Actually Sits

Choose one food systems issue your organisation is working on. For example: school meal quality, dietary diversity in Anganwadi meals, FPO market access, street food regulation, post-harvest loss, or millet procurement.

Complete the table below:

Question	**Your response**
What is the specific issue or change you are working on?	
Is the main decision controlled by the centre, the state, the district, or a local body?	
Which ministry, department, mission, or authority is formally responsible?	
Who influences implementation in practice, even if they do not hold formal authority?	
What does this tell you about where engagement should begin?	

Reflection prompt: If your current engagement plan focuses on one level of government, does this exercise confirm that choice – or does it show that another level may matter more?

2.3 Food Systems Across the Policy Architecture

Food systems do not map neatly onto any single ministry, scheme, or constitutional list. They cut across all of them. A child's nutritional status is shaped simultaneously by what her household can grow or afford, what supplementary food she receives at the Anganwadi, whether her mother received adequate care during pregnancy, what the family's ration entitlements are, and whether the local environment supports diverse diets. Each of these is governed by a different ministry, a different scheme, and a different set of actors.

This fragmentation is one of the central challenges of food systems advocacy in India. No single ministry owns the problem. Inter-ministerial coordination on food and nutrition exists in principle – POSHAN 2.0's convergence mandate explicitly calls for it – but in practice, ministries plan, budget, and report against their own mandates. The linkages that make food systems work as a system are rarely the linkages that government structures are designed to manage.

The implication for engagement strategy is direct: an organisation working exclusively through one ministry, or at one level of government, will have a partial view and limited reach. The entry points that matter are distributed. Knowing which institution controls which lever, at which level, and at which stage of the policy cycle is what makes it possible to engage strategically rather than reactively.

For coalitions, the advantage is not only wider access; it is the ability to hold connections between issues that government systems often treat separately. One member may bring evidence on farmer livelihoods, another on nutrition outcomes, another on food loss, and another on local governance. Read together, this evidence can show where the system is failing across departmental boundaries – and where engagement needs to be coordinated rather than fragmented.

2.4 Entry Points for Non-State Actors

'Non-state actors' refers to all actors who are not part of the government – civil society organisations, research institutions, think tanks, international agencies, and the private sector. In the context of this module, the focus is primarily on civil society organisations and coalitions, though research institutions and international agencies are also significant actors in many of the entry points described below.

Civil society organisations engage the policy process through a wide range of mechanisms – legal, technical, relational, and through demonstration. Two strategies that civil society practitioners frequently use in India, and which are worth naming explicitly, are:

- **Mainstreaming** refers to the process of taking an approach, practice, or body of evidence that has been developed in a pilot or project context and working to have it adopted as standard practice within a government programme or policy. For example, a locally tested approach to improving dietary diversity in school meals may be mainstreamed if it is incorporated into state-level menu guidelines or teacher training systems.

- **Demo-to-policy** is a related but distinct strategy. It involves establishing a proof of concept at small scale – demonstrating that a particular intervention works under real field conditions – and using that documented evidence to make the case for policy-level adoption. For example, a district-level model for reducing post-harvest loss through FPO-linked aggregation may become a policy reference if it is documented well enough for state officials to assess its cost, feasibility, and results.

The most productive entry points combine credible evidence with a clear and specific ask, timed to when the relevant decision-making process is active. The table below maps these entry points across the policy cycle, with an honest account of where access is more structured and where it depends on prior relationships and credibility. Product 2, Chapter 3 provides a practical engagement sequence that builds on these entry points.

Stage	Entry Points	Degree of Access	Notes
Agenda-setting	Evidence publications and policy briefs; media engagement; parliamentary questions through sympathetic Members of Parliament; public statements and open letters. Coalition advantage: joint statements signal broader legitimacy and geographic reach; diverse membership makes it harder for the government to treat an issue as a fringe concern.	Indirect	Most effective when sustained and when multiple pressure points align simultaneously – a court case, an audit, and media coverage arriving together carry more weight than any one in isolation.
Budget allocation	Pre-budget memoranda to the Ministry of Finance and line ministries; engagement with the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Finance; state budget consultations. Coalition advantage: aggregated evidence across states and sectors makes the case for resource allocation more compelling than any single-state submission.	Moderate; timing-dependent	Union Budget consultations typically open October–November; state budget processes vary. Specific asks – a per-unit allocation, a new scheme head, a budget line – are more effective than general advocacy for "more funding".
Policy formulation	Technical working groups and expert committees; consultations convened by ministries or NITI Aayog; informal engagement with officials during drafting periods. Coalition advantage: access to multiple ministries and ability to present evidence synthesised across member geographies.	Moderate; relationship-dependent	Access differs by ministry and by issue. Credibility built through prior engagement is often a prerequisite for the informal channels that matter most at this stage.
Standards-setting	Public comment periods on FSSAI draft standards; technical submissions on scheme guidelines; representation on regulatory advisory bodies. Coalition advantage: technical submissions backed by field evidence from multiple states carry more weight than comments from a single organisation.	Moderate to good	One of the more structurally open entry points in food policy; FSSAI formally requires stakeholder comment before a standard is notified. Technical rigour is essential.

Mainstreaming and demo-to-policy	State-level technical working groups; Annual Programme Implementation Plan consultations; presentations to senior programme officials at state review meetings. Coalition advantage: coalitions can share pilot evidence across states and connect state officials to counterparts where similar approaches have worked.	Variable; more accessible at state level	Timing matters: engagement before Annual Programme Implementation Plans are finalised is more productive than after. Approaches that can be presented as evidence-based and low-risk are more readily adopted.
Parliamentary scrutiny	Submissions to Parliamentary Standing Committees; briefing sessions with Members of Parliament. Coalition advantage: a coalition can combine field evidence, technical analysis, and constituency-level experience into one submission, making the input more useful to committees examining both legislation and implementation quality.	Moderate	Standing Committees formally invite external inputs; both legislation and implementation quality can be the subject of submissions.
Scheme design and revision	State-level Joint Review Missions; Annual Programme Implementation Plans; inter-ministerial working groups. Coalition advantage: members across multiple states can participate in state-level reviews simultaneously, producing comparative evidence no single organisation can generate.	Variable; more accessible at state level	Implementation-stage engagement is often undervalued; it is where field evidence carries the greatest weight and where officials are most directly accountable for results.
Implementa-tion monitoring	Community-based monitoring; social audits; POSHAN Tracker data engagement; NFSA State Food Commission grievance processes; Gram Sabha processes. Coalition advantage: coordinated monitoring across geographies produces aggregated findings with statistical credibility that isolated monitoring cannot achieve.	Good at state and district level	The social audit model from MGNREGA – mandatory community-based review of implementation, findings presented publicly – is directly applicable to nutrition and food access programmes.
Evaluation and review	Inputs to CAG review processes; independent evaluations commissioned by state governments; NITI Aayog review processes. Coalition advantage: coalitions that include research institutions, field organisations, and policy actors can produce evaluation inputs that combine methodological credibility with grounded implementation insight.	Limited formally; stronger through research partnerships	Quality of evidence and institutional credibility are the primary determinants of influence at this stage.

2.5 Case Study — The Right to Food Campaign and the National Food Security Act, 2013

Food systems problems resist single-point solutions. They are rarely only technical, only legal, only administrative, or only political. The development of the National Food Security Act (NFSA), 2013 illustrates this clearly. The grain surplus paradox of 2001 was simultaneously a constitutional question, a distribution failure, a programme design problem, and a political challenge. It took more than a decade, and more than one kind of actor, to move it.

The enactment of the NFSA followed twelve years of engagement across India's food policy ecosystem – legal, evidentiary, political, and grassroots. No single actor drove it.

In 2001, government warehouses held over 60 million metric tonnes of food grain – three times the required buffer stock – while starvation deaths were being reported across Rajasthan and other drought-affected states. The People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) filed a writ petition before the Supreme Court, represented by advocate Colin Gonsalves of the Human Rights Law Network. Rather than deliver a single verdict, the Court adopted continuing mandamus – issuing binding interim orders over many years. This kept government obligations enforceable and gave civil society a recurring, formal basis for accountability work at every level of the implementation chain.

Different actor categories engaged around this judicial anchor, each doing what it was best placed to do:

- **Legal actors** secured orders that converted welfare programme questions into constitutional obligations – binding on state governments, not merely aspirational.
- **Research actors** conducted independent field surveys on mid-day meal delivery, ICDS functioning, and PDS access. Court-appointed Commissioners drew directly on this civil society evidence to monitor implementation. Field surveys became court-admissible accountability tools.
- **Grassroots organisations** mobilised at block and district level to demand compliance, generating ground-level intelligence that no Delhi-based actor could produce independently.
- **Civil society networks** monitored threats to programme quality. When packaged biscuits were proposed as a substitute for cooked mid-day meals, the Right to Food Campaign submitted evidence to the Court, helping resist the substitution.
- **Media actors** kept food insecurity in public view across multiple government terms, sustaining political salience in the gaps between formal process moments.

The NFSA's formulation involved the National Advisory Council, comprising social and economic policy experts. Researchers associated with the Campaign contributed to those deliberations, bringing a decade's worth of field evidence into the policy formulation space. The judicial process, the research, and the legislative engagement were led by different actors – but each drew on what the others had built.

The NFSA, enacted in 2013, guarantees subsidised food grains to approximately two-thirds of India's population, universal mid-day meals for school children, supplementary nutrition for children under six, and maternity entitlements.

The entry points in Section 2.4 were not worked in sequence. Agenda-setting, monitoring, scheme revision, policy formulation, and parliamentary engagement ran concurrently, with different actors carrying each. This is what makes the case useful for practitioners: it shows that complex policy change is often built through parallel forms of engagement, held together over time.

Sources: Right to Food Campaign (www.righttofoodcampaign.in); PUCL vs Union of India, Writ Petition (Civil) No. 196 of 2001; Drèze, J. (2004), Economic and Political Weekly; Pinto, S. (2023), PMC/NCBI; Gauri and Poorvi (2014), ESCR-Net; Birchfield and Corsi (2010), Michigan Journal of International Law.

CHAPTER 3

Reading Power, Interest and Influence

Stakeholder mapping helps identify who is present in the ecosystem. The policy landscape helps locate where decisions are made and implemented. Before moving from analysis to communication, practitioners need one further step: a simple way to read which actors matter most, why they matter, and how they may need to be approached.

Power, interest and influence provide that lens. This chapter introduces these concepts briefly so that readers can use the maps developed in Chapters 1 and 2 more deliberately. A more detailed treatment of the power–interest–influence matrix is covered in a separate module.

3.1 What the Three Dimensions Mean

- **Power** refers to an actor's ability to make, approve, fund, block, or enforce decisions. In food systems work, power may sit with a Union ministry, a state department, a district administration, a regulator, a municipal body, or even a market actor that controls access to procurement, distribution, or finance.

- **Interest** refers to how much an actor cares about the issue, or has a reason to engage with it. Interest may come from mandate, political priority, public pressure, funding priorities, reputational concerns, or direct experience of the problem. It should not be assessed only through public statements. Budget allocations, review agendas, staffing, and willingness to participate in working groups often provide clearer signals.

- **Influence** refers to an actor's ability to shape how others think, decide, or act, even without holding formal authority. Research institutions, civil society networks, funders, media actors, respected field organisations, and community leaders may all influence whether an issue becomes visible, credible, or urgent.

These three dimensions do not always sit together. A ministry may have high power but limited interest in a specific issue. A research institution may have no authority to approve a policy, but may strongly influence how the problem is framed. A grassroots network may not control budgets, but may carry the field evidence and legitimacy needed to make an implementation failure visible.

3.2 Using the Lens Before Moving to Engagement

The purpose of this lens is not to score actors mechanically. It is to help practitioners make more deliberate choices after completing a stakeholder map.

A few simple questions can be asked:

- Who has the authority to make or block the decision?

- Who is already interested in the issue?

- Who can influence the actor with formal authority?
- Which relationships already exist through the organisation or coalition?
- Which actors should be engaged now, and which should simply be monitored?

This reading also prepares the ground for Product 2. Once practitioners know who matters and why, they can begin to decide how to communicate with each actor. A high-power, low-interest actor may need a message that connects the issue to their mandate or current pressure. A high-interest, low-power actor may be better approached as an ally, evidence partner, or coalition collaborator. A high-influence actor may need a message designed to shape wider understanding rather than secure an immediate decision.

In this sense, power, interest and influence sit between actor mapping and messaging. They help practitioners move from a broad understanding of the ecosystem to a more focused judgement about where engagement is realistic, what kind of ask is appropriate, and how communication should be adapted.

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