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Practitioner's toolkit

on narratives, messaging and ecosystems engagement on Food Systems Transformation



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Introduction

India is producing more food than at any point in its history. It also has the highest child wasting rates in the world, a diet-related disease burden that the ICMR puts at 56.4% of total illness, and post-harvest losses worth an estimated USD 17.7 billion every year. These are not separate problems – they are symptoms of the same system struggling across multiple points: what is produced, what reaches people, what is affordable, and what is consumed.

Yet the institutions that civil society engages – governments, funders, media, the private sector – frequently treat nutrition, agriculture, health, food safety, and livelihoods as distinct mandates. Organisations working to shift this dynamic often end up making the case in isolation, each from within a specific part of the issue, with limited cumulative effect.

This toolkit equips civil society practitioners to make the food systems argument more coherently and more effectively across different stakeholder contexts. It assumes that readers have some working familiarity with food systems, development practice, or sector-specific work in areas such as nutrition, agriculture, livelihoods, climate, or public health. It is designed to help practitioners translate that experience into clearer messaging and more purposeful engagement.

The toolkit covers:

- Shared narrative – a structured way to articulate the food systems problem, the direction of change, and the practitioner's role, using the WHY–WHAT–HOW framework
- Audience-specific message translation – guidance on adapting messaging for governments, funders, media, the private sector, research institutions, and civil society without losing alignment
- Sample message bank – audience and issue-specific messages grounded in current data, ready to be adapted for use
- SDG-linked messaging – guidance on connecting food systems arguments to the SDG framework for audiences working within it
- Practitioner's guide – a practical engagement sequence covering what to do before and after using the messaging templates, from problem identification to stakeholder follow-through

For practitioners seeking to understand who the ecosystem actors are and how the policy landscape works, Product 1 should be read alongside this toolkit. Product 1 supports actor and policy analysis; this toolkit focuses on how that analysis is translated into communication, positioning, and engagement.

CHAPTER 1

Building a Shared Narrative on Food Systems

Food systems advocacy is mediated through communication. Across policy processes, partnerships, and public discourse, how practitioners articulate the problem – and whether they are understood – affects credibility and influence.

Civil society organisations working on food systems bring distinct perspectives and evidence. This is an advantage, because it allows the agenda to be grounded in different geographies, communities, and kinds of practice. It also creates a risk. External stakeholders do not encounter these perspectives as internal coalition distinctions; they read them as signals of what the food systems agenda represents and whether it merits attention.

This chapter establishes a shared narrative foundation. It clarifies why coherence matters, introduces a structured way to articulate a food systems position, and provides a practical checklist for maintaining alignment across communications.

1.1 The Case for Narrative Coherence

Civil society organisations working on food systems typically operate from distinct contexts, relationships, and vocabularies. This is a genuine asset: it enables varied forms of evidence, engagement across different parts of the system, and relevance across geographies and themes. It also creates a communicative challenge. When messages are weakly aligned, the food systems agenda can appear diffuse, even when the underlying work is substantive.

Narrative coherence keeps communication anchored to a shared position. It allows practitioners to be understood as advancing a recognisable standpoint, with a consistent logic linking the problem, the direction of change, and their contribution. It refers specifically to:

- A shared articulation of the problem being addressed
- Alignment on the direction of change being pursued
- Consistency in how the practitioner's or organisation's role is presented
- Use of evidence that reinforces a common position
- The ability to adapt messaging across contexts without losing core alignment

This is distinct from uniformity. Uniformity would require practitioners to use identical language and communicate in the same way across all contexts – neither practical nor desirable, given the range of stakeholders and constraints involved. It would also erase the specificity of different organisations' evidence, relationships, and field experience, which is precisely what gives a coalition its credibility.

Coherence, by contrast, sets the boundaries within which variation can occur. The problem is framed consistently, the direction of change does not shift, and the role of civil society remains clear. The next section introduces a structured way to build and maintain this coherence.

1.2 The WHY–WHAT–HOW Framework

Narrative coherence requires not only agreement on substance, but a consistent way of expressing it. The WHY–WHAT–HOW framework provides this. It helps practitioners organise communication so that it remains clear and aligned across different contexts and audiences.

1.2.1 Understanding the Frame

The three components serve distinct functions:

- **WHY** – establishes the problem and its significance
- **WHAT** – defines the direction of change being sought
- **HOW** – clarifies the coalition's role and contribution

Together, they form a complete narrative logic. Messages that omit one element tend to lose clarity – either describing problems without direction, proposing change without grounding, or lacking a clear role.

1.2.2 Illustrative Example: Nutrition Education in Schools

The table below illustrates how the framework can be applied in CoFTI's context. It is not exhaustive or prescriptive. Its purpose is to show how each component translates into practice, what strong application looks like, and where messaging commonly weakens.

Aim	How it translates into work (Illustrative: Nutrition Education in Schools)	Signals of strong application	Signals of weak application
WHY – The Problem			
Establish that the issue is systemic, not isolated	Link poor dietary habits among children to gaps in school-based nutrition education, food environments, and household consumption patterns; connect to rising NCD risks and uneven nutrition outcomes; draw from field evidence and programme experience	Problem connects behaviour, environment, and systems; uses relevant evidence; aligns with current policy concerns (e.g. child health, learning outcomes, NCDs)	Frames issue narrowly as "lack of awareness" or a single intervention gap; no link to broader food system or policy context
WHAT – The Change			
Indicate a specific shift in how the system should function	Integrate structured nutrition education into school curricula; align it with school meal programmes and local food systems; enable state-level adaptation and teacher capacity building	Change is tied to identifiable levers (curriculum, programme design, state implementation); actionable at a defined level; clearly improves system functioning	Uses broad statements ("improve awareness among children"); lacks clarity on where change should occur or who acts
HOW – The Coalition's Contribution			
Position CoFTI as a credible, enabling actor	Bring field-tested models of school-based nutrition education; synthesise evidence across states; convene education, health, and food system actors; support design and adaptation	Coalition role is specific (evidence, convening, synthesis); adds value to decision-makers; proportionate to context	Role is unclear, generic, or overstated; message shifts to individual organisations; no link between coalition capability and the ask
Choosing emphasis			
Shape the message based on the actor and moment	For state education departments: lead with actionable integration into curriculum (WHAT); for media: lead with child health and behaviour (WHY); for partners/ funders: lead with coalition capability and scale (HOW)	Message is focused on what the actor responds to; one element is clearly foregrounded; others remain aligned in the background	Message attempts to cover all elements equally; feels generic; does not respond to the specific context of engagement

The table should be used as a reference while preparing or reviewing communication. In practice, members will foreground different elements depending on the situation. Coherence is maintained when, across these variations, the framing of the problem, the direction of change, and the coalition's role remain consistent. The same logic can now be applied to any food systems challenge.

Exercise: Applying the Framework to Your Issue
The same logic applies to any food systems challenge – whether post-harvest loss, farmer income, urban food environments, or agroecological transition. Use the template below to develop a narrative for an issue relevant to your context, working through each component in sequence.

- Insert blank template

Reflection questions:

- Does the problem statement go beyond a single gap – connecting behaviour, environment, and systems?
- Is the change sought tied to an identifiable lever that the relevant actor can act on?
- Is the role claim specific and proportionate to what the organisation can deliver?
- Would a decision-maker in the target audience recognise their own mandate in the framing?

This exercise works individually or in a group. Comparing how practitioners frame the same issue across organisations tends to surface assumptions that are otherwise difficult to see.

1.3 Message Alignment Checklist

Having a shared narrative matters less than applying it consistently. The checklist below distils principles from policy and development communication into six dimensions. The order matters: a message must first be clear about its purpose and core point before it is refined for audience, evidence, tone, structure, or timing.

It should be used as a pre-engagement review tool, particularly for external communication.

Dimension	Questions to ask
1. Purpose and core message	◎ What is the purpose of this communication (inform, influence, request, convene, position)? ◎ What is the one key takeaway for this audience? ◎ Can this be clearly stated in one or two sentences? ◎ If the audience remembers only one thing, what should it be?
2. Alignment with coalition narrative	◎ Does this reflect CoFTI's framing of the problem as systemic? ◎ Is the direction of change consistent with the coalition's position? ◎ Is the coalition's role clear and appropriately represented? ◎ Does the message reinforce the coalition's identity rather than that of a single organisation?
3. Audience relevance	◎ Who is this message for? ◎ What are their current priorities, constraints, or pressures? ◎ Why should this matter to them now? ◎ Does the framing connect to their mandate or decision-making role? ◎ Are we using language and framing that this audience is likely to respond to?
4. Clarity	◎ Is the message easy to understand on first reading or hearing? ◎ Are key terms and concepts clear? ◎ Is there any ambiguity in what is being said? ◎ Does the message avoid unnecessary complexity or abstraction?
5. Use of evidence	◎ What evidence supports this message? ◎ Is it credible, recent, and relevant? ◎ Is it the right type of evidence for this audience (data, field insights, examples)? ◎ Does it strengthen the message without overwhelming it? ◎ Are claims proportionate to the evidence being used?
6. Structure, language, tone and timing	◎ Is the message logically structured (clear flow from problem to implication)? ◎ Is it concise and focused on the most important points? ◎ Is the language simple and free of jargon where possible? ◎ Is the tone appropriate to the context and relationship? ◎ Is this the right moment to communicate this message? ◎ Is the format suited to the channel being used?

The checklist is a tool for quality, not uniformity. The goal is that messages remain clear and aligned regardless of who is drafting them or which audience they are meant for.

CHAPTER 2

Audience-Specific Messaging

A shared narrative is a foundation. Making it effective requires translating it for different actors – governments, civil society organisations, the private sector, research institutions, media, and funders – each of whom operates within a distinct mandate, responds to different pressures, and makes decisions differently.

This chapter focuses on that translation: how a single narrative can be adapted so that it is understood, taken seriously, and acted upon across different contexts.

2.1 The Logic of Message Translation

The need for message translation arises from how decisions are made in practice. Different actors are accountable for different outcomes, operate within different constraints, and respond to different incentives. As a result, the same evidence does not carry equal weight across contexts.

For instance, a central ministry is more likely to engage with questions of scale, coordination, and alignment with national priorities. A state department is more responsive to implementation gaps and operational feasibility. A private sector actor evaluates risk, cost, and opportunity. A journalist looks for clarity, narrative value, and public relevance. In each case, the underlying issue may be the same, but the point of entry into the conversation differs.

Effective communication depends not only on what is said, but on how it connects to the audience's decision-making context. Messages that miss this tend not to land.

Message translation, therefore, involves:

- identifying what the actor is currently prioritising or responding to
- selecting the element of the narrative most relevant to that context
- framing the issue in terms that connect to the actor's mandate or incentives
- making the implication or ask clear and actionable

For example, the same evidence on post-harvest food loss may be framed for a state agriculture department as a farmer income and market efficiency issue, for an urban local body as a market infrastructure issue, and for a funder as an investment gap with measurable returns.

The problem framing, the direction of change, and the practitioner's role remain fixed. What shifts is how the narrative connects to the specific audience. When this distinction is not maintained, communication either becomes too generic to land, or shifts position in ways that undermine credibility.

2.2 Message-by-Audience Table

The table below illustrates how a food systems narrative can be translated across specific audience groups, drawing on structures used in UN and World Bank communication toolkits. It links audience type to decision-making drivers, framing, evidence, and the nature of the ask. It is a reference for preparation, not a set of fixed messages.

Audience (Illustrative examples)	What drives them in practice	How to frame the issue	What evidence is most persuasive	Nature of ask
Central Government (e.g. MoA&FW, MoHFW, MoWCD, NITI Aayog officials; Joint Secretaries; policy advisors)	National targets (nutrition, farmer income), inter-ministerial coordination, flagship programme performance, political visibility	Position food systems as a cross-sectoral issue requiring alignment across ministries; link to Viksit Bharat, SDGs, and national outcomes	National datasets (NFHS, NSS), cross-state comparisons, synthesis reports, alignment with national targets	Inclusion in national frameworks, inter-ministerial coordination mechanisms, policy convergence
State Government (e.g. Secretaries, Directors, Mission Directors, District Collectors, Programme Officers)	Scheme implementation, fund utilisation, district performance, audit findings, political accountability at state level	Frame as implementation gap with actionable solutions; link to state-specific outcomes and delivery systems	State/district data, field evidence, implementation case examples, operational insights	Adoption of specific practices, convergence at state/district level, programme adjustments
Civil Society & Field Organisations (e.g. state NGOs, grassroots organisations, network partners, FPO support institutions)	Alignment of efforts, resource constraints, community impact, legitimacy of action	Emphasise shared purpose, complementary roles, and coalition coherence; position as collective effort rather than duplication	Field experiences, community-level insights, case studies, practice-based evidence	Collaboration, alignment of interventions, joint advocacy or pilots
Private Sector (e.g. agri-input companies, food processors, retailers, start-ups, impact enterprises)	Supply chain reliability, cost structures, regulatory environment, market opportunity, reputational risk	Frame in terms of supply chain resilience, efficiency, and emerging opportunities; highlight intersections with business outcomes	Business cases, pilot results, cost-benefit insights, supply chain data	Partnerships, co-investment, adoption of responsible sourcing or distribution models
Research & Academic Institutions (e.g. ICAR institutes, NIN, IFPRI, universities, think tanks)	Credibility, methodological rigour, contribution to knowledge, policy relevance	Position issues as areas requiring deeper analysis and interdisciplinary collaboration; connect field insights to research gaps	Peer-reviewed literature, datasets, synthesis of field evidence, identified gaps in current knowledge	Collaborative research, validation studies, joint publications
Media (e.g. national newspapers, regional media, digital platforms, specialist agriculture / nutrition / health journalists, general assignment reporters)	Story relevance, public interest, clarity, timeliness, narrative value	For specialist journalists, retain policy and technical detail where useful. For mainstream or general assignment reporters, simplify the framing, lead with public relevance, and make the human or institutional implication clear.	Human stories, relatable examples, key statistics, trend data, field evidence, and clear links to current events or policy debates	Coverage, amplification, framing of public discourse, or deeper reporting on an under-recognised food systems issue
Funders / Donors (e.g. CSR heads, philanthropic foundations, bilateral agencies like GIZ, FCDO)	Impact, scalability, alignment with priorities (SDGs), accountability, portfolio fit	Frame as a high-leverage systems intervention with potential for scale and measurable outcomes Also see Section 2.3.2 for SDG-linked messaging that can be adapted for funder and bilateral conversations.	Impact data, cross-sectoral insights, scalability pathways, alignment with SDGs and national priorities	Strategic funding support, long-term partnerships, portfolio alignment

The table should be read as a guide to how emphasis shifts across audiences. In practice, members will draw selectively from these elements depending on the context. Coherence is maintained when, across these variations, the underlying narrative remains consistent.

2.3 Sample Message Bank (Illustrative)

The messages in this bank are organised by transition areas, actors, and relevant Sustainable Development Goals. In this context, "transition areas" refers to the specific food systems shifts around which communication may be built – for example, nutrition and food environments, food loss and waste, farmer livelihoods and market linkages, or food systems investment and scale.

These messages are starting points. Each is written with a specific actor or focal area in mind and grounded in current data. Practitioners should adapt them by adjusting register, incorporating state-specific evidence, and reflecting recent developments before use. The bank should be updated as new data becomes available. Messages should also be translated into local languages where relevant.

What these messages are for:

- Opening a conversation on a new theme with an unfamiliar actor.
- Framing a written communication or concept note.
- Preparing a spokesperson or team member for a stakeholder meeting.
- Anchoring coalition materials in evidence.

What they are not:

- They are not talking points to be read aloud or distributed as-is.
- They are not a substitute for understanding the specific policy context, funding priorities, or institutional mandate of the actor you are engaging.

2.3.1 Actor-linked Messaging

Cells are left blank where the actor–transition combination does not yield a genuinely distinct or actionable message.

Transition	State Government & Departments	Central Government & Departments	Urban Local Bodies & FSSAI	Funders & Bilateral Agencies
Nutrition & Food Environments	India's child wasting rate – 18.7% of children under five – is the highest in the world, and the ICMR attributes 56.4% of the country's total disease burden to unhealthy diets. Both problems are present at the state level, and both are shaped by decisions that sit within state jurisdiction: what is taught in schools, what is served in anganwadis, what is procured for the public distribution system, and what food environments look like in urban and peri-urban areas. POSHAN Abhiyaan provides the national architecture, but its outcomes depend on state-level implementation. States that have treated nutrition as a convergence priority – linking agriculture, health, and education – have seen measurably better outcomes than those that have managed it as a welfare scheme.	India ranks 102nd out of 123 countries on the 2025 Global Hunger Index – despite producing a record 357 million tonnes of food in 2024–25. This is not a production problem. It is a food systems problem: of what gets produced, how it moves, what it costs, and what reaches whom. At the same time, 56.4% of India's total disease burden is now attributable to unhealthy diets, and a 2025 Lancet projection puts India's overweight and obese adult population at 450 million by 2050. The policy architecture – NFSA, POSHAN Abhiyaan, PM POSHAN, FSSAI's Eat Right India – exists. The gap is convergence: agriculture, health, and food processing operate with distinct mandates, timelines, and data systems. Bringing them into alignment, at the district level where schemes actually intersect, is where national nutrition policy becomes nutrition outcomes.	India's quick service restaurant market reached USD 25 billion in 2024 and is projected to reach USD 38 billion by 2029, growing at nearly 9% annually. Against this, FSSAI's own data shows that 38% of Indians consume unhealthy foods and only 28% meet the five recommended food groups. The consequence is measurable: the ICMR finds that among urban youth, 11% show signs of diabetes, 35% hypertension, and 40% are clinically obese. Urban local bodies and food regulators are not bystanders to this trend – they shape it, through decisions on street food licensing, school meal procurement, public market infrastructure, and the enforcement of labelling standards. Improving urban food environments does not require new legislation. It requires existing mandates to be exercised with nutrition outcomes as an explicit objective.	India's nutrition situation presents a case study in the limits of production-focused investment. The country produces more food than at any point in its history, yet 172 million people remain undernourished and child wasting rates are the highest in the world. At the same time, diet-related NCDs are rising sharply across income levels. Philanthropic and bilateral investment in nutrition has historically concentrated on supplementation and fortification. The evidence now points toward food environment interventions – procurement policy, market infrastructure, and food labelling – as higher-leverage entry points. These are underfunded relative to their impact, and they require sustained investment over a longer horizon than most nutrition programmes have been willing to hold.

Transition	State Government & Departments	Central Government & Departments	Urban Local Bodies & FSSAI	Funders & Bilateral Agencies
Food Loss and Waste	India loses between 6–15% of its fruit and vegetable output to post-harvest inefficiencies, according to the 2022 NABCONS study submitted to Parliament. These losses are not uniform across the value chain – they concentrate at specific points: inadequate on-farm storage, poor connectivity between mandis and cold chain facilities, and the absence of grading and sorting infrastructure that would allow produce to move into higher-value markets. State agriculture departments control many of the relevant levers: mandi regulation, cold storage incentives, extension support for post-harvest handling, and coordination with the private sector on processing infrastructure. Addressing loss at these points has a direct effect on farmer income – not as a welfare measure, but as a value chain efficiency intervention.	India's post-harvest losses amount to an estimated USD 17.7 billion annually – equivalent in scale to Afghanistan's GDP. A 2022 NABCONS study found that horticulture alone accounts for losses of 49.9 million metric tonnes each year, driven primarily by cold chain gaps. These losses represent a simultaneous failure on three fronts: farmer income, food availability, and natural resource efficiency, since every tonne of food lost carries with it the water, land, and labour used to produce it. The Prime Minister's World's Largest Grain Storage Plan and PM-KISAN provide the fiscal scaffolding. What is needed alongside this is a coordinated inter-ministerial approach – linking the Ministry of Food Processing Industries, Ministry of Agriculture, and the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade – to reduce losses systematically rather than sector by sector.	Urban wholesale markets, last-mile distribution points, and the street food and catering sector are where a significant share of India's post-harvest losses become visible and actionable. Losses of 6–15% of fruits and vegetables before reaching the consumer represent both a food availability and a livelihoods problem – for vendors and small traders as much as for farmers. Urban local bodies have direct authority over the physical infrastructure that shapes these outcomes: market facilities, vendor licensing conditions, cold storage access points, and organic waste management systems. Reducing loss at the urban end of the chain does not require displacing existing market systems. It requires improving the conditions under which they operate – which is, in practice, a function of regulation and public investment that urban governance bodies are already mandated to provide.	India's post-harvest losses of USD 17.7 billion annually represent a quantifiable and addressable inefficiency – not a structural intractable. The NABCONS data is specific about where losses occur and why. Targeted investment in rural cold chain infrastructure, smallholder storage solutions, and processing capacity has a direct and measurable return in farmer income, food availability, and reduced greenhouse gas emissions from wasted production. The financing gap in this area is not primarily a question of commercial viability – post-harvest infrastructure investment in middle-income agricultural economies has a track record. It is a question of risk perception, the absence of blended finance mechanisms that make first-mover investment viable, and the chronic underfunding of the last mile: storage and logistics at the level of the individual farmer or FPO.

Transition	State Government & Departments	Central Government & Departments	Urban Local Bodies & FSSAI	Funders & Bilateral Agencies
Farmer Livelihoods & Market Linkages	Agriculture contributes 16% of India's GDP and employs 46% of its workforce. Eighty-six per cent of operational holdings belong to small and marginal farmers – those with less than two hectares – who face compounding disadvantages: limited bargaining power, long intermediary chains, and income that is highly exposed to price and weather volatility. Over 29,000 Farmer Producer Organisations have been registered by mid-2025, and evidence shows FPO membership improves price realisation and reduces poverty incidence. Yet FPO performance varies significantly across states and commodities. States with active FPO promotion – backed by NABARD and SFAC support, adequate working capital, and commodity-specific market linkages – are achieving outcomes that states with only registration-level engagement are not. The distinction between creating FPOs and making them functional is a state-level governance question.	India's agricultural policy has historically prioritised production – with considerable success. Foodgrain output reached 357 million tonnes in 2024–25. The frontier challenge is what happens after harvest. Farmers typically receive a fraction of the final consumer price, with the gap absorbed by intermediary chains that add cost without proportionate value. The government's FPO promotion programme, with over 29,000 organisations registered by mid-2025, represents a structural response to this problem. Its effectiveness depends on whether FPOs can access working capital, negotiate with institutional buyers, and compete on quality and reliability. Policies that determine this – relating to credit access, contract farming regulation, APMC reform, and processing incentives – sit across multiple ministries. A cross-ministerial review of how current policy either supports or constrains FPO market integration would surface the points of friction that limit the programme's impact.	-	India's smallholder agricultural sector employs the largest farm workforce in the world, the majority of them with less than two hectares. Private equity and venture capital investment in agricultural value chains averaged just USD 892 million annually between FY2020–22 – concentrated in storage solutions and R&D, with very little reaching market infrastructure and logistics at the smallholder level. FPOs offer a bankable aggregation structure, but most lack the working capital, offtake guarantees, and technical support that would make them viable partners for institutional investment. Blended finance instruments – first-loss capital, credit guarantees, and patient equity – that de-risk investment in FPO market linkages represent a high-leverage entry point for funders seeking durable and measurable livelihood outcomes. The investment case exists; the enabling architecture does not yet.

Transition	State Government & Departments	Central Government & Departments	Urban Local Bodies & FSSAI	Funders & Bilateral Agencies
Food Systems Investment & Scale	India's food systems span agriculture, nutrition, health, water, environment, logistics, and food safety – governed through distinct state and central departments with separate budgets, mandates, and data systems. At the state level, this produces specific and predictable failures: schemes arrive through parallel channels with no guidance on prioritisation, local institutions are overloaded, and evidence generated in one department does not inform decisions in another. States that have made progress on food systems outcomes – Odisha's Millet Mission is a frequently cited example – have done so by treating food systems as a convergence domain, not a departmental one. The building blocks are present in most states. What is typically missing is a designated coordination function, with enough authority and enough cross-departmental access to identify and reduce the friction between existing programmes.	India has the policy architecture for food systems transformation: POSHAN Abhiyaan, PM-KISAN, the National Food Security Act, the FPO promotion programme, and FSSAI's Eat Right India. The evidence that these programmes are not yet delivering commensurate outcomes – on nutrition, on farmer income, on food loss – points to a governance problem rather than a resource problem. Food systems span at least eight central ministries, and inter-ministerial coordination mechanisms are weak relative to the complexity of the domain. Districts, where multiple schemes actually intersect and where delivery happens, typically have neither the mandate nor the capacity to align them. A national food systems governance framework – establishing convergence mechanisms, shared data standards, and district-level coordination accountability – would not require new programmes. It would require existing ones to work together.	Urban food governance in India sits across FSSAI, urban local bodies, state health departments, and agricultural marketing boards, with limited formal coordination between them. The result is that decisions about street food licensing, school meal procurement, cold chain investment, and food labelling enforcement are made in parallel rather than as part of a coherent urban food strategy. Several Indian cities – Bengaluru, Pune, and Hyderabad among them – have begun developing integrated urban food strategies, but these remain exceptions. A more systematic approach, linking food safety regulation, nutrition-sensitive procurement, public market investment, and urban planning, is technically feasible and within the existing mandate of urban institutions. The gap is not authority – it is coordination, resourcing, and the political will to treat food as an urban systems issue rather than a welfare one.	The returns to food systems investment are highest when policy, finance, and implementation are aligned – and lowest when they operate independently. In India, a substantial share of food systems investment – public, private, and philanthropic – runs in parallel, with limited connection between what pilots demonstrate, what policy enables, and what finance scales. This is not a problem any single funder can resolve through programme design. It is a structural feature of how investment flows are organised. Funders that coordinate – on evidence standards, co-investment frameworks, and shared advocacy for the enabling policy environment – generate impact that isolated grants do not. The Indian food systems space has sufficient activity. What it lacks is investment architecture – a way of organising finance, evidence, and policy engagement so they compound rather than run in parallel.

Transition	State Government & Departments	Central Government & Departments	Urban Local Bodies & FSSAI	Funders & Bilateral Agencies
Systems Coordination & Policy	India's food policy landscape at the state level is characterised by programme proliferation and institutional fragmentation. Nutrition, agriculture, food processing, and food safety functions sit in separate directorates, often with no formal mechanism for alignment. The consequence is that good schemes underperform not because they are poorly designed, but because they are implemented in isolation from the conditions that would make them effective. POSHAN Abhiyaan's own structure – which attempts convergence across six departments – is an acknowledgment of this problem. States that have gone further, creating dedicated food systems coordination functions with cross-departmental authority, have demonstrated that convergence is achievable within existing institutional structures. The question for state governments is not whether to coordinate, but what coordination mechanism is proportionate to their food systems challenge.	Food systems policy in India is generated by at least eight central ministries – Agriculture, Health, Food Processing, Consumer Affairs, Water Resources, Environment, Education, and Women and Child Development – each with its own mandate, budget cycle, and performance metrics. The result is a policy environment that is simultaneously active and fragmented: well-designed programmes working at cross-purposes, evidence that does not travel between departments, and a gap between the ambition of national frameworks and the coherence of their implementation. A National Food Systems Coordination Mechanism – with a mandate to align NDC commitments, nutrition targets, and agricultural policy – would not require new institutional creation. It would require an existing body, most logically NITI Aayog, to be explicitly mandated for food systems convergence, with the data systems and inter-ministerial access to make that mandate operational.	-	-

Primary data sources: 2025 Global Hunger Index; UN State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World (SOFI) 2025; ICMR–NIN Dietary Guidelines for Indians; NABCONS Post-Harvest Loss Study 2022 (as presented to Lok Sabha, August 2024); FAO–CPI Agrifood Landscape Report 2025; FSSAI Eat Right India; India Economic Survey 2023–24; 2023 national soil health survey; Science Advances groundwater–cropping intensity study; Lancet Regional Health – Southeast Asia 2024; NAFPO FPO registration data, 2025. All figures should be verified against primary sources before use in formal settings.

2.3.2 SDG-Linked Messaging

The SDG framework is useful when engaging funders, bilateral agencies, national and state governments, and platforms already working with global development commitments. These messages should not replace the actor-linked messages above. They are intended to help practitioners connect food systems work to recognised SDG priorities when that framing is useful for the audience. Possible cases of use:

SDG 1 – No Poverty	For state governments, livelihoods funders, and bilateral agencies focused on inclusive growth
SDG 10 – Reduced Inequalities	
Food systems transformation – through FPO strengthening, market linkages, post-harvest investment, and improved access to affordable food – is among the more direct routes to reducing rural poverty and economic inequality. SDGs 1 and 10 cannot be achieved in India without addressing the structural conditions that determine what smallholder farmers earn, how much value they retain, and what low-income households can afford to eat.	
SDG 2 – Zero Hunger & Food Security	For national and state governments, bilateral agencies, and nutrition funders
India's progress on SDG 2 is uneven. Record food production has not translated into zero hunger: 172 million people remain undernourished, child wasting rates are the highest in the world, and micronutrient deficiencies persist across income levels. SDG 2 will not be achieved through production alone. It requires attention to what food is available, at what cost, and for whom. Food environments, procurement policy, and post-harvest infrastructure are underfunded levers. Meeting the 2030 target requires a shift in both investment and policy attention toward these system-level drivers.	
SDG 3 – Good Health & Well-Being	For health ministries, urban local bodies, FSSAI, and health-focused funders
The ICMR attributes 56.4% of India's total disease burden to unhealthy diets. Diet-related non-communicable diseases – diabetes, hypertension, and cardiovascular disease – are rising among urban populations, including younger age groups. SDG 3 targets on premature NCD mortality cannot be met without addressing the food environments that shape dietary behaviour. What is produced, marketed, labelled, and made accessible directly determines what people eat. Progress on SDG 3 requires health systems and food systems to be governed in alignment.	
SDG 5 – Gender Equality	Women's livelihood programmes, SHG and FPO platforms, gender-focused funders, state rural livelihoods missions
Women are central to food systems as agricultural workers, food processors, caregivers, consumers, and members of SHGs and FPOs. Yet their work is often under-recognised and under-resourced. Food systems transformation can advance SDG 5 when it improves women's access to productive assets, market linkages, nutrition knowledge, income opportunities, and decision-making spaces. Gender should therefore not be treated only as a beneficiary lens; it should shape how food systems interventions are designed, financed, and governed.	
SDG 12 – Responsible Consumption & Production	For environment ministries, the food processing industry, urban local bodies, and sustainability-focused funders
India loses an estimated USD 17.7 billion worth of food annually to post-harvest inefficiency. Every tonne lost carries with it the water, land, energy, and labour used to produce it. SDG 12 is therefore a food security and livelihoods target as much as an environmental one. Reducing food loss and waste requires investment in cold chain infrastructure, processing capacity, and last-mile logistics, as well as urban food governance systems capable of reducing losses at the distribution end of the chain. Progress in this area is measurable, falls within existing institutional mandates, and has direct returns for farmer income and public health.	
SDG 13 – Climate Action	For environment ministries, climate finance bodies, and NDC-aligned funders
Food systems account for approximately one-third of global greenhouse gas emissions. In India, agriculture and land use change are significant contributors to the national emissions profile, while food insecurity is itself a climate vulnerability. Reducing food loss, supporting more diverse and less input-intensive production, and improving urban food logistics can contribute to both mitigation and adaptation. NDC commitments and SDG 13 targets provide an accountability framework for integrating food systems into climate finance. Civil society organisations are well-placed to make these connections visible, especially where formal government processes have not yet consistently done so.	
SDG 17 – Partnerships for the Goals	For bilateral agencies, foundations, and multi-stakeholder platforms
The scale and complexity of food systems transformation exceeds the mandate of any single actor. In practice, this means aligning investment flows, harmonising evidence standards, and building the enabling policy environment through coordinated engagement rather than isolated programmes. Civil society organisations working across research, field implementation, and policy advocacy are a structural part of this architecture – not a delivery mechanism for others' priorities.	

Audience-specific messaging is not about changing the substance of the food systems argument each time a new actor is engaged. It is about making the same argument legible to different mandates, incentives, and decision-making contexts. The next chapter turns this into a practical sequence: how practitioners can move from identifying a problem to building evidence, mapping connections, crafting the message, and following through after engagement.

CHAPTER 3

Championing an Integrated Approach to Food Systems: A Practitioner's Guide

The messaging frameworks in this toolkit work best when they are embedded in a structured process. This chapter provides that structure – a practical sequence from problem identification to stakeholder engagement and follow-through. The sequence is not rigid. Practitioners will move between steps and return to earlier ones as the context shifts. This guide should be read as the point where the two products come together.

Step 1: Identify the Problem

The starting point is a precise articulation of what needs to change and why it matters now. Vague problem statements produce weak engagement. Decision-makers respond to problems that are specific, evidenced, and connected to something within their remit.

At this stage, it is worth asking whether the problem is genuinely systemic, or whether it is only being described that way. What other parts of the food system are implicated? Whose lives are most directly affected? Are their perspectives informing how the problem is being understood?

Equally important is the question of timing. Policy windows are finite – elections, budget cycles, and institutional transitions all create moments of openness that close quickly. Understanding why now matters is as important as understanding what the problem is.

- Useful tools and practices:
  - Problem mapping – Identifying the actors, incentives, and feedback loops that sustain a problem helps distinguish symptoms from structural causes before external engagement begins. Causal loop diagrams and influence maps are standard tools in policy planning and useful for this purpose.
  - Community voice – Field interviews, participatory rural appraisals, and community consultations surface evidence that national datasets cannot provide. This evidence should be documented in formats that can be used externally – short case studies, testimony, field notes, photographs, or visual documentation.
  - Story as evidence – A well-constructed story can show why a problem matters in ways that data alone rarely does. It works best when it is accurate, specific, and clearly connected to the wider systems argument.

Use Product 2, Chapter 1, Section 1.2 – The WHY–WHAT–HOW Framework to convert the problem into a clear narrative structure. The WHY should clarify the problem and its significance before the practitioner moves to the change being sought or the role being claimed.

Step 2: Build an Evidence Base and Understand the Local Context

The quality of external engagement depends heavily on preparation. This includes understanding the policy landscape, what is already being done, and the pressures facing the actors one wants to reach.

A practitioner who understands what a state department is currently being held accountable for, or what a funder's current portfolio priorities are, is better placed to frame a convincing argument. It is also important to understand what has been tried before. Knowing where previous efforts stalled – and why – shapes both the framing of the problem and the nature of the ask.

◎ Useful tools and practices:

- Primary data sources – For food systems work in India, commonly used sources include NFHS, NSS, NABCONS, ICAR, ICMR–NIN, FSSAI, the Global Hunger Index, and SOFI reports. Current figures from these sources provide a reliable baseline for external engagement.

- Policy landscape scanning – Ministry annual reports, parliamentary committee reports, and state budget documents often reveal actual priorities more accurately than official policy statements. These are worth reviewing before approaching any government actor.

- Local implementation evidence – District-level data, field observations, community feedback, implementation gaps, and case examples help practitioners move from national framing to locally grounded engagement.

- Horizon scanning – SDG reporting periods, COP processes, budget cycles, and electoral calendars all create windows of relevance. Tracking these in advance allows engagements to be timed more deliberately.

Use Product 1, Chapter 2 – The Policy Landscape in India, especially Sections 2.1, 2.2 and 2.4, to understand how policy is made, how implementation moves across centre, state, district and frontline systems, and where non-state actors can realistically enter the process.

Use Product 2, Chapter 2, Section 2.3 – Sample Message Bank and Section 2.3.2 – SDG-Linked Messaging for evidence-backed language that can be adapted once the local context is clear.

Step 3: Map Connections and Identify Entry Points

Relationships are as important a resource as the evidence base. The question at this stage is not only who the right actors are, but who has access to them, who influences them, and through what route engagement may be possible.

Existing connections – within civil society, across sectors, with funders, inside government, and through coalition members – should be mapped before deciding how to approach an engagement. It is also worth identifying the most credible messenger for a specific audience and moment. A technically sound argument delivered by the wrong person will not land.

In some cases, working through a trusted intermediary – a peer government official, respected researcher, practitioner, funder, or private sector actor with relevant standing – may be more effective than direct engagement.

◎ Useful tools and practices:

- Actor and relationship mapping – Identify who holds decision-making authority, who influences those decision-makers, who is affected by the issue, and who already has a relationship with whom.

- Formal and informal networks – Formal spaces such as inter-ministerial committees, consultations, parliamentary forums, and multi-stakeholder platforms provide structured access. Informal networks – professional associations, shared funders, alumni links, and peer relationships – often provide faster routes. Both are worth cultivating.

- Coordinated engagement – Where multiple organisations share a position, joint submissions, shared evidence, aligned public communication, or collective convening usually carry more weight than isolated outreach.

For a structured approach to actor mapping, including a fillable template and worked example, see Product 1, Chapter 1, Section 1.4 – Using the Stakeholder Mapping Template.

Use Product 1, Chapter 3 – Reading Power, Interest and Influence to decide which actors should be engaged now, which should be approached through allies, and which should be monitored.

Use Product 1, Chapter 2, Section 2.4 – Entry Points for Non-State Actors to identify whether the most realistic route is policy formulation, standards-setting, implementation monitoring, mainstreaming, demo-to-policy, parliamentary scrutiny, or evaluation and review.

Step 4: Identify Your Audience and Craft the Message

The same food systems problem reads differently depending on who is in the room. Translating the shared narrative into communication specific to an actor, a moment, and an ask is the core task at this stage.

The most useful discipline is specificity. Who precisely is being engaged – not just a category, but a named role, institution, or individual? What are they currently responding to? What is the one thing they should understand or do as a result of this engagement? Is the ask within their power to act on?

◎ Useful tools and practices:

- Message testing – Testing a message with a trusted peer who knows the audience – before a high-stakes engagement – is a simple way to identify whether it is likely to produce the intended response. The question is not only whether the message is accurate, but whether it will land with this specific actor.

- The one-page brief – For government and institutional audiences, a single-page summary covering the problem, evidence, and ask is often more effective than a longer document. It should be tailored to the specific actor rather than used as a generic note.

- Stories as communication tools – A farmer who lost produce because cold chain infrastructure ended three kilometres from her holding, or a child whose school meal did not meet basic nutritional standards, can make a systems argument tangible. Stories should sit alongside data, not replace it.

- Format discipline – TThe same content may need to be packaged as a policy brief, two-minute verbal summary, visual one-pager, longer analytical note, presentation, or media pitch. The format should match the audience, channel, and moment.

Use Product 2, Chapter 1, Section 1.2 – The WHY–WHAT–HOW Framework to structure the message.

Use Product 2, Chapter 1, Section 1.3 – Message Alignment Checklist as a pre-engagement review tool before sharing the message externally.

Use Product 2, Chapter 2, Section 2.2 – Message-by-Audience Table to adapt the framing for government, civil society, private sector, research institutions, media, and funders.

Use Product 2, Chapter 2, Section 2.3 – Sample Message Bank for issue-specific language and Section 2.3.2 – SDG-Linked Messaging where the audience responds to SDG, bilateral, or global development framing.

Step 5: Engage and Follow Through

How a message is delivered is as consequential as what it says. This step involves selecting the right channel, format, and moment – and thinking through what sustained engagement looks like beyond a single interaction. A useful question at this stage is what a successful outcome actually looks like: a meeting secured, a commitment made, a framing shift, a new partnership. Clarity on this shapes both how the engagement is conducted and what follow-up is needed.

- Useful tools, modes of engagement, and practices:

  - Policy engagement – Formal submissions, briefings, and participation in government consultations are the primary channels for influencing policy. Submissions tend to be most effective when concise, evidence-based, and concluding with a specific ask. Following up in writing after verbal engagements helps confirm what was discussed and maintain accountability.

  - Convenings and roundtables – Bringing decision-makers and practitioners into the same room creates conditions for relationship-building and position-shifting that formal submissions cannot replicate. Pre-convening outreach to secure the right participants and post-convening documentation to capture commitments both matter.

  - Field demonstrations and exposure visits – Showing decision-makers what works in practice is often more persuasive than written or verbal argument, particularly with audiences unfamiliar with ground realities. A functioning FPO, a school nutrition programme, a cold chain facility – these make the abstract concrete.

  - Digital and social media campaigns – Useful for building public visibility and creating political salience. Campaigns tend to work better when anchored in a clear narrative, supported by visual content, and sustained over a defined period. LinkedIn reaches policy and institutional audiences most effectively; X and Instagram reach broader publics.

  - Media engagement – Op-eds, interviews, press briefings, and background conversations shape how issues are framed in public discourse. Relationships with journalists covering food, agriculture, health, and policy are worth cultivating over time rather than activated only when there is something to announce.

  - Community and peer channels – Community radio, local language publications, and peer networks reach audiences that formal and digital channels do not. These channels also generate the stories and field evidence that strengthen communication across other modes.

  - Documentation and learning – After each significant engagement, prepare a short

internal note recording what was done, what response it generated, what commitments were made, and what should be done differently. This is the discipline that turns experience into learning.

Use Product 1, Chapter 2, Section 2.4 – Entry Points for Non-State Actors to choose the appropriate engagement route.

Use Product 2, Chapter 2, Section 2.2 – Message-by-Audience Table to check whether the channel and format are appropriate for the audience.

Use Product 2, Chapter 1, Section 1.3 – Message Alignment Checklist after engagement as well as before it, to assess whether the message remained clear, aligned, and appropriate to the moment.

The steps listed above form a cycle. Policy windows open and close, evidence accumulates, personnel change, and new actors enter the space. Practitioners should return regularly to Step 1 to reassess the problem framing, stakeholder landscape, evidence base, and effectiveness of past communication.

This is especially important in food systems work, where policy priorities, evidence, actors, and public narratives shift quickly. The discipline is not to produce one perfect message or one fixed engagement plan. It is to keep the argument clear, the evidence current, the audience specific, and the follow-through consistent.

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