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Rethinking Food Policy: A Fresh Approach to Policy and Practice

Brief 3: Integrated food policy: What is it, and how can it help transform food systems?

A systems approach

Integrated food policy is a response to a paradox: food is increasingly understood as an interconnected system, but policies targeting different parts of the food system are typically made in isolation. So what does integrated food policy look like in practice?

For at least two decades, there has been pressure – from academics, civil society, industry and some policymakers – to join up the many policies influencing food systems and move food up the policy agenda. Food systems are increasingly understood as an interconnected system of “everything and everybody that influences, and is influenced by, the activities involved in bringing food from farm to fork and beyond”.¹

Taking a systems approach means looking at connections between the different parts of a

system, understanding where activities in one part of the system impact on another and where feedback within the system is broken.

A systems approach to food policy means making these connections across discrete policy areas, different levels of government, and between the public, private and third sectors. Developing more integrated policy has the potential to support such connections. But there are currently few examples of integrated food policy, and those that have been tried have often fallen short of their aims.

Fragmented food policy

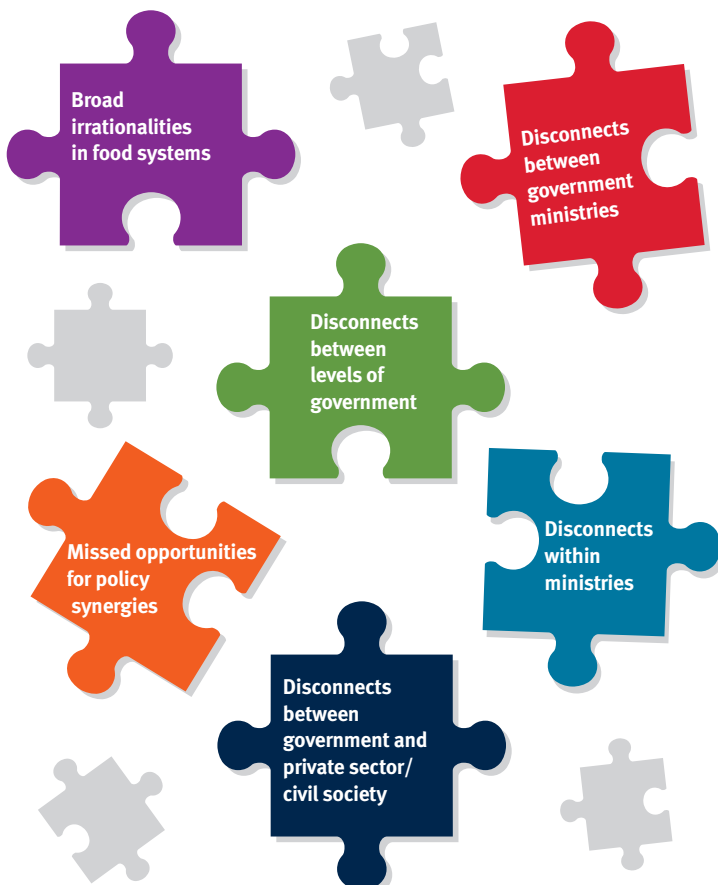
Understanding how food policy has developed and recognising its various disconnects can help explain the need for integrated food policy.

Public policy has been the main focus of calls for more joined-up food policy. This is because historically governments have tended to address food issues through policies, strategies or plans focusing on one or occasionally two aspects concerning food independently.² This approach was understandable when governments' primary concern was ensuring an adequate food supply through agriculture and trade.

But – because of changes in how it is produced and consumed, and the resulting impacts on the health of the planet and its inhabitants – food has become relevant for policy areas beyond agriculture and trade. Food is now relevant to domains including health, environment, education and migration, though it is rarely a top priority.

At the same time, there is seldom any coordination of the range of food-related activities going on across government. This fragmentation means that activities may be pulling in different directions, the relative importance of food-related objectives is not clear, or food issues end up falling through the cracks between policy responsibilities.

Fragmentations that integrated food policy can address



Integrated food policy is a way to rectify the hangovers from the past by overcoming different types of food policy disconnects:

- 1 **Irrationalities in food systems**, such as hunger when there is sufficient food, or externalised costs in food production and consumption, which mean the price of food fails to reflect the true cost of its environmental and health impacts.
- 2 **Disconnects between government ministries**, where activities pull in different directions, for example, one part of government recommending eating fish for health reasons, while another addresses critical fish stocks. Issues can also fall through gaps between ministerial responsibilities for food, for example, failure to include food insecurity in a government's obesity strategy.
- 3 **Disconnects between levels of government**, where work at one level is hindered by a lack of support from another, such as when national policy relies on implementation at local level, or local policy action is unsupported by national policy (see p. 7 for examples).
- 4 **Disconnects within ministries**, where work on food in one division happens in isolation from related work in another.
- 5 **Disconnects between government and private sector/civil society**, where their agendas – such as a private-sector profitability motive and a public-sector health initiative – may be pulling in different directions, or relevant specialist industry or on-the-ground knowledge fails to make it onto the policy agenda.
- 6 **Missed opportunities for policy synergies**, for example, failing to underpin policies with the principle of healthy and sustainable diets, which are good for people and the planet; and failure to link food and planning, or agriculture and diets.

Fragmented definitions, connected aims

The term “policy integration” comes from the field of public policy, but several other terms are used, often interchangeably, to address fragmentation in (food) policy: policy coherence; policy coordination; joined-up; cross-government; and whole-of-government policy. Most of these are associated with integration across government horizontally.

Integrated food policy is **the joining up of goals and policies related to food systems – horizontally across governments, vertically between government levels, or between inside and outside government actors – to better align these efforts, reduce incoherence between them, and tackle food systems challenges more effectively.**

A distinction should be made between the integration of policymaking *process* and coherence of policy *content*. Both are needed for a joined-up approach to food policy. Policy coherence is a term popularised in the development field, and has been applied more commonly in relation to avoiding conflicts in objectives and outcomes between policy areas. An example is the economic policy incoherence resulting from OECD countries providing subsidies to their own agricultural sector while other policies encourage developing countries to export their agricultural produce to world markets (see Brief on Policy Coherence).



What can be integrated?

Policy areas/ domains	This is the most common focus of integration, involving joining up siloed policy areas represented by particular portfolios or ministries with a role in making food policy, such as agriculture, industry or health.
Policy levels	Food policy is made at multiple levels – local, national, regional and global. But without formal coordination between them there can be contradictions, inconsistencies and limits to what activities can be taken at different levels; for example, what local councils have the power to tackle in a food strategy or what EU countries are able to take national action on.
Goals	Integration can also apply to incorporating particular food systems goals – such as health and sustainability – into food policies, to make sure they take account of these priorities.
Parts of the food supply chain	The agri-food industry is often considered a homogenous stakeholder group and food businesses can be highly integrated along their own supply chains. But there can be disconnects between interests in different parts of the supply chain, which can mirror policymaking fragmentation. An example is the way farming and manufacturing can be treated as separate groups by policymakers. Farmers also tend to be disconnected from consumers, whereas manufacturers – and especially retailers – have closer links.

Integrated food policy in practice

Though there is growing acceptance that food systems suffer from policy fragmentation and silo working, there is still debate over what integrated food policy means in practice and how it can be made to happen. But several distinct approaches are emerging.

Examples of integrated policies that have been implemented at a national level are particularly scarce. UK and Australian cross-government food policy projects, for example, were never implemented because of changes in government. Examples of national food security policies, such as India's National Food Security Act 2013, that take a comprehensive, rights-based approach to food security do not integrate all the different aspects of food. There are examples of city-level projects, but their integration methods are in most cases difficult to establish.³

The three main types of integrated policy are:

Type 1: Bringing policies together

Many attempts to join up policy involve the creation of a new plan or strategy to bring all (or several) aspects of policy related to food together in an overarching cross-government or whole-of-government project. These can aim to join policy across different areas, or levels of government, or address different parts of the supply chain, and may aim to integrate particular goals around health and sustainability.

The UK's 2008 national food policy

In 2007 Prime Minister Gordon Brown's Strategy Unit was charged with examining the government's "approach to food policy right across the board".⁴ The result was a report, *Food Matters: Towards a Strategy for the 21st Century*, which highlighted the need for a clearer policy framework to "fit the different elements together more effectively"⁵ because the "UK has not had a comprehensive statement of 'food policy' since the Second World War" and "a patchwork of strategies addresses different aspects of the food system".⁶ It led to the creation of novel cross-cutting mechanisms for food policy, including a food policy task force of civil servants and a cabinet sub-committee on food. It also instigated several cross-departmental policy programmes, including an Integrated Advice to Consumers project to link fragmented nutrition, safety and environmental advice, and a cross-government food research group.

While food's social and environmental challenges and a joined-up approach were given strong and unprecedented focus, the report did not address food production in any detail, and therefore fell short of tackling all aspects of the food system. A second report, *Food 2030*, was published two years later by the Department for Environment, Food

and Rural Affairs and was described as "the first attempt since the 1950s to bring together cross-government policy on food into one overarching policy framework".⁷ The report combined *Food Matters'* attention to social – in particular health – and environmental challenges with the themes of food security and production. But, while *Food 2030* considered the food system more broadly, it focused heavily on identifying issues and general recommendations for future actions, rather than an implementation plan. A change in government in 2010 meant the project was abandoned.⁸ A process to develop a new national food strategy for England was launched in 2019.⁹

There are also variations of bringing everything together: projects which aim to bring together part of government, rather than the whole of government, covering some but not all policy related to food systems. An example is a national or city food security policy, which might encompass health, social assistance, agriculture or education.

Belo Horizonte's food security policy

The Brazilian city of Belo Horizonte's food security policy is perhaps the best example of an integrated approach in action. It has been described as "a world pioneer in tackling food consumption, distribution and production as components of an integrated urban policy for food security".¹⁰ Its programmes range from subsidised food sales through "people's popular restaurants"; school meal provision, including sourcing from small-scale farmers; programmes for linking producers and consumers; support for urban agriculture; and education and training programmes on healthy diets and the safe handling, storage and cooking of foods.¹¹ This was supported by several governance mechanisms (see p. 7).

Scaling down further still, there are efforts to bring together two policy areas related to food, through what has been called "policy patching".¹²

Nutrition-sensitive agriculture

Nutrition-sensitive agriculture aims to incorporate nutrition goals into agricultural practices and policies. It focuses on ensuring agriculture makes nutritious foods more available and affordable. In low- and middle-income countries there is a growing number of interventions designed to make agricultural practices more nutrition-sensitive, such as biofortification, homestead food production, irrigation systems for nutritious foods, aquaculture and

the development of market linkages for nutritious foods.¹³ According to the Food and Agricultural Organisation of the United Nations (FAO), an enabling policy environment is essential if these types of agricultural programmes and investments are to effectively contribute to improving nutrition.¹⁴ The FAO recommends that policies are needed to “increase incentives (and decrease disincentives) for availability, access, and consumption of diverse, nutritious and safe foods through environmentally sustainable production, trade, and distribution” (see p. 2). Potential examples include seed sector policy frameworks that support indigenous varieties and mainstream their production into national breeding programmes, requirements for procurement from local farmers for school meals and policies on food safety for nutritious foods.¹⁵

Type 2: Food in all policies

This approach aims to ensure food is included in other policy areas. It is a style of policy integration which has been used to address environmental issues (environmental policy integration), health issues (health in all policies) and gender issues (mainstreaming). It involves targeting policy areas which do not necessarily focus on food explicitly, raising the profile of food challenges and advocating for what food can do to achieve wider policy goals. It may mean joining up policy areas, parts of the supply chain or policy levels, but the primary focus is integrating food, and food system goals, into policies. This can entail getting food written in to other top-tier strategies. It can also involve a combination of bringing together and “food in all policies”: for example, a food strategy is developed which covers food across a city, while at the same time food issues in broader policy areas are targeted (see Brief on Food in All Policies.)

The London Food Strategy

The 2018 London Food Strategy was developed with integration as an aim from the start. Along with creating a specific food strategy that takes a holistic view of food in the city, the Greater London Authority Food Policy Team also

pursued an innovative approach to ensure “the positive role that food can play in everyone’s lives has been integrated across the full range of Mayoral strategies”.¹⁶ These include seven statutory strategies the mayor must publish, on the environment, spatial development, transport, economic development, housing, culture and health inequalities. Through the mechanism of a strategy coordination working group, the team ensure “actions in the London Food Strategy complement those in other strategies, and officers will work together across policy areas to maximise opportunities for good food”.¹⁷

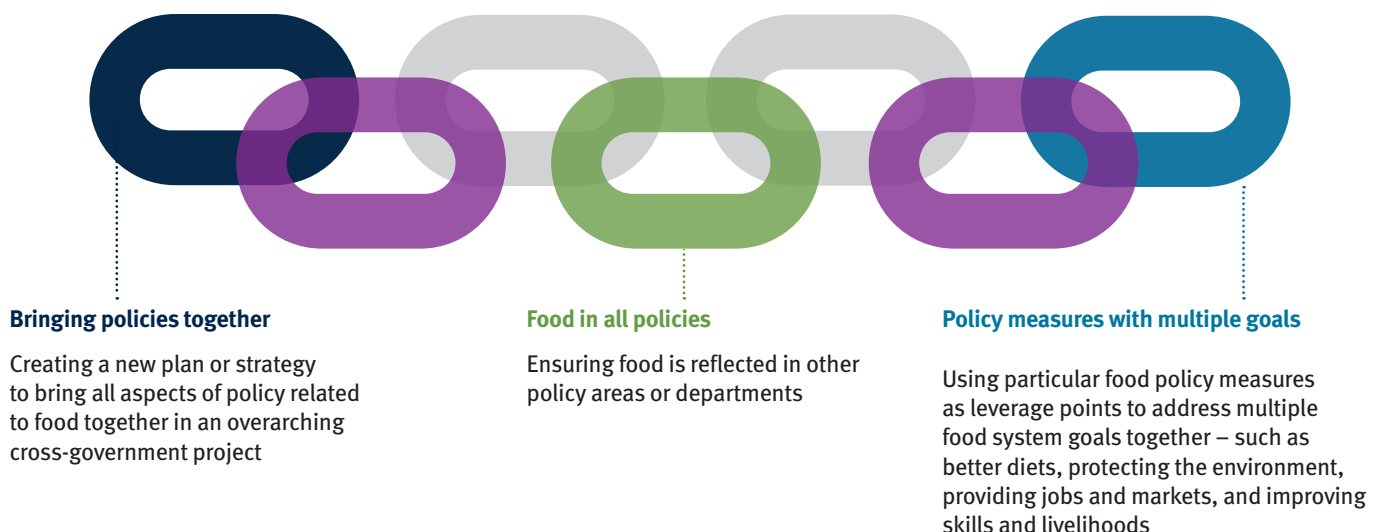
Type 3: Policy measures with multiple goals

Tackling an entire national or local food system at once can be overwhelming, and tensions in the current mix of policy goals and priorities mean that looking for ways to move forward which incentivise cross-cutting working is challenging.¹⁸ One pragmatic way to take a more integrated approach is to use particular food policy measures – such as procurement, labelling, skills development and innovation – as leverage points to address multiple food system goals together. This is the least explored method of integration – and procurement has been the primary focus to date – but may, ironically, have the most potential.

Toronto’s “Grab Some Good” supply chain initiative

Food procurement is a policy measure with significant potential to act as a food systems leverage point. Grab Some Good is a collaboration “between multiple levels of municipal, provincial and federal government, charitable organizations, academic institutions and community agencies”.¹⁹ Fresh food – sourced from local farmers, where possible – is delivered to low-income neighbourhoods and vulnerable groups via pop-up and mobile markets. Exploring ways to use imperfect fruit and vegetables in an effort to reduce food waste’s impact on the environment and targeting skills development mean there are potentially multiple systemic benefits from this one intervention.

Types of Integrated Food Policy



Implications for a different approach to food policy

Examples of integrated food policy remain rare, particularly at national level, but there are vital lessons to be learned from past efforts. So what could improve chances of future success?

1

Be clear about what is in scope

Most countries have many different food-related policies, but specific food plans and strategies that bring them together in one place are relatively new. A historic challenge for national integrated food policy projects has been defining what aspects of food should be included. Despite rhetoric about a cross-government approach, food production tends to dominate efforts to develop a national, integrated food policy. In particular, the prioritisation of goals around food industry productivity, innovation and competitiveness means holistic food policies can end up focusing primarily on agri-food industry output. Conversely, since there is a food angle to almost all policy, there is potential for practically any policy to be part of an integrated policy – from social policy to labour policy, transport to urban planning. Being clear about the scope of a project from the outset will reduce the risk of the end reports being narrower than envisaged, or unfocused.

These issues tend to be less visible, or less problematic, at city level, because the purpose is often to introduce food into other policy areas for the benefits it can bring.

2

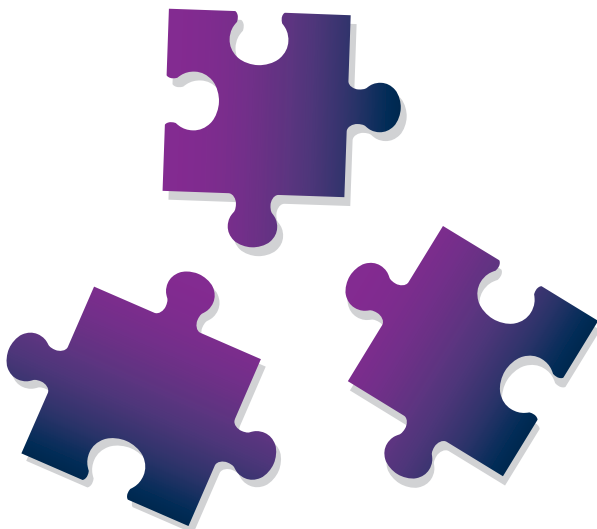
Acknowledge tough choices

There are inherent tensions between the goals of different food-related policy areas – for example, between health, environmental and economic goals.²⁰ Historically these tend to go unmentioned, particularly in national “bringing together” food policy projects, which develop visions with goals for improved food systems for better health, protecting the environment, and economic gains, and collate existing policies without addressing the relevance of these different goals to each other. One example is how supporting current approaches to livestock production may be incompatible with making dietary and sustainability changes. Often tactical ambiguity is used to secure multiple stakeholders’ support for a project. But true integration means addressing the interactions and being clearer about where trade-offs must be made between different interests.

3

Build in mechanisms to protect against political fragility

Integrated food policies often impose new ideas and relationships beyond the policymaking status quo and require long-term visions, which take time to develop. There is a tension on a practical level with the political cycles and staff changes which characterise modern government. Food policy projects may, by their nature, be temporary, meaning the implementation of a longer-term plan is not supported by staff or other resources. Projects closely associated with a particular political party are unlikely to survive a change in government. At city level, it can be challenging to maintain momentum, particularly if relying on one or two local government “champions” to support a strategy.²¹ Because integrated food policies have so rarely been



implemented, there is no obvious solution to this problem, but one important lesson is on timing: previous national food policy projects in the UK and Australia took several years to develop and were launched only months before an election. Incoming governments in both cases rejected the new food policies, which were closely identified with their predecessors. So working out a project timetable which aligns with electoral cycles is sensible. Exploring the potential for cross-party consensus, including cross-party commissions, is another possible response.

4

Redesign governance architecture to support holistic food policy

The fragmented approach to food is often exacerbated by policy-making practices and structures which lag behind new ideas about what food policy needs to be: there is rarely any specific place within government which can deal with food holistically, meaning those working in one ministry on food may not be aware of other food-related activities or goals elsewhere in the same government (see Brief on Governance).

Because most governments do not have a ministry of food,²² ministries of agriculture can end up dominating an integrated food project, which can skew the focus and impede input from other departments. In addition, joint meetings between departments are rare and there are few if any mechanisms for coordinating on food. An exception is Brazil's intersectoral food and nutrition approach, which has been supported by several governance mechanisms. At a city level, there are many different types of food policy council, which can support food policy. These may be housed within government or in civil society.²³

Other governance mechanisms which could be used to support an integrated food policy approach include: creating a new unit or commission inside or outside government to advise and monitor; and creating a new ministerial post or special portfolio, or new ministry, with broad responsibility for food.

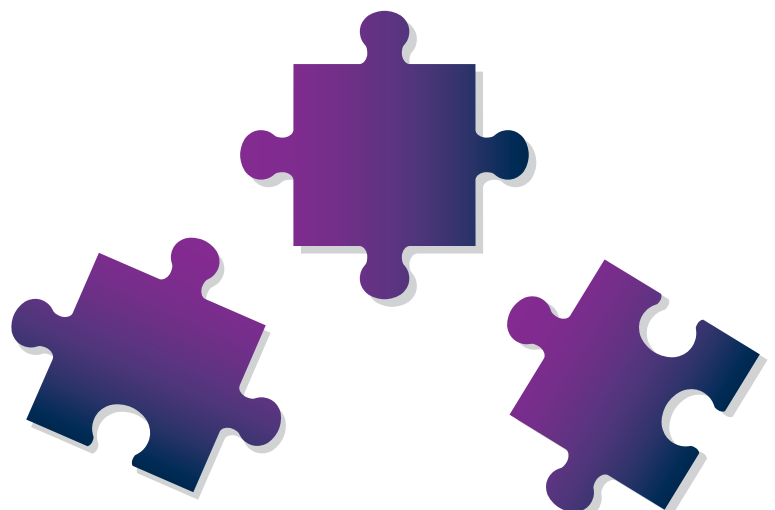
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Understand what levers are accessible

Because responsibilities for food policy are split across several levels – global, supranational, national and local – it can be challenging for a project at one of those levels to take an integrated approach, as some policy areas, or levers, may be outside its control. For example, national governments may rely on local authorities to implement policy, or local governments can be frustrated in their efforts because decisions are taken at national level.

In the case of the Amsterdam Healthy Weight Programme, for example, the city had responsibility for public health locally, but advertising to children was controlled by national legislation.²⁴ And when New York requested a waiver from federal administration to allow the city to ban the use of SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, formerly the Food Stamp Program) vouchers for soda, it was refused.²⁵ These issues can be particularly tricky if different political parties are in power at different levels. Food policy also increasingly involves the activities of those outside of government, such as the food industry and civil society, limiting what government mandates can tackle. The tendency towards voluntary levers – though a political choice – further constrains government's own ability to implement more integrated activities. Plans and strategies for a more holistic approach need to take into account the levers which are, and are not, within the scope of the project when setting goals.

In a world where food systems are an increasing focus, a more integrated approach to food policy makes sense. The growing evidence on how it has been, and could be, done needs to be extended, with more examples of what a successful integrated policy approach looks like in practice, and a better record of how food policy is currently being made, in order to understand the changes needed to address food systems effectively.



Notes

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