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Policy Brief

Key Principles for Country Theory of Change for Food Systems Transformation Anchored in CAADP Strategic and Action Plan (2026–2035)

AGRA-IFPRI Policy Brief #1

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About AGRA

Established in 2006, AGRA is an African-led and Africa-based institution dedicated to placing smallholder farmers at the core of the continent's burgeoning economy. AGRA is focused on scaling agricultural innovations that help smallholder farmers towards increased incomes, better livelihoods, and improved food security. AGRA understands that African farmers need uniquely African solutions to the environmental and agricultural challenges they face, enabling them to sustainably boost production and gain access to rapidly growing agricultural markets. In collaboration with its partners, AGRA catalyzes and sustains an inclusive agricultural transformation aimed at increasing incomes and enhancing food security in 12 countries.

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About IFPRI

The International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), a research center of CGIAR, provides research-based policy solutions to sustainably reduce poverty and end hunger and malnutrition in low- and middle-income countries. IFPRI was established in 1975 to identify and analyze alternative national and international strategies and policies for meeting the food needs of the developing world, with particular emphasis on low-income countries and on the poorer groups in those countries. Partnerships, communications, capacity strengthening, and data and knowledge management are essential components for translating IFPRI's research to action and impact. The Institute's regional and country programs play a critical role in responding to demand for food policy research and in delivering holistic support to country-led development. IFPRI collaborates with partners around the world.

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Recommended citation: Ulimwengu John, Vine Mutyasira, and Boaz Keizire. 2024. "Key Principles for Country Theory of Change for Food Systems Transformation Anchored in CAADP Strategic and Action Plan (2026-2035)." Policy Brief 1. Nairobi: AGRA, IFPRI, and IDRC.

Policy Brief #1¹

1. Introduction

Africa is at a pivotal moment in its journey toward achieving sustainable agricultural development, food security, and climate resilience. Agriculture, which employs over 60% of the continent's population, plays a critical role in economic growth and poverty reduction. Yet, Africa's food systems are under pressure from multiple challenges, including widespread food insecurity, malnutrition, environmental degradation, and vulnerability to climate change. Despite two decades of significant advancements through the implementation of the **Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP)**, the continent faces complex issues that demand a more transformative and systemic approach to agricultural development.

The latest Africa Union 4th CAADP Biennial Review Report shows that none of the Member States are on-track towards achieving the CAADP Malabo commitments by 2025. The continent is doing particularly poorly on the ending hunger commitment, with none of the countries on-track towards achieving access to agriculture inputs and technologies, agricultural productivity, and food security and nutrition. The 2024 Africa Food Systems Forum (AFSF) saw a greater commitment from global leaders, Africa Heads of States, private sector, civil society, and international organizations to scale up investment in the transformation of Africa's food systems to ensure food and nutrition security in Africa while creating jobs and opportunities youth and women. The year also saw intensification of engagements around the Post-Malabo discussion which have seen a strategic shift towards a broader agri-food systems approach.

The upcoming Kampala Declaration in January 2025 will see the launch of the **CAADP Strategy and Action Plan (2026-2035)**, which introduces a shift from a traditional focus on agricultural production to a broader **agri-food systems transformation** approach. This strategy aligns with the goals of **Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs)** under the **Paris Agreement**, addressing the critical intersections of food production, climate change, and sustainable development. To operationalize this ambitious agenda at the country level, the development of tailored **Country Theory of Change (ToC)** frameworks is essential. These frameworks will serve as blueprints for aligning national food systems transformation strategies with broader regional goals under CAADP, the **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**, and **Agenda 2063**.

Through funding from the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) has been working in collaboration with AGRA on a project aimed at strengthening the coherence of food systems indicators and outcomes of the CAADP BR processes. The work seeks to address gaps and mismatches between UN Food Systems Summit priorities and existing CAADP BR process, with an exploration of how new or existing instruments can inform development of a more comprehensive set of food systems indicators to be integrated into the CAADP process. The goal is to enhance food systems thinking among African decision makers. The project has been working towards fostering greater coordination and integration of food systems indicators into national agendas, piloting this initiative in Ethiopia, Ethiopia, Malawi, and Rwanda. This endeavor is not just about numbers and frameworks; it is expected to empower policymakers, guide crucial

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policy decisions, and enhance the tracking of Africa's journey towards sustainable and resilient food systems.

This policy brief outlines the critical importance of developing country-specific **Theories of Change (ToCs)** for transforming food systems across Africa, drawing on insights from country experiences and lessons from the IDRC project. Robust ToCs provide an important framework for guiding country food system transformation efforts and strengthening coherence of food systems indicators and outcomes. They also allow for a greater appreciation of the trade-offs and synergies across multiple and often competing goals, as well as interlinkages across critical sectors. By focusing on key outcomes such as food security, economic inclusion, and environmental sustainability, the **Country ToCs** will align national efforts with the broader objectives of the **CAADP Strategy and Action Plan (2026-2035)**, ensuring that Africa can meet its developmental and climate goals in the coming decades.



2. The Case for a Country Theory of Change for Food Systems Transformation

In an era of accelerated efforts to transform Africa's food systems, the need to develop robust and comprehensive framework to effectively harmonize, consolidate and integrate food systems indicators and coordinate action across sectors cannot be overemphasized. A Country Theory of Change (ToC) provides a detailed roadmap for how a nation can address the interconnected challenges facing its food systems. It allows for the identification of strategic entry points where interventions can have the most impact, and it highlights ways to align food systems with sustainability and equity principles. This could also be used as a critical rallying point to ensure that there is a coherent process and systems that would allow and enable countries to report on implementation of food systems pathways, the NDCs and the CAADP Malabo Commitments.

A country ToC is a strategic and tailored approach that helps nations identify the specific challenges and opportunities within their own food systems. It provides a structured pathway to define how policies, interventions, and resources can be best leveraged to achieve long-term goals. This includes integrating sustainable agricultural practices, climate-smart technologies, and inclusive economic strategies to empower marginalized groups such as smallholder farmers, women, and youth. The transformation of Africa's food systems is a complex process that requires a clear alignment between desired outcomes, policies, and activities. The success of such transformation hinges on ensuring that policies provide a strategic framework that not only guides actions but also directly leads to the achievement of tangible outcomes, such as improved food security, sustainability, and economic inclusivity. Without this alignment, there is a risk that well-intended policies will remain theoretical constructs with little impact on the ground, failing to translate into meaningful change.

Furthermore, with agriculture being a key contributor to greenhouse gas emissions in Africa, the need to align food systems transformation with climate goals is more urgent than ever. A well-designed **Country ToC** enables countries to tailor their agri-food policies to their unique environmental, social, and economic contexts, ensuring both mitigation of and adaptation to climate change. It also promotes **climate-smart agriculture**, sustainable land management, and low-carbon development, which are critical components of Africa's strategy to meet its NDC commitments.

In a nutshell, the key rationale for developing country ToCs for food systems transformation can be summarized as follows:

- ❖ **Context-Specific Challenges and Opportunities:** Every African country has unique agricultural landscapes, socio-economic structures, and environmental conditions. A **Country ToC** allows nations to design interventions that are sensitive to their specific needs, whether it's enhancing drought resilience, improving access to markets for smallholder farmers, or scaling up agro-industrial capacity.
- ❖ **Strategic Pathways for Transformation:** The Country ToC lays out a clear sequence of actions—starting with policy development, moving through practical activities such as capacity building and infrastructure investment, and culminating in desired long-



term outcomes like food security and climate resilience. This structured approach helps align national priorities with CAADP's broader objectives.

- ❖ **Monitoring and Accountability:** By defining specific milestones and outcomes, the Country ToC supports monitoring and accountability mechanisms. The Biennial Review (BR) process, a core component of CAADP, can use these country-specific frameworks to track progress, ensuring that each nation is moving toward its food system transformation targets.
- ❖ **Inclusive and Participatory Planning:** A Country ToC encourages inclusive planning by involving key stakeholders—governments, civil society, the private sector, and local communities—in the design and implementation of food system strategies. This ensures that the needs of marginalized groups such as women and youth are fully integrated into national development plans.



3. Implementation of Country ToCs

Country TOCs provide a strategic framework for guiding national efforts to develop food systems that are resilient, inclusive, and sustainable. However, translating these frameworks into tangible outcomes requires strategic planning, stakeholder engagement, and effective governance. The ensuing section discusses some of the imperatives in the development and execution of country ToC and the necessary conditions for ensuring catalytic change.

3.1 Ensuring Coherence Between Policies and Activities:

Policies serve as instruments for achieving specific outcomes, but their success depends on how well they are translated into **practical, on-the-ground activities**. Activities must be directly linked to the outcomes they aim to achieve, and the implementation of policies must be proactive, with ongoing monitoring and adaptation. For example, to achieve the goal of **improved food security**, policies that enhance agricultural productivity should also address issues of distribution and accessibility. To be effective, food security policies must be complemented by the following:

- **Building rural infrastructure**, including roads, storage facilities, and transportation networks, to ensure that food can reach markets efficiently.
- **Improving logistics for food distribution**, especially in remote or vulnerable areas, where infrastructure gaps often lead to food shortages despite adequate production levels.
- **Promoting local markets** and regional trade to encourage the distribution of food within countries and across borders, increasing access to diverse and affordable food supplies.

This alignment ensures that the activities are **outcome-driven** and directly address the issues of **access, availability**, and **affordability** of food.

3.2 Aligning Policies with Sustainability Goals:

Similarly, policies aimed at promoting **sustainability** in food systems must encourage practices that reduce the environmental footprint of agriculture. Activities aligned with such policies include:

- **Conservation agriculture**, which promotes soil conservation techniques such as minimal tillage, crop rotation, and cover cropping to preserve soil health and water retention.
- **Organic farming practices** that reduce the use of chemical inputs and pesticides, thereby minimizing environmental degradation and promoting biodiversity.
- **Agroecological practices** that focus on using natural processes, such as biological pest control and integrated farming systems, to enhance agricultural productivity in an environmentally sustainable manner.

The coherence between policies and activities ensures that environmental sustainability is embedded within the daily operations of food systems, and that the long-term impact of agricultural practices is both productive and protective of natural resources.



3.3 Integrated and Flexible Policy Approach

Fragmented policies and weak governance structures often result in poor coordination across sectors and ministries, slowing the progress of food systems transformation. The transformation of Africa's food systems requires a **holistic** and **flexible policy approach** that accounts for the **interconnectedness** of agriculture with other sectors, such as trade, health, environment, and education. Policies must not operate in silos but rather encourage collaboration across multiple sectors to ensure that interventions are integrated and mutually reinforcing. Given the complexity of Africa's food systems and their susceptibility to external shocks—such as climate change, market volatility, and health crises—this approach is necessary to achieve **sustainable and resilient outcomes**. It will be critical to strengthen institutional governance and coordination among relevant ministries such as Agriculture, Environment, Health, among others, and align policies to ensure an integrated approach to food systems transformation.

3.4 Cross-Sectoral Synergies:

Food systems do not exist in isolation; they are deeply intertwined with other systems such as **water management, energy, public health, and trade**. Policies that promote these cross-sectoral linkages help to create synergies that maximize productivity and sustainability. For instance:

- **Agriculture and water management policies** must work together to ensure that water resources are sustainably managed for irrigation, without depleting natural water systems or contributing to land degradation.
- **Agriculture and health policies** can ensure that food production is not only sufficient in quantity but also addresses public health concerns, such as malnutrition and foodborne diseases.
- **Agriculture and climate adaptation policies** need to be harmonized to ensure that food systems are climate-resilient and can withstand extreme weather events, which are becoming more frequent due to global climate change.

3.5 Adaptability and Responsiveness:

A flexible policy framework allows governments to **quickly respond to new challenges** as they arise. For example, unexpected climate events such as droughts or floods, volatile food prices, or global health crises like pandemics can drastically affect food systems. Policies should be designed with flexibility so that governments can implement emergency measures, scale up or down certain activities, and redirect resources to areas of urgent need. This flexibility was demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic when food systems were disrupted worldwide, and governments had to act swiftly to stabilize markets, provide food aid, and ensure that supply chains continued to function. Such adaptability is critical in **building resilience** into food systems, ensuring that they are able to recover from shocks while maintaining their core functions.

3.6 Accounting for Political Economy in Food Systems Transformation

The **political economy** of food systems must be carefully considered in any attempt to transform agriculture in Africa. Food systems are shaped by a wide array of stakeholders, including **governments, agribusinesses, smallholder farmers, multinational**

corporations, and **civil society organizations**. The distribution of power and resources among these stakeholders often determines who benefits from food systems and who remains marginalized. The following are some of the fundamental political economy considerations:

a. Power Dynamics in Food Systems:

- Large **agribusinesses** and **multinational corporations** often wield significant power within the global food system. They can influence **policy decisions**, lobby for favorable regulations, and dominate food markets, often at the expense of **smallholder farmers** and local food systems. These corporations may have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo, especially if they benefit from policies that favor industrial farming over small-scale, sustainable practices.
- Transforming food systems requires addressing these **power imbalances** to create a more **equitable** system. **Smallholder farmers**, who make up a majority of Africa's agricultural workforce, must be empowered with access to **land, technology, finance, and markets**. Policies must also ensure that marginalized groups, such as women and youth, are not excluded from agricultural development.

b. Building Political Will and Support:

- **Political will** is essential for the successful implementation of transformative policies. In many cases, governments may face opposition from powerful interest groups that benefit from maintaining current food systems structures. Transforming food systems requires building broad-based support for change, which often involves **coalition-building** among diverse stakeholders, including **civil society organizations, local communities, international donors, and the private sector**.
- These coalitions can help **drive political momentum**, ensuring that food system reforms remain a priority on the national agenda. For example, international development organizations can support national governments by providing funding, technical assistance, and policy guidance, while local communities and farmer organizations can advocate for policies that reflect the needs and interests of smallholder farmers.

c. Policy Frameworks to Empower Marginalized Groups:

- To create more equitable food systems, policies must be designed to **empower marginalized groups**, particularly **smallholder farmers, women, and youth**. These groups often face significant barriers to accessing land, credit, and technology, which limits their ability to participate fully in the agricultural economy. Policies that **secure land rights**, provide **subsidized access to technology**, and create **inclusive financial instruments** are critical for ensuring that marginalized groups can benefit from agricultural growth.
- Furthermore, policies should encourage the development of **inclusive markets** that give smallholders access to fair prices for their products, as well as the tools and knowledge needed to improve productivity and adapt to changing environmental conditions.



3.7 Outcome-Oriented Activities:

Every activity undertaken must have a **clear connection** to the desired outcomes. For instance, if the outcome is improved **nutritional outcomes**, the activities should target increasing the availability of **nutrient-dense crops**, improving **food safety standards**, and promoting **nutrition education**. The alignment between these elements is essential for making the transformation of food systems **effective** and **sustainable**.

3.8 Optimizing Trade-offs:

Integrated policies must be designed to **prevent trade-offs** between sectors. For example, promoting economic growth in agriculture should not come at the expense of environmental sustainability. By encouraging **collaboration between sectors**, policies can create win-win scenarios where **economic, social, and environmental objectives** are achieved simultaneously.



4. Alignment with CAADP Strategic Objectives and Interventions in a Country ToC

Strategic Objective 1: Intensifying Sustainable Food Production, Agro-Industrialization, and Trade

African nations must scale up sustainable food production while ensuring that growth is climate-resilient and environmentally sustainable. By focusing on **agro-industrialization** and **regional trade**, national policies can contribute to achieving food security and economic growth.

Key Interventions:

- Promote climate-smart agriculture that reduces the environmental footprint of food production and increases resilience to climate variability.
- Strengthen value chains to integrate smallholder farmers and small and medium enterprises (SMEs) into national, regional, and global markets, focusing on local capacity-building and infrastructure improvements.
- Develop policies that foster agro-industrialization, providing rural communities with access to modern processing facilities, storage infrastructure, and transport networks.

Strategic Objective 2: Boosting Investment and Financing for Agri-food Systems

One of the major barriers to agricultural development in Africa is insufficient investment, particularly in rural infrastructure, research, and innovation. A **Country ToC** can help attract **public and private sector investments** by creating de-risking mechanisms and promoting inclusive financial systems.

Key Interventions:

- Encourage **public-private partnerships (PPPs)** to scale up investment in critical areas like energy, water, and technology for agriculture.
- Develop **innovative financing solutions** that increase access to credit for smallholder farmers, women, and youth, including microfinance, blended finance, and revolving loan funds.
- Support **research and development (R&D)** in agriculture to accelerate the adoption of new technologies and improve productivity.

Strategic Objective 3: Ensuring Food and Nutrition Security

Despite improvements in food production, millions of Africans remain vulnerable to hunger and malnutrition. Country ToCs must focus on making food systems more inclusive, ensuring that nutritious and safe food reaches vulnerable populations.

Key Interventions:

- Enhance nutrition-sensitive agriculture by increasing the production of nutrient-dense crops such as biofortified maize, beans, and traditional African grains.



- Strengthen food safety standards, especially in processing and distribution, to reduce the incidence of foodborne illnesses and ensure that all food consumed is healthy and safe.
- Promote home-grown school feeding programs that source food locally to support both child nutrition and rural livelihoods.

Strategic Objective 4: Advancing Inclusivity and Equitable Livelihoods

A key principle of a **Country ToC** is ensuring that food systems benefit all citizens, particularly marginalized groups. This requires addressing unequal access to land, finance, and resources.

Key Interventions:

- Implement land reform policies that secure land rights for women and youth, ensuring they have the resources needed to participate in agriculture.
- Promote youth engagement in agriculture through vocational training, digital agriculture, and access to entrepreneurial opportunities.
- Expand social protection programs to ensure that vulnerable populations are supported, especially during periods of economic or climate shocks.

Strategic Objective 5: Building Resilient Agri-food Systems

Building resilience is central to transforming Africa's food systems in the face of climate change. National policies must focus on mitigating the impacts of climate variability while ensuring that food systems can recover quickly from disruptions.

Key Interventions:

- Promote agroecology and regenerative farming practices that restore soil health, increase biodiversity, and enhance resilience to climate shocks.
- Invest in renewable energy solutions such as solar-powered irrigation systems and biogas for food processing, to reduce reliance on fossil fuels and improve food system sustainability.
- Strengthen early warning systems and disaster preparedness to reduce the impacts of climate shocks on food security.

Strategic Objective 6: Strengthening Agri-Food Systems Governance

Good governance is critical to the success of food systems transformation. Country ToCs must ensure that all stakeholders are involved in decision-making, and that policies are transparent and accountable.

Key Interventions:

- Establish multi-stakeholder governance platforms that include government representatives, private sector leaders, farmer organizations, and civil society to ensure inclusive decision-making.
- Strengthen accountability mechanisms, such as the BR process, to track progress toward national and regional food systems goals.
- Enhance the capacity of local institutions to implement agri-food systems transformation at the grassroots level.

5. Conclusion

The development of country-specific **ToC** for food systems transformation is essential for aligning national agricultural policies with the broader objectives of the **CAADP Strategy and Action Plan (2026-2035)**. By tailoring interventions to the unique contexts of each nation, countries can address their specific challenges in achieving food security, climate resilience, and economic inclusion while contributing to regional and global goals.

The **Country ToCs** serve as strategic roadmaps, guiding nations in the transition toward **sustainable, inclusive, and resilient** agri-food systems. This transformation requires coordinated action across governments, private sector actors, development organizations, and local communities. Furthermore, the integration of **NDCs** into national food systems policies ensures that Africa can meet its climate goals while advancing economic development and reducing poverty.

Ultimately, the success of these **Country ToCs** will depend on continued investment in agriculture, innovative financing solutions, and the creation of strong governance structures. With these elements in place, Africa's food systems can be transformed into engines of sustainable growth, capable of providing food security and economic opportunity for all citizens, while safeguarding the environment for future generations.

The **CAADP Strategy and Action Plan (2026-2035)** provides the guiding framework for this transformation, and by developing country-specific **ToCs**, African nations can take concrete steps toward achieving a resilient, inclusive, and sustainable future.

Acknowledgements

This work is a product of a project funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), and a technical collaboration between AGRA and the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI). The project is aimed at strengthening coherence of food systems indicators and outcomes of the CAADP BR processes. The authors would like to acknowledge the IDRC for the funding and thought leadership on food systems. We would also want to thank all project technical teams that assisted in desk reviews and in-country engagements. Any opinions expressed here belong to the authors alone and do not necessarily reflect those of the Government, IFPRI, AGRA, or the funders of the project.



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