

BREASTFEEDING IN THE UNITED NATIONS FOOD SYSTEMS SUMMIT 2021

The just concluded United Nations (UN) Food Systems Summit (FSS) in September 2021 convened global stakeholders to adopt a food systems approach, integrating consumption and production patterns to transform food systems into healthier, more sustainable and equitable systems.¹ The general concept of the food system encompasses the related resources, the inputs, production, transport, processing and manufacturing industries, retailing, and consumption of food as well as its impacts on environment, health, and society. Conceptualized by a high-level panel of experts (HPLE) in 2017, the framework emphasizes that food systems are built on the interaction between drivers, actors and elements, as well as with other systems e.g. health, energy, and transportation.² See Figure 1 below.

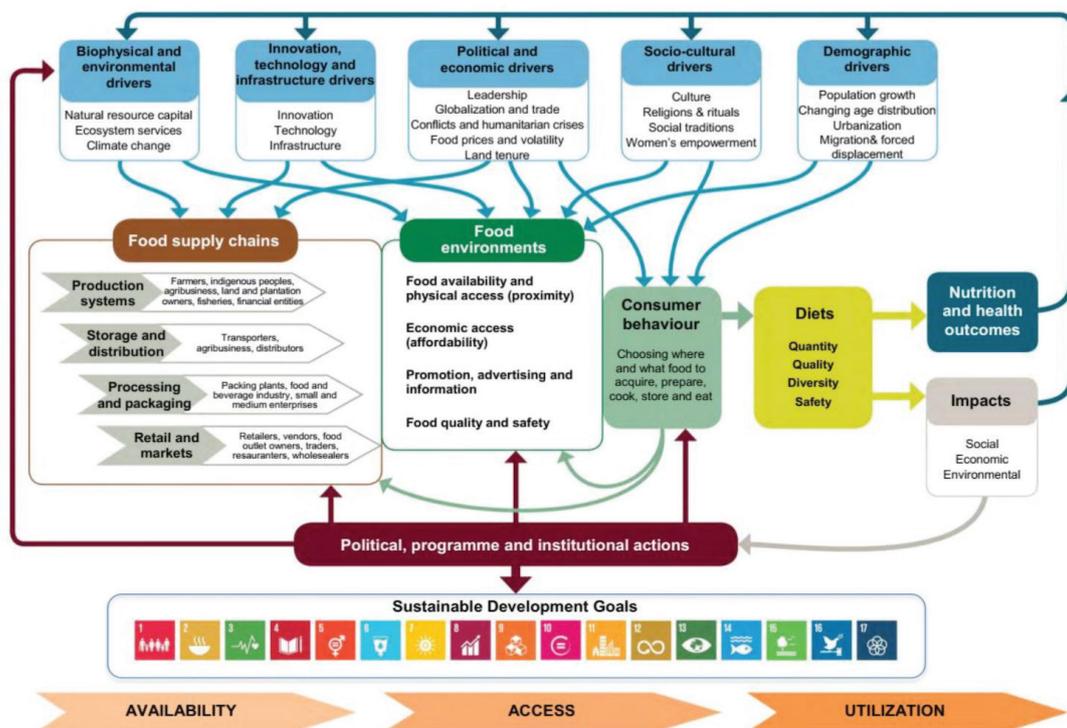


Figure 1. The 2017 Conceptual Framework of Food Systems for Diets and Nutrition³

¹ United Nations Food Systems Summit 2021 Scientific Group. Food Systems – Definition, Concept and Application for the UN Food Systems Summit. Available from: <https://www.un.org/en/food-systems-summit/leadership#scientific-group>

² Alive & Thrive. FHI Solutions and Save the Children. Global Policy Brief. Oot L, Mason F, Lapping K. The First-Food System: The Importance of Breastfeeding in Global Food Systems Discussions.

³ Source: UN High Level Panel of Experts Report on Food Systems and Nutrition 2017

Building on the 2018 FAO definition,⁴ food systems encompass the entire range of actors and their interlinked value-adding activities involved in the production, aggregation, processing, distribution, consumption and disposal of food products that originate from agriculture, forestry or fisheries, and food industries, and the broader economic, societal and natural environments in which they are embedded.

The practical definition of food systems emphasizes two essential criteria: 1) Suitability - to support global and national collective efforts to bring about positive change in food systems, accelerating progress on meeting the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs; and 2) Sufficient precision - define the domains for policy and programmatic priorities. It should also serve concepts for data gathering, modelling, and analysis to assist in effective policy action. Simultaneously, it should be sufficiently general not to exclude any aspects of the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of sustainability.

Figure 2 below illustrates a food systems concept with the realities of its main components and allows for positioning of the Food Systems Summit “Action Tracks”.⁵

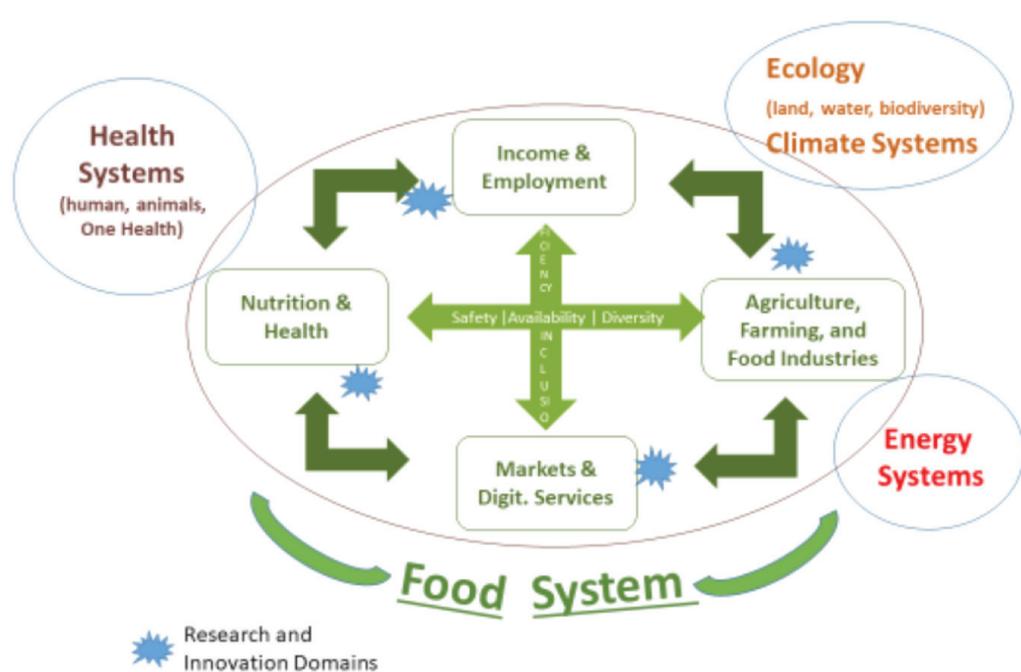


Figure 2. The food system in the context of other systems⁶

Having discussed these concepts and definitions, it is surprising that the above frameworks do not articulate a critical element - BREASTFEEDING. This glaring gap should be filled by emphasizing that breastfeeding is the first food system in infancy, providing food from the first hour after birth up to at least 2 years of life. Recognizing breast milk as an optimal element of the first-food system also has benefits for society through its contribution to reducing climate change. As the first food system, breastfeeding is characterized by the shortest food chain – directly from mother to child.

This brief was prepared by the International Institute of Rural Reconstruction with support from SUN Civil Society Network.

⁴ FAO. 2018. *Sustainable food systems: concept and framework*. Brief. Rome
⁵ United Nations Food Systems Summit 2021 Scientific Group. Food Systems – Definition, Concept and Application for the UN Food Systems Summit. Available from: <https://www.un.org/en/food-systems-summit/leadership#scientific-group>
⁶ Rollins Nigel C, et al., Why invest, and what it will take to improve breastfeeding practices? *The Lancet*, 2016, vol. 387, pp. 491-504.