

POLICY COHERENCE IN THE ETHIOPIAN FOOD SYSTEMS TRANSFORMATION EFFORT

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The issue of policy coherence has gained growing significance in development discussions over the past few decades. It was also emphasized in the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and is highlighted in Sustainable Development Goal 17. Similarly, it has been noted by both experts and researchers that fragmented policies and isolated thinking can hinder the effectiveness of policy implementation, often leading to unexpected adverse outcomes (Monticone and Samoggia, 2023; Parsons and Barling, 2022). In simple terms, policy coherence refers to aligning policy actions across different sectors and stakeholders to achieve common goals (Koch, 2018).

The food sector is a prime example of the importance of policy coherence. As a complex issue, food policy covers various topics, including food security, nutrition, sustainability, and animal welfare. Effective food policymaking requires balancing these diverse areas and fostering collaboration among multiple stakeholders, making it difficult to achieve strong policy coherence (Monticone and Samoggia, 2023). Margulis (2013) and Popkin et al. (2012) indicates that government actions and policies impacting the food system are not aligned with improving nutrition outcomes, primarily due to conflicts with government priorities to drive economic growth, especially through economic liberalization. Consequently, many scholars advocate for a coherent and integrated food policy as a practical approach to addressing contemporary food system challenges. Despite this, there are still opportunities to improve policy coherence within the food system to develop national strategies for sustainable food systems.

When considering how to achieve greater policy coherence in the food system, it is essential to address the following key questions: What is policy coherence? Why is it important in the food system? What challenges does it face? How can capacity for policy coherence and analytical tools be built? This note aims to explore these questions, focusing on Ethiopia's initiatives to transform its food systems.

What is Policy Coherence?

"Policy coherence" is broadly defined and interpreted by various researchers and organizations. According to the OECD, Policy coherence involves coordinating efforts across government departments to promote policies that reinforce each other, aiming to create synergies that achieve shared objectives while minimizing negative impacts in other policy areas (OECD, 2016). The UNEP (2019), referencing the definition by Dubé et al. (2014), adds that policy coherence involves ensuring "consistency, comprehensiveness, and harmonious-compatible outcomes across policy areas and sectors, without compromising the integrity of policymakers' objectives ."Overall, the goal of policy coherence is to reduce

inefficiencies and conflicts among different objectives while identifying synergies that can yield mutual benefits.

Although development literature has identified several dimensions of policy coherence, the two most frequently mentioned are horizontal coherence and vertical coherence (see [Dubé et al., 2014](#); [Guerrero & Castañeda, 2021](#)). **Horizontal coherence** ensures the coherence and integration of policies among various actors and institutions within the same level of governance. **Vertical coherence** addresses the alignment and consistency of policies at different levels of governance, such as local, regional, national, and international.

Why is it Important in the Food Systems?

Ethiopia faces a severe food crisis driven by conflict, drought, rising living costs, prolonged macroeconomic challenges, and natural disasters, resulting in widespread acute food insecurity and malnutrition. In 2024, 15.8 million people require food assistance, and 55% of children under five in the country are malnourished ([WFP, 2024](#)). Additionally, 37% of children under five are stunted, indicating chronic undernutrition ([EPHI & ICF, 2021](#)). Furthermore, with a score of 26.2 on the 2024 Global Hunger Index, Ethiopia has a high level of hunger. The situation is critical and requires urgent intervention. Tackling this dual burden of malnutrition will require a comprehensive policy approach that aligns policies and strategies across various sectors to support the transformation of the food systems in Ethiopia.

Studies by [Margulis \(2013\)](#) and [Popkin et al. \(2012\)](#) indicate that conflict between the policy goals of various sectors can lead to policy incoherence. As a result, government initiatives to tackle challenges within food systems become less effective and efficient, reflecting a form of self-sabotage that undermines the government's multiple objectives. Thus, ensuring policy coherence is crucial for recognizing and enhancing synergies between economic, social, and environmental policies and addressing any trade-offs ([OECD, 2015](#)). As [IWMI \(2023\)](#) revealed, another key element of policy coherence is facilitating effective coordination among ministries and across various levels of governance, such as federal, regional, zonal, woreda, and kebele levels in Ethiopia. Consequently, policy coherence is key in determining the best policy mixes and governance structures for addressing interconnected systems ([Weitz et al., 2017](#)). Moreover, [Nilsson and Weitz \(2019\)](#) emphasized that policy coherence is crucial in the planning phase and throughout implementation, monitoring and evaluation, and impact assessment. Therefore, understanding how policies interact, the nature of policymaking processes, and evaluating policy decisions are critical for grasping the concept of policy coherence in the food systems.

In summary, policy coherence is crucial for addressing three key challenges that all countries, including Ethiopia, encounter when implementing a universal, integrated, and transformative food system agenda: (i) achieving integration; (ii) promoting alignment between local, national, and international efforts; and (iii) overcoming fragmented or siloed policy actions ([OECD, 2015, 2016](#)).

What are the Policy Coherence Challenges in Ethiopia's Food Systems Transformation Efforts?

Nutrition is central to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and plays a critical role in achieving 12 out of the 17 goals (see [United Nations, 2015](#)). Ethiopia is one of the countries suffering from widespread malnutrition. For instance, 37% of children under five are stunted ([EPHI & ICF, 2021](#)), 15.8 million people need food assistance, and 55% of children under five are malnourished ([WFP, 2024](#)). In response, the Ethiopian government has implemented several multisectoral policies and plans, including the Homegrown Economic Policy Reform agenda, the Seqota Declaration, the National Food and Nutrition Strategy, the National Disaster Risk Management Policy, the Ten-year Development Plan, the Livestock Master Plan, and the revised Agricultural and Rural Development Policy. Recently, the Ethiopian government launched the Food Systems Transformation Plan (2021-2030), centered around 22 game-changing solutions grouped into six clusters, all of which are aligned with the UNFSS global action tracks and existing national policies and programs ([MoA & MoH, 2021](#)).¹ Thus, transforming Ethiopia's food systems requires coordinating these policies and strategies across different organizations, sectors, and governance levels.

Ethiopia's food systems transformation efforts face several policy coherence challenges, mainly due to the complexity of interconnected sectors, interests, and policies. Key challenges include:

- ✚ ***Sectoral Fragmentation:*** In Ethiopia, various ministries and agencies are typically responsible for different aspects of the food system, often working independently, which results in fragmented approaches that fail to align with the broader food system objectives. For instance, intensive agricultural production can lead to environmental degradation, thus undermining sustainability goals. Similarly, trade policies might favor export crops over local food security initiatives.
- ✚ ***Nutrition vs. Export-Oriented Agriculture:*** Ethiopia's goals for enhancing nutrition frequently conflict with its export-driven agricultural strategy. Cash crops, such as coffee and khat, are prioritized for foreign exchange earnings, while nutritional crops for domestic consumption are sometimes neglected. In this context, agriculture represents 80% of Ethiopia's total exports, yet 37 % of children under 5 are stunted, reflecting an apparent dissonance between agricultural and nutrition goals.
- ✚ ***Environmental Sustainability Conflicts:*** To transform the food system, expanding agricultural land to increase production can result in deforestation and biodiversity loss, thereby undermining efforts to protect ecosystems and mitigate climate change. Additionally, Ethiopia's agricultural transformation agenda promotes the use of chemical fertilizers and high-yield seed varieties to increase productivity.

¹ For more information on the 22 game-changing solutions outlined in the Ethiopian Food System Transformation Plan, refer to [MoA & MoH \(2021\)](#).

While this boosts short-term agricultural output, overuse of inputs like fertilizers can degrade soil health and reduce long-term productivity. For example, as reported by the [World Bank](#), Ethiopia's cereal yield rose from 1,767.3 kg per hectare to 2,813.7 kg per hectare between 2010 and 2022. However, between 2010 and 2023, the country lost 36.2 thousand hectares of natural forest, leading to 20.7 million tons of CO₂ emissions, according to [Global Forest Watch](#). This highlights the trade-off between increasing agricultural productivity and environmental sustainability.

- ✚ ***Policy Implementation and Capacity Gaps:*** Even when coherent policies are in place, their implementation is often hindered by limited institutional and field capacity, including insufficient funding, weak extension services, and a lack of trained personnel for food security and agricultural transformation programs. For example, Ethiopia's Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP), designed to enhance food security, has often struggled with effective distribution due to bureaucratic inefficiencies and lack of coordination between national and local governments. While the PSNP reached over 7.9 million people, evaluations show that only about 60% of beneficiaries reported receiving the full package of services and inputs promised under the program ([World Bank, 2024](#)).
- ✚ ***Inconsistent Policies and Regulations:*** Policies at different levels of government sometimes conflict, undermining overall food system goals. For instance, while the Ethiopian government provides subsidies for smallholder farmers to boost local production, trade policies simultaneously promote cheap imports of food products that undermine local producers. In 2022, according to the USA Department of Commerce report, Ethiopia imported over \$3.6 billion of agricultural and food goods, negatively affecting local farmers by undercutting prices. This policy inconsistency discourages investments in domestic agriculture and hinders local food security efforts.
- ✚ ***Trade and Market Access Issues:*** Trade policies can conflict with local food security efforts, affecting farmers' ability to access markets and consumers' ability to afford food. For instance, tariffs on imported agricultural products might protect local farmers but raise food prices for consumers, compromising food affordability, especially in urban areas. In 2022, food price inflation in Ethiopia reached 22.9%, severely affecting low-income families' ability to afford food ([Nuru, 2022](#)). As a result, 55% of children under the age of five suffer from malnutrition, in part due to the inaccessibility of food driven by rising prices ([WFP, 2024](#)).
- ✚ Moreover, ***insufficient stakeholder collaborations, limited data and evidence-based policymaking, and socioeconomic inequalities*** are policy coherence challenges the Ethiopian food systems face.

Tackling these policy coherence challenges requires a comprehensive strategy that aligns agricultural, economic, environmental, and social policies. Thus, enhancing capacity-building is crucial for establishing a more sustainable and equitable food system in Ethiopia.

How can capacity for policy coherence and analytical tools be built for Ethiopian food systems?

Building capacity for *policy coherence* in Ethiopian food systems is essential for aligning agricultural policies with nutrition, health, and environmental goals. This capacity building effort involves the development of *analytical tools* and a structured approach to enhance capacity for policy coherence analysis, which is critical for creating effective policies that improve food security and nutrition and promote sustainable agricultural practices. Here is a comprehensive and detailed plan to achieve this:

- ✦ ***Strengthening Institutional Frameworks:*** Establish a national food policy coordination unit and set up inter-ministerial committees that include representatives from government, academia, civil society, research institutes, and the private sector. Their task will be to foster dialogue, ensure policy coherence across sectors related to food systems, encourage collaborations among sectors, and supervise the implementation of food-related initiatives.
- ✦ ***Enhancing Stakeholder Engagement:*** Involve civil society and the private sector and hold public consultations and workshops to ensure that policies reflect the population's needs and priorities and to gain valuable perspectives on food system challenges and opportunities.
- ✦ ***Organize Workshops and Training programs:*** Offer specialized training to policymakers and analysts on the significance of policy coherence across various sectors to achieve food systems goals. This should include hands-on training on using policy coherence analytical tools, interpreting outcomes, and applying findings to policy decisions. Moreover, it is helpful to collaborate with universities to design curricula integrating policy coherence methodologies for food systems.
- ✦ ***Enhance Data Collection and Management:*** Improve data systems to collect comprehensive data on food production, consumption, nutrition, and market dynamics. Moreover, create a centralized food systems database that integrates data from various sectors to support policy analysis and decision-making. Partner with IFPRI, CSA, and other relevant organizations to create a robust data system that facilitates better analysis and decision-making in the food systems domain.
- ✦ ***Mainstreaming Policy Coherence in Development Planning:*** embedded food system considerations into the national development plans and sectoral strategies, including the Homegrown Economic Policy Reform agenda. Ensure that the national food system policies align with the international development agendas, like the SDGs, and use them as a framework to guide coherence efforts and assess progress.
- ✦ ***Foster International Collaboration and Knowledge Exchange:*** Collaborate with international organizations and research institutions such as the FAO, WFP, UNDP, IFPRI, ILRI, CGIAR, and IFAD to access technical support and capacity-building resources for transforming Ethiopia's food systems. Join regional initiatives that focus on food systems and policy coherence to learn from best practices and share experiences with other countries.
- ✦ ***Assessment of Existing Tools and Frameworks:*** Evaluate current policy coherence analytical tools and frameworks used in Ethiopia to identify gaps and areas for improvement. Identify gaps in capabilities, methodologies, and data sources.

✚ ***Develop and adopt Analytical Tools for Policy Coherence Analysis:*** Examine practical analytical tools used in other countries to address food systems and policy coherence and tailor them to fit the Ethiopian context. Various methodological approaches exist for assessing policy coherence, including scoring and ranking systems, trade-off evaluations, and quantitative modeling of policy priorities and planned actions. However, this field is still developing, meaning methodologies are evolving, and the choice of approach often depends on specific cases and the quality of available documentation and data.²

Generally, building capacity for policy coherence and analytical tools in Ethiopia's food system requires a multifaceted approach that integrates institutional development, training, data management, stakeholder engagement, and international collaboration. Strengthening these areas will enable Ethiopia to better assess and enhance policy coherence across various sectors, ultimately boosting food security and nutrition for its people.

How can NPS promote policy coherence?

CGIAR brings extensive expertise in food, land, and water systems at both country and regional levels, alongside a robust body of evidence on policy design, implementation, and impact evaluation. Through its Initiative on National Policies and Strategies (NPS) for Food, Land, and Water Systems Transformation, CGIAR aims to foster deeper understanding and enhance capabilities within and across various policy domains. This Initiative seeks to identify and respond to opportunities for systemic change across these interconnected systems. It aims to anticipate and drive transformational change by supporting policy processes and equipping policymakers while addressing trade-offs and accommodating diverse needs (CGIAR 2022).

NPS could also support the implementation of policy analysis and outcome measurement, which is critical for assessing policy coherence over time. It can help identify gaps in alignment and allow for timely adjustments based on emerging evidence or changing circumstances. The NPS Initiative is actively engaged in Ethiopia and five other countries to develop new tools and adapt existing CGIAR tools to assist governments in making informed investment decisions. This includes identifying trade-offs and opportunities and prioritizing development programs. By designing transformative programs and strategies collaboratively, the Initiative aims to attract funding and support from donors, development partners, and the private sector, fostering alignment around shared multi-objective goals.

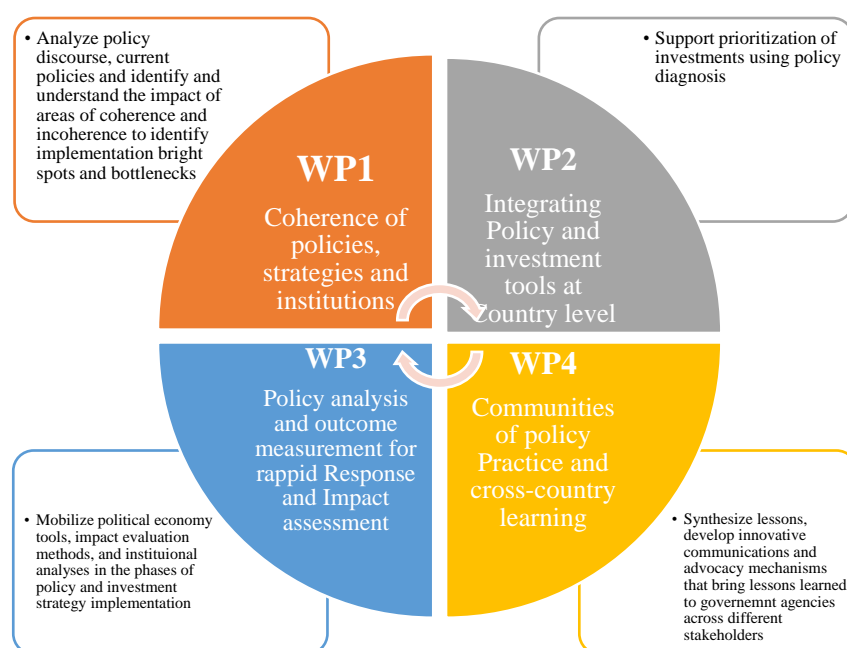
The NPS Initiative seeks to empower national and regional decision-makers to make informed choices by strengthening public policy institutions, researchers, and policymakers. This includes building capacities in data collection, evidence generation, investment prioritization, and leveraging planning tools to ensure

² For additional details on the analytical tools available to evaluate and ensure policy coherence, please refer to [Halim et al. \(2011\)](#) and [Trivedi et al. \(2023\)](#).

gender-responsive policies and investments. Collaborating with regional organizations and community groups, the Initiative will develop monitoring, knowledge management, and accountability tools to enhance government transparency and promote citizen engagement. Through learning and feedback, the Initiative will facilitate a policy-innovation exchange across countries and regions, fostering a vibrant community of practice. These efforts aim to create a unified evidence base to support transformative strategies for systemic change.

The NPS Initiative operates across key focus areas or work packages. Figure 1 highlights how these work packages contribute to supporting Ethiopia's food system transformation.

Figure 1: The Role of NPS Work Packages in Supporting Ethiopia's Food System Transformation



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