

Studying Food Policy: baseline studies

Briefing Paper

Authors: Peter Oosterveer and Fatime Traore

Environmental Policy Group, Wageningen University, The Netherlands

Contact: peter.oosterveer@wur.nl



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INTRODUCTION

The CGIAR Research Program on Agriculture for Nutrition and Health (A4NH), led by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), responds to concerns about global diet trends and demands from countries on how to transition to food systems that address unabated problems of under-nutrition, micronutrient deficiencies, and overnutrition. To enable resilient, sustainable and inclusive food systems, better food system policies are urgently needed. However, food policy processes are complex phenomena, and to help understanding them, the range of currently available analytical tools need to be widened. To contribute to filling this limitation, this briefing paper resumes the experiences from four comprehensive food policy baseline assessments carried out in Vietnam, Bangladesh, Nigeria and Ethiopia between 2017 and 2021¹. The approach is summarized here in order to guide future research on food policies from a food system perspective. The ultimate aim of such research is to better understand policy processes and identify spaces for intervention to promote more sustainable and healthy diets.

POLICY PROCESSES AND THE FOOD SYSTEMS APPROACH

In this paper, we use the following definitions of food systems and policy processes.

Policies related to food and nutrition security are approached within a sustainable **food systems approach**. A food system ‘gathers all the elements (environment, people, inputs, processes, infrastructures, institutions, etc.) and activities that relate to the production, processing, distribution, preparation and consumption of food, and the outputs of these activities, including socioeconomic and environmental outcomes’ (HLPE, 2017, p. 11). Food systems consist essentially of three building blocks, namely food supply chains, food environments and consumer behavior (HLPE, 2017) and five drivers that affect the building blocks. These five drivers are biophysical and environmental drivers; innovation, technology and infrastructure drivers; political and economic drivers; socio-cultural drivers; and demographic drivers. Food systems result in nutrition and health outcomes and social, economic and environmental impacts.

Policy is not a goal-oriented rational-synoptic process following certain steps (Crabbé & Leroy, 2008) but a complex and dynamic policy **process**. In policy processes, policies are understood, formulated and implemented, while involving a range of actors and interests. A policy process can best be understood as the interconnections and overlaps between discourses, actors and interests (IDS (Institute of Development Studies), 2006).

ANALYZING POLICY PROCESSES

Discourses & policy narratives

It is important to be aware of the way policy issues are defined and talked about—including the language used to describe one’s assumptions—as these framings are inherently value-laden, have their histories and reflect particular types of knowledge. These ways of talking are understood as specific discourses and a discourse is a “specific ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categorizations that are produced, reproduced and transformed in a particular set of practices and through which meaning is given to physical and social realities” (Hajer, 1995, p. 44).

¹ Please find a summarizing report on these national study in Traore, Fatime (2021) *Food systems policy processes*. Wageningen; Environmental Policy Group, Wageningen University

Policy narratives are stories about policy change that consist of a beginning, a middle and an end. Consequently, food policy narratives define problems in food systems, explain their origin or their root causes, and suggest solutions to overcome the challenges thereby shaping policy decisions in certain ways. By doing so, they determine what is included in the policy and what alternative interpretations are excluded, empowering certain institutions and actors in the process whilst marginalizing others. For narratives to be meaningful for policy process analysis purposes they need to be: i) cohesive, ii) structured; and iii) contextualized.

Actors & networks

Different actors actively spread, maintain, reinforce, suppress and change discourses and narratives through their practices. These practices and actions of a number of interacting actors lead to the spread of certain narratives. Therefore, the relevant stakeholders, their actions, practices and interactions should be uncovered. Mapping social networks and identifying epistemic communities is helpful here.

Politics & interests

Politics is inherently value-laden and involves permanent interactions between different groups with differing political interests. This means that a permanent process of bargaining, competition and conflict between groups in society, each with their particular interests, is going on. The executive part of the government is not excluded from this process, because also here competition among and within ministries and agencies across different scales over control and resources are prevalent. Government institutions cannot be viewed as neutral and objective implementers of policies.

Synthesis

Food and nutrition security problems are complex, unpredictable, subject to uncertainty, operate across a number of scales and are influenced by a large number of actors. The way they are understood by different political, societal and economic actors, and the interactions between them constitute the dynamics of food system policy. The synthesis of the three elements (policy discourses, actors and interests), needs to be analyzed to uncover deeper dynamics behind food system related policy processes.

METHODOLOGY

Objective

This section describes the methods and element of a comprehensive food policy baseline assessment. The objective of a policy baseline of national food system-related policies is to provide a snapshot of the existing policy context around food systems in a country. This constitutes a baseline which can be compared with the views and perceptions of the key-actors around the impacts of this food system policy through a similar exercise in a later stage. The ambition is to realize a longer-term food system policy impact evaluation.

The data collection should start with establishing the dominant and alternative narratives, and through them arrange the plethora of actors and interests and their interactions.

Methods

The baseline policy assessment involves the collection of primary data obtained through two main research methods: (i) face-to-face open-ended interviews with a group of approximately 20-25 key-informants, and (ii) a larger on-line semi-quantitative surveys targeting a group of approximately 100 key informants (including those who have been included in the initial face-to-face interviews). The

participants to those two surveys are direct stakeholders and key-informants from several groups who are expected to influence and shape the debates around food system policies, namely (a) government officials from different relevant ministries; (b) key actors from the private sector; (c) representatives of civil society and NGOs, (d) representatives of different international development agencies and donors, and technical experts from national and international research organizations. Those are all expected to have a good understanding of the policy situation in the country –and in particular the key policy debates and issues that are specific to the regional and national food-systems. It is helpful to include some actors that reside more at the lower levels among the respondents to uncover local interests and dynamics next to national ones. A more diverse range of informants could facilitate identifying more power relations, such as from the private sector and policy implementers.

Prior to the start of the data collection, a literature and document analysis for each policy area should be performed. Subsequently, consultations should be held with a select number of key actors in order to identify key issue areas that are perceived as crucial to the particular country's food systems. These issue areas should then be used to guide the formulation of the questions for both the face-to-face interviews and the online surveys. It is most practical to identify respondents through purposive sampling.

Face-to-face interviews: For the face-to-face open-ended interviews, a questionnaire needs to be structured around the Narratives – Actors – Interest framework (Keeley & Scoones, 2003) to unpack and reveal the narratives, agenda setting and processes of current legislation, practices, regulations and policies around food systems:

- ⇒ *Narratives:* what are the assumptions and prescriptions assumed by people when talking about food policy issues?
- ⇒ *Actors:* what different (groups of) actors relevant for food policy are present in the country and what are their practices and actions?
- ⇒ *Interests:* what do different (groups of) actors believe and do about food policy issues in light of their interests?

The interviews should generate detailed information on:

1. Main actors and institutions involved in food system-related issues (Actors);
2. Areas of convergence and divergence in the position of those actors (Actors);
3. Main challenges related to the issue areas and their corresponding solutions according to the different actors (Narratives); and
4. Underlying power dynamics (Interests).

Mapping networks of actors may be a too complex exercise for individuals to deal with in the short timeframe that is provided during an interview. However, when insufficient data are acquired from the interviews, presenting the networks involving the different policy actors may be difficult. In that case, the use of documents and online information may be used. Another potential research tool is focus group discussions to map networks, for example through the usage of social network analysis combined with power mapping.

Online-survey: online surveys are appropriate to acquire a large amount of data and attract a large sample. Being an efficient, inexpensive method, it enables researchers to collect data from a large sample efficiently. For the on-line survey, a semi-quantitative questionnaire exploring the Behavior, Attitude, Skills, and Knowledge (BASK) (Ajzen, 1991) of the key decision-makers around the specific key issues related to food system policies generated from the face-to-face interviews, needs to be developed. The structure of the survey should be linked to the framework used for the interviews, so that data acquired can be linked to the analysis of the interview data. The questions need to be formulated on the basis of psychometric techniques requiring self-evaluation and use a 1-5 Likert scale. The Likert scale is applicable in this survey because it allows for assessing opinions, attitudes and behaviours.

It is important to acknowledge that parts of this data may be skewed due to the subjectivity inherent to some the aspects of the survey. Whilst choosing an option from a pre-defined list to express one's opinion on what is the driver of the policy agenda is quite straightforward, the self-assessment of different aspects, such as knowledge, skills, engagement and comprehension is more problematic. Therefore, it is important to account with some level of bias in the responses, and try to form the questions as measurable as possible.

Expected outcomes

- Better understanding of narratives and discourses amongst regional and national key-decision makers with regard to specific food system related issues that are critical in a country or region
- Snapshot of the current knowledge, attitudes, perceptions and skills of key decision makers.

Presentation of data

The data from both the interviews and the survey should be clearly presented in a report. This report should first establish the dominant and alternative narratives, followed by the associated actors and interests. The analysis relies only on interviews so there is a chance that a number of key actors have been missed. Interviews are appropriate for collecting a lot of the data, but this kind of research requires contextualization and verification if it is to be used to identify policy spaces. Triangulating the data through different sources of information creates a more complex picture. Therefore, applying other tools, such as document and literature review, as well as social network analysis combined with power mapping may help acquire more information and strengthen the confidence in the acquired information.

The report should present this uncovered narratives, with their beginning, middle and end in a rather aggregate manner, and exclude the less relevant ones. Relevant individual responses can then be structured around these aggregated narratives. The data should be processed through thematic coding (indexing, categorizing) and proceed to a thematic analysis that is helpful in categorizing similar ideas and themes and in building informative narratives. This allows for showing the interconnections between the different themes. The identified narratives should be positioned vis-a-vis the dominant narratives identified from the initial document review. This makes it possible to situate the findings and identify which narratives compete with the dominant ones.

The report should list the key policy actors (individuals and/or institutions) for each issue area by presenting their name along with the type of institution they belong to and further information on their type on involvement. The type of involvement should include the level where the different actors operate. Whilst this may be rather straightforward with government ministries, this may be less the case with other actors.

The social network approach calls for moving beyond looking at individual actors and argues for the mapping of networks, coalitions, alliances of actors (individuals, institutions) to get a better picture about the construction of knowledge.

It is helpful to use graphs and charts to visualize the data in an aggregate form (e.g. showing the level of institutional and personal knowledge against all the five key issue areas in one chart). This kind of display not only demonstrates the information acquired for each issue area, but at the same time relate them to the other issue areas, showing key differences. This makes the data more comprehensible and also comparable to other sets of information.

Levels of influence

Revealing policy entrepreneurs in policy processes (or champions) can be very informative, as it has the potential to uncover deeper dynamics about the transformative role of certain individuals or groups in creating and seizing momentum for policy change. This information makes it possible to peel back a further layer of the complex interactions behind policy change and demonstrate how a single actor can be very influential in bringing about transformation.

The levels of influence of the different key actors from each issue area can be graphically mapped out along two axis. The horizontal axis presents the type of institutions the key policy actors mentioned in the narratives section belong to, and the vertical axis reflects their degree of power and influence (ranging from less influential to more influential). Such a visual representation helps enhance the understanding of power relations and the significance of the different actors in policymaking.

CONCLUSION

To provide a well-rounded picture of the dynamics involved in food system policies, this brief summarized the experiences from four different case-studies. A well-planned and well-organized research on food policies, both as a baseline study and as an evaluative study, may shed interesting light on a relevant but complex and often neglected aspect of food system transformation towards sustainable and healthy diets.

LITERATURE

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