

The political economy of food system transformation: pathways to progress in a polarized world

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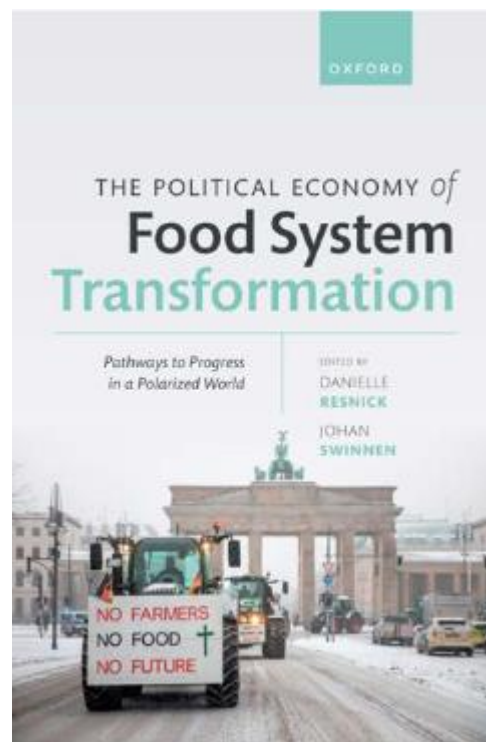
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Country-wide hunger that is persistent and pervasive, as opposed to a relatively sudden and localised famine, was once largely viewed as fundamentally a production problem: farmers couldn't grow enough. Then it came to be seen as also being a consumption problem: poor people couldn't afford to buy food even if it was available. The term protein-calorie deficiency or undernutrition was later replaced by the more nuanced one of malnutrition – too little or too much of the right or wrong type of food. The responsibility for finding solutions to the food problem,

initially given to agriculturalists, was then shared with agricultural economists; then when the socio- cultural and institutional contexts of food-centred behaviour began to be appreciated, specialists in these fields became involved. In the 1980s, when the concept of 'supply chain management' began to gain hold, it and the more politically charged idea of the 'value chain', were also applied to the food problem. Thus what was at first considered to be primarily a technological issue had become a concern about market failure as well, and in due course widened to include consideration of the political economy of the food problem in a belated acknowledgement of the complexity and intractability of the challenge. What indeed should governments be advised to do in order that they can satisfactorily discharge one of their most basic responsibilities, namely ensuring food security for all? (The concept of 'food security' itself only gained general currency in the 1990s.) Hence the food problem is presented today as requiring an all-embracing approach in the search for its solution, with the holistic notion of a 'food system' at its core – a subject worthy of academic study in its own right, with 'food system management' as its practical counterpart for application in the real world. For anyone wishing to understand what is currently meant by 'food system' and 'food system



management', this wide- ranging collection of papers compiled by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) is an excellent introduction, with exhaustive lists of references in the bibliographies at the end of each chapter.

The book addresses what it says is the increasingly recognised unsustainability of the current structure of the global food system.¹ Its unsustainability is evidenced by problems with the environmental impact of agricultural production and with the health consequences of unequal access to food. 'Policy pathways' for achieving food system transformation are highly contested and the 'enabling conditions' for implementation are often absent. The picture is further complicated by 'polarising factors' affecting decision-making at domestic and international levels "from debates over values and (mis)information, to concerns over food self-sufficiency, corporate influence, and human rights."

As the preface observes, the disciplines brought to bear on this analytical challenge include economics, ecology, geography, nutrition, political science and public policy. Twelve of the book's 23 contributors are academics and 11 are based in international research organisations, such as IFPRI, International Center for Tropical Agriculture, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and the like. The introduction notes that only a minor part of consumer spending on food goes to farmers: less than 10 percent in rich countries and around 30 percent in many middle- and lower-income countries. In the light of this and given that the transactional operation of food systems is handled almost entirely by the private sector, the absence of any contributors from commerce or industry is, to this reviewer, a little disappointing.

Nevertheless, the ambition behind this endeavour is impressive. Its investigative scope is indicated by the first chart in the book (see below).

The editors explain that this framework informs their visualising of the book as comprising of four parts, viz:

- The first examines in depth the various components of the 'incentive space', with chapters titled as follows: Facts, interests and values: identifying points for convergence and divergence for food systems; The political economy of reforming agricultural support policies; From re-instrumenting to re- purposing farm support policies; and Policy coalitions in food system transformation.
- The second part focusses more directly on coalitions that mobilise for or against reform, with chapters titled: Government response to ultra-processed food and sugar beverage industries in developing nations – the need to build coalitions across policy sectors; Ultra-processed food environments – aligning policy beliefs from the state, market and civil society; Asymmetric power in global food system advocacy; and The political economy of bundling socio-technical innovations to transform agri-food systems.
- The third part deals with what are termed 'design spaces', with chapters titled: Sustainable food and farming – when public perceptions depart from science; Enabling tipping points in public support for food system transformation – the case of meat consumption; and Urban food system governance in Africa – towards a realistic model for transformation.
- The final part is concerned with what is called 'adaptive space' and focusses on food system reform at local, international and global levels. The chapters are: Political economy of food

system transformation in the EU; and Tracking progress and generating accountability for global food system commitments.

Given the huge amount of information, data and analysis drawn from a wide range of sources in this book, most readers will look to the editors' concluding chapter to pull all the disparate threads together into some sort of coherent design. The editors approach this task cautiously. They first identify certain themes and dilemmas that emerge in several of the preceding chapters, viz:

1. Transforming food systems often involves trade-offs across development objectives, among policy instruments, and over time, resulting in different distributional effects across interest groups – hardly a surprising conclusion perhaps. However, there may also be inter-temporal trade-offs to consider between the benefits of current policy familiarity, however flawed, and the costs of future policy uncertainty and possible unintended consequences. Examples cited include the vehement resistance by Indian farmers to proposed market reforms in 2020 and the impacts of the United States (US) biofuels mandates on increased greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions due to land expansion.
2. In the context of mobilisation of support for particular interventions, the formation of active coalitions among various subsets of interest groups are a recurrent theme, such coalitions becoming increasingly expansive in food systems as agricultural value chains have become more complex. For example, there are groupings of farmers with processors (ie within the supply/value chain), of farmers with environmentalists in supporting biofuels or ecosystem payments, and of biotechnology, child nutrition and environmental sustainability interests in mobilising support for taxes on sugar and sugary beverages (SSBs). When these coalitions are transnational, they can put more resources at the disposal of the domestic allies, although the credibility of the advocacy can be undermined if such coalitions are seen as elitist and detached from local preferences.
3. The diversity of coalitions requires a more considered approach to designing politically feasible food system reforms. 'Policy bundling' aims to address the concerns of several interest groups simultaneously, reducing the efficacy of counter- advocacy by any single group. Getting 'policy sequencing' right is critical to sustaining public confidence in governments' future reform efforts, especially with regard to health or economic consequences. Done well, policy sequencing can create positive policy tipping points with consumer confidence increasing due to good experience with earlier changes.

4. External disruption events or ‘critical junctures’ can impact on the acceptability of food system reforms. Thus, fiscal crises in Mexico, India and South Africa increased the attractiveness of previously unused SSB taxes, and in the European Union (EU), a ‘window of opportunity’ to introduce genetically modified (GM) soybean crops to Europe was partially closed by the mad cow disease scare of 1996.

The editors then turn to what they see as those aspects of food system transformation

that are less well understood (the ‘need further research’ category). One is that while there are several policies concerning specific food issues that seem to work across several countries, “the ideal constellation of policies to actually transform the entire food system are relatively unknown”. Another is how negotiation tactics between interest groups have changed and will continue to change with the emergence of new political configurations. A third aspect is the importance of citizen trust in their governments, which is essential for the acceptance of food system reforms involving intertemporal trade-offs and uncertainty. Fourthly, how exactly can the growth of politically influential constituencies for needed reforms be fostered, this being particularly relevant to repurposing agricultural subsidies for research and development? Finally, how are the effects of linkages between global, regional and local policies, especially concerning cross- jurisdictional issues, such as climate change and biodiversity, to be factored into our understanding of how food systems behave? The complexity of these linkages and the unpredictability of their impacts at specific times in particular places for certain groups might seem beyond almost any kind of analysis that seeks to be universally applicable, but the implication is that we nevertheless need to make the attempt.

This book is a comprehensive, rigorously analytical and evidence- based review of the past and present state of food systems. Individual chapters provide fascinating accounts of how and why particular food systems in specific countries behave in the way they do. In its totality, does this impressive compendium of food system knowledge allow robust generalisations about what is required to underpin the successful transformation of existing food systems into more sustainable ones? The answer must be ‘not really’ or, perhaps more hopefully, ‘not yet’. It seems appropriate, therefore, to end this review with the book editors’ own final sentence: “Indeed, while the needed policies to achieve a food system that contributes to human and planetary health might be technical, the pathways to those policies will almost always be political”.

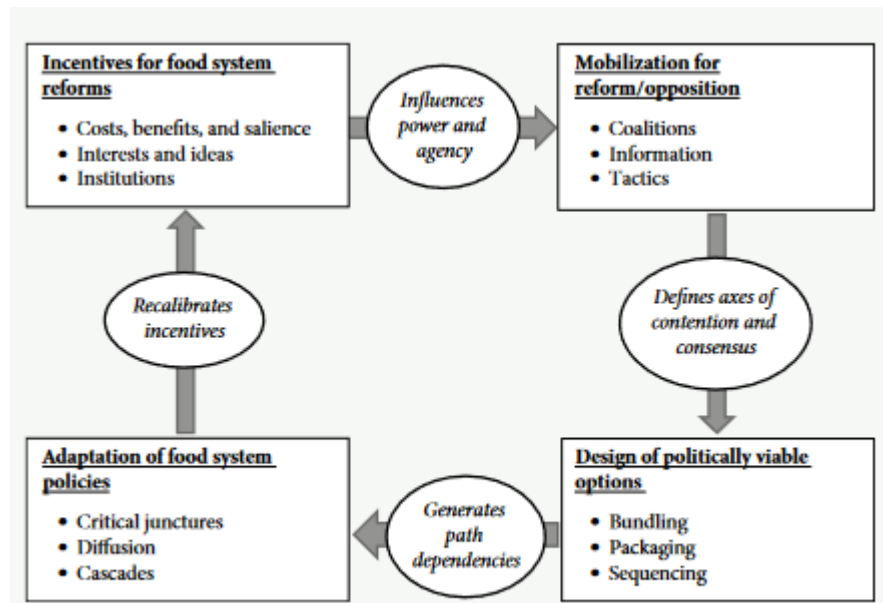


Figure 1.1 Political economy considerations for food system reforms.

Martin Evans

(TAAI Member)