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Strengthening farmers' voices in food systems transformation: an analysis of the Governor's Day with Farmers in Western Kenya

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Kenya, like many countries, faces the challenge of transforming its food systems to make them more just, resilient, and sustainable. A significant obstacle in this transformation is the challenge of meaningfully including various actors—food producers, researchers, policymakers, entrepreneurs, and consumers—in decision-making processes. Farmers, in particular, are often excluded from such critical discussions. This case study examines the Governor's Day with Farmers (GDF) initiative in Kakamega County, Kenya. The GDF takes a bottom-up approach to agricultural policymaking, empowering farmers and ensuring greater inclusivity in food systems transformation. Using original qualitative data, including expert interviews, document analysis, and participant observation, the authors analyzed the preliminary impacts of two iterations of GDF. The case study's findings suggest that GDF serves as a vital platform for stakeholder engagement, enabling farmers to voice concerns directly to policymakers. This increased representation and dialogue help policymakers better understand farmers' needs and facilitates the integration of farmer-driven priorities into local government planning processes. In this way, GDF strengthens the link between farmers and policymakers, promoting more inclusive and responsive governance in the agricultural sector. The study also identified several challenges. First, there is a risk that GDF may be exploited for political purposes rather than serving as a genuine process for inclusive policymaking. Such political instrumentalization would undermine its effectiveness. Second, farmer organizations must be adequately equipped—both financially and technically—if they are to take the lead in extending the initiative beyond Kakamega to other counties in Kenya. In this community case study, GDF emerges as a promising policy tool for inclusive governance in food systems transformation. It empowers farmers and has the potential to contribute to meaningful policy change, provided that risks such as political exploitation and resource constraints are managed effectively. To maintain the initiative's impact over time, efforts will be needed to overcome financial constraints, mitigate political interference, and ensure adequate follow-up and integration into policymaking processes.

KEYWORDS

agriculture, food security, governance, policy, accountability, food systems transformation, empowerment, marginalized groups

1 Introduction

Our food systems are in crisis (Fanzo et al., 2021; Lartey et al., 2018). Challenges such as rising hunger and malnutrition (FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO, 2022; von Grebmer et al., 2022), biodiversity loss and ecosystem degradation (Benton et al., 2021; Habibullah et al., 2022), and climate change (IPCC, 2019, 2022) are well documented [for a definition of food systems, see cf. Van Berkum et al. (2018)]. There is widespread agreement that our food systems must be transformed to ensure safe, nutritious, and affordable food while minimizing carbon emissions, safeguarding ecosystems, promoting equitable livelihoods, and enhancing resilience to shocks and crises (Béné and Abdulai, 2024; Roosevelt et al., 2023; Ruben et al., 2021; Woodhill et al., 2022). At the United Nations (UN) Food Systems Summit in 2021, 165 UN member states and the Holy See committed to this vision. However, despite the unanimous consensus on the need for food systems transformation, significant challenges remain in its implementation.

One major obstacle to advancing food systems transformation is integrating the various actors involved in these processes (Seifu et al., 2022). Food systems encompass a wide range of actors, including food producers such as farmers and fishermen, as well as food vendors, manufacturers, and consumers. Davis et al. (2022) reviewed influential publications on food systems and found that most analyses of food systems transformation tend to focus on major changes required in food production and value chains, with comparatively less attention given to the individuals whose livelihoods are closely linked to and dependent on these systems. This is particularly true for groups like small-scale farmers, who are routinely excluded from agricultural policymaking. This exclusion has been documented in various contexts, for instance in Ethiopian land use policy (Ariti et al., 2018) and agricultural innovation systems in Ethiopia (Seifu et al., 2022), as well as transnational roundtable discussions on sustainable palm oil production (Cheyns, 2014).

The reasons for inadequate farmer participation in agricultural policy-making and other political processes that affect their livelihoods vary significantly depending on the stakeholder, cultural context, and administrative setting. Common barriers identified in the literature that undermine the voices of disadvantaged groups include power imbalances and unequal representation among stakeholders (Davis et al., 2022; Larson et al., 2022; Seifu et al., 2022). Additional challenges include a lack of awareness among farmers on the existence of relevant policies (Ariti et al., 2018), and insufficient coordination capacity of farmers' organizations to mobilize their members for participation in policy processes (Raišienė et al., 2019), among other issues.

The insufficient inclusion of smallholder farmers in policymaking is also evident in Kenya. Ajwang et al. (2022) analyzed agricultural policy discourses in Kenya and found that the marginalization of smallholders in shaping agricultural development dates back to colonial times. Although the devolution process, which transferred agricultural responsibilities to the county level, was intended to bring policymaking 'closer to citizens', farmers' agency remains limited. This marginalization is especially pronounced among small-scale farmers (Ajwang et al., 2022).

In response to the conventional top-down approach to policy design, a group of mainly farmer organizations initiated the *Governor's*

Day with Farmers (GDF) in Kakamega County, Kenya. GDF seeks to bridge the gap between farmers and policymakers by providing a platform where farmers can formulate their political demands and communicate them directly to political decision-makers, thereby strengthening their voices and bargaining power.

In this paper, we present and analyze the potential of GDF to strengthen farmers' voices in agri-food policy specifically and food systems transformation more broadly. The analysis is based on participant observations and interviews with key informants involved in the first two GDF events. Although still in its early phases, the study's findings suggest that the GDF has the potential to serve as a platform and policy tool through which farmers can voice their concerns to local policy-makers. However, continuous and frequent monitoring and analyses of the GDF's impact on agri-food policy-making are needed.

To contextualize the case study, we begin by outlining agricultural policy-making at sub-national (county) and national levels. Subsequently, we describe the genesis of the GDF, followed by a presentation and discussion of the study's findings. The paper concludes by reflecting about potential impacts and political implications of the GDF.

2 Context

2.1 Demographics, geography, and climate of Kakamega County

Kakamega County, located in Western Kenya, covers an area of around 3,000 km². It is the country's fourth most populous county, with nearly 1.9 million residents as of 2019 (KNBS, 2019). The population is mostly rural, with over 60 percent dependent for their livelihoods on crop and livestock production (Ondiba and Matsui, 2019). More than one-third of Kakamega's residents live below the overall/absolute poverty line (DFEP, 2023), which has been reported to be less than 4,000 Kenyan Shillings or KES (approx. USD 30) per month in rural areas (Mburu, 2023).

The altitude of Kakamega County ranges from 1,200 m above sea level in the southwest to 2,000 m in the east (Ondayo et al., 2023). It experiences a tropical climate with bimodal rainfall patterns, receiving between 1,250 and 1,750 mm per year and average temperatures around 21 °C (MoALE, 2018). However, the impacts of climate change have led to temperature fluctuations and rainfall variability, which pose risks to food security (Calicioglu et al., 2019; Saalu et al., 2019).

2.2 Agriculture and food security in Kakamega County

Agriculture is the cornerstone of Kakamega's economy, contributing 52 percent to the Gross County Product (CG Kakamega, 2023a). The average farm size is 1.5 acres for small-scale farmers and around 10 acres for large-scale farmers (DFEP, 2023). Staple crops such as maize, beans, cassava, bananas, and sweet potatoes are grown alongside cash crops like sugarcane and tea. Livestock farming, particularly cattle, sheep, goats, and poultry, supplements agricultural activities (MoALE, 2018).

Despite favorable agroecological conditions, over 33% of the county's population experienced food insecurity in 2000 (CD AFLDI,

2023), and around 18% of children under the age of five were stunted in 2022 (Nutrition scorecard in Kakamega County, Kenya, 2025). Limited local food production exacerbates this issue, resulting in reliance on imports from neighboring counties and Uganda, with Kakamega Town serving as the county's main food distribution hub (Shikoli et al., 2024). Furthermore, food scarcity disproportionately affects women compared to men (Liru and Heinecken, 2021) and varies significantly between income groups (Ombogo, 2017).

2.3 Agriculture policy-making in Kenya

In 2010, Kenya promulgated a new constitution that established a two-tier governance system, comprising a national government and 47 county governments. Agriculture is one of the sectors where most competencies have been delegated to the county level, although the national government retains the authority to establish overarching agricultural policies (KLRC, 2010). National and county governments play important roles in agricultural policy. Both share the responsibility of creating an enabling environment for the development of the sector, while counties are empowered and encouraged to prioritize their own goals.

The national government provides general frameworks and sets overall standards for agricultural policy, which counties adapt to fit their specific needs and priorities. To align with national standards, county governments implement these policies through their own legislation and administrative actions, as well as in accordance with national policy guidelines. The effectiveness of these policies largely depends on the availability of financial resources. Funds for agricultural initiatives are allocated through the national budget by both the national and county governments. These are supplemented by local revenue, donor funding and grants, loans, public-private partnerships, and special funds, such as the equalization fund, which supports marginalized communities in bridging development gaps.

The national government is required by law to improve food and nutrition security, as the Right to Food is enshrined in the Kenyan constitution (KLRC, 2010). Additionally, it aims to maximize incomes optimally utilizing resources in the agricultural sector (Government of Kenya, 2021).

3 Methods

3.1 Case study background: Governor's Day with Farmers

The idea of a *Governor's Day with Farmers* emerged during stakeholder consultations held in 2016 and 2018 (Kiragu and Flohr, 2016). These highlighted several key challenges farmers face in terms of agricultural productivity and food security. Key issues identified in the literature include limited access to extension services (Evans, 2014), high input costs (Dhillon and Moncur, 2023), volatile markets, and land tenure insecurity (Mbudzya et al., 2023). In addition, many smallholder farmers felt their interests were under-represented in agricultural policy-making, an observation also made by Ajwang et al. (2022). In response to these challenges, the idea of a GDF was further developed by Shibuye Community Health Workers (CHW), the Kakamega County Farmers Association (KACOFA), and TMG

(Töpfer, Müller, Gaßner) Research, a think tank focusing on food systems, among other topics. The objective of the GDF was to provide a platform for farmers to engage directly with county-level policymakers and raise awareness of the issues farmers face. This objective materialized in the first GDF event held in February 2022.

GDF is convened annually as a forum for farmers to voice their concerns and demands directly to county government officials. Before each GDF event, farmers' associations compile these demands into a farmers' declaration. In 2022, over 200 farmers were consulted at the sub-county level, while approximately 400 farmers provided inputs to the declaration in 2023.

During the GDF event, the declaration is presented to the county policy-makers, including the Governor, Deputy Governor, County Executive Committee Members, Chief Officers, and Members of the County Assembly. The goal is to have farmers' demands, articulated through these declarations, incorporated into county planning documents such as the county-integrated development plan (CIDP) and the annual development plan (ADP). By and large, these plans determine resource allocation across various sectors and programs. Integrating farmers' issues into these plans may increase the likelihood that their concerns will be adequately addressed.

The first GDF was held in February 2022, attracting over 700 participants. The second GDF took place in 2023 with over 2,000 attendees.

The event not only includes the presentation of the farmers' declaration but also features an agricultural trade fair where exhibitors showcase products and services. Moreover, the annual GDF is strategically scheduled for the end of February to coincide with the county's fiscal planning and budgeting cycle with a view to incorporating farmers' demands into annual planning.

The preparations and realization of GDF in 2022 were largely financed by TMG Research through a project on soil protection and restoration (ProSoil).¹ Additionally, the hosting organizations provided financial and in-kind contributions. Following the first event, funding from development partners diminished, as the TMG-led research project ended in 2022. Consequently, the planning and realization of the second and third GDFs underwent some changes. A steering committee, led by the main hosts KACOFA and Shibuye CHW, and consisting of various agri-food stakeholders, was established to mobilize and pool resources and coordinate the efforts of the various stakeholders. Responsibilities such as inviting guests and setting up the event venue were shared among the members of the steering committee.

Following the first and second GDFs in 2022 and 2023, we analyzed the potential of GDF to influence the governance of

1 ProSoil (2014–2027) is a global project, implemented by the German Development Agency, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH. Its main donor is the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), with additional funding currently provided by the European Union and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The project is currently implemented in Benin, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, India, Kenya, Madagascar, and Tunisia. ProSoil promotes sustainable land management practices aimed at conserving and restoring degraded soils, thereby supporting smallholder farmers to improve food production. More information can be found here: <https://www.giz.de/en/worldwide/129677.html>

transformations towards sustainable food systems in Kakamega County, especially to empower farmers in agricultural policy-making.

3.2 Theoretical underpinnings

Our analysis of GDF as a policy tool is grounded in scientific literature on food systems governance, including works by [Delaney et al., 2018](#); [Leeuwis et al., 2021](#); [Sonnino and Milbourne, 2022](#); [Termeer et al., 2018](#); [Vignola et al., 2021](#). Common elements of food systems governance identified in the literature relevant to GDF include leadership “to stimulat[e] action and articulat[e] a vision” ([Delaney et al., 2018](#): 294), inclusion and empowerment of “actors who are affected by the problem and proposed policies” ([Termeer et al., 2018](#): 88), and accountability and transparency ([Vignola et al., 2021](#)). These common governance elements informed both the development of the interview guide and the subsequent data analysis.

3.3 Data collection and analysis

Qualitative data collection methods, including informal discussions, document analysis, and in-depth key informant interviews, were used to better understand the stakeholders’ perspectives on GDF. In February and March 2023, shortly after the second GDF, we conducted 11 individual key informant interviews with representatives from organizations involved in the planning and realization of the GDF, including leaders of three smallholder farmers organizations. An open-ended question guide was used to facilitate the interviews, enabling participants to share their insights, perceptions, and experiences freely. The quotes presented in this paper stem from the key informant interviews. The responses of key informants were anonymized and reported by organizational affiliation to ensure confidentiality. The interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed. Interviewee statements were analyzed by grouping responses into themes, such as participants’ understanding of GDF, inclusion and stakeholder engagement, farmers’ voices and representation, accountability and transparency, impacts on policy-making, and challenges and opportunities. This approach enabled the identification of both common patterns and divergent perspectives on various aspects of GDF.

Additionally, we gathered information through participant observation ([Kawulich, 2005](#)) during the first and second GDFs, focusing on “active looking, improving memory, informal interviewing [and] writing detailed field notes” ([DeWalt and DeWalt, 2002](#), p. 7). The first two authors of this paper conducted the participant observation, which included attending the GDF events, accompanying their preparation, and remaining informed about follow-up activities. We also conducted a document analysis by reviewing GDF declarations and county plans.

The approach of qualitative triangulation enabled a more nuanced understanding of the GDF. Key informant interviews provided insight into the perspectives of various stakeholders, while participant observation helped us to see how these perspectives manifested in practice. Document analysis and informal discussions helped to verify the claims made during interviews, particularly concerning the integration of farmers’ concerns into local development plans.

4 Results

4.1 Stakeholders’ understanding of the GDF

As regards the perception of the stakeholders’ involved in the conception and execution of the first and second GDF event, the interviewees demonstrated a range of perspectives. Most (six out of eleven) viewed the GDF primarily as a specific day or event in Kakamega County’s calendar. However, all six respondents agreed that GDF provides farmers with the opportunity to interact directly with high-level county policy-makers. As the representative of a faith-based development organization explained: “It [GDF] is one of the key events in the county calendar that gives a farmer a voice to see the leaders one on one and discuss with them the issues that they face.”

When asked specifically about the objectives of GDF, it became clear that some interviewees (four out of eleven) also see it as a platform that enables farmers, including women and youth, to participate in county planning and policy processes. A Kakamega county government officer noted: “At [agriculture] department, I feel it gives us a platform to get the farmers’ requirements so that our planning is both bottom up and top down, (...) when we plan for the farmers, when we plan for the county’s financial allocation, especially to agriculture.”

4.2 Stakeholder engagement and inclusion

During the second GDF in 2023, core conveners Shibuye CHW and KACOFA engaged eleven additional stakeholders, including a local university, and local and international development organizations. This collaboration aimed to pool both financial and in-kind resources, ensuring that the event ran smoothly and that infrastructure, including tents, chairs, catering, and media outreach, was in place. However, interviewees also pointed out that the financial sustainability of the GDF remains a significant challenge, particularly in terms of ensuring on-site farmer participation and effectively gathering farmers’ demands in the field.

In addition to resource pooling, the extensive involvement of stakeholders contributed to a broad range of perspectives on farmers’ issues. As highlighted by a representative of a local farmer organization: “[The steering committee members] were bringing on board also their views because they are working with farmers, they are working with the farmer groups on production and whatever information (...) they were collecting in the field they were also bringing to us so that we can put it as one package to the governor.”

Interviewees had varied perspectives on the extent of stakeholder engagement. During the first GDF, separate consultations were held for youth, women, and persons with disabilities (PWDs), alongside the main farmer consultations. These parallel consultations provided an opportunity for many from these minority groups to voice their concerns. However, due to limited resources during the second GDF, the issues of youth and PWDs were assumed to be covered by in the general farmer consultations. One spokesperson from a local youth farmer organization noted that youth issues had not been clearly addressed, and PWDs were less actively involved in the conception of the farmers’ declaration compared to the first GDF. He observed: “...from the first assessment of the Governor’s Day, then the second assessment, we believe

that youth are not coming out very clearly. (...) PWDs we have also not seen them actively involved in the planning of the Governor's Day."

One interviewee criticized the lack of private-sector participation. However, our participant observation indicated that agribusiness stakeholders, including seed and fertilizer companies, participated in the associated trade fair. Four interviewees, including two representing farmer organizations, also acknowledged the extensive involvement of county staff, highlighting the active participation of various ministries, departments, and members of the county assembly.

4.3 Farmers' voices and representation

Most interviewees highlighted the potential of GDF to strengthen farmers' voices. A local farmer organization's member noted: "There is currently nothing in Kakamega County that brings the Governor directly to the voters except the Governor's Day with Farmers. (...) the Governor's Day brings the real people who have power and resources, including the Governor himself to listen to a big number of farmers who are speaking with a collective voice."

The initial effects of farmers' dialogues with policy-makers during the GDF are evident in the increased engagement of farmer representatives with government officials and their greater involvement in agricultural planning discussions, such as those held by the County Agricultural Sector Steering Committee (CASSCOM). As a result, some elements of the farmers' declaration, such as an increase in agricultural extension staff, have been incorporated into planning documents such as the integrated county development plan (cf. [CG Kakamega, 2023a](#)).

4.4 Accountability and transparency

According to the assessments made by respondents in this study, GDF can serve as a platform for holding governments accountable for the progress of policy implementation, which is crucial for the performance of the agriculture sector. GDF allows farmers to provide feedback to the county government on the effectiveness of policies and projects in meeting defined goals and targets. Seven out of eight respondents who addressed the issue of accountability highlighted this particular aspect. A farmers organization representative observed: "(...) you heard one of the farmers yesterday saying, 'Your Excellency, we are waiting for government subsidy of fertilizer, and we have only received 1,400 bags of fertilizer out of a population of 7,000 farmers. Where is the rest. When is it coming?' I think that is already accountability because they are reporting what is on the ground."

Interviewees also highlighted the role of GDF in promoting transparency and accountability by putting pressure on the government to act on their announcements and promises, driven by the huge number of farmers—and potential voters—at the event. A staff member of the local university remarked: "(...) when you meet a lot of people, you are also being made to do even monitoring and evaluation of some of the processes and activities." An official of the county government further noted: "With the Governor's Day, what we are seeing is that it is kind of a platform to give a report. We are setting a scorecard, on government to farmers directly."

At the same time, some interviewees voiced reservations about how effectively GDF can strengthen accountability, questioning the actual pressure on policy-makers to deliver on their promises. A staff member of a development organization noted: "You can declare and say, I'm going to do this, but along the way, you do not do it. People continue to glorify it successfully, but they forget there were some key takeaways were supposed to be acted upon and probably nobody follows up."

Respondents also recommended establishing a dedicated task force, as was done in the planning of the second GDF, to follow up on the county government's commitments, as highlighted by a county government representative: "We have just been urging the [county minister of agriculture] that we want to form a task force, including his office and other stakeholders (...) that we sit down and dissect from the Governor's Day what needs our attention, what is now, what is for tomorrow (...) so that we (...) sit down and agree how to move forward."

4.5 Integration of farmers' issues into county plans

Interviewees highlighted the role of the farmers' declaration presented at GDF in documenting farmers' demands. GDF can serve to monitor the implementation of the commitments outlined in the declaration, which the government endorsed by signing it, as explained by a farmer representative: "So we have to go back to our lead person in the Minister of Agriculture (...) to know what priority items in the declaration have been put in the CIDP from the first declaration, and also bring out the second declaration and to know what items can we include."

Nonetheless, opinions vary regarding the extent to which the declaration's topics have been integrated into county development plans, for example, the CIDP 2023–2027 and the ADP 2023/2024. Five interviewees highlighted that aspects such as extension services, access to weather information, and farmer participation in local governance from the 2022 declarations have been adopted in the current CIDP and ADP. However, a Kakamega County government member pointed out potential shortcomings in addressing farmers' issues due to political realities: "There was very little that could have been done with the first [GDF, 2022] declaration, the first Governor's Day, because the governor was getting out of office and the CIDP had already been completed, the ADP already completed."

Representatives of the leading farmer organizations were more optimistic: "We ensured [the issues of the declaration] went into the CIDP, and the governor even said the [county-level agriculture minister] should go ahead and give us someone from the county who can work with us as communities, as farmers, to ensure that it goes to the CIDP. They tracked every stage of where the CIDP was." This claim of success can be better understood when exemplified by the demand for agricultural advisory and extension services. Increasing the number of extension staff and "equipping farmers with the necessary knowledge and tools to address the challenges they face" was a key demand prominently included in the 2022 GDF. In 2022, nearly 170 additional extension officers were employed, as noted by the KACOFA chairperson and confirmed by official county documents ([CG Kakamega, 2023b](#)), suggesting that GDF may have influenced this measure.

Other demands focused on weather information. In response to the declaration's call for 'real-time weather information,' KES 100 million (approx. USD 0.8 million) has been allocated to establish hybrid agrometeorological weather stations. Additionally, KES 40 million (approx. 0.3 million USD) has been set aside for acquiring soil testing kits, soil testing demonstrations, and promoting soil conservation technologies, addressing the declaration's request to "enable farmers to access affordable soil testing services" (CG Kakamega, 2023b).

Despite progress, some issues, such as adoption of community-land lease guidelines, remain unadopted, leading to repetition in subsequent GDF declarations. All interviewees emphasized the importance of rigorous follow-up processes to ensure that GDF commitments do not become mere political statements. Debate continues on whether tracking should focus on bodies such as CASSCOM or the Agricultural Committee in the County Assembly. Some interviewees suggested forming a dedicated team from organizing institutions for this purpose. Recent informal consultations indicate that a multi-stakeholder team has been established, including local farmer organization and development organizations, though achievements are yet to be assessed.

5 Discussion

5.1 Farmers' inclusion in food systems governance

Weak interaction between farmer organizations and local governance institutions is known to hinder food systems transformation (Manlosa et al., 2023). Government actors often adhere to a top-down planning culture, hindering real change (Seifu et al., 2022). In this regard, GDF emerges as promising approach to overcome this barrier by strengthening farmers' advocacy capacities. Interviewees consistently highlighted the farmer-led nature of GDF spearheaded by farmers' associations such as the women's grassroots organization Shibuye Community Health Workers as critical to its legitimacy. Through their capacity to mobilize large numbers of farmers, these local institutions amplify collective voices and raise policy-makers' awareness of farmers' perspectives and concerns, thereby increasing the farmers' negotiating leverage (Ma et al., 2023).

Key informant interviews and document analysis indicate that GDF contributed to farmers' representation in county-level agricultural dialogues. Farmer representatives have reported being approached more frequently by county officials and invited into planning discussions where they were previously absent. Furthermore, certain demands articulated in the farmers' declaration, such as the call for increased extension staff, have already been reflected in county development documents. However, despite this increase, the number of extension officers remains insufficient to meet farmer's needs. The lack of adequate extension staff is a common challenge in Africa, and especially Kenya (Ogola et al., 2023; Wekesa and Ogemah, 2025). This understaffing is therefore unsurprising and unlikely to improve in the short term, despite the essential role of extension services in improving farmers' livelihoods (Adeyanju et al., 2023).

5.2 Lasting impacts on policy making

The study's findings indicate that GDF can enhance farmer representation, and potentially influence policy priorities. However, transformation of food systems occurs at the institutional level – through systemic shifts in rules and norms—and in stakeholder relationships, including changes in power dynamics (Manlosa et al., 2023).

A key element in lasting policy impact is accountability (Steets, 2010). It is critical to establish mechanisms that ensure stakeholders inputs are considered and translated into tangible outcomes (Garton et al., 2022). Respondents recommended establishing a dedicated task force to monitor the integration of farmers' priorities into county program and policy processes, aligning with Jansen and Kalas (2020), who observed that multi-stakeholder partnerships and processes can enhance accountability and transparency through continuous dialogue. Garton et al. (2022) propose practical measures, including transparent reporting, institutionalized follow-up, and stronger stakeholder responsibility.

Nonetheless, some interviewees questioned whether GDF can exert sufficient pressure on policymakers to deliver on commitments. Similar concerns have arisen in other contexts, where policy dialogues improved communication but often failed to generate sustained action. In Liberia, dialogues before and during the Ebola crisis identified priorities but lacked adequate follow-up (Nabyonga-Orem et al., 2016). In Uganda, community-politician meetings fostered empowerment and mutual understanding, yet consistent engagement and adequate financial support were identified as requirement for long-term impact (Lee et al., 2024). Lessons from Kenya's participatory budgeting processes show that accountability strengthens when commitments are embedded in legal frameworks and reinforced by community monitoring mechanisms (Muthomi, 2021). Overall, this evidence suggests that for GDF to generate lasting impact, it must move beyond dialogues to institutionalize follow-up, enable citizen oversight, and align commitments with county plans and budgets.

From this perspective, the early achievements of GDF, while notable, should be treated with caution. The adoption of isolated farmer demands into planning documents represents an incremental adjustment, but it does not yet indicate a transformation of governance processes. The long-term impact on improving outcomes for farmers and whether power relations among agriculture sector stakeholders will genuinely shift in favor of smallholder farmers remains to be seen. Continued research is recommended to assess the medium- and long-term impacts of GDF on agricultural policy-making and governance, particularly regarding inclusive participation and the empowerment of farmers and marginalized groups.

5.3 Challenges and risks

Multi-stakeholder platforms have gained popularity as governance approaches to address complex sustainability challenges in the agri-food sector, aligning business, government, NGOs, and other stakeholders to achieve better outcomes based on diverse perspectives (Thorpe, 2022). However, effective participation in multi-stakeholder governance processes demands financial resources, knowledge, and organizational capacities (Ariti et al., 2018; Bizikova et al., 2020; Raišienė et al., 2019). Smallholder farmers and other marginalized groups often lack these, limiting active engagement in policy processes

(Bizikova et al., 2020; Berchoux et al., 2023). Pooling resources from various organizations involved in the GDF, as was done for the second GDF, is a good place to start. Furthermore, it could be beneficial for the organizing institutions to develop and implement a comprehensive fundraising strategy spanning several years.

Multi-stakeholder platforms may disadvantage less powerful stakeholders, including the rural poor (Davis et al., 2022). To safeguard independence and integrity, it is essential to establish clear protocols for the planning and implementation of the GDF. Another risk is that GDF may be perceived merely as a ceremonial event rather than a sustained policy tool. Without effective follow-up and monitoring between annual events, its impact on agricultural policy and governance is likely to be limited. Ensuring continuity, structured follow-up, and systematic documentation of commitments is therefore crucial.

6 Conclusion

After a joint reflection with participating stakeholders following two editions of the Governor's Day with Farmers, we assessed the potential of the GDF as a policy tool to shape food systems transformation at the county level.

Our analysis clearly indicated that GDF has the capability to enhance farmers' voices, enabling them to convey their perspectives to county policy makers. This, in turn, can lead to the development of improved policies that respond to the specific needs of farmers—an essential requirement for inclusive governance in transformation processes. Given the underperformance of other multi-stakeholder platforms at county level, such as CASSCOM, GDF appears to fill gaps in inclusive agricultural policy making. In this regard, the study's findings suggest that GDF has the potential to function as more than a symbolic platform, creating tangible entry points for farmers to participate in local governance processes in a more substantive way than previously.

Despite its potential, risks and challenges associated with GDF persist. For GDF to effectively serve as a platform in shaping food systems governance, the processes between the GDF annual events are crucial. Regular follow-ups on the issues that policymakers committed to are necessary. It is equally vital for GDF to remain a farmer-led initiative.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

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Ethics statement

Written informed consent was obtained from the individual(s) for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

Author contributions

LS-B: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Data curation, Formal analysis. WO: Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – review & editing. HH: Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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