

November 2024

Steering Transformation

Pathways to Enhanced Coordination among Food Systems Actors in Kenya

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Overview

Globally, the momentum to transform food systems continues to grow. Kenya, like many other countries around the world, has committed itself to transforming its food systems. Its “Agricultural Sector Transformation and Growth Strategy 2019–2029” (ASTGS) provides a policy framework for food systems transformation. It prioritises three core areas: (1) raising farmers’ incomes; (2) increasing agricultural output and value addition; and (3) building household food resilience. The Government of Kenya’s [Bottom-Up Economic Agenda \(BETA\)](#) also prioritises agricultural transformation and inclusive growth. While these commitments mark an important first step, the transformation of food systems is an extremely complex process, which must consider multiple factors and challenges.

In Kenya, these include balancing climate action and ecosystem preservation while meeting current and future food and nutrition needs (de Jong et al., 2024).

Kenya’s agri-food sector contains a diverse range of actors, including 47 county governments, the national government, a large private sector, farmers’ and civil society organisations, academia, and development partners. While this diversity can yield a wide variety of proposed solutions, it can also impede progress due to conflicts of interest and contradictory approaches. A key factor in managing the transformation of food systems is the effective coordination of these diverse actors.

This policy brief outlines the challenges of coordinating the work of diverse actors and explores the potential of certain agencies, particularly the Agriculture Transformation Office, to enhance that coordination. The Brief is based on discussions with a range of Kenyan agri-food experts.

»Every person has the right to be free from hunger, and to have adequate food of acceptable quality.«

Article 43, Constitution of Kenya (2010)

What is Food Systems Transformation?

Food system transformation processes ideally reshape the way our food system is organised in a way that helps to better address desired food system outcomes including but not limited to:

- ▶ **Food security:** providing all people with access to sufficient food;
- ▶ **Healthy diets:** making sure people have access to diets that deliver good health;
- ▶ **Economic wellbeing:** assuring food systems contribute to a living income for all;
- ▶ **Social wellbeing:** ensuring that food systems contribute to all people leading a safe, flourishing life;
- ▶ **Environmental sustainability:** making sure food systems do not harm our natural environment.

Source: Dengerink et al. 2022, Wageningen University & Research

Coordination – a key factor in food systems transformation

Transforming food systems is much more than a science-based process; it is a socio-political challenge involving various actors, often with competing views (Leeuwis et al. 2021). While key policy documents like Kenya's ASTGS outline goals for transformation, the pathways to achieving them differ widely. Debates around food systems transformation often reflect diverging development paths based on competing ideologies, such as smallholder-centred approaches that emphasise indigenous knowledge and low-input farming versus export-oriented, technology-driven agricultural policies.

The coordination of food systems transformation must go beyond conventional policy processes that focus on areas such as farming or forestry in isolation.

Integrated approaches are required that reflect the diversity of actors and the multi-scale and multi-sector nature of food systems (Béné & Abdulai, 2024).

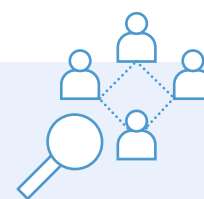
In practice, however, the implementation of more integrated food system strategies has been disappointing so far. Weak coordinating structures are a major reason for this underperformance (Termeer et al., 2018; Di Prima et al., 2022).

»We have not invested enough in ensuring that the different efforts we put into transforming our food systems are adequately coordinated and that might be our biggest undoing as a country and a sector.«

Agatha Thuo, Agricultural Sector Network

Gaps in coordination

Based on our analysis of the existing coordination landscape, including mechanisms led both by government and non-state actors, we have identified several gaps in coordination in Kenya's agri-food sector. Coordination is weak between the government and other non-state food system actors, including private sector, civil society, producer and consumer organisations, and development partners. Structured engagements between government and non-state actors have often been erratic, driven by specific events such as the United Nations Food Systems Summit (UN FSS) or other global commitments, but sustained coordination efforts have been lacking.

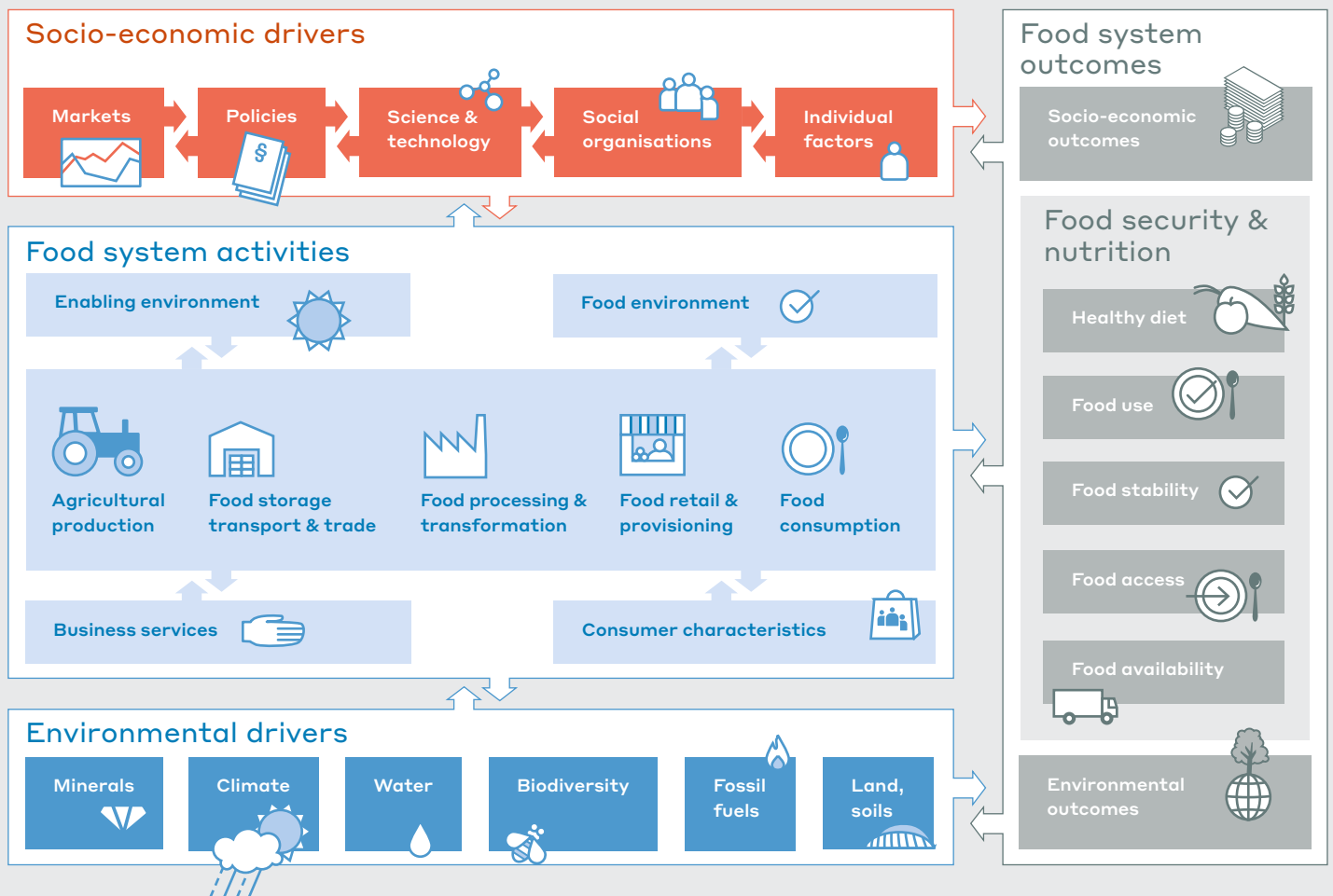


Coordination challenges in Kenya's agricultural extension service system

At a **multi-stakeholder dialogue** held by TMG in Nairobi in June 2024, food systems experts from government, civil society, research, and the private sector highlighted the importance of effective coordination for food systems transformation. They specifically underscored the need for improved coordination in delivering extension services, which is currently hindered by fragmented advisory systems, poor collaboration among service providers, and challenges in reaching marginalised groups.

Uneven distribution of service providers within counties leads to disparities, as actors often target better-organised beneficiaries, further skewing service reach. Competing interests among providers also result in duplicated efforts and conflicts. A lack of accountability among development partners compounds these issues, hindering fair service distribution. Proposed solutions include creating a Directorate of Collaboration & Partnerships within the Ministry of Agriculture to coordinate partners at national and county levels and establishing an online hub to share data on donors, project beneficiaries, investments in value chains, etc. to enhance decision-making and transparency.

Conceptualisation of the Food Systems Approach



Source: Berkum and colleagues (2018) of Wageningen University & Research

»We need (...) a mechanism through which actors can work together. We do not have to agree on every little detail (...), but (...) we ought to coordinate ourselves.«

Edgar Okoth, Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Civil Society Alliance

What a coordination mechanism needs to deliver

- ▶ **Creating a shared vision:** Addressing conflicts in interests to agree on clear, actionable food system goals that can guide national and county-level efforts
- ▶ **Enhancing transparency, accountability and trust:** Ensuring transparent and accountable processes to improve policy decisions and investments across the public and private sectors
- ▶ **Ensuring inclusivity:** Involving all relevant stakeholders, especially those most affected by food system policies, to ensure that food-insecure communities are effectively reached
- ▶ **Improving communication and information flow:** Facilitating timely knowledge-sharing and data access among stakeholders to avoid duplication of efforts and to leverage synergies
- ▶ **Tracking progress and learning together:** Conducting regular evaluations of food system programmes to assess outcomes and drive shared improvements
- ▶ **Strengthening cross-sector partnership:** Enhancing practical collaboration across relevant sectors to overcome silos, address inter-connected food system challenges and pool valuable resources

Source: TMG-led stakeholder consultations

The landscape of food systems coordination in Kenya

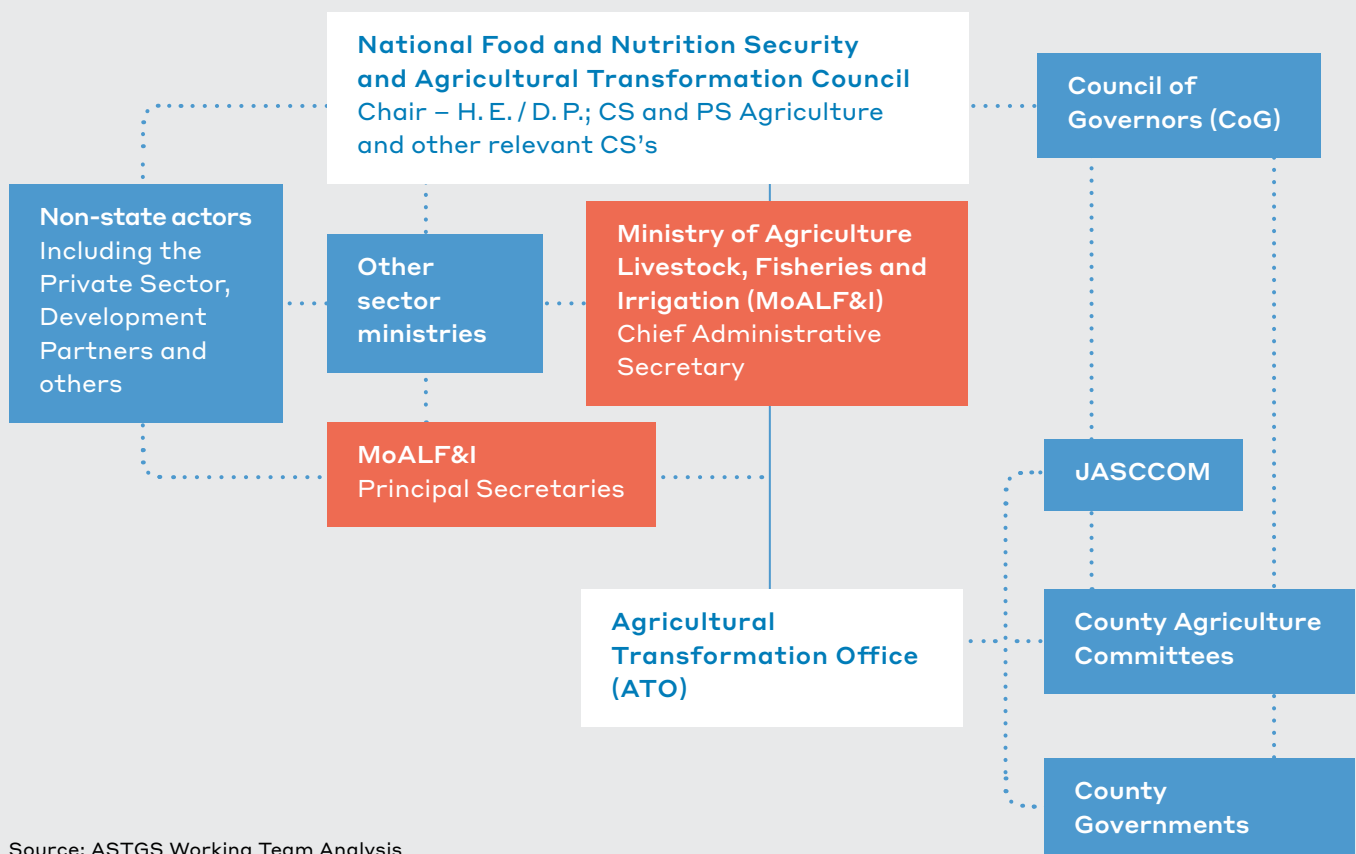
Kenya has various structures in place for coordinating action by agri-food system actors. Under the ASTGS, the Government of Kenya envisions a coordination framework linking county governments, the national government and non-state actors.

At the national level, two main structures support coordination. The first of these, the National Food and Nutrition Security Council, which is chaired by the president or deputy president and made up of cabinet and permanent secretaries, is the top policymaking body on food and nutrition security. The second, the Agricultural Transformation Office (ATO), is situated within the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock Development and connects county-level agencies and non-state actors to the Ministry. The ATO is also tasked with interministerial coordination, monitoring and evaluation, and overseeing that sustainability targets in the ASTGS implementation are met.

The Joint Agriculture Sector Steering Committee (JASSCOM) facilitates coordination between counties and the national government, guiding food system transformation initiatives. It also oversees the Joint Agriculture Intergovernmental Secretariat (JAS-IGS) and the Sector Technical Working Groups (SWAGs) to ensure decisions are effectively implemented across both levels of government. JASSCOM is co-chaired by the chairperson of the Council of Governors Agriculture Committee and the Cabinet Secretary for Agriculture.

The County Agricultural Sector Steering Committee (CASSCOM) is the main coordination structure at county level. It oversees coordination between state and non-state actors, steers communication and information sharing, guides participatory monitoring and evaluation, and promotes accountability of county-level projects.

Schematic overview of the ASTGS coordination structure



Source: ASTGS Working Team Analysis

There are several challenges involved in coordinating food systems transformation in Kenya. For example, the National Food and Nutrition Security and Agricultural Transformation Council has yet to be operationalized. Its absence limits potential to elevate the food systems agenda to the highest policy-making level, the presidency. Similarly, JASSCOM struggles with capacity limitations in fully executing its role. The ATO was a strong attempt to establish a coordination structure under the ASTGS, but political shifts and competing priorities have left it dysfunctional for over a year, with ongoing restructuring and key positions unfilled.

Counties have yet to fully adopt the CASSCOM structure as a coordination mechanism. Although the structure was proposed over a decade ago, only a few counties are in advanced stages of implementation. Limited public investment hampers CASSCOM's effectiveness, with most counties relying on non-state funding from development partners and the private sector, which risks external influence and compromises sustainability. The limited effectiveness of CASSCOM also restricts the representation and participation of diverse stakeholders at the county level.

»In some of the counties (...), the one who finances the [CASSCOM] meeting usually determines the agenda and (...) who attends the meeting (...). To realize the full potential of the CASSCOM mechanism, we must be firm on rules of operation and secure core public financing.«

Mary Karanu, Right to Food Coalition

Beyond government: multi-stakeholder power for transformation

While government has a crucial role to play in coordinating food systems governance, effective transformation relies on collaboration with non-state actors, including the private sector, civil society, academia, and producer and consumer groups. These stakeholders contribute perspectives, resources and expertise, fostering innovation and inclusivity, and ensuring policies are transparent and responsive to the diverse needs of Kenyan society.

Several initiatives exist for stakeholder coordination led by non-state actors. These range from networks and associations to broad multi-stakeholder platforms (MSPs) involving actors from private sector, civil society, producer and consumer associations, government and donors. MSPs can range from ad-hoc initiatives intended to address an immediate food system event to long-term structures for actor coordination ([Alliance of Bioversity et al. 2021](#)). They unite diverse actors to address common challenges, promote a similar approach, and develop and implement joint advocacy strategies.

Although MSPs have grown in influence, their full potential remains untapped. Their impact on food systems governance remains limited due to weak links with policy processes. These gaps show the need for a coordination mechanism that fosters a strong linkage between the different MSPs and the government.

Strengthening the ATO

The gaps identified show a clear need to strengthen central coordination levels. The food system experts interviewed by TMG unanimously agree that such a coordination mechanism must be led by the government as the central duty bearer for ensuring Kenya's food security. Our analysis indicates that, with possible adjustments, the Agriculture Transformation Office (ATO) offers a viable model for the coordination of Kenya's food systems transformation. Established five years ago, it was designed to coordinate the implementation of the ASTGS and related programmes.

There are clear benefits to building on existing coordination mechanisms rather than establishing new structures: continuity, reduced costs, and established relationships and knowledge. Improving current systems also enables faster implementation, fosters trust, and strengthens partner buy-in, promoting more effective collaboration and minimizing risks tied to unfamiliar processes. Experts interviewed expressed confidence in a revamped ATO, citing its past successes in coordinating actors, such as during the United Nations Food Systems Summit dialogues, in supporting the establishment of CASSCOM structures at county level, and in steering implementation of the ASTGS. The ATO has the potential to systematically bring state and non-state actors together for a common vision of food systems transformation. Several areas for improvement were identified to enhance the ATO's effectiveness as a coordination structure for all food systems actors.

»It is important to anchor structures in clear governance systems to ensure longevity beyond donor funding or specific projects.«

Rosinah Mbenya, Participatory Ecological Land Use Management (PELUM), Kenya



Nairobi expert dialogue held by TMG in June 2024. Group discussion on pathways for enhancing coordination in food systems governance. © D. Montas / TMG Research gmbH 2024

Recommendations for strengthening the ATO

► Establish a clear mandate for the ATO.

A clear mandate for the ATO will strengthen its credibility within the government and secure support from non-state actors. Its role should extend beyond implementation of the ASTGS to help actors understand what roles and functions the ATO can deliver. Key functions should include a governance mechanism that unites government, development partners, the private sector, and civil society to foster transparency and coordination in food system interventions and investments.

► Promote transparency and accountability.

A strengthened ATO can enhance transparency and accountability in food system governance. This will build trust in the ATO as a key coordination mechanism. Achieving this requires not only effective alignment among stakeholders in Kenya's food sector but also transparency in investment processes. This could include information about the investments, intervention zones and target groups for different food system actors. A prerequisite for actors to share information about their investments is trust in the ATO's effectiveness and impartiality.

► Enhance county-level coordination.

Since agriculture is a devolved function, effective national-level coordination relies on strong county-level coordination. Strengthening CASSCOM and JASSCOM is key to enhancing county-level and intergovernmental coordination.

► Foster multi-stakeholder engagement and regular dialogues.

While the ATO should be government-led, effective food system coordination requires the engagement of all key stakeholders, including development partners, the private sector, CSOs, and producer and consumer organisations. Active participation from relevant actors is essential, supported by awareness campaigns and information-sharing to clarify roles and contributions. Involved actors must also ensure that their representatives truly present their institution and not just themselves. Regular roundtable discussions convened by the ATO can provide a platform for transparent, inclusive decision-making, with feedback mechanisms to ensure consistent engagement. Involving representatives from multi-stakeholder platforms will further enhance collaboration and coherence in the coordination structure.

► Strengthen the ATO's capacity and financial base.

The ATO's capacity needs to be enhanced to effectively manage coordination between a broad spectrum of food systems actors. Specific capabilities in stakeholder engagement, data and information sharing, and effective resource management are essential for delivering its mandate. To ensure sustainability and create a structure that truly serves Kenya's food system transformation, core funding should primarily come from taxpayer contributions.



»» We need to work on trust first.
If actors do not trust each other,
there is no way they can be
on the same table.««

Nancy Rapando, WWF Kenya

TMG's work on food systems governance in Kenya

The Berlin-based TMG Think Tank for Sustainability is undertaking a research project to explore promising governance approaches to food systems transformation, focusing on Kenya. This project, funded by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), advises development cooperation agencies on how to effectively support these transformation processes. Drawing on Germany's flagship initiative "One World No Hunger" and on dialogues with stakeholders in Kenya, Germany and elsewhere, the project addresses key issues such as inclusion (especially of smallholder farmers), stakeholder coordination and financing mechanisms.



This policy brief is endorsed by



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This publication was made possible with financial support from the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ)

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