Title: Institutional and data limitations to operationalizing sustainable diets: Perspectives from Kenya and Vietnam

Introduction

There is an urgent need to reshape food systems to safeguard human health, the livelihoods of marginalized groups, and use of the planet's natural resources – interconnected goals that are integral to the concept of "sustainable diets" (Mason and Lang, 2017). However, a major barrier to achieving sustainable diets is defining clear interventions points. Parsing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) exemplifies this challenge. The first three of these goals—addressing poverty, hunger, and improving human health—all of which are directly linked to diets, include 28 individual targets, and identify many ambiguous objectives that do not provide clear policy guidance (Blesh et al., 2019). Furthermore, while more than 30 sets of guidelines for sustainable diets have been developed by non-governmental organization (NGOs), business organizations and government agencies globally, the majority of these guidelines lack sufficient scientific evidence to support their recommendations, and many narrowly focus on single food categories or sustainability concerns (Joseph and Clancy, 2015). Moreover, the segregation of data collection, analysis and related decision making within sectoral silos often prevents information from reaching the most relevant decision makers and from being applied across sectors (Abson et al., 2017). How then, can such frameworks and data scenarios guide decision-making on the ground? Based on case studies of Kenya and Vietnam, our study aims to understand the barriers and possibilities of operationalizing and achieving "sustainable diets" at the local level in a project we refer to as *Entry points to Advance Transitions towards Sustainable diets* (EATS), a research partnership between the University of Michigan and the Center for International Tropical Agriculture (CIAT).

Methods

The EATS project selected Kenya and Vietnam as sites for analysis because they each offer unique policy contexts and face dynamic diet-related disease burdens and challenges related to equitable and sustainable resource use. This particular paper focuses on the results of a piece of the more expansive EATS project – 114 semi-structured interviews we carried out in 2018 with national and sub-national food systems researchers, policymakers, private sector leaders, and development organizations in rural and urban sites in each country (66 in Kenya and 48 in Vietnam). We identified interviewees using a chain sampling approach, stratified across location, the type of organization they worked for, and primary sector of focus and focused on individuals who are considered to be part of epistemic communities (i.e., actors or institutions that policymakers look to for authoritative guidance about policy solutions). Drawing on policy process theories (e.g., Sabatier and Weible, 2014), our aim was to determine: a) the extent to which leading decision-makers were already carrying out work that aligns with sustainability diets frameworks, b) how locally-available food systems data and institutional collaboration are currently debilitating or aiding efforts to improve the sustainability of diets, and c) opportunities to advance more holistic, sustainable diets-focused decision-making. Our analysis was based on thematic content analysis of the transcribed interview data using a constant comparisons approach.

Results

We found that state-level organizations, businesses and other institutions who are intervening in local communities – regardless of the location – rarely address or see problems holistically across agricultural production, nutrition, livelihoods and environmental impacts simultaneously, though many link at least two of these sustainable diet domains. We found that only a quarter of organizations are working across all four of these sustainable diet domains and less than ten percent identified issues needing urgent

attention that cross all four domains. Even if more actors were to see food systems problems more holistically, a lack of evidence is a considerable barrier to more integrated decision-making, because of a combination of access issues or poor coordination around existing data, as well as concerns with outdated data, poor quality data, and the limited amount of disaggregated data. This forces most organizations to collect their own data each time they launch a new intervention. Data issues were similar in both countries, though Kenya's health and agricultural sectors face unique barriers trying to align efforts vertically between national and local efforts due to recently enacted government devolution. Nearly half of the organizations in both countries also noted challenges with collaboration across sectors and institutions, with only eleven percent of organizations noting collaborations that cross all four sustainable diet domains. In Vietnam, the highly centralized national government creates major horizontal coordination issues as ministries and institutes either duplicate responsibilities or work in isolation across sustainable diet domains.

Discussion and Conclusions

Minimal attention has been paid to understanding sustainable diets in low and middle income countries (Nemecek et al., 2016), particularly as it relates to the development of actionable policies that simultaneously address agricultural, environmental, economic, and health related issues. As the SDGs and sustainable diet guidelines continue to be promoted globally, our findings reinforce the need for strategies to increase and improve the quality of data being collected locally and to overcome the intra-organizational politics and institutional barriers that limit cross-sector collaboration, such as collective impact models, data sharing platforms, shared measurement agreements, and collaborative food systems planning. Despite the challenges we found, in both countries, regional and national initiatives are emerging to coordinate data sharing and to collect more integrated data to better understand the multiple drivers of food insecurity, an encouraging sign that a more holistic approach to food systems planning is beginning to take root. The EATS project has also initiated several partnerships with various ministries and national institutes in each country to offer practical examples of the insights and potential leverage points (i.e. points for interventions that could effectively shift multiple axes of food systems toward enhancing the sustainability of diets) that a more holistic analysis can offer.

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Contact Information
Lead author: Lesli Hoey, lhoey@umich.edu

Full list of authors: Lesli Hoey[1], Anna Shires[1], Alex Judelsohn[1], Colin Khoury[2], Thanh Duong Thi[3], Brenda Binge[4], Dorcas Jalango[4], Jamleck Osiemo[4], Huong Trinh[3], Tuyen Huynh[3], Stef de Haan[3], Evan Girvetz[4], Martin C. Heller[5], Andrew D. Jones[6]

Affiliations:
[1]*Urban and Regional Planning Program, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor MI U.S.A*
[2]*International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT), Cali, Colombia*
[3]*CIAT-Asia, Hanoi, Vietnam*
[4]*CIAT-Africa, Nairobi, Kenya*
[5]*Center for Sustainable Systems, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI U.S.A.*
[6]*School of Public Health, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI U.S.A.*