

# Synopsis: Rwanda's food systems transformation

## A diagnostic of the public policy landscape shaping the transformation process

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As Rwanda journeys towards a broad-based social and economic transformation, there are opportunities for the country's food systems to become a key driver on that journey. This idea has attracted considerable attention in the national consultations conducted in the run-up to the United Nations Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) in September 2021, at the summit itself, in the post-summit actions that Rwanda is now pursuing, and in a series of prior case studies on Rwanda's food system (Adolph et al. 2021; Guijt et al. 2021; Malabo Montpellier Panel 2021).

This note summarizes a recent diagnostic of Rwanda's food systems and the policy landscape that shapes them. Emphasis is placed on six inter-related clusters: diet quality and nutrition security; livelihoods equity; environmental resilience; agricultural productivity; infrastructure capacity; and financing and investment.

Overall findings suggest an opportunity for a tangible shift in how public policy in Rwanda approaches its food systems and how the systems contribute to the broader national transformation process. We offer several policy recommendations to support the design of a coherent country strategy and policy framework. First, strengthen existing entities and mechanisms, and innovate on them. Second, develop a national food systems transformation strategy that is integrative, multi-sectoral, and action-oriented. Third, innovate on existing programs. Fourth, allow for learning through both success and failure. Fifth, invest in rigorous impact evaluation.

### Rwanda's Food Systems Transformation

As Rwanda journeys towards a broad-based social and economic transformation, there are opportunities for the country's food systems to become a key driver on that journey. This idea has attracted considerable attention in the national consultations conducted in the run-up to the United Nations Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) in September 2021, at the summit itself, in the post-summit actions that

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The note contributes to conversations on national and local efforts to accelerate and deepen the transformation process—conversations that are meant to inform the design of a multi-sectoral food systems transformation strategy for the country. By acknowledging the challenges that Rwanda still faces, identifying ways to build on impressive achievements to date, and encouraging greater policy innovation for the future, there is considerable opportunity for a more productive, inclusive, and sustainable transformation of Rwanda's food system.

The analysis produced by this diagnostic is primarily informed by a consultative exercise conducted during a six-month period between April and September 2021 as part of the run-up to the UNFSS. Extensive background research was conducted by a multidisciplinary team with expertise in multiple aspects of the food systems perspective and experience in Rwanda. See Rockefeller Foundation et al. (2021) for details.

## **Rwanda's Progress and Continuing Challenges**

Rwanda's journey towards a food systems transformation is well captured in Vision 2050, the National Strategy for Transformation (NST 1), and strategic plans for sectors such as agriculture, health, nutrition, commerce, and the environment. Their priorities are echoed in ongoing programs and investments of the government, its development partners, the private sector, and civil society.

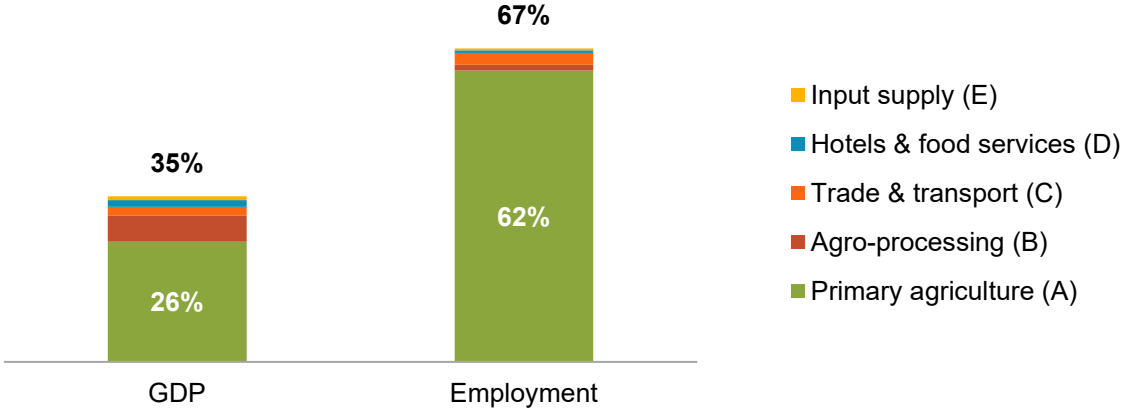
Nonetheless, Rwanda faces a triple threat to the realization of its long-term, transformational vision and goals for the nation. These threats are (1) low agricultural production, productivity, and productivity growth; (2) persistent malnutrition, including micronutrient deficiencies across the life cycle, even despite significant progress in poverty reduction; and (3) significant environmental challenges that are exacerbated by the country's vulnerability to climate change and limited adaptation capacity.

But in the face of this triple threat, Rwanda has also demonstrated its capacity to pursue and sustain an impressive growth trajectory, with annual GDP growth averaging 7.2 percent between 2010 and 2019, rebounding to 10.9 percent in 2021 following the 2020 economic downturn caused by the global COVID-19 pandemic (NISR 2022). A combination of sound macroeconomic policies, an attractive investment environment, long-term political stability, and a strong commitment to sustainable development have all contributed to this encouraging trend, particularly in light of where Rwanda began during the darkest moments of history—the Genocide against the Tutsis—in 1994. This combination has led to the implementation of multiple strategies, policies, and programs to address poverty, food insecurity, and malnutrition.

Rwanda itself recognizes that there is much to be done, especially to feed a population projected to grow from 12.6 million in 2019 to 22.1 million by 2050. Rwanda's food system—comprising agricultural production, agro-processing, food trade and transport, and food services—accounts for approximately 35 percent of total GDP and 67 percent of total employment (Figure 1), making it a system of clear im-

portance to the entire country. Efforts to overcome these challenges call for a deeper and more significant shift in thinking—informed by the food systems perspective—that is highlighted by stronger multi-sectoral approaches to problem-solving.

**Figure 1: Rwanda’s food systems as a share of GDP and employment, 2019**



Source: Aragie et al. 2022; Thurlow et al. 2022 (forthcoming).

**Findings**

Overall findings suggest an opportunity for a tangible shift in how public policy in Rwanda approaches its food systems and how the systems contribute to the broader national transformation process. This means addressing how balances are struck—and tradeoffs are managed—between and among agriculture, nutrition, health, and the environment in the face of a climate crisis. It also means giving greater attention to the demand-side drivers in Rwanda’s food system, recognizing that singularly focused supply-side strategies rarely succeed in isolation. Finally, it means deepening the integration of policies and policy actors in the design and implementation phases of interventions that shape the food system.

Many of these findings are already well articulated in Rwanda’s own development discourse and policy practice. Still, additional gains can be realized through a deeper and more nuanced conversation—and tangible policy shifts—on three key issues: striking a new balance in the food system; focusing on demand-side drivers; and integrating policy actors and actions in the food system.

**Policy recommendations**

The challenge now is to translate abstract ideas about its food systems transformation into a coherent and focused set of actions. We offer several policy recommendations to support the design of a coherent country strategy and policy framework.

**1. Strengthen existing entities and mechanisms, and innovate on them.** It is clear that proper policy coordination and sequencing are critical to advancing Rwanda’s food systems transformation. There may be limited interest in the government for new agencies, committees, task forces, or secretariats to convene, coordinate, and manage the food systems transformation process. As such, the food systems approach provides an opportunity to strengthen existing entities by focusing on integration across sectors (agriculture, nutrition, health, and environment), domains (public, private, and civil society), and levels (national, district, sector, and community). This implies greater investment in mechanisms that go beyond the improvement of just government coordination, and substantively engage the private sector and communities through, for example, home-grown solutions. Ultimately, this may suggest the need

for a small but agile entity for coordination, monitoring, and accountability purposes. It may also suggest the need for greater recognition of the possibility that some actors may have solutions that require less, not more, intervention by the government on occasion.

**2. Develop a national food systems transformation strategy that is integrative, multi-sectoral, and action-oriented.** It is critically important to develop a national food systems transformation strategy that integrates and builds on existing sectoral plans, leverages existing inter-sectoral coordination mechanisms, and provides for monitoring of progress in a non-duplicative manner. This food systems strategy would have to delineate a very practical set of actions for the government and its partners to pursue, and would require broad consultation and backing. Ideally, the implementation of a widely accepted strategy would be monitored by using existing performance indicators, tracking public expenditure and economic performance tracking on a multi-sectoral or systems-level basis (as in Figure 3), and leveraging other well-established monitoring mechanisms. This approach has the potential effect of extracting government ministries and agencies from siloed, sector-based planning and budgeting to consider a more multi-sectoral approach to the food systems transformation.

**3. Innovate on existing programs.** Third, there is scope to innovate within existing programs to introduce greater nutrition sensitivity and environmental sustainability. For example, there is scope for the introduction of healthier foods and greater dietary diversity in school feeding programs, building on past programs and experiences in other countries. This could be augmented by the procurement of nutrient-dense and animal-sourced foods from farmers and other value chain actors for schools and other public institutions. There are also possibilities to experiment with the distribution of “healthy food” vouchers under national social protection programs in lieu of or alongside cash transfers or staple food distributions. There is also scope for strengthening the coherence of content and messaging from frontline workers providing health advice, nutrition counseling, and agricultural extension to individuals and communities to improve a range of food systems outcomes. These are just a few of the opportunities for programs in the spirit of a food systems transformation.

**4. Allow for learning through both success and failure.** The success of an integrated, multi-sectoral approach to Rwanda’s food systems transformation will hinge on open spaces for learning. Food systems are a relatively new concept, as are policy and program designs from a food systems perspective. This means that some approaches will succeed while others will fail. Opportunities to learn from both failures and successes are essential.

**5. Invest in rigorous impact evaluation.** Finally, Rwanda’s food systems transformation will require greater investment in the evaluation of program impacts. Currently, the country’s monitoring systems are primarily focused on ensuring transparency and accountability, and on monitoring program outputs. While this focus is extremely important, it is not a substitute for the rigorous quantitative and qualitative evaluation of program impacts. This includes the measurement and analysis of impacts related to agriculture, household income and welfare, individual health and nutritional status, and environmental sustainability, as well as the cost-effectiveness of programs designed to generate these impacts.

In summary, there are significant opportunities to advance inclusive and sustainable food systems transformation in Rwanda even despite the many challenges. While the 2021 United Nations Food Systems Summit has drawn attention to these opportunities, the task now is to translate abstract ideas into real actions. But such actions cannot be undertaken in a vacuum: an enabling policy environment is critical to success. And this enabling policy environment is itself an outcome of broad-based national conversations; integration across sectors, domains, and levels; and the encouragement of policy and program innovation.

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