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BRIEF

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# Applying an Integrated Engagement Model to Support Country-Led Food Systems Transformation

Insights from the SHiFT Initiative's Approach in Viet Nam, Ethiopia, and Bangladesh

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## Introduction

From 2022 to 2024, the CGIAR Research Initiative on Sustainable Healthy Diets through Food Systems Transformation (SHiFT) combined high-quality nutritional and social science research with development and policy partnerships to generate innovative food systems solutions that contributed to sustainable healthy diets. Through a country-led approach, SHiFT supported the design and implementation of national food systems transformation activities in Viet Nam, Ethiopia, and Bangladesh, aiming to achieve sustainable healthy diets while also working toward improved livelihoods, gender equity, and social inclusion.<sup>1</sup>

Following the 2021 United Nations Food Systems Summit (UNFSS), countries were encouraged to define pathways for transforming their food systems to align with the 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).<sup>2</sup> Many countries have since developed national action plans to operationalize these pathways, requiring coordinated multisectoral efforts. SHiFT contributed to this process by generating evidence and supporting national stakeholders in developing context-specific food systems solutions.

This brief introduces SHiFT's country engagement strategy and explains how SHiFT supported collaborative pathways and processes in each target country during its initial phase. From 2025 to 2030, the

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<sup>1</sup> CGIAR. (n.d.). *Sustainable Healthy Diets*. <https://www.cgiar.org/initiative/sustainable-healthy-diets/>

<sup>2</sup> United Nations. (n.d.). *Food Systems Summit 2021*. <https://www.un.org/en/food-systems-summit>

CGIAR Science Program on Better Diets and Nutrition (BDN) will build on SHiFT's approach through Area of Work 1: Consumers and Food Environments.

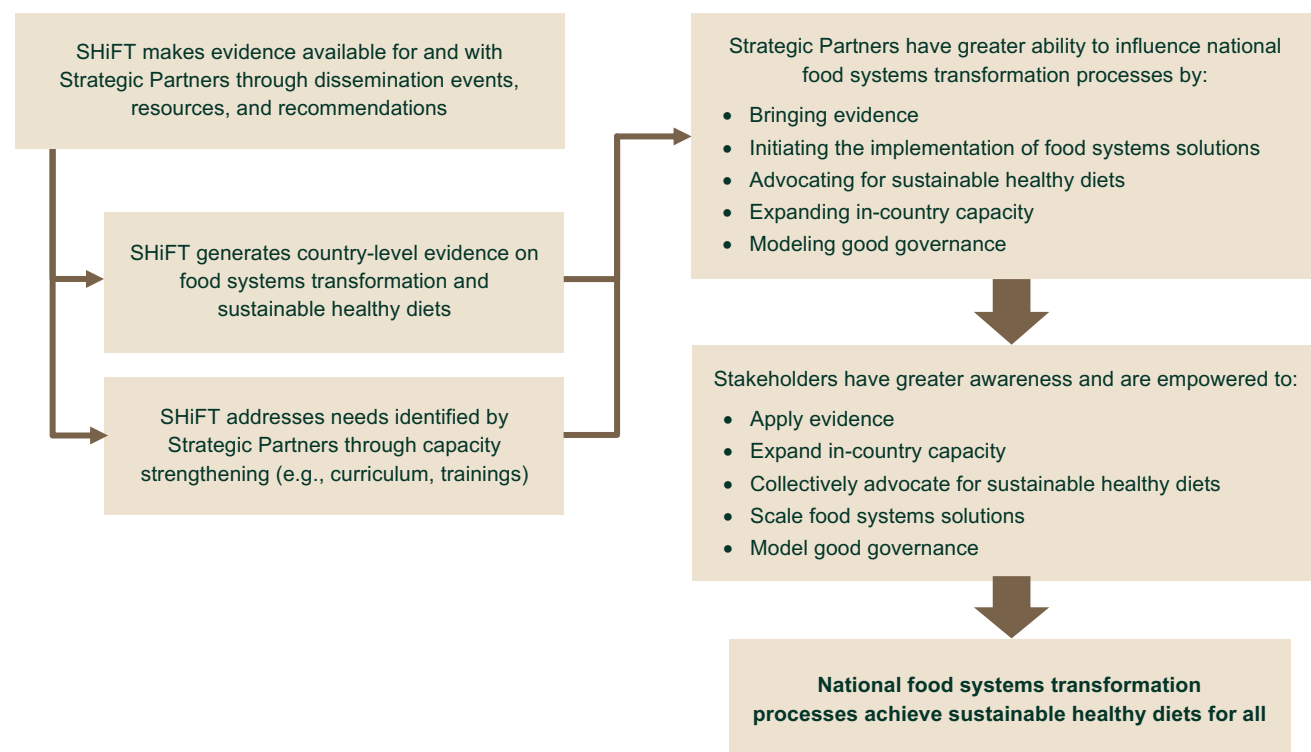
### Theory of Change

The goal of SHiFT's country engagement was to support food systems transformation processes in Viet Nam, Ethiopia, and Bangladesh to achieve sustainable healthy diets for all. SHiFT's Theory of Change provided a framework for achieving this goal, outlining how research, engagement, and capacity sharing were expected to contribute to desired outcomes.

A core aspect of SHiFT's Theory of Change was engagement with key government institutions in each country, referred to as **Strategic Partners**. SHiFT and the Strategic Partners worked together to generate country-specific evidence on challenges and opportunities related to food systems transformation. These insights helped influence transformation processes and inform effective food systems solutions.

In addition to research, SHiFT aimed to address needs identified by Strategic Partners through capacity sharing activities. Training programs enhanced stakeholders' knowledge of sustainable healthy diets and food systems governance, enabling them to generate awareness within their own networks. The trainings also deepened SHiFT researchers' understanding of food systems transformation processes, strengthening their ability to co-create context-specific solutions. These changes were envisioned to cascade to the national policy environment, contributing to the advancement of food systems transformation toward sustainable healthy diets (Figure 1).

**Figure 1.** SHiFT's Theory of Change for country engagement



## Country engagement model

Guided by the Theory of Change, SHiFT developed a systematic country engagement model with key steps for implementing its approach in each country. The model was centered on strong national partnerships bridging food, agriculture, nutrition, and public health. The importance of this kind of structured country engagement was informed by lessons from the CGIAR Research Program on Agriculture for Nutrition and Health (A4NH), which highlighted the value of coordinated partnerships in supporting food systems transformation.<sup>3</sup>

Following the 2021 UNFSS, countries nominated a Food Systems National Convenor to lead national dialogues on food systems transformation. In Viet Nam, Ethiopia, and Bangladesh, SHiFT engaged directly with the National Convenors, formalizing partnerships through Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs). In countries where the National Convenors represented only the food and agriculture sectors, SHiFT also engaged with the Ministry of Health and embedded nutrition and public health institutions. Collectively, these actors became known as Strategic Partners and were instrumental in integrating SHiFT's research and capacity sharing efforts into national food systems transformation processes.

In each target country, engagement between SHiFT and Strategic Partners was managed by a Country Coordinator as part of a broader Country Coordination Unit (CCU). The Country Coordinator was a full-time, in-country position hired by a CGIAR Center. The role required strong networking and communication skills, fulfilling two key functions: (1) providing internal coordination across SHiFT Work Packages, and (2) facilitating ongoing engagement with Strategic Partners. The CCUs served as SHiFT's primary in-country communication hubs, ensuring research findings and technical support reached national decision-makers, and that research demands reached CGIAR researchers. The CCUs met quarterly to exchange information, with frequent informal communication to maintain continuous engagement.

## Key Country Engagement Activities

SHiFT's model was designed to align with country-led food systems transformation efforts, with national pathway documents serving as the primary entry point for engagement. SHiFT supported Strategic Partners as they moved these documents through each country's political process—from design to approval to implementation (see country cases, p. 6–13). By collaborating with Strategic Partners, SHiFT established an initial set of engagement activities (Table 1), which expanded over time as priorities evolved. These activities aimed to help SHiFT and its Strategic Partners achieve three core objectives.

### 1. Bring SHiFT evidence to multi-stakeholder processes to develop, implement, and monitor national action plans where appropriate and useful (*Technical support* in Table 1)

SHiFT provided Strategic Partners with technical support in designing, implementing, and/or monitoring their national action plans. Specific needs were identified by each Country Coordinator, who then relayed requests to SHiFT leadership for incorporation into work plans. Country Coordinators were invited to serve on official committees and working groups, leading to additional opportunities for SHiFT to support the development of resources that raised awareness for national action plans

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<sup>3</sup> Herens, M., Tezzo, X., ten Hove, H., & Kusters, C. (2021). Nurturing food systems research: Lessons from the food systems for healthier diets flagship of the A4NH program. *Wageningen Centre for Development Innovation*. <https://doi.org/10.18174/558897>

and for the importance to incorporate a focus on sustainable healthy diets, and contributed to their implementation.

## **2. Build in-country partner capacity to (1) use evidence and advocate for a strong focus on sustainable healthy diets in food systems transformation policy processes and (2) improve food systems governance** (*Capacity sharing* in Table 1)

During SHiFT's first year, each Country Coordinator, in consultation with Strategic Partners, completed a stakeholder mapping exercise to identify national food systems transformation actors.<sup>4</sup> In the second year, the Country Coordinators led Strategic Partners through a capabilities self-assessment, guided by staff from the Wageningen Centre for Development Innovation.<sup>5</sup> These activities, combined with needs expressed by Strategic Partners, informed SHiFT's capacity sharing efforts.

For example, SHiFT launched an e-course on food systems governance for institutions identified through the stakeholder mapping exercise. The course was adapted to the context of each country. In total, nearly 200 food systems actors participated in the course from 2022-2024. Inspired by this, SHiFT and its Strategic Partners co-developed a training of trainers (ToT) program on food systems transformation to increase the number of national partners skilled in food system approaches and tools. Resources were reallocated to support this program in response to partner demand. Although not part of the initial work plan, the ToT program became a major collaborative activity with in-country partners and led to the development of a bilateral proposal to support south-south learning between SHiFT countries.

## **3. Align SHiFT's research agenda with country-identified processes**

SHiFT relied on Strategic Partners for guidance on implementing research activities aligned with national action plans. Strategic Partners identified areas where SHiFT could contribute evidence, such as consumer behavior, informal food environments, and the broader political economy. These suggestions were communicated via the CCU to SHiFT researchers and leadership, who adjusted research plans accordingly and identified new areas for collaboration. However, despite attempts to engage with in-country demands, this process was marked by discussions and negotiations, as not all topics that emerged were relevant for SHiFT nor amenable to research or the budget available. Additionally, differing visions for the research, as well as varying capacities of local institutions, limited SHiFT's ability to respond to all research requests in a timely fashion.

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<sup>4</sup> Huyn Thi, T. T., Pham Thi, H. M., Duong, T. T., Pittore, K. H., & Herens, M. (2022). Key stakeholders and platforms/networks in food systems transformation in Vietnam in 2022. <https://hdl.handle.net/10568/127244>

<sup>5</sup> Namugumya, B. S., Herens, M., Kruff, K., de Groot, B., Huyn Thi, T. T., Pham Thi, H. M., & Duong, T. T. (2024). Capabilities assessment to support food systems transformation towards sustainable healthy diets in Viet Nam. *Wageningen Centre for Development Innovation*. <https://hdl.handle.net/10568/169021>

**Table 1.** Overview of SHiFT’s core engagement activities in each country, 2022-2024

Activity	Viet Nam	Ethiopia	Bangladesh
<b>TECHNICAL SUPPORT</b>			
Serve on official technical working groups/committees	✓	✓	✓
Provide inputs into official resources that build policy awareness and/or support implementation	✓	✓	✓
Inform the development of systems to monitor the process (not the outcome) of national action plan implementation	✓		
Provide support to Strategic Partners in convening dialogues and/or consultations	✓		
Support National Convenors in their contributions to UNFSS activities	✓	✓	✓
<b>CAPACITY SHARING</b>			
Conduct stakeholder mapping of food system actors	✓	✓	✓
Conduct capabilities self-assessment	✓	✓	✓
Offer e-course on food systems governance	✓	✓	✓
Design ToT program on food systems*	✓	✓	✓
Pilot ToT program on food systems	✓	✓	
Offer a small grant scheme to MSc students	✓	✓	

# Viet Nam

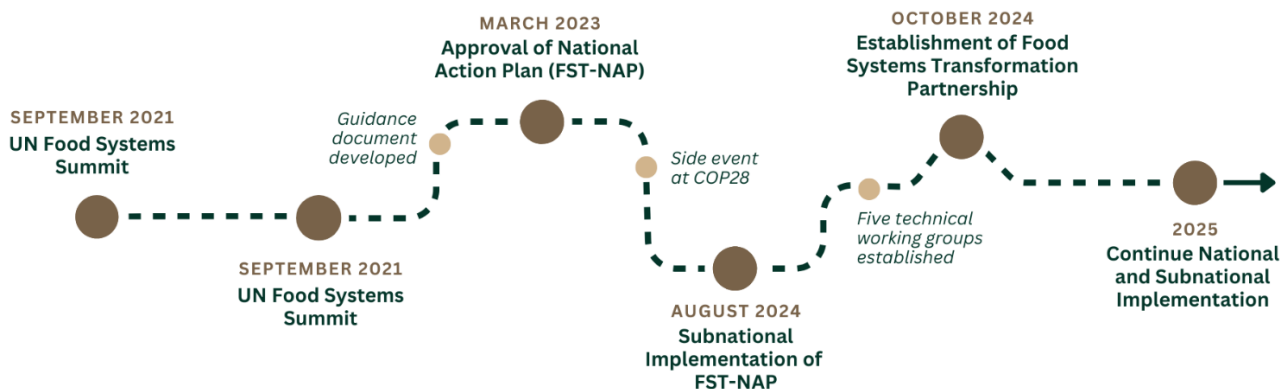
## Milestones

Viet Nam is undergoing a rapid nutrition transition, marked by changing food preferences due to urbanization and economic growth. In response, the government has taken a proactive approach, culminating in the approval of the National Action Plan for Transparent, Responsible, and Sustainable Food Systems Transformation 2022-2030 (FST-NAP) in March 2023. A guidance document was developed in 2022 by the Institute of Policy and Strategy for Agriculture and Rural Development (IPSARD) and the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD).<sup>6</sup>

To operationalize the FST-NAP, Viet Nam established the Food Systems Transformation Partnership (FST-Partnership) in 2024, led by MARD in collaboration with the Ministry of Health (MOH), Ministry of Industry and Trade (MOIT), and Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (MONRE). More than 40 partners have formally joined this innovative multilateral partnership to combine research and government expertise with international development support. A key structural component of this implementation is the establishment of five technical working groups (TWGs), covering agroecology, nutrition and local food diversification, food loss and waste, responsible consumption, and governance.

At the subnational level, MARD identified Dong Thap and Son La provinces in 2024 as pilot locations for implementing the FST-NAP, focusing on tailoring food systems strategies to local needs. Additionally, Viet Nam has actively participated in global food systems dialogues, including COP28 and the Emirates Declaration on Resilient Food Systems. These efforts demonstrate Viet Nam's commitment to building a transparent, responsible, and sustainable food system that aligns with national and global development goals.

**Figure 2.** Key milestones in Viet Nam



<sup>6</sup> IPSARD & MARD. (2022). Strategy for sustainable agriculture and rural development in the period 2021-2030 and vision to 2050. <https://ipsard.gov.vn/Strategy-Guidelines/index.html>

## SHiFT's Engagement in Viet Nam

### *Technical support*

SHiFT's engagement in Viet Nam built on work that started under A4NH in 2017. SHiFT's engagement was instrumental in advancing food systems transformation in Viet Nam, starting with the introduction of concepts linking the agricultural and health sectors through diets.<sup>7</sup> Leading up to the approval of the FST-NAP in 2023, SHiFT contributed to technical reports and consultations that shaped the policy framework. SHiFT's evidence on food environments and dietary behaviors also influenced policy innovations, including food labeling initiatives, educational campaigns, and proposed taxation on unhealthy foods.

At the subnational level, SHiFT provided direct technical assistance to Strategic Partners to convene, facilitate, and support engagement with provincial authorities in Dong Thap and Son La, helping to develop priority activities and consolidate a monitoring and evaluation framework to ensure effective FST-NAP implementation. Additionally, SHiFT was invited to co-lead the TWG on Responsible Distribution and Consumption and participate in the TWG on policies, further integrating its expertise into national governance structures.

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***“I heard that Viet Nam is now considered a flagship in food system transformation, and I do believe that without SHiFT, we cannot reach such positive results.”***

– SHiFT CCU member in Viet Nam

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### *Capacity sharing*

Beyond technical support, SHiFT played a critical role in building national and subnational capacity for food systems transformation. In collaboration with national partners, SHiFT facilitated training workshops and stakeholder consultations, equipping policymakers with the necessary tools to develop strategies that support food systems transformation and sustainable healthy diets. Experts from SHiFT joined the FST-Partnership and were also part of the official committee to design it.

One of SHiFT's primary activities was the Training of Trainers (ToT) program, which was co-designed with national partners and incorporated into the subnational implementation of the FST-NAP. The program has filled gaps in awareness and strengthened the competencies of local actors, enabling them to apply food systems approaches in policy processes. After the first cohort of expert trainers was trained in 2023, in-country partners took the lead in expanding the program, demonstrating the long-term sustainability of SHiFT's approach. SHiFT continues to provide technical support upon request, but the program is now largely partner-led and prepared for expansion in 2025.

Another activity was an MSc small grant scheme. SHiFT and the Hanoi University of Science and Technology awarded grants to four master's-level students studying at universities in Viet Nam. The

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<sup>7</sup> Raneri, J.E.; Kennedy, G.; Nguyen, T.; Wertheim-Heck, S.; Do, H.; Nguyen, P.H. (2019) Determining key research areas for healthier diets and sustainable food systems in Viet Nam. IFPRI Discussion Paper 1872. <https://doi.org/10.2499/p15738coll2.133433>

purpose of the grant scheme was to enrich master’s-level research projects on topics related to sustainable healthy diets, food environments, and/or food systems in Viet Nam. Each winner received \$4,000 USD to support data collection and fieldwork for their master’s thesis. In addition to the grant, the winners attended a one-day introductory workshop on food systems research and were mentored by a SHiFT researcher. Students had an opportunity to present their research to CGIAR researchers and national partners in October 2024. The scheme helped to engage and strengthen the relationships CGIAR—via SHiFT—has with universities and students in the center and south of Viet Nam, where SHiFT has not traditionally been as active.

Finally, SHiFT helped position Viet Nam as a leading country in Food System Transformation globally by clearly communicating its ambitious goals of a food system that balances sustainable production with responsible and healthy consumption. These efforts enhanced Viet Nam's role supporting neighboring countries under ASEAN, as well as its engagement with African countries via bilateral support and an increasingly visible role in key global events such as climate and biodiversity COPs, the Alliance of Food System Champions, the One Planet Sustainable Food System Program, and the UNFSS process.

**Table 2.** SHiFT country engagement activities undertaken in Viet Nam

Activity in Viet Nam	Timeframe
<b>TECHNICAL SUPPORT</b>	
Contribute evidence to technical reports to inform policy framework	2022 – 2023
Assist with development of provincial monitoring and evaluation framework	2024 – present
Co-lead TWG on Responsible Distribution and Consumption	2024 – present
Participate in TWG on Policies	2024 – present
Support Strategic Partners in convening dialogues and/or consultations	2022 – present
<b>CAPACITY SHARING</b>	
Conduct stakeholder mapping of food system actors	Annually
Design ToT program on food systems*	2022 – 2024
Offer e-course on food systems governance	2022 – 2023
Train expert trainers for ToT program (Level 1)	2023
Conduct capabilities self-assessment	2023
Offer small grant scheme to four MSc students	2024
Expand ToT program (Level 2)	2024 – present

# Ethiopia

## Milestones

Ethiopia advanced its food systems transformation through the Ethiopian Food Systems (EFS) Dialogue and Design, initiated in 2021. The first phase involved assigning National Convenors, identifying gaps, and developing game-changing solutions. The EFS launch meeting was held in July 2021, introducing 22 proposed solutions accompanied by a synthesis report and position paper. By September 2021, Ethiopia presented its progress during the 2021 UNFSS and joined three global coalitions to address zero hunger, promote healthy diets, and support school meals. In 2022, the Ethiopian Food-Based Dietary Guidelines (FBDGs) were published, providing a national framework for sustainable healthy diets. Piloting of the Food-Based Dietary Guidelines in targeted regions has been carried out since 2024.

From 2021 to 2023, the Governance and Implementation Roadmap was developed, outlining the critical strategies and governance structures necessary for implementing priority actions. To enhance coordination, the Food Systems Transformation and Nutrition Inter-Ministerial Steering Committee was established in June 2023. The committee is comprised of 15 government ministries led by the Ministry of Agriculture and Ministry of Health. A diagnostics study was initiated in October 2023 among the ministries and nine development partners, followed by a validation workshop in early 2024 to refine resources and address coordination issues.

Moving forward, EFS roll-out activities are taking place across Ethiopia, emphasizing implementation and stakeholder engagement. Ethiopia continues to generate political and operational buy-in for the Roadmap, conducting trainings at the regional and local levels. A new Food Systems Training Manual was completed in 2024 to support these efforts. SHiFT supported the development, review, and publishing of the manual.

**Figure 3.** Key milestones in Ethiopia



## SHiFT's Engagement in Ethiopia

### *Technical support*

SHiFT's first contributions in Ethiopia included carryover work from A4NH. A food systems situation analysis was published in 2018 marking the first document of its kind in Ethiopia.<sup>8</sup> Research supported by A4NH also informed the development of the Ethiopian FBDGs, which were published in 2022. Since then, Strategic Partners requested SHiFT's financial support to implement the FBDGs due to limited government resources for this task. The SHiFT Country Coordinator serves on the country's food systems transformation Multisectoral Technical Core Team for the UNFSS+4 preparation, in addition to a Task Team under the Steering Committee's Technical Support Unit in Cluster-2, that focus on sustainable and equitable consumption of healthy, safe, and nutrient dense diets throughout the life cycle. These engagements opened opportunities for SHiFT to contribute to the country's diagnostics study, and more recently, to be part of the writing team for the Food Systems Training Manual. The manual and associated facilitators guide will serve as the basis for food systems trainings offered in Ethiopia by government and non-government partners, including the food systems ToT program co-designed by SHiFT and the Strategic Partners. To a lesser extent, SHiFT engaged in conversations around the monitoring and evaluation of food systems transformation in Ethiopia under processes led by colleagues at the International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI).

### *Capacity sharing*

The Government of Ethiopia expressed a need for training opportunities related to food systems transformation. In response, SHiFT implemented the food systems governance e-course. In collaboration with national stakeholders, a follow-on ToT program was designed and launched. Through awareness-raising workshops, SHiFT also engaged youth and the private sector in food systems transformation, followed by a subnational capacity sharing training on sustainable food systems transformation. Additionally, SHiFT sponsored a small grant scheme for master's students, supporting the next generation of food systems researchers. The goal of these activities was to introduce national and subnational stakeholders to food systems concepts and tools in ways that contribute to broader practical application.

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<sup>8</sup> Gebru, M. et al. (2018). Food systems for healthier diets in Ethiopia: Toward a research agenda. IFPRI Discussion Paper 1720. <https://doi.org/10.2499/1032568455>

**Table 3.** SHiFT country engagement activities undertaken in Ethiopia

Activity in Ethiopia	Timeframe
<b>TECHNICAL SUPPORT</b>	
Provide inputs into the Ethiopia Food-Based Dietary Guidelines	2022 (and before)
Support Strategic Partners in convening dialogues and/or consultations	2022 – 2024
Serve on official technical teams within the EFS Transformation and Nutrition Inter-ministerial Steering Committee	2023 – 2024
Inform framework to monitor national action plan implementation process	2023
Provide inputs into the Food Systems Training Manual	2024
Support National Convenors in their contributions to UNFSS activities	2023, 2025 (expected)
<b>CAPACITY SHARING</b>	
Conduct stakeholder mapping of food system actors	Annually
Offer e-course on food systems governance	2022 – 2024
Design ToT program on food systems*	2024
Train expert trainers for ToT program (Level 1)	2024
Conduct awareness raising workshops for specific populations (e.g., youth, private sector)	2024
Conduct first subnational capacity sharing training with multisectoral stakeholders	2024
Offer small grant scheme to six MSc students	2024

# Bangladesh

## Milestones

Bangladesh made strides toward food systems transformation through participation in the UNFSS and the development of a National Pathway Document. Leading up to the 2021 UNFSS, Bangladesh held a series of dialogues – three at the national level, six at the subnational level, and 23 independent discussions – to identify challenges and opportunities. These efforts were coordinated by the Food Planning and Monitoring Unit (FPMU) of the Ministry of Food and supported by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN).

A National Pathway Document was formulated to serve as a roadmap for guiding the country’s transition toward more sustainable, equitable, and resilient food systems. Post-UNFSS, Bangladesh continued its momentum, organizing national dialogues, hosting side events at COP27 and UNFSS+2, and developing a Food Systems Dashboard to support evidence-based decision-making.

Bangladesh has worked toward developing a Plan of Action (PoA) and monitoring framework to ensure effective implementation of food systems transformation activities. Following a series of consultations and working group meetings, a national dialogue session was held in December 2024 to review the draft PoA. Next steps involve finalizing the plan, consulting with additional stakeholders, and preparing a report for UNFSS+4.

**Figure 4.** Key milestones in Bangladesh



## SHiFT’s Engagement in Bangladesh

SHiFT’s engagement in Bangladesh progressed at a slower pace than the other two countries (Table 4). This was partly due to the absence of a clear entry point, as government guidance was limited to the 2021 National Pathway Document. Additionally, GAIN is a trusted partner of the FPMU and was implementing many activities similar to what SHiFT had envisioned, often with greater speed. For example, the Food Systems Dashboard was developed largely through GAIN’s support, without contributions from SHiFT.<sup>9</sup> Compounding these issues, SHiFT did not have a Country Coordinator continuously in place and lacked in-country senior researchers funded by the Initiative. Lastly, political unrest in July-

<sup>9</sup> Food Systems Dashboard. (n.d.). Bangladesh. <https://www.foodsystemsdashboard.org/countries/bgd/subnational-data>

August 2024 disrupted activities and changed the policy landscape in ways that are still being understood.

### **Technical support**

Like in Ethiopia, SHiFT conducted a situation analysis of Bangladesh’s food systems as carry-over work from A4NH.<sup>10</sup> As the country prepared its Plan of Action, SHiFT was invited by FPMU to participate in the working group alongside GAIN and Rome-based agencies. SHiFT’s Country Coordinator will continue to facilitate inputs into the Plan of Action as it develops in 2025. SHiFT was also involved in the stakeholder group convened by FPMU to prepare the voluntary progress review for UNFSS+2 and expects to be involved in preparations for UNFSS+4 in 2025.

### **Capacity sharing**

The e-course on food systems governance was completed by stakeholders from various institutions in Bangladesh. Due to the political unrest, the ToT design workshop did not take place until October 2024. GAIN is also operating a ToT program on food systems in Bangladesh. Next steps for the program are not as evident as for the other two countries.

**Table 4.** SHiFT country engagement activities undertaken in Bangladesh

Activity in Bangladesh	Timeframe
<b>TECHNICAL SUPPORT</b>	
Support Strategic Partners in convening dialogues and/or consultations	2022 – 2024
Serve on TWG for the Plan of Action	2024
Provide inputs to support Plan of Action development	2024
Inform development of systems to monitor Plan of Action implementation process	2024
Support National Convenors in their contributions to UNFSS activities	2023, 2025 (expected)
<b>CAPACITY SHARING</b>	
Conduct stakeholder mapping of food system actors	2022 – 2024
Offer e-course on food systems governance	2022 – 2024
Conduct capabilities self-assessment	2024
Design ToT program on food systems	2024

<sup>10</sup> de Brauw, A. et al. (2019). Food systems for healthier diets in Bangladesh: Towards a research agenda. IFPRI Discussion Paper 1902. <https://doi.org/10.2499/p15738coll2.133549>

## Lessons Learned

SHiFT's country engagement strategy has yielded valuable insights regarding what drives success in country-led food systems transformation.<sup>11</sup> These reflections highlight the strengths of SHiFT's approach while offering considerations for how BDN and similar projects might approach country engagement.

### ***Capacity sharing***

Food systems and sustainable healthy diets are relatively new terms, and as such, efforts are needed to engage actors, translate global concepts to local realities, and build shared understanding and language to underpin action. Across Viet Nam, Ethiopia, and Bangladesh, capacity sharing emerged as a key entry point for fostering collaboration among stakeholders and generating awareness for food systems transformation and sustainable healthy diets. SHiFT's capacity sharing activities enabled stakeholders to navigate food systems transformation processes and implement innovative solutions.

### ***Context-specific approach***

SHiFT's ability to support food systems transformation was dependent on its context-specific approach to country engagement. The CCU was central to this model, connecting SHiFT's research and capacity sharing activities with the priorities of national stakeholders. By tailoring partnerships to the context of each country, SHiFT adapted to unique food systems dynamics and remained responsive as needs evolved over time. Rather than compete with or replace Strategic Partners' efforts, SHiFT embedded its work within and in support of their agendas.

The SHiFT country engagement model works best where you have long-term, consistent partnerships, in-country staff, and trust with Strategic Partners built over years (i.e. Viet Nam). It works less well where some of those factors are not yet in place (i.e. Ethiopia), and it struggles where nearly all conditions are not yet present (i.e. Bangladesh). In the latter cases, projects should assess whether or not they have a comparative advantage to engage in this kind of approach or if other organizations might be better suited to lead.

### ***Bridging global and national agendas***

Through activities such as stakeholder mapping, capacity workshops, and participation in multi-stakeholder platforms, SHiFT elevated the profile of sustainable healthy diets in national food systems dialogues, aligning national processes with global frameworks like the UNFSS and SDGs. By merging global priorities with national food systems transformation agendas, SHiFT strengthened policy coherence and laid the foundation for sustainable and inclusive food systems in each focus country. These activities also generated visibility for Strategic Partners and their work, encouraging them to continue moving their agendas forward. These activities also positioned SHiFT countries to play important roles in south-south learning and regional and global leadership at multiple scales.

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<sup>11</sup> Hove, H., Gaviola, A. G., Harding, T., & Herens, M. (2024). *Country engagement and responsive research approaches for food systems transformation: Experiences from the SHiFT Initiative*.

## Potential Ways Forward

Moving forward, the CCU model is recommended for future research related to food systems transformation and sustainable healthy diets, as it supports country-led processes while connecting to global sustainability goals. The model could also be useful for engaging stakeholders in addressing other systemic issues, such as climate action or biodiversity conservation. However, feedback from SHiFT's target countries highlighted challenges related to the clarity of roles and responsibilities, which limited the CCU's ability to achieve its intended impact.

A key lesson from SHiFT's engagement is the need for greater country involvement in research activities, moving beyond consultation to agenda setting and active participation. Additionally, countries expressed an interest in connecting to broader technical expertise, including areas outside SHiFT's focus, such as biofortification and food safety. This highlights an opportunity for Better Diets and Nutrition to foster connections across different facets of the food system, enabling a more interdisciplinary, holistic approach.

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The CGIAR Science Program on Better Diets and Nutrition (BDN) identifies, co-designs and tests consumer-oriented solutions to ensure sustainable healthy diets for all while enhancing livelihoods, social equity, and environmental sustainability. Through evidence-based research and collaboration, BDN supports country-led food system transformation in low- and middle-income countries. To learn more about BDN, please visit <https://www.cgiar.org/cgiar-research-portfolio-2025-2030/better-diets-and-nutrition/>

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