



PRINCIPLES FOR FOOD SYSTEMS TRANSFORMATION

A Framework for Action

DISCLAIMER

This document was prepared by the Global Alliance for the Future of Food to stimulate an understanding of critical issues related to food systems reform, inform individual member foundations, and guide Global Alliance collective action. The Global Alliance has chosen to make it available to the broader community to contribute to thinking and discussion about sustainable food systems reform. Any views expressed do not necessarily represent the views of the Global Alliance or of any of our members.

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FOREWORD

Let me start with the punchline: our world needs principles.

We sit in unprecedented times. We are facing growing food insecurity, climate change, devastating decline in planetary health and biodiversity loss, and rapidly rising rates of food-related diseases such as diabetes and obesity. These challenges are not new — we have been watching them for decades. The new, unprecedented challenge for most of us is a global health pandemic with a reach and scope that few of us could imagine.

As we grapple with the realities of COVID-19, a sharper focus is placed on the climate, health, and environmental crises — in part because they are so interconnected; in part because they all speak to the deep trouble we are in as a human community. So, what do we do? How do we respond?

All too often, especially when faced with such calamity, our instinct is to reach for solid answers, firm metrics, dependable pathways. We look to financial investments, innovation, commitments from governments, behavioural change, technology, policy reform. These are reasonable, useful, and important responses. But time and again they are upheld as a solution without a cause. Financial investment to what end? Behavioural change to what end? Technology to what end?

This is where principles come into play. Some say that principles are nice words but have little use. “Motherhood and apple pie” statements. Who could disagree with those? But principles are powerful if used well. They tell us where we need to go and how to get there. They are both the destination and the compass.

The Global Alliance for the Future of Food has a set of seven principles: renewability, resilience, health, equity, diversity, inclusion, and interconnectedness. In 2014, we succeeded in both articulating and agreeing on an indivisible set of guiding principles. Despite differences in size, assets, culture, geography, mission, history, staffing, and programming, these principles helped to manifest and establish what members of the Global Alliance were committing to and provided boundaries for identifying goals, strategies, priorities, and specific activities on a day-to-day basis. From that moment, principles became the “beating heart”¹ of the Global Alliance.



These principles are our destination; they define our vision of food systems. They help us imagine a future of food that is full of biodiversity, that provides access to healthy food for all, that is resilient to shocks and stresses, that upholds human dignity, that is built on inclusive decision-making. We believe our food systems should be designed to account for these principles, to nurture them, and, ultimately, to realize them as the central defining features of our future of food.

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These principles also guide the decisions and choices we make every day. They are the compass we check at regular intervals to determine if we are on the right course, whether this is related to a program, a report, a convening, or the way in which we engage with others in collaboration for food systems change.

The following Framework for Action is a result of this approach used by Global Alliance members and the secretariat team over the last 8 years. Today, it has never felt more urgent to elevate this way of thinking, working, and being. Now is the time, more than ever, to be clear about what we value, to fight for these values, to practice these values, and to let them lead us to a truly healthy, equitable, inclusive, resilient, diverse, and beautiful future of food.

Sincerely,



A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Ruth Richardson".

RUTH RICHARDSON
Executive Director, Global Alliance for the Future of Food



OVERVIEW

Ensuring the sustainability, security, and equity of our food systems is one of the most defining issues of our time. Food systems are at the centre of many of the critical issues we face today, from biodiversity loss and climate emergency to political unrest, oppression, and economic vulnerabilities.

Increasingly, it is recognized that transformational change of food systems is key to tackling these critical and interconnected issues. Incremental change — involving single-focused initiatives or siloed innovations — do little to challenge established societal rules, behaviours, practices, and patterns. What is needed instead is transformational change to disrupt the status quo.

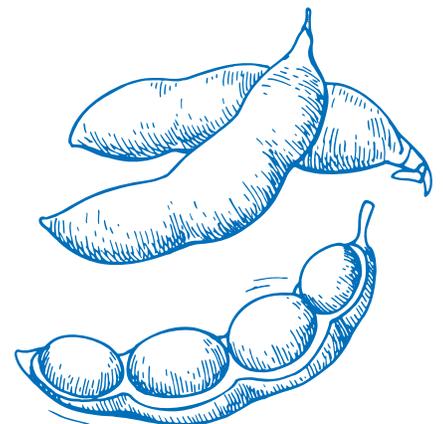
The Global Alliance for the Future of Food is committed to food systems transformation. Our transformation agenda is guided by seven shared principles: renewability, resilience, health, equity, diversity, inclusion, and interconnectedness. These principles serve two important functions in challenging the status quo and moving us toward a more desired future.

First, these principles shape our vision of the future of food, express our values, and encompass the change we want to make. They help us to see food systems in new ways, shining a light on “what to examine and what ought to matter.”²

Second, they help operationalize what is valued and important. When taken together, they provide a powerful and actionable framework to actively inform the choices we make. Principles provide deeper guidance that is adaptable to specific contexts with sensitivity; they inform and shape the questions to ask, data to collect, results to highlight, and learnings to attend to.

This Framework for Action highlights the Global Alliance’s seven principles and provides a guide for using the principles to inform decisions about how to act, reflect, and learn as we grapple with one of the most complex and important issues of our time: the future of food.

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ABOUT THIS FRAMEWORK

“The greatest danger in times of turbulence is not the turbulence—it is to act with yesterday’s logic.”³

The Global Alliance has designed this Framework to share with our members, peers, partners, and other like-minded individuals and organizations working on systems transformation to show how principles can be used to help inform and guide their work.

This Framework is a “rubric” — a tool that sets out criteria (what to assess, learn from, and act on) and standards (different levels of alignment) for assessing and understanding the effects of an activity. It also describes what performance would look like at each level.⁴ Rubrics are used to enhance transparency, engagement, learning, development, and adaptation through various evaluative processes. In doing so they go beyond linear Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and SMART goal methodologies, which are common in strategy development and in program-planning efforts.

The Global Alliance’s “Principles Framework for Food Systems Transformation” (Table 1) presents the Global Alliance’s seven principles for food systems transformation and the supporting assessment criteria. With this tool, the principles become a practical way to influence decisions, highlighting important interrelationships and opportunities for network engagement that can lead to systemic transformation.

Though the principles provided are shaped and interpreted as they relate to food systems, we believe that the content and the methodology outlined can be harnessed to stimulate new ways of thinking and to challenge existing assumptions across a diversity of contexts and environments.

Though the principles provided are interpreted and shaped through a food systems lens, we believe that the content and the methodology outlined can be harnessed to stimulate new ways of thinking and challenge existing assumptions across a diversity of contexts and environments.



TABLE 1:
Principles Framework for Food Systems Transformation

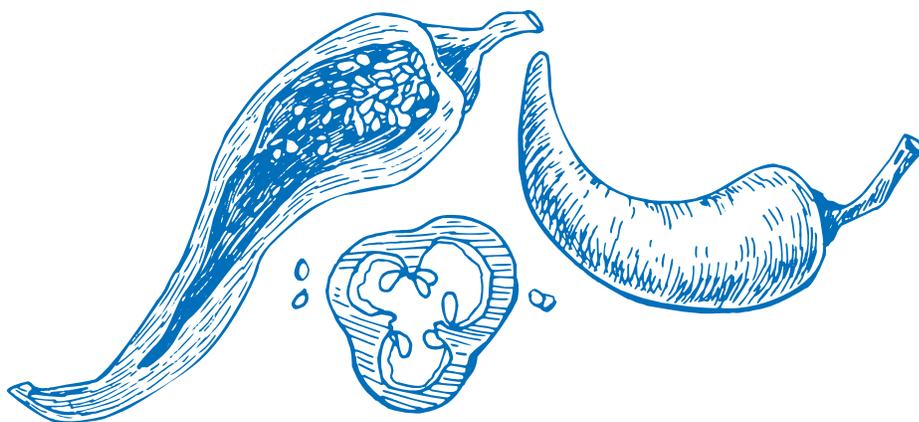
GLOBAL ALLIANCE SEVEN SHARED PRINCIPLES	WHAT IS BEING ASSESSED?		WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE ASSESSMENT? <i>EVALUATE ... LEARN FROM ... ACT (ADAPT, IMPROVE, ENGAGE ...) ON ...</i>	
	DEGREE OF ALIGNMENT	POSITIVE & NEGATIVE ASPECTS WORTH HIGHLIGHTING	IMPLICATIONS	PATHWAYS FOR TRANSFORMATION
RENEWABILITY Address the integrity of natural and social resources that are the foundation of a healthy planet and future generations in the face of changing global and local demands				
RESILIENCE Support regenerative, durable, and economically adaptive systems in the face of a changing planet				
HEALTHFULNESS Advance the health and well-being of people, animals, the environment, and the societies that depend on all three				
EQUITY Promote sustainable livelihoods and access to nutritious and just food systems for all				
DIVERSITY Value our rich and diverse agricultural, ecological, and cultural heritage				
INCLUSION Ensure meaningful and authentic engagement of diverse people and organizations in transparent deliberations, shared power, democratic decisions, and collective actions affecting food systems for the public good				
INTERCONNECTEDNESS Understand the implications of the interdependence of food, people, and the planet in a transition to more sustainable food systems				
OVERALL ALIGNMENT WITH THE SEVEN PRINCIPLES				

HOW TO USE THIS FRAMEWORK

This Framework is inspired by Principles-focused Evaluation,⁵ which conceptualizes and explains how principles provide meaningful guidance in complex situations. Principles-focused Evaluation theory argues that principles need to: 1) provide meaningful guidance; 2) be useful in helping to get to expected results; 3) be inspiring; 4) be context-sensitive, adaptable, and enduring; and 5) be evaluable in whether they are being followed, useful, and effective.

To use this Framework, we suggest the following steps:

1. Identify and write down why you are doing this assessment using the two boxes at the top of Table 1. *Note: This Framework can be used for a variety of products or activities, such as a report, an ongoing project, a conference, or the creation of a new partnership. It can also be used for different purposes; for example, to evaluate how principles are being followed in order to support decision-making or to learn about how principles are being enhanced in any particular area of work.*
2. Read through Table 2 (page 9) and familiarize yourself with the criteria for determining the degree of alignment. These criteria will help you to understand the extent to which each principle is being followed. *Note: You can edit and change these criteria according to what is expected from the principles being followed; for example: increased engagement of constituents; enhanced impact from actions; an advanced sense of purpose within the organization.*
3. Return to Table 1 and, in the first column (marked by a yellow circle), fill in the degree of alignment between 1 to 5. *Is the principle significantly advanced? Or moderately advanced? Or not advanced at all?*
4. Staying with Table 1, fill in the other boxes, reflecting on the implications of this alignment.
5. You are encouraged to work with others to discuss, learn from, and act on the results from this analysis. *What new insights did you gain? Were your assumptions confirmed? Are there follow-up actions needed? By whom? By when?*



HOW TO DETERMINE THE DEGREE OF ALIGNMENT

The Framework that follows (Table 2) defines five levels of alignment grouped according to three criteria.

The five levels of alignment (running on the vertical axis) reflect the degree of alignment to each principle from *not advanced* to *significantly advanced*.

The three criteria (running on the horizontal axis) provide a way to assess the extent to which the principles are being followed. The three criteria are:

- 1. Deeper systemic understanding:** The way in which each principle is addressed provides new ways of understanding key issues, delineates pathways forward, and supports integrated decision-making.
- 2. Potential to guide transformational engagement:** The way in which each principle is addressed sheds light on systemic issues and systemic solutions, and has the potential to support meaningful engagement with others in promoting genuine systems transformations.
- 3. Integration of principles:** The way in which each principle is addressed acknowledges the integrity of the entire set of principles.

Though these criteria are anchored in a food systems perspective developed over time by the Global Alliance, they can be tailored to different purposes and expectations for different organizations and individuals engaged in systems transformation.

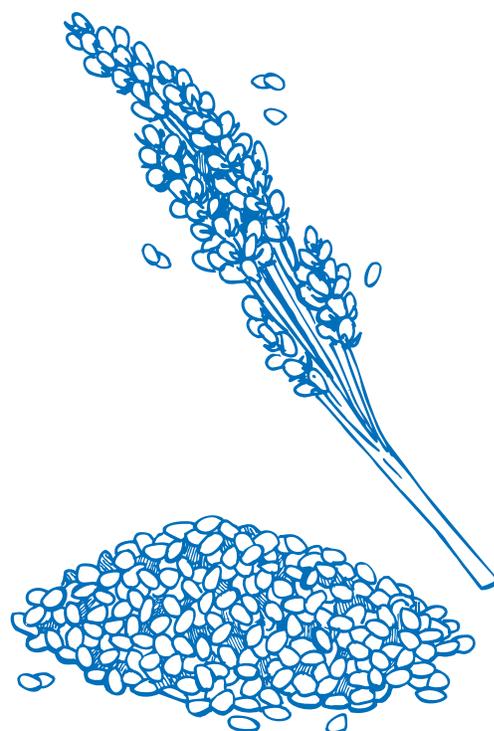


TABLE 2:

Proposed Levels of Alignment and Criteria Used to Complete the Framework (Table 1)

DEGREE OF ALIGNMENT TO EACH PRINCIPLE		DEFINITION OF EACH OF THE LEVELS OF ALIGNMENT BASED ON THE CONSEQUENCES FOR THE WORK BEING ASSESSED		
		DEEPER SYSTEMIC UNDERSTANDING	POTENTIAL TO GUIDE TRANSFORMATIONAL ENGAGEMENT	INTEGRATION OF PRINCIPLES
5	The principle is significantly advanced .	The way the principle is addressed allows us to understand key systemic issues and delineate pathways forward in more integrated ways .	The way the principle is addressed is compelling to wider audiences and has the potential to deepen engagement with other systems actors along transformational trajectories .	The way the principle is addressed clearly highlights and explores synergies with the other principles .
4	The principle is moderately advanced .	The way the principle is addressed provides insights and guidance on how issues are framed, and pathways forward are/could be advanced.	The way the principle is addressed is compelling to like-minded people and organizations , and strengthens networks for transformational engagement.	The way the principle is addressed identifies links with other principles .
3	The principle is ambivalently advanced .	The way the principle is addressed adds little insight to existing common knowledge on food systems transformation.	The way the principle is addressed somewhat reinforces existing messages but does not advance relationship building.	The way the principle is addressed superficially refers to other principles.
2	The principle is slightly advanced .	The way the principle is addressed does not provide substantial insights or ideas either explicitly or implicitly.	The way the principle is addressed is not helpful in furthering or deepening engagement with others.	The way the principle is addressed is siloed and does not acknowledge relations with other principles.
1	The principle is not advanced .	The way the principle is addressed does not improve systemic understanding of systems issues and pathways forward.	The way the principle is addressed does not deepen engagement with others.	The way the principle is addressed does not integrate the other principles .

THE FRAMEWORK IN ACTION: AN EXAMPLE

This section shares a completed Framework to help show it in action. We use a **fictitious report** about a topical issue related to food systems and climate change to shine a light on how the principles bring important, actionable insights to the fore.

The Global Alliance was invited to review and provide feedback on this fictitious report in advance of it being published. The fictitious report explores the concept of “ecosystem services markets” based on carbon markets and emissions trading (considered an economically efficient method to reduce global greenhouse gas emissions) in relation to agricultural land use in ten countries around the world.

It makes recommendations aimed at public sector actors on the adoption of this approach, supported by transparent metrics and strong safeguards. Understanding concerns about the financialization of nature instead of holistically valuing the ecological integrity of natural systems, as well as impacts on communities and rights, this imagined assessment explores how the recommendations align with the principles, providing the authors with ideas and recommendations on what to do next as a result of this analysis.

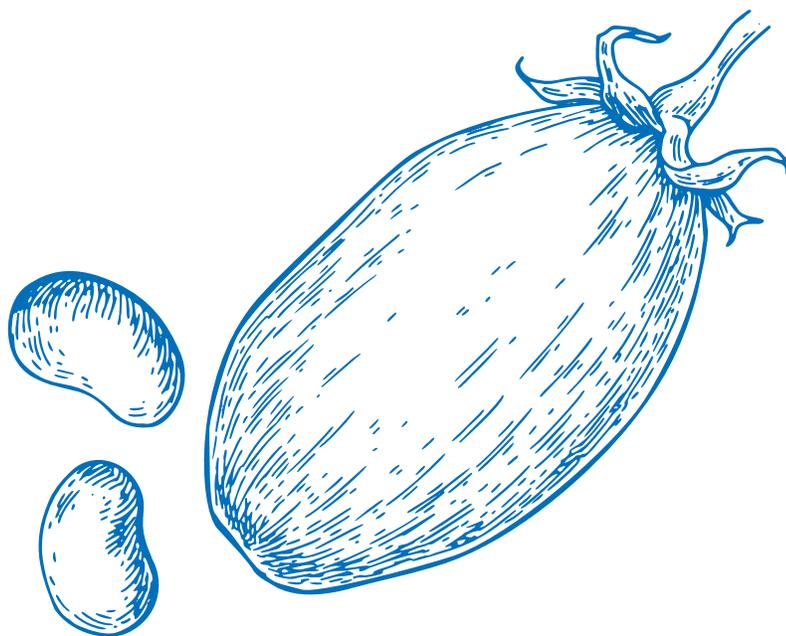


TABLE 3:
Fictitious Case of Application

The objective of the assessment is to understand how the report could be enhanced and be more systemic.

GLOBAL ALLIANCE SEVEN SHARED PRINCIPLES	DEGREE OF ALIGNMENT	POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE ASPECTS WORTH HIGHLIGHTING	IMPLICATIONS	PATHWAYS FOR TRANSFORMATION
<p>RENEWABILITY Address the integrity of natural and social resources that are the foundation of a healthy planet and future generations in the face of changing global and local demands</p>	4	The 27 mentions of renewability in the report frame and provide pathways for how diverse food systems' positive environmental externalities contribute to lowering emissions and increasing soil carbon sequestration through building soil fertility and other means.	Good evidence-based pathways for action for enhancing positive environmental externalities, but the report lacks how these environmental externalities affect and are affected by other dimensions, such as human health, livelihoods, or social capital.	Deliberately explore and incorporate how social, human, and produced capital affect and are affected by the environmental externalities aiming to be fostered.
<p>RESILIENCE Support regenerative, durable, and economically adaptive systems in the face of a changing planet</p>	3	Authors stress the need to repair and build food systems resilience in the face of climate change but do not adequately explore evidence related to diverse and resilient production systems, e.g., monocultural systems vs. diversified production.	Shallower analysis than is needed to point to adequate solutions.	Authors should consider explicitly how ecosystem service markets contribute to regenerative, durable, and adaptive systems particularly given local contexts and considerations.
<p>HEALTHFULNESS Advance the health and well-being of people, animals, the environment, and the societies that depend on all three</p>	3	The report speaks to how human, animal, and ecological health is interconnected but adds little insight to the implications of these interconnections.	By not providing clear insight to the implications of taking a "One Health approach," the report risks lack of up-take and application. It also misses the opportunity to bring in the human health dimension, which is top of mind for public sector actors.	Review the literature on One Health approach and determine how to better bring in animal and human health considerations and critical intersections between them, e.g., zoonosis.
<p>EQUITY Promote sustainable livelihoods and access to nutritious and just food systems for all</p>	2	Jobs and livelihoods do not feature explicitly in the analysis or recommendations. The analysis also does not address the legitimate concerns of many regarding the risks of land-grabs, human and land tenure rights, meaningful consultation, etc.	Without adequate consideration of these issues, the recommendations risk serious unintended consequences and the credibility of the recommendations will be questioned by important stakeholders.	Engage with relevant NGOs, farmers organizations, and Indigenous groups to explore what the issues are and how to adequately address them.
<p>DIVERSITY Value our rich and diverse agricultural, ecological, and cultural heritage</p>	1	This report does not address the type of land-base/ production system upon which ecosystem services markets are based.	Research shows that ecosystem services are greater on biologically diverse land. To miss this connection undermines the potential of the recommendations.	Consult with [name], [name], [name] as leading experts on this subject.
<p>INCLUSION Ensure meaningful and authentic engagement of diverse people and organizations in transparent deliberations, shared power, democratic decisions, and collective actions affecting food systems for the public good</p>	2	Though the authors call for collective action for the public good, the mechanisms proposed are not helpful to further or deepen engagement with others, particularly potentially impacted communities.	Recommendations could be perceived as further greenwashing rather than enabling systems change.	Consider recommendation that public sector actors interested in this approach first consult meaningfully with a diverse group of stakeholders and impacted communities.
<p>INTERCONNECTEDNESS Understand the implications of the interdependence of food, people, and the planet in a transition to more sustainable food systems</p>	1	The interdependence of considerations and possible outcomes is implicit but superficially upheld in the recommendations.	This could result in missed opportunities, unintended consequences, and misdirected applications of the solutions.	A deeper analysis is needed, especially of issues related to equity, blind spots, lock-ins, and trade-offs.
<p>OVERALL ALIGNMENT WITH THE SEVEN PRINCIPLES</p>	2	The report falls short on meaningfully addressing all the principles, and thus it lacks the needed systemic approach. It needs considerable improvement / consideration of key issues in order to be useful in advancing food systems transformation. Although the report is strong on renewability, and adequate on resilience and health, it falls short on addressing diversity, equity, and inclusion raising serious concerns about the approach, insights, and evidence put forward by this report.		

OTHER WAYS TO EXPLORE PRINCIPLES IN ACTION

Links to a non-exhaustive list that demonstrates how principles are being taken up by individuals, communities, and organizations and being used to shape how we perceive, frame, and act on a multitude of issues follow:

1. [FAO: The 10 Elements of Agroecology: Guiding the Transition to Sustainable Food and Agricultural Systems](#)
2. Beverley Burke and Philomena Harrison: [Anti-Oppressive Practice](#) (Chapter 14)
3. [Convention on Biological Diversity](#): the 12 principles are complementary and interlinked (2007)
4. [Paris Declaration and Accra Agenda for Action](#) (2005)
5. Michael Quinn Patton: [Principles-Focused Evaluation: The Guide](#) (2017)

ENDNOTES

- 1 M.Q. Patton, *Principles-Focused Evaluation: The Guide* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2017).
- 2 M.Q. Patton, "Evaluation Criteria for Evaluating Transformation: Implications for the Coronavirus Pandemic and the Global Climate Emergency." *American Journal of Evaluation* 42, no. 1 (2021): 53–89. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1098214020933689>.
- 3 M.D. Carrigan, "The Greatest Danger in Times of Turbulence Is Not the Turbulence — It Is to Act With Yesterday's Logic." *Journal of Business & Economics Research* 8, no. 4 (2010): 99–104 (p. 448).
- 4 J. Dart, J. Petheram, and W. Straw, *Review of Evaluation in Agricultural Extension: Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation*. Publication no. 98/136 (1998). Cited by BetterEvaluation: <https://www.betterevaluation.org/en/evaluation-options/rubrics>.
- 5 M.Q. Patton, *Principles-Focused Evaluation: The Guide* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2017).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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ABOUT THE GLOBAL ALLIANCE FOR THE FUTURE OF FOOD



The Global Alliance for the Future of Food is a strategic alliance of philanthropic foundations working together and with others to transform global food systems now and for future generations.

We believe in the urgency of transforming global food systems, and in the power of working together and with others to effect positive change. Food systems reform requires that we craft new and better solutions at all scales through a systems-level approach and deep collaboration among philanthropy, researchers, grassroots movements, the private sector, farmers and food systems workers, Indigenous Peoples, government, and policymakers.

www.futureoffood.org

