

# Book Review

## *Resilience and Food Security in a Food Systems Context*

**Christophe Béné and Stephen Devereux (Eds)**

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Resilience and food security in a food systems context refers to a food system being able to withstand or recover from shocks and stresses and ensure that everybody has access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food.<sup>1</sup> It involves understanding and addressing the various interconnected factors that contribute to food security, including agricultural production, distribution and consumption, as well as the social, economic and environmental dimensions of food systems.<sup>2,3</sup> Resilience in this context refers to the capacity of a food system to absorb and adapt to shocks and stresses, including climate change, natural disasters and economic fluctuations, while still providing food security for all.

In the context of Africa's food systems, resilience and food security are critical issues. The continent's food systems are often vulnerable to shocks such as frequent droughts and floods, political instability, conflicts, pandemics, and economic challenges such as high unemployment rates and poverty.<sup>4,5</sup> Additionally, many African countries have high population growth rates, which puts additional pressure on the already strained food systems. Lack of access to modern farming technologies and limited knowledge on sustainable farming practices also contribute to food insecurity.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, issues like poor infrastructure, inadequate storage facilities, and inefficient supply chains lead to significant post-harvest losses.<sup>7</sup> Lastly, climate change poses a significant threat to food security in Africa, as it exacerbates weather-related disasters and disrupts agricultural activities. Therefore, efforts to improve resilience and food security in Africa's food systems are focused on addressing these challenges. This includes initiatives to promote sustainable agricultural practices, improve infrastructure, and strengthen local economies.

The book titled *Resilience and Food Security in a Food Systems Context*<sup>8</sup> is intended to contribute to the discourse on food security. It is part of the series titled *Palgrave Studies in Agricultural Economics and Food Policy*. The volume comprises 12 chapters that offer a carefully pondered combination of conceptual discussions, historical reviews and empirical analyses. Part I of the book deals with the concepts, policy framework and narratives, while Part II focus on specific issues and empirical Analyses. The goal was to address the main questions

pertaining to the three concepts central to this volume and their interactions in a balanced and comprehensive manner. The aim was to ensure that the discussion would be relevant not only to researchers, policymakers and practitioners, but also to members of the United Nations and bi/multi-lateral development agencies engaged in food security or related development policy, planning and programming.

The editors of the volume, Béné and Devereux, wrote Chapter 1 of the book to clarify three basic concepts, namely food security, resilience and food systems. The authors highlight the general shortcomings of these concepts in the public domain and offer suggestions to expand the current definitions of the three concepts. They also try to create awareness of the close linkages between resilience, food security and food systems, and how efforts to improve one aspect often have implications for the other two.

Chapter 2 focuses on achieving food security through a food systems lens. Its author, Fanzo, articulates why a food systems perspective is necessary, but not always sufficient, to guide effective food security improvement efforts. Although the global food system may have not been broken yet, its resilience is threatened. This is augmented in Chapter 3, which is authored by Caron, Daguet and Dury. The authors address the way food systems have been able to evolve in the past under huge and numerous constraints. These include the development and adoption of new technologies, changes in farming practices, shifts in consumer behaviour, and policy interventions. The chapter further provides reasons why Global Food System still needs a profound transformation, and what will it take to achieve such transformation.

Chapter 4 analyses the narratives of development agency of food security and the fractured consensus on food resilience. The authors, Lindgren and Lang provide an overview of the diverse interpretations and narratives on resilience presented by international development agencies. The goal was to understand the divergence in views that can sometimes lead to conflicting policies and programs, making it challenging to build truly resilient food systems. Expanding on the knowledge of food security and resilience, Chapter 5, authored by Conostas, explores the potential for coherence and the reality of fragmented applications in both policy and research. The chapter makes a strong point that the potential for coherence between food security and resilience is significant, although the reality often involves fragmented applications in policy and research. This fragmentation can be attributed to a variety of factors, including the complexity of food systems, differing priorities among stakeholders, and the challenges of implementing comprehensive policies and research strategies. At the end, the author recommended that there is a room for improvement in work that aims to integrate resilience and food security in policy discourse and in research.

Chapter 6 deepens the understanding of food systems, their resilience and the implications for public action. Its author, Hodinott, seeks to contribute to efforts that bring these two notions together to understand how a resilience lens can improve our understanding of food systems at local and global levels, how resilience can be measured and assessed better, and how this subsequently contributes to improving food security interventions and policy.

Chapter 7 reviews food security in the context of a changing climate. De Pinto, Mofakkarul Islam and Katic explore how the concept of resilience has been integrated into the work on climate change and food security and whether this has helped researchers and practitioners

advance their agenda. They provide a case study about the way implementers ensures resilience in practice.

In Chapter 8, Bryan, Ringler and Meinzen-Dick focus on the important aspect of gender inclusivity, and highlight the key gendered dimensions of resilience in food systems. Although, women play a crucial role in food production and distribution, especially in developing countries; the chapter reveal that they often face more significant challenges than men, such as limited access to resources, education, and decision-making power. This gender inequality therefore requires significant intervention as it can undermine the resilience of food systems. The food resilience concept is expanded on in Chapter 9, which examines the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on household resilience and rural food systems, by drawing on evidence from southern and eastern Africa. Its authors, Upton, Tennant, Fiorella and Barrett emphasise how the systematic mechanisms that mediate a substantial covariate shock can significantly amplify the extent and severity of its negative consequences.

Chapter 10 explores emerging trends and lessons from South Africa, with the focus being place-based approaches to food system resilience. Losch and May demonstrate the need to adopt a local approach based on community-led responses to food system management in times of crises. Chapter 11, authored by Haysom and Battersby, draws the focus to urban food security and resilience. They explore the aspirations and limitations associated with the resilience of African urban food systems.

In Chapter 12, Béné and Devereux present the reflections and conclusions of the book, which address what has been learned. They also highlight the issues that remain unresolved, and the way forward for resilience, food security and food systems.

In general, the book demonstrates the importance of adopting a food systems perspective when addressing questions about food security. This perspective provides a more suitable framework for comprehending the complex interrelationships among various elements of the food system, including production, processing, distribution, consumption and waste management. By considering all these aspects, we can identify the various factors that influence food security, including environmental sustainability, economic viability and social equity. It also enables us to understand how changes in one part of the system can affect other parts and, ultimately, food security. For instance, changes in agricultural practices affect not only the quantity and quality of food produced, but also the sustainability of the environment and the livelihood of farmers. Similarly, changes in consumer behaviour influence demand for specific types of food, which subsequently affects production practices and food prices.

A food systems perspective offers a comprehensive approach to addressing food security, which facilitates the development of more effective and sustainable solutions. Nevertheless, the book also emphasises that functional food systems do not necessarily translate into improved food security. Although a food system approach can assist in addressing issues such as food availability, access and utilisation, it does not guarantee that everyone will have access to an adequate and nutritious food supply. Additional factors (including income inequality, political instability and environmental degradation) will continue to affect food security even if a functional food system is in place.

The successful implementation of a food system approach requires the coordination and collaboration of various stakeholders, including governments, farmers, businesses and consumers. This can be challenging due to the complexity of the global food system and the diverse interests and priorities of different actors. The existing food system is deeply entrenched and often resistant to change. Adopting a food system approach may require a significant shift in policies, practices and behaviours, which may encounter resistance from vested interests and established power structures.

Implementing a food system approach requires adequate financial, human and technological resources. Many developing countries may struggle to allocate sufficient resources to support the necessary changes and investment in infrastructure, research and capacity building. The current food system is characterised by inequalities in access to resources, markets and nutritious food. While a food system approach aims to address these disparities, there is a risk that it may inadvertently perpetuate or exacerbate existing inequalities if not implemented with a focus on equity and social justice.

Although the book reflects on various challenges related to the food system approach, it does not explore the issue of limited political will extensively. It is increasingly being recognised that adopting a food system approach requires strong political will and commitment from governments and policymakers. However, political priorities and agendas may not always align with the long-term goals and systemic changes required by a food system approach. These sentiments are reaffirmed in the 2023 Africa Agriculture Status Report.

Nevertheless, the knowledge generated by this book volume will play a crucial role in informing policies for building resilient, sustainable, and inclusive food systems. Firstly, the book helps identify the root causes of food insecurity and the factors that contribute to the resilience of food systems. This includes understanding the impacts of climate change, socio-economic factors, and agricultural practices on food production and distribution. Secondly, the knowledge and case studies shared in the book can provide innovative solutions to these challenges. This could be in the form of new farming technologies, improved crop varieties, novel approaches to supply chain management, and good approaches to governance of food systems. Thirdly, the book provides the basis to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of existing policies and interventions. This can provide valuable feedback that can be used to refine and improve these strategies. Lastly, the book contains important new knowledge that can help raise awareness and educate stakeholders, including policymakers, farmers, and consumers, about the importance of resilient and inclusive food systems. This can help build support for necessary policy changes and encourage practices that contribute to food security.

## Notes and References

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