MISTRA FOOD FUTURES

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Why do we need better sustainability indicators for the Swedish food system? “What gets measured, gets done!”

In recent decades, the imperativeness of transforming the Swedish food system towards a more resilient and sustainable one has become a principal endeavor for research in food and agriculture and gained increasing relevance to policy and practice. Especially, the strong and complex interlinkages between the food system and the ambitions of Agenda 2030 imply that achieving the integrated set of the 17 SDGs would greatly depend on Sweden’s ability to build a resilient food system that adapts to environmental changes and sustainably fosters food and nutrition security for the current and future generations. Thus, throughout the last 5 years of the Agenda 2030 implementation, it has been hard not to ask “Are we there yet?” or at least, “Are we getting there?” with the hope that evidence of progress could be detected.

To answer these questions, we need “indicators” to track progress towards the transformation of the food system. Fundamentally, indicators are signs of progress, which determine and show changes that an intervention or a programme is making toward achieving a specific outcome. More so, indicators allow for comparisons over time, over different geographic areas and across programmes. In particular, there are three critical aspects of food system sustainability that need to be regularly monitored and evaluated: i) tracking the performance of interventions that are undertaken to transform food systems, ii) tracking pre-identified risk thresholds, which identify when adaptation actions should be undertaken, and iii) determining the effectiveness of planned output and outcomes from actions and interventions. Indicators related to these and other critical aspects of the food system can provide food chain actors, technical experts and decision-makers with the information required to effectively manage the transformation process of the food system.

While the need for reliable indicators to guide transformation processes of food systems has in recent years been increasingly recognized, several researches have underscored the insufficiency and limitations of existing indicators and the need for developing new ones to evaluate interactions between different environmental, demographic, social and economic dimensions of food systems. Specifically, we need indicators to measure how interventions and efforts can make the food system more productive, more efficient in using inputs, less variable in its outputs, less damaging to the environment, and be more resilient to risks, shocks and long-term climate variability. To accomplish this, good indicators are an essential part of effective monitoring and evaluation as they can provide vital information on performance, achievement and accountability.

Now it is reasonable to ask: what makes a good indicator? Well, several organizations and researchers have developed criteria that provide a useful guide in deciding if an indicator is a good indicator. For

criterion of good indicators is to be “relevant” in the sense that stakeholders should agree that the indicator will make a relevant contribution to measuring and determining how to effectively transform the food system. Good indicators should also be “measurable”, so that they accurately measure what they claim to measure. In connection with this, if it is not “feasible to collect data” for an indicator, or the data that can be collected are not meaningful, the indicator will have little or no utility. Furthermore, a good indicator should be “simple” and should focus on a single issue to provide the strategic insight required for effective planning and sound decision-making. In addition, researchers, practitioners and policy-makers must collaborate in developing food system indicators, because, separately, they may not know or agree on what matters. That is, the most scientifically credible, socially acceptable, practically feasible and politically impactful indicators will come from collaborative research that launches from clear decision-making needs.

In the **Mistra Food Futures programme**, we will develop a suite of performance monitoring indicators for actors in the Swedish food system. These indicators are envisaged to contribute to the programme’s overarching vision of “create a science-based platform to enable transformation of the Swedish food system into one that is sustainable, resilient and delivers healthy diets”. Moreover, these indicators will be designed to facilitate efficient evaluation and development at all systems levels, leading to an overall sustainable system that delivers healthy foods within a sustainable and resilient production system.

In summary, purpose-driven, decision-relevant and meaningful indicators represent a cornerstone of effective monitoring and evaluation of progress towards transforming the food system for achieving sustainability goals. Good indicators need to provide accurate, useful, and critical information on performance, achievement and accountability, and they must come from collaborative efforts that launch from clear decision-making and stakeholder needs.

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