

SUSTAINABLE DIETS FOR ALL

Agency and advocacy in the food systems of the majority

Food for thought from the Sustainable
Diets for All programme

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ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

CBO	Community-based organisation
CSO	Civil society organisation
D&D	Dialogue and Dissent
EU	European Union
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
ILO	International Labour Organization
INGO	International non-governmental organisation
KRC	Kabarole Research and Resource Centre
MAI	Multi-actor initiative
MEL	Monitoring, evaluation and learning
MSME	Micro, small and medium-sized enterprise
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
SD4All	Sustainable Diets for All
UN	United Nations

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SUMMARY

Interventions to improve the sustainability and nutrition of food can be misdirected when based on assumptions about people's priorities and level of knowledge. When citizens have the capacity to act on their own priorities – in other words when they have agency – there is the potential to achieve better and more durable outcomes.

This paper highlights lessons and insights gained from the Sustainable Diets for All (SD4All) programme about the opportunities, dilemmas and tensions of putting citizen agency – with an emphasis on low-income citizens – at the centre of advocacy and interventions, when supported by external development agencies. The paper situates those insights within the wider context and literature.

The food systems that feed and provide livelihoods for low-income citizens – who make up the majority of the world's population – have characteristics that make citizen agency an especially important starting point for external interventions. These **food systems of the majority** operate largely through the informal and semi-formal economy without large-scale corporate structures. They have supply networks that may stretch over great distances. At the consumption end, these food systems meet a growing demand for prepared food, with the role of women and youth being particularly important throughout. The organisation and federation of these systems are usually unclear to outsiders. Policy neglect is rife, as is lack of trust between food system actors and governments. This lack of trust may extend to NGOs and donors. Local concepts of sustainable food systems may differ fundamentally from western framings of food and diets.

External interventions therefore need to be carefully grounded in the realities of the food systems of the majority. By understanding lived experience and by locating hotspots of organisation and energy, interventions by outsiders have a chance to establish common cause with food producers, traders and consumers, in particular in the informal food economy.

In its relatively short lifespan, pointers to success with citizen-oriented approaches to advocacy in SD4All are emerging. These include working to improve the competitiveness of Bolivian women cooks in the face of westernisation of diets; local government recognition of informal food vendors in Zambia; the revival of indigenous foods by rural communities in Uganda; and the improvement of diets of school-aged children in Indonesia.

Based on these and other experiences in SD4All, our reflections for citizen-centred interventions are summarised as follows. First, space and opportunity for agency should be designed from the beginning of an intervention. Second, careful scoping in the food system of the majority and its organisation – including informal citizens' groups and community-based organisations (CBOs) – helps to build around people's priorities rather than an imposed agenda. Third, ways of working need to be adapted to keep citizens at the centre of advocacy, especially if conducted on citizens' behalf. Fourth, advocacy at the local level and in the wider policy and market environment will not always be directed at public policy. Finally, effects on citizen capacities and agency can be monitored as outcomes in their own right.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper highlights and reflects on the opportunities, dilemmas and tensions of putting citizen agency at the centre of advocacy and interventions to improve the sustainability and nutrition of food. Interventions can be misdirected when based on assumptions by outside experts about people's priorities and their level of knowledge. The agency of citizens, on the other hand, can potentially direct interventions towards better and more durable outcomes. This is especially important in the food systems of the majority, which are central to food and nutrition security and livelihoods of low-income citizens. But it has much wider relevance, including for adaptation to climate change, or conservation of natural resources.

Citizen agency is a core focus of the Sustainable Diets for All programme (SD4All), which aims to make more sustainable, diverse, healthy and nutritious food available to low-income citizens, initially in Bolivia, Zambia, Uganda, Kenya and Indonesia. Kenya was added later in the programme, and therefore does not feature in this reflection paper. SD4All has set out to strengthen the capacities of civil society organisations (CSOs) to influence the policies and practices of governments, market actors and international institutions in pursuit of sustainable diets. It is one of four programmes being implemented by the Citizen Agency Consortium comprising Hivos, IIED and Article 19, in partnership with the Dutch government's 'Dialogue and Dissent' (D&D) initiative (Box 1).

The term 'for all' in 'Sustainable Diets for All' has important ramifications. It requires a deliberate emphasis on the food systems of the majority – that is, the systems that feed and provide livelihoods for low-income citizens: about 80% of people in sub-Saharan Africa and more than half of the population in Latin America and Asia. These food systems are, across much of the world, fundamentally different from the systems that hinge on large-scale agriculture and supermarkets, and feed wealthier segments of the global population. When 'sustainable diets' are framed by the food systems of the majority, our definitions, theories of change, targets and tools may look quite different. Interventions that assume a trickle down from the middle classes and conscious consumers, or a strong influence of leading corporates, may not be valid.

Box 1. Dialogue and Dissent: strengthening the advocacy capacity of civil society

Instituted in 2014 by the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs and funded from the beginning of 2016, Dialogue and Dissent (D&D) is a new donor approach to aided change (Government of the Netherlands, 2014). Its objective is to drive changes in policy, structures and processes – and ultimately people's lives – through increasing the capacity of civil society to lobby and advocate around their priorities. It is a recognition, at least within parts of the aid and development architecture, that markets, big business, and information technology have their limits in delivering impacts for low-income populations. Development agencies have invested heavily in 'making markets work for the poor' and 'inclusive business' – often with NGOs and CSOs in a service delivery role – but with limited results (IIED, 2011). D&D therefore marks a move into the higher risk environment of strengthening a political role of CSOs in their struggle against poverty, injustice and insecurity, at a time of shrinking civic space in many countries.

The term 'citizen agency', as a framing principle of the Citizen Agency Consortium, also carries much significance. Rather than externally conceived interventions, citizen agency starts from people: their lived experience and priorities. Supporting citizen agency puts an important check on a tendency to assume that people lack the knowledge to improve their lives, reinforced by the tendency to call citizens at the receiving end of projects 'beneficiaries'. It recognises that many of the world's most significant social and political changes have emerged as a result of community-based action from citizens that then evolved into movements for positive change. External intervention in support of agency is then, when merited, more about supporting and strengthening local capacity than running a project. Citizen agency is particularly relevant to the goals of Dialogue and Dissent, which aim to develop the capacity



Weekly farmers' market, Fort Portal, Uganda (Bill Vorley)

of civil society, particularly via CSOs, to lobby and advocate around their priorities.

With **citizen agency** at the core of the programme, the **advocacy capacity of civil society** at the centre of its donor's strategy, and with the **food systems of the majority** as its main focus, SD4All provides an important canvas for evaluating the real opportunities, tensions and challenges of citizen-driven interventions. In its design and allocation of resources, SD4All was not originally a programme-wide application of citizen agency approaches. But over time, the programme has been seeking to make it a guiding principle. There are enough examples across the SD4All countries that, when combined with the literature, can provide interim conclusions and pointers for an improved

citizen focus in the future. While aimed at food, from production to consumption, the paper has a wider relevance for the Citizen Agency Consortium, the Dialogue and Dissent programme, donors and practitioners.

The paper is divided into three parts. First, we present the theory of citizen agency and citizen-driven change, based on the wider context and literature. We discuss the distinctive characteristics of citizen agency within the food systems of the majority, as well as its implications from a gender perspective. Second, we present some interim learnings and reflections from SD4All on bridging the gap between citizens' lived experience and policy. And third, the paper ends with a number of approaches that point a way towards a stronger agency focus in future work.

2. CITIZEN AGENCY: PEOPLE UNLIMITED?

2.1 What citizen agency is – and what it isn’t

Agency refers to the capacity of people to act independently and to make their own free choices. It can cover both the individual and collective capacity of people to be agents of their lives and of their development. Working with others to achieve collective cultural, political and economic goals is what Harry Boyte terms ‘civic agency’ (Biekart and Fowler, 2009). Agency provides the basis for people to negotiate with and challenge institutions that affect their lives and their ability to achieve their goals. Agency is thus rooted in people’s own lived experience, in which daily realities are not necessarily viewed and expressed in terms of crises – such as food and nutrition insecurity or unsustainability (Payne, 2012).

An agency perspective challenges a common pattern of external expert-driven policies and interventions that makes assumptions about people’s priorities or lack of knowledge. It ensures that projects are conceived and designed with communities to address issues they face.

It is the capacity for action that – when grounded in the primary concerns and priorities of citizens – distinguishes citizen agency from ‘participation’, ‘engagement’, ‘voice’ and ‘inclusion’. Those concerns and priorities may be

Lost in translation

Over the course of the SD4All programme, attempts in Bolivia, Uganda, Indonesia and Zambia to translate the concept of agency into the local language arrived at terms like ‘people’s actions’, ‘citizens’ activities’, ‘people’s empowerment’ or ‘participation’. These terms can miss the deeper meaning around the capacity for purposeful action, but they also reflect the challenges of using English as a working language, and the limitations of anglophone concepts in diverse cultural settings. Despite these challenges, discussions with local groups found that the idea of **willingness and capacity for action** was a universally recognised framing of citizen agency.

very different from assumptions of policymakers, donors, NGOs and corporations, especially in the very personal realm of food and diets. Projects conceived and designed outside communities may set out to ‘sensitise’ people or ‘empower’ them in organisations, in markets, or in politics. But interventions may continue to assume that people lack information to make good choices. They are often rife with gaps between assumptions and people’s real priorities (Robins et al., 2008).

“Projects will often talk of ‘empowerment’ even though they typically involve managerial interventions by outside experts and intermediary organisations, especially NGOs.” (Long and Villareal, 1994)

Even citizen-inspired development objectives can be deprived of agency in the hands of a managerialist development sector. The use of principles and concepts like empowerment, participatory planning and self-help initiatives can be turned into prescriptive instruments of government-aided development (Fowler and Biekart, 2008b). ‘Citizen-driven’ initiatives will be nothing of the sort if initiatives have already been designed and framed (with funder expectations for delivery) before citizens are even engaged (Vorley, 2018). That applies just as much to the concept of ‘sustainable diets’.

It is however worth reminding ourselves that there are justifications for public awareness raising for D&D when knowledge or organisation are absent. We should initially assume knowledge rather than ignorance, but what people don’t know (or can’t make sense of) can’t help them (eg Bentley, 1989). ‘Induced participation’ to encourage citizens to stand up against power holders is not always a contradiction (cf De Gramont, 2013).

We should also note that agency is not possible without basic rights (Dagnino, 2008). Those rights are under attack, and the space for civic action is shrinking in many parts of the world – not only in developing countries – where authoritarianism is on the rise.

Box 2. Conflicting realities: Whose ‘sustainable diets’?

The ‘sustainable diets’ concept links the sustainability of agriculture with the health and nutrition of food consumption (FAO and Bioversity International, 2010). The concept thereby encompasses the whole food system. It is also universal in its applicability to high- and low-income countries, but has often been framed and operationalised in NGO-led projects around the formal food system of industrialised countries. In higher-income countries, producers and consumers can rely on trusted third parties to enforce standards and certifications, such as organic, sustainable, or Fairtrade. Short supply chains, such as farmers’ markets and local gastronomy, can be seen as an antidote to large-scale, conventional agrifood practices.

But many of these tools may not be available or appropriate to low-income citizens. Though promoted by local NGOs and CSOs, the strategies of sustainable diets may fit poorly with the priorities of the majority low-income producers and consumers. Expectations that innovations in sustainable diets in the middle class and formal part of the food system will trickle down to the informal may be misplaced. And in global processes, sustainable consumption and the green economy have, like much of the ‘sustainable development’ agenda, been widely framed from the perspectives of advanced economies.

Source: Nair, 2018

2.2 Agency in the food systems of the majority

As set out above, ‘for all’ in ‘Sustainable Diets for All’ means paying particular attention to working with the food systems of low-income citizens. The characteristics of these food systems are fundamental to prioritising citizen agency in SD4All. The food systems of the majority are not residual structures that will be eclipsed by modernisation. One of the most widespread features of these food systems is their location partly or entirely in the informal economy. Between agricultural producers and low-income consumers there will often be a dynamic and entrepreneurial informal trade sector based on small-scale enterprises. Supply networks may stretch over great distances, connecting with more and more farmers via emerging urban centres in rural areas. At the consumption end, especially in the informal settlements that house a quarter of the world’s urban population, these food systems meet a growing demand for prepared food.

Informal does not always mean unregulated. For example, the use of public urban spaces in which street vendors operate will usually be strictly regulated, though those regulations may be unclear or contradictory, and poorly suited to the economic realities of citizens. Food system actors operating on the legal margins often experience those regulations as harassment, rent-seeking and the arbitrary application of the law (Brown and McGranahan, 2016; Castells and Portes, 1989). The 2020 coronavirus outbreak provided authorities with another justification to crack down on the informal food economy. But generally the state perpetuates a process of ‘disregulation’ (Goldstein, 2016) or ‘repressive toleration’ (Kamete, 2013) of informality as an expedient way to satisfy a growing population’s needs while enabling administrations and officials to profit.

Distrust between informal actors and authorities is often mutual, especially around regulation. Agency will rarely be directed at public policy except to defend livelihoods against arbitrary actions by authorities, for example to protect

market spaces against vendor clearances or being planned out of urban development, for example through zoning or beautification (War on Want, 2007).

Agency and organisation within informal food systems are often dispersed and fluid, and not obvious to the outsider. For that reason, outsiders tend to perceive people in the informal economy as lacking agency and not being capable of organising (Lindell, 2010). But agency may well be present in “new and diffuse forms of collaboration” (*Ibid.*), despite the high costs of and many obstacles to collective agency by the poor. An organisation that appears to be coordinated and formally constituted may in fact be viewed with distrust by informal actors. Penetration of party politics into the informal sector presents challenges to establish genuinely autonomous and representative organisations. This was revealed in an SD4All-commissioned study of informal markets in Zambia, which found deep distrust by vendors in the market organisations that claim to represent them.

So interventions in the food systems of the majority that intend to seek common cause with grassroots organisations need to take great care in understanding the representativeness of their partners. Interventions also need to take stock of the current performance of the food systems of the majority. Too often talk of food system ‘transformation’ via new projects is done before understanding what the current system is providing in terms of nutritious, accessible and affordable food to low-income citizens.

Since its characteristics are so poorly understood, it’s no wonder that there are frequent mismatches between policy and local priorities in the food systems of the majority, and that projects fail to take root or scale up. Understanding those features, including the prevalence of informality, is central to any framing of citizen agency in pursuit of sustainable diets for all, and must not be ignored – although international processes in pursuit of sustainable food and agriculture consistently do so.

“A critical problem is that most participatory programmes focus on the involvement of residents. There has been no parallel effort to engage workers in the informal economy in urban political processes – thus street traders are excluded from public debate in areas where they have a major impact on services and management.”

(Brown and Lyons, 2010)

The SD4All programme has collaborated with local partners in Indonesia (Natawidjaja et al., 2019), Zambia (Mwango et al., 2019), and Bolivia (García et al., 2020) to produce evidence on urban informal food markets.

The low visibility of organisation in the informal food system means that citizen organisations in the informal economy are rarely linked to NGOs and CSOs and their international partners. Nevertheless, there are opportunities for alliances between informal organisations and progressive state actors, as seen in Fort Portal, Uganda (Box 3) and various cities in Indonesia (Natawidjaja et al., 2019). Those alliances, however, may be unstable, because periods of political openness and accommodation are, with changes in regime, often followed by repression. Furthermore, government motivations for accommodation with informal actors may have more to do with tidying the urban landscape than improving their economic prospects and addressing the disparities underlying urban poverty and informality (Taylor and Song, 2016). More typically, the traders, vendors and SME processors who are the backbone of the informal food system are overlooked in policy and public debate.

2.3 Gender and agency

The position of women, including their role in market associations, is key to agency throughout the food systems of the majority; the same applies to youth. Of all

employed women in sub-Saharan Africa, 90% are in informal employment when agriculture is included, and 79% excluding agriculture. For all low-income countries the figure (including agriculture) is 92% and for lower-middle-income countries 85% (ILO, 2018). In SD4All countries and many of the food systems of the majority, women are the primary agents, especially in trading and vending. Yet, in advocacy and formal policy processes – including multi-stakeholder initiatives – there is a tendency for men’s perspectives and agendas to dominate, unless specific efforts are made to adapt those processes and strengthen women’s voice and participation. Strengthening gender equality and inclusion is one of the key premises of the SD4All programme.

The low levels of representation of women and youth from the informal food system can also be mirrored in ‘inclusive’ processes. Driven by experts, there may be little input from women at the grassroots beyond statements of ‘problems’, and therefore poor understanding of their capacities and knowledge. Small-scale entrepreneurs, especially women, will not have time to attend a multi-day process during working hours, or may sometimes choose to operate under the radar of policy and projects. For this reason, a special session (‘pre-lab’) with women vendors was deliberately planned into the SD4All multi-actor ‘lab’ process in La Paz (Box 4).

Box 3. Fort Portal Uganda recognition of informal food vendors

Informal street vending of food provides increasing opportunities for self-employment in Uganda, including many young entrepreneurial women and men. National colonial-era legislation outlaws street vending for reasons of public health. But municipal authorities in the regional centre of Fort Portal in Kabarole district have taken a progressive view in moving from conflict to coexistence with street vendors, acknowledging that informal food provision is a necessity for a large part of the urban population. The deputy mayor assisted the street vendors to form their own association to address concerns of security, food hygiene, waste and cleanliness of the streets, and help bridge the communication gap between officials and vendors. All food vendors in the town have

subscribed to the association. The Public Health Act remains a major issue. SD4All partner Kabarole Research and Resource Centre (KRC) facilitated a multi-stakeholder coalition to empower food vendors, spearheading radio campaigns and calls for policy reform which have resulted in the review of local policies, such as the Kabarole food and production ordinance (passed in February 2019). Eleven new sites were allocated to the informal food vendors by the Fort Portal municipality leaders. Ten water points have been included in the municipality plan targeting street food vendors. This is an outcome of the Food Change Lab process, started by KRC in 2015 – see Section 3.4.



Woman street vendor, Fort Portal, Uganda (Bill Vorley)

Box 4. Supporting women's agency in formal processes: La Paz, Bolivia

The Food Change Lab in La Paz within the SD4All programme has, through six sessions, focused on women in low-income neighbourhoods. Without some preparatory investments, the chances of productive participation and agency of those women from the informal food economy in the more formal lab process would be limited. This is due to the prevailing language and agenda – dominated by NGOs – and the unwillingness of individuals to speak on behalf of fellow women. In order to overcome that challenge, a ‘pre-lab’ was held with around 30 women. It involved a one-day training session for each group to orient women on how the lab process would work

and their role in it. They discussed and drafted their priorities and main concerns about food in urban areas, and designated representatives who would attend the women’s food lab to draw out their perceptions and main problems associated with food. They also selected representatives to join the more familiar stakeholders – including NGOs and chefs – at the main event. These representatives took on their role with a high degree of investment in the process, and were able to shape the lab’s direction and language. Their role could then become one of agents rather than recipients or beneficiaries.

This look at gender and agency is another reminder that interventions should not be projectised into short-term attempts at ‘inclusion’ and ‘consultation’ by inviting people to participate in processes. Developing capacity for people to ‘make and shape’ rather than simply ‘use and choose’,

takes time and care (Cornwall, 2001). And, shocking as it may seem, people who operate at the economic and legal margins – women, youth and men – may have legitimate reasons **not** to participate under any terms.

3. BRIDGING THE GAP?

Even with the best intentions, a programme like SD4All exposes a gap in representation and voice which must be bridged for interventions to be grounded in the real priorities of the majority food system. Understanding the food systems of the majority is not enough for a successful intervention. There remains the question of trust and legitimacy, including for the CSOs that are the cornerstone of the D&D approach.

Based on our learning in SD4All, this section discusses different approaches to bridge that gap, including critically assessing the role of CSOs as intermediaries or representatives of citizens around specific issues; finding common cause around advocacy; capacity strengthening of CSOs and citizen groups; using multi-actor initiatives; and using evidence, including evidence generated with citizens.

3.1 CSOs as intermediaries

Civil society organisations are at the core of the lobby and advocacy activities in D&D. A theory of change grounded in civil society and CSOs depends on: (1) CSOs being effective intermediaries or boundary organisations between outsiders and those more informal and local groupings; and (2) CSOs being accountable to the citizens they work with and whose lives they aim to improve. Are those assumptions realistic? And if so, what sort of CSOs should programmes like SD4All be partnering with as interlocutors?

The answer lies in the way that citizen agency is being operationalised: how those intermediaries interpret their relationship to citizens, and the extent to which they are driven by the agendas and priorities of citizens in a bottom-up way. Most CSOs will claim that their agendas and actions are fully co-created with citizens. But on closer inspection the picture is much more mixed, with instances of ‘advocacy capture’ (Green, 2020; Silberman, 2020) and failures to really understand what it takes to catalyse community-based action. If a CSO works through high-level federations, then its actions may be indistinguishable from classic interventions, since ‘voice’ is generally exercised by experienced associations (Brown and Lyons, 2010). Many NGOs and CSOs can fail to see the big differences between citizen-based action and their own civic actions. Without an awareness of these differences, CSOs and NGOs may not

connect with the right partners when it comes to citizen agency work; at worst they find themselves alienated from or unaware of the key actors and groups they need to be collaborating with. CSOs do not have a monopoly over active citizenship, and “locating civic-driven change in civil society confuses the concept of citizenship” (Fowler and Biekart, 2008b). In fact, CSOs comprise a spectrum from progressive to deeply regressive and uncivil.

But there are examples of established CSOs that successfully link informal groups and community-based organisations (CBOs) with those in power, in ways that “level inequalities of authority, power and resources” between ‘informals’ and state agencies (Song, 2016), either as active citizens or as intermediaries (Box 5). Intermediaries promoting constructive policy engagement between informal actors and municipal authorities include SD4All partner KRC in Fort Portal, Uganda (Boerwinkel and Vorley, 2016) and Yayasan Kota Kita in Surakarta, Indonesia.

Box 5. CSOs as active citizens

Some CSOs will consider themselves active citizens first and foremost. La Casa de los Ningunos in Bolivia and Tanoker in Jember, Indonesia are examples from SD4All where active local citizens, inspired by global and local issues, have taken it upon themselves to help their community towards a healthier, more sustainable way of life. Even though their agenda may not have emerged from the wider citizenry, that ‘external’ agenda may then become locally owned and replicated once their community is galvanised and convinced of the value of change. Even Slow Food Uganda, which is part of an INGO and a global movement, has grounded its work with communities rather than superimposing an external agenda. This dynamic of community sensitisation and horizontal scaling falls in between the classic CSO-supported model of citizen-led action and a ‘pure’ citizen agency model. These smaller, more grassroots, CSOs and CBOs are likely to benefit most from capacity development.



Vendors in Surabaya, Indonesia, self-organised as alternative to municipal relocation programme (Bill Vorley)

This dilemma of citizen-led or CSO-led change leads to the concept of seeking **common cause** around citizens' lived experience, which has featured in part of SD4All and which can be stepped up further in future work.

3.2 Advocacy and common cause

Everyday agency means meeting people where they are. It is at the local and regional level where much agency is directed and innovation is taking place. SD4All is an externally conceived programme, and as discussed in the previous section, brings to countries its own frameworks and agendas – which may be quite different from those of local citizens and organisations. Where possible, the approach of SD4All has been to seek **common cause** with citizen-based organisations or social movements around a sustainable diets agenda.

The establishment of common cause around what people genuinely care most about involves effort and resources, and needs to be built in from the beginning as part of the design of programmes. The location of existing or incipient spots of energy and struggle around a food systems issue can form the basis of common cause and real innovation, such as concern about school-age children's diets by the Tanoker Foundation in Indonesia. Identifying these hotspots is where a baseline context analysis can pay dividends

before interventions are designed and undertaken. An 'intervention test' (Fowler and Biekart, 2008a) can be a useful way of checking whether civic energy is broadly exhibited, rather than induced – for example by prospects of external resources.

Advocacy to address those hot topics may be aimed at demanding new policies or laws. In other cases we have learned that, although many countries have excellent laws, without citizen demand they are often not enacted. There is a role for citizen agency in pressing that demand and driving implementation and accountability of existing regulations. There may sometimes be opportunities for finding common cause with more progressive parts of national or local government. Examples include Jember in Indonesia (Box 6) and the push for crop and dietary diversification in Zambia, where common cause was found with the Ministry of Agriculture (BrandOutLoud, 2017). In other situations, advocacy may be directed at the private sector. More contested environments, such as the defence of informal food systems against 'market grabs' and harassment, may put CSOs on a collision course with powerful forces and vested interests. Civic space for this advocacy role of CSOs is shrinking in many countries.

Box 6. Advocating for a child-friendly region, Jember, Indonesia

Fast food and highly processed foods have made deep inroads into the diets of Indonesians throughout the country. The Tanoker Foundation, based in Ledekombo subdistrict in Indonesia's Jember regency, was set up in 2000, originally as a learning community for children. Despite a widening mandate of the organisation, Tanoker continues to believe in children as agents of change. Incomes in the region are low and there is a history of out-migration of women to work abroad. Tanoker's Director, Farha Ciciek, became very concerned about the changing diets of migrant families, and the shift to cheap processed and snack foods. By using food diaries in partnership with SD4All and Jember University, it became clear to the community that most children access unhealthy food in the school environment (Mayer et al., 2019).

Tanoker has cooperated with schools and teachers to implement healthy canteens and promote healthy diets, and has partnered with the health office of Jember regency, as well as other relevant government agencies in the sustainable healthy food movement (*Gerakan Pangan Sehat Berkelanjutan*). Jember region has become a recognised frontrunner in advancing basic public health; in July 2017, the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection declared Jember a 'child-friendly region', linked to Tanoker's work on promoting the availability of healthy food in schools. In July 2018, the ministry upgraded Jember regency, thanks to its compliance with one of the integral indicators of basic health: the availability of healthy food for children in schools via healthy canteens. The food is sourced from local female-led micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs).

3.3 Capacity strengthening

Strengthening the capacity of civil society actors is an important way of identifying priorities and collaborating around a common cause, and is integral to D&D. In SD4All, capacity strengthening is a two-way street and reciprocity is important: the programme supports CSO partners to develop their capacities for lobby and advocacy (and evidence generation, when appropriate); at the same time, interaction with partners enhances the capacities of Hivos and IIED as programme implementors.

In SD4All, it soon became clear that the community groups we most wanted to work with did not comply with traditional grant compliance measures. This led us to a different type of capacity strengthening. The first was working with larger CSOs to backstop CBOs; in Zambia, this role was filled by CUTS in support of the Alliance for Zambian Informal Economy Associations (AZIEA). Second, the programme developed an advocacy learning programme that coached six national CSO staff in Zambia and Uganda, supporting their community mobilisation and advocacy work with one-to-one mentoring.

A third key element of capacity strengthening in SD4All is the Advocacy Toolkit (De Toma, 2018), which was developed to support partners to reflect on their advocacy strategies and provide them with concrete advocacy tools. Citizen agency is a thread running through the toolkit so that capacity of CSOs is built to support citizens with their advocacy priorities, rather than running with an external agenda. One of the most important, and somewhat unintended, outcomes of rolling out this toolkit was the discussions it triggered about the meaning of citizen agency in the programme, and its contribution to the strategic direction of advocacy in each country. It prompted reflections about

who is driving the agenda, and which citizens CSOs work for. Subsequent discussions with partners, including CSOs, used citizen agency as a frame to understand and assess their own advocacy objectives and strategies. The conversations in each of the four countries were instrumental in sharpening the advocacy focus and finding new strengths in the partnerships.

Each country can tell a rather distinct story. In **Zambia**, the programme began as Hivos-driven, but reflections on citizen agency allowed for the role of partners to come out more strongly. SD4All is supporting a national coalition around agricultural diversification, where the relationship with CSO partners is about finding common cause with them (Hivos, IIED and partners are part of that coalition). The reflections also allowed us to raise the profile of AZIEA, who are programme partners around policy recognition of the informal food economy.

In **Uganda**, the reflections around citizen agency have brought together the different partners around a commonly agreed narrative of indigenous food. The notion of citizen agency was important to understand the relative strength of the CSO partners, and how they speak for different and complementary constituencies – farmers, urban consumers and activists, and others – on the issue of indigenous foods in the Ugandan food system.

In **Bolivia**, the CSO partners are well established and work well together. The conversation around citizen agency prompted a reflection on the extent to which those CSOs engage with grassroots movements, especially because they all work in urban middle-class contexts. The question resonated with the partners, and led to a reorientation of some of their work towards a much more explicit focus on



Customer of food vendor, Bolivia (Mauricio Panozo/Hivos)

low-income citizens. It also led to the development of the research work with women cooks. Capacity strengthening in this example has looked beyond the conventional ‘advocacy to change policy’ approach. Agency is being explored around self-help, building skills of the cooks to compete against the processed western diet (Box 7).

In sensitive political contexts, capacity building for CSOs in voice and policy agenda (the ‘dissent’ of Dialogue and Dissent) may be fraught with difficulty. It is very important that any external support given is in pursuit of genuine citizen aspirations, which can counter accusations that CSOs “may in fact be pursuing foreign agendas or wasting resources by working in areas that do not resonate with

citizens’ needs.” (Eyakuze, 2018). In other words, a genuine and legitimate citizen agency agenda can be an asset for the D&D approach to work. The degree to which CSOs genuinely represent marginalised groups – and the degree to which they are neutral in respect to political parties – affect whether officials take them seriously (Joshi and McCluskey, 2018). This has been a central pillar in the SD4All approach to capacity strengthening for advocacy, as set out in the Advocacy Toolkit.

Citizen agency is a durable asset rather than a temporary aid to project success. In that sense, capacity building is a key outcome in its own right and not just a means to an end, and must be evaluated as such.

Box 7. La Paz women cooks as change agents

In La Paz, Bolivia, more and more people are eating prepared food on the streets. Women cooks are a key repository of traditional food skills and agents of healthy diets. By linking consumers to diverse and indigenous products, they play a significant role in citizen health. In common with most informal entrepreneurs, these vendors have carved out spaces for enterprise despite, rather than because of, public policy. Independence is highly valued, and external initiatives are viewed with some distrust. After an initial cool response, SD4All was able to open a conversation with women cooks about their interests by building trust and demonstrating independence from the municipality and associated regulation and taxation. The cooks’ priorities are to make a living and compete against

the encroaching western diet. These cooks reported losing customers to vendors selling low-cost western-style food outside of the market. Together with Bolivia’s gastronomic integration movement *Manifesto del Movimiento de Integración Gastronómica de Bolivia* (MIGA), a chef helped the women cooks to prepare appealing and competitive dishes, suggesting ways to expand their repertoire, building on traditional ingredients. One market requested support to prepare juices with local and traditional products. So here agency and capacity are less directed to advocacy and public policy, and more to improving market competitiveness.

Source: García et al., 2020a

3.4 Agency and multi-actor initiatives

Another way in which SD4All has sought to bridge the gap in representation of actors from the informal food systems of the majority in policy processes and interventions is through ‘multi-actor initiatives’ (MAIs). MAIs can be a way to ‘get the whole system in the room’ with a broader range of stakes and roles beyond the usual representatives from the development sector, and where possible across old divides (such as state versus civil society). They are also opportunities to pool evidence for a systemic understanding of the current food systems of the majority and their challenges. Innovation Labs build on multi-stakeholder approaches to trial and prototype solutions for practice, behaviour or policy change.

MAIs have been an important part of SD4All (Ho, 2020), and they can be a way to bring the priorities and agendas of citizens to the table. Food Change Labs – convened in Fort Portal, Uganda (Boerwinkel and Vorley, 2016; Boerwinkel et al., 2018), Bandung, Indonesia (Boerwinkel and Paath, 2018), Chongwe, Zambia (Boerwinkel and Chilufya, 2018), and La Paz, Bolivia (García et al., 2020b) – have deliberately set out to include informal market actors, youth and women. The Zambia experience showed again how citizen agency can be built around tangible local issues and trust-based relationships, but also how the process struggles to remain

grounded and relevant to those citizens when operating at the national level (Box 8).

Several multi-actor initiatives supported by SD4All take place at the municipal level. In Bolivia, the CSO Alternativas has helped to establish a Food Security Council – a platform that convenes several actors in the food system – firstly in La Paz, and then in Sucre and Tarija. In Uganda, local relevance and CSO support close to a location were critical to the establishment of Food Parliaments in Buikwe district. There, the coordinator has built rapport and trust with groups such as the Food Communities and Food Parliament participants (Box 9).

The outcomes of MAIs can depend greatly on the extent of civic engagement and ‘ownership’ of the process (Biekart and Fowler, 2018). In SD4All, much effort has been invested in the inclusiveness of MAIs, to mitigate against replicating existing structures of power, gender, and expert knowledge. But representation of actors from the informal food system, especially women, continues to be a challenge, and capacities and knowledge from the grassroots have not been adequately reflected in the processes. That was the reason for including a preparatory process – a ‘pre-lab’ – with women vendors into the SD4All process for the La Paz Food Change Lab (Box 4).

Box 8. Zambia Food Change Lab: the challenge of going national

The Zambia Food Change Lab was designed to generate ideas for change in the food system and test these innovations on the ground, with particular emphasis on involving local people. The lab started in Chongwe district in 2016, and soon after shifted its orientation to the national food system after adding partners with a national focus, and as agricultural policy issues resurfaced. The lab resulted in the emergence of four prototyping groups: Crop Diversity, Youth, Awareness Raising and Informal Economy, each led by Hivos partner organisations with thematic expertise. With the shift

to national level, the contribution to outcomes of the prototype groups has been challenging to identify. This, in part, influenced the decision to form the Lusaka Food Policy Council and limit its focus to the capital city. The lab experiences showed that a local food governance initiative can address specific local challenges and give a voice to marginalised groups that are often excluded from national-level processes.

Source: Ho (2020)

Box 9. The Food Parliament and Food Communities in Buikwe district, Uganda

Slow Food Uganda, one of the SD4All partners, started in late 2017 with an initiative in Buikwe for citizens to share ideas around common food-related interests. The first participants called it *Seteserezo lye'byemere*, which translates to ‘food parliament’. These Food Parliaments are not formal organisational structures, but resemble town hall meetings, and membership has grown to 45 people. As an example, local concern with a sugarcane outgrowing scheme and its impact on food production were discussed and channelled to Buikwe district council. Members of the Food Parliament visit places to generate new ideas and experiences. As a result of one such visit, the idea of vegetable home gardens is now spreading among the group members and beyond. Under the Food Parliaments, groups of smallholder farmers within particular geographic areas ('food communities') strive to promote the production and preservation of traditional and indigenous foods from extinction, and protecting their food cultures.

See: <https://east-africa.hivos.org/blog/food-parliaments-providing-a-platform-for-citizen-involvement/>

At the global level within SD4All, significant investments have been made in international MAIs, notably the Sustainable Food Systems Programme convened under the UN 10-Year Framework of Programmes on Sustainable Consumption and Production (10YFP). Cases and reports from Uganda and Zambia have been used in those international meetings to show the issues, needs and opportunities for change from local level, and to support food system transformation processes at local level. A positive result has been a greater recognition of the importance of local-level processes to drive global changes (see HLPE, 2018: 55 for the Uganda Food Change Lab case). The orientation of these high-level processes has, however, remained relatively distant from the priorities of the food systems of

the majority, and opportunities for synergism with a citizen-driven agenda have so far been limited.

Some tough questions remain about MAIs and their link to citizen agency, especially regarding ownership and durability. It may be unclear to participants who owns and leads the change process, and whether this leadership consciously changes over time (Ho, 2020). This scenario may give rise to issues of durability; for example in Bolivia, the CSO Alternativas may eventually need to transfer ownership of the Food Security Councils, but the circumstances of that transfer are unclear. Building ownership and durability becomes more difficult when multiple stakeholders are involved. Too often MAIs are one-off events, or the coalitions arising from MAIs are only as durable as their external funding. Ownership and durability should be factored into a design process from the start.

3.5 Citizen agency and evidence

For citizen agency to translate into effective advocacy, evidence can be a critical ingredient, for a number of reasons. First, with evidence in their hands, citizens and CSOs can advocate directly in support of their priorities, and be less dependent on external experts to set the agenda. Evidence makes visible the realities of their lives, which are otherwise often invisible to policymakers; that invisibility is a major factor in political exclusion and marginalisation, and results in frequent mismatches between policy and local realities. Second, evidence can increase the legitimacy and effectiveness of citizens' policy engagement, helping “to gain a place and have influence at the policy table”; and ensuring “that policy recommendations are genuinely pro-poor” (Court et al., 2006). The importance of evidence, expertise and analysis for CSOs involved in lobbying and advocacy was stressed in the 2014 D&D policy framework by the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Government of the Netherlands, 2014). Agency without evidence can undermine credibility and risks fostering fake news and populist agendas. And finally, the process of generation, documentation and use of evidence can itself be highly beneficial for building group agency.



Onion seller, Mugusu weekly market, Uganda (Bill Vorley)

Box 10. Citizen-generated evidence

If communities can generate evidence themselves, either as primary data or from existing credible sources, they may be more effective in lobbying and advocacy around their priorities, and less dependent on others to set the agenda. The scope for citizen-generated evidence underpins the concept of citizen agency and community self-determination, helping communities exercise their own decision-making powers in support of their own priorities. Generating evidence allows citizens control over the use of data, but only when the right accompanying approaches are in place. A discussion paper on citizen-generated evidence has been prepared under SD4All (Vorley, 2018).

An example is the generation of evidence of a community's dietary status, which can be gathered by citizens using food diaries. As referenced earlier, in East Java Indonesia, a SD4All study worked with 97 households to record diets using food diaries, in partnership with the CBO Tanoker and the University of Jember. It found that half of adults, and nearly three-quarters of children consumed ultra-processed foods that are high in fat,

sugar and salt at least three times a week. Almost four in ten children aged from 5 to 18 had insufficiently diverse diets according to the FAO dietary diversity score (FAO and FANTA, 2016) despite a wide range of foods available locally, including 18 types of dark green leafy vegetables. The work with households exposed some weaknesses in the available tools, both in terms of validation and suitability for this kind of 'citizen science'. The SD4All team called for the development of assessment methods that help communities record and interpret their own dietary data (Mayer et al., 2019).

Research carried out prior to SD4All with women factory workers and their organisations in Bandung, Indonesia involved those workers in generating data about their diets, again using food diaries. But the research did not extend to bringing the workers into analysis of the data. From an agency perspective, it thus missed an opportunity of feeding back the results to the workers and informal food vendors, and involving them in interpretation and advocacy (Natawidjaja et al., 2019).

4. REFLECTIONS

Considering the urgency of improving food systems around the world, a citizen agency approach can seem like an obstruction to getting things done. Urgency and impetus to ‘transform’ food systems can distract us from the realities of the most important food systems – of the majority poor. Before rushing to transform food systems, we should first take stock, understand how these food systems really work, and seek common cause with the farmers, enterprises and consumers that comprise them. This is especially true for the systems that feed and provide livelihoods for low-income citizens.

If we are looking for ‘less pretension and more realism’ in interventions to achieve **durable impacts** on poverty, health, and sustainability (IOB, 2019), greater attention clearly needs to be paid to citizen agency. We have seen how the food systems of the majority – which are central to the food and nutrition security and livelihoods of low-income citizens – have characteristics that make citizen agency a particularly important starting point for external interventions. Without that investment in agency, interventions by outsiders, even when citizen-centred, may continue the tradition of seeking out partners that reflect an outsider’s worldview, with agendas that replicate misguided assumptions. They may also provide governments with pretexts to restrict the civic space for externally supported CSOs.

Establishing common cause with agents in the food systems of the majority requires time and flexibility. Over the course of the SD4All programme we have seen how, by focusing on citizens’ agency and lived experience, it is possible to build a basis for genuine common cause. The programme has gained insights into the (mainly informal) food system in Zambian markets, and has found common cause with women cooks of street food in La Paz around indigenous foods, and with mothers in Jember, Indonesia around children’s diets.

Common cause combines agendas from external and grassroots actors. Building common cause from the grassroots up can ground concepts of ‘sustainable diets’ and ‘sustainable food systems’ in realities of low-income households. But there is value in externally derived agendas when there is an organisation and collaborative environment in place to discuss and co-learn – as in the case of Slow Food in Buikwe, Uganda. Here the external agenda has been catalytic rather than imposed.

We have also seen how capacity strengthening, aided by the roll-out process of the SD4All advocacy toolkit (De Toma, 2018), has helped implementing organisations and local partners to develop more effective and grounded lobbying and advocacy strategies. Multi-actor initiatives have provided further opportunities for bringing the voices of low-income citizens to the table, especially in Zambia, Uganda and Bolivia. The value of citizen-generated evidence has also been demonstrated, especially in Indonesia, though not yet to a level of improving the effectiveness and legitimacy of citizen advocacy.

But what about trickle-up? Can local citizen-centred interventions be scaled up across regions and countries? And if so, under what circumstances? This is where national CSOs and platforms, as well as international implementing partners, have an important role, provided they are aware of the considerable risks of ‘advocacy capture’ (Green, 2020).

Our work to take citizen agency with a focus on low-income citizens from an idea to effective implementation in SD4All has shown its promise and its complexities. At the outset of SD4All, we did not get this right. But we adapted our approaches over time, including different approaches to capacity development.

Based on our emerging experience from the last four years, we offer some preliminary recommendations for future work.

- 1. Plan and invest for agency.** Working with citizens can mean added complexity, effort and resources, especially early in the process. But there are benefits in the long term, including benefits that CSOs and NGOs derive from partnering with citizen-based actors and groups delivering change. Because it is so difficult to retrofit, citizen agency needs to be built in from the beginning of a programme. The choice of partners is key to finding legitimate representatives in the food system of low-income women and men. It requires a recognition of a diverse range of CSOs, and perhaps a deliberate effort to work with informal CBOs. The same goes for the selection and training of staff in coordination and donor organisations.

- 2. Locate energy.** Activities are best targeted to where there is energy and (even incipient) organisation around citizens' priorities. The food parliament in Buikwe, Uganda is a good example of how this can be achieved (Box 9). Setting an advocacy strategy in support of those priorities in the food systems of the majority requires a scoping that is different from generic national surveys of food systems and governance, to carefully probe for hotspots of agency, especially with women. Existing initiatives may neither want nor need external support, other than possibly helping alliances to get established around common agendas across different levels of society. CSOs should properly understand the current performance of food systems, before rushing to intervene or 'improve'.
- 3. Adapt ways of working.** An environment for collaboration and common cause in the food systems of the majority may require adjustments to ways of working, with the programme's design and direction open to the involvement of partners. We have observed how entrepreneurs and consumers in this food system are unlikely to attend meetings, because it is 'not their world', or because of the fragile economics of their enterprise, or because people do not feel they have been endorsed to speak for their group. So a different approach is needed to ensure representation and legitimization of voices and agendas from the grassroots. A focused effort can especially help mitigate against exclusion of women and youth from consultations and decision making; for example, the SD4All 'pre-lab' with women in Bolivia (Box 4). Programmes should be ready to adjust working definitions and framing of 'sustainable diets' and their fit with the food system in question. The gathering and interpretation of supporting evidence can be a strong aid to advocacy if it is held in the hands of actors themselves. Advocacy will often be conducted by citizens and local CBOs, with national CSOs and INGOs in a supporting role. National CSOs may also be well placed to conduct advocacy on behalf of citizens if they can demonstrate how they have organised their constituency.
- 4. Take a wide view on advocacy.** Not all agency will be political in orientation. Citizen scepticism of state actors and public policy may be entrenched, to a point where CBOs are looking elsewhere for change. This may include capacity strengthening in the market, as seen with supporting women cooks in La Paz to be more competitive against a westernised diet (Box 7). When public policy is a target, citizen agendas may be adversarial, for example, in defence of the food systems of the majority, confronting policymakers and planners against 'market grabbing' and/or 'planning' informal markets out of existence. Another target may be large food companies – domestic and multinational – that promote a western diet of highly processed food, which influence consumer aspirations across all socioeconomic groups. Other citizen agendas will present opportunities for common cause with policymakers, such as 'Beyond Maize' advocacy in Zambia (Mwanamwenge and Cook, 2019; BrandOutLoud, 2017), or school children's diets in Indonesia (Mayer et al., 2019).
- 5. Rethink global advocacy.** We have seen how citizen-oriented interventions are often hyper-local, with opportunities for horizontal scaling between citizens to create national coalitions (Zanello and Maassen, 2011), but without an obvious local-to-global route to advocacy. What does this mean for global advocacy, and where does citizen agency have a role at the global level? There are still advocacy opportunities at the global level that, while not directly linked to local advocacy, can influence the wider policy and market environment around the same advocacy targets. For example, global advocacy to challenge the promotion of western diets high in processed foods can mirror and complement the citizen-driven advocacy in support of a 'child-friendly food system' of Jember, Indonesia.
- 6. Monitor impacts on citizen agency.** Enhanced citizen agency is an end in itself as well as a means to advocate for particular policies. Monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) systems then need to be adjusted to assess what impact interventions have on collective citizen agency. This is because of the widespread distrust between informal food actors and the state, the informal and diffuse organisation of those actors, and the distance between large CSOs and the grassroots. Standard measurements of citizen agency and empowerment, such as levels of engagement with duty bearers, or the number of advocacy initiatives carried out by CSOs, may be insufficient. MEL systems can benefit from an extra layer that reflects the real goals of citizens in the food systems of the majority.

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