

# FARMER-LED FOOD SYSTEMS FRAMEWORK

Heifer's Learning  
Journey Series



August 2025





**Heifer's Learning Journey Series** is strategically designed to drive local and global action by fostering collaboration, increasing awareness, and sharing knowledge and best practices. This effort includes events, materials and frameworks that reflect and explore the essential elements needed to transform food systems to ensure they are farmer-led as we work towards achieving Heifer's mission and vision.

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**“Farming is not just work—it’s life, identity and dignity. A farmer-led food system gives life not only to plants, but to culture, hope and the Earth itself.”**



# INTRODUCTION

## TRANSFORMATIVE VISION OF HEIFER'S PROGRAM MODEL

To fulfill its mission, Heifer has embraced its transformation through a **new program model** focused on “thriving and resilient smallholder farmer households through transformed food systems.” With smallholder farmer households at the core of this aspiration, **farmers and their communities are leaders and co-creators** in transforming food systems, no longer seen as only beneficiaries. **Heifer positions itself as a facilitator and ally that walks** alongside farmers, sometimes behind, offering resources and support based on the farmer’s stated opportunities and needs.

Food systems are complex and interconnected ecosystems that, defined broadly, include production, processing, distribution, consumption, and disposal, and which interconnect with social, environmental, economic and cultural systems. Farmer leaders emphasized the importance of **indigenous knowledge, cultural identity, local markets and ancestral practices** in these food systems.

Heifer’s focus on “transformed food systems” responds to the systemic challenges and injustices of smallholder farming communities, creating a paradox where those who feed the world are often the most food insecure. Increasing global food insecurity, accelerating political instability and continuing ecological crises make this a critical moment to transform the way development has been led and significantly change the role of smallholder farmers. The existing systems often move wealth and power away from farmers; therefore, transforming this course is key to sustainability. **Farmer-led food systems (FLFS) are a direct response to these challenges**, based not only on local needs but also on opportunities and the requirement for agile, locally based solutions. Farmer leadership in food system transformation is ethically and strategically necessary to fulfill Heifer’s mission, which is firmly based on smallholder farmer and community agency, wisdom, innovation and resilience.

Food system transformation in the hands of farmers emphasizes an intentional move from linear thinking to **system thinking and continuous learning and adaptation**. Food systems transformation is a complex challenge that requires a holistic and structural approach. It is not enough to make one-off changes; a broad vision encompasses all system dimensions, from production to consumption, including distribution, public policies, consumer awareness and equitable access to markets. It is a declaration that food should be fair, that farmers should thrive, that sustainability and equity must go hand in hand, and that **real change begins when we listen to the voices that have too often been left out of the conversation**.



## HOW TO USE THIS FRAMEWORK

Promoting farmer-led food systems reflects Heifer International's deep-rooted commitment to *working in partnership with communities* and its evolving strategic vision. This framework serves as an internal guide that **captures Heifer's collective learning, farmer voices, and cross-regional insights, shaping the organization's direction in food systems transformation**. Rooted in the spirit of the learning journey and summit, it fosters global understanding while honoring local contexts, emphasizing ancestral knowledge, traditional practices and regional leadership. Through dialogue among farmers, staff, collaborators, and researchers, the process highlighted both opportunities and challenges, with key themes emerging around resilience, climate change, inclusive markets, and the critical role of local leadership in driving lasting change. The FLFS guide seeks to:

- **Move forward in supporting farmer-led food systems, drawing on the collective wisdom and global consensus** gained from the food systems learning journey.
- **Encourage further collaborative, transparent and inclusive discussions** of strategies, best practices, lessons learned and tools at various organizational levels.
- **Stimulate continuous learning** around food systems transformation in the hands of farmers.

**IT IS NOT** a mandate but a reference. It consolidates shared expertise but is not a structured approach to designing, delivering and measuring farmer-led food systems.

**IT IS** a complementary resource and should be reviewed alongside the Program Model and other relevant documentation to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the approach.

**CONTINUOUS LEARNING & ADAPTATION:** The learning journey emphasized the importance of constant learning and adaptation in transforming food systems. In response to key challenges and opportunities, four strategic pillars were established to guide the work: Food and Nutritional Security, Environmental Sustainability, Economic and Political Aspects and Social and Ethical Dimensions. These pillars shaped the summit and underpinned the framework. Rooted in farmer voices and Heifer's experience, the framework supports ongoing reflection and action. While there is strong alignment around inclusive, farmer-led approaches and sustainable practices, internal debates remain around operational capacity, funding and balancing local needs with global goals. As Heifer's role evolves, the framework must remain flexible and informed by collective input to adapt to a dynamic international context.



# HEIFER'S CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Version 4<sup>1</sup>

## SYSTEMIC TRANSFORMATION

Food systems are at the center of multiple global crises, from rising hunger and malnutrition to accelerated biodiversity loss. This reality directly threatens the livelihoods and autonomy of more than 2 billion people who depend on smallholder farmer agriculture, artisanal fishing and foraging for their survival and indirectly, the rest of the world's population that depends on them. These crises are compounded by the persistent exclusion of smallholder farming or **campesino**<sup>2</sup> (peasant) communities from the development of public policies and development models. However, their agroecological practices, ancestral knowledge and solidarity-based production networks represent real and sustainable alternatives to the dominant agro-industrial model. Recognizing and strengthening the central role of small rural producers is not only a matter of justice but a *necessary condition for building truly sustainable, resilient and equitable food systems*.

Systemic transformation of food systems requires profound, long-term change that addresses the underlying structures, power dynamics and cultural norms of current inequitable models. Led by smallholder farmers, Indigenous peoples, women, youth and local communities, this process involves dismantling dominant barriers like market concentration and exclusionary policies, while building grassroots pathways for inclusive, regenerative and sovereign food systems. In the face of global crises such as climate change, food insecurity and inequality, transformation is essential, not just to produce food, but to ensure access to healthy food, restore ecosystems and advance equity through local markets, agroecology, land rights and inclusive public policy.

**"If we do not tackle the root causes of inequity, we risk reproducing them."**

~ Heifer's Global Food Systems Summit, May 2025

Heifer will apply a systemic approach to food system transformation based on lessons learned from programs in the Americas, Africa and Asia and continue to promote multi-stakeholder platforms, cooperative networks, and resilient production systems that seek to return control over land, seeds and markets to smallholder farm families. A co-creation approach will guide donors and program alignment, ensuring a shared understanding of impact narratives and outcomes. The process will include stronger internal technical capabilities, increased knowledge sharing through communities of practice, and the elevation of farmer voices in communications with funders.

<sup>1</sup> Updated with Global Summit input, Working Group review

<sup>2</sup> Though Campesina, or campesino, is often translated to "peasant" in English, the word's meaning is richer and more significant: for farmers in Latin America, it's a cultural identity rooted in a deep connection to community, food and the natural world. (A. Knight, 2022)



## DEFINITIONS

### REFERENCE: Adopted Standard **Food System** Definition

*Food systems comprise all the processes associated with food production and food utilization: growing, harvesting, packing, processing, transporting, marketing, consuming, and disposing of food remains (including fish). All these activities require input and result in products and/or services, income, and access to food, as well as environmental impacts. A food system operates in and is influenced by social, political, cultural, technological, economic, and natural environments (HLPE, 2014; UNEP, 2016; Global Panel, 2016; HLPE, 2017).<sup>3</sup>*

### CONCEPT<sup>4</sup>: Heifer's Operational Approach to Farmer-led Food Systems

*A farmer-led food system (FLFS) is a regenerative, just, and interconnected food system fundamentally driven by smallholder farmers, who lead its design, governance, production, and transformations. Rooted in ancestral wisdom, ecological knowledge, and community collaboration, farmer-led food systems are locally grounded and responsive to the needs and aspirations of their communities, from producers to consumers.*

*These systems deliver culturally appropriate, nutritious food that supports healthy living, food security and food sovereignty while advancing climate resilience, regenerative practices, and equitable prosperity. They work to preserve the economic, social and environmental foundations necessary to sustain future generations.*

*By reinforcing connections across the entire food system, from production to consumption, farmer-led food systems adopt a systems approach that recognizes the deep interconnections between social, economic, environmental, cultural and political dimensions. These systems are designed to adapt to climate change, economic shocks and other disruptions, ensuring sustained access to healthy food and secure livelihoods.*

This model requires not just listening to farmers but enabling them to shape, lead and co-create the systems in which they live. Transformation involves investing in their voice, visibility and influence; recognizing their traditional knowledge; improving access to equitable markets and tailored financial services; and aligning public policies with their needs. True food system transformation demands profound structural change, restoring the relationship between people and nature, and affirming communities' rights to define their food systems. The success of FLFS depends on intentional power-sharing mechanisms that dismantle entrenched inequalities in market control, donor reliance, and land tenure, ensuring that systemic barriers do not undermine farmer agency.

<sup>3</sup> Siemen van Berkum, Just Dengerink and Ruerd Ruben, 2018. The food systems approach: sustainable solutions for a sufficient supply of healthy food. Wageningen, Wageningen Economic Research, Memorandum 2018-064. 32 pp.; 9 fig.; 0 tab.; 39 ref.

<sup>4</sup> Working Group of Program Model Core Team with Core Team feedback integrated; FLFS summit feedback integrated

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

### Main Outcome: What Does Success Look Like?

A just, resilient and sustainable food systems led by smallholder farmers and embraced by consumers that guarantee food security, protect the environment, ensure economic equity, and strengthen social and ethical values, allowing dignified livelihoods and sustainable locally led development.

This vision is expressed through four strategic outcome pillars:



### Core Pillars and Strategic Outcomes

Pillar	Strategic Outcome
<b>Food &amp; Nutrition Security</b>	<p>Smallholder farmers and communities have consistent access to safe, nutritious and sufficient food through locally appropriate and culturally relevant agroecological practices.</p> <p>These systems prioritize local food needs and preferences, strengthen food sovereignty, and recognize the vital role of smallholder production in building healthier, more resilient communities.</p>
<b>Environmental Sustainability</b>	<p>Regenerative agriculture and agroecology help restore ecosystems by enhancing biodiversity, reducing environmental harm, and increasing farmers' resilience to climate change.</p> <p>These approaches focus on healing the land while sustaining long-term productivity.</p>
<b>Economic &amp; Political Aspects</b>	<p>Farmers gain fair and reliable access to markets, diverse products and inclusive financial services tailored to their needs.</p> <p>With supportive policies and fair pricing, they can increase their income, improve wealth distribution, and create jobs, strengthening livelihoods and rural economies.</p>
<b>Social &amp; Ethical Transformation</b>	<p>Farmers, especially women, youth, Indigenous peoples and other underrepresented groups, are empowered through stronger community networks and shared leadership.</p> <p>The approach promotes gender equality, intergenerational inclusion, and community-led governance, ensuring people have an authentic voice in shaping their future.</p>

These outcomes are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. They reflect not just what Heifer hopes to achieve, but how it intends to work: with humility, partnership and systemic thinking.



## Pathways for Change: How Transformation Happens

*Pathways articulate the means of transformation, describing how program activities, enabling conditions and stakeholder engagement lead to intermediate outcomes and long-term impact. These pathways cut across multiple pillars and outcomes, intersecting to form a living system of change, evolving with time and adapting to context and learnings.*

- **Farmer Leadership & Voice:** Facilitate the strengthening of leadership capacities of farmers, especially women, youth, and Indigenous peoples, to lead change in their communities and influence decision-making at all levels. Farmer leadership is essential for sustainability and equity in food systems. Empowered farmer voices and visibility are fundamental to legitimacy and systemic change.
- **Knowledge Co-Creation:** Blend Indigenous and scientific knowledge, farmer experience and innovation through local labs, peer learning, and applied research.
- **Strategic Alliances:** Facilitate partnerships between farmers, governments, NGOs and private sector actors to scale change across systems. System change requires both from-the-ground initiatives and institutional support.
- **Facilitator Role:** Catalyze farmer agency, strengthen systems and nurture enabling environments by acting as a facilitator, amplifying farmer-led solutions instead of driving top-down programs.
- **Context-Sensitive Design:** Implement evidence-based, participatory design processes that reflect local needs, power dynamics, and cultural values. Program design must integrate farmer input and knowledge alongside donor perspectives.
- **Market Sensitization:** Enable and support connections to responsible, sensitized markets that recognize the value of sustainable production and promote access to safe, healthy, and locally appropriate food.
- **Access To Finance & Infrastructure:** Expand financial inclusion, develop rural market infrastructure and ensure that capital flows equitably.
- **Policy Influence & Visibility:** Support farmer organizations to engage in policy dialogues, advocate for rights and amplify their stories in public and donor-facing spaces.
- **Results:** Explore multi-dimensional outcomes (not just yields or income) to define transformation.
- **Time & Flexibility:** Support and enable long-term investments and extended support timeframes with agile change processes required for sustainable impact and systemic change.



## Cross-Cutting Intermediate Outcomes

*Intermediate outcomes represent critical progress points in the transformation of food systems, capturing tangible changes in behaviors, capacities, systems and policies that collectively move us closer to long-term impact.*

- **Strengthened Farmer-Led Governance:** Cooperatives, associations, multi-actor platforms, and local councils are empowered to lead inclusive decision-making, advocacy and food systems governance.
- **Adoption of Inclusive Regenerative Practices:** Farmers adopt climate-resilient, regenerative, and culturally relevant practices that improve productivity, strengthen food sovereignty and sustain ecosystems.
- **Enhanced Policy Influence:** Farmers and their organizations gain the capacity and support to shape public policies and influence regulatory environments at local and national levels.
- **Learning, Innovation, & Knowledge Sharing:** A strong learning culture promotes collaboration, research and co-creation, integrating farmer wisdom with scientific and indigenous knowledge to adapt to challenges.
- **Context-Sensitive Program Design & MEL:** Programs use participatory, evidence-based frameworks for design, monitoring, learning and adaptation, ensuring alignment with local realities and evolving needs.
- **Youth and Women's Empowerment:** Youth and women's leadership, retention and active participation are prioritized across all interventions, reinforcing equitable representation and intergenerational continuity.
- **Institutional Engagement:** Professional and traditional institutions are actively involved in tailoring programs for local production and consumption systems.
- **Public–Private Sector Integration:** Government and private sector services and participatory structures are aligned and integrated to support long-term, inclusive food system transformation.
- **Financial Sustainability:** Efficient and context-responsive financial systems ensure long-term program sustainability and scalability.
- **Access to Finance for Farmers:** Smallholder farmers gain improved access to credit, capital and financial services, enabling investments in regenerative practices and rural enterprises.
- **Aligned Fundraising & Impact Measurement:** Fundraising efforts are strategically integrated with program goals, adaptive learning and impact tracking to demonstrate effectiveness.
- **Expanded Donor Engagement:** Stronger systems are in place to engage donors and transparently report progress, outcomes and long-term impact.

## Key Facilitators & Activities

Strategic facilitators are operational levers that help translate vision into action, facilitating meaningful progress to farmer-led food systems, directly advancing intermediate outcomes, and reinforcing progress across the strategic outcome areas.

Facilitators	Examples of Key Activities
<b>Farmer Agency &amp; Leadership</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Recovering local knowledge</li> <li>Strengthening leadership and cooperative capacity (mentoring and coaching).</li> <li>Facilitating policy dialogues and decision-making platforms.</li> <li>Promoting farmer associations to enhance competitiveness and sustainability.</li> </ul>
<b>Farmer Visibility &amp; Policy Influence</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strengthening producer organizations for collective bargaining.</li> <li>Training in media, advocacy and public engagement.</li> <li>Advocating land rights, fair pricing and climate finance.</li> <li>Supporting farmer-led policy coalitions and reforms.</li> </ul>
<b>Strategic Partnerships</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Multi-stakeholder platforms for joint decision-making.</li> <li>Collaborations with research institutions and consumer movements.</li> <li>Promoting fair trade, collective action and market access.</li> <li>Investing in market infrastructure that benefits producers.</li> </ul>
<b>Knowledge Systems &amp; Innovation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Facilitating peer learning and innovation labs.</li> <li>Integrating Indigenous, traditional and scientific knowledge.</li> <li>Conducting applied research and addressing knowledge gaps.</li> <li>Adapting proven practices to local contexts.</li> </ul>
<b>Context-Sensitive Program Design</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Grounding programs in local evidence and community planning.</li> <li>Supporting NGOs in transitioning to facilitative roles.</li> <li>Designing region-specific interventions with built-in adaptability.</li> <li>Providing exit-phase support to sustain impact post-project.</li> </ul>
<b>Market Infrastructure</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Valuing cultural and environmental contributions of smallholder production.</li> <li>Strengthening farmers' ability to influence consumer demand.</li> <li>Building systems that value quality, sustainability and local identity.</li> <li>Increases resilience to economic shocks</li> </ul>
<b>Financial Inclusion &amp; Access to Capital</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Facilitating access to tailored credit and microfinance tools.</li> <li>Expanding rural finance through blended capital models.</li> <li>Ensuring the availability of working capital for agroecological practices.</li> </ul>
<b>Youth &amp; Women Empowerment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Offering leadership training and engagement opportunities.</li> <li>Creating inclusive spaces for young people and women in food systems leadership.</li> </ul>
<b>Fundraising/Program Integration</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Donor alignment</li> <li>Coordinating fundraising with long-term program goals.</li> <li>Addressing tensions between short-term funding and long-term change.</li> </ul>
<b>Monitoring, Learning &amp; Adaptation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Participatory evaluation and community feedback loops.</li> <li>Measuring systemic change across individuals, institutions and systems.</li> <li>Using adaptive tools like outcome harvesting to refine strategies.</li> </ul>



## From Vision to Action in Farmer-Led Food Systems

While the Farmer-Led Food Systems (FLFS) framework offers a bold and necessary vision, its success hinges on confronting several persistent challenges. The implementation gap reveals a need for clearer operational pathways that translate ambition into action. Varying processes and methodologies signal a call for a unified theory of change that aligns FLFS with existing program models and learning systems. Tensions between equity and scale highlight the difficulties of transforming value chains that continue to favor large, efficient actors over smallholder farmers.

Environmental aspirations clash with input dependency, as many farmers remain locked into unsustainable systems. Additionally, the promise of inclusive participation must be safeguarded against tokenism, ensuring that farmers, especially women, youth, and Indigenous communities, are not merely consulted but actively shape decisions. Finally, the mismatch between short-term funding cycles and long-term transformation goals underscores the need for sustained investment and donor alignment.

Despite these contradictions, the path forward remains both urgent and hopeful. Transforming food systems through the FLFS framework is not just possible, it is essential. It requires intentional power-sharing, inclusive partnerships, adaptive learning, and systems rooted in the leadership of farmers themselves. Farmers are not passive beneficiaries; they are innovators, organizers and the stewards of a more just, sustainable future. Realizing this transformation means aligning resources, strategy and willpower to reimagine how we value food, community and the Earth.

