

**IDS Working Paper 597
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Equity in Food Systems Livelihoods: A Review of Conceptualisations, Approaches, and Actions

**Ayako Ebata, Imogen Bellwood-Howard and
Jane Battersby**

December 2023

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Summary

Food systems employ billions of people across the world, many of whom are socially and economically marginalised. The livelihoods within the food systems these people rely on tend to be precarious and low in economic return, exacerbating social and economic inequality while preventing food systems from improving their ecological sustainability. In this paper, we review the different ways in which equitable livelihoods within food systems are conceptualised across academic communities, and what interventions are suggested to make food systems livelihoods more equitable. We analyse the tensions and complementarity between these different approaches and suggest an inter- and trans-disciplinary methodology.

Keywords

Livelihoods, food systems livelihoods, equity.

Authors

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Executive Summary

Food systems across the world provide livelihoods for billions of marginalised individuals and families. However, the jobs that they rely on are precarious and low in economic returns, exacerbating their social, economic, and ecological vulnerability. Differing views exist on identifying ways to improve the persistent inequity in food systems livelihoods. In this paper, we provide a review of different conceptualisations of equitable livelihoods in food systems. Broadly, we draw from (agricultural and applied) economics, the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach, agrarian studies, food studies, and agroecology. We show that different academic traditions have different understandings of what a food system livelihood comprises and how opportunities for better livelihoods are shaped by economic, social, and political structures. They differ in terms of the ways in which they conceptualise the purposes of food systems livelihoods and access to resources needed to make a living from food-related activities. This, in turn, leads to varying assumptions about what will address inequities in livelihood opportunities and outcomes.

We then analyse how these different understandings of equity in food systems livelihoods lead to and are informed by a difference in research methods used, and therefore evidence generated. We argue that there are, broadly speaking, qualitative and quantitative methods, and that these methods are typically used to highlight specific aspects of food systems livelihoods and/or outcomes. For instance, quantitative methods allow us to highlight the difference in quantifiable outcomes, such as income and wages, between different kinds of value chains that agri-food enterprises participate in. Qualitative methods are often used to explore social, political, and historical dynamics that lead to the marginalisation of certain people and food-based livelihoods. We argue that no single approach and method can address the complex relationship between food-related livelihoods, resource access, and relations between people and organisations within food systems.

Finally, we conclude by suggesting several areas for further research, which combine various research methods and approaches. This will help us understand the interactions between measurable – e.g. income, nutrition, health, etc. – and non-measurable – e.g. general wellbeing, sense of place, etc. – outcomes linked to livelihoods, and tensions, synergies, and power relationships between different actors within food systems that affect livelihood options and outcomes. This, in turn, implies using a mixture of the methods outlined above and the need for conceptual as well as methodological innovation that spans across different academic communities.

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1. Introduction

This paper considers food systems livelihoods and critically assesses how livelihoods within food systems are currently understood, conceptualised, and operationalised. Food systems provide livelihood opportunities for an estimated 4.5 billion people across the world, 2.3 billion of whom are socially and economically marginalised (Fanzo *et al.* 2021). IFAD (2013) estimated that about 70 per cent of 1.4 billion poor people rely on agricultural activities for their living. Many are small-scale farmers who are vulnerable to the risks of increasing climate vulnerability and food insecurity (Woodhill, Hasnain and Griffith 2020). Beyond the farms, food systems offer marginalised people income opportunities along the agri-food value chains as, for example, small-scale food retailers (Kawarazuka, Béné and Prain 2018), traders, and animal slaughterers (Ebata 2022). At the same time, the current ways in which people earn livings through jobs in food systems show significant inequality and inequity. For instance, small-scale food producers face challenges in accessing key production resources such as land, credit, and farm input because of existing social, economic, and political structures (Ebata *et al.* 2020).

Livelihoods in the food sector are not necessarily unique from those in other sectors: they all provide people and families with income to thrive on. However, food systems livelihoods have significant implications on poverty reduction, food and nutrition security, and environmental sustainability. As one of the main objectives of food systems livelihoods is to provide people with food, efforts to make food systems livelihoods equitable also need to consider nutrition security for vulnerable people (Ruben *et al.* 2021). Also, food-based livelihoods depend significantly on access to natural resources such as land and water (Alarcón, Lodin and Hajdu 2022). These resources are embedded in local to global power relations, and these relations determine who can make a decent living from food systems livelihoods (Michelutti 2022). In addition, food systems tend to employ marginalised people, women, and small-scale businesses – see section 4.2 for more details – and are therefore critical to achieving a number of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); for example, No Poverty (SDG 1); Zero Hunger (SDG 2); Good Health and Wellbeing (SDG 3); Decent Work and Economic Growth (SDG 8); Life Below Water (SDG 14); and Life On Land (SDG 15).

The idea of livelihoods has been central to several disciplines and ways of thinking over the past decades. In this paper, we draw on theories on food systems livelihoods from several key bodies of literature that are relevant to the global debates on effective ways to reduce inequity in food systems livelihoods. We do not claim that our analysis covers all the relevant academic disciplines. We also recognise that food systems livelihoods debates do not necessarily sit within and between disciplines, and that some approaches and conceptualisations are

multi-, trans- and inter-disciplinary. Therefore, we build on our collective expertise in key academic debates, approaches, and policies from individual contexts as they represent a diversity of areas that are prominent in the global debates on food systems livelihoods and their contribution to reducing poverty and inequality. Specifically, we will (broadly) draw from: economics, agrarian study, Alternative Food Systems literature, and agroecology.

We ask: how do these various approaches understand livelihoods and the inequities that exist in them, and what have been the implications of these understandings? How may we gain a more holistic and useful understanding of food systems livelihoods and the inequities in them?

The rest of the paper is organised as follows. In section 2, we discuss how key bodies of literature engage with the concept of equity in food systems livelihoods and their suggested approaches to tackling inequities. In section 3, we show the methods that have been used by these different bodies of work and discuss how alternative approaches may yield better results in reducing inequities. In section 4, we discuss realistic options for gaining a better understanding of food systems livelihood inequity, and propose forward research directions.

2. Disciplinary approaches to food systems livelihoods and inequities

2.1 Equity in economics

Mainstream (development and applied) economics conceptualise equity from the perspective of fair distribution of opportunities. Perhaps the most influential publication on equity in economics is the World Development Report by the World Bank (2006). The report states that equity refers to a situation where ‘individuals should have equal opportunities to pursue a life of their choosing and be spared from extreme deprivation in outcomes’ (*ibid.*: 2). This notion emphasises the opportunities given to individuals (or households) regardless of their sociocultural, economic, and political standings in a given society, and economic policies to facilitate individual choices to optimise efficient allocation of resources and maximise (economic) growth. Building on this notion, the report suggests economic policies to level ‘the economic playing field’ (*ibid.*: 3), including: effective land tenure policies, improving access to basic services such as health care and education, and enhancing market competition. Essentially, all of these recommendations intend to correct market failures that distort the most efficient allocation of limited resources, which is in line with neo-classical economic theories.

While the notion of equity is not explicit, Piketty (2022) analyses the historical, sociocultural, and institutional structures that lead to unequal outcomes in terms of, for instance, income, household-level asset, and generational wealth. He highlights socio-political events (e.g. the two World Wars and colonialism) that triggered the formation and transformation of highly unequal societies across Europe and in the United States, and argues that inequality has, overall, decreased over the last centuries while more progress is needed to achieve true equality. As in the conceptualisation by the World Bank (2006), Piketty calls for improved access to education and employment opportunities by people from underprivileged backgrounds and echoes economists’ notion that equity is desirable because it generates growth and maximises welfare (Klasen 2008). However, he also recognises the socio-political dynamics and historical legacies on inequality that persist today and suggests a series of inter-temporal and national policies to achieve social ‘justice’.

While economic thinkers – including those building on Marx and Sen – challenge the narrow interpretation of equity by the Bank, its notion dominates much of the current thinking behind food systems livelihoods and (in)equity within them. A more recent and equally influential publication by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) conceptualises equity in the context of agricultural

development in line with the Bank's dominant notion (Otsuka and Fan 2021). The chapters of this book discuss equity as fair allocation of production resources through effective policy interventions (e.g. land and natural resources) (Place, Meinzen-Dick and Ghebru 2021; Rosegrant, Fan and Otsuka 2021), ensuring that marginalised (i.e. smallholder) farmers have the right incentives to participate in lucrative value chains (Otsuka and Zhang 2021), and women's differentiated experiences of asset control and ownership (Doss and Quisumbing 2021). This view is echoed in the 2020 World Development Report, which argues that reducing trade barriers and ensuring that labour regulations do not raise the costs of labour will help developing countries participate in global value chains (World Bank 2020).

A branch of applied and agricultural economics has recently focused on understanding the distributional effects of expanding marketisation of food production and trade, the resultant increase in international trade and, more specifically, global value chain development (Reardon *et al.* 2009). This segment of economics explored whether marginalised farmers in low and middle-income countries (1) participate in export-oriented value chains (Reardon and Minten 2021), and (2) benefit from the participation in terms of income (Michelson 2013), poverty reduction (Maertens and Swinnen 2009), food security (Chege, Andersson and Qaim 2015; Olounlade *et al.* 2020), and women's empowerment (Maertens and Swinnen 2012). In other words, the underlying assumptions in the economics community are that equity in agricultural livelihoods is achieved when marginalised actors are able to participate in lucrative value chains, economically benefit from it, and translate their income to tangible social and environmental outcomes (Meemken *et al.* 2021). While the empirical literature has documented links between global value chain participation and welfare outcomes, it remains unclear whether the positive outcomes are caused by value chain participation or simply indicate that better-resourced producers can benefit from these value chains (Bellemare and Bloem 2018; Barrett *et al.* 2012).

This body of literature deviates slightly from the neo-classical economics assumption that markets work without failures. Such positioning is categorised as 'new institutional economics', which recognises that the role of institutions – formal structures such as government policies as well as informal rules such as sociocultural norms – influences the ways in which market transactions occur (Coase 1937; Williamson 2000). North's (2003) notion that institutions are 'the rules of the game of a society, or, more formally, are the humanly devised constraints that structure human interaction' (2003: 54) clearly recognises the role of socially – and politically – imposed structures on the functioning of the market. Indeed, there is a common recognition that markets do not function perfectly and demonstrate market failures such as information asymmetry (Leonard *et al.* 2013) and transaction costs (Fafchamps and Gabre-Madhin 2006). Empirical studies on value chains, therefore, suggest governments play

an active role in order to enable marginalised producers to participate in lucrative markets by increased investment in rural infrastructure and social services, and strengthening of social and environmental standards. The ‘African green revolution’ builds on the idea that effective institutions are needed to transform agri-food production (Blaustein 2008), which links with the new institutional economics’ conceptualisation.

2.2 Sustainable Livelihoods Approach

The Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (SLA) provides a framework for analysing the range of activities people engage in to make a living. It conceptualises this living as facilitated through access to resources, named ‘capitals’, and this access as constructed by people’s capabilities to access these capitals (Scoones 1998; Carney 2002; Chambers and Conway 1992). The focus on access and on capabilities, drawn from Sen’s work on entitlements, introduced concepts other than income generation and production into livelihoods analyses. The SLA had a degree of policy impact as a framework for interventions, specifically with the UK Department for International Development (DFID, now the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office, FCDO). Nevertheless, there were critiques of the SLA as apolitical and weakly embedded in historical context (O’Laughlin 2002; Small 2007).

2.3 Attention to power relations in agrarian studies

In line with the critique that greater attention to power relations in food systems and livelihoods is needed, agrarian political economy analyses the power relations that confer access to different livelihood opportunities on people in agrarian settings, and in historical context (e.g. Bernstein 2006; Borras, Edelman and Kay 2008). This implies analysing the actions and entitlements of the rich as well as the poor and understanding how relations between them influence livelihood outcomes for the latter. There is a particular focus on relations within factor and output markets (Bernstein and Oya 2014). Access to resources such as land, labour, and capital determines how much of a livelihood people can make from agricultural value chains, but macropolitical structures and processes of class formation influence these dynamics (Scoones *et al.* 2020). This literature focuses on the production segment of the value chains and provides limited theories for upstream activities such as retail, transport, and food consumption.

This approach draws on Marx’s economics, and questions the mainstream economic orthodoxy outlined above, that more widespread participation in lucrative value chains will enhance equity. It does so by pointing out that the social and political relations that structure access to the factors of production are

arranged in such a way that smallholders, women, and other marginalised groups are less likely to accumulate from market integration, even if positive discrimination eases their entry into such markets. As such, there is a link to the new institutional economics described above, which recognises the role of institutions – i.e. social and political structures – in influencing the outcomes of market participation.

Though this literature has remained more of an academic discussion, the analysis of the politics of land ownership later influenced arguments about food sovereignty in more political versions of agroecology literature, which will be described in section 2.5.

2.4 Cultural turn in food studies

A literature on ‘alternative food systems’ (AFS) (and ‘local food systems’) has turned attention to ways of organising food systems that stand in contrast to industrialised and corporate global food value chains (Sonnino and Marsden 2006). This literature has drawn more attention to non-measurable aspects of food, such as its quality (Ilbery and Kneafsey 2000); cultural aspects of food and food systems (Parkins and Craig 2009); and the experience of consumers and the relationships between consumers and producers (Goodman 2002; Sage 2003; Sonnino and Marsden 2006). Simultaneously, attention is retained towards power dynamics between food system actors. This literature moves beyond the above-mentioned approaches to livelihoods in that it proposes that food systems livelihoods comprise intangible aspects beyond income, prices, and factors of production. AFS scholars therefore argue that meaningful analyses of food systems livelihoods should consider cultural aspects and relations between different food systems actors.

This literature has mostly focused on the global North, where ‘alternative’ structures refer to initiatives such as local farmers’ markets, community gardens, community-supported agriculture schemes, community kitchens, food redistribution mechanisms, and other community-level approaches which are often non-profit and sometimes explicitly anti-corporate or anti-capitalist.

Much AFS work has been concerned with understanding the perceptions and experiences of value chain actors about aspects of their livelihoods. These include symbolic aspects such as the cultural meanings of certain foods, as well as the economic implications of various power relations (Myers and Sbicca 2015). Many works draw connections between ethical aspects of ‘alternative’ markets and systems, which are defined as offering fairer livelihood opportunities to producers and traders, and the aesthetic and symbolic qualities of the food that circulates within them, which is often understood to offer a preferable experience to consumers (Goodman, DuPuis and Goodman 2012).

AFS literature is normative: its prescriptions are different from the economic approaches outlined earlier, in that local solutions are proposed, generally focused on strong social relations, rather than integration into global value chains. AFS literature has not been taken seriously by policy or programming, but it is linked to many grass-roots and civil society movements that organise the types of interventions described above.

2.5 Agroecology

Agroecology is also a body of academic literature linked to a normative political movement (Wezel *et al.* 2009), which addresses the combined concerns of the AFS and agrarian political economy literatures. It claims relevance to global North and South, proposing that food auto-production (i.e. limited international trade) and local markets with food and nutrition security objectives can be mobilised in both the global North and South, in a more intentionally organised way than conventional small-scale informal local markets that often predominate in global South contexts (Loconto, Jimenez and Vandecastelaere 2018; Muñoz *et al.* 2021). Agroecologist authors pose that this would provide decent livelihoods to groups that are currently marginalised, predominantly small-scale farmers, because the primary objectives of such systems are food and nutritional security and sovereignty, valorisation of cultural heritage, and construction of solidarity relations between producers and consumers, rather than corporate profit (Nicholls and Altieri 2018). Much of this literature, therefore, also has an explicitly anti-capitalist framing.

Similar practical ideas of regional markets are proposed by advocacy groups linked to city region food systems literatures, though this literature has less of an anti-capitalist framing and is rather focused on understanding how cities can be incorporated into equitable regional food systems.

Some versions of agroecology also foreground cultural aspects of food systems, and frame culturally appropriate food and spiritual connections to land as part of good livelihood. This cultural aspect includes the valorisation of a 'peasant' identity and livelihood (Muñoz *et al.* 2021). The political concerns at the heart of agrarian political economy remain central to agroecology because a central proposition is that smallholders or peasants should have unfettered land access and usufruct (Rosset and Martínez-Torres 2012) (although not necessarily ownership (Calo, Shields and Iles 2022)). Discussions about 'scaling up' agroecology now focus on the roles of various institutions, including the state (Giraldo and McCune 2019; Mestmacher and Braun 2021).

Agroecology has been associated with advocacy and action movements for several decades, and there has, therefore, been small-scale agroecological activity during that time. Since around 2018, it has started to gain traction in some European national policies. Increasingly, the Food and Agriculture

Organization of the United Nations (FAO) is paying attention to it and development programming is therefore borrowing from agroecological ideas (FAO 2018).

2.6 Summary

This section demonstrates that different academic traditions have different understandings of what a food system livelihood comprises and how opportunities for better livelihoods are shaped by economic, social, and political structures. They differ in terms of the ways in which they conceptualise the purposes of food systems livelihoods and access to resources needed to make a living from food-related activities. This, in turn, leads to varying assumptions about what will address inequities in livelihood opportunities and outcomes. The economics approach assumes that resource access is uneven because of failed economic incentives and market competition, and thereby suggests policy measures to intervene and correct market failures. On the contrary, SLA as well as agrarian political economy approaches argue that resource access at the individual or household level is determined by the socio-political structures that make key resources accessible to certain individuals and/or groups of people. Therefore, without addressing these socio-political structures, marginalised people will continue to face problems in gaining access to resources, with consequences for equity. Furthermore, these approaches suggest that the meaningfulness of livelihoods to those who live them may be partially defined by non-tangible components such as cultural relevance and community embeddedness.

3. Methods to understand food systems livelihoods and equities within them

This section builds on section 2 and discusses how the different focuses on food systems livelihoods across bodies of literature are reflected in the research methods commonly employed to understand food systems livelihoods and inequity within them.

3.1 Commonly used methods

As economics is concerned about monetary and materialistic outcomes of (food systems) livelihoods, the literature is dominated by approaches that quantify the outcomes depending on how households participate in agricultural markets. Quantitative data on household income (which may be disaggregated between income controlled by women and men), poverty level, household assets, and other approximation of outcomes are collected through household surveys: most evidence is cross-sectional (i.e. a snapshot of one occasion) while others have built panel data, documenting the same individuals or households over a few years. In designing surveys, a key consideration is to obtain a statistically representative sample from the population of interest. In other words, the analysis needs to inform what an average individual or household would experience if they had (or had not) participated in certain marketing channels, livelihood activities, and/or interventions.

Social scientists argue, however, that traditional economists' conceptualisation of equity issues pays insufficient attention to power relations and institutions, and therefore cannot inform the degree of change that would be necessary to reduce inequity in food systems.

The work done on the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) (Alkire *et al.* 2013; Malapit *et al.* 2017) is perhaps the most innovative way that takes these socio-political dynamics into consideration when examining outcomes from agricultural production and marketing within the economics community. These researchers have closely worked with social theories of women's empowerment to understand the effects of gender inequality on women's access to agricultural production resources, income, and marketing opportunities, and how that links to outcomes such as household food security and nutrition (Malapit and Quisumbing 2015; Sraboni *et al.* 2014). Their work demonstrates that social structures – such as gender norms – may be intangible and difficult to quantify but, however, have tangible implications on agricultural

and welfare outcomes. Bearing in mind the context-specific nature of women's empowerment and how it translates to outcomes, the authors recommend different tools such as improved collective action, community engagement opportunities, and/or credit access by women.

Agrarian political economy approaches, e.g. food regimes analyses, imply a more explicit attention to power relations, across scales. These require analysts to position these questions in relation to examination of how global structures of resource (land, labour, capital) access are organised. This requires a multi-scalar approach to examining food systems, where one understands the implications of global structures for how equitable livelihoods (opportunities) are. Political economy approaches sometimes deal with large-scale quantitative data, sometimes policy analysis, and sometimes sociological or ethnographic case studies to understand the power dynamics behind inequitable outcomes.

AFS literature, on the other hand, embraces qualitative enquiries, often focusing on the subjective experiences of research participants at the local level, in an attempt to understand affective as well as material dimensions of inequality (e.g. Parkins and Craig 2009). The methods used in AFS studies rarely aim to be objective, as many scholars choose to take a scholar-activist approach to their work, implying inherent bias. This body of work attempts to understand the various experiences of consumers as well as producers, and to some extent to link them to the inequitable outcomes that producers and some traders experience.

Agroecology research has been linked to participatory methods, which also have a connection with SLAs. Although agroecology research can be performed using a mixture of agronomic and social science methods, the participatory ethos generally runs through the work. This means that farmers are involved in the development of field trials, and analyses of social and market aspects takes forms such as participatory diagramming and transect walks (Guzmán *et al.* 2013). The strand of agroecology research that deals with the political aspects may be based on policy analysis and case studies, similar to agrarian political economy (Calo *et al.* 2022), and qualitative or ethnographic investigations of the experiences of food system actors, similar to AFS research (Mestmacher and Braun 2021).

3.2 Complementarity of these methods

While the quantitative methods can elicit who can benefit from participating in certain (e.g. global) value chains in terms of income and other indicators, they also have limitations in understanding underlying social structures that lead to unequal outcomes. First, they fall short in explaining **why** certain groups of people can take advantage while others cannot. This can be complemented by the political economy approaches that examine the power dynamics and political

relations that determine who can participate in a particular market, and/or the terms in which different people participate in a market.

Second, because quantitative data is collected on one (or repeated) instance, it does not provide dynamics over time and across different spaces that connect livelihood options and marketing opportunities to time- and space-specific institutions, social movements, and political dynamics. This can be complemented with qualitative research methods – e.g. document reviews, qualitative analysis, and historical analysis. Indeed, political economy approaches as well as development scholars and economic geographers have used these tools to understand the geographical and historical dynamics that influence livelihoods (Henderson *et al.* 2002; Humphrey and Schmitz 2000; Ponte 2019a).

Third, surveys are naturally close ended in comparison to open-ended qualitative interviews. As a result, they may miss out on key aspects that affect people's livelihoods – e.g. local socio-political dynamics linked to land and/or credit access. This shortcoming can be mitigated by more open-ended enquiries that address people's lived experiences by the AFS literature. Likewise, the participatory methods employed commonly by agroecology can inform researchers with perspectives of marginalised communities and help incorporate these in-depth insights into the survey design.

Fourth, because participation in certain markets is often conditional to people's socioeconomic and/or resource-related characteristics, standard survey-based techniques are unable to unpack whether a particular marketing channel causes improvement in welfare, or simply whether they are correlated with each other. This is a point of criticism by the economics community itself, to which several researchers suggest randomised controlled trials (RCTs) to account for selection bias (Bellemare and Bloem 2018; Meemken *et al.* 2021). However, RCTs can be costly, their designs are unrealistic especially in analysing the effects of market participation on participants' welfare, and they raise ethical questions during implementation (Barrett and Carter 2020, 2010). These concerns can be mitigated through adapting a mixed-method approach that can identify the social processes and mechanisms that link market participation and observed outcomes.

3.3 Need for innovative methods and approaches to understanding food systems livelihoods

In summarising section 3, we argue that no single approach and method described above can address the complex relationship between food-related livelihoods, resource access, and relations between people and organisations within food systems. The discussion in section 2 suggests that the various

components of livelihoods are linked. Relations, including power relations, between food system actors inflect the resources they can access, and the outcomes for them. These outcomes can be tangible (e.g. income, food security, health) and also intangible (e.g. cultural importance of food and livelihoods, identity and meaning).

We urgently need research methods and approaches that can help us understand the interactions between these measurable and non-measurable components, and tensions, synergies, and power relationships between different actors within food systems that affect livelihood options and outcomes. Importantly, how can we generate evidence that improves the livelihoods of vulnerable and marginalised people who rely on food systems for their living?

We argue that, in order to understand these interactions, we need a more multidimensional understanding of what a livelihood comprises, which recognises that measurable livelihood outcomes – e.g. health, income, nutrition (types of food, etc.) – are inflected by the non-measurable – e.g. general wellbeing, sense of place, and a more relational one – and relations between actors as part of livelihood. This, in turn, implies using a mixture of the methods outlined above and need for conceptual as well as methodological innovation that spans across different academic communities.

4. Discussion and conclusions

In this concluding section, we propose interdisciplinary approaches to understanding equity issues in food systems livelihoods based on our own experiences as inter- and trans-disciplinary researchers working across western and southern Africa, and South and Southeast Asia. Previous sections have critically assessed the different ways in which equity is conceptualised and approached across different bodies of literature. In doing so, we demonstrated that no one approach is suitable, by itself, to grasp the multitudes of equity issues that lead to outcomes for marginalised actors in making livelihoods. In this section, we therefore showcase our approaches that combine insights, understandings, and methods from multiple disciplines and academic traditions and how such inter- and trans-disciplinary approaches to understanding equity issues in food systems are needed to unpack the underlying social, economic and political determinants of livelihood outcomes.

4.1 Reflecting non-agricultural livelihoods in quantitative statistics and policy debates

As problematised by Fanzo *et al.* (2021), the current framing of the food system has been dominated by agricultural livelihoods and, as a result, much of the aforementioned bodies of literature as well as efforts to quantify food systems livelihoods focus on agri-food production, i.e. agricultural employment and farm-based livelihoods. The official International Labour Organization (ILO) International Standard Industrial Classification of All Economic Activities (ISIC) 4 categorisations are constructed in such a way that it is hard to identify food-based livelihoods. Similarly, the ILO's data sets dealing with informal employment categorise employment as agricultural and non-agricultural. Food-based activities are a central component of informal sector activities, but these are obfuscated by the framing of the data.

The default position, therefore, has been to conflate food-based employment and livelihoods with agricultural employment and livelihoods. This conflation leads to considerable omissions in the framing of food-based livelihoods. Allen, Heinrigs and Heo (2018) calculated that in West Africa the food economy accounts for 66 per cent of total employment, with 78 per cent of these being within agriculture and the remainder being in food processing, food marketing, and food-away-from-home. In high-income countries, the conflation of agricultural and food-based livelihoods is even more problematic. In the United States, 11 per cent of the workforce is in the food sector, with just 2.6 per cent in farming and 6.4 per cent in food services, and a further 2 per cent in food manufacturing (US Department of Labor, cited in Quak and Woodhill 2019: 7).

Our experience in the field in a number of African cities indicates that local governments do not commonly disaggregate food-based trade from other forms of trade, despite their marked presence in these spaces (by way of example, a survey of informal street traders operating in metropolitan Durban, South Africa in 2003 found that 60 per cent were selling food (KMT Cultural Enterprises 2003: 12, cited in Skinner 2008: 230), and their specialised needs. The result of this is that food-based retailers are heavily regulated in terms of expectations of meeting public health standards, but there is rarely the provision of any supportive infrastructure that meets the specific food storage and preparation needs of food retailers. Given the marginal nature of many of these livelihoods, this absence of food-sensitive infrastructure and programming increases the vulnerability of food-based retailers in these settings. There are also gender dimensions to this exclusion in contexts where tasks such as retailing or farming certain crops are practiced as gendered occupations.

This narrow conceptualisation and poorly represented data, therefore, render many food-based livelihoods invisible to policymakers. This leads to people participating in non-farm sector food systems livelihoods being left out of food security and food labour policy debates, exacerbating the inequity behind food systems livelihoods. As stated in Fanzo *et al.* (2021),

What is not visible is neither valued nor viewed as a viable part of food system transformation. To advance monitoring in this area, we emphasize the critical importance of data disaggregation to understanding the unique livelihood challenges that face women, youth, and minoritized groups working in food systems.

4.2 Qualitative engagement with food system actors to improve equity

The dominant approaches to food systems livelihoods have failed to account for the ways in which food-based livelihoods, particularly for women, are sites of complex negotiation, in which people do not necessarily maximise economic efficiency or act in a competitive manner.

Food-based livelihoods often have low barriers to entry (both in terms of capital and bureaucratic requirements) and are therefore accessible livelihoods for marginalised people (Battersby, Marshak and Mngqibisa 2016; Bellwood-Howard *et al.* 2021; Moussavi, Liguori and Mehta 2016; Wegerif 2020). Various case studies have found that length of business operation in urban food-based livelihoods seems to be bimodal, with clusters of long-standing businesses operating for more than ten years, but equally many businesses having been in operation for fewer than five years (Battersby *et al.* 2016; Fuseini, Battersby and Jain 2018). The informal sector generally is characterised by high 'churn' rates

(Nackerdien and Yu 2019), as people transition into and out of employment and self-employment. While this may be an indicator of precarity, it is important to note the people may not view these livelihoods as permanent. Entry and exit of food-based livelihoods may be viewed as a household strategy to meet household needs at certain times, but not as a permanent, entrepreneurial activity.

While many food-based livelihoods may be characterised by precarity and relatively low incomes, those within the informal sector offer some equity benefits that may not be evident from purely economic analysis of the sector. For example, women market traders often operate cooperatively rather than competitively, minding each others' stands while traders go to purchase wares or attend to personal needs (Sowatey *et al.* 2018). Additionally, many food-based livelihoods, either in the home or in the market provide women with the opportunity to work and manage childcare, thereby reducing financial or social costs associated with employment. To this end, pro-equity policies and programmes should be informed by everyday practice and lived experience of workers in the sector. An example of pro-equity planning that has improved the livelihood of women market traders is the creation of child play spaces within market structures in Accra, Ghana, which has provided safe and educational spaces for children of market traders, thereby improving intergenerational equity and improving the quality of livelihoods for women traders (many of whom trade in food) (HealthBridge Canada 2018). Similarly, programming that takes place without understanding these lived experiences reproduces and exacerbates inequities. Siebert and Mbise (2018), for example, highlight how toilet fees at markets in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, have a disproportionate impact on female traders, who spend up to 20 per cent of their daily income on toilet fees. While toilet fees were put in place to provide adequate sanitation to improve the health of markets and therefore the viability and quality of livelihoods, the gender blindness of the tax has a significant impact of livelihood viability from women and therefore undermines equity.

Such evidence indicates the need for research that addresses multiple modes and scales of food systems to understand what enables and undermines equitable livelihoods. In doing so, qualitative exploration of the lived experiences of food-based workers is key, as it allows researchers and policymakers to understand the sources of their vulnerability and socio-political mechanisms that can assist them.

4.3 Centring power in understanding its consequences on food systems livelihoods

While value chain development has been praised as a catalyst against poverty (World Bank 2020), evidence suggests that lucrative agri-food value chains tend

to exclude poor and marginalised farmers (Bellemare and Bloem 2018) and vulnerable actors are exploited through inhumane working conditions and low wages (Clark and Longo 2021). While a purely quantitative approach has shown what key resources and conditions allow households to participate in and benefit from global value chains (Michelson 2013), they are unable to help us understand what underlying socio-political relationships influence the participation and its outcomes. In other words, conventional approaches to the analysis of value chains are insufficient, as they frequently fail to take account of power and politics, which are crucial to defining who gains and who loses, and how production and trade affect people's health and the environment (Selwyn 2019).

The AFS system literature poses that so-called alternative or agroecological food systems can provide more equitable livelihood opportunities, due to deeper social embeddedness, shorter value chains, and alignment between the priorities and values of consumers and producers, which often encompass ideals of equitable access to quality food, and environmental responsibility. This is advocated as the way to reduce trade-offs between welfare of consumers and producers. Advocates claim that the analysis of benefit in these systems should extend beyond examining income and nutritional outcomes, and also consider social aspects such as the degree to which consumers and producers develop networks of solidarity, the degree to which they are empowered, and the extent to which they feel their culture and identity is respected in the system. Yet, critical literature has also explored the racist and exclusionary aspects of alternative food systems (Guthman 2008), and the power dimensions that inform these.

Thus, in both conventional value chains and so-called 'alternative' food systems, there is a need to understand the underlying power relations that affect people's livelihoods and other system-level outcomes. To comprehend the social and power dynamics that inform these outcomes, we need an innovative mixed-methods approach that combines the rich analytical insights from social science theories – on power (Dahl 1957; Gaventa 2006; Lukes 1974), social embeddedness of market-based transactions (Granovetter 1985), and value chain governance (Humphrey and Schmitz 2001; Ponte 2019b) – with the tools to understand and quantify the consequences of these socio-political relationships. This needs to be done through employing in-depth qualitative exploration of power and social relations between people and businesses working along a particular value chain. Analysts need to understand how such power and social relations influence people's access to key resources, opportunities to earn a living, and translate economic gains into tangible outcomes, as well as the influence on less commonly quantified food system outcomes, such as how far producers and consumers consider their food system activities reflect their cultural identities and values, and whether they seek to be or feel they are part of a community.

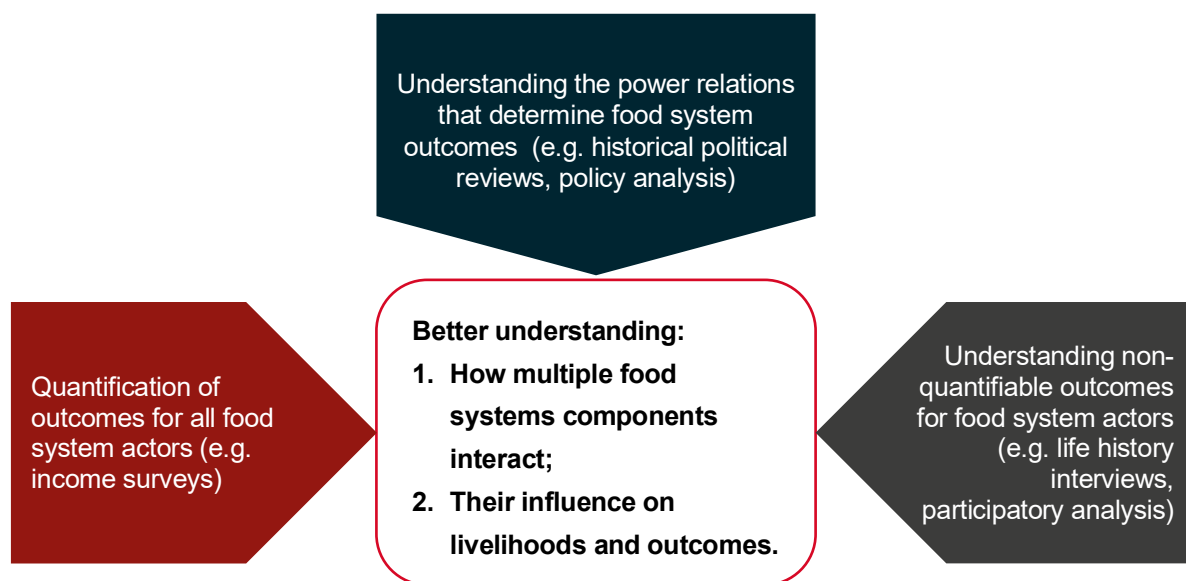
While it is impossible to quantify power relations themselves, the consequences of power relations – such as wages/income, people's opportunity to access resources, prices of agri-food products they can negotiate, prices of key inputs they require for their businesses, etc. – can be quantified. Quantitative evidence developed based on in-depth qualitative insights will, therefore, go a step further and shed a light on the implications of power relations on tangible outcomes. Rigorous qualitative methods can also be extensively used to understand how food system actors, including consumers, feel about participation in value chains, including in relation to their cultural, environmental and social value, and therefore how far such actors consider their participation in these activities to comprise a meaningful livelihood.

4.4 Final recommendations

To fully understand the relations between different dimensions of livelihoods, it is therefore appropriate to incorporate political analysis methods that help understand the power and social relations structuring food systems, and combine these with the qualitative and quantitative methods that help understand the various dimensions of livelihood outcomes for multiple actor groups. Such an approach implies being open to the simultaneous use of qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis. It also implies that a range of analysis methods needs to be considered, to the degree that they allow the analyst to draw and combine insights from various forms of data.

Examples include: triple bottom line accounting that measures environmental and social costs of business activities (Elkington 1998); realistic discounting measuring intergenerational inequity; and incorporating participatory and qualitative approaches. Actors-based models and actor-oriented approaches can also assist in understanding the interaction and influence between the activities of multiple food system actors, and their influence on livelihood outcomes for multiple groups (see Figure 4.1). The traditional concerns and techniques in economics – e.g. wages and income – need to be combined with those of political science, anthropology and geography, for example. This implies that interdisciplinary teams should become increasingly important in the exploration of livelihood equity dimensions in food systems.

Figure 4.1 Methodological innovation toward a better understanding of socio-political dynamics that influence food systems livelihoods



Source: Authors' own.

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