Food security, food safety and healthy nutrition: are they compatible?

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My stance

- Are they compatible? – Yes, and no!

- **The 'no' part is where our challenges lies**

- In this presentation, I'm going to describe the compatibility and tensions that exist between food safety, healthy nutrition, and the distinct aspects of food security

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Definitions

- Food safety
  - food-borne illness; covers food handling preparation and storage
- Healthy nutrition
  - Malnutrition and associated disease including non-communicable disease (NCD); about nutritional quality of the diet
- Food security
  - 'a situation that exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life' (UN Committee on World Food Security)
  - Four pillars (FAO)
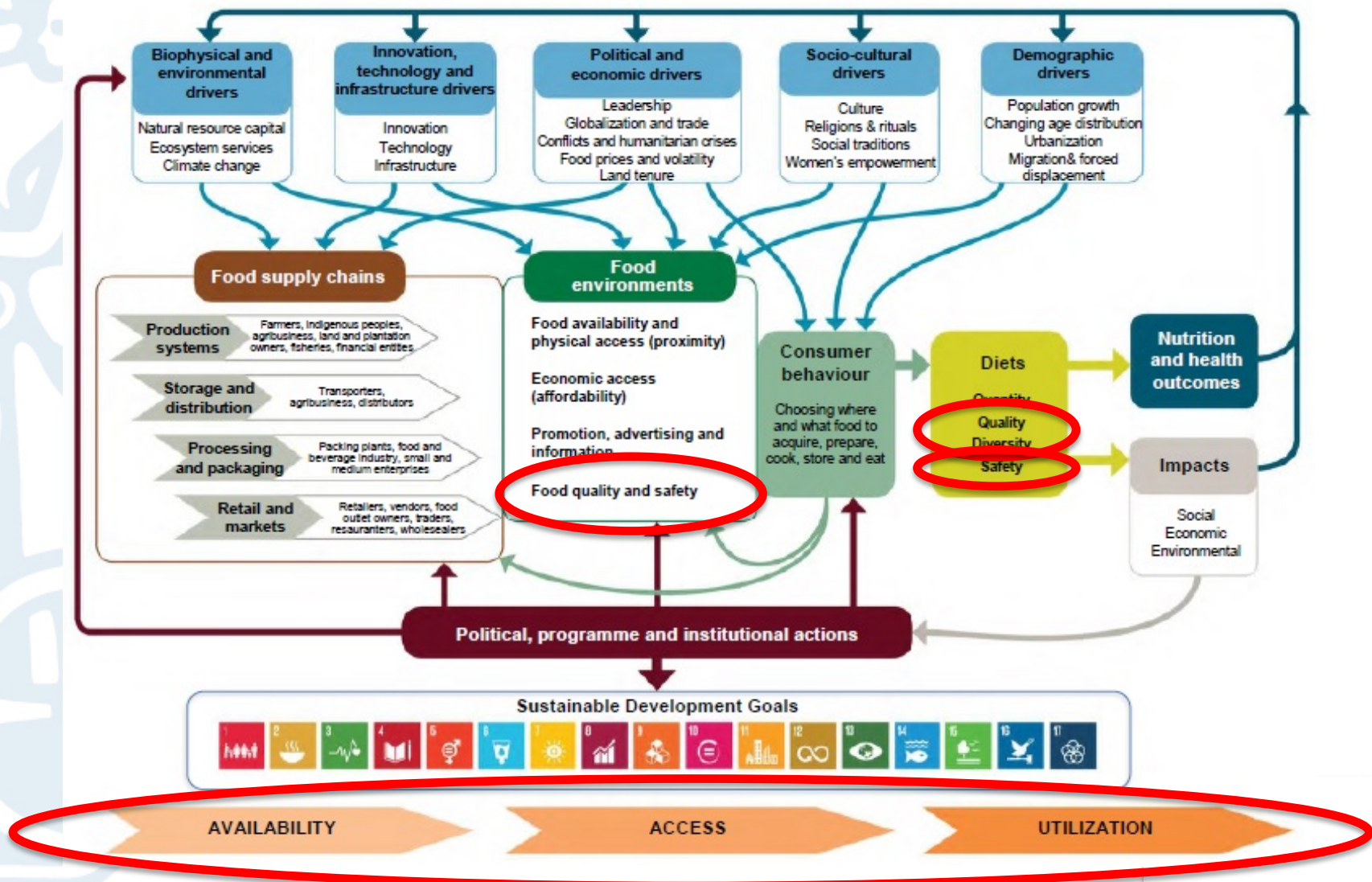   - Availability, access, utilisation and stability

Are they compatible? – Yes

- There are differences between them, but…
    - all three are needed for health and wellbeing
    - all three are components of healthy food systems

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Conceptual framework

Are they compatible? – kind of not

- They are conceptually compatible, but addressing them is fundamentally a political issue.

- Their different characteristics mean that they are considered and prioritised differently by policymakers

Political prioritisation...

- Requires political prioritisation, and the allocation of resources commensurate with the severity of the issue.

- However, policymaking is not a rational process.

- Instead, policymaking is complex, non-linear, messy...

- Policymakers are pulled between multiple concurrent policy challenges, each with advocates able to cite evidence on the scale of the issue and the need for government response

Political Prioritisation

- Shiffman and Smith (2007) outlined four key areas that shape the priority an issue receives on a political agenda:
  - actor power
  - ideas
  - political context
  - issue characteristics

Political Prioritisation

- Shiffman and Smith (2007) outlined four key areas that shape the priority an issue receives on a political agenda:
  - actor power
  - ideas
    - e.g. understood and portrayed as being linked to national security (**food security**)
  - political context
  - issue characteristics
    - e.g. being an 'acute' issue (**food safety**) vs. a chronic issue (**healthy nutrition**)

Food safety

- Acute issue, with potential to disrupt country exports
- International standards/domestic regulation strongly enforced
- World Trade Organization (WTO) Agreement on the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (SPS Agreement)
  - addresses application of food safety, animal and plant regulations
  - requires countries to adopt international standards such as those developed by the Codex Alimentarius Commission for food safety.
- Domestic food safety regulations often more stringent than those of the SPS Agreement

Unhealthy nutrition

- Few strong regulatory measures implemented to address unhealthy nutrition, either at national or international levels.

- No strong global mechanism for addressing unhealthy diets.

- Governments have favoured approaches with little chance of success *in isolation* – educational approaches and industry self-regulation – rather than enacting comprehensive structural measures addressing the production, availability, processing and marketing of foods.

Food security – high income

- Food security often features in debates on national (regional) security, e.g the EU's Common Agricultural Policy.

- For example, agriculture was selected as a core policy area on which to base the development of trans-European economic and political integration in the 1950s.

    - The idea was that countries with integrated food supplies would be less likely or able to go to war.

- More recently, EU countries (and US) have strongly protected domestic agricultural producers from external competition. This protectionism reflects decision-makers' concerns about national security, and need to address food security and protect domestic supplies.

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Food security – low income

- High prioritization of food security – most appropriate in a context of on-going food shortages and hunger?

- e.g. in Malawi, malnutrition levels are high and there are challenges with food safety. Both issues are rightly on the political agenda, but food security is most highly prioritized.

- Malawian government has introduced agricultural input subsidy programmes, including the 2005/06 Farm Input Subsidy Programme (FISP).
  - Following several poor growing seasons and hunger crises, in years following economic liberalization of the 1980s/1990s, and adverse weather and other conditions

Food security – Malawi FISP

- The FISP is a large-scale national programme, the main objectives of which are to increase maize production, promote household food security, and enhance rural incomes.

- The donor community was opposed to the FISP – despite many high-income countries subsidising their farmers extensively.

- The FISP was considered a success, with Malawi achieving its biggest ever maize harvest in 2006.

- Over time, the FISP has evolved to target legumes as well as maize – with one of the aims of this change to address healthy nutrition. But food security still the primary target.

The prioritisation – and synergies

- Food security is often prioritized politically over food safety, and food safety over healthy nutrition.

  – More appropriate in low-income than high-income contexts.

- Substantial overlap/synergy between the 3 food system issues and their health outcomes – and in both instances their causes are at least partly political in nature.

  – For example, the so-called 'double burden of malnutrition' is often a result of varying combinations of food insecurity, unhealthy nutrition, as well as issues with food safety, which can affect nutrient absorption.

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Conclusion

- The 3 aspects of strong food systems are compatible and even complimentary in principle.

- However, in terms of their politics, they are much less compatible, with trade-offs between addressing them evident.

- The challenge for researchers/advocates is to find ways to improve the compatibility of healthy nutrition with food safety and food security from a political perspective.

- This involves the development of food security and food safety measures which at the same time support the goal of healthy nutrition within healthy, sustainable food systems

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