



Prepared by  
World Agriculture Forum

[www.worldagricultureforum.org](http://www.worldagricultureforum.org)

---

## ABOUT THIS POLICY BRIEF

This policy brief is issued as an outcome of the World Agriculture Forum (WAF) Global Policy Dialogue on Advancing Sustainable Agriculture: From Policy to Practice, held on 20 November 2025. The dialogue convened senior policymakers, researchers, practitioners, private sector leaders, and development partners to examine why progress on sustainable agriculture remains uneven despite strong scientific consensus and growing policy commitments.

The brief synthesizes the key insights, experiences, and conclusions that emerged from the dialogue, translating them into policy-relevant messages focused on the challenge of implementation. Rather than introducing new concepts or frameworks, it concentrates on the institutional, financial, and governance conditions required to move from ambition to action across diverse regional and national contexts.

The World Agriculture Forum (WAF) served as a neutral and independent convening platform for the dialogue, enabling open, evidence-based exchange across regions, disciplines, and institutions. WAF facilitates collective learning, policy coherence, and cross-sector collaboration to support sustainable, inclusive, and resilient food and agriculture systems.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The World Agriculture Forum gratefully acknowledges the valuable contributions of the distinguished speakers whose expertise informed the dialogue, including:

- Dr. Ibrahim Mayaki, Former Prime Minister of Niger; Food Security Envoy, African Union (AU)
- Dr. William Dar, Vice-Chair, World Agriculture Forum (WAF) Board; Former Secretary of Agriculture, Philippines; Former Director General, ICRISAT
- Dr. Claudia Ringler, Director, Natural Resources and Resilience, International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI)
- Prof. Ramesh Chand, Member, NITI Aayog; Member, CGIAR Integrated Partnership Board; Member, Policy Advisory Council, ACIAR

Their contributions enriched the discussions by bringing diverse regional perspectives, policy experience, and scientific evidence to the examination of how sustainable agriculture can be advanced from policy design to effective implementation.

The synthesis and analysis presented in this brief reflect the outcomes of the dialogue and are issued by the World Agriculture Forum. The views expressed do not necessarily represent the individual positions of the acknowledged contributors or their affiliated institutions.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Global agriculture is at a critical inflection point. Scientific consensus on sustainability is strong, technologies are increasingly available, and political commitments continue to grow. Yet across regions, implementation remains the weakest link. Policies designed to promote sustainable food and agriculture systems too often remain aspirational, while soils degrade, groundwater tables decline, biodiversity is lost, and climate shocks intensify. The central challenge is no longer vision, but execution. The gap between ambition and action is now clearly structural, rooted not in a lack of ideas, but in outdated institutions, uncoordinated actions, fragmented governance, distorted incentives, and limited financing and capacity at the last mile.

Today's food systems are expected to deliver more than production alone. Sustainable food and agricultural systems must deliver productivity, resilience, livelihoods, and environmental integrity together, across production, inputs, markets, nutrition, consumption, and food loss and waste. Insights from the World Agriculture Forum (WAF) policy dialogue underscore a central truth: sustainable agriculture advances only when countries redesign the systems through which policy becomes practice. While the language of sustainability and food systems is now widely adopted, delivery mechanisms remain siloed, weakly coordinated, and poorly aligned with on-the-ground realities.

A global paradigm shift is emerging. With [CR1] demographic pressures in several regions easing, countries have a unique opportunity to pivot from "growth-at-all-costs" to long-term ecological resilience. Science must anchor this transition through better soil and water diagnostics, climate-resilient seed systems, digital agriculture, and data-driven monitoring embedded directly into delivery structures. Institutional arrangements that align policies, incentives, budgets, and accountability across agriculture, water, energy, climate, and food systems, from national planning to local delivery are equally essential. In practice, this means joint planning across ministries, shared targets and financing frameworks, coordinated data and monitoring systems, and empowered local institutions with clear responsibility for implementation. The Water–Energy–Food–Environment (WEFE) Nexus emerged from the dialogue as a practical framework to manage trade-offs and translate integration from principle into practice.

Ultimately, sustainable food system transformation happens locally. When science, institutions, markets, and communities converge, sustainable practices can scale with speed and credibility. The implications are profound. Implementation strength and incorporation of sustainability and resilience considerations will increasingly define national competitiveness. The cost of delay will rise sharply as climate shocks intensify.

Drawing on the global policy dialogue, this brief calls for a new phase of action: elevating agriculture within national economic planning, embedding science into policy design and delivery, applying nexus-based planning, realigning incentives toward regenerative outcomes, empowering local governments and farmer networks, and unlocking youth-led innovation. The path forward demands bold institutional redesign, coherent governance, and collective resolve to turn ambition into impact.

## I. WHEN POLICIES MEET PRACTICE: THE IMPLEMENTATION FAILURE

Despite mounting numbers and quality of policies and strategies at the global, regional and national levels, from climate-smart agriculture to agroecology and regenerative farming, implementation remains weak due to four failures.

- 1. Institutions Have Not Evolved to match Concepts and Frameworks:** Sustainable food and agriculture systems transformation demands cross-ministerial coordination. Yet government structures remain locked in outdated silos. While planning and finance ministries shape national priorities, ministries of agriculture, environment, water, and food often lack the political weight needed to influence broader policy design or institutional incentives.
- 2. Multisectoral Approaches Exist on Paper, Not in Practice:** Food systems inherently cut across agriculture, health, trade, climate, water, energy, and infrastructure. Yet programmes remain top-down and sector-bound. Local governments, responsible for last mile delivery are rarely part of early design, eroding ownership and weakening implementation.
- 3. Distorted Incentives Undermine Sustainability:** Subsidies intended for food security goals- fertilizer, electricity, water, often lead to over-extraction of resources, monocropping, and ecological damage. Incentives built for yesterday's challenges undermine tomorrow's sustainability imperatives.
- 4. Missing Foundations: Finance, Awareness, and Capacity:** Even when reforms are understood and accepted, implementation falters due to: insufficient financing for adaptation and resilience, weak institutional capacity, limited farmer awareness and digital access, fragmented delivery systems.

The gap is systemic not conceptual.

## II. FOUR CONDITIONS FOR POLICY AND STRATEGY TO TAKE HOLD

Drawing from diverse regional experiences, the dialogue highlighted four enabling conditions that consistently determine whether policies translate into practice.

- 1. Clear Need and Local Demand:** Policy and institutional reforms succeed when local actors perceive the urgency. Without a shared diagnosis, problems and potential solutions to challenges such as groundwater depletion, soil degradation, or climate risks, reforms face resistance and fail to sustain momentum.
- 2. Building Trust, Communication and Consultation:** Reforms break down when farmers are not meaningfully consulted, as seen in multiple countries' pricing and subsidy reforms. Transparent communication builds trust and legitimacy.
- 3. Adequate and Accessible Financing:** Climate adaptation and sustainable agriculture remain underfunded. Financing must flow to frontline actors especially smallholders through blended finance, concessional instruments, and local financial institutions.
- 4. Incentive Alignment Across Institutions:** Incentives must not punish sustainability or reward extraction. Alignment across ministries, budgets, and programmes is essential for coherence.

## III. A PARADIGM SHIFT

For decades, countries pursued yield and production growth, often ignoring agroecological limits. This has created a legacy of:

water-intensive crops in water-scarce regions  
deterioration in soil, water, and biodiversity  
subsidy regimes that lock farmers into unsustainable patterns

Yet there is room and momentum to shift toward long-term sustainability and resilience. This shift does not imply abandoning growth, but redefining success to include soil health, water security, biodiversity, livelihoods, and resilience.



## IV. HOW SYSTEMS MUST CHANGE: FROM POLICY DESIGN TO DELIVERY

Moving from ambition to impact requires a fundamental shift in how agricultural policies are designed and delivered. Implementation failures are not the result of isolated gaps, but of systems that do not translate evidence, coordination, and local realities into routine decision-making.

Redesigning these systems demands:

### A) Science-Led Implementation

Across regions and income contexts, successful sustainability efforts share one principle: science is embedded in implementation, not treated as an afterthought. Durable gains emerge where evidence, innovation, and delivery operate as a single system.

High-impact delivery systems consistently integrate soil and water diagnostics, digital advisory tools, climate-resilient seed systems, precision nutrient and water management, and data-driven feedback loops. Where these elements are fragmented, impact remains limited. Where they are institutionalized, sustainability becomes operational rather than aspirational.

The challenge is not generating more knowledge, but redesigning delivery systems so existing knowledge informs everyday decisions in fields, watersheds, and value chains.

### B) Nexus Thinking: Breaking Silos Through Integrated Policy Design

Many policies unintentionally pull in opposing directions, creating trade-offs that undermine long-term progress. The Water–Energy–Food–Environment (WEFE) nexus framework, examines how interventions in water, energy, food, and environment interact. The nexus framework allows policymakers to assess impacts on water security, food supply, and environmental health and help policymakers to anticipate trade-offs before policies are implemented, identify synergies across sectors, and foster collaboration among ministries and agencies.

### C) Context-Specific Solutions:

#### The “How” Behind Last-Mile Success

Most policies are crafted to address broad problems—declining water tables, soil degradation, shrinking biodiversity—through uniform solutions. Sustainability challenges, however, require context-specific, nuanced solutions tailored to local ecological and socioeconomic conditions. Where policies lack this specificity, implementation weakens and results fragment.

Successful approaches consistently share several features:

Tailored interventions aligned with agroecological diversity

Convergence of measures across water management, seed systems, markets, and training

Community-led planning, including local water budgeting and seasonal decision-making

Redesigned incentives that support sustainability rather than extraction

Youth- and farmer-led enterprises serving as anchors for delivery

When these elements are combined, growth and sustainability can be pursued together through locally grounded, well-coordinated implementation supported by research and development.

### D) Integrating Youth into Policy Design

Across regions, the governance systems must adapt to demographic realities, particularly the growing role of youth in shaping agricultural innovation, entrepreneurship, and labour markets. Youth should be included from the start of policy design rather than consulted after plans are set.

Practical mechanisms include supporting youth-led agribusinesses and digital service providers as delivery partners, creating targeted finance and incubation windows, and embedding youth perspectives in local planning and monitoring processes. Early and meaningful inclusion improves relevance, adoption, and long-term sustainability.

## V. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR KEY STAKEHOLDERS

### 1. Governments & Policymakers

Governments must modernize the machinery of implementation. This is not about drafting new strategies; it is about redesigning how ministries collaborate, how incentives are structured, and how local governments are empowered.

- Elevate agriculture, water, and environment ministries into the core of national planning, alongside finance.
- Mandate science-based decision-making through soil/water diagnostics, climate modelling, and digital agronomy.
- Create flexible, real-time feedback systems that allow policies to adapt based on data rather than political cycles.
- Replace distorted incentives (free power, over-subsidized inputs) with smart incentives rooted in sustainability

### 2. Research Institutions & Academia

Science will matter only when it travels the last mile.

- Co-create research agendas with farmers and local bodies not just donors.
- Develop tools that simplify complexity: nexus scorecards, real-time dashboards, climate advisories.
- Focus on adaptive, region-specific solutions rather than universal “best practices.”
- Strengthen collaborations with national statistical systems to improve monitoring and evaluation.

### 3. Private Sector & Agri-Business

The private sector will increasingly shape sustainability outcomes through technology, markets, and financing models.

- Develop blended finance mechanisms targeted at climate-resilient practices.
- Build supply chains that reward sustainability (traceability, low-carbon markets, regenerative premiums).
- Co-invest in village-level infrastructure: storage, aggregation, soil testing, water conservation.
- Support startups and youth-led innovations in precision agriculture, digital extension, and regenerative inputs.

### 4. Farmers, Cooperatives, and Community Institutions

Community-led action is the heartbeat of successful implementation.

- Participate in co-design of local sustainability plans (water harvesting, cropping patterns, regenerative practices).
- Build community monitoring groups to track groundwater, soil health, and climate impacts.
- Adopt diversified cropping and regenerative methods that pair traditional wisdom with modern technologies.
- Strengthen cooperatives to negotiate better prices, adopt scientific seed systems, and access finance.

### 5. Youth & Startups

Youth are the future of agriculture

• Lead innovations in digital advisory, AgriTech, climate-smart logistics, and financial inclusion.

- Build rural startups that turn villages into laboratories of regeneration.
- Partner with governments to design youth-sensitive policy instruments, not merely respond to them.

### 6. Donors, Multilaterals, and Philanthropies

Financing must flow toward implementation capacity, not just pilot projects.

- Fund long-term institutional reforms that enhance delivery systems.
- Support technology diffusion (soil testing, remote sensing, digital farmer registries).
- Create pooled funds for water–energy–food–environment nexus programs.

Facilitate cross-country learning pathways that help nations replicate what works.

## VI. STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. Align institutions with modern food system challenges:** Policy concepts have advanced faster than institutional mandates. Governments must strengthen cross-ministerial coordination, shared targets, and joint financing to match the integrated nature of food, water, energy, and environment systems.
- 2. Redesign incentives to reward sustainability outcomes:** Existing subsidies often encourage resource depletion rather than resilience. Incentive frameworks should be reoriented to promote efficient resource use, diversification, and regenerative practices without undermining farmer livelihoods.
- 3. Embed science at the core of implementation:** Science must inform routine decisions, not only strategies. Soil diagnostics, climate-resilient seeds, digital advisory tools, and data-driven monitoring should be integrated into delivery systems at farm and district levels.
- 4. Prioritize local engagement and fit-for-context solutions:** National strategies succeed only when adapted to local ecological and socioeconomic conditions. Community engagement and context-specific solutions improve adoption, accountability, and long-term impact.
- 3. Deliver integrated intervention packages, not isolated actions:** Single interventions rarely shift outcomes. Converging water and soil health management, seed systems, extension, markets, and finance consistently delivers stronger and more durable results.
- 4. Strengthen data systems and feedback loops:** Timely, reliable data are essential for course correction. Investments in monitoring, evaluation, and learning systems enable policies to adapt to changing climate, market, and resource conditions.
- 5. Combine traditional knowledge with modern science:** Sustainability is strongest when local practices such as mixed cropping and water harvesting are reinforced with precision technologies and scientific validation.
- 6. Integrate youth early into policy design and delivery:** Youth are shaping agricultural innovation and markets. Governance systems must engage them from the outset to ensure policies remain relevant, scalable, and future-ready.

## CONCLUSION

The future of Sustainable food and agriculture systems will be determined not only by the quality of our ideas, but by the strength of the systems that deliver them. Countries across the world now possess the scientific knowledge, digital tools, and proven methodologies to build resilient and sustainable food systems. What is missing is the institutional architecture capable of translating this knowledge into large-scale, lasting change.

As climate pressures intensify and resource constraints tighten, the cost of fragmented governance, misaligned incentives, and weak implementation will only grow. Conversely, nations that redesign their delivery ecosystems, strengthening local institutions, embedding science into practice, aligning ministries around shared outcomes, and empowering youth and farmer networks will shape a more resilient, competitive, and inclusive agricultural future.

The window for incremental reform has closed. Advancing sustainable agriculture now demands systems leadership, policy coherence, and courageous redesign of how decisions are made and implemented. Platforms like WAF will continue to play a critical role in enabling this transition, convening leaders, amplifying evidence, and catalysing the cross-sector partnerships needed to turn ambition into action.

Sustainable agriculture is no longer an option; it is an imperative. The next decade will determine whether countries can move decisively from policy to practice and secure a food-secure, climate-resilient future for generations to come.

This policy brief is issued by the World Agriculture Forum (WAF) and is informed by expert insights and evidence-based discussions from the WAF Global Policy Dialogue on Advancing Sustainable Agriculture: From Policy to Practice.

For further information regarding this policy brief, please contact:  
Mehnaz Wani  
[mehnaz.wani@worldagricultureforum.org](mailto:mehnaz.wani@worldagricultureforum.org)

WAF Policy Briefs and Reports are available at [www.Worldagricultureforum.org](http://www.Worldagricultureforum.org)



**About the World Agriculture Forum (WAF)**

*The World Agriculture Forum is global platform connecting diverse stakeholders to drive sustainable agricultural development through policy advocacy, trade facilitation, and technology-driven solutions. WAF unites governments, farmers, agribusinesses, experts, and development institutions to bridge implementation gaps and drive sustainable agriculture and food systems transformation towards a resilient, food-secure future. With a strong focus on collaboration, innovation all along the value chain, and public-private partnerships, WAF is committed to transforming agriculture worldwide.*