



# Food, Climate & Health

A deep dive into citizen-informed  
directions for food systems transition

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Food systems are often approached through efficiency and supply chains. The [Global Citizens' Assembly's] framing, connecting food to climate, health, equity, and livelihoods, should be prioritised because it reflects a more accurate understanding: food systems are deeply interconnected systems that shape and are shaped by human and ecological relationships.



Wakanyi Hoffman, The New Institute and Global Citizens' Assembly Strategic Advisory Board

# About this Deep Dive

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This Deep Dive is part of a series from the Global Citizens' Assembly exploring different dimensions of food systems transformation in the context of the climate crisis.

Food systems are the focus for 2026 because they cut across climate, health, equity and livelihoods. They are where planetary pressures and everyday realities meet, from extreme weather and rising costs to trade disruption, energy shocks and growing concerns about food security. This makes them a powerful entry point into climate governance.

Its central insights are drawn from 22 Calls to Action developed through the 2026 Global Assembly on Food and Climate, where 105 people from 60 countries and territories deliberated on food systems and climate change over seven weeks. These insights are situated within a wider ecosystem of participation through analysis of more than 7,000 participatory processes worldwide, contributions from local assemblies and exchanges with practitioners, researchers and experts working across food systems, climate, governance and systems change, including Ertharin Cousin, former Executive Director of the UN World Food Programme; Sandrine Dixon-Declève, Former Co-President of the Club of Rome, Executive Chair of Earth4All; Kirsten Dunlop, CEO of Climate KIC; Wakanyi Hoffman, writer and African Indigenous Knowledge scholar & researcher; Dr. Bonny Ibhawoh, professor of History and Global Human Rights at McMaster University; Sir Geoff Mulgan CBE, professor of Collective Intelligence, Public Policy and Social Innovation at University College London; and Otto Scharmer, Senior Lecturer at MIT and founder of the Presencing Institute.

Together, these sources help identify emerging public priorities, tensions and directions on how food systems need to be transformed and governed to ensure they are more resilient, equitable and sustainable.

This Deep Dive should not be read as a technical policy blueprint or statistical survey. Its value lies in what emerges when people from very different realities are given the time, information and space to work through complex questions together, exploring what food-system transformation could look like in practice and what it may require from governments, institutions, communities and citizens.

For the full framing, methodology and sources, see [Appendix A](#), [Appendix B](#) and [Global Citizens Assembly website](#)

# Why this matters now

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“ Overall, I believe a strong food system should protect nature, support farmers, and improve access to healthy food.

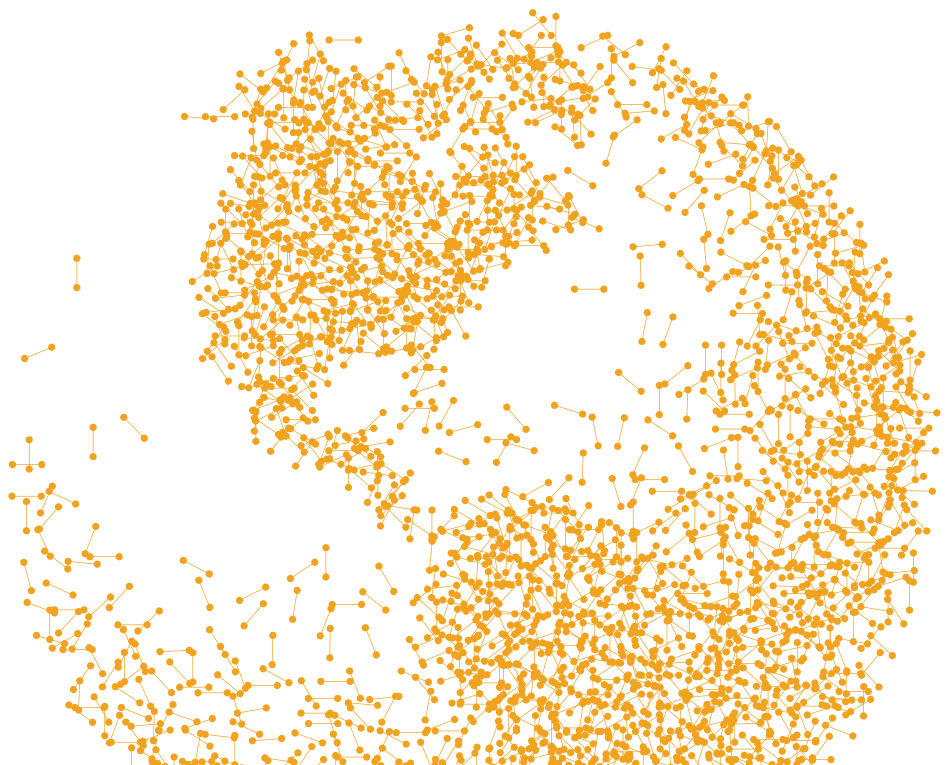
— Participant, 2026 Global Assembly on Food and Climate (Azerbaijan)

Across the 2026 Global Assembly on Food and Climate and the wider participation landscape, food systems were consistently understood as a health issue. Discussions connected food security, nutrition, environmental quality, livelihoods and wellbeing, reflecting a broader understanding of health as an outcome of food-system design rather than healthcare alone.

This perspective is becoming increasingly important. Climate change, environmental degradation, food insecurity and diet-related illness are placing growing pressure on both people and ecosystems. Rather than occurring in isolation, these challenges often reinforce one another and are experienced simultaneously by individuals, families and communities.

Participation is particularly valuable in this context because it creates space for people to connect issues that are often treated separately within policy-making. Across the discussions, participants regularly linked food security with nutrition, environmental quality with physical health, and climate resilience with wellbeing. In doing so, they pointed towards a more integrated understanding of health, one that recognises the connections between people, food systems and the natural world.

The priorities explored in this Deep Dive reflect a growing recognition that healthier food systems support healthier people, communities and environments. They also highlight the importance of involving citizens in identifying risks, navigating trade-offs and shaping solutions that reflect the realities of everyday life.



# Public priorities emerging

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## 1. Healthy food should be accessible to everyone

A recurring insight across the Assembly and wider participation landscape was that access to healthy, nutritious food is a matter of fairness rather than individual choice alone. Healthier diets were often seen as less affordable and less accessible, particularly for lower-income communities, while food insecurity continues to affect millions of people worldwide.

Discussions frequently moved beyond questions of food quantity towards questions of food quality, nutrition and dignity. Whether through debates about food prices, school meals, nutrition programmes or food labelling, a consistent theme emerged: everyone should be able to access food that supports healthy lives.

For governments, public health authorities and food-system actors, this suggests that improving health outcomes requires more than increasing food availability alone. Ensuring equitable access to healthy, nutritious food will depend on addressing affordability, accessibility and the wider conditions that shape what people are able to eat.

## 2. Health should be considered across the whole food system

Across the Assembly and wider participation landscape, health emerged as a food-system issue rather than a standalone outcome. Conversations about food frequently extended beyond nutrition and physical health to include mental wellbeing, environmental quality, dignity, livelihoods and community resilience.

The discussions repeatedly highlighted the connections between soil health, water quality, biodiversity, pollution, nutrition and wellbeing, pointing towards a broader understanding of health as an outcome of food-system design. Rather than treating health, agriculture and the environment as separate issues, many discussions pointed towards the need for more integrated approaches to food-system governance.

For public health institutions and food-system actors, this suggests that health should be considered across the full food system, from production and environmental management through to processing, distribution and consumption. Improving health outcomes may depend as much on how food systems are designed as on healthcare interventions alone.

### **3. Prevent harm before it occurs**

Across the discussions, another recurring theme was that food systems should do more to prevent harm before it occurs. Concerns frequently centred on environmental and health risks that accumulate over time, including pollution, harmful agricultural chemicals, contaminated water, degraded ecosystems and unhealthy diets.

Conversations pointed towards approaches that prioritise prevention, precaution and long-term stewardship rather than responding to problems only after significant damage has occurred.

For policymakers, public health authorities and food-system actors, this suggests that precaution should be treated as a core principle of food-system governance. Building healthier and more resilient food systems may depend as much on preventing harm as on responding to it.

### **4. Support the people who sustain food systems**

Food-system resilience depends on more than crops, infrastructure and technology. It also depends on the wellbeing of the people who produce, distribute and care for food.

Across different contexts, food-system resilience was understood as depending not only on crops, infrastructure or technology, but also on the wellbeing, knowledge and livelihoods of the farmers, food producers and communities caring for food.

For governments, employers and food-system actors, this suggests that supporting health and wellbeing across the food system should be viewed as an investment in resilience. Protecting the livelihoods, working conditions and wellbeing of the people who produce, distribute and care for food may be as important as investing in infrastructure, technology or productivity.

### **5. Communities should help shape healthier futures**

Communities were frequently seen as an important source of knowledge, leadership and problem-solving capacity. Across assemblies and other participatory processes, people consistently expressed a desire for greater involvement in decisions affecting food systems, health and environmental governance.

Local knowledge, lived experience and community leadership were widely viewed as important resources for identifying risks, shaping solutions and ensuring that policies reflect the realities people face. The discussions point towards a growing expectation that communities should play an ongoing role in shaping healthier and more resilient food systems.

For governments, public health authorities and food-system actors, this suggests that participation should be understood as a source of knowledge as well as legitimacy. Communities are often the first to experience emerging risks and the first to identify practical solutions. Creating meaningful opportunities for participation may therefore help strengthen both the effectiveness and resilience of food-system decisions.

## ASSEMBLIES IN ACTION: Climate and health community assembly in Caruaru

In July 2025, during the São João festival season, eight women agricultural producers from across the semi-arid interior of Pernambuco gathered in the city of Caruaru to discuss a crisis that was becoming increasingly difficult to separate into individual parts.

For two consecutive years, the corn harvests that sustain many families across the region had failed. The impacts were economic, environmental and social, but participants described them most often through their effects on daily life and wellbeing. Food production was becoming less reliable. Traditional plant species were disappearing from the landscape. Household incomes were under growing pressure. And alongside these material challenges came growing anxiety, exhaustion and uncertainty about the future.

The assembly was convened by Amanda, a psychologist and founder of the NGO Saúde em Clima, who argued that for women living and working in the semi-arid region, climate change, food security and health could not be treated as separate issues. Crop failure affected household income. Income affected access to food. Food insecurity affected both physical and mental health. Together, these pressures were compounded by unequal care responsibilities and the additional burdens often carried by women in rural communities.

As one participant reflected:

“**Women are overburdened by two crises at once, the food security crisis and the climate crisis, but also by the health crisis. And the care crisis as a whole.**”



Through mapping exercises, storytelling and collective discussion, participants explored how climate change was affecting both their livelihoods and their wellbeing. The conversation revealed not only the practical challenges of adapting to changing environmental conditions, but also the emotional toll of carrying those challenges largely alone.

The deliberation generated practical proposals. Participants identified COP30 as an audience for their recommendations and proposed the creation of a medicinal plant fair to support women producers, strengthen local livelihoods and promote traditional knowledge about health and wellbeing.

The assembly demonstrates how communities often experience climate, food and health challenges as a single interconnected reality. It also illustrates how participation can surface dimensions of wellbeing — including mental health, care burdens and social resilience — that are often absent from policy discussions.

# Directions for action

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1

## **Integrate health, food and environmental policy**

Participants consistently viewed food systems, health and environmental sustainability as interconnected challenges. Governance approaches should reflect these links rather than treating them as separate policy domains.

2

## **Create conditions for healthy diets**

Healthy diets should be accessible to all, affordable and supported by clear information that enables people to make informed choices. Enabling anyone to eat healthy is an issue of justice.

3

## **Prevent harm before it occurs**

Food systems should place greater emphasis on reducing pollution, environmental degradation and other preventable risks to human and ecological health.

4

## **Strengthen the resilience of farmers and communities**

Long-term food security depends on supporting the wellbeing, livelihoods and adaptive capacity of the people most affected by climate and food system disruption.

5

## **Make participation part of food systems governance**

Citizens should have meaningful opportunities to help shape decisions about food, health and environmental policy through ongoing and institutionalised forms of participation.

# Closing reflection

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Across the 2026 Global Assembly on Food and Climate and the wider landscape of participation, a consistent message emerges: healthy societies depend upon healthy food systems, and healthy food systems depend upon healthy ecosystems.

Participants repeatedly rejected the idea that climate action, food security and human wellbeing should be pursued separately. Instead, they described futures in which ecological resilience, human health and social justice reinforce one another. Discussions consistently connected nutrition, environmental quality, mental wellbeing, livelihoods and community resilience, pointing towards a broader understanding of what health means in the context of the climate crisis.

In many ways, the conversations point towards an emerging public understanding that mirrors the principles of One Health: that the wellbeing of people, communities and the natural systems they depend upon cannot ultimately be separated.

At a time when climate change, food insecurity and social pressures are becoming increasingly interconnected, participation offers a way to navigate complexity collectively. Not simply to improve decisions, but to build the understanding, trust and legitimacy needed to shape resilient futures.



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