



50th Anniversary Celebration of MSU's Food Security Group (FSG): Key Themes and Implications for FSG

FSG Issue Brief

4th October 2024

Michigan State University's Department of Agricultural, Food, and Resource Economics (AFRE) celebrated the 50th anniversary of its Food Security Group on September 12, 2024. The question animating the celebration was "The future of food security research for policy impact: What research should FSG be doing and how should it be doing it to have impact over the coming 10 years?". Three sessions approached the issue in different ways. The opening session featured a keynote address by Professor Matin Qaim¹ on the overall topic, accompanied by complementary remarks from Dr. Derek Byerlee and Dr. Jeffrey Bloem.²

This session was followed by two panel discussions that delved deeper into the questions of *what* research should be done and *how* it should be done. The first panel focused on important current and future research issues and brought great insights from four global scholars on health and food systems transformation, the hidden middle of input supply chains, consumer demand and experimental data for international development, and the value and need for interdisciplinary work. The agenda for the event, the three PowerPoints from the opening session, and a full recording of the event can be found on [FSG's website](#).

The second panel focused on partnership and collaboration—how best to do research that is impactful and whose process is equitable with local partners. It featured FSG partners from Africa and Asia as well as US-based scholars with long commitment to equitable and productive partnering with local organizations.

Together, these keynote presentations, the discussion around them, and the panel discussions highlighted several critical themes that will shape the future of agricultural development economics and food security research that is intended both to have impact on public policy and to contribute to advances in scientific understanding and research methods. These themes emphasize the need to address the increasing complexity of global food systems, the challenges posed by climate change, and the evolving roles of both public and private sector research. They highlight the importance of adopting an integrated approach to scientific and policy-oriented research and underscore the necessity of working in equitable partnerships with in-country research and policy partners to increase the likelihood of sustained policy and program impact. Because assisting local partners to strengthen their institutional capacity for this work is critical to achieving meaningful outcomes, and because this kind of progress does not happen rapidly, the importance of long-term, sustained partnerships was also emphasized. The remainder of this brief outlines the key themes that emerged and explores the implications for what FSG must prioritize and how it should implement those priorities over the next 10 years.

Key Themes

- 1. Food Security and Sustainability Challenges: The Need for Food System Transformation:** Food insecurity remains a pervasive issue, with a "triple burden" of malnutrition that includes hunger,

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micronutrient deficiencies, and rising rates of overweight and obesity. The growing global demand for food places pressure on agricultural systems, leading to biodiversity loss, environmental degradation, and greenhouse gas emissions. The urgent need for a transformation in food production, distribution, and consumption practices were a common thread, with a strong focus on making food systems more sustainable while supporting vulnerable populations. Agricultural economics, with its focus on rigorous but applied work addressing real world problems, was identified as a crucial field for advancing solutions, requiring interdisciplinary collaboration across nutrition, health, and environmental sciences. Within the field, FSG's sterling reputation for developing detailed, on-the-ground understanding of local systems is recognized as having very high value.

- 2. The Importance of a Broad Food Systems Perspective:** Urbanization has increased dramatically over the past decades and markets for food (sale and purchase), inputs, labor, and services have deeply penetrated rural areas of developing countries. When seeking solutions to specific challenges, it is essential to consider the entire value chain—from input provision and production to the midstream and market-mediated consumption, both in rural and urban areas. This includes a need for continued work on the cost of affordable diets; a better understanding of input and service supply chains, including a deeper understanding of the role of agrifood firms and micro, small, and medium-scale enterprises (MSMEs) in the midstream of both input and output supply chains; and how food choices and food demand are currently shaped and what tools can incentivize/nudge consumption behavior towards nutritious diets.
- 3. Grappling with Declining Public Sector Funding for Agricultural Research:** The keynote session presentations and discussion underscored the growing challenge of declining public sector funding for agricultural research, particularly as funds are redirected toward climate change mitigation. This has increased reliance on private sector investment, which tends to focus on niche, high-value crops and proprietary value chains, making it difficult to align private sector interests with public goods like food security and climate resilience, especially for the poorest farmers.

In response to these challenges, there is a critical need for institutional innovations to secure more funding for global public goods, such as food security and climate resilience. Producer organizations and levies on agricultural products were highlighted as potentially effective mechanisms to support research that serves broader public interests in the face of declining multilateral and regional funding for agricultural research. There may also be broader lessons in successful private sector involvement in hybrid maize in Asia and Africa. Overall, however, more out-of-the-box thinking on institutional design to incentivize private sector investment in public goods is badly needed.

- 4. Research Focus and Methodologies: Prioritizing Greater Transparency, Rigorous Descriptive Work, and Filling of Data Gaps:** The discussion highlighted the need for a more diversified research approach in agricultural economics, one that values both causal identification and rigorous descriptive research. While causal research is essential, rigorous descriptive research can provide crucial insights and “narrative” around the real-world contexts within which agricultural policies and programs operate, and thereby have outsize effects on policy and program design. Speakers also called for changes in academic publishing incentives, encouraging greater transparency about approaches and about research weaknesses, which would foster better understanding and more effective policy development. The research panel highlighted the need for quality data that is too often lacking in the developing country context. Such data is especially needed for subsets of the food system such as consumer demand and agrifood firms along input and output supply chains.



5. **Interdisciplinary Collaboration: We Need More, not Less:** Another key theme was the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration. The discussion emphasized the critical need for renewed focus on interdisciplinary collaboration beyond agricultural economists (particularly) and the field of agriculture (more broadly), especially in addressing global challenges like climate change, nutrition, biodiversity loss, insecurity and its impacts on livelihoods and food security, and sustainable food production. These issues demand expertise from multiple fields, yet there has been a concerning decline in interdisciplinary work over at least the past decade. This trend is largely due to a lack of incentives among researchers and the complexities of coordinating research across different disciplines, including varying terminologies and methodologies. To reverse this, the profession must develop standards and incentives that prioritize creative, problem-oriented interdisciplinary research, rather than trying to conform rigidly to standards often applied in mainstream economics. Creating environments that encourage partnerships with experts from fields like agronomy, climate science, political science, and psychology is essential for tackling these pressing global issues.
6. **Local Leadership for Lasting Change:** As highlighted by the panel on partnership, change will be sustained, and will build on itself, only if it is owned by local partners. A basic observation in this panel was that western partners cannot bring anything to scale – change at scale is the product of changed behavior by millions of local households and 10s of thousands of local firms. Understanding the local system and partnering with local organizations in a way that helps them build their own institutional capacity based on their own assessment of needs, becomes the only approach to assure lasting and self-sustaining productive change. Both local partners on the panel emphasized the positive impact this approach has had on their organizations and underscored the need to continue and further strengthen this way of doing business.

Implications for FSG

1. **Leading Public Goods Research:** As funding for global public goods remains a challenge, FSG should lead in promoting research that addresses these broad societal needs. This may involve developing new institutional partnerships and designing innovative approaches that link private sector investments to public goods, ensuring that food security and climate resilience remain central to research agendas. Concepts and approaches in the environmental economics literature may be especially helpful in this regard.
2. **Promoting Both Rigorous Descriptive and Causal Analysis:** FSG's reputation for developing detailed empirical understanding of how local systems work gives it a unique opportunity to generate – and advocate for the value of - rigorous descriptive research that supports compelling narratives. By doing this, FSG can ensure that its work remains policy-relevant and impactful and potentially nudge the profession's thinking about what classifies as high-quality research. Emphasizing transparency and openness about research findings will help drive more meaningful learning and improve policy outcomes.
3. **Fostering Interdisciplinary Collaboration:** To address the complex challenges facing global food systems, FSG should prioritize interdisciplinary collaboration. Creating environments where agricultural economists can work closely with climate scientists, agronomists, food scientists, nutritionists and other experts will lead to more holistic and effective solutions. This will require changes in how research is funded, taught, and evaluated, but it is essential for addressing the multifaceted issues facing food security and sustainability.
4. **Equitable Partnerships Deeply Committed to Local Leadership:** MSU/FSG has a long history of focusing on strengthening local institutions over long-term engagements. The past several years of FSG activity have seen this approach be more systematically embedded in the group's operations, with big



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payoffs in the strength of our partnerships. FSG needs to continue being a leader on this “localization” agenda and work with our partners to extend it into all the ways that, together, we work to do applied policy and program research for impact.

In summary, the presentations and discussion collectively underscored the need for FSG to continue leading interdisciplinary research that addresses food security challenges through sustainable, market-based approaches while engaging in policy-relevant work. FSG has a reputation for developing long-term relationships with multiple actors in policy systems across the globe. The group’s future will likely focus on tackling complex issues such as climate change, food systems transformation, and equitable access to resources, with a greater emphasis on engaging with value chain intermediaries and improving the measurement of food insecurity. To address the challenges ahead, it will be crucial to maintain and improve the FSG approach of developing equitable long-term relationships in the countries where we work, enhancing collaboration across disciplines, and continuing our focus on generating detailed empirical understanding of local systems that support strong narratives that can capture policymakers’ attention and drive productive change. This will ensure that FSG and its partners stay at the forefront of agricultural development economics for the next 50 years.