

Main insights from the World Café on the Missing Middle

On 4 December, approximately 30 people from the Global Food Security conference came together in a World Café on the Missing Middle. This World Café started off with a presentation on the Missing Middle in Sustainable Development Goal 2 (SDG 2) followed by six table discussions.



Missing Middle in SDG 2

SDG 2 aims to end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture. Currently, however, there is a Missing Middle in SDG 2 that hinders effective implementation. This Missing Middle consists of a global-local axis and a food production-consumption axis.

On the global-local axis, there is a mismatch between the SDGs at macro level and local realities at micro level. The SDGs are commonly translated into national policies (top-down) that lack proper grounding at micro levels, whereas bottom-up initiatives at micro levels usually cannot be connected to other levels. On the food production-consumption axis, separate SDG 2 targets for agriculture and nutrition can reinforce silos in decision-making. Agriculture and nutrition, however, are inextricably linked: agriculture is a necessary condition for nutrition. Rather, striving for sustainable agriculture and healthy diets means that trade-offs within and between SDGs need to be addressed.

Better alignment of stakeholder perspectives and actions towards SDG 2 and related SDGs through a food systems approach contributes to bridging the Missing Middle in SDG 2 for more effective implementation.

Key points from table discussions

1. How can we connect SDG 2 to local realities?
 - There is a diversity of local realities and food systems
 - Empower local communities
 - Focus on both rural and urban farming and non-farming communities
2. How can we connect local with global contributions to SDG 2?
 - Balance global and local food supply, living income and cost of food
 - Make interventions culturally relevant – there are few blueprints
 - Hierarchy vs. networks

3. How can sustainable agriculture contribute to healthy diets and vice versa?
 - Sustainable practices like diversification, diverse cropping systems and crop rotation can deliver both by e.g. maintaining soil health, delivering diverse products and enabling farmers to earn better incomes
 - Do we have enough resources (land, water etc.) for everybody to have a healthy diet according to WHO guidelines?

4. Are value chains the answer to bridge the Missing Middle?
 - Nested webs rather than value chains
 - Redefining the value that value chains can deliver e.g. through more inclusive and transparent value chains with shared benefits
 - Production for local or national consumption vs. production for export chains

5. What is key to address the Missing Middle?
 - Managing complexity and uncertainty in policy-making though more participation, inclusion, inter- and transdisciplinarity
 - Interactive dimensions of the issue: the problem moves across levels and solutions need to be interactive and trans-level
 - Who could break down the silos?
 - Interconnected nature of SDGs – what does the story of food across the SDGs look like?

6. How can we align relevant policies, initiatives and decisions by various stakeholders?
 - Link bottom-up and top-down in co-development processes (from the beginning) for a shared vision
 - Achieve common understanding of what is involved, but then align different horizons over longer timeline
 - How to deal with conflict? (inevitable)
 - Who will provide what type of safety nets for most vulnerable?

Points for discussion

There seems to be some disagreement on e.g. the (potential) role of companies and value chains, and the importance of top-down versus bottom-up approaches. Points that remain largely open for discussion are how to balance living income and the cost of food, how to redefine 'value' in value chains, whether we have sufficient resources for everyone to enjoy a healthy diet, how to break down the silos at scale, how food cuts across all SDGs exactly, how to deal with conflict and a lack of consensus, and who will take care of the most vulnerable? Each of these points offers entry points for continued discussion.