

Agricultural Economics Society Centenary Conference
Wadham College Oxford
23-25 March 2026

Symposium 1: A Food Systems Approach to Addressing the Challenges facing Agri-Food Sectors: the Role for Economics Research and Policy

Time and location: 16:00-17:15, Monday 23 March, Holywell Music Room Wadham College

Moderator: Wilfrid Legg, AES Hon. Sec., formerly OECD, Co-Editor of *EuroChoices*)

Objective

The food systems approach has gained a lot of traction in recent years, in particular in embracing sustainability and nutritional issues, and in identifying challenges for policy design, coherence and implementation. The symposium brings together 4 speakers who are involved in various ways with using a “food systems approach” to address the many challenges facing agri-food sector in different countries and contexts. Those challenges range from the viability of farming and food security, environmental sustainability, health and nutritional status, to issues of wellbeing, equity, fairness and social justice.

The symposium will explore the role of economics (trade-offs, alternative approaches, unintended consequences, costs/benefits...) within a food systems approach to identify possible pathways to increase net societal benefits, including through the design and implementation of targeted and tailored public policies. Moreover, an important issue is to outline the priorities for the way in which agricultural economists organise research.

Context

The High Level Panel of Experts (HLPE) of the UN Committee on World Food Security defines food systems as ‘all the elements (environment, people, inputs, processes, infrastructures, institutions, etc.) and activities that relate to the production, processing, distribution, preparation and consumption of food, and the outputs of these activities, including socio-economic and environmental outcomes’. As the UN Sustainable Development Goals, a food systems approach is a holistic integrated way of thinking about the numerous linkages, feedbacks, trade-offs and potential win-win outcomes. But there are contested definitions, boundaries, data gaps and analytical methods.

There is an apparent paradox that the food system over time has – largely through technology and structural change increasing productivity – been able to feed billions of people with affordable and conveniently sourced food, yet that has been unevenly distributed, with the coexistence of food insecurity and excess consumption, putting enormous strains on the environment, natural resources, animal care, and human health. This has resulted in some commentators and the media arguing that the food system is broken and needs fundamental “root and branch” reform. Others retort that is a selective interpretation of success and failures and what’s necessary is to understand the complexities and interlinkages of how the food system works to identify and fix only those elements that are failing.

This symposium will thus attempt to better understand the concept, identify the insights through its adoption, and outline the implications for agricultural economics research,

stakeholders, and public policy. Key questions are whether and how the methods, models and data available to researchers can address the challenges identified, and whether - and how - it implies a reset of policies, institutions, methods and data. Moreover, pragmatism needs to be recognized in moving from the relative simplicity of a food systems analytical framework to implementing policy and practice in a complex and diverse world.

Structure of the Symposium

The Symposium should encourage a lively interaction among the participants and the speakers, but would not involve full PowerPoint presentations (perhaps one or two headline slides that to help orient the discussion). Each speaker would be invited to give a brief presentation of up to **8 minutes maximum** focusing on the key points they wish to highlight. Then the floor would be open to engagement by and with the audience and finally each speaker would have about **2 minutes** to sum up and stress the key take home message(s).

Panel

Dr Monika Zurek (Head of the Food System Transformation Group, Environmental Change Institute, Oxford University)

- From your perspective, what are the key features of a "food systems approach", why is it important, and what challenges does it present for collaboration among researchers across several disciplines?

Dr Krijn Poppe (formerly of Wageningen University and Research, one of the authors of *Sustainable Food Systems: Do Agricultural Economists have a Role?* in the European Review of Agricultural Economics (2020), Chair of the Advisory Board of *EuroChoices*).

Dr Alban Mas Aparisi (Economist specializing in food systems transformation and agricultural policy, leading the food systems work at the OECD's Sahel and West Africa Club).

Dr Johan Swinnen (Director General of the International Food Policy Research Institute since January 2020, former professor of economics and director of the Centre for Institutions and Economic Performance at KU Leuven Belgium).

Wilfrid Legg, 17 March 2026