



ISAP 2024

Thematic Tracks 1 (TT-1)

# Latest insights from food system transformation research

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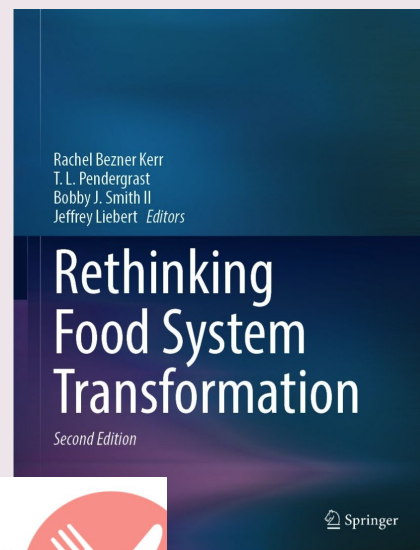
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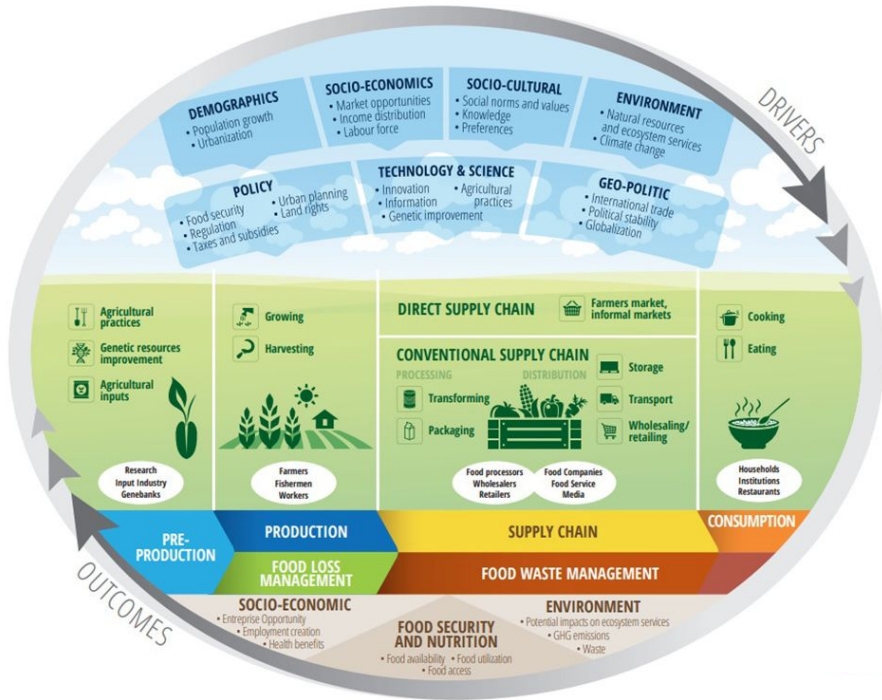
Stockholm  
Resilience Centre



# Food systems transformation as a “buzzword”



# A systems view

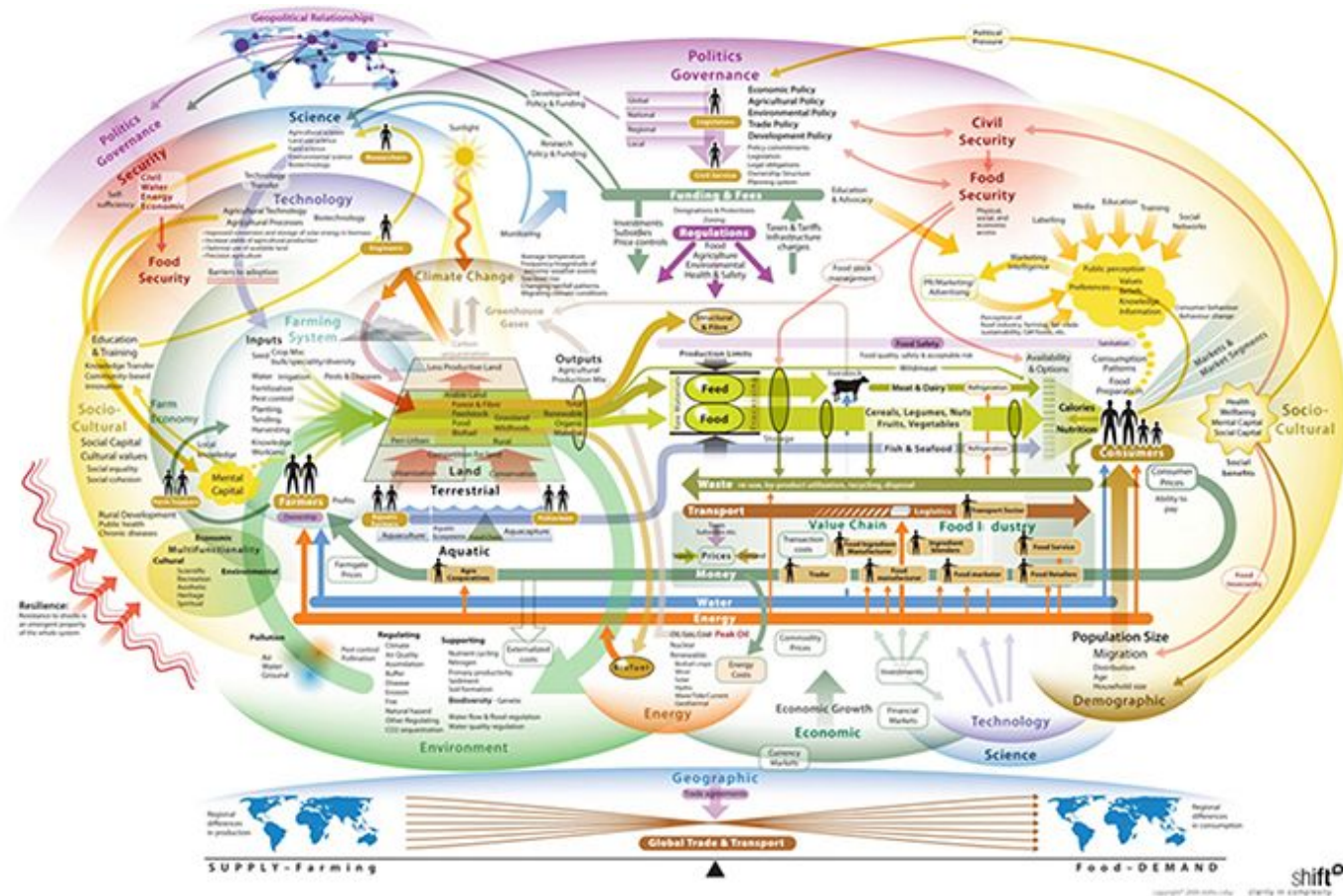


Food System Components, Processes, and Activities



Multiple drivers of change / multiple activities / multiple actors → outcomes





complex interactions / feedbacks across spatial and temporal scales

# Insights based on a semi-systematic review of research literature

- Aim: understand the evolution of this discourse and attempt to synthesize what it means.
- 3 databases and 2 languages: English and Spanish Scopus, Dialnet and REDIB
- +/- 3 decades (1994 - 2023)

Juri, S., N. Terry, and L. M. Pereira. 2024. **Demystifying food systems transformation: a review of the state of the field.** Ecology and Society 29(2):5.  
<https://doi.org/10.5751/ES-14525-290205>

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Research

## Demystifying food systems transformation: a review of the state of the field

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**ABSTRACT.** There is increasing interest and hype around the need for transforming food systems toward sustainability. Today, calls for food systems transformations abound in the scholarly and gray literature, and even major international platforms have brought attention to this argument. However, as happens with many sustainability-related buzzwords, trendy terms can become co-opted, emptied of meaning, or used to refer to very different types of change in relation to goals, processes, or outcomes. In addition, many terms and theories are adopted to speak of and explain change. Therefore, what is meant by food system transformation remains opaque, and underscores the fact that food systems themselves are understood in multiple ways within the research community. As the urgency in accelerating food system transformations worldwide builds up, it is important to understand how this field has evolved and how food system change is conceptualized today. We offer an overview and synthesis of the scholarly literature in English and Spanish anchored on food systems change in the past three decades to shed light on how the theory and literature landscape has evolved, and how concepts are understood. At the same time, we provide an overview of the mechanisms of change that are most prominent and the frameworks that have been proposed. We conclude with what we think is a key definition of this critical concept. Our contribution serves to confirm and expand recent reviews, while mapping out the most prominent contributions to allow fellow researchers to navigate a diverse field and build upon these insights.

**Key Words:** food system transformation; frameworks; map of the field; re-design; synthesis; theory; transitions

### INTRODUCTION

Food systems offer an important and urgent lever of change as societies face and tackle multiple sustainability challenges. Calls for food systems transformations abound in the literature, from peer-reviewed research to the diverse abundance of reports and publications from international and governmental organizations, advocacy groups, etc. (IPES-Food 2015, Gordon et al. 2017, HLPE 2017, Willett et al. 2019, FOLU 2019, Fanzo et al. 2020, FAO et al. 2020, Global Panel on Agriculture and Food Systems for Nutrition 2020, WWF 2020, Slater et al. 2022). The recognition of food systems as levers of change, especially in relation to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals has recently gained particular attention as evidenced by international initiatives such as the United Nations Food Systems Summit. Despite critiques and the coexistence of diverse viewpoints (Jonas 2021), this attention has helped highlight both the urgency and opportunities for transformative action within food systems across all societal sectors and scales (from households to nations, from governments to industry and academia).

Within the research literature, the interest in food systems as a unit of analysis (Eriksen 2008) and a locus of purposive change has been growing over the last three decades (Weber et al. 2020). In 1994, a paper by Kenneth Dahlberg, published in the journal *Futures*, called for a transition to regenerative food systems as a way to tackle emergent societal threats such as climate change,

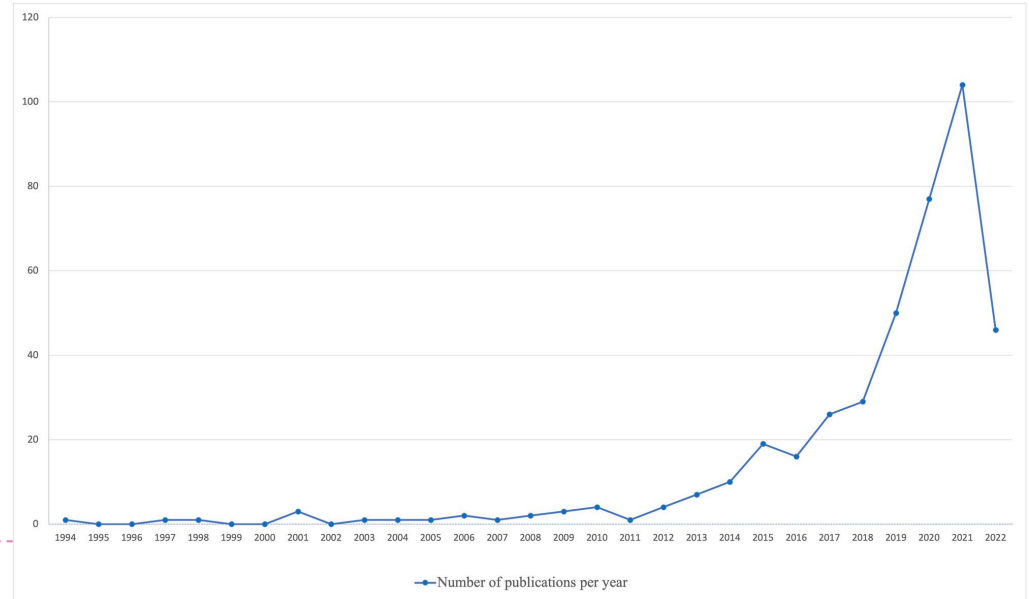
a particular theory of change that may have been ahead of its time three decades ago, but is particularly poignant now. A theory of change, following Thornton et al. (2017), refers to a description in the form of a hypothesis of how change is expected and planned to come about (from design, actions, outputs, and outcomes), which typically also includes making the assumptions behind such strategy and its effectiveness explicit. In Dahlberg's argument, change should be developed using systemic approaches, constitute a change in values or paradigm (which determine what outcomes or impacts are seen to be desirable), and offer a reconfiguration of structures of production, distribution, trade, and consumption that moves away from the hegemonic industrialized food system while it integrates and is sensitive to diversity: perspectives/worldviews, knowledge types, and ecosystems. Although this argument was very clear then, the current state of the myriad food systems-related concerns and the increasing calls for their transformation seems to suggest not much progress has been made (Fanzo et al. 2020, Slater et al. 2022).

As happens with many sustainability-related buzzwords (see Paehlke 2005, Davoudi et al. 2012) certain trendy terms are adopted and co-opted to the point of becoming vague or empty of meaning. The term food system transformation has been used to imply and suggest very different types of change: from mere reformation and adaptations to radical and deep overhauls (Slater

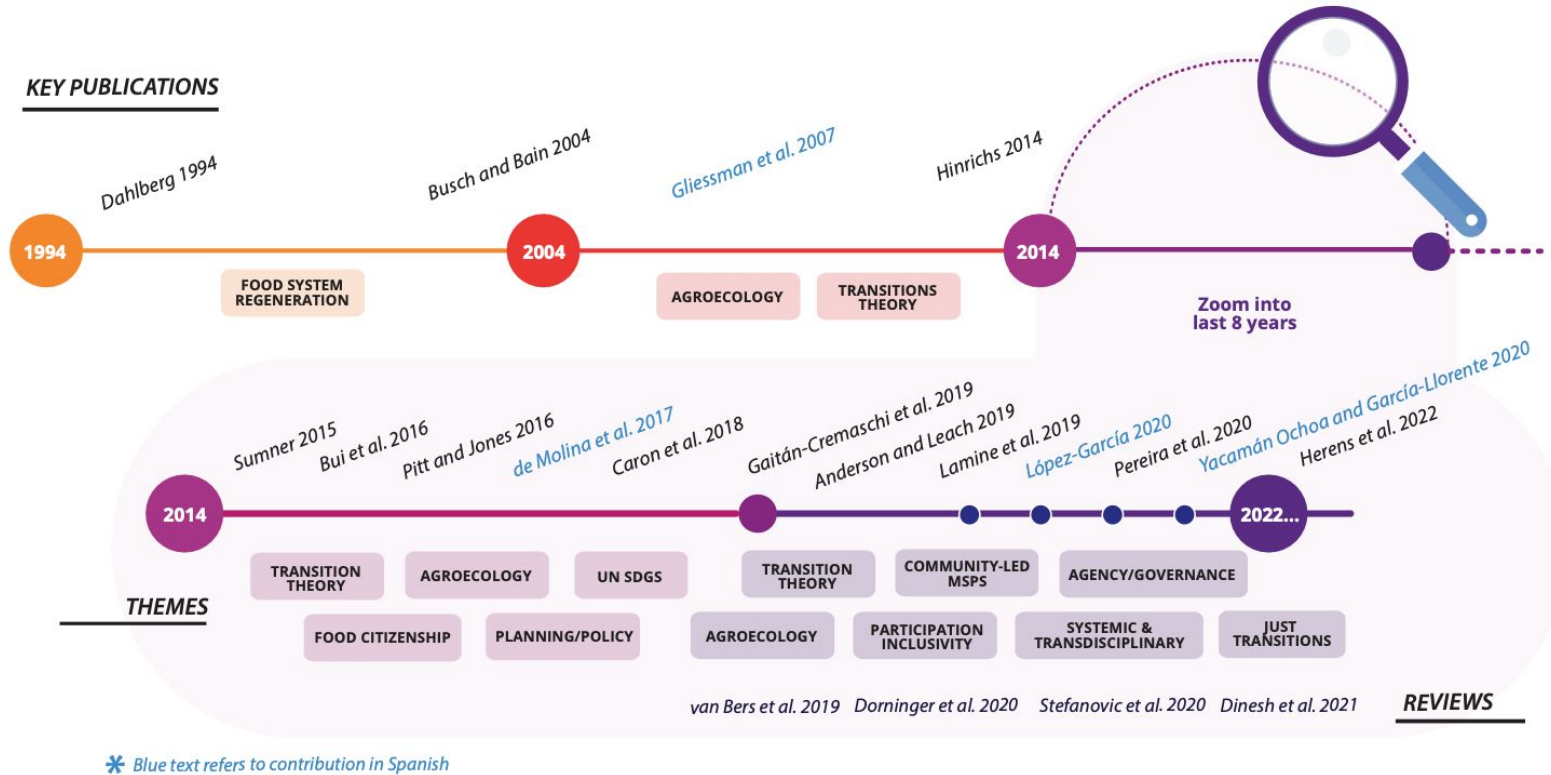
# Where and who is behind this research?

Start in 1994 with Kenneth Dahlberg “**A transition from agriculture to regenerative food systems**”: large transformation and decolonization of industrial agriculture, preservation of indigenous/traditional food systems, value shift towards quality and health, and systems approaches.

- **90% of publications** scoped (367) were **published in the last 7 years since 2015**.
- Authors **mainly based in the Global North**, lowest representation of corresponding authors from the Global South.

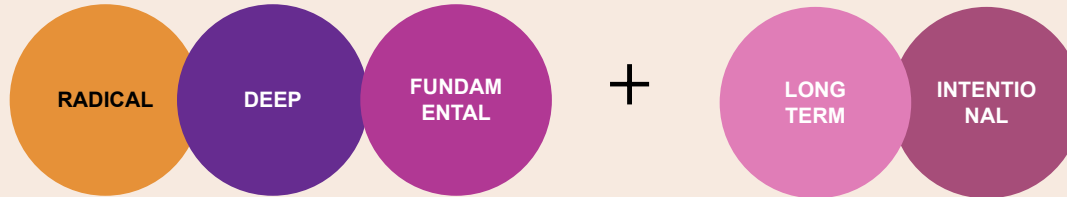


# Evolution of perspectives & interest areas



# Different terms but scholars point to transformative rather than incremental change

Radical	Deep	Fundamental	Intentional	Long Term / Multi-Scale
Radical transformation of society (Cohen and Illieva 2015)  Radical changes in food system	Profound regime reconfiguration (Bui et al. 2016; Gaitan et al. 2019; Bui 2021)  Deep change of	Fundamental transformation process (Anderson et al. 2019)  Fundamental changes in	Planned and agreed process of change (Caron et al. 2018)  Intentional transformation (Hubeau et al. 2017)	Long-term change (Caron et al. 2018, Anderson et al. 2019)  Long term process of reconfiguration,

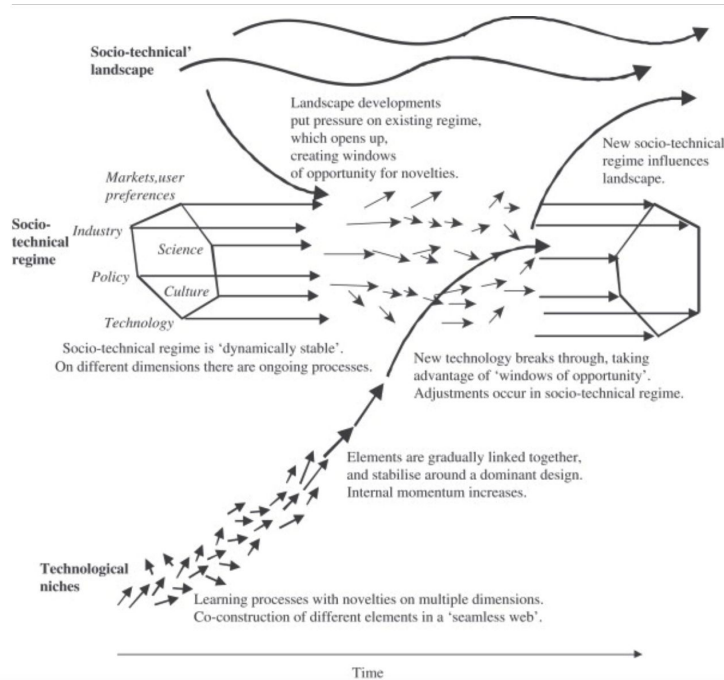


Transformative change - **a significant shift** - to intentionally **move away from the current industrialized model** (status quo), to a whole alternative one (eg. agroecology).



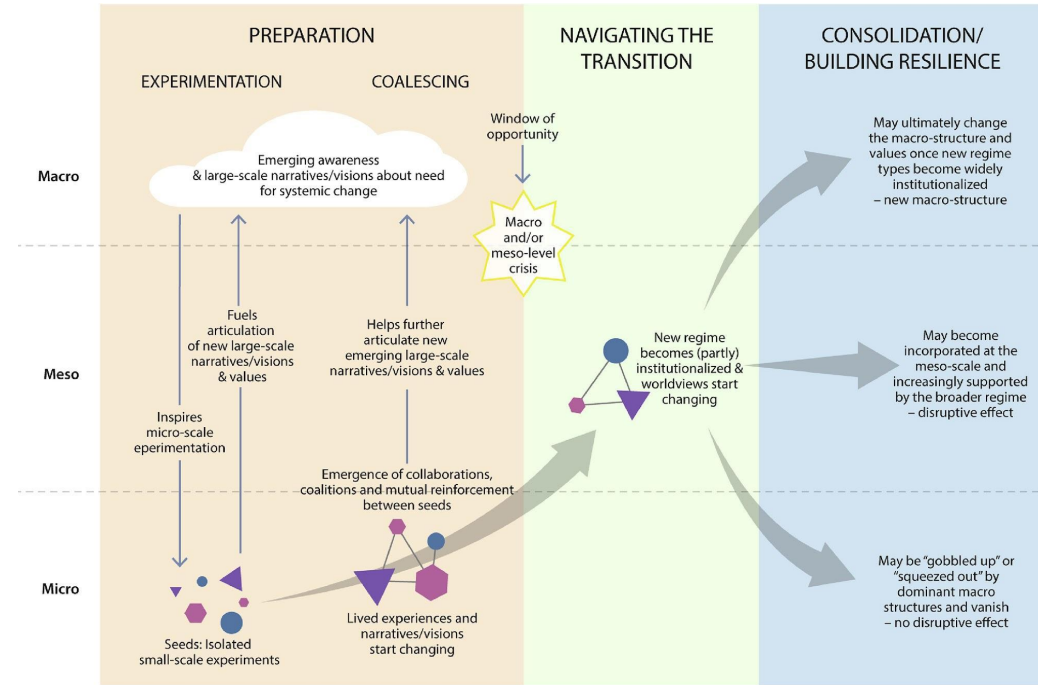
# Insights: change strategies and interacting scales (how)

## Transitions



(Geels & Kemp, 2007)

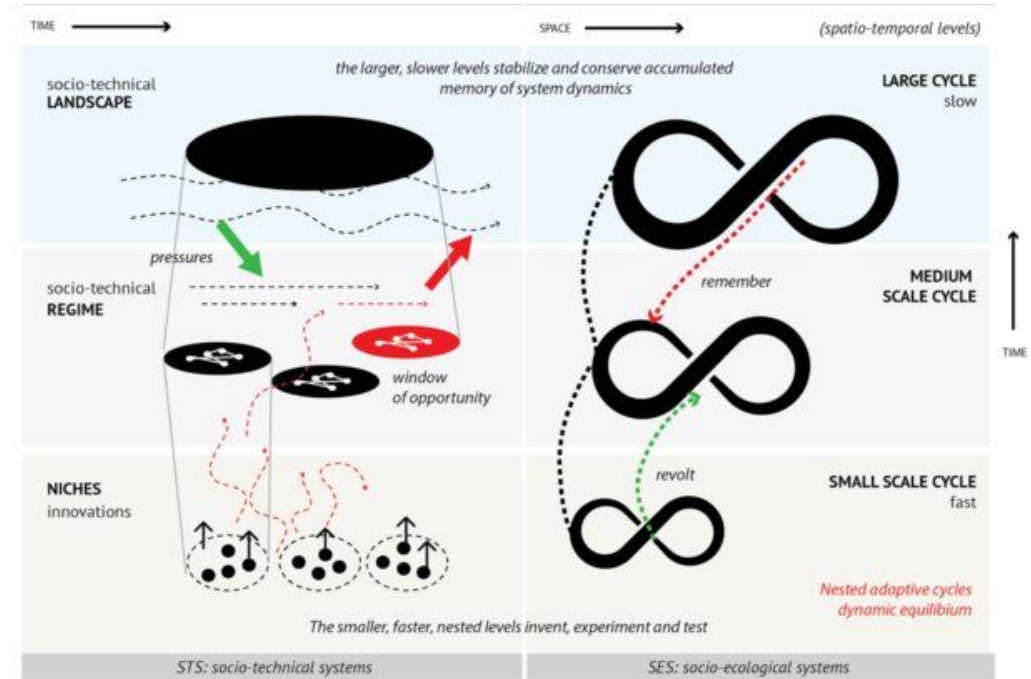
## Transformations



(Sellberg et al. 2020)

# Insights: change strategies and interacting scales (how)

- Not only a matter of either/or bottom-up or top down: recent contributions offer **nuanced/hybrid approaches**.
- Consider change and feedbacks / tradeoffs **across time but also space** (telecoupling).



# Insights: the target of change (who)

- Systemic approaches consider **multiple drivers of change** - avoid suggesting change relies on consumers (e.g. food literacy strategies).
- Systemic approaches **avoid singular solutions**. Are less inclined to: suggest change based on sectors or activities, change as linear and controllable, or solutions as universal.
- Interest in the **governance of food systems**, and change promoted by a change in governance.
- Transformation is political (contested): **barriers relate to power and politics** – not merely a lack of scientific or technological knowledge or solutions.

# Insights: change processes and goals (how)

- **Importance of stakeholder participation, both powerful and disempowered.** Strategies vary between those that integrate very powerful or excluded actors (indigenous or rural communities) (top vs. bottom).
- Emerging attention to discussing **justice in FST**, especially how to how to ensure equitable participation, representation and decision making (Tribaldos and Kortetmäki 2022) .
- **Research needs to be aware of potential biases and inequalities:** at present, low representation of scholars from Low- and Middle-income Countries.



## *We propose a definition*

“Food system transformations refer to significant re-configurations of the assemblage of food system activities, actors, outcomes, and relationships (dynamics) to move away from the current globalized industrial model and ensure sustainable, resilient, and just models of production and consumption.

These transformative processes demand the collective and inclusive re-designing (from re-imagining to re-governing) of food system components through platforms where governance, practices, power, and value-change can be debated and enacted at multiple scales.

Food system re-design should therefore be seen as an ethico-political process that needs to be collectively stewarded and nurtured in an adaptive, engaged, and creative way. This also means that strategies (pathways) and tools need to respond to and resonate with current contextual needs and features, while also being future-proof and proactive (anticipatory).”

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WHAT

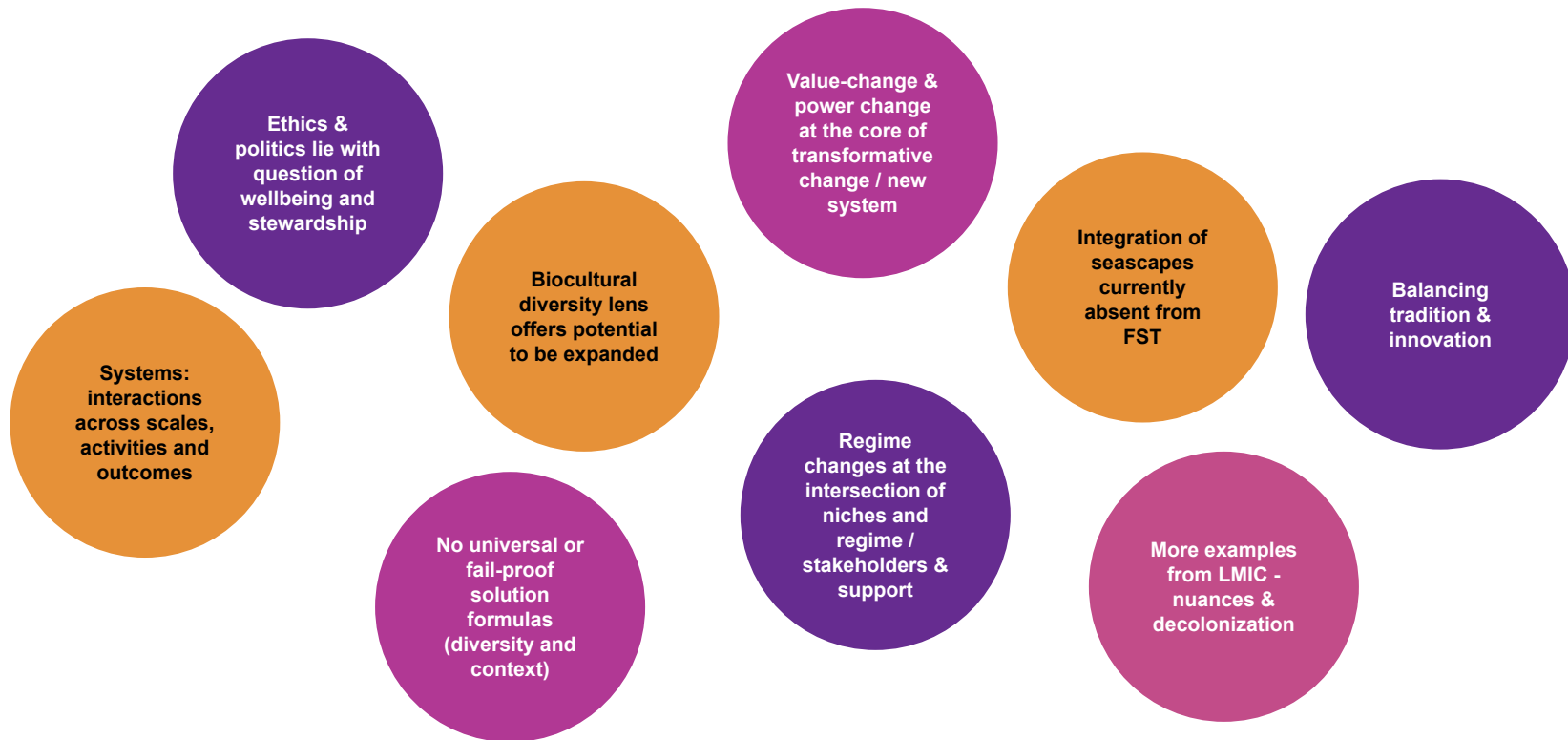
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WHO

A solid pink circle containing the word "HOW" in white capital letters.

HOW

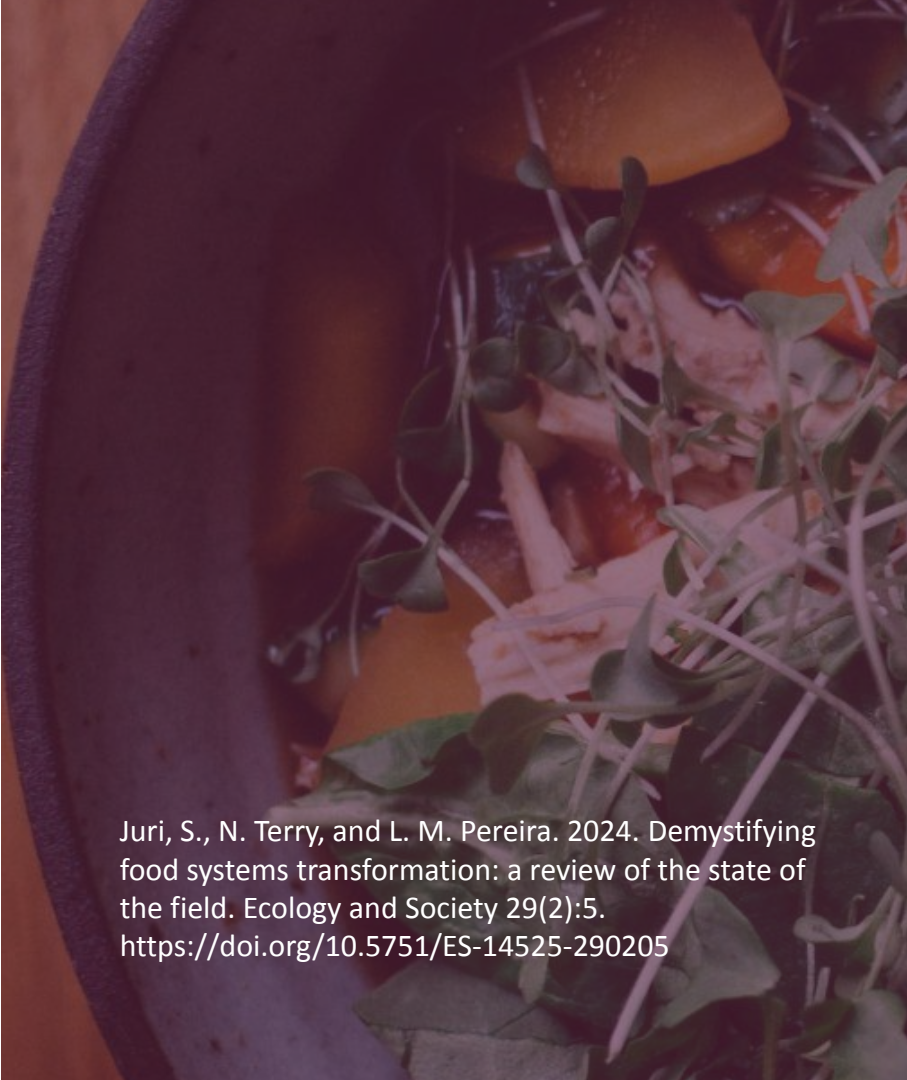
# Takeaways for SEPLS



# Thank you

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