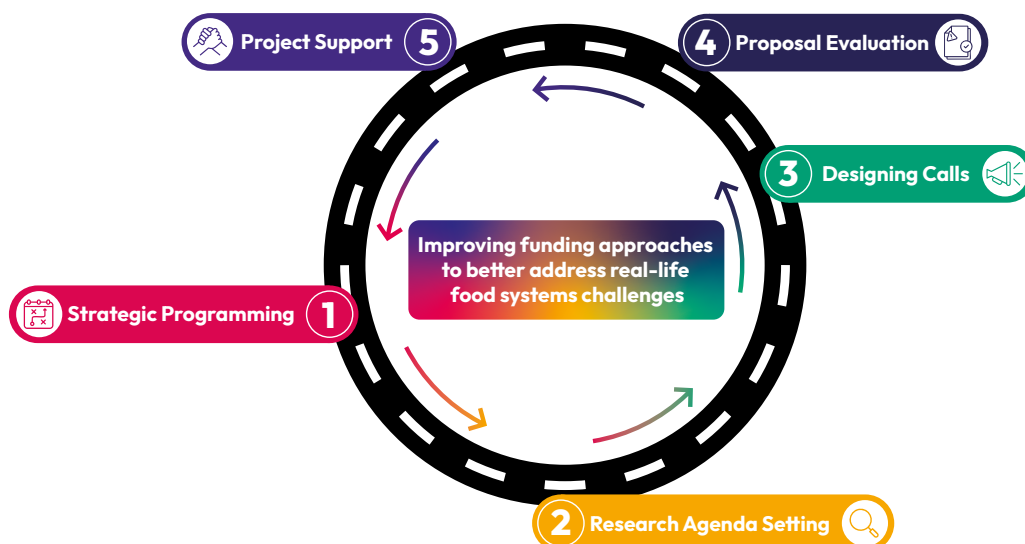


Food systems approach integration into the programming and funding cycle - Strategic recommendations

This analysis brings together insights from funders, researchers, and other food system stakeholders on how to strengthen future funding for sustainable food systems research.

It identifies needs across the whole funding cycle: from long-term strategic programming, to agenda setting, call design, evaluation, and project support. Together, these findings provide a roadmap for funding that enables transformation towards healthy, fair, and sustainable food systems.

This analysis is based on insights from six Funders' Fora held in 2023–2024 with the FOODPathS Funders' Network, sixteen semi-structured interviews with diverse food system stakeholders, and a validation workshop during the FOODPathS Festival in 2025, where funders, researchers, and stakeholders refined the findings together.



1. Strategic Programming

Funding should move beyond isolated projects toward long-term, thematic programmes of 5–10 years, with checkpoints and continuity between proof of concept, implementation, and policy uptake. Short-term rapid-response calls should complement these longer programmes. Coordination across ministries and integration of national, EU, and international levels are essential to reduce fragmentation. Beyond research, investments should also support infrastructures, Living Labs, and networks, with funding for professional coordination and systemic capacity. Strategic alignment with policies and early involvement of policymakers ensures research responds to real needs, while differentiated funding channels help avoid duplication.

2. Research Agenda Setting

Agendas should be set transparently, with public consultations and stakeholder mapping. Inequalities must be addressed by including indigenous, small, and remote communities, offering co-creation formats and vouchers to enable participation, and prioritizing vulnerable groups to maximize social return. Building a joint narrative around funding priorities, while acknowledging national and regional differences, strengthens cooperation. Research agendas should involve diverse ministries and sectors, including health, food, education, environment, and culture, taking a systemic and transdisciplinary perspective.

3. Designing Calls

Diverse and flexible funding models are key: from vouchers and seed grants to full grants, staged funding, and mixed national/EU schemes. In-kind contributions can broaden access. Call texts should be co-created with experts, focused yet systemic, and designed to build consortia across countries and sectors. Aligning with policymaking, education, and industry strengthens uptake, while longer preparation times and partnering tools support collaboration. Accessibility can be improved by reducing bureaucracy, staggering calls, and enabling flexible budget lines. Innovation should be encouraged with funding for high-risk/high-reward research and proof-of-concept top-ups. Calls must require projects to define impact from the start, require multidimensional indicators, integrate dissemination (ex. up to 30% of budgets), and encourage inclusion of youth, patients, and vulnerable groups.

4. Proposal Evaluation

Evaluation should go beyond CVs and scientific excellence by integrating impact, relevance, and transdisciplinarity into scoring. Fit-for-purpose metrics and separate reviews of implementation potential ensure fairer outcomes. Panels should be more diverse, including private sector, early-career researchers, and non-academic stakeholders, all trained in systems approaches. Agile models—such as two-stage applications, feedback loops, or AI-assisted screening with oversight—can make evaluation both fairer and more efficient.

5. Project Support

Projects need ongoing support to ensure knowledge uptake and learning. Monitoring should be continuous, with site visits, check-ins, and feedback loops. Connecting projects through clusters, shared platforms, and knowledge bases promotes synergy and scale-up. Funding should also cover coordination, communication. Capacity-building helps early-career researchers gain experience and develop transferable skills. Follow-up activities, valorisation funding, and implementation resources help results move into practice.

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