

FOOD SYSTEMS SOLUTIONS DIALOGUES

Inclusive Participatory Design to Transform Food Systems

18 September 2024

Summary Report

Introduction

The Food Systems Solutions Dialogues (FSSD) are purposeful and organized events that bring together National Convenors and other food systems actors to share their experiences and insights on food systems hosted by the UN Food Systems Coordination Hub (the Hub). A new series is launched each year, and morning and afternoon sessions are held for each Dialogue to accommodate different time zones. On September 18, 2024, the fourth Dialogue of the year was held on “Inclusive Participatory Design to Transform Food Systems” - this Summary Report reflects the combined discussions from the two sessions (morning and afternoon).

The Dialogue explored innovative and collaborative efforts to empower stakeholders as agents of change in food systems, focusing on grassroots groups such as Indigenous Peoples, farmers, youth, and women. Through discussions, it examined inclusive initiatives supporting economic, social, and cultural development tailored to national contexts.

Setting the Scene

The Dialogue commenced with insights from Mr Khaled Elthaweel, Senior Coordinator at the Hub, who emphasized the urgency of inclusive, participatory design in transforming food systems. He explained that participation across different sectors, including civil society, private sector, and local communities, is crucial to addressing interconnected challenges. He noted that some countries are already taking steps in this direction, with participatory design promoting equity, transparency, and shared ownership in food system reforms. This approach, according to him, fosters cooperation, builds trust among stakeholders, and helps align actors in addressing complex challenges like malnutrition, climate change, and biodiversity loss.

Mr Eltaweel welcomed a distinguished panel of speakers that included:

- Ms Siobhan Kelly, Agribusiness Officer at the Agrifood System and Safety Division at FAO
- Ms Manisha Pandya, Project Coordinator at Self Employed Women Association (SEWA) from India
- Ms Rita Bonwi Njابه, Alumna of the UN Food Systems Youth Leadership Programme from Cameroon

Ms Mia Madsen, Policy Officer at the Hub, moderated both morning and afternoon sessions.

Key Insights from Panellists

The Dialogue panel of distinguished experts shared their extensive experience and insights on inclusive, participatory design to transform food systems.

Ms Kelly underscored the long-standing role of multistakeholder collaboration in agrifood systems. While such collaboration is not new, she pointed out that its integration into national policies and program implementation has become more widespread, especially following the UN Food Systems Summit. Countries that have embraced a systems approach are increasingly adopting multistakeholder mechanisms in food systems governance. However, Ms Kelly warned that these mechanisms require substantial resources in capacity, time, and funding and must be designed to operate efficiently to avoid resource waste. She introduced a guide co-developed by FAO, UNEP, and UNDP – titled [Rethinking our food systems: A guide for multistakeholder collaboration](#), which outlines five key building blocks for successful multistakeholder collaboration. These include fostering broad participation, ensuring a good understanding of the food system, and nurturing inclusive and effective cooperation. The guide emphasizes that stakeholders from less visible sectors must be included to create a truly inclusive system. Ms Kelly cited examples from Uganda and Rwanda, where national committees and strategies foster deeper collaboration across sectors.

Drawing on her extensive work with rural women in India, Ms Pandya presented the critical issues facing women farmers, particularly in relation to access to land, finance, and market opportunities. She explained how cultural barriers prevent women from being recognized as farmers, excluding them from mainstream financial support and government schemes. She stressed the importance of organizing women into collectives to amplify their voices and provide them with greater bargaining power. Digital and financial inclusion were identified as key enablers for empowering women, allowing them to access resources and participate more fully in economic activities. Ms Pandya also explained that there is a need to establish a climate resilience fund specifically for women farmers, which would provide soft loans and grants to help them recover from climate-related shocks. She shared the success story of Ramilaben Parmar, a woman farmer from Gujarat who transformed her livelihood through SEWA's support, providing a model for empowering rural women through financial inclusion and agricultural innovation

To close the panel, Ms Njابه shared her experience as a youth leader in Cameroon, where she works with the Ministry of Agriculture to integrate young people into the country's food systems transformation national pathway. She highlighted the importance of youth participation in all phases of food system initiatives, from design to implementation, and called for greater resources to support youth-led projects. Ms Njابه stressed that young people are often excluded from decision-making processes despite being crucial to the future of food systems. She advocated for intergenerational knowledge transfer and the establishment of innovative financing mechanisms, such as accessible insurance systems and market information platforms, to better engage youth in agriculture.

Dialogue with National Convenors

Following the panel, National Convenors were invited to share insights on inclusive participatory designs. The Convenors were provided with two guiding questions:

1. Please share examples of successful inclusive participatory design, implementation, and monitoring initiatives where stakeholder engagement has been actively integrated into national policy or strategy development for food systems transformation.
2. How can innovative ideas from underrepresented stakeholders be supported and piloted at the country level? What are the key enablers, based on your experience?

The Convenors' contributions were centered on sharing country-specific experiences and challenges related to food system transformation. Several Convenors emphasized the importance of multistakeholder collaboration, stressing the need for coordination among government ministries and between public and private sectors. They noted that this type of collaboration helps align national priorities with food system goals, including nutrition, climate resilience, and agricultural development.

The interventions touched upon several key topics essential for the transformation of agrifood systems. Emphasis was placed on the importance of inclusiveness in these systems, advocating for the involvement of diverse stakeholders, including those who may not reside in rural areas but maintain strong connections through agrifood tourism and community engagement. Recognizing the contributions of all individuals involved in agriculture is crucial, as it fosters a greater acknowledgement of their efforts, which can enhance sustainability and promote biodiversity.

The discussions also reflected on the evolving landscape of food systems, which has shifted to incorporate national security issues, particularly in light of climate change and its impacts on agricultural practices. Engaging various stakeholders in meaningful dialogues is vital to ensure that the voices of those concerned with local security are included in food system discussions, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges at hand.

Moreover, developing strategic documents outlining multiple pathways for food system transformation was a focal point of the discussions. These documents incorporate private sector investment, nutrition, and climate change initiatives, emphasizing the collaborative processes that led to their creation. However, there were concerns regarding the proliferation of multistakeholder forums addressing different issues, as this overlap may lead to confusion and dilute focus on critical challenges within the food system.

Addressing crises within food system strategies was also discussed, including ensuring that policies reflect the complexities of crises and provide mechanisms for effective management. The need to examine existing policies to better align with practical actions within the food system framework was highlighted as essential for achieving sustainable outcomes. Finally, establishing mechanisms to assess progress and evaluate how policies have been implemented into actionable strategies was emphasized. This evaluation process is crucial for understanding the effectiveness of food system initiatives and ensuring that transformative goals are met. Collectively, these insights underline the importance of fostering an inclusive,

collaborative environment that recognizes the interconnectedness of social, economic, and environmental factors in achieving sustainable food systems.

The Way Forward

The meeting brought light to several crucial takeaways related to the transformation of food systems. First, a key aspect discussed was incorporating crises, such as recent flooding impacts on crops, into food transformation strategies. Participants emphasized recognizing these challenges to navigate the food system roadmap effectively.

Second, the emphasis on financial support for farmers underscored the need for inclusive economic policies that empower individuals and communities. This approach is critical for enhancing farmers' livelihoods and ensuring their active participation in the food system.

Third, effective multistakeholder collaboration was identified as essential for successful policy implementation. Participants stressed the importance of creating clear, concrete agendas to combat fatigue and encourage active stakeholder engagement. Additionally, the urban-rural continuum was noted as critical for fostering interdependence among various groups involved in food systems.

Finally, a participatory approach was deemed vital, allowing countries to engage in the transformation process without solely relying on UN interventions. This type of approach can enhance farmers' access to resources, reduce poverty, and alleviate social tensions.

Mr Elthaweel provided closing remarks at the morning and afternoon sessions. In his conclusion, he re-emphasized that successful multistakeholder platforms should actively involve diverse stakeholders, including smallholder farmers, women, youths, and Indigenous Peoples. He called for improved capacity building and transparent governance structures that ensure fair representation and decision-making. The Dialogue reinforced the importance of collaboration, financial inclusion, and community engagement as foundational elements for building a more equitable and sustainable food system.