

FOOD SYSTEMS SOLUTIONS DIALOGUES

Leadership skills for managing complex and polarized stakeholder relations

5 November 2025

Summary Report

Introduction

The Food Systems Solutions Dialogues (FSSD) are purposeful, organized events that unite 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 launches annually. Morning and afternoon sessions are held for each Dialogue to accommodate different time zones. On 5 November 2025, the Dialogue "Leadership skills for managing complex and polarized stakeholder relations" was held as part of the 2025 FSSD series. The Dialogue was organized in partnership with the [UNDP Food and Power Initiative](#) (FPI) and the [Conscious Food Systems Alliance](#) (CoFSA). This Summary Report reflects the combined discussions from the two sessions (morning and afternoon).

The Dialogue explored the essential leadership skills and inner capacities needed by National Convenors and other food systems actors to navigate complex and often polarized multi-stakeholder environments. It highlighted how personal values, relational skills, and the ability to build trust and manage power dynamics are as crucial as technical expertise in advancing inclusive and sustainable food systems transformation. Drawing inspiration from the Conscious Food Systems Alliance and the UNDP Food and Power Initiative, speakers and participants reflected on the "invisible yet essential ingredients" of effective food systems governance, such as self-awareness, empathy, resilience, and conscious collaboration. The session provided a platform for National Convenors to share experiences, identify lessons on cultivating these leadership qualities, and discuss strategies to strengthen wellbeing, relationships, and systemic impact in driving national food systems transformation.

Setting the Scene

Ms. Lena Savelli, Deputy Director of the UN Food Systems Coordination Hub, opened both Dialogue sessions by welcoming participants and introducing the focus on leadership skills for managing complex and polarized stakeholder relations. Highlighting the pivotal role of National Convenors, she underscored the importance of inclusive collaboration across sectors and stakeholders, including government ministries, Indigenous Peoples, youth, academia, farmer organizations, civil society and the private sector. She encouraged participants to reflect on how to strengthen resilience, build trust, and foster value-based,

people-centered leadership to drive sustainable and equitable food systems transformation.

The morning and afternoon sessions featured a distinguished panel that brought together global and national perspectives on cultivating the leadership and interpersonal skills needed to navigate complex stakeholder relations in food systems transformation. The panel included:

- Mr Christian Derlagen, Senior Food Systems Advisor, UNDP
- Ms Charlotte Dufour, Senior Practice Advisor, Conscious Food Systems Alliance
- Mr Karma Tshering, National Convenor, Bhutan
- Ms Janine Giuberti Coutinho, Project Coordinator of the Office of the National Secretariat on Food and Nutrition Security, Ministry for Social Development, Brazil

Ms Abigail Stein from the Conscious Food Systems Alliance, moderated the morning session, while Ms Mia Madsen, Policy Officer at the Hub, moderated the afternoon session.

Key Insights from Panellists

Mr. Christian Derlagen underscored the often-overlooked importance of understanding power dynamics in food systems transformation. He explained that while discussions frequently center on technical and financial solutions, limited attention is given to the political and economic barriers that shape outcomes. Referring to the UN Secretary-General's opening remarks at the UNFSS+4 Stocktake, where he stressed the urgency of addressing power imbalances, Mr. Derlagen emphasized that achieving equitable and sustainable food systems requires recognizing visible, hidden, and invisible forms of power and ensuring the meaningful inclusion of women, youth, farmers, Indigenous Peoples, and local actors in decision-making. He introduced UNDP's Food and Power Initiative, which supports governments and communities in mapping and navigating power relations through research, capacity building, and dialogue. He concluded by encouraging participants to reflect on how they engage with power and to promote spaces where less powerful actors can influence food systems governance.

Ms. Charlotte Dufour highlighted the deeply human dimensions of food systems transformation. She noted that National Convenors operate in complex environments shaped by competing mandates, power dynamics, and vested interests, requiring diplomacy, empathy, and systems thinking. Drawing on lessons from CoFSA's informal dialogues held in 2023 and 2025 with senior policymakers and advisors, she emphasized the importance of cultivating inner capacities such as deep listening, humility, and respect to build trust and foster collaboration across diverse stakeholders. Ms. Dufour underscored that effective policy making depends on creating safe and transparent spaces for dialogue, translating technical language into accessible terms, and embracing vulnerability as a strength in leadership. She introduced the Conscious Food Systems Leadership Programme, which supports practitioners in developing these skills, and concluded that lasting transformation requires leaders to model the very change they seek to create.

Mr. Karma Tshering shared reflections from the Conscious Food Systems Alliance retreat held in October, 2025, highlighting five insights: strengthening leadership clarity, embodying presence before policy, recognizing that land and body remember wisdom, understanding that collective silence builds trust, and valuing gentle strength as true leadership. He emphasized that “leadership is not only an inner journey but also an outer art, one that harmonizes values, relationships, and actions in service of the greater whole”. In Bhutan, food is not viewed merely as a commodity, but as a continuous and sacred process carrying heritage, dignity, memory, and prayer. The act of praying before meals and expressing gratitude to farmers reflects a deep awareness that food connects people, nature, and spirit. “Land is sacred in Bhutan,” he noted, “and to work with it requires consciousness and mindfulness.” He announced the upcoming Global Summit on Conscious Food Systems, the first of its kind, which will be hosted by the Royal Government of Bhutan and the Conscious Food Systems Alliance (CoFSA), together with UNDP and partners, from 31 August to 4 September 2026. He noted that the summit will serve as a milestone to elevate consciousness as a key lever for transformation, share Bhutan’s lessons from Gross National Happiness, and inspire countries to integrate inner development with systemic change towards the achievement of the 2030 Agenda.

Ms. Janine Giuberti Coutinho outlined the mission of Brazil’s National Secretariat on Food and Nutrition Security, to plan, implement, coordinate, and monitor national public policies that promote food and nutrition security, and highlighted its engagement in UNDP’s Food and Power Initiative. Ms. Coutinho emphasized Brazil’s recognition of deep power asymmetries throughout the food system, from production to consumption, which have contributed to environments dominated by ultra-processed foods, aggressive marketing, misinformation, and limited access to healthy options. She explained that Brazil is examining these asymmetries through areas such as school food regulations and governance mechanisms, exploring how leadership and policy can help rebalance power for more equitable and nutritious food systems. She described three interconnected dimensions of power that shape food choices and policy outcomes: Corporate power, the dominance of large food and beverage companies controlling production, markets, and distribution of ultra-processed foods; Institutional imbalance, the influence of private interests seeking to delay or weaken public regulation; and Narrative power, the ability to shape public discourse, including efforts to question scientific evidence. Through this lens, Brazil aims to strengthen democratic governance and reclaim the public interest at the heart of its food systems transformation.

Dialogue with National Convenors

Following the expert panel, National Convenors and other dialogue participants joined breakout room discussions on the leadership skills and mindsets needed to navigate complex stakeholder relations. Facilitated in multiple languages by Charlotte Dufour, Christian Derlagen, Elena Dolmat, Maria Soledad Riestra, and Laouratou Dia, the sessions invited participants to share experiences on building trust, managing power dynamics, and fostering inclusive collaboration.

To guide the conversation, participants were provided with a few guiding questions:

1. What skills and qualities have been important in helping you navigate the complexities of your role as a National Convenor? What lessons do you bring from building trust and managing power dynamics and multi stakeholder collaboration?
2. How can National Convenors cultivate these skills? What support do National Convenors need?

During the breakout discussions, National Convenors and other dialogue participants reflected on the skills and qualities that support them in managing the complexities of often polarized stakeholder relations. They highlighted communication, empathy, adaptability, and teamwork as essential to engaging diverse actors and fostering collaboration. The discussions emphasized integrity, humility, and patience as qualities that help sustain credibility and trust, while noting the importance of analytical and negotiation skills, as well as decision-making based on evidence. Many shared that personal conviction and passion are what keep them motivated and committed to advancing food systems transformation despite challenges. This inner drive, they noted, helps sustain perseverance and inspire others to stay engaged in the process even when progress is gradual.

Drawing from their experiences, dialogue participants agreed that progress depends on creating inclusive and transparent spaces where all stakeholders feel heard and respected. Building trust requires listening carefully, being non-judgmental, and valuing others' perspectives, including those of youth, women, and local communities. Participants emphasized that effective collaboration comes from open dialogue, mutual respect, and ensuring that all actors, government institutions, civil society, farmers, and private sector representatives, can contribute on equal footing. The discussions highlighted that using accessible, non-technical language helps bridge understanding among diverse groups, while evidence and data are essential for strengthening accountability and supporting informed decisions. Progress often relies on finding common ground through consensus rather than uniformity and that decentralization and shared ownership encourage broader participation. Humility, consistency, and recognition of others' expertise were seen as key to maintaining trust and long-term collaboration across sectors.

To build these capacities further, dialogue participants called for more training, peer exchange, and opportunities for shared learning. They emphasized that capacity building in facilitation, communication, and coordination skills can facilitate the complex task of managing complex stakeholder consultations. Participants also highlighted the importance of reflection and peer learning spaces to share experiences and maintain motivation. They noted that institutional and political support are essential, including stronger coordination across ministries and more decentralized decision-making to enhance participation and ownership. Overall, it was agreed that continuous learning, collaboration, and reflection are key to leading inclusive and effective food systems transformation.

The Way Forward

Building on the rich insights and reflections shared during the Dialogue, the way forward centers on strengthening the leadership and inner capacities of National Convenors and food systems actors to manage complexity, build trust, and foster inclusive transformation. Participants emphasized that sustainable progress requires both systemic and personal shifts, linking technical expertise with empathy, self-awareness, and relational intelligence. Moving forward, National Convenors are encouraged to:

- Foster inclusive and transparent dialogue spaces that value diverse voices and perspectives, particularly those of women, youth, Indigenous Peoples, and smallholder farmers.
- Invest in personal and collective leadership development, combining technical training with opportunities for reflection, mindfulness, and peer learning.
- Strengthen institutional collaboration and coherence by promoting cross-ministerial coordination and shared ownership of food systems transformation.
- Leverage evidence and shared narratives to counter misinformation and rebalance power in food systems governance.

The Dialogue reaffirmed that transformative leadership is not only about managing stakeholders but about embodying the values of empathy, humility, and conscious collaboration. As countries advance towards the 2030 Agenda, cultivating these inner and relational capacities will be vital to sustaining momentum and achieving equitable, resilient, and people-centered food systems.

Concrete follow-up steps you can take if you are interested in following up with the Conscious Food Systems Alliance:

- **Sign up** to the CoFSA Newsletter and **become a member** (free) to be invited to the various CoFSA events and receive news and resources related to conscious food systems: <https://consciousfoodsystems.org/join-the-movement/>
- Mark your calendars for next years: **Global Conscious Food Systems Summit**, hosted by the Royal Government of Bhutan 31st August -4th September 2026.
- **Download tools** from the [CoFSA Toolkit](#) that can inspire you to bring more **consciousness practices** in your daily life and in your work space, such as mindful eating, Nature connection, conscious facilitation, mindful meetings.
- Watch out for the next cohorts of the **Conscious Food Systems Leadership Programme** (starting second quarter of 2026). The calls for registrations will be shared with you through the UN Food Systems Hub.