



UNFSS: GRASSROOTS PERSPECTIVES
An Independent Food Systems Summit Dialogue, Asia & Africa
18 February 2021, 14:00 – 16:00 IST
Convened by Bharat Krishak Samaj and Rythu Sadhikara Samstha (RySS)

Introduction

The UN Food Systems Summit has called for participation from diverse stakeholders in making the transition towards robust, equitable and sustainable food systems. The Food Systems Dialogues are an opportunity to bring the voices and perspectives of diverse and often underrepresented food systems actors into the Summit process.

As organizations that advocate for and work towards the interests of farmers and producers in India, we believed it necessary to organize an Independent Dialogue that would represent the farmers' stakes in our food systems. The problems of unsustainable production, producer's livelihoods, consumer welfare and the environment are often seen at odds with one another. However, these issues intersect for the farmer, who is both a producer and a consumer, and depends on the environment for his/her livelihood. This is especially important in the context of the Global South, where large populations depend on agriculture for their livelihood. Keeping this in mind, the focus of our dialogue was on 'Building synergies between seemingly competing interests of production, consumption, livelihoods and the ecosystem'.

The geographical scope of our dialogue was Asia and Africa. Although the two continents comprise diverse ecologies and cultures, there are many similarities in our food systems that made our discussion a rich source of insights and learning. We hope to draw attention to the interests of farmers from the Global South through this Dialogue.

Method

The Dialogue was co-convened by Rythu Sadhikara Samstha (RySS) and Bharat Krishak Samaj, organizations that work on agriculture and farmers' welfare in India. RySS is a not-for-profit organization set up by the Andhra Pradesh government to work towards farmer's empowerment. It has pioneered the implementation of Zero Budget Natural Farming (ZBNF) across Andhra Pradesh through farmer-to-farmer dissemination and a network of Community Resource Persons (CRPs). Bharat Krishak Samaj was founded as a non-political, non-sectarian association of agriculture producers on 3 April 1955. It advocates for farmer's welfare and prosperity, while providing a platform to discuss agrarian problems and their solutions, through meetings, conferences, and seminars. It also provides inputs in the formulation and promotion of national agricultural policies.

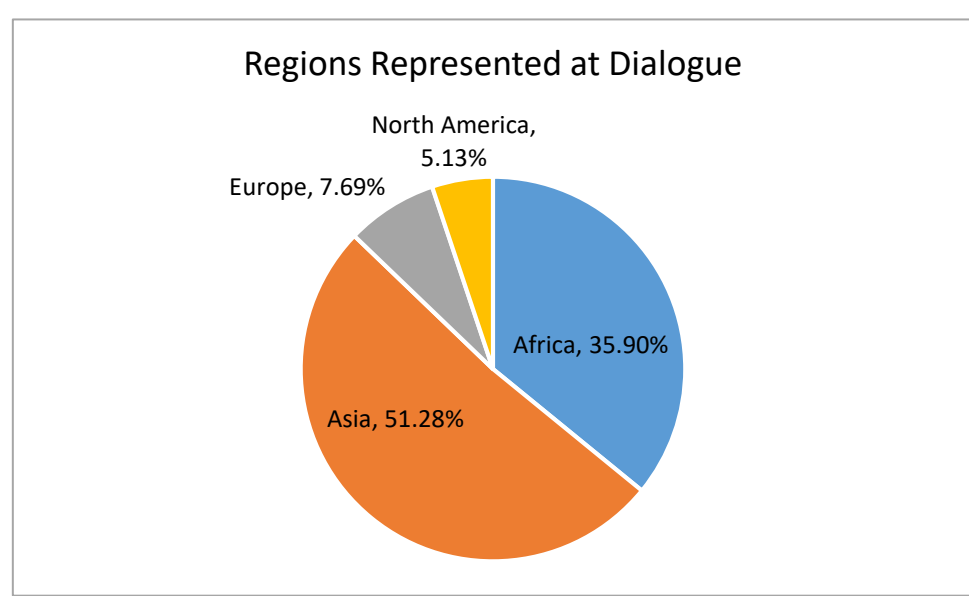
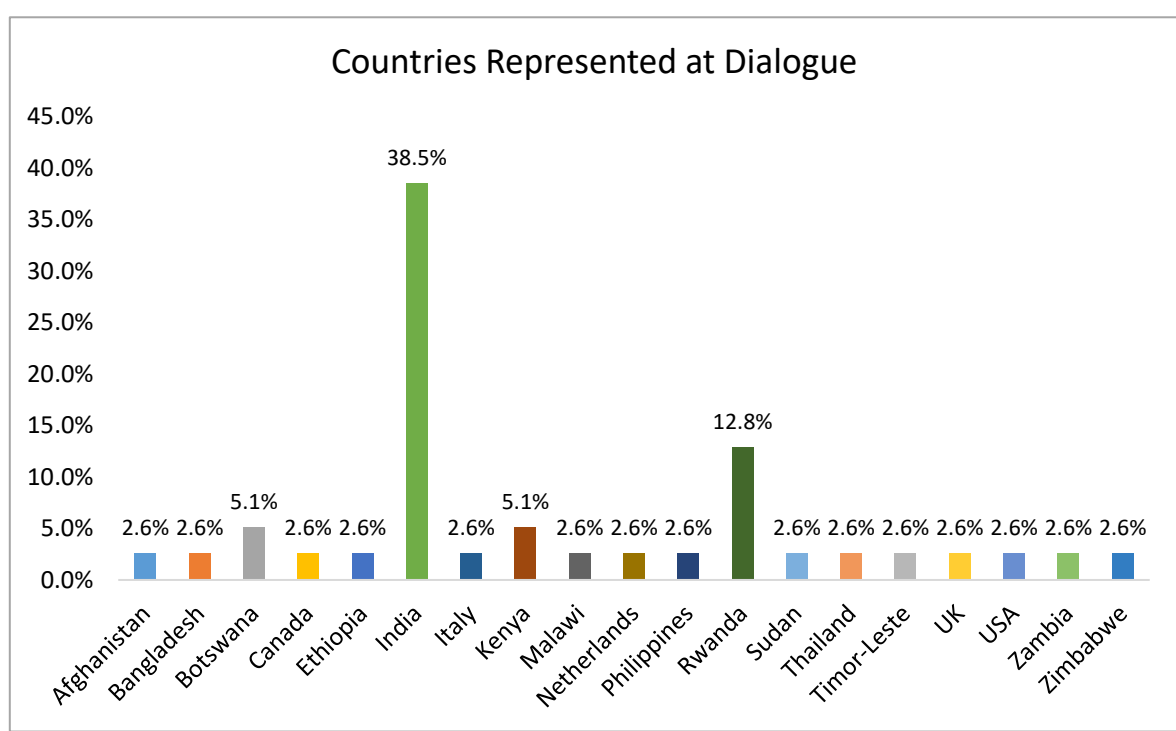
The structure of the Dialogue closely followed the recommendations given in the Food Systems Dialogue Gateway. The five Action Tracks of the UNFSS served as the basis for the discussion topics. The Dialogue participants were requested to indicate an Action Track of their preference. As most of our participants indicated their preference for Action Tracks 1, 3 and 5, we decided to coalesce the Action Tracks into 4 Discussion groups:

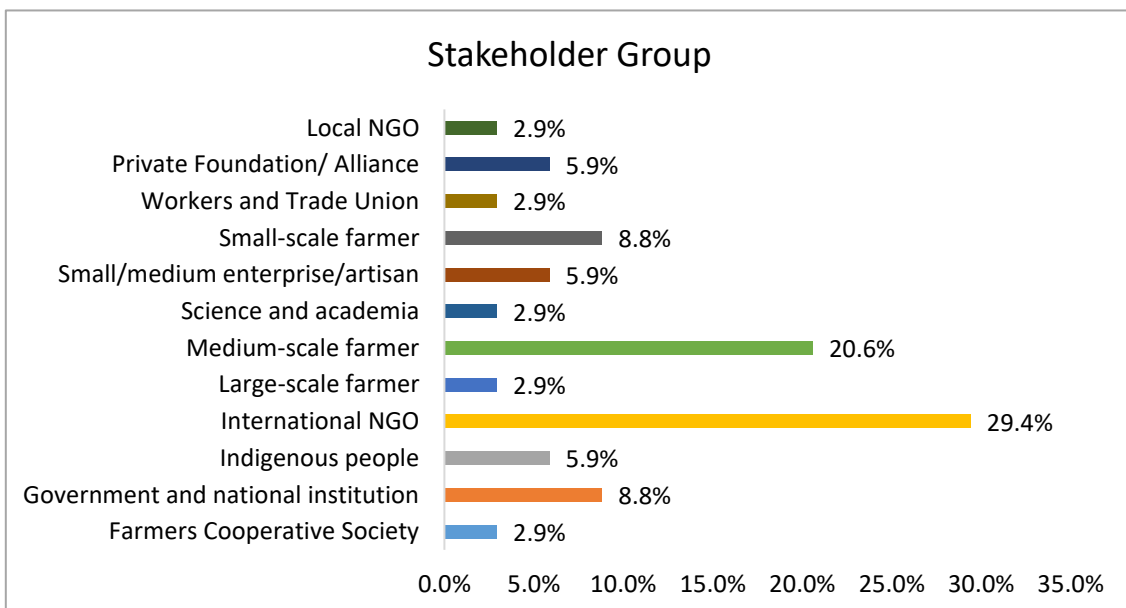
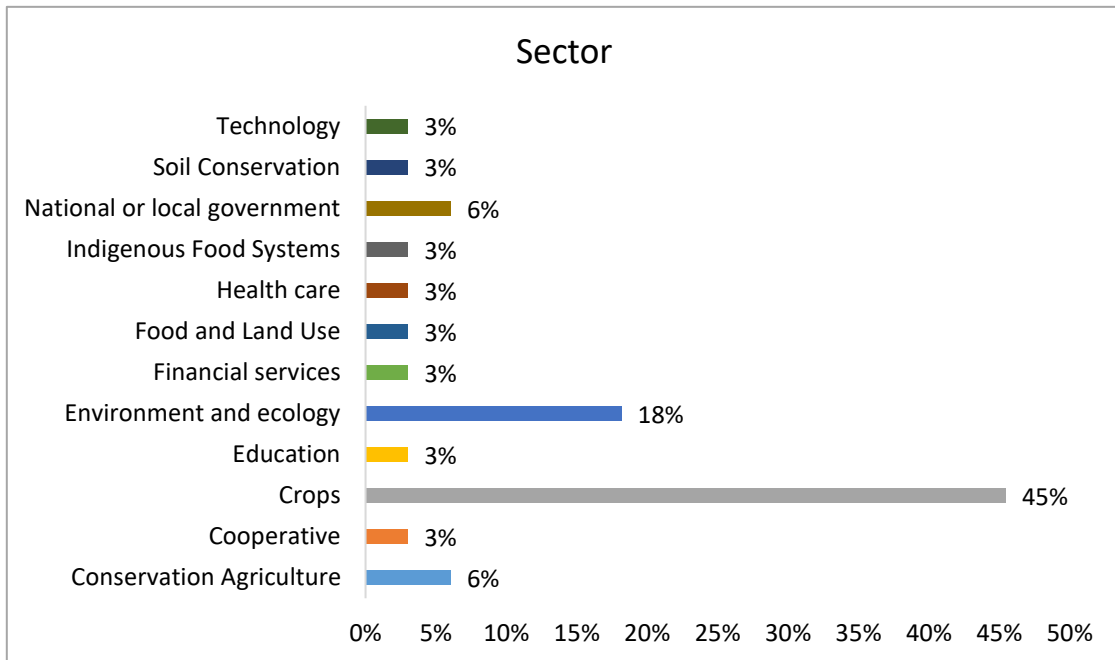
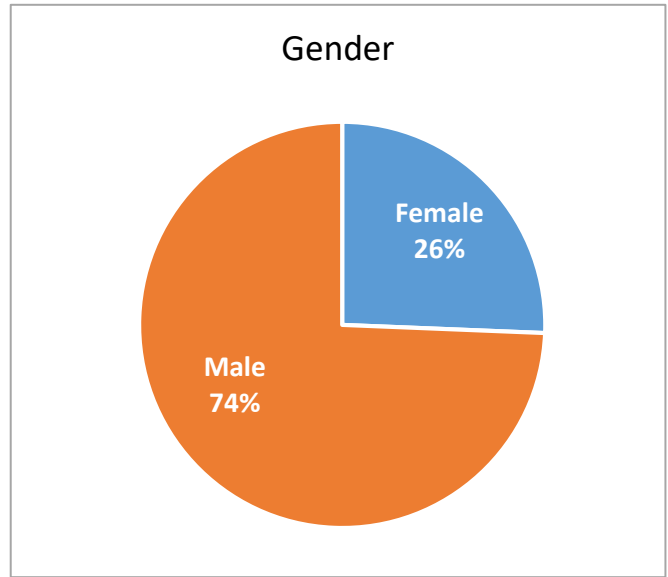
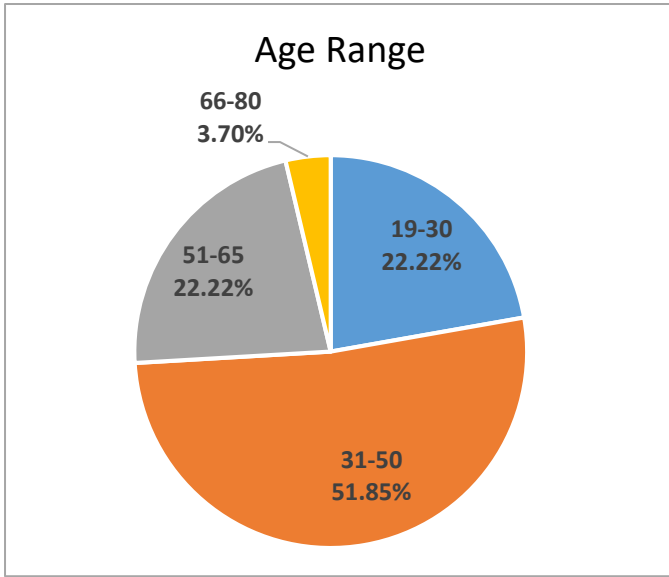
- **Discussion Group 1** - AT1 (Ensure access to safe and nutritious food for all) and AT2 (Shift to sustainable consumption patterns)
- **Discussion Groups 2a and 2b** - AT3 (Boost nature-positive production)
- **Discussion Group 3** - AT4 (Advance equitable livelihoods) and AT5 (Build resilience to vulnerabilities, shocks and stress)

The Discussion Starter paper for their preferred Action Track was then shared with them, which formed the basis for the discussion. We attempted to keep the number of participants in each group within the range of 10-12. Since the Dialogue was to be conducted online over the Zoom platform, in accordance with Covid-19 restrictions, Breakout Rooms were used to facilitate the Discussion Sessions.

Participant Information

The event had 59 registrations overall. Approximately 40 participants attended the Dialogue on 18 February. This number excludes the Convenors, technical team and internal resource persons such as note-takers (12 members in all). Based on the attendee data, there was participation from 19 countries at the Dialogue. India was the most well represented country, followed by Rwanda. Although the Dialogue’s geographical scope was Asia and Africa, there was also participation from Europe and North America. A little less than half of the participants fell within the age range of 31-50, while the remaining were equally divided into the 19-30 and 51-65 groups. There was relatively little representation of the age group 66-80, while there were no participants in the age ranges of 0-18 or 80+. In terms of gender, approximately 3 out of 4 respondents identified as male while only a quarter identified as female. The sector diversity was quite high, with a large percentage of respondents working in the area of Crops, followed by Environment & Ecology. The largest stakeholder group among the respondents was International NGOs, followed by Medium-scale Farmers.







Dialogue Overview

The dialogue began with opening remarks by Mr. Vijay Kumar Thallam, a retired officer of the Indian Administrative Service (I.A.S.), who is Advisor to the Andhra Pradesh Government on Agriculture and Co-Vice Chairman of RySS. He is also the Vice-Chair on Production to the UNFSS Champions Network. Mr. Vijay Kumar welcomed the participants and thanked them for joining the Dialogue. He emphasized the unique opportunity that the Food Systems Dialogues provide for bringing grassroots voices into the process and outcomes of the UNFSS. Mr. Vijay Kumar also highlighted the sense of urgency surrounding the Summit's objective: to transform food systems to benefit producers, consumers and the environment. He outlined the importance of perspectives from Asia and Africa, and invited participants to draw from their rich grassroots and research experience to suggest breakthrough solutions for local as well as global contexts. He also hoped that the conversations would continue beyond the Dialogue and inform actions on the ground.

Mr. Ajay Vir Jakhar, the Chairman of Bharat Krishi Samaj and Vice-Chair for Action Track 2 at the UNFSS, then addressed the participants. He spoke about the potential that food systems have to improve the health of our environment, our bodies and our economies. The UNFSS is working towards realizing this potential. Mr. Jakhar then expanded on the five Action Tracks, highlighting that they are not silos but just guidelines for discussion, and that the most valuable solutions would be applicable across Action Tracks. Mr. Jakhar also described the public engagement strategy of the UNFSS, including the Food Systems Dialogues, Champions Network, Public Forums and surveys. These aim to mobilize public participation in the Summit, making it a people's movement, much like the Paris Agreement on climate change. He concluded by introducing the four Facilitators for the Discussion Groups and explaining the Breakout Rooms process.

- **Discussion Group 1** - AT1 (Ensure access to safe and nutritious food for all) and AT2 (Shift to sustainable consumption patterns)

Facilitator - G Muralidhar, Senior Consultant/Anchor in Programme Strategy, Planning and Technical Support for Rythu Sadhikara Samstha.

Concerning AT1, the participants agreed that providing access to safe and nutritious food to all was possible and achievable, but required significant policy shifts and ground level changes. One of the most important steps to be taken towards this is to localize food value chains and public distribution programmes. This would lead to less food loss, sustainable and nutrition-sensitive agriculture, and a more resilient food system. The participants highlighted the importance of building resilience in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has severely undermined food and nutrition security for millions in Asia and Africa. Regarding the issue of food safety, the participants emphasized the importance of incorporating traditional, indigenous knowledge, along with scientific knowledge. This information should be disseminated to all consumers, through food safety awareness campaigns and curriculums. The food safety polices and implementing bodies (such as FSSAI) need to be strengthened to tackle systemic issues such as adulteration and chemical residues in food. Along with this, the safety of air and water should also be ensured, as they can affect the health benefits accrued from safe and nutritious food.

The participants then addressed the issue of moving towards more sustainable and nutritious consumption patterns. Diversifying and localizing diets was seen as the way forward. Globalization and industrialization have resulted in increased consumption of processed foods in both Asia and Africa, which are often subsidized. This results in processed food being more affordable than fresh, organic produce, disproportionately affecting the health of the poor and marginalized. Thus, governments should encourage the production and consumption of locally sourced foods. The group also suggested producers and consumers should be organized into institutional collectives, which need to work together to better our food systems.



- **Discussion Group 2a** –AT3 (Boost nature-positive production)

Facilitator - Dr. Leigh Ann Winowiecki, Soil Systems Scientist at World Agroforestry (ICRAF), Nairobi, Kenya.

In this discussion, participants concurred on the need to change the narrative around farming such that parents can actually encourage their children to pursue it. In most parts of Asia and Africa, farming is associated with pain and poverty. Moving away from conventional farming practices could help change this narrative to one of hope and productivity. Participants pointed out that current farming policy often incentivizes chemically intensive agriculture, and concrete actions need to be taken to encourage nature-positive approaches, such as minimum tillage and conservation agriculture. Rwanda's Green Growers initiative was brought up as an example of such a policy action. Policy that incentivized funding for non-conventional agriculture was also crucial. The importance of indigenous knowledge was also recognised in this transition, as traditional farming practices were more ecologically sensitive and sustainable. There is an urgent need to actively conserve and promote such indigenous knowledge, which is rapidly dying out due to the pressures of food security and commercialization.

The discussants then brought up the many implementation challenges that they had observed at the ground level. In the African context, smallholder farmers lack access to resources and policy support to make the transition to sustainable production. Intensive capacity building (such as educating farmers on effective farming practices) and providing access to resources (such as markets and value chains) were required to overcome these hurdles. Technology was also considered as a tool to increase access to resources, and to reduce the gender gap in agriculture. The participants agreed that any change had to be community-driven to be sustainable over time. Thus, communities needed to be empowered to take ownership of this transition through FPOs, women's SHGs and other collectivizing schemes. Informal/formal networks for resource and equipment sharing would also help make this transition sustainable over time.

- **Discussion Group 2b** –AT3 (Boost nature-positive production)

Facilitator – Ajay Vir Jakhar, Chairman, Bharat Krishak Samaj and Vice-Chair of Action Track 2 for the UNFSS

The participants began by addressing the question of whether it was possible to shift to nature-positive production while maintaining productivity. The example of regenerative agriculture was brought up, which can be undertaken even in dryland ecologies. This type of production is environment friendly while also increasing productivity and profitability. A few participants spoke of their personal experience as farmers practicing conservation agriculture in India. They had seen improved yields, soil health and fertility and increased incomes. Another participant illustrated the experience of Thailand in implementing integrated land and water management in agriculture. The participants noted that traditional farming practices are also regenerative and scientific concepts such as permaculture and agroecology validate their significance. Thus, communities should be empowered to revive their indigenous knowledge to improve both human and planetary health.

The participants then discussed the implementation and scaling challenges for nature-positive approaches. Currently, the commercialization of agriculture has led to chemical intensive monocropping. This can make communities more vulnerable to shocks such as drought and famine, as history has often demonstrated (for instance, the Irish potato famine). It was agreed that the first requirement for the transition was the empowerment of small farmers. This would require support through policy instruments and collectivizing institutions such as cooperatives and FPOs. The lack of access or affordability of organic inputs was another constraint preventing the large-scale adoption of nature-based production. The setting up of NPM (non-pesticide management) shops at the local level (as in Andhra Pradesh) could be a policy instrument to encourage natural farming and boost the village economy. The involvement of youth was also considered crucial in facilitating the shift. The participants also recognised the importance of creating solutions that are sensitive to local contexts and ecologies.



The discussion then moved to nature-positive production outside agriculture, i.e. in animal husbandry and livestock management. Animal husbandry is often held responsible for environmental degradation. However, the problem lay not in animal husbandry itself, but in the way, it is undertaken. The industrialized animal agriculture of developed countries are resource-intensive and harm the environment, whereas traditional livestock rearing in pastoral economies do not have such impacts. The participants pointed out that livestock breeding can ensure a circular flow of nutrients, with manure going back into the soil as a fertilizer. It can also improve carbon sequestration. A participant spoke of his experience as a dairy farmer in Punjab. While he was earlier reliant on purchased feed for his cattle, he now makes his own natural cattle feed. This has resulted in better yield and fewer medical problems for his animals. It was also recognised that, in both developing and developed countries, farmers are now using rotational grazing to increase the productivity and sustainability of their grasslands. Ultimately, animal husbandry can be a way to achieve diversification of agroecological systems.

- **Discussion Group 3** - AT4 (Advance equitable livelihoods) and AT5 (Build resilience to vulnerabilities, shocks and stress)

Facilitator – Eliane Ubalijoro, Global Hub Director, Future Earth, Montreal and Executive Director of Sustainability in the Digital Age.

This group began the discussion by recognizing the complexity of the interconnections between various aspects of food systems. The importance of learning from nature, linking indigenous knowledge to modern science and disseminating it with the help of digitalization were also acknowledged. The participants then discussed the benefits of knowledge intensive and regenerative agriculture. This kind of agriculture encourages carbon sequestration, which in turn increases the groundwater table (for every gram of carbon sequestered, the soil can hold 8 grams more water). Regenerative agriculture also improves the soil microbiome. These can lead to greater resilience of farming to climate change and also decrease the chance of zoonosis like Covid-19.

The practicalities of promoting and implementing regenerative agriculture were then discussed. A crucial question was how these schemes would be funded. Participants suggested linking grassroots organizations in need of funding with financial/donor institutions that are looking to finance green initiatives. An example was Microsoft, which recently gave 1 billion dollars to companies that were showing long-term carbon sequestration, to help them achieve their net zero carbon goals. It was also necessary to empower communities and facilitate development that spreads from farmer to farmer. Women's SHGs and farmers could be considered as the unit of knowledge transfer. Universities could be enlisted to provide financial and capacity building training to these communities. The idea that farming is a business that has to provide financial as well as ecological returns should be mainstreamed.

Post the discussion sessions, the Breakout Rooms were closed and all the participants reconvened in plenary. Mr. Jakhar then invited the Facilitators to present the main points of their discussions. The Facilitators succinctly summarized the major outcomes from their discussions. This was followed by a question and answer session, where participants posed their questions or comments to the Dialogue Conveners and Facilitators. The questions and answers are summarized in Annexure 1.

Mr. Jakhar then invited Mr. Vijay Kumar to conclude the Dialogue. Mr. Kumar thanked all the participants for their invaluable contributions to the dialogue. He emphasized that the Dialogues would not just help in taking their voices to the UNFSS, but also in connecting and collaborating with each other. Mr. Kumar encouraged everyone to explore partnerships within the diverse group of stakeholders represented in the Dialogue, from policymakers to academia to practitioners. He also requested participants to share their game changing solutions, which are already in practice on the ground, with the Dialogue team. These would serve as the contribution of the Dialogue to the Summit process and as a foundation for further collaboration. Mr. Kumar concluded by expressing hope that the conversations started at the Dialogue would continue to take place and inform future work in food systems.



Annex. 1: Questions Posed by the Dialogue Participants

Note: Grammar and language imperfections in the original questions/comments and answers are to be expected, given the rapid nature of the Q&A. The initials before each response indicate the respondent (VK= Vijay Kumar, AJ=Ajay Jakhar, LW= Leigh Winowiecki).

No.	Themes	Question(s)/Comment(s)	Responses(s)
1.	<i>Summit Process – Dialogue Outcomes</i>	What happens next after this Dialogue?	<p>VK: We will be synthesizing the outcomes of the Dialogue from the Facilitators' observations and rapporteurs' notes. These outcomes will be uploaded on Food Systems Dialogues Gateway and will go into the proceedings of the UNFSS, where it will be curated by the Secretariat and inform the outcomes. But more importantly, which David Nabarro also said, we don't see this as a one off event, the connections made during these dialogues should continue during and beyond the summit to work together to set right the food systems. This is an opportunity for us to collaborate and send our findings to the FSS. The recommendations from the FSS will translate into policy. Thus, we can achieve impact at different levels but I look forward most to the continuation of dialogue with the participants and building the India Africa connection to work on regenerative agriculture. This Dialogue is an invitation to all to find alliances and make connections to take forward these issues, which are so meaningful to us.</p> <p>AJ: We would also be sharing the outcomes and our recommendations to the UNFSS with you all over email.</p>
2.	<i>Summit Process - Political Economy</i>	Do you think that, as part of the game changers, we will get adequate representation of agro ecology, regenerative agriculture, natural farming approaches, because the concern is the UNFSS will become a forum for techno-fixes?	<p>VK: That is also my concern, but ultimately I am not worried because for solutions to take off, we need to establish them on the ground. If agro ecology is practiced by only 5% of farmers on the ground, then no matter how much we glorify it, we cannot amplify it. However, if this figure becomes 50%, it will automatically happen. So it depends on the number of farmers and the farming area under these approaches. How do we disseminate these ideas from a niche to the mainstream? The UNFSS is only one method, but it could happen in multiple ways.</p> <p>AJ: Another aspect that is also very important is the language that is used in preparing these recommendations/outcomes of the UNFSS. They have to be accessible, so that people from all walks of life can understand them. For example, if you use the word</p>



			<p>agency, institutions and policymakers can understand it, but not a farmer. As Vice-Chair, I have been advocating for the language of the recommendations to be simplified.</p> <p>LW: The UNFSS has been receiving many game changing solutions around agro ecology and natural farming. All of you who have been interested in submitting solutions, please use the Public Surveys of the Action Tracks. We take all the information from the surveys and incorporate them into the Manage, Protect and Restore components of AT3. In a Public Forum, it was pointed out that livestock isn't prevalent enough. We are now submitting a game changing solution on grasslands and rangeland management. We have received feedback from the industry, soil health scientists to the rangeland community. 40 institutes have given their feedback on the solution. So I fully support that all voices should be heard at the UNFSS.</p>
3.	<i>Summit Process-Financing</i>	<p>I think we should have a session on raising funding for natural, regenerative agriculture, because this is a critical element for the transition. The UNFSS needs to focus on this.</p>	<p>VK: There is a group in the UNFSS, which is looking at finances. I have contributed a paper there. We all know that If we transform to natural farming, there are multiple benefits to farmers, consumers and the planet. However, the benefit to government is even more in terms of avoided subsidies. We worked out, for one state, with 6 million farmers, that moving them into practicing agro ecology will take 10 years and 1.4 billion USD, but the government will save 5 billion USD in avoided fertilizer subsidies and reduced electricity consumption, because natural farming requires less water. This is a very powerful lever, because governments are struggling with finances. So science has to demonstrate and make tangible the benefits of agroecological transformation. This endeavor is still in its infancy. We are conducting a large study to tell our government the amount of reduction in water consumption and electricity expenditure by shifting to natural farming. Finance is a very serious constraint and it is currently incentivizing input intensive agriculture. This is an uneven playing field, and our voices need to be heard at various levels. The situation is that no one is taking climate change seriously; they are worried about today, not about what we should do today to prevent the shocks of tomorrow. We need to be able to grasp the complexity of this system and our situation. Can we see this in terms of benefits to different constituencies, if there is benefit to government in this transformation, maybe that will incentivize and attract them to the cause.</p>



4.	<i>Food Systems Issues – Payment for Ecological Services (PES)</i>	<p>However much we try to make agriculture nature-based and zero input, it requires an incentive from government. Changing the language in which we speak is very important. Farmers should be entitled to compensation for the ecological services they are providing. FOLU has published a report on the costs of conventional farming. But what is the incentive for farmers who change their business, taking major risks? We need to move the discourse from incentives to entitlement. WRI has launched an initiative to create tools and metrics to evaluate the economic benefits of ecological services. FOLU is also creating a sub-national landscape, which we want to trial in 2-3 years. We will be taking inputs from RySS and the Natural Farming Coalition. We are working on what are the benefits of natural farming and what costs the farmer will be entitled to. FOLU is also involved in an India-Ethiopia collective programme on sustainable agriculture.</p>	<p>VK: The farmer should receive entitlements for their efforts in providing public goods and services, not just incentives. We will include this in our recommendations to the FSS. We have a strong connect with Africa, and if any others want to work on strengthening the connections between Asia and Africa, we hope you will take it up.</p>
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Annex 2: List of Dialogue Participants

Note: *The names italicized and in bold are the Facilitators of the four Discussion Groups.*

Name	Organisation	Country
<i>G. Muralidhar</i>	Rythu Sadhikara Samstha	India
<i>Leigh Ann Winowiecki</i>	World Agroforestry (ICRAF)	United States of America
<i>Ajay Vir Jakhar</i>	Bharat Krishak Samaj	India
<i>Eliane Ubalijoro</i>	Future Earth, McGill University	Canada
Kassahun Suleman	David and Lucile Packard Foundation	Ethiopia
Rosine Ndayishimiye	Bridge2Rwanda	Rwanda
Jean Paul Nsengiyumva	Bridge2Rwanda	Rwanda
Marc Gijbers	WBCSD	Netherlands
Prosper Bizimungu	BiziSol	Zambia
Violet Kathambi	Kenya National Farmers' Federation	Kenya
Florence	Bridge2Rwanda	Rwanda
Elfas Mcloud Zadzagomo Shangwa	Farmers Pride International	Botswana
Ravi Kumar	INSEAD	India
Stewart Wilson	Commercial Farmers Union	Zimbabwe
Jacob Nyirongo	Farmers Union of Malawi	Malawi
Seth Cook	SYSTEMIQ	United Kingdom
Michael Misiko	The Nature Conservancy	Kenya
Nasratullah	Public Health	Afghanistan
Elias Bizuru	University of Rwanda	Rwanda
Almojtaba Hassabo	Federal Ministry of Animal Resources (FMoAR)	Sudan
Phrang Roy	The Indigenous Partnership	Italy
Christina M. Sayson	Independent	Philippines



P. Venkataramana	Rythu Sadhikara Samstha	India
Tanuja Prasad	Apply Complexity	India
Panida Thatujirangkul	Department of Agricultural Extension, Government of Thailand	Thailand
Molla Mohammad Neyamul Basar	Department of Cooperatives, Government of Bangladesh	Bangladesh
Naveen Chand	Parishkaar Technologies	India
Agustinho Ximenes	Catholic Relief Services (CRS)	Timor-Leste
Jayahari KM	FOLU India	India
Nikhil Ambish Mehta	Punjab Government	India
Brigitte Nyiridandi	Lecturer, University of Rwanda	Rwanda
Hardeep Singh	Organic Fruit & Vegetable Farmer	India
Butta Singh	Organic & Dairy Farmer	India
Aman Ahuja	Fruit & Vegetable Farmer	India
Gagandeep Singh	Dairy Farmer	India
Harprit Singh	Organic Farmer	India
Sahab Singh Dabas	Award-winning Sugarcane Farmer	India
Vikas Choudhary	Farmer practising Conservation Agriculture	India
Gihozo Aline	NA	NA
Yadwinder Singh	NA	India