UNFSS: GRASSROOTS PERSPECTIVES
An Independent Food Systems Summit Dialogue, India
29 January 2021, 11:00 – 13:00 IST
Convened by Bharat Krishak Samaj and Rythu Sadhikara Samstha (RySS)

Introduction

The UN Food Systems Summit 2021 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, we believed it necessary to organize an Independent Dialogue that would represent the farmers' stakes in our food systems. In India, while there are separate policies on agriculture, food security and nutrition, the food systems approach is lacking. 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. Keeping this in mind, the focus of our dialogue was on 'Building synergies between seemingly competing interests of production, consumption, livelihoods and the ecosystem', in the Indian context.

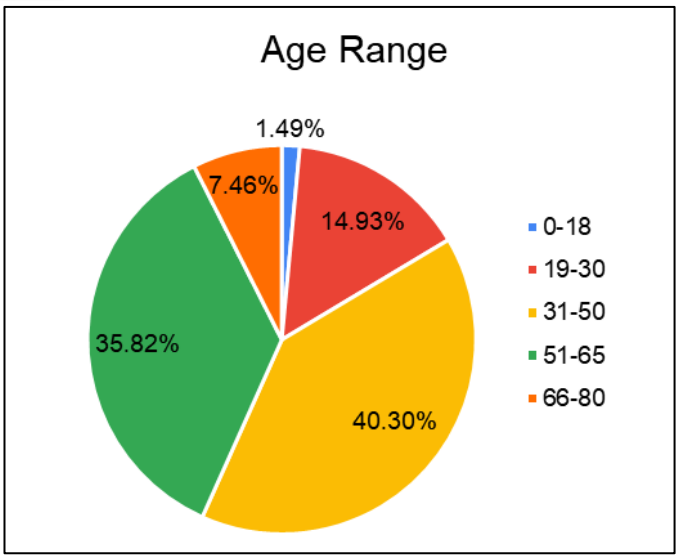
Method

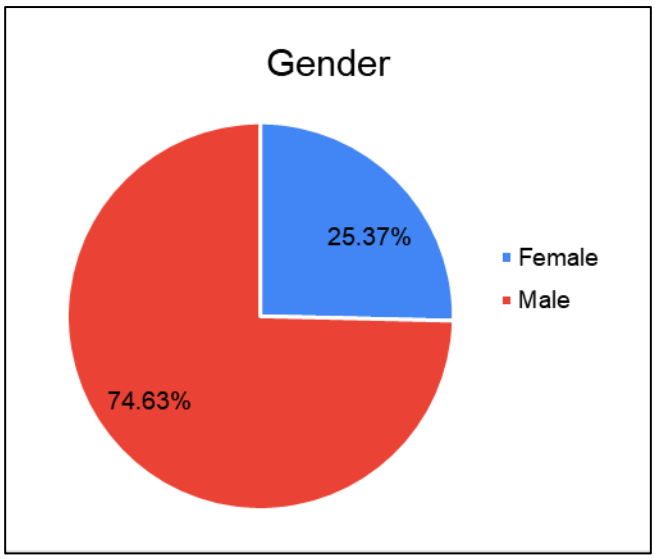
The Dialogue was co-convened by Rythu Sadhikara Samstha (RySS) and Bharat Krishak Samaj, organizations that work on agriculture and farmers' welfare in India. RySS is a not-for-profit organization set up by the Andhra Pradesh government to work towards farmer's empowerment. It has pioneered the implementation 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 several meetings, conferences, and seminars. It also provides inputs in the formulation and promotion of national agricultural policies.

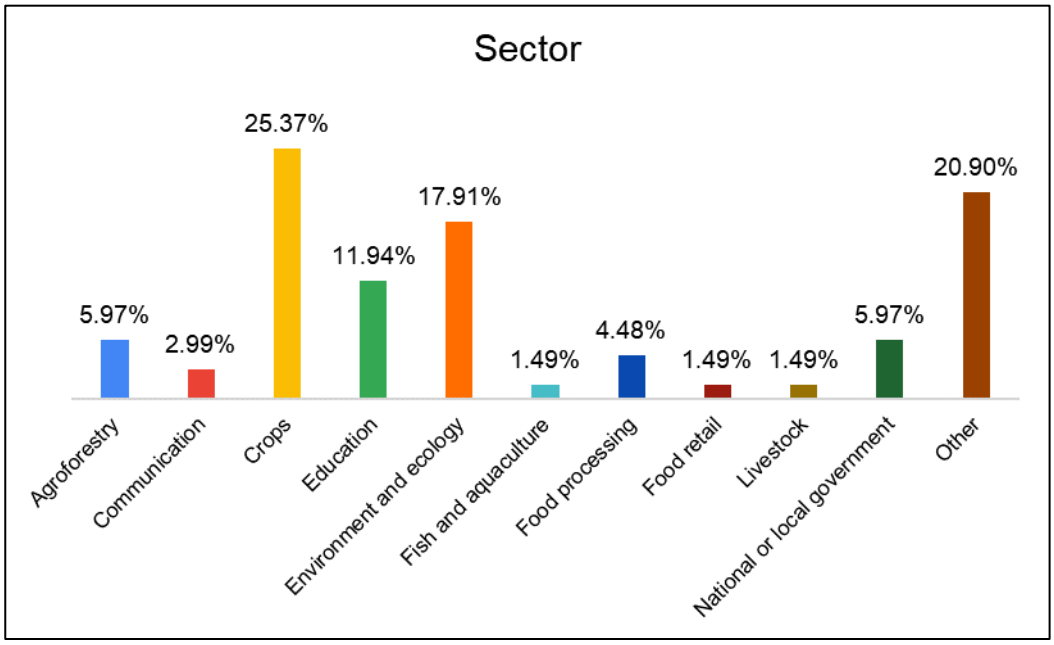
The structure of the dialogue closely followed the recommendations given in the Food Systems Dialogue Gateway. The five Action Tracks of the UNFSS served as the five discussion topics for the dialogue. The Dialogue participants were requested to indicate an Action Track of their preference. The Discussion Starter paper for their chosen Action Track was then shared with them, which would form the basis for the discussion at the dialogue. We attempted to keep the number of participants in each group within the range of 12-14. 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.

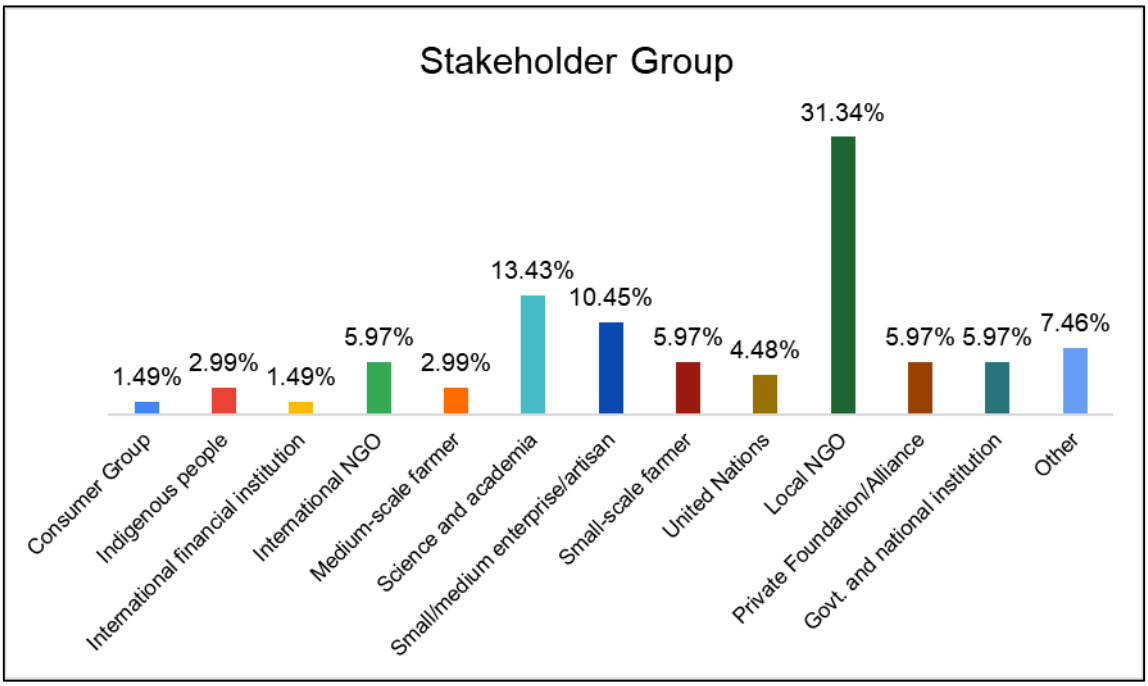
Participant Information

The event had 67 registrations overall. Approximately 59 participants attended the Dialogue on 29 January. This number excludes the Convenors, technical team and internal resource persons such as note-takers (15 members in all). Based on the registration data (which might differ from the actual attendee data), a majority of the respondents (over 76%) fell within the age groups of 31-50 and 51-65. There was little to no representation of the age groups 0-18 and 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 and Education. A relatively high proportion (20.9%) preferred to self-define their sector of work. The largest stakeholder group among the respondents was Local NGOs, followed distantly by Science & Academia and Small/medium enterprise/artisan.


Age Range
1.49%
7.46%
14.93%
35.82%
40.30%
0-18
19-30
31-50
51-65
66-80


Gender
25.37%
74.63%
Female
Male


Sector
5.97%
2.99%
25.37%
11.94%
17.91%
1.49%
4.48%
1.49%
1.49%
5.97%
20.90%
Agroforestry
Communication
Crops
Education
Environment and ecology
Fish and aquaculture
Food processing
Food retail
Livestock
National or local government
Other


Stakeholder Group
1.49%
2.99%
1.49%
5.97%
2.99%
13.43%
10.45%
5.97%
4.48%
31.34%
5.97%
5.97%
7.46%
Consumer Group
Indigenous people
International financial institution
International NGO
Medium-scale farmer
Science and academia
Small/medium enterprise/artisan
Small-scale farmer
United Nations
Local NGO
Private Foundation/Alliance
Govt. and national institution
Other

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 shaping the process and outcomes of the UNFSS. Mr. Vijay Kumar also outlined some of the major environmental, economic and social problems facing food systems in India 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 Krishak Samaj and Vice-Chair for Action Track 2 at the UNFSS, then addressed the participants. He spoke about the need for a systems approach and how this is being incorporated in the Summit process. Mr. Jakhar then expanded on the five Action Tracks, highlighting their membership structure and areas of overlap. He encouraged participants to only base their discussions and not restrict them to these Action Tracks. Mr. Jakhar also described the public engagement strategy of the UNFSS, including the Food Systems Dialogues, Champions Network, Public Forums and surveys. He concluded by introducing the five Facilitators of the Discussion Groups and explaining the Breakout Rooms process.

The participants were then allocated to a Breakout Room corresponding to an Action Track of their choice or field of work (in case of no preference). The Breakout Room Sessions were timed to close in one hour. Each Facilitator was assisted by two note-takers/rapporteurs who recorded the discussions on Zoom while also keeping note of the points of convergence/divergence and the major outcomes. Please find a brief summary of the discussions below:

- **AT1 Discussion:** Ensure access to safe and nutritious food for all

  Facilitator - Dr. G. V. Ramanjaneyulu, Executive Director, Centre for Sustainable Agriculture

  The participants discussed the key challenges and solutions for ensuring access to safe and nutritious food for all. Actions were discussed in three broad areas: improving access to nutritious foods for marginalized and rural communities, increasing consumer demand for natural, sustainably produced food and enhancing food safety.

  In order to improve access to food and food security, participants suggested that the current production systems need to change and adopt agro ecological approaches. Government needs to play a role in incentivizing natural farming and setting up Farmer Producer Organisations (FPOs), especially for small and marginal farmers. They also recommended village/community level measures such as storage and distribution systems and backyard poultry for landless households.

  To increase demand and consumption of nutritious food, the discussants recommended measures such as awareness campaigns, decentralizing procurement and distribution under the Public Distribution System (PDS), strengthening local markets (such as *mandis*) for farm produce and ensuring cooked, healthy meals to children under the Anganwadi and Mid-Day Meal programmes.

  To enhance food safety, the measures recommended were government certification of organic products, soil testing and discouraging perverse incentives and subsidies (such as electricity and fertilizer subsidies) that encourage monoculture and industrial agriculture.

- **AT2 Discussion**: Shift to sustainable consumption patterns

  Facilitator - Dr. Jayahari KM, Food and Land Use Coalition (FOLU) India Country Coordinator at World Resources Institute (WRI)

  This discussion on AT2 revolved primarily around the question of how to define sustainable consumption and how can we move towards it. It was decided that sustainable consumption patterns would entail sustainability not just for the environment and the human body, but also over time. For this, changes needed to be made not just in production systems and government regulations but also in consumer behavior.

There was an understanding that our current food systems encourage the consumption of unhealthy, processed foods, which are not only more affordable than fresh, healthy food but also more aspirational. The role of advertising was debated in this context and the discussants agreed that punitive measures such as regulating advertisements or taxing unhealthy foods needed to be supplemented by constructive measures such as building awareness and providing affordable alternatives.

Discussants also questioned the role of government in regulating food choices and consumption, as the Right to Food is recognized by the Indian constitution. The consensus was that the government's role should involve providing information and awareness to consumers while also implementing behavior change interventions such as removing sugary foods from checkout counters and promoting indigenous foods and kitchen gardens in schools. Government schemes and systems that are already in place, such as mid-day meals and Anganwadis, can be used to facilitate sustainable consumption at the local level.

The discussants then returned to the question of who should decide the standards for healthy and sustainable diets. Everyone agreed that, while national frameworks are necessary, they need to be flexible to be adopted within local cultural and environmental contexts. Indigenous and traditional foods, wherever supported by science, should be promoted.

The question of food waste was also discussed. The participants agreed that shorter value chains and the farm-to-fork approach would help in tackling food waste. Circular economy approaches should also be promoted, not just in terms of food but the overall capital of a community. The government could also play a role by regulating the food waste of food retail businesses, through certifications or ratings.

- **AT3 Discussion:** Boost nature-positive production

  Facilitator – Dr. Arabinda Kumar Padhee, Director, Country Relations and Business Affairs, ICRISAT

  The discussion centered on the question of what measures should be taken to shift towards nature-positive production. Many discussants highlighted certain regenerative agriculture approaches such as Zero Budget Natural Farming (ZBNF), which has been implemented in states like Andhra Pradesh and Kerala. It was agreed that there is a lack of proper scientific evidence and poor documentation of traditional natural farming practices. These should be taken up on a priority basis and disseminated to both farmers and policy makers.

  The importance of local level collectives such as FPOs, Self Help Groups (SHGs) and cooperatives in bringing about the transition to natural farming on the ground was acknowledged. The role of the government in this transition was also discussed, in terms of incentivizing and subsidizing natural farming (such as compensation for ecosystem services) instead of chemical intensive agriculture.

  Participants also spoke about the consumption side of the issue, as increasing the market demand for natural produce is equally important. This could be done through consumer awareness and increasing the affordability of such produce. At the same time, farmers' incomes needed to be remunerative. Providing quality bio-inputs at low cost was also crucial to increasing farmers' margins.

- **AT4 Discussion:** Advance equitable livelihoods

  Facilitator - Ravindra A, Director, Watershed Support Services and Activities Network (WASSAN)

  In this discussion, there were two main overarching concerns: that farmers are perceived as only 'beneficiaries' and not as producers, service providers and risk-taking entrepreneurs; and how should we value farmers' contribution to the economy and ecology? The share of rural India in the national GDP is much smaller than the share of its population. This implies that, even if farmers were to get their fair portion of the consumer rupee, it might not amount to a substantial income redistribution. This calls for a more expansive understanding of the valuation of farmers' contribution, to include ecosystem services as well as their produce.

  The solutions discussed for the above mentioned concerns included strengthening the local, circular economy, ensuring better price realization for farmers and creating equitable systems of production.

This will involve knowledge generation at the grassroots level, enterprise development and infrastructure, all of which would require public investment. Crucial to such a transition would be farmers' collectives and women's SHGs, as a large proportion of small and marginal farmers are women. An appreciation for the ecological services provided by farmers should also be inculcated through mass consumer education, implemented through digital technologies. Finally, it should be remembered that the farmer is also a consumer and nutrition security should be ensured for farming households.

- **AT5 Discussion:** Build resilience to vulnerabilities, shocks and stress

  Facilitator - Sangeeta D.C. Agarwal, Project Manager - Natural Resource Management, KfW Development Bank

  Resilience and sustainability were two important keywords that anchored this discussion. The challenges of ensuring both resilience and sustainability, especially for marginalized and indigenous people, were discussed. Two closely linked approaches, of diversification and decentralization, emerged from the discussion.

  Diversity involved acknowledging the diversity of agro-ecologies in India and the world, and recognizing that diverse, localized approaches needed to be taken. Transitioning away from the monoculture, rice-wheat model of the Green Revolution would require crop diversification according to the local environment. This would not only ensure carbon sequestration but also lead to increased diversity of foods consumed.

  There was a consensus among the participants that production and consumption systems needed to be decentralized. This was further emphasized by the pandemic, where local supply chains became important. National and state policies needed to focus more on the principles of action and the outcomes rather than the inputs. Investing in local capacity building and consumer education would also facilitate decentralization.

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. Mr. Jakhar then invited Mr. Vijay Kumar to conclude the Dialogue.

Mr. Vijay Kumar thanked all the participants for their invaluable contributions to the dialogue. He proposed that, since the participants worked with diverse stakeholder groups such as farmers, youth, indigenous people and women, they could organize similar dialogues with these stakeholders. These perspectives would greatly enrich the Summit. Mr. Vijay Kumar also requested the participants to share a breakthrough solution that they or other organizations have implemented on the ground successfully. Although there is a broad understanding of the problems in food systems, there is a strong need for workable, context specific solutions. These solutions would be a concrete contribution of the Dialogue to the Summit process.

Finally, Mr. Vijay Kumar concluded by welcoming ideas from the participants on how to continue the conversations started at the Dialogue, for the UNFSS as well as to inform future work in the field.

Annex 1: List of Dialogue Participants

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

Name	Organisation
G.V. Ramanjaneyulu	Centre for Sustainable Agriculture (CSA)
KM Jayahari	Food and Land Use Coalition (FOLU), WRI India
Arabinda Padhee	ICRISAT
Ravindra Adusumalli	Watershed Support Services and Activities Network (WASSAN)
Sangeeta Agarwal	KfW Development Bank
PS Vijayshankar	SPS, Bagli, Dewas (MP)
Deborah Dutta	Institute of Rural Management
Srijit Mishra	Indira Gandhi Institute of Development Research
Minhaj Ameen	National Coalition for Natural Farming
Dr Shubalakshmi Iyer	AROEHAN
Rohit Parakh	ASHA Kisan Swaraj
Richa Kumar	IIT Delhi
Bruno Dorin	CIRAD (France) / CSH (India)
G. Poyyamoli	Consultant Coastal Ecologist, Taru Leading Edge, New Delhi
Vibha Varshney	Down To Earth
Karthik Gunasekar	Participatory Guarantee System Organic Council
Joy Daniel	Lipok Social Foundation
Rakesh Pandey	Shramik Bharti
Abhishek Singhania	National Coalition for Natural Farming
Krishnan Pallassana	Digital Green
Gurusharan singh	CARD Bhopal
Pawan Kumar Agarwal	Department of Consumer Affairs, Government of India

Pulikesh Naidu	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
Vineet Kumar	Centre for Science and Environment, New Delhi
Sasmita Jena	Welthungerhilfe
Nikhil Ambish Mehta	Punjab Government
Abhishek Jain	Council on Energy, Environment and Water
Shrinivas Anant Kher	MKCL knowledge foundation
Prabhakar Adhikari	PRAGATI, Koraput
Surabhi Singh	Council on Energy, Environment and Water
Nitya Rao	University of East Anglia
Sweta	GreyMatters
Raj Sitaraman	Isha Outreach
prachur goel	Socratus
Ethirajalu.R	Isha Foundation
Shanal Pradhan	Council on Energy, Environment and Water