0FOOD SYSTEMS DIALOGUES (FSDs)
NEW DELHI, 11 NOVEMBER 2019
CO-ORGANIZED BY BHARAT KRISHAK SAMAJ

SUMMARY REPORT*

*The format of FSDs Summary Reports is under development. This report may be subject to change

Executive Summary

On 11 November 2019 a Food Systems Dialogues (FSDs) event took place in New Delhi, India co-organized by Bharat Krishak Samaj. This event marked approximately one year since the inaugural Dialogues held in New Delhi, and was an opportunity to strengthen relationships formed at the 2018 event, to review progress, and further develop ideas and projects for change.

Approximately 120 participants attended, reflecting a range of actors working in Food Systems, from government officials to farmers, to representatives of the hotel industry, researchers in anthropology and nutrition, and members of development organizations.

Groups were asked to present one or more proposals to address a specific area of food systems, with a focus on the Indian context. Ideally, the proposals were to be achievable within 3 years. The prompt themes for dialogue at this event addressed the following areas: Climate change, food availability and strategies; Finance and investment; Agriculture, diets and nutrition in India; and Making data work for India's farmers.

The following is a summary of the groups' proposals for food systems transformation as well as the discussions that led them to their conclusions.

As is the norm at FSDs events, all Proposals outlined in this Summary Report are not attributed to any particular individual or organization. Each proposal did not necessarily receive universal support from all participants at the event; rather, the aim of this report is to capture recommendations made at the event, in order to allow continuity and consensus - a 'red thread' - to emerge across all FSDs events.

Proposals

'Climate change, food availability and strategies.'

***

Proposal 1: Situate the challenge of climate change in the context of broader challenges

Climate change should be understood in the context of the broad crises affecting farmers in India, in order for climate-appropriate solutions to be found, while prioritizing the wellbeing of Indian farmers.

India is grappling with an agrarian crisis; farmers across the country are in situations of severe distress. Climate change cannot be understood in isolation of these urgent problems. When designing strategies to mitigate the effects of climate change in India, those strategies which also benefit farmers should be prioritized (e.g. improved technologies, more efficient transport, and techniques for increased productivity).

In addition, it is challenging for farmers to embrace solutions which address the problem of climate change while they are first and foremost seeking to improve their livelihoods.

Therefore, climate change and farmer livelihoods must be considered as two parts of the same conversation.

Proposal 2: Break down silos and strengthen shared knowledge

Over the past 60 years, knowledge and innovation in Indian food systems has developed in silos. Actors in food systems should be supported to engage with each other, and to share knowledge. Infrastructure should be improved to strengthen platforms where individuals and groups can meet, document their experiences and learn from best practice.

It will be important to ensure that farmers themselves have a voice in information-sharing infrastructure, so that their direct experience in the field, as well as their needs, can be communicated to other actors in food systems, especially those designing solutions. This will help to avoid a 'top-down' approach' rather than proactively listening, and customizing solutions. Farmers could be connected to information-sharing platforms through existing bodies such as farmer and producer organizations.

Relatedly, in order to build a robust center of knowledge, it would be beneficial for food systems actors to take a collaborative approach, rather than a competitive one. In India, points of view

shared by university academics and by farmers often present as being somewhat in conflict; researchers may reach one conclusion, while farmers stress a different conclusion. This kind of zero-sum-game approach to knowledge sharing is evident in the debate taking place in India at present in regards to natural farming.

It is worth noting that such differences in perspective are sometimes rooted in disparate belief systems, rather than purely in scientific fact or traditional practices. Similarly, there can be a tendency to dismiss the ideas of another group, claiming that they are not relevant in certain parts of the country or in certain cases, rather than identifying which parts of these perspectives are relevant and useful. If actors sought to combine knowledge rather than compete, India could achieve a more comprehensive and useful information base for food systems.

Across the country, many different models are being tested by farmers, as means to overcome the farming crisis. It would be valuable to connect farmers to academics and institutions to document the best examples occurring across the country. Different states in India do indeed require different approaches for successful farming; therefore, it is important to create a holistic database of best practice examples.

Proposal 3: Bring innovation to subsidy systems

There is room for improvement in government subsidy systems to increase the uptake of suitable crops, as well as to models of production which improve productivity across the country.

At present, only certain crops and models of production are promoted by subsidies, whereas a holistic approach, tailored to the specificities of different regions, would be more effective. As an illustration of the variable outcomes of current subsidy policy, one can observe the implementation of drip and sprinkler irrigation technologies. In southern states, irrigation technologies are utilized at a rate of approximately 80 per cent. By contrast, states in the north have a much lower utilization rate. Indeed, in northern states, only a minority of states capture the subsidy schemes for irrigation technology.

Fertilizer subsidy schemes should also be reviewed. In some cases, these schemes have led to unintended consequences, such as usage patterns of fertilizers which are harmful to the environment.

There is room to improve public policy interventions to ensure that the right measures are undertaken by the government, prioritizing suitable technologies, as well as the best systems to move them forward across the country.

<center>***</center>

<center>*'Finance and investment.'*</center>

<center>***</center>

Proposal 4: Review lessons learned from the KALIA scheme

Lessons in regards to farmer support can be drawn from the implementation of the Krushak Assistance for Livelihood and Income Augmentation (KALIA) scheme. Valuable lessons range from the inclusion of landless laborers in the scheme, to the use of data and algorithms to identify scheme beneficiaries.

Additionally, the scheme's implementation was led by states, rather than the central government; this has proven largely a success, and state leadership could be replicated with other programs.

Finally, the strong results of the KALIA scheme in terms of supporting women farmers is noteworthy, with 30% of beneficiaries being women. The example of KALIA may be used in future thinking about how to target and encourage capacity-building among women cultivators and workers in farming.

Proposal 5: Compare the effectiveness of farmer support programs

To improve farmer livelihoods, multiple pillars of government support should be considered. Direct transfers are just one of a range of options available; the effectiveness of different methods should be measured in order to identify the best approach.

Direct income support and price support for farmers has been implemented for several decades in India. Some believe that government spending would be more effective if directed towards subsidy systems, such as schemes to encourage the use of irrigation technologies, or if used to invest in capacity building for farmers.

Proposal 6: Strengthen access to institutional credit and value chain for farmers

An important pillar of financial support to farmers is enabling institutional credit and other forms of investment in farming.

There is potential for market reforms to promote both public and private investment. These should create an enabling ecosystem for market-led growth. Agricultural Produce Market Committees (APMCs) could be used as a tool to continue encouraging private investors to invest along the value chain.

***

'Agriculture, diets and nutrition in India.'

***

Proposal 7: Rebuild consumer food environments in India

The food environment in India has deteriorated significantly in recent years, across both urban diets and rural diets. Indeed, the Indian population is affected by the double-bind of malnutrition and obesity. In order to address this situation, it is useful to review its causes.

A major reason for the deteriorating quality of diets is the relatively low price of grain products compared to other foods. The political economy of agriculture has resulted in grains being significantly cheaper than perishable foods, which are often more protein-rich and contain a higher nutrient content. Relatedly, India's natural agrobiodiversity has diminished as a result of the concentrated production of grains. Imported seeds and hybrid seed technologies have been introduced as crops, exerting a negative impact on natural agrobiodiversity.

Another contributing factor to the decline in healthy eating habits in India is the existence of bottlenecks in the production and distribution of fish and livestock. A considerable amount of wastage has resulted from poor systems in cold chain supply chain networks, post-harvest technologies, transport and processing.

Finally, the government's design to mitigate inflation in a particular way over the decades, has resulted in farmers not realizing the true cost of growing crops.

Proposal 8: Increase access to information about, and demand for, healthy food

The information environment for nutrition in India has contributed to an increase in unhealthy eating habits in the population. Packaged foods are marketed widely, and there is a lack of adequate information for consumers on healthier choices.

To improve this, efforts to create awareness about healthy eating should be increased. Institutions such as the National Institute of Nutrition are well placed to lead in these efforts.

The government could also consider a tax on unhealthy food, or subsidies to healthier foods. However, advocacy is a critical component of supporting healthy eating habits. All segments of the population should be targeted with nutrition education, and efforts should move beyond recent campaigns for high-end organic food and traditional foods.

Proposal 9: Build on the Public Distribution System to support healthy diets

The Public Distribution System (PDS) has been highly controversial; however, with some improvements, it could serve as an important avenue for increasing access to healthy diets for the Indian people.

PDS was designed to provide food to millions of people who do not have access to adequate nourishment. However, in line with the general trend in food production, PDS has become oriented towards grain-based calorie-rich foods.

Improving PDS could take several forms, including diversifying the types of foods provided, to favor greater balance and foods of higher nutrient content. Nonetheless, the question of what constitutes a healthy food basket remains debated. A healthy food basket may contain fortified foods, or it may simply be defined as a diverse range of foods.

As improvements to PDS are considered, it is relevant to note that there is an emerging movement in some states towards agrobiodiversity, and diversity of production. This movement is driven by NGOs, but is taking hold among consumers.

***

'Making data work for India's farmers.'

***

Proposal 10: Introduce interoperability standards

Interoperability standards should be introduced for data collection and processing systems in India. These standards would enable rich insights to be gained across the country from weather data, soil data, inventory data, and crop data.

The approach for creating these standards should be simple and practical. It should initially be built upon the exchange of data between a small number of parties in a standard format. Later, as the system is put into practice and grows, standards will evolve and improve.

Proposal 11: Deploy a federated system to underpin digital technology in food systems

A federated digital backbone should be deployed in India. This system would provide a connection point for all digital systems across the country. Importantly, the system should be federated, without being centralized.

A major benefit of a national digital backbone lies in its ability to enable organizations, systems and stakeholders to discover each other and to transact with each other. It also provides a hook for organizations to become integrated into a single platform.

An example of a specific use-case for a digital backbone in the context of food systems is as follows: a farmer, by connecting to the platform, would be able to view and interact with agencies and organizations who could provide services at all stages of pre- to post-harvest.

The website "data.gov.in" represents an early attempt to create such a backbone; however, more needs to be done to develop the platform.

Proposal 12: Design and implement suitable governance and data policies

As the digital environment for food systems in India develops, it will be important to establish governance and data policies. Details of these policies require further thought and planning; however, core components should include stipulating that ownership of data lies by default with farmers, rather than with companies. Some components of the data may be owned by government, to support analytics.