

Food systems are dynamic and constantly changing in response to natural forces, demographics, economics, as well as technological advancements in processing, entrepreneurship, and consumer preferences.¹ They encompass interconnected systems, processes, and actors that are involved in the production, processing, transportation, marketing, distribution, consumption, and disposal of food. Current food systems have evolved over many years across civilisations.

Over the past 50 years, globalisation has increased the degree of interdependency between the actors and processes responsible for the entire spectrum of activities, from production to consumption. At the same time, governance mechanisms for these actors and processes have tended to take place in silos, resulting in the fragmentation of food systems. These systems have also failed to achieve nutrition security and livelihood security for farmers.

Across the world, the need to transform food systems is clear for multiple reasons. First, the impact of current agricultural practices resulted in ecosystem functioning, reducing its service generation capabilities, which in turn has had detrimental effects on agriculture productivity. The current practices led to soil degradation, responsible for 31 percent of all greenhouse gas emissions, and depletion of groundwater resources. Secondly, hunger is on the rise again, impacting about 828 million people, or nearly 10% percent of the world's population.² There has also been a decline in the diversity of foods produced and consumed worldwide. Only 30 crops supply 95 percent of the food calories that people consume today. Out of the 30 crops, a mere four crops – rice, wheat, maize, and potatoes – supply over 60 percent,³ and three crops (rice, wheat, and maize) provide the majority of the nutrients and daily calories to humankind.⁴ Finally, agriculture is not an economically remunerative profession for many farmers worldwide, who struggle with high input costs and onerous levels of indebtedness.

As agriculture is the key element of all food systems, one of the primary approaches to transforming the system is to reinvent agriculture production.⁵ To overcome challenges associated with this and to develop adaptive policies, the science-policy interface needs to be enhanced, which can also serve as a repository of evidence-based data and case studies across food systems. This can help to build institutional capacity and combine scientific evidence and insights from relevant stakeholders. Moreover, the production systems need to be climate-proofed with mitigation, adaptation, and resilience-building activities to maintain the productivity and livelihoods of the farmers.

¹ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK114491/>

² <https://www.actionagainsthunger.org/world-hunger-facts-statistics>

³ https://www.fao.org/fileadmin/templates/nr/documents/CGRFA/factsheets_plant_en.pdf

⁴ <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/10/once-neglected-these-traditional-crops-are-our-new-rising-stars/>

⁵ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/33501403>

Changing consumer behavior towards healthy diets can be another feasible option to transform food systems. This calls for prioritising national public goals and identifying methods for linking these with commercial interests, considering factors like affordability and accessibility to ensure that people are not excluded because of poverty, isolated geography, gender, and other inequalities. As another approach, community markets and private sector engagement can help strengthen supply and value chains from farms to markets, benefiting producers by providing them with livelihood and other benefits.

In November 2019, the United Nations held the first Food System Summit to initiate global thinking on food system transformation. The discussions and criticisms around the Summit helped to mainstream the concept of sustainable development in the general discourse.

The 2022 Food Systems Dialogue (FSD 2022) was organised by Bharat Krishak Samaj (BKS) to give this global discourse a national context. In India, BKS has organised the Food System Dialogue for the last four years. Over time, the event evolved into an annual brainstorming session on different aspects of food system transformation. FSD 2022 was a three-day conference that facilitated discussions on food systems in India among different stakeholders, including research and academia. With ten partner organisations, FSD 2022 organised a series of deep-dive consultations covering a wide spectrum of themes, from production to consumption, focusing on key issues such as governance, equity, and data.

Due to multiple efforts of national and global organisations during this period, India has started thinking much more discerningly about sustainable food system transformation. However, realising the real system change is still a challenge. The challenges vary from country to country and even within the countries across the food systems. BKS and FOLU India Country Platform recognise the need to leverage the richness of ideas generated at last year's summit and to take the deliberations forward toward shaping the national pathways for the transformation. The 2023 FSD edition aims to identify the policy scenarios with an enabling potential and the immediate accelerators and entry points for initiating a sustainable food system transformation. It also looks forward to delineating the scenarios and elements that may impede the transformation process.

FSD 2023 is scheduled from 18-20 December 2023. The three-day conclave will witness high-level plenaries; focussed dialogues on key topics such as markets, production systems, support systems for farmers, and health and nutrition with an informed group of stakeholders; talks by special guests on cross-cutting or emerging issues; and several side events by external partners. True to its inclusive approach, FSD 2023 will be collaborating again with a wide group of stakeholders comprising entities from research, private sector, and academia.

