

## **Impressions – Dialogues at the first ever virtual African Green Revolution Forum – 2020**

This year's annual African Green Revolution Forum (AGRF) focused on *Feed the Cities, Grow the Continent – Leveraging Urban Food Markets to Achieve Sustainable Food Systems in Africa*.

On Monday September 7<sup>th</sup>, just before the start of AGRF, the Food and Land Use Coalition (FOLU) and EAT, together with a number of other partners, organised an independent, online **Food Systems Dialogues (FSDs)** event. The objective of the event was to identify ways that urban governance can be strengthened to support the development of integrated food strategies for better health, environment, and more inclusive development in Africa. The event was curated by David Nabarro, Strategic Director of 4SD Systems Leadership Mentoring and World Health Organization Special Envoy on COVID-19.

Structured dialogues can help us to enhance our human-to-human connections. Words on a paper, logos on a presentation, or a handful of panelists presenting are helpful but may not unlock the potential that we offer if only we can work on complex systems challenges together. Finding ways to work together is not easy, but we have to start somewhere. It is through connecting with one another, in a candid way – even on a screen – that we are enabled to appreciate the perspectives of others, appreciate the reason why we are engaged in the first place, and work out how best to work together by making that one of our principle goals.

Because this FSDs event took place in the margins of the AGRF, it benefited from the participation of a small and diverse group of senior practitioners who were also due to be at the Forum. They were able quickly to engage in each other's perspectives, respond to what they heard and collectively explore pathways for system change. Each reflected on the issues in ways that drew on their knowledge, experience and networks.

Here are some of the key outcomes of this dialogue:

**Technologies**, and the acceleration of innovation in digital services, are influencing and stimulating change around food systems, at an increasingly rapid rate. The processes through which food systems actors explore, and then access, novel technologies are advancing through partnerships that prioritize equity of access. One example is direct access to 'live', and ideally open-sourced, data that assists both researchers and decision-makers in real time.

**Procurement practices** are becoming more agile, allowing for more efficient and effective ways to ensure people's access to healthy, nutritious, and sustainable food. They are increasingly being assisted by technology. There are big challenges to enabling poor people to access what they need. The COVID pandemic and the impact of measures used to contain the virus has led many actors to re-imagine the way food systems work so that they do not leave people behind. How to ensure that rapidly increasing numbers of very poor people can access nutritious food for themselves and their families without extensive delays

and discomfort? There are some promising examples through novel approaches to procurement, in some cases through formal social protection schemes.

People and nations are experiencing a deepening economic crisis because of the continuing impact of COVID outbreaks in societies that are not yet able to keep the virus at bay. The need for **financing** continues to stand out. Currently resources are being heavily diverted to crisis and mitigation programs. However investments in health and food systems that are strategic and holistic, involving multi-stakeholders, could help establish the local-level systems needed for defending against the virus. They could increase the capacities of food systems to respond to the needs of those made poor by COVID: they could also increase the resilience of small-holders' and food labourers' livelihoods in the face of sudden shocks beyond COVID.

Our food systems are only as strong as their weakest links, and their **resilience** is the key to their being prevented from stuttering, shuddering, or breaking. They need to be agile enough to anticipate, and – if necessary – absorb future shocks. Defining the different facets of resilience that are expected of a “well-functioning food system” would help both with assembling examples of how best to achieve resilience and with the analysis of what works best in different settings.

While we make our way through 2020, a year to remember, and collectively look to the future, we must do all we can to ensure that young people do have seats at all tables. We should refrain from just checking the “**youth**” box, but rather set out to welcome young people, and all other under-represented stakeholders (whose absence is often unnoticed). They must be welcomed into the conversations and given the chance not only to set the agenda but also to drive forward solutions for long term change.

As this year's AGRF draws to a close, and we consider three words which came out of our Food Systems Dialogues session. They are particularly relevant as we look ahead.

1. **Narrative:** The different stakeholders in these Dialogues were able to explore new ideas and challenge their own thinking, in an authentic way. This has helped us give meaning to a broader and more unifying narrative for food systems transformation that seems to makes sense to all. If we are able to stand together, aligned with this joint narrative as it evolves, we will all be able to shine and showcase together.
2. **Network** Food Systems Dialogues are about our sharing words with each other: at the same time, they are also about listening, absorbing, and reflecting, not just during each event but also afterwards. The Dialogues link practitioners from different disciplines, sectors and administrations to work together on propositions for the better functioning of food systems. We respond to the challenge by trying to improve on what is working and reimagining what isn't. As we connect with each other we become more comfortable even when engaging with those with whom we do not agree. Through these dialogues we have had an opportunity to embark on new and (for us) unusual relationships. We expect to build on them, supporting the emergence of a powerful changemaker network.

3. **Nurture:** The power of each dialogue is in its ripple effect. Participants witness first-hand the connections that happen among the actors in Food Systems Dialogues and the way in which they contribute to new approaches for food systems transformation. They are now in a position to nurture others as they run their own Dialogues. They will nurture by connecting food systems actors far and wide, creating trusted spaces for them to interact and foster systems transformation. They will inspire them to advance the work, support them as they share their experiences and encourage them to get their wider networks to engage.

Those who have shown that they can facilitate are crucial to the success of Dialogues wherever they are undertaken. We thank those who invested their time and energy to become the highly competent and capable facilitators of these dialogues

As we turn our attention to the UN Food Systems Summit in 2021, we see the potential of inclusive multi-stakeholder dialogues when attempts are made to find pathways for the transformations that food systems need to make in the coming decade.

The participants in this FSDs event during the AGRF have accepted the challenge of equitable and sustainable food systems. They stand ready to champion action within their own communities, and constituencies over the coming 12 months and beyond.

Aman Sidhu, Food and Land Use Coalition