

# **FOOD SYSTEMS DIALOGUES (FSDs)**

## **ABU DHABI, 10 DECEMBER 2019**

INDEPENDENT, ORGANIZED BY THE FOOD FOREVER INITIATIVE  
(labeled 'FOOD FOREVER DIALOGUE – ABU DHABI')

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### **SUMMARY REPORT**

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## Executive Summary

The Food Forever Dialogue – Abu Dhabi is an independent edition of the Food Systems Dialogues (FSDs) organized by the Food Forever initiative through the *Dialogues in a Box* methodology. In alignment with the foundational mission of the Food Forever initiative (food4ever.org), the Dialogues focused on discussing and finding consensus around the key challenges and most important opportunities around SDG Target 2.5, this is, around the conservation and use of agricultural biodiversity in food systems. The Dialogue was organized in conjunction with the Second Annual Meeting of the Food Forever initiative, which took place in the Abu Dhabi National Exhibition Center (ADNEC) on 9-10 December, hosted by the Ministry of Climate Change and Environment of the UAE (MOCCA). The Dialogue *per se* took place in the Capital Suite 13 of ADNEC on 10 December, between 3.30 and 6 pm.

The Dialogue was attended by 29 participants, most of them Champions and representatives from Partner Organizations of the Food Forever initiative, and a smaller number of stakeholders from MOCCA. Given that the audience came from very diverse national backgrounds, unlike other FSDs the discussions had a global scope, although local solutions were encouraged as much as possible. In terms of area of work, participants ranged from high-level politicians to heads of scientific and research institutions, to young advocates and corporate leaders from large food companies.

Three tables of 9 to 10 participants were formed, each covering three different and equally important statements related to mainstreaming agrobiodiversity in food systems. Given that the issues were global and complex, the year 2030 was suggested as the referential deadline for all tables, although, during the discussions, participants were asked to provide solutions within a timeframe of three years. The statements were the following:

**Group 1:** “By 2030, eating ‘diverse’ becomes the most popular food trend.”

**Group 2:** “By 2030, all currently neglected and under-utilized crops and rare breeds have sustainable access to the markets.”

**Group 3:** “By 2030, agrobiodiversity conservation and use are recognized in all national policies beyond the agricultural sector.”

The first statement was mostly focused on consumer behavior and how to target communication efforts better to create a food trend that acknowledges the value of more diverse diets and encourages indirectly more diverse and resilient agricultural systems. The second one focused on market access to neglected crops and breeds, the hurdles they face

and what is needed to mainstream them in the local, regional and international markets. The third aimed to cover the high-level political discussion around valuing agrobiodiversity and promoting its conservation and use at all state-level policies, including those of the health, education and finance sectors.

Throughout the Dialogue, discussions revolved around linking agrobiodiversity with a more human and cultural narrative, beyond genebanks; clarifying and promoting the relation between more diverse diets and better nutrition, health, livelihoods and climate resilience; making different stakeholders across the board accountable for conservation and sustainable use efforts; and involving the new generations through better targeted and more frequent educational programs.

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 from the Dialogue tables

### Proposal 1: Put storytelling at the center of the awareness-raising efforts

All groups agreed that in order to nudge consumers and companies towards incorporating more agrobiodiversity into diets and value chains, there needs to be a compelling narrative that is relatable, easy to understand, and generally valid. This is difficult, because there is not a single definition of 'eating diverse' or 'diverse diets' but, in contrast, it varies heavily depending on the local context and idiosyncrasies. To that extent, the initiative must focus on a positive language that can appeal to everyone, regardless of their cultural background.

The participants stressed the importance of developing key messages that allow an impactful storytelling to take place while engaging in awareness-raising efforts. These messages include:

- What is agrobiodiversity? When is a consumer eating a 'diverse' and 'sustainable' diet? How can I make sure that my diet is contributing to more diverse and resilient food systems?
- How does agrobiodiversity relate to other trending topics and key issues in the media and the market? How can SDG 2.5 be linked to improving nutrition, ending food waste, ensure better livelihoods for farmers, adapt to climate change?
- If I have difficulties to include more diversity in my diets (lack of financial means, access, etc.), what can I do as a consumer? What is the call to action?

Participants insisted that instead of creating a new narrative from zero, the initiative should build and couple with other campaigns, stories and awareness-raising efforts out there that area already driving action and proving success.

A consensus among all tables was that a factor that can help build this 'unifying narrative' is the experience of food, as a cultural expression, a symbol of identity, an exploration of the foreign culture and a source of good taste and social cohesion. Therefore, instead of stressing the importance of conservation of agrobiodiversity for scientific reasons, define a more relatable message like "all the gastronomic options we have lost due to lack of conservation", "the lost recipes of your grandmother", etc. Appealing to the emotional, human side is crucial.

Participants in the Dialogue who are leaders in very distinct fields and areas of expertise, offered to help the initiative's Secretariat in aligning the messaging behind SDG Target 2.5 with the campaigns and projects they are driving to ensure greater outreach.

Some participants also highlighted the importance of identifying the right target audience, particularly the right influencers and media outlets who can help convey the message as accurately as possible and reach an audience 'beyond the converted'. A participant coming from the media sector offered help in defining key spokespeople for SDG Target 2.5 (particularly among the Champions and Partners of Food Forever) and link them with media outlets that might be interested in promoting those stories.

#### Proposal 2: Make politicians and decision-makers accountable

The group encouraged the advocacy efforts around SDG Target 2.5 to keep to the 2020 deadline, to stress the sense of urgency and need of immediate action. However, to really drive action, participants agreed that it was important to do two things:

- (i) Define a clear call to action of what governments, private sector and other decision-makers should do to help implement the target.
- (ii) Create a progress framework that makes it clear to all stakeholders how much we have moved forward with the implementation of the target, and how much is still needed.

One of the tables highlighted the importance of making the Declaration of Interdependence of Food Forever a more effective political tool. The Declaration is a document created by the Food Forever Secretariat which plays with the wording of the United States Declaration of Independence but promoting instead some key principles around food systems that should always be maintained and prioritized. The Declaration has been shown in most of the initiative's events and has since garnered the signatures of several decision-makers, including a head of State. The participants indicated that it is now important to promote the Declaration at the country level, to make more politicians accountable.

Similar to Proposal 1, participants indicated that in order to lobby the inclusion of agrobiodiversity in the high-level political agenda of different countries, it was important to ensure a clear link between this and other more pressing national agendas, such as early childhood development, food sovereignty, environmental degradation and climate change. This also requires ensuring that SDG Target 2.5 is covered in symposiums and fora where these other key issues are the main focus, through the right high-level spokespeople.

Finally, the participants agreed that the initiative should continue using the Dialogue platform to continue gaining more information at the local level, in order to liaise more efficiently with politicians, and also to feed into the general knowledge and reports around food systems.

### Proposal 3: Engage the new generations in the discussions

A wide consensus among all participants was the importance to engage youth in the discussions around agrobiodiversity and food systems. To achieve that, it was important to work in three different levels:

- (i) Use the initiative's external media support to understand the key issues where youth is showing more engagement and learn where (which outlets, formats, or channels) they are choosing to learn more about them. To that end, the communications strategy of the initiative should be based in this information to ensure that young people receive educational material and data about the importance of Target 2.5 in a way that is approachable and easy to understand, but also that blends well with other interesting topics where there is already commitment or call to action.
- (ii) Outside of the Food Forever Experiences and Dialogues with decision-makers, influencers and stakeholders, the initiative should organize discussions between one or more of the Champions and young advocates, innovators, students, etc., in an intimate format that will encourage everybody to speak. A methodology that could be applied is the 'Youth Circles', organized by MOCCA and other government agencies in the UAE which has shown excellent results.
- (iii) Engage young champions in the initiative and ensure participation and awareness-raising efforts in events targeted at youth, especially in those where agrobiodiversity and food systems are not the main scope.

### Proposal 4: Leverage from 'success stories' of ingredients already in the market

The Dialogue participants, particularly in Table 2, agreed that, in order to ensure access to the market for more under-utilized and neglected crops, it was important not to vilify or speak against the Big 4 (maize, wheat, potatoes and rice), but rather to understand why they were successful and leverage from those successes to apply these lessons-learned in new crops. Some participants mentioned that the efforts should not focus on eradicating staple crops or breeds, but rather making more crops and animal products staples. The consensus was to identify 'low-hanging fruits', this is, crops or rare breeds that share the success factors behind the Big 4, but that simultaneously contribute to solving some of the challenges resulting from the over-production of these current staples. Some crops that were identified by the group

include different varieties of millet, foneo and amaranth. For these crops that have the potential to be grown and sourced sustainably in different areas of the world, it is important to engage the private sector to ensure that they incorporate them in their product development and marketing campaigns.

However, it was also clear to the group that not all crops and breeds had the potential of being 'commoditized' because it could lead to unwanted effects, such as market failures, environmental degradation or inequitable access to the nutritional and economic benefits of producing them. In these cases, the group agreed that the focus needed to be in creating a local market where all stakeholders thrive and where conservation and use of agrobiodiversity play a central role in improving the livelihoods of all members of the community. A proposal in this regard was to create 'food neighborhoods', community projects in centers of origin or diversity of certain crops or livestock, where conservation creates a thriving economy that leads to economic growth not only in the agricultural sector, but also in other industries such as tourism.

The example that was given was the Potato Park in the Highlands of Peru where different communities living in an area with an astounding diversity of potatoes (more than a thousand varieties), joined efforts to create a conservation project, with a community seedbank and sustainable agricultural practices, and where visitors could clearly see the link between this wealth of varieties and the local culture, the gastronomic offer, the state of nutrition in the community, etc. Since the inauguration of the Park, all economic and well-being indicators have improved, and all the different varieties are sustainably preserved. The group pointed out that this experience could be replicated in other regions of the world with different crops and animal breeds to promote greater conservation and sustainable access to the market.

An additional element that was mentioned is the importance to involve innovators and SMEs in the efforts to diversify food systems. This could be by using the event pipeline of Food Forever to ensure participation of the local innovation ecosystem in the different activities and find ways to link those innovations to some of the challenges these crops and rare breeds are facing in order to gain access to the market. Another option would be to ensure speaking slots around SDG Target 2.5 in summits that gather innovators for food and agriculture.

Proposal 5: Create signals to the market through a 'certification' process

A final proposal was to create some type of 'certification' tool which helps Food Forever and the community working around SDG Target 2.5 to give a positive signal to the market when a

retailer or large food company is promoting more diverse food systems. This idea stemmed from the experience of a large supermarket chain in South America who, after participating in a Food Forever event, decided to increase the varieties of potatoes offered in their supermarkets from 3 to 14. The participants agreed that this experience could be easily replicated in other areas of the world to make retailers accountable for the degree of agrobiodiversity they are offering to their consumers.

However, to achieve this, the group proposed the creation of a database which compares what is available (using official information of the Ministries of Agriculture, for example) with what is offered in the different supermarket chains. This would allow creating an Index to certify whether a retailer is contributing to implementation of SDG Target 2.5 or not. The database could be first piloted in a specific city or country, and later scaled up with the help of other actors in the network. This could also be applied to large food corporations working with a wide array of different agricultural products, to certify whether they are using several varieties of each crop and breed, or they are using only a limited number of staples.

With this information at hand, the campaign could create a visually impactful certification symbol that could nudge consumers to opt for more 'diverse' retailers and food distributors.