


# Food systems transformation through dialogues

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More than 1,600 multi-stakeholder dialogues were convened in preparation for the United Nations Food Systems Summit 2021. These dialogues have helped facilitate inclusive explorations of the complex challenges of transforming food systems and accelerate progress towards the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals.

In September 2021, the United Nations (UN) Secretary-General convened the [UN Food Systems Summit](#) (UNFSS) to identify the changes that are needed for food systems to contribute to realizing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. In preparing for the summit, the UNFSS Secretariat sought inputs on what countries need most urgently and to mobilize action to these ends. Both national governments and independent entities were invited to engage in summit preparations by initiating Food Systems Summit Dialogues. They were requested to do so in ways that reflected the summit's [Principles of Engagement](#), namely: act with urgency, be respectful, recognize complexity, embrace multi-stakeholder inclusivity, complement the work of others, build trust and appreciate local context.

In 2020, the UNFSS Secretariat led by Agnes Kalibata approached the 4SD Foundation (4SD) to provide support for national governments as they undertake food systems dialogues. This was because 4SD had been working with partners since 2018 to develop a method to engage multiple food systems stakeholders through dialogues. The UNFSS wanted to support governments and in-country stakeholders using food systems dialogues to explore options for systems transformation.

The UNFSS dialogues were then framed to enable inclusive engagement of stakeholders, with meaningful connections, open exchange, exploration of options, debate around priorities and examination of trade-offs. The intention was that everyone, everywhere, would have a chance to weigh in on how they would want their food systems to be taken forward. The dialogue method involved national leaders and governments while also reaching groups of producers, women, youth and indigenous people. The invitation to dialogue was designed specifically to interest groups of food systems stakeholders who do not usually interact with each other.

As a first step, national governments were invited by the UN Deputy Secretary-General in November 2020 to nominate a National Dialogue Convenor. In many countries, the identification of convenors prompted a reflection on the composition and functioning of national food systems. Once convenors were nominated, in-country representatives of UN organizations and of local support groups accompanied the convenors as they organized dialogues. Convenors sought ways to mobilize a range of stakeholder groups and engage multiple voices,



and were offered guidance on ways to do this in the six official UN languages and Portuguese. Convenors also had access to a range of guidance materials, including manuals, templates and online training sessions (complete with interpretation); they indicated their wish to continue sharing experiences with, and learn from, each other as they advanced their national dialogue programs.

An online platform – the [Summit Dialogues Gateway](#) – proved to be a useful means to ensure the flow of information to and from convenors. They were able to input information directly onto the gateway, which contributed to transparency of the entire process and of the findings that emerged. The forms for feedback from dialogues were designed to help convenors structure their dialogues, while allowing them sufficient flexibility to adapt the process in ways that suited their circumstances. One consistent request was that dialogues reflected the UNFSS's guiding Principles of Engagement. The contents of the dialogue feedback forms were synthesized into four reports published over 2021 and 2022 (ref. 1) for the UNFSS Secretariat that were used by the different technical workstreams: Action Tracks, Scientific Group and Champions. Likewise, a mechanism was developed to pass messages from the summit's technical workstreams to in-country stakeholders and then back to the Secretariat through the dialogues.

With a focus on ways in which food systems do and do not work for people and planet, the UNFSS dialogues led to profound and large-scale engagement in the UNFSS, and prompted concerted efforts, within and between countries, to transform food systems for the better. From October 2020 to November 2022, 151 national convenors had been nominated and almost 1,700 dialogues had been announced on the gateway. Dialogue feedback forms indicated that there were, altogether, around 110,000 participants in these dialogues. Anecdotal accounts suggest that this is an underestimate, and that many more multi-stakeholder dialogues took place within countries in the run up to the summit.