

# OFFICIAL FEEDBACK FORM

<b>DIALOGUE DATE</b>	Wednesday, 14 July 2021 14:00 GMT +05:30
<b>DIALOGUE TITLE</b>	Nourishing South Asia in a post COVID-19 world: reinvigorating rural communities through climate resilient agriculture and food systems transformation
<b>CONVENED BY</b>	Dr. Nafees Meah, Regional Representative for South Asia, International Rice Research Institute
<b>DIALOGUE EVENT PAGE</b>	<a href="https://summitdialogues.org/dialogue/30950/">https://summitdialogues.org/dialogue/30950/</a>
<b>DIALOGUE TYPE</b>	Independent
<b>GEOGRAPHICAL FOCUS</b>	Bangladesh, India, Nepal

The outcomes from a Food Systems Summit Dialogue will be of use in developing the pathway to sustainable food systems within the locality in which they take place. They will be a valuable contribution to the national pathways and also of interest to the different workstreams preparing for the Summit: the Action Tracks, Scientific Groups and Champions as well as for other Dialogues.

# 1. PARTICIPATION

## TOTAL NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS

186

## PARTICIPATION BY AGE RANGE

25 0-18      79 19-30      31-50      49 51-65      6 66-80      80+

## PARTICIPATION BY GENDER

121 Male      38 Female      27 Prefer not to say or Other

## NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS IN EACH SECTOR

135	Agriculture/crops	11	Education		Health care
1	Fish and aquaculture	15	Communication	4	Nutrition
1	Livestock		Food processing		National or local government
	Agro-forestry		Food retail, markets		Utilities
6	Environment and ecology		Food industry		Industrial
	Trade and commerce		Financial Services	13	Other

## NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS FROM EACH STAKEHOLDER GROUP

6	Small/medium enterprise/artisan		Workers and trade union
2	Large national business		Member of Parliament
1	Multi-national corporation		Local authority
3	Small-scale farmer	43	Government and national institution
1	Medium-scale farmer		Regional economic community
2	Large-scale farmer		United Nations
11	Local Non-Governmental Organization		International financial institution
50	International Non-Governmental Organization	5	Private Foundation / Partnership / Alliance
	Indigenous People	1	Consumer group
41	Science and academia	19	Other

## 2. PRINCIPLES OF ENGAGEMENT

### HOW DID YOU ORGANIZE THE DIALOGUE SO THAT THE PRINCIPLES WERE INCORPORATED, REINFORCED AND ENHANCED?

Bringing grassroots participants to an online forum was identified as a challenge. To address this, country focus group discussions—conducted through a hybrid online/offline format—were conducted beforehand to ensure that these perspectives were well represented in the regional dialogue. Key findings were reported in the public forum by rapporteurs selected from among the FGD participants and organizers. The approach that we adopted reflected, in particular, multi-stakeholder inclusivity and promoting and building trust principles. Registration for the online forum was opened to various sectors and countries across the region, and a live broadcast was made available via Facebook to further broaden participation.

### HOW DID YOUR DIALOGUE REFLECT SPECIFIC ASPECTS OF THE PRINCIPLES?

Diversity and inclusion were key determinants in selecting the panellists for the country focus group discussions and the public forum. In addition, the range of food chain actors and interests invited to participate in the country-level FGDs recognizes the complexity of the food systems in South Asia.

### DO YOU HAVE ADVICE FOR OTHER DIALOGUE CONVENORS ABOUT APPRECIATING THE PRINCIPLES OF ENGAGEMENT?

It is important to avoid falling into patterns of whatever dominant discourse that is fashionable. That trap is easy to fall into if the discourse is held only in European languages such as English, French and Spanish. In order to truly listen to stakeholders in a respectful and inclusive way, we felt that it was important to organize FGDs in local languages.

# 3. METHOD

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The outcomes of a Dialogue are influenced by the method that is used.

**DID YOU USE THE SAME METHOD AS RECOMMENDED BY THE CONVENORS REFERENCE MANUAL?**

**Yes**

**No**

# 4. DIALOGUE FOCUS & OUTCOMES

## MAJOR FOCUS

The success of efforts to develop rural economies, ensure food and nutrition security, and eradicate rural poverty depend on building climate change resilient agricultural systems managed by smallholders and the widespread adoption of innovations at the technical, institutional, social and policy levels. However, although there are “islands” of climate-resilient agriculture practiced in the Global South, what has been lacking to date has been change at scale.

The COVID-19 pandemic may present an opportunity to build back better if public and private investment is directed towards reinvigorating rural communities by developing an inclusive, climate-resilient smallholder agriculture sector that meets the needs of people and the planet.

The Independent Food Systems Dialogue that we organized aimed to bring together a range of stakeholders across the food system -- from producers to value chain actors, consumers and policymakers -- to respond to the challenge of nourishing South Asia in a post-COVID 19 context. Specifically, the dialogue addressed the following questions:

- 1) What are the main barriers to agricultural innovation for climate resilience in South Asia? Who should be involved in research for development, investment, and deployment decisions for building climate resilience at scale?
- 2) How do we ensure that food value chains in South Asia are inclusive?
- 3) What kind of investments in food system transformation in South Asia can help reinvigorate rural communities? For example, investments in cold chains, custom hiring centres and mechanization?
- 4) How should digitalisation of the food value chain be implemented in South Asia in a way which benefits smallholder farmers? Will this help to build back better after COVID-19?

The dialogue consists of two parts: a) a series of in-country focus group discussions (Bangladesh; Assam and Odisha in India; Nepal) with farmers, value chain actors, and policy makers addressing these questions, and b) an online public forum with stakeholders and experts at the regional level.

The Bangladesh FGD was held on 8 July, focusing primarily on the themes of climate- and COVID-19 resilience, inclusive value chains, and rural reinvigoration. The Nepal FGD was held on 12 July and focused on the themes of climate- and COVID-19 resilience and inclusive value chains. FGDs for Assam and Odisha were simultaneously conducted on 13 July; Assam focused on inclusive value chains and digitalization, while the Odisha discussion centred on climate- and COVID-19 resilience and rural reinvigoration.

Key findings were reported in the online public forum on 14 July to high level ministry officials and a panel of experts from Bangladesh, India and Nepal, who provided feedback and their own insight on these themes.

### ACTION TRACKS

- ✓ Action Track 1: Ensure access to safe and nutritious food for all
- ✓ Action Track 2: Shift to sustainable consumption patterns
- ✓ Action Track 3: Boost nature-positive production
- ✓ Action Track 4: Advance equitable livelihoods
- ✓ Action Track 5: Build resilience to vulnerabilities, shocks and stress

### KEYWORDS

- ✓ Finance
- ✓ Innovation
- ✓ Human rights
- Women & Youth Empowerment
- ✓ Policy
- ✓ Data & Evidence
- ✓ Governance
- Trade-offs
- ✓ Environment and Climate

## MAIN FINDINGS

The agri-food system is undergoing profound and drastic changes: globalization, demographic shifts, and changing dietary preferences, amplified by transforming land-water systems, climate change and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Urgent and collective action is required of all stakeholders across the system to ensure that it is able to build resilience to these changes and provide access to safe, nutritious and sustainably produced food for all. The food systems approach calls for an integration of the food system with the social system and the environment, and a clear recognition that equitable access to food is a human right.

Climate change is a global phenomenon that has location-specific impacts. As such, some of the solutions that can help build climate resilience are necessarily local. For the countries included in this dialogue, rural and agricultural investment priorities include the development and dissemination of climate-smart crop varieties and technologies, pivoting to more resilient farming systems, nutrition-sensitive cropping systems, crop insurance, digitalisation of agriculture and real-time access to weather data, among others. Regional cooperation is also important for policy development, knowledge exchange and capacity building. It is now evident that climate change reduces productivity—and the lack of access to appropriate mechanized tools, machinery and other resources hinders the participation of women and youth.

Making food systems more inclusive means that all actors—even vulnerable and underserved sectors—have equitable income earning potential. Social safety nets and incentives that allow access to financing, capacity building, and appropriate varieties, technologies and other resources are necessary to ensure that women and youth are able to meaningfully participate in the food system. Organizing and mobilizing constituencies play a key role in providing access.

Discussions around nutrition-sensitive interventions also fall under the theme of inclusive value chains. Such interventions require that producers, value chain stakeholders and policy makers consider the nutritional needs and dietary preferences of consumers, while providing a compelling case for consumers to shift towards more nutritious diets. Rice will continue to play a key role in mediating the region's food and nutrition security goals as a staple crop that billions of individuals rely on for sustenance and livelihoods.

Improving agricultural value chains plays a critical role in rural reinvigoration: improving access to inputs, building storage and processing facilities, strengthening transportation systems and broadening market access through stakeholder linkages, digital platforms, and demand-driven production. Mitigating the impacts of male out migration through rural job generation, strengthening social safety nets, and safeguarding farmers' incomes through the enforcement of minimum standard pricing and the promotion of domestic production can also contribute to rural reinvigoration. COVID-19 underscored the vulnerabilities of the food value chain that can be addressed through infrastructure investment, but opportunities were also identified in broadening markets, particularly in establishing digital platforms that can help producers, value chain actors, consumers, and policymakers make informed decisions.

Digitalisation is perceived to be a lever of transformation, but current gaps in implementation must be addressed in order to reap its expected benefits. Human intervention remains necessary for technology adoption, and extension and advisory services can complement digital tools in strengthening the right to information.

These outcomes are discussed in further detail in the following sections.

While the goal of food systems transformation, in broad terms, can be envisioned as providing healthy, sustainably produced food on the plates of all people at all times, specific indicators for measuring the success of food system transformation have yet to be clearly articulated in detail. A proposed initial step in articulating these indicators would be through establishing multi-stakeholder participatory monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to enable vulnerable groups and underserved sectors to provide grassroots perspective that can inform research and development priorities and policy recommendations. All stakeholders across South Asia must have a say on where time, money, resources are invested to maximize impact.

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## OUTCOMES FOR EACH DISCUSSION TOPIC - 1/4

There were clear differences in perspectives on the complexity of climate change and its impacts on the agri-food system between the on-line public forum and the individual FGDs. From a top-down policy perspective represented by the on-line public forum, addressing climate change is viewed as a complex system with agriculture being both casualty and a driver of climate change. This viewpoint was less prominent in the FGDs, where local discourse on climate resilience was mostly centred on the impact of climatic hazards on the agro ecological landscapes and how this leads to significant losses in productivity and income. Building resilience to these hazards also entailed interventions such as changing cropping systems, adopting productivity-enhancing technologies and infrastructure—which require financial investments that vulnerable smallholder farmers were unable to afford. Access to financial mechanisms and other necessary resources was particularly limited for women and youth, as well as those living in remote, less developed communities.

Convergence and organization of key stakeholders at multiple levels were proposed as solutions. These include institutional mechanisms, such as merging government development schemes with agricultural plans, and expanding disaster risk, reduction and recovery plans to cover smallholder farmers. Organizing and clustering farmers is needed to improve their access to inputs, capacity building, and formal financial services. Mechanization and its associated increased productivity were also seen as pathways for increased participation of women and youth. Crop insurance and other safety nets can help smallholder farmers bounce back from climatic shocks.

Identified priority areas for research and development are dependent on landscape and climatic conditions. These include the development of lower cost and scale-neutral stress tolerant rice varieties, improving rice-fish systems and polder farming, and the establishment of climate smart villages. It was also suggested that promising new technologies must be made readily available in the public domain.

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## OUTCOMES FOR EACH DISCUSSION TOPIC - 2/4

The transformation towards inclusive food value chains that improve the livelihoods of farmers and other involved stakeholders would have to seriously address the current gaps and inefficiencies of the value chain, such as poor farm-to-market infrastructure (lack of storage and processing facilities, underdeveloped transportation systems, among others) that lead to unfair disparities in farm gate and retail pricing; as well as lack of access to machinery, support services, financing mechanisms, and marketing channels that can help improve farmer income. Male out migration and the resulting agricultural labour shortages, household vulnerabilities and food insecurity were also identified as challenges for smallholder farming households. The fragmentation of farming holdings was again identified as a barrier to accessing resources and developing market linkages.

Investments in infrastructure and research and development, possibly through public-private partnerships, are necessary to move forward. Research priorities varied by country and region. For example, in Bangladesh the preferred focus was on the development of biofortified staple crops, whereas in Odisha, the FGD advocated for the scaling of nutrient-rich and resilient traditional crops.

Behaviour change and communication programs are critical in enabling the participation of women and youth in the value chain. Increasing job creation in the agricultural sector can minimize the economic and social impact of male out migration. Digital tools for market linkages, advisory services and weather data can help in creating accessible pathways for underserved sectors. Aggregating farmers through formal organisations such as farmer producer companies (FPCs) can help develop linkages between farmers and other value chain/industry actors, including academia, for knowledge exchange and capacity building. Such linkages can increase their bargaining power as value chain actors and also help producers develop demand-based products that meet consumer needs and preferences. Multi-stakeholder cooperation and participatory monitoring and evaluation contribute to making value chains more inclusive.

An important insight about the impact of increasing women's participation in value chains is its impact on embedding nutrition as a key food value chain priority of agri-food systems—essentially scaling women's nutrition-centred decision-making from the household to community. Improving community nutrition can help improve quality of life and productivity, leading to more opportunities for participation within the agri-food system.

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## OUTCOMES FOR EACH DISCUSSION TOPIC - 3/4

The third discussion topic centred on reinvigorating rural communities in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. Mobility restrictions imposed to curb the spread of COVID-19 underscored the vulnerabilities of the agricultural value chain: reducing access to inputs, labor and markets, as well as reducing incomes and purchasing power. In some cases, unfair pricing made local produce unable to compete with the lower cost of imported produce. Other challenges such as deteriorating food quality caused by disrupted value chains, food and nutrition insecurity in less accessible communities and male migration and its attendant issues were also exacerbated by the pandemic.

A broad range of strategies were proposed for the reinvigoration of rural communities, underpinned by the recognition that food systems activities provide “essential services” and are, therefore, unlike other sectors of the economy in South Asia. To address the disruption of value chains, interventions such as Nepal’s “agricultural ambulance” experiment that deliver fresh produce direct to households could be institutionalized as an emergency response, and interventions that shorten the value chain developed. These include ensuring local access to inputs, building community processing facilities, building rural infrastructure, establishing community seed banks, and promoting local production and consumption through ICT based extension and marketing.

Strengthening social safety nets is also necessary. Proposed activities include providing COVID-19 vaccines; issuing official identification certificates that can help farmers and their households to access government support mechanisms; and establishing reintegration plans for migrants who have returned to rural communities. Social networks, both formal and informal, can help farmers access knowledge and resources.

Farmers’ incomes can be safeguarded from food shocks through emergency funding, crop insurance, and the establishment of minimum support price/buy-back policies. To help local produce compete with imports, domestic production must be supported through favourable policies and strengthened customs regulation. Investment must be made in strengthening local, regional and national supply chains to ensure adequate food supply and reduce reliance on imports. Development of up-to-date data dashboards can help improve food systems governance and inform policy development.

Building back rural communities in a much better way would require continued and sustained effort from R&D and extension platforms along with policy support to facilitate the expedition of proposed suggestions.

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## OUTCOMES FOR EACH DISCUSSION TOPIC - 4/4

The fourth and final theme focused on digitalisation of the value chain and how it could be used to build back better food systems. While this was only discussed in depth during the Assam FGD, feedback and recommendations related to ICT and digitalisation cut across the different FGDs and occupied a central point of discussion in the public forum.

Digitalisation of the food chain is seen to benefit both end-users and policymakers. End-users include farmers and value chain actors who are able to access updated tools and resources that can help them make better decisions about which crops and products to cultivate, and allow them to have a broader consumer reach. For policymakers, digitalising the value chain provides access to updated data (organized in relevant dashboards) that allows for foresighting, market analysis and development of evidence-based policies for a more inclusive agriculture sector.

However, a number of challenges were identified at the local level. This includes limited resources and access at the household level and connectivity issues due to poor digital infrastructure. The digital divide also manifests itself in terms of poor digital literacy among the older generation and low confidence among end-users in accessing digital platforms—with the problem of information overload being identified. The language barrier was also identified as a factor, as apps and other digital tools are not always available in the local language. On the other hand, policymakers noted that availability of information and data pertaining to the agricultural value chain is still limited to a limited number of technologies and processes. There is limited availability of authentic data on other food value chain actors and available infrastructure at the regional level.

This indicates that digitalisation is viewed as a lever of change, but on-ground implementation must be improved in order to meet its promise of providing more equitable pathways to participation in the food system. Some suggestions for the way forward include: addressing lack of household access by establishing common service centres and using traditional media to supplement access to the information available in digital tools; improving digital literacy through sensitization programs conducted by extension workers and the development of region-centric apps using the local language; and developing digital platforms on value chain actors and infrastructure to help inform policy decisions. Minimizing these barriers to digital uptake can help ensure that digital services and apps developed for marketing, advisory services, and financial mechanisms can be accessed by a greater number of their target end-users.

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## AREAS OF DIVERGENCE

What was remarkable was the convergence in thinking with respect to addressing food system transformation at the: a) local and regional level; and, at the b) value chain actor and expert/policy maker level. “Divergences” where they did emerge during the country FGDs and in the public forum were not indicative of differing priorities, but rather underscored: a) current gaps in implementation and expected outcome, as was the case in the conversation surrounding digitalisation and extension services; and b) how external stresses (e.g. the COVID-19 pandemic) can modulate the impact of social phenomenon such as male out migration from rural areas.

**Digitalisation and extension services:** Digitalisation as a lever for transformation emerged as a common theme in all discussion groups, but this requires—among others— infrastructure investment and social and behaviour change communication initiatives that would address the digital generation divide. Therefore, investing in human capital, particularly in extension and advisory services, that could contribute to community organisation, knowledge exchange, and improve access to formal mechanisms is required. This would address current challenges in improving uptake of digital services for end-users. In addition, digitalising the value chain can also provide easy access to relevant and real-time data that policymakers can use for food systems governance. Digitalisation and extension services can both be viewed as transformative actions for making the food system more resilient and inclusive.

**Impact of male out migration from rural areas:** In pre-pandemic situations, insufficient local opportunities contributed to the phenomenon of male out migration, which in turn increased the vulnerability of female-headed households. With COVID-19, migrants who have lost employment in urban areas began to return back to their communities, which were not equipped to reintegrate them, and this phenomenon disrupted the social norms that had been developed to cope with male out migration. For both situations, rural job generation was viewed as a potential solution.

**Different perspectives (although these could be complementary) emerged with respect to addressing nutritional imbalances as part of the food systems transformation.** This was most evident in the identification of research priorities, which were aligned to the needs of the states or countries where the discussions were held. One example was in the discussion on access to nutritious food. In Bangladesh, the FGD identified the development of biofortified staple crops as a priority, whereas in Odisha, the FGD advocated for the scaling of nutrient-rich and resilient traditional crops. The FGD in Nepal, on the other hand, focused on local food production as a means of improving nutrition while addressing rural reinvigoration.

**Discussions on value chain upgrading provided another example of different, but complementary, solutions.** The disruption of value chains due to COVID-19 mobility restrictions have underscored the challenges of bringing produce to market. A number of short-term solutions were identified, including emergency transport interventions, but there was consensus that more sustainable solutions are needed to shorten the value chain and establish the necessary storage and processing facilities, coupled with marketing initiatives to promote local production and consumption. A parallel solution was also proposed: to further broaden market access, perhaps to capitalize on the new markets reached during the pandemic, through digital platforms. Market analysis and consumer research, along with stakeholder linkages, could help make production more profitable by focusing on demand-driven products that meet market needs and preferences.

The urgency and complexity of food systems transformation underscores the need to consider multiple perspectives and pathways.

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# ATTACHMENTS AND RELEVANT LINKS

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## RELEVANT LINKS

- **Link to online public forum**  
<https://fb.watch/6QEUj3RKct/>