



MAY 2021

INDEPENDENT FOOD SYSTEMS DIALOGUE REPORT

MEALS4NCDS PROJECT



TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACRONYMS.....	1
Dialogue Conveners	0
Funding Support	0
Date and Place of Meeting	0
Dialogue participants	1
1 BACKGROUND.....	1
2 PARTICIPANTS	4
3 DIALOGUE FORMAT	5
3.2 Summary of the Opening Remarks.....	6
3.4 Summary of Closing Remarks	10
4 ATTACHMENTS.....	10
APPENDIX I – AGENDA.....	12

Dialogue Conveners

The Measurement, Evaluation, Accountability, and Leadership Support for NCDs Prevention (MEALS4NCDs) Project/African Food Environment Research Network (FERN) was the lead convener for the United Nations Food Systems Summit Independent Dialogue in collaboration with some key stakeholders in the African region. Namely:

- African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC)
- Réseau de Recherches sur les Politiques et les Systèmes Alimentaires en Afrique de l'Ouest (REPSAO)
- African Nutrition Society (ANS)
- Federation of African Nutrition Societies (FANUS)
- Coalition of Actors for Public Health Advocacy (CAPHA)
- IFPRI-led CGIAR-Research Program on Agriculture for Nutrition and Health (A4NH)
- Rockefeller Foundation's-led Food Systems Transformative Integrated Policy (FS-TIP)
- Drivers of Food Choice Program (DFC)
- Agriculture, Nutrition and Health Academy (ANH Academy)
- Chronic Diseases Initiative for Africa (CDIA)
- African Union Development Agency (AUDA-NEPAD)

The MEALS4NCDs Project is presently being implemented by the University of Ghana, in collaboration with the University of Health and Allied Sciences (UHAS), the Ghana Health Service (GHS), the African Population and Health Research Centre (APHRC), Kenya, French National Research Institute for Sustainable Development (IRD), France, University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands, and the Scientific Institute of Public Health (Sciensano), Belgium. The profile of investigators and partner institutions can be found at <https://www.meals4ncds.org/en/project-investigators/>.

Funding Support

The MEALS4NCDs project is supported by funding from The International Development Research Centre (IDRC) Food, Environment, and Health Program – IDRC, Canada.

Date and Place of Meeting

The meeting was held virtually on Zoom on 26th May 2021.

Dialogue participants

The dialogue recorded a total of 82 participants/stakeholders from a variety of food systems sectors and stakeholder groups, including agriculture, environment and ecology, trade and commerce, education, media & communication, food processing, food retail, healthcare, nutrition, and national and local government.

1 BACKGROUND

The world is facing an unprecedented challenge of four intersecting pandemics - climate change, undernutrition, obesity, and COVID-19 with far-reaching consequences for human and planetary health, if urgent and decisive action is not taken. Regarding COVID-19, A joint statement by the International Labor Organisation (ILO), the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the World Health Organisation (WHO) underscores its devastating impact on people's livelihoods, their health and their food systems (ILO, FAO, IFAD and WHO , 2020). The co-occurrence of these four pandemics and their collective impact on the food system has laid bare its frailty, and hence a renewed urgency to improve the food system. Of these four pandemics, malnutrition is the longest raging, and Africa is particularly hard hit. Home to more than half of the world's acutely food insecure people, it also faces increasing rates of overweight and obesity and other diet-related non-communicable diseases (NCDs). To illustrate, between 1980 and 2015, adult overweight and obesity in Burkina Faso increased by 1400%, and by over 500% in Ghana, Togo, Ethiopia, and Benin. The existing evidence further indicates that eight of the 20 nations in the world with the fastest-rising rates of adult obesity are in Africa (GBD Collaboration, 2017).

While the causes of the current malnutrition pandemic are complex, unhealthy diets remain one of the key contributors. Increasing dependence on unhealthy diets is linked to food system failures to supply healthy and safe food options that are affordable, accessible, and feasible for all (Freudenberg 2014). Governments are often called upon to ensure that such transformations happen. To be successful, however, governments require inputs – including data, evidence, nudging, and support from other actors. In response to this call for partnership and a collaboratively delivered response, the UN Secretary-General has called for a Food Systems Summit in September 2021 to articulate and adopt an actionable, integrated plan for food systems transformation.

The MEALS4NCDs project in collaboration with regional partners co-convened this independent dialogue to offer a platform for diverse food systems actors to exchange ideas and reflect on the challenges and opportunities for transforming African food systems, in contribution to the upcoming September 2021 UN Food Systems Summit. The theme for the event was: Re-imagining Africa’s Food Systems Transformation through Data, Advocacy, and Leadership”.

The purpose of the dialogue included:

- I. To discuss the role of data, advocacy, accountability, governance, and leadership in reimagining the African food systems.
- II. To identify and prioritize policy and practice asks for transforming African Food Systems by 2030

1.1 Summary of discussion starter papers for Facilitators

Track 1: Data: The Role of measurements (data) in Africa’s Food Systems Transformation

The paper recognized data – whether research, monitoring and evaluation evidence, development data, big data, close or open data - as essential for setting development targets, and monitoring their progress. The availability, timeliness, quality, and overall usability of data are crucial for food systems transformation. It highlighted several data-related impediments to food systems transformation which need to be addressed. Examples include lack of data to establish true cost accounting of food, true cost of diets, lack of country capacities to collect agricultural and food system data; lack of statistical systems available to analyse data; and poor use of empirical data by countries to accurately measure the nutritional impact of national agricultural and food policies (Global Panel, 2015).

The paper also highlighted several ongoing global and country-specific efforts to strengthen the nutrition data value chain which included: in-country mechanisms for priority-setting and data coordination, operational guidance for strengthening nutrition data systems and dissemination of knowledge and experience, and capacity development at multiple levels among others. It also suggested that new sources of data such as satellite data, new technologies and new analytical approaches if applied responsibly, can enable more agile, efficient, and evidence- based decision-making and can better measure progress toward food systems transformation.

Track 2 - The role of Advocacy and Accountability Science in Africa's Food Systems Transformation

The paper recognized the role and importance of advocacy and accountability science in achieving more healthy, sustainable, and equitable food systems for Africa. In the context of food systems transformation, advocacy could potentially influence all food system activities and actions of all actors via reframing of food system policies, recommendation of regulatory changes for practices with negative externalities, and support for the creation of private sector/industry standards to protect public health and promote environmental sustainability. Other advocacy approaches mentioned in the paper included building stakeholder coalitions (civil society, non-governmental organizations, academia, media, community groups, distribution networks and trade associations) and alliances to challenge political barriers and undesirable commercial and economic interests of different food system actors.

The paper also talked about accountability science –the need for all food systems actors to be held accountable for the impact of their actions, as well as their commitment to achieving food system goals. Governments could hold the private sector to account, and civil society could hold both government and private sector actors to account, including identifying, preventing and addressing conflicts of interests between government and private sector actors.

Track 3 - The Role of Governance & Leadership in Africa's Food Systems Transformation

The paper recognized the role of governance of food systems to be multi-dimensional ranging from governance of natural resources to commodities, products, and socio-economic aspects; and extending beyond the formal functions of government, to include markets, networks, communities, and non-state actors such as industries and civil society organisations. The paper focused the lens of leadership not only on high-level political leadership (governance), but also the importance of the role of individuals working at ground and executive levels, who collectively contribute to the functioning of food systems leadership. It went on to give examples of successful leadership for food systems transformation such as in Chile, Brazil and Finland. A key challenge related to leadership which was discussed was power relations and vested interests emanating from the sheer number of diverse stakeholders in food systems. The paper admonished that ultimately, we all have a leadership role to play via participation, demanding as well as exhibiting accountability in our individual and collective endeavors to transform food systems.

2 PARTICIPANTS

The event hosted a range of participants from the public, non-profit, and private sectors whose work border on the African food systems. This included consumer groups, small to large-scale farmers, national and multi-national businesses, local and international non-governmental organizations, workers and trade union, Government institutions, regional economic communities, United Nations, and academia. Invitations were sent directly via email to contacts in relevant fields, who were encouraged to promote the event to other potentially interested persons within their organizations/institutions. In addition, an online search using keywords like, food systems, NCDs, nutrition transition, research and name of country (e.g., Nigeria) was used to identify potential delegates. Considerable efforts were made to ensure diversity (regional/geographic representation, as well as food systems stakeholder/sector representation) of participants.

82 participants registered and took part in the event. To encourage wider participation, the event flyer was circulated on social media platforms including Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn. The majority of the participants were from the education and healthcare sectors (Table 1a), and the stakeholder most represented were science and academia, and government and national institutions (Table 1b). About 62% (n=51) of the participants were female, and 73% (n=60) were aged between 19-50 years.

Table 1a) Participants by sector

Agriculture/crops*	3	Education	36	Health care	17
Fish and aquaculture	0	Communication	2	National or local government	4
Livestock	0	Food processing	2	Nutrition*	8
Agroforestry	0	Food retail	1	Utilities	0
Environment and ecology	2	Food industry	2	Industrial	0
Trade and commerce	3	Financial services	0	Other	2

Table 1b) Participants by stakeholder group

Small/medium enterprise/artisan	2	Workers and Trade Union	1
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Large national business	0	Member of Parliament	0
Multinational corporation	0	Local authority	4
Small-scale farmer	2	Government and national institution	20
Medium-scale farmer	1	Regional Economic Community	2
Large-scale farmer	0	United Nations	2
Local Non-Governmental Organization	3	Private Foundation / Partnership / Alliance	2
International NGO	5	International financial institution	0
Indigenous people	0	Consumer Group	1
Science and academia	34	Other	2

3 DIALOGUE FORMAT

3.1 The Food Systems Summit Principles of Engagement

The organization of the dialogue was largely adherent to the Food Systems Summit Principles of Engagement. Adhering to recommendations from the UN regarding organization of the Food Systems Summit Dialogues, the conversation was held as focus groups such that all participants had purposeful and respectful exchanges with diverse food systems stakeholders and contributed to the discussion topics. Below are examples of specific principles and how this was achieved.

“Act with urgency”: Recognizing the urgency with which food systems transformation actions needed to be taken, the Dialogue Conveners and Facilitators deliberately requested specific policy asks, and critical practice changes required to transform the African food systems as soon as **now, and by 2030.**

“Commit to the Summit”: Dialogue conveners, curators, facilitators and participants received orientation at different phases of the dialogue preparation and execution on Dialogue Principles As part of the concluding remarks **participants were called upon to seek opportunities to contribute to the UNFSS processes in their respective countries and engagements.**

“Be respectful”: Dialogue conveners incorporated into the facilitation guidelines the need to be respectful of nature, natural resources, African culture and values, and contexts, which was reinforced during the dialogue by facilitators. Participants were able to choose freely which session they wanted to contribute to, without undue influences by the organizers.

“Recognize complexity”: Cognisant of the fact that food systems are complex and are impacted largely by the actions and inactions of humans, dialogue facilitators engaged participants in discussions that facilitated identification of **multiple-duty innovations/actions** that can influence different parts of this complex system.

3.2 Summary of the Opening Remarks

In welcoming participants, the principal investigator of the MEALS4NCDs Project, **Professor Amos Laar** talked about the unprecedented challenge of four intersecting pandemics - climate change, undernutrition, obesity/DR-NCDs, and COVID-19. He explained that the collective impact of these pandemics on our food systems warrants urgent and decisive actions to be taken by governments with data-driven inputs and nudging, with support from all relevant stakeholders. He urged stakeholders to consider their participation in the dialogue as their ongoing contribution to reimagining Africa’s food future, and ultimately, Africa’s future.

Following the opening remarks, there were contextualizing and framing presentations for Dialogue participants. Ms. Bibi Giyose (Senior nutrition and food systems officer, and special advisor to the NEPAD CEO) provided a perspective on how Africa is positioning itself for the upcoming UN Food Systems Summit and general food systems transformation. Prof. Anna Lartey (Professor of Nutrition at the University of Ghana and Immediate past Director of Nutrition, FAO, Rome) presented the African context and introduced the idea of food systems in context with key concepts and ideas. Dr. Samuel Oti (Senior Program Specialist at Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and Host of MedTek Africa podcast) highlighted the crucial role that measurement, evaluation, accountability, and leadership support (“MEALS”) plays in food systems transformation. Once the context of the conversation was successfully framed, participants were ushered into their respective breakout groups – focusing on the three core themes of the Dialogue – Data; Advocacy & Accountability; and Governance & Leadership.

3.3 Breakout Sessions

Due to the high number of participant turnout, the originally planned 3 breakout rooms were duplicated – resulting in a total of 6 breakout rooms. Participants were allocated to breakout rooms of their choice. Discussions in each breakout room were facilitated by two experts, who used pre-

approved discussion topics/prompt questions, and group-specific templates. The discussions were organized around three main questions:

1. What policy actions or critical practice changes do we want various food system actors (e.g., governments, private sector, academia, farmers, etc.) to adopt to transform the African Food Systems by 2030?
2. How do we use advocacy, accountability science, governance, leadership and leadership support to facilitate the transformation of Africa's food systems?
3. Who will need to be involved and what specific actions do we require of them?

The discussion lasted for approximately 90minutes, with a notetaker taking notes. Facilitators encouraged divergent views and ensured that all voices were heard. Key messages were then summarized by a facilitator or notetaker from each of the 6 rooms during a feedback and closing session that lasted about 30mins.

3.3.1 Feedback from Breakout sessions

Main Findings

The key findings produced from the discussions are summarized below under the three core areas.

Data/Measurement

- ***The need to establish a clear strategic plan for food systems data:*** At the moment, there's an ad hoc approach to data collection and use across Africa, rather than a clear road map for data. There should be institutionalization of data, where various Government agencies and the private sector can share data on what is happening in the food system. This should include a clear plan for ***data financing***.
- ***The use of technology in gathering data:*** Artificial Intelligence (AI) can be leveraged in food systems to empower consumers to contribute to the production decision-making. Secondly, AI can be used to enhance agricultural operations via innovations such as drone farming, monitoring of cattle movement, and facilitation of vertical farming.

- ***Transparency and accountability in sharing of data:*** Data should be made accessible to all the actors along the food systems, and the private sector should share their rich sources of data for food systems decision-making.

Advocacy/Accountability science

- ***Bridging the advocacy gap:*** Awareness and sensitization on what exists in Africa for Africans is important in promoting advocacy and accountability.
- ***Advocate for strong regulation and transparency of the food environment:*** Governments need to link trade policies, and food and nutrition security policies to the nutritional needs of the population. Inequities in the food environment should be corrected to allow access to fair marketing, competition and capital investment for SMEs.
- ***Advocate for legislation and harmonization of standards*** that are transparent and accountable to control the markets and promote healthy lifestyle changes related to food consumption patterns.
- ***Consumer driven advocacy:*** Industry often responds to consumer demands and this can be harnessed, e.g., involvement of celebrities in building demands for sustainable, healthy and safe diets, to help transform food systems.

Governance/ Leadership

- ***The need for Champions/Food Systems Heroes:*** Participants expressed the need for key actors such as the government leaders, community actors, nutrition champions, policy entrepreneurs, and academics who would serve as “champions” for the food systems transformation cause.
- ***Inclusive leadership from government, media, civil society, and public health experts*** is needed. This should take a bottom-up approach across different sectors to enhance ownership and sustainability. To illustrate this, participants mentioned that farmers are often left out in the formulation of policies that affect agriculture, yet they are key stakeholders.
- ***Build capacity of local leaders on the food systems value chain:*** Local leaders, experts and community food systems actors should be linked to the state institutions in a way that engages them in the planning and implementation of food systems actions.

- ***Policy framework and regulation enforcement:*** There is the need for governments to adopt a combination of incentives and disincentives to promote and regulate the production of healthy, safe and sustainable diets. Participants also stressed the need for strong regulations in the food retail and food advertisement sectors.
- ***Collaboration among food systems actors:*** A salient point highlighted in the discussions was the need for innovation, transparency, accountability, and stronger partnership between science, the private and public sectors, and stakeholders across food systems.
- ***Network all food systems actors:*** Food systems actors do not know they are in the same system with others. Networking among actors from various sectors and levels of the food chain will enhance sharing of ideas and also facilitate collaboration.
- ***The role of women in food systems*** was highlighted and the need for promoting gender-related food policies was emphasized.

Areas of Divergence

During the discussion, there were some points of divergence among participants on some of the proposed solutions for food system transformation. It is important to note such opposing positions to ensure diverse views are captured. Some of these opposing views are summarized below.

- ***Who is in charge of collecting data?*** Two strong opposing views were advanced. One was that Leadership/government is solely responsible for overall strategy for data collection, protection, and financing, and thus should be held accountable for it. A differing view indicated that private sector should also be responsible for data collection as the government sector does not have the capacity to do so unaided.
- A participant suggested that a ***disruptive advocacy*** (e.g., non-importation of certain foods) should apply to foods that are produced in or available in African countries to encourage consumption of locally available foods. However, another participant fervently disagreed, indicating that disruptive advocacy is not the solution, but what needs to be advocated for is for countries to link national agricultural transformation, trade policies, and food and nutrition security policies to the nutritional needs of the population.

- Proponents of **AI technology** by farmers advanced the view that technology will help with data capturing, e.g., AI could link farmers to consumers to inform demand and supply of certain foods. However, there was an opposing view that the use of AI could be harmful if not used appropriately – without the necessary regulatory mechanisms in place on the access and use of such data.
- The trade-offs regarding the **role celebrities could play to help transform the food systems**. There was a suggestion for celebrities to use their influence to promote food system transformation. However, some participants felt involving celebrities may only lead to popularization which is not necessarily transformation.
- **Private sector engagement in data sharing**: there were differing views on why the private sector was not actively engaged in food systems transformation despite having valuable data which is needed for this transformation. They should be more open in sharing data. Some participants noted the private sector actors are business minded, and hence profit oriented, and if engaging will not lead to an increase in profits why should they? However, others felt that the private sector actors have a duty to all and not just their board of directors. The participant mooted the idea of decolonialization of data and destabilization of information asymmetries if we need to truly transform our food systems.

3.4 Summary of Closing Remarks

In delivering the closing remarks, Professor Amos Laar expressed his appreciation to all those who contributed to the dialogue, including the MEALS4NCDs core team, local organizing committee, and facilitators. He also thanked the dialogue curators, Dr. Namukolo Covic (President of the African Nutrition Society, International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) Ethiopia) and Prof. Anna Lartey as well as all the participants of the dialogue. He noted that the closing of this meeting is not the end, but rather the beginning of a fruitful, impactful, and sustainable collaboration among stakeholders to successfully transform Africa's food systems.

4 ATTACHMENTS

Dialogue Brochure (including Facilitators' pre-read/discussion starter papers)

Links:

Dialogue page via MEALS4NCDs web site : <https://www.meals4ncds.org/en/dialogues/>

Dialogue page via UN FSS Gateway : <https://summitdialogues.org/dialogue/6387/>

APPENDIX I – AGENDA

Time	Session	Who	Purpose
	Opening plenary		
12.00	Call to order	Dr. Namukolo Covic	Share purpose and format of the overall Dialogue
12.05	Welcome and introductions	Prof Amos Laar	Welcome participants to Dialogue; Introduce Dialogue Co-Conveners
12.10	The UN Food Systems Summit: Essence and expectations (Focus on Africa)	Ms. Bibi Giyose	Share how Africa is positioning herself for UN Food Systems Summit and Food Systems Transformation in the continent
12.15	Food Systems - Framing and Contexts	Prof. Anna Lartey	Provide African context and facilitate shared understanding of Food Systems
12.45	Role of data, advocacy, accountability, governance, and leadership in FS transformation	Dr. Samuel Oti	Share critical role of MEALS in FS transformation
	Breakout Sessions		
13.00	ROOM 1[A &B] Data (measurements & evaluations) & food systems transformation	Facilitators & Participants	In this breakout rooms, participants will discuss the role data, advocacy, accountability, governance, and leadership can play in transforming the African food systems
	ROOM 2 [A & B] Advocacy, Governance, Accountability Science & food systems transformation	Facilitators & Participants	
	ROOM 3[A &B] Leadership & food systems transformation	Facilitators & Participants	
	Feedback Plenary		
14.30	Feedback from breakout sessions	Moderated by Dr. Namukolo	Identify top policy and practice asks needed for food systems transformation
14.50	Recommended key actions	Dr. Namukolo Covic	Highlight key policy and practice asks from breakout sessions
15.00	Closing and next steps	Prof Francis Zotor	Outline next steps and actions required post Dialogue

