



# Dialoguing at scale

## Reflecting on experience

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### Background

More than 1,600 multi-stakeholder dialogues were convened in preparation for the United Nations Food Systems Summit 2021. These dialogues helped facilitate inclusive explorations of the complex challenges of transforming food systems and accelerate progress towards the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. The context for the summit and the place of dialogues within it can be explored in more detail in an article published in 'Nature Food' [here](#).

The dialogues were designed to help stakeholders in agriculture, food and sustainable development as together they made sense of and started to shape their own food systems. This document reflects some of the premises that guided the design roll-out and stewardship of the dialogues as a 'systems intervention' and suggests areas of learning. The term 'systems intervention' is used to mean a deliberate effort to prompt a shift in how a system functions among many entities with multiple interests. It is distinguished from delivering a programme of work in a specific single field or embarking on a process of organizational development within a single organisation.

In this regard, food systems share characteristics with other Human Systems. There are multiple over-lapping and inter-dependent networks, resulting in multiple sources of power and authority and multiple perspectives on an appropriate path forward. This creates an infinite number of different combinations which makes it hard to discern cause and effect clearly. Every action leads to multiple unintended consequences, only some of which are predictable. In short, systems interventions take place in a complex environment and rarely provide clear indications of cause and effect. Instead of trying to appreciate the origins of new ways of thinking and working, it can be more valuable to consider the conditions which favour their emergence and the benefits that will accrue as a result.

### Why dialoguing

Dialogue has been a part of human activity for as long as there has been language. Groups of people converse together to determine how, or even if, they wish to move forward together. It is an everyday occurrence in many indigenous cultures that can manifest as informal, formal, and ritual interaction.

More recently in Western interpretation and particularly following the work of Bill Isaacs, David Bohm and others, dialogue has come to mean an open conversation with generative intent. What is of special interest is the features of a dialogue that enable it to generate promising new ways of thinking and working, particularly encouraging participants to

suspend internal points of view and judgement. This makes it easier for them to listen to what others say, respect their viewpoints and build upon them when they intervene. They avoid the habitual reflex of jumping in with their own thoughts or judgements. The dialogue finds a flow that is creative and progressive.

This kind of dialogue provides a way of managing multiple non-aligned interests and power imbalances in pursuit of an ideal. However, those who do it successfully require a degree of self-discipline, comfort in the process, and experience of interacting in this way.

## **Dialogues and UN Food System Summit 2021**

Global and National (and sub-National) Food Systems are characterised by tensions and power imbalances. Land ownership and use has in many cases been a source of conflict. Power is disproportionately held by governments and large corporations often to the disadvantage of smallholder farmers of which there may be some 500 million worldwide. Feeding a growing urban population is no simple matter. Feelings can run high.

It was important to ensure that a wide diversity of perspectives was both represented and able to speak and be heard. The dialogues needed to create an environment where young and old, women and men, small holders and indigenous peoples could sit alongside government officials, academics, and global businesses. This required skilful design, preparation, and facilitation and 4SD invested carefully in equipping people to do this.

For dialogues to be used as a successful approach for navigating such a system, and fostering novel ways of working, a specific architecture had to be created to hold the tensions in the system. A purist viewpoint would be unfeasible given the timescale and starting conditions, outwith areas where such approaches were already practised. 4SD evolved a structure and approach to dialoguing that provided the architecture for over 1600 dialogues. Governments were asked to identify individuals to perform the role of National Dialogue Convenor. They were nominated in 148 countries. Non-governmental organisations, civil society, academics and local authorities could also run their own dialogues nominating their own convenors. These led to 111 national Pathways to sustainable and equitable food systems, with 96 heads of state endorsing them at the UN Food Systems Summit. They link to national budgets, strategies and development plans.

The details of this structure, including handbooks and manuals needed to successfully run it, the feedback from each dialogue, the depth and breadth of participation and Synthesis Reports that tell the story of the dialogues are all available on the website <https://summitdialogues.org>.

This document does not seek to repeat or expand on what is a most thorough resource. Instead, it seeks to share key areas of learning from four specific aspects as follows.

- 1.** The act of designing and evolving systems interventions.
- 2.** The art of accompanying people through systems intervention.
- 3.** The experience of being involved in systems interventions.
- 4.** The mindsets that help us work this way.

A document that captures these learnings more fully, identifying qualities with descriptions

and examples, is attached as an annex.

## **The act of designing and evolving systems interventions**

To create the conditions in which 1600+ dialogues led to global discernible outputs required an architecture, a process and a system for orienting those using it. This needed to build on and acknowledge existing practice and find the line between providing enough structure to satisfy the aims of the summit whilst allowing sufficient flexibility to maximise local benefit. The guiding principle in dealing with National Dialogue Convenors was to use the momentum and impetus provided by the summit to further what is needed nationally rather than simply satisfying the needs of the summit itself.

To do this required a design for the dialogues which enabled local leaders to take on the process to address local challenges. Their actions were especially valuable if they reflected a set of critical guidelines.

The first was clarity on the intent of the dialogues. It provided a common language and identity, a sense that participants were doing something important for their communities and at the same time were contributing to a critical global movement.

The second was on participation: the need for attracting and enabling as diverse and inclusive a group of participants as possible – all stakeholders with an interest, with efforts to ensure that there were diverse participants from within each stakeholder group.

The third was to ensure that the approach was flexible enough to take account of local circumstances, including weather, elections, conflict and COVID-19.

The fourth was for the process to be able to evolve whilst maintaining the integrity of the work. 4SD did this by creating open spaces where everyone could learn from the participant experience.

The fifth was to land something meaningful by the time of the UN Food Systems Summit, the whole process taking place within a year and in a Covid restricted environment.

The act of designing and evolving the approach was one of constant attention to purpose, curiosity on how it could be realized, and feedback amongst the summit organizers. Not everything worked everywhere, and processes of regular reporting (on progress), communication (on engagement) and training (open to all with an interest) were built in. They enabled processes for design and rollout to be responsive and adaptive.

All this would not have happened without financial support from the Summit secretariat to national convenors. Organising and running dialogues requires an investment in time and incurs cost.

## **The art of accompanying people through a systems intervention**

If the 'act of designing' provided an architecture for the dialogues, this would not have been sufficient without the ability to create a relational context within which the various elements could be found. Throughout the dialogues there was much attention given to creating and tending this relational space. It was referred to as the place where people were *accompanied* through the systems intervention'. The dialogue 'convenors' were identified as being essential catalysts and national governments were invited to place them

at the heart of the process. The 4SD role was to serve them in relation to their role with the summit.

Throughout the dialogue period a great deal of emphasis was placed on the nature and quality of interaction among the National convenors and their communications with the Summit organisers. This has involved establishing a regular rhythm tempo and style of meetings, working weekly in multiple languages to ensure ease of comprehension and engagement. This was a two-way flow, convenors wanted to know how preparations for the summit were developing, how their work would feature, what would be valuable. The summit organizers needed to know how things were progressing, what was working and where barriers lay, what more convenors needed. 4SD oscillated between being catalyst for, and midwife to, the process.

The success of the whole process depended on there being unequivocal trust between the convenors (and their governments) and the summit organizers (and the multilateral entities they represent). The 4SD investment included fostering a sense of common interest, as well as being visible, transparent, responsible, generous and inclusive. Carefully attending to these attributes and testing the validity and legitimacy of assumptions, gave 4SD the confidence to make bold advances without being reckless.

## **The experience of being involved in systems interventions**

Systems are by their very nature complex and food systems are certainly no exception. What happens in these complex human environments is affected by how power is concentrated and used: indeed, politics are an inevitable and significant phenomenon within them. Where approaches and outcomes are contested, and power is dispersed, the individuals and groups who want to get things done seek the power that enables them to do so. That means that engaging in a food systems intervention is engaging in a political activity. It is a reality that is worth recognizing because it means paying constant attention to the political dynamics within food systems and how they shift over place and time. It also means that those involved in influencing how food systems behave need to be comfortable with operating in this sphere.

To do so with comfort means being able to manage paradox skilfully. Different views need not be opposites. Two or more elements that appear to be in conflict can both be valid. Those working with food systems are constantly involved in creating frames for conversations and activities that can hold multiple perspectives. Constant effort is needed to hold that frame firmly but lightly. In the case of the Food Systems Summit Dialogues the emphasis was on prioritizing the interests and needs of participants, and not on pursuing specific outcomes that might be desired by the summit organizers or by 4SD as their contractors. In this kind of working others expect to be asked to support, or oppose, a particular agenda. They can be disconcerted and even become critical when effort is invested in creating an agnostic platform for collective working. Yet it is vital for the catalyst to remain neutral and earn the authority to operate in challenging spaces.

All of this describes environments where passions run high, emotions are aroused and those involved may well find themselves caught in the energy of the moment. It would be naïve to request that you remain unaffected in such circumstances. It may be useful if you recognise the emotion of a situation, and its impact on yourself and on others. Ethical

behaviour, in this setting, is choosing to care for all involved.

## **The mindsets that help us work this way**

The success of your efforts to work in this way will be determined by your mindset. There is no straightforward “mindset test” to apply. But a systems leadership mindset begins from curiosity, from questions like “What is going on here, how do we know, what might work?” Continuing to seek answers drives the desire to explore capacity for adaptation. As circumstances evolve, understanding shifts and new potential emerges. This creates opportunities for rethinking, redesigning and retuning.

Successfully stimulating meaningful changes takes energy. There is huge energy for changing and improving what is eaten and ways food is produced. Tapping into that energy and unleashing it requires widespread, high quality connections. Make a habit of investing in people – finding the time that is needed to meet them where they are, listen to them, understand what drives them and respect differences between them. Create the spaces in which they can get your measure and decide for themselves the amounts of their energies they will commit to the work. 4SD quickly realized the impossibility of mobilizing change in food systems in over a hundred countries around the world through personal drive alone. There were systematic efforts to tap into the goodwill, excitement and energy of others to foster a sense of movement and the potential for an exponential shift in outcome.

The expectations were high as dialogues were advanced, pathways emerged, and the Summit date approached. But anxiety ran throughout. In each dialogue, participants asked what they had to give up moving forward? Are they going in the right direction? Anxiety is inevitable when new ways of thinking and working are starting to emerge. That is because we move from the comfort and security of the known into the transformative realm that is as yet unknown. This anxiety is vital but it can be crippling. This means that the environment, validity and readiness for new approaches is constantly being tested. Embracing anxiety is hard: 4SD’s close-knit and committed team made a habit of regularly connecting on the morning of each working day to help ensure that this vital element of mindset was not disregarded.

## **Going further**

The summit dialogues website <https://summitdialogues.org> provides a huge resource on a unique global process. The learning here is applicable to other global events, national or sub-national events and for commercial corporations. If you wish to explore any element further, please contact the authors [contact@4SD.org](mailto:contact@4SD.org).

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## Disclaimer

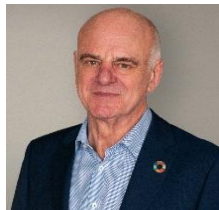
The views and lessons presented in this paper reflect the experiences and reflections of 4SD's team. They do not necessarily represent the official views, positions, or endorsements of the United Nations or its affiliated entities.

## The Authors

In our work together we have explored what systems leadership means, what working with living systems really looks like and how that plays out for real when you have a central role within loosely- organized human systems that are trying to address complex issues.

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