



# 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 organisational development within a single organisation.

In this regard, food systems share characteristics with other Human Systems. There are multiple overlapping 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 a 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 organizers. 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 their 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).

## Our learnings regarding Systems Change

### Illustrated by lessons from the UN Food Systems Summit Dialogues



The act of designing systems interventions		
Quality	Description	Example from the Food Systems Summit Dialogues
<b>1. Local focus and leadership</b>	We focus on a real challenge in a defined place, supporting local direction and authority to create ownership.	National governments nominated convenors who chose the focus and the discussion topics.
<b>2. Legitimacy</b>	We provide a structure within which things can legitimately happen and recognize that legitimacy in a complex system may not be clear and will shift over time.	Initial legitimacy provided by UNSG's call for a Food Systems Summit in support of SDGs; strengthened by the inclusive dialogue process.
<b>3. Diversity and inclusivity</b>	We help people find new and surprising connections and know that diversity of voices is critical for breakthrough.	Principles of engagement and specific guidance for inclusivity.
<b>4. Flexibility and co-creation</b>	We enable people to amend the process to suit their circumstances, the changing mood and environment, to allow an ongoing process of co-creation.	Standardised approach adapted to local context but within principles of engagement of the FSS.
<b>5. Identity of the work</b>	We codify a common understanding and language and build belief in the importance of the work and its processes.	Creation of common process with defined roles (convenor, curator, facilitator), and pieces ("pathway", "official feedback form" ...).
<b>6. Pace, rhythm and readiness</b>	We encourage those leading change to adapt their rhythm and play with time. We are with them as they test when the time is right and then to jump.	We encouraged convenors to use a feasible timeframe while also constraining time around national pathways for the summit, to encourage the crystallisation of ideas and a collective global momentum for change.
<b>7. Viewing the whole</b>	We view designing systems interventions as an act of enabling the system to develop as far as it can within the overall direction of change. This requires avoiding bias, viewing the system as a whole, not from a specific point of view.	We constantly sought to hear different viewpoints, oscillated quickly between fine detail and the big picture, and developed tools that recorded the detail of dialogue outcomes enabling us to see patterns and connections.
<b>8. One step at a time with the direction in mind</b>	we adapt as we go, empowering others through involving them as we focus on the present and what is happening, while thinking of what comes next.	National pathways were always in the design of the process but highlighted only close to the Summit. Some convenors were anxious for detailed guidance on their pathways, but we maintained a broad perspective, encouraging them to shape the documents and process to suit their needs.

## Our learnings regarding Systems Change

### Illustrated by lessons from the UN Food Systems Summit Dialogues



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

Quality	Description	Example from the Food Systems Summit
<b>1. The tempo of trust</b>	We act deliberately to establish and maintain trusted relationships. We make those relationships in service of those whom we are accompanying, and not the wider process.	Weekly 'convenor connection' sessions gave a rhythm to the work, maintaining a regular pattern of interaction and flow of up-to-date information. Relationships were built with convenors every step of the way.
<b>2. Language and multi-lingualism</b>	We invest in translation and interpretation services, reach out to people in their language, with materials and instructions that they can easily engage with.	A multilingual team and communications (online sessions, website, manuals...) were a key factor in creating connections across the globe.
<b>3. Radical listening to meet people where they are</b>	We listen not just to the words but also to the emotions, the intent, the story behind the story. We try to feel for what could be possible, in each context and moment, never imposing thought or solutions.	Working with empathy meant listening carefully to the political and cultural context, being aware of personal circumstances and adapting relationships depending on the unfolding situation, including calling convenors when they or their country faced a critical challenge or crisis.
<b>4. Communicating with simplicity &amp; integrity</b>	What we say matters. We try to speak in plain sentences and words. When we don't have an answer, we say so. We listen deeply to what people say and how they say it. We tune in to guide our responses.	We tried to use simple language in the facilitation of convenor connection sessions, manuals and synthesis documents. When we did not know information (e.g. run-in to the pre-summit or in the forming of coalitions), we said it, yet without blaming others for frustrating situations.
<b>5. Making it easy</b>	We try to make it easy for people: to see what comes next, to do the right thing, to access the people shaping the process, to adapt and disagree. We know that making things easy can be hard.	We built an online gateway as a simple point of access for people looking for information, constantly seeking to improve its navigation. We created handbooks, manuals and two-page pdf 'how to' guides to support people at each stage of the process.
<b>6. Enabling connections</b>	We avoid becoming the only point for connection, which would limit each system's capacity to act and adapt. We connect people in systems with each other to explore and resolve their own differences.	The process was characterised by a constant effort to develop connections and relationships: between countries with similar geographies or issues together; between organisations; between convenors, coalition leads and action tracks...
<b>7. Visibility and transparency</b>	We make what we do visible and transparent. We sense that everyone owns the process, and their generosity is both virtuous and healthy.	The Gateway) hosts all the feedback forms from national, independent and global dialogues and all the data on them can be downloaded by anyone so they can be analysed and further explored.
<b>8. Audacity and tenacity</b>	Carefully and repeatedly testing the validity and legitimacy of the work gives the confidence to take bold steps. Conscientiously deepening understanding of progress and priorities ensures we step from solid ground. We can be bold but never reckless.	We meticulously kept records of every contact and activities within the process. This enabled us to see the overall trend alongside the granularity that made the process come to life. We could make significant decisions (eg about the focus on pathways), based on a deep awareness of context.

## Our learnings regarding Systems Change

### Illustrated by lessons from the UN Food Systems Summit Dialogues



The experience of being involved in systems interventions		
Quality	Description	Example from the Food Systems Summit
<b>1. Politics and complexity</b>	Politics is the way societies hold the tensions of complexity. We expect difference, machinations, posturing and positioning. It is part of the fabric of the system. It cannot be resolved even when discrete parts and activities are being explored. The more we engage, the more we see working with politics as positive.	We experienced politics at multiple levels. We were regularly engaged with political leaders and their teams. We gained a deeper understanding of the issues that mattered in each specific context and who needed to be involved.
<b>2. Managing paradox</b>	We hold together different thoughts and opinions, within the work and within the team. We are looking for what connects not distinguishes. We help people to make sense of situations and scenarios, describing them, testing them, and reflecting on them. Moving forward means adapting as understanding changes.	There were constant differences of opinion at all levels. We tried to see each viewpoint as valid from the perspective of the person holding it. We tried to see this as valuable, enabling us to gain a deeper comprehension. We tried to hold difference as an asset rather than rush to resolve it.
<b>3. It's not about us</b>	When a system connects more intimately with itself, the tensions and pressures in that system can become channelled towards or through us. This can be deeply uncomfortable and distressing. We try to avoid being given ownership of the system's problems.	Being the focal point in many conversations meant that many pressures were aired in conversation with us. Our response was to try and illuminate what was happening in these tensions but not take sides or ownership for finding a solution. It was important to never take sides and to give the challenge of finding the solutions to those directly involved.
<b>4. Earning authority</b>	We know that if a system is functioning effectively as a system, the intervention will be superfluous. Until then, we will find ourselves (and others) repeatedly questioning the limit of our authority. But we know that if we stick closely to the authority that already exists, we can be seen as acting to perpetuate the existing system. We seek to create our roles by constant exploration of what is possible. The roles are established through consent and the authority to operate is then earned.	Throughout the dialogues process, we were acutely conscious that as a newer form of intervention the limit of our role and responsibility was at times unclear and untested. We explored what could be achieved through dialogic intervention, aiming to be clear about what we were doing and sharing that with others. We encouraged national convenors to do the same. We constantly questioned ourselves, asking if what we might do was a legitimate activity or next step. We were alert to the political environment and saw our work as an intervention in that environment, as the national dialogues were an intervention in national food systems.
<b>5. Navigating emotions / the importance of care</b>	Moments of transition in systems arouse strong passions. Perhaps we realise that if we don't feel it, it isn't happening. Yet if we become gripped by our emotion our ability to act is diminished. To intervene ethically and effectively is an act of care, and that includes caring for ourselves and those around us.	There were moments of intense pressure, particularly around the pre-summit and summit. We developed team processes that helped us make sense of why we were feeling as we were and relieve the pressure: daily 'check-ins', with Friday check-ins are more reflective. Senior team members acknowledging their mood, or that their week has been tough, creates the space for others to acknowledge this too. Building a strong team ethic is seen as a point of significant importance.

## Our learnings regarding Systems Change

### Illustrated by lessons from the UN Food Systems Summit Dialogues



The mindsets that help us work in this way		
Quality	Description	Example from the Food Systems Summit
<b>1. Curiosity</b>	We are curious as to what is really happening, in the detail and distance. We ask ourselves how we know what is happening and why things are as they are; what has meant that, however good the ideas, systems transformation has not progressed as anticipated.	Trying to understand the nature of countries we supported was important. Our curiosity fuelled our learning, making us more open to understanding local situations and building a deepening perspective on how dialogues were supporting a process of systems change.
<b>2. Adaptation</b>	We let what we learn through our curiosity feed our adaptation. We help others to let go of fixed procedures and delivery plans when they no longer help, encouraging them to constantly rethink and improve them to fit evolving circumstances.	We adapted the Gateway to fit what was helpful for users. Who had permissions to access various areas changed over time to balance security of the site with open availability of information. As convenors began to use feedback forms or upload pathways, we adapted our guidance.
<b>3. Conscious connections</b>	We become conscious of the extraordinary potential of connections. We pay attention to how we connect and with whom. We help others to find surprising and novel connections. We explore possibilities with new eyes to better understand and strengthen the weave in the systems we work with. We try to make collective sense of situations and find common meaning.	As the dialogues process grew and grew, it was soon apparent that connection would be a critical element of the work. We learned about the importance of timing in connections, how some convenors needed a constant background conversation and others only occasional touchpoints. We paid careful attention to protocol, to political level and who to involve and how in every conversation.
<b>4. Unleashing energy</b>	We look out for opportunities to unleash energy. We show our excitement and at times our despair. We find the brilliance in people and help make spaces for that brilliance to shine. We believe that this is how transformation proliferates, through the infectious energy of people believing in their power to act. We help others build these energy fields in all that they do.	In the training sessions we ran for curators and facilitators, we made the point that how you appear in a dialogue profoundly influences the mood of participants. We made sure we had a positive and enthusiastic demeanour. The aim was to help others find the enthusiasm to bring forward commitment in everyone who engaged in their dialogues.
<b>5. Respecting difference</b>	We respect difference as a critical element for transformation. We picture the world as full of great people who view events from different perspectives. We look for what they are seeing and do what we can to tune in to the feelings. We seek ways to build a bigger picture from this combination of views.	The whole point of a dialogue is to hold together multiple perspectives in order that something new and more valued might emerge. It was critical to model this. When feeding back from breakouts in our online sessions, we reported all viewpoints. We used the phrase 'we can disagree without being disagreeable' as a mantra. In our conversations we portrayed difference as inevitable and beneficial, with variation being the source of adaptation. This created an environment where differences, sometimes long suppressed, could be raised, and although this was not always easy, it was most important.
<b>6. Comfort with anxiety</b>	We know that systems are transforming amidst much uncertainty: this fuels anxiety and it will be ever-present. Our systems interventions touch this anxiety: it is a sign that we are genuinely stepping into the transformative realm. We cannot have all the answers. We seek to find comfort in anxiety: our attentiveness and values provide our security, keeping us attentive, caring, questioning and accountable.	There were many times when we were anxious. Sometimes it was because we felt the frustration in others. People needed to let off steam from time to time. We concentrated on building a team environment where we able to discuss these anxieties, notice their impact on us and others and reflect on how to respond. Our work was characterised by an absence of 'office politics' and the presence of care. Care for ourselves, for each other and for the remarkable people we have been fortunate to work with.

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## Disclaimer

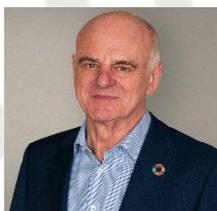
The views and lessons presented in this paper reflect the experiences and reflections of 4SD's team. They do not necessarily represent the official views, positions, or endorsements of the United Nations or its affiliated entities.

## 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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