

Food SINERGY

Food Systems Innovation to Nurture Equity and Resilience Globally (Food SINERGY) Forum

Summary Report

Mont Orford, Québec

March 19-21, 2023

In March 2023, over 30 international delegates gathered at a forum in Mont Orford, Québec to launch the *Food Systems Innovation to Nurture Equity and Resilience Globally* (Food SINERGY) collaboration network. Food SINERGY convenes scholars and practitioners from universities, NGOs, Indigenous networks, farmers' associations, consumer organisations, research institutes and social enterprises with a shared interest in transforming food systems in favour of greater resilience and equity. In the weeks preceding the Food SINERGY Forum, two online pre-forum sessions and a consultation survey integrated the participation of additional members of the Food SINERGY collaboration network and provided preliminary insights to orient the forum dialogue.



The Food SINERGY network benefits from a diversity of knowledge from its members' collective experience working in localities around the world, depicted in the map above.

Key themes

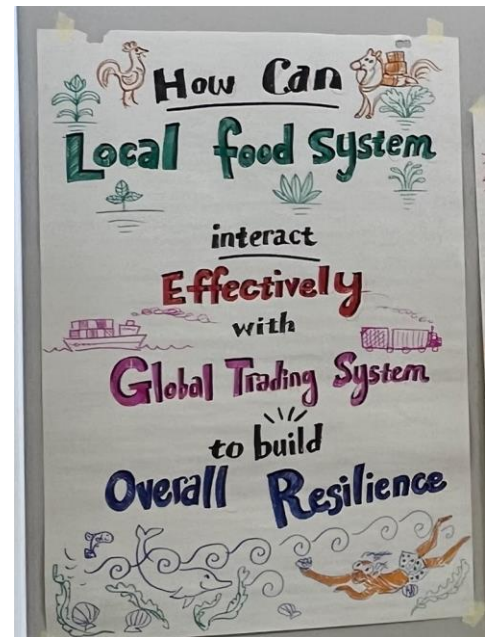
Through activity-based dialogue, the Food SINERGY Forum generated productive knowledge and avenues to support resilient and equitable food systems at, and across, different scales (e.g. local, regional, global). Several key themes received recurring attention throughout the Forum.

Resilience: The concept of “resilient food systems” was clarified to reach a shared understanding that creating resilient food systems is a *transformative* process, acknowledging that the current food system is not resilient and should therefore not be sustained. Food system resilience depends on diversified strategies that build stable redundancies and stopgaps into the food system, such that if one strategy fails, others can quickly and effectively fill the gap before negative consequences occur to planetary and human health and well-being. For food systems to be resilient, they must also be equitable.

Local-to-global scale: The need was identified to operate at different scales on a spectrum (local, national, regional, global), as well as to operate across these scales, with the recognition



These posters summarizing the outputs of a dynamic “1-2-4-all” discussion activity show the interacting nature of disruptions to food systems and the multiple ways that diverse actors have reacted to these disruptions.



The question posed in this poster guided paired discussion walks in the forest.

that they do not exist in silos. To transform food systems in favour of resilience, it is necessary to support food sovereignty on the local and national side of the scalar spectrum and to support equitable international trade on the regional and global side. While these have often been discussed separately of, or even at odds with, each other, complementarities must be found in order to create resilience.

Systems interactions: Transforming food systems involves action around production, distribution, processing, marketing, consumption, disposal and other intermediate elements. Additionally, food systems cannot be divorced from other system-level interactions, such as water, energy or terrestrial systems. Attention to systemic

interactions will support construction of food system resilience.

Integrated approaches to health and well-being: Multiple overlapping conceptual paradigms exist to integrate health and well-being among people, animals and the environment (e.g. One Health, Planetary Health, etc.). Each has their histories, proponents and merits. For Food SINERGY, it is more important to root our collaborations in these integrated approaches than to advocate for one approach over others.

Agroecology: A wealth of experiences, social organising and research has coalesced around agroecology as an integrated food system paradigm. While this paradigm emerged out of a focus on agriculture, it contributes guiding principles that operate across the food system, such as its principles around fairness, participation and co-creation of knowledge.

Our engagement around these themes did not always begin with consensus. However, divergent opinions usually found common ground and reached agreement after nuanced discussion.

Formative discussions:

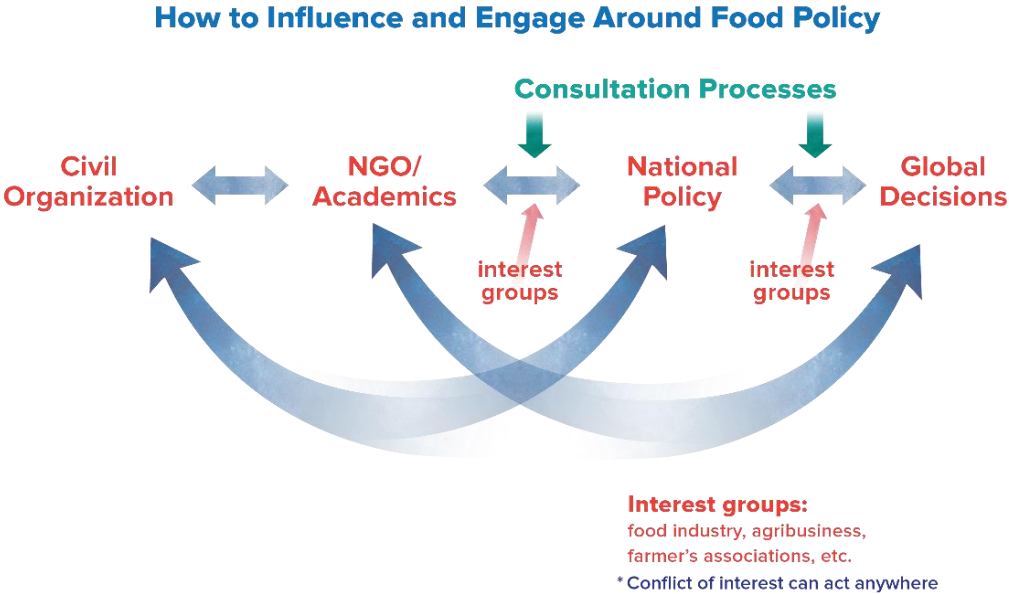
“Open Space” sessions allowed Food SINERGY delegates to propose and host small-group discussion on other themes relevant to constructing resilient food systems. These discussions were instrumental to clarifying the collaboration network’s collective interests and developing a conceptual framework (discussed further below). Highlights from discussions around the emergent themes are summarised below:

How to influence and engage around food policies?

There exist multiple spaces and actors where it is possible to engage around national and international food policies (e.g., Codex Alimentarius, side-meetings at the United Nations, Committee on Food Security, Sustainable Development Goals, WTO, IMF, WHO, IFAD, FAO, WFP, WOA). In democratic societies, policy-making typically occurs through a bi-directional pathway by which civil organising influences NGOs and research institutions, which in turn influence national policies or positions; the latter influence global decisions (which reverse the directionality to influence national policies). However, all points are vulnerable to the influence of interest groups as well as conflicts of interest.

To influence food trade policies on an international scale, it is necessary to understand how the World Trade Organization functions. However, the WTO’s closed-door discussions coupled with heavy industry influence means that the space for civil society is limited. A promising alternative approach to influencing trade policies is by leveraging the role of other international agreements, such as the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Food SINERGY should focus its efforts on changing the food system narrative that feeds into policy-making. Specifically, we can contribute by: conducting research to evaluate advocacy initiatives; contributing to consultation processes and supporting development of guidelines; examining the role of trade agreements in influencing food system policies at different scales (e.g. how do national governments use the WTO to justify national policies?); propose alternative indicators (e.g., alternatives to GDP); improve our internal literacy as well as that of our broader networks on how to impact policy.



Glo/cal dynamics: Attention to global and local (glo/cal) dynamics across different disciplines tends to reveal contradictions. For example, environmentalist discourse tends to suggest that local is always better, while nutrition discourse tends to favour access to a diversity of foods from around the world. A similar contradiction is observed in a (perhaps unspoken) debate between locally-oriented and globally-oriented schools of thought. The former find local approaches to be sufficient and global solutions to be too mercantile. The latter find the former to be idealistic or naive.

These contradictions underline the need for Food SINERGY to host and document formative dialogue on how to reconcile global and local dynamics while giving attention to different dimensions that are relevant to the food system. This dialogue will contribute to the development of cross-scale solutions and trans-scale advocacy for more resilient food systems.

Knowledge systems, education systems and transformative knowledge: Multiple dualities exist in discussions around knowledge and education: formal / informal; Western / traditional or Indigenous; institutional / local; conventional / alternative, among others. These dualities must be dissolved in favour of an integrated approach to knowledge that respects and values multiple sources of knowledge. This process should involve inclusion of a broader diversity of actors in knowledge systems, as well as equity in the valorization of knowledge approaches (e.g. Indigenous frameworks such as “two-eyed seeing”).

Further, there is a difference between knowledge production and knowledge use; while the former is often oriented around cause-and-effect, the latter is usually less linear, includes more dimensions and mobilises different actors. While science is often presented as neutral, it is not; for

example, the production of data is largely related to politically-motivated budgets. Therefore, it is necessary to move away from the positivist notion that “science knows, and science transfers knowledge” and instead focus on the learning process itself, with greater interest in how to collectively build and share knowledge that is adapted to a given context. Part of this involves knowledge sharing through valorization, rather than knowledge “transfer” through “vulgarisation” or “lay communication”; these terms are condescending and dismissive of other people’s knowledge.

Food SINERGY can contribute to these needs by conducting participatory research involving profound community engagement rooted in mutual respect and trust. Further, we can support education initiatives that break down knowledge dualities, both among the types of actors who are sharing their knowledge (e.g. farmers alongside academics) as well as in the learning community. Finally, we can strategically invest in knowledge production that promotes more resilient food systems.

Tracking change by telling stories of sustainable regional food systems: Despite a recognized need for more attention to community-driven knowledge and data, little such data has been systematically collected or documented. As researchers, it is necessary to work in service of communities, and to respond directly to community-identified needs for data. At the same time, it is important to communicate (to communities) why and how their data is relevant. For example, stories or case studies of innovation are important evidence that can help advocate for food system transformation. Furthermore, dominant knowledge paradigms tend to favour quantitative data used to measure certain indicators. In community-driven research, this poses multiple challenges; for example, the predominant quantitative indicators are not always adapted to local complexities. Because of this, it is necessary to co-create new indicators or methods for monitoring change that are adapted to community needs and contexts. In many cases, it may be necessary to find innovative ways to evaluate emergent aspects relevant to food systems, such as social, environmental, ecological and economic values around food. To support co-creation of knowledge, Food SINERGY can conduct participatory action research, with a strong emphasis on empowering people and communities to create, own, develop and manage their own data, as well as strong attention to the role of qualitative methods and adapted indicators.

(Bio)diversity for healthy food systems: Diversity is necessary for resilience through multiple dimensions: biodiversity, agrobiodiversity, diversity of foods, diversity of knowledge, biocultural diversity, soil microbiome diversity, genetic diversity, ecosystem/landscape diversity, among many others. These multiple ways of describing diversity are often linked, such as in the linkages between agrobiodiversity and dietary diversity. Discussions on diversity tend to turn to different subjects at different scales. At the local scale, for example, many discussions focus on knowledge (e.g. respecting and protecting Indigenous knowledge, intellectual property). At the global scale, many discussions focus on the need for access to diverse foods in the diet coupled with the concern of diversity loss in agriculture. Attention to diversity in its multiple aspects is instrumental for healthy food systems, particularly in the face of climate change.

Mobilising consumer organisations for food system change: Mobilising consumers is a strategic resource for influencing the food system because everyone is a consumer: everybody eats. In Latin America, there are several compelling examples of how organised consumer groups have successfully

advocated for food system change. Examining these cases is important for understanding how to have further successes. For example, we may be able to find key entry points that motivate and mobilise collective action (e.g. a focus on child nutrition could motivate parents to advocate for change in school food programs, or to support taxes on sugar-sweetened beverages). Such research is necessary not just to examine successful initiatives, but to empower citizens to be a part of food system change.

What does it take to bridge other systems to the food system? Food systems are interconnected with other systems (water, energy, etc.). The research funding environment has responded to this, recognizing the limitations of unlocking funds in silos. However, the pendulum may have swung too far, as now projects are often expected to tackle all issues at once, which is not feasible. Integrated conceptual frameworks, such as One Health (as well as Planetary Health, Social Determinants of Health, Ecohealth, among others), can help researchers integrate their work across systems, although they might still be too broad to effectively guide research. There are numerous paradigms and frameworks that are coherent with broader frameworks such as One Health, but that are more narrowly delineated within a focus theme (e.g., the principles of agroecology, circular economy, lifecycle analysis). These paradigms may be more useful in helping researchers give attention to systemic interactions, but are sufficiently delimited for projects to be feasible, as well as to “be humble about what we can and cannot do and explain clearly how our contribution will be relevant.”

The role of Food SINERGY: a conceptual framework

Our collective interest in resilient food systems is underscored by a shared understanding that food systems at different scales are currently facing multiple pressing threats, and that the need for transformation is urgent. Food SINERGY’s role is to mobilise a collaboration network that is in position to create, support and react quickly to opportunities for nurturing equitable and resilient food systems around the world through innovative approaches.

Based on our collective dialogue in the Food SINERGY Forum and in the activities leading up to the forum, we have identified a conceptual framework to guide Food SINERGY in our goal of supporting resilient food systems. At the heart of this framework is action-oriented research, which is understood to include participatory research, synthetic research, and other forms of research that support transformative action. Our research will respond to three interacting focal points:

(1) Local to Global Policy: This focal point will give attention to food system policies both at different scales, and across different scales. Research will serve multiple objectives: to better understand the policy environment as it relates to food systems; to document and learn from cases that have implemented more resilient food policies; to improve understanding on how to impact policies at different scales and in different governance contexts; and, to use an evidence-based approach for shifting the food system narrative feeding into policy decisions.

(2) Learning from Stories of Resilience: This focal point will give the stage to frontline experiences around nurturing more resilient food systems to both learn from the experiences as

well as strengthen these initiatives through co-learning. Participatory action research will serve not only to document experiences, but to obtain a nuanced understanding of their implementation in diverse contexts.

(3) Bridging and Expanding Knowledge for Transformation: This focal point responds to our interest in breaking down silos and dualities in knowledge production, sharing and use with respect to food systems. It will serve two primary purposes: to support Food SINERGY in valorizing and mobilising multiple forms of knowledge into our inquiries; and, to synthesise and share the knowledge produced from across Food SINERGY’s focal points into formative learning experiences that are adapted for diverse audiences and are effective in supporting food system transformation.

Our attention to these focal points will be conducted in a conceptual backdrop that is guided by integrated health approaches, recognizes and attends to system-level interactions, and engages interdisciplinary and intersectoral actors.

Framework for Supporting Resilient Food Systems



Avenues for the Future

Synergy is when the interaction or cooperation between multiple groups, actors or agents produces a combined effect greater than the sum of each of their separate effects. For Food SINERGY to have an impact that is greater than the sum of our parts, we need to give diligent attention to the aspects that support our interactions and cooperation and ultimately create synergy. To these ends, we propose three concrete avenues for our network's future that are intended to bridge diverse knowledge approaches, scales and topics that do not often interact. These are: engagement in communities of practice; creation of spaces for dialogue; and, collaboration in interdisciplinary research.

