



Date: **07 November, 2021**

To:

Dr. Elise Golan, Director for Sustainable Development
U.S. Department of Agriculture
cc: Hope Bigda-Peyton, International Trade Specialist

Room 112-A, Whitten Building, 1400 Independence Avenue Southwest
Washington, DC, DC 20250

From:

Meghna Tare
Director of the Institute for Sustainability and Global Impact
University of Texas at Arlington
701 S. Nedderman Drive
Arlington, TX 76019

Angie Fyfe
Executive Director
ICLEI-Local Governments for Sustainability USA
1536 Wynkoop St #901
Denver, CO 80202

RE: Outcomes from the *North Texas Local Food Dialogue on Sustainable Food Systems*, a contributing dialogue to the United Nations Food Systems Summit

Overview

University of Texas-Arlington and ICLEI hosted North Texas Local Food Dialogue on Inclusive Food Systems, a contributing Dialogue to Biden Administration's Food Policy Agenda, the UN Food System Summit and national discussions. The 2-hour session had about 50 stakeholders from a variety of fields including science, healthcare and academia, farmers, ranchers, local governments, activists etc. discussing sustainable regional food system visions.

Dr. Teik C. Lim, the interim president of The University of Texas at Arlington opened the dialogue. He noted that North Texas is in an urgent need of resilient, sustainable food systems that support public health and wellbeing through collaboration among the private, public and nonprofit sectors. The North Texas Food Policy Alliance (NTFPA) launched and established by UTA is one among the 5% of all the food policy councils in United States that are embedded within universities



and academic institution and aims to bring together expertise across multiple sectors to foster regional collaboration to develop a sustainable and equitable food system.

All the speakers emphasized on the importance of the participation and collective intelligence gathering and sharing to drive and accelerate the implementation of a resilient, sustainable food system and attain the sustainable development goals. Throughout the dialogue, local food system practitioners shared their best practices and ideas for how to approach local food system work. The discussion pointed out the importance of having multilevel governance and multi-stakeholder dialogues to successfully establish a sustainable food system that is accessible for people and communities that are most impacted by food system policies. Multilevel governance is key as the local governments cannot implement resilient, urban food systems without national governments and national governments cannot do it without local governments. Multi-stakeholder dialogues can bring everybody to the table and give them opportunity to speak and be heard and develop a shared vision coordinated act. Speakers, panelists, and participants shared their community's contexts, successes, and visions for a sustainable food system.

Insights from Pandemic

Food system is incredibly complicated. The pandemic had left thousands of people in our communities hungry and not knowing where their next meal would come from. This showed us how fragile our local food ecosystems, supply chain and distribution practices are, and pointed to the value of local food chains, including regional and urban production systems and importance of informal market arrangements. Regional or local action, supported by both national and global contexts and opportunities like online farmer's markets and open food network are vital. The pandemic helped people to see the connection about what lack of food can do to a family and what needs to be done to ensure food security for the people. The small-scale businesses, processes, distributors have incredible knowledge of traditional and indigenous food systems that can thrive in their location. This knowledge should be utilized and shared so the local authorities in cities can work from there.

Working at the Grass root level

The concentration of population in cities makes them the epicenters of the many issues, like climate change, poverty, public health implementation, food system problems etc.. Cities are not only the heart of these challenges, but also where the solutions live. When we use food as a lever for change, we can address all these issues at the same time and bring about meaningful, equitable transformation for the environment including improved biodiversity and gender equity, better inclusion for BIPOC communities. The food procurement for school nutrition is an example as it can connect all the different sustainable development goals like public health implementation, biodiversity, culture, and climate change in one public plate.

To improve local food system outcomes the cities are trying to work from different angles and build on projects that are already going on. One key point the discussion brought out was to



understand the community and its needs and involve the community in the conversations to avoid wastage of time and capital. Focusing on collaborating with different stakeholders whose works align with each other would make it more productive.

Food system and urban agriculture depends on the local demographics and growing seasons. Working together with the local farmers who have abundant knowledge about traditional and indigenous farming will enhance the outcome. Thinking in context of the end user and finding out what resonates with their needs and educating the community will help develop a holistic food system. Many cities are successful at different projects at microlevel and should focus on scaling them up. High rate of consumers unaware about the issue or lack of concern about the issues are hindering the process. They need to be educated to ensure success of the project.

Programs and Initiatives in North Texas

1. Food match / recovery programs:

There are several ongoing projects in North Texas that aim to create a system or framework that will help to connect those with excess food to the ones in need, without a middleman.

- Food recovery project involving university students partnering with on campus dining's to distribute excess food is one such example.
- The surplus food rescue program created a network of non-profit organizations across the US to donate excess food. The logistics including drivers and vans are provided to collect the food and immediately donate it out within a five-to-10-mile radius of the location.
- Food distribution program partners with different businesses or sports teams, organizations and set up pop-up grocery stores and reach out communities that otherwise don't have a means of transportation to the food bank. The program provides culturally and dietarily appropriate food for the communities.
- Retail rescue program partners food banks with local grocery retailers to rescue product from them and take it in to food bank. 20 million pounds of food was rescued through those retail partnerships in the past year.

Challenges

Some of the biggest challenges faced by food recovery programs include

- Difficulty in finding people that are willing and interested to be a part of the initiative.
- Finding volunteers post-Covid is a challenge as they are still not seeing as many people return to volunteering as in pre-covid times.
- Shipping and trucking shortages and issues related to transporting food from source to needy is the biggest challenge faced by the agencies.
- As non-profits can't afford to pay as competitively as for-profits, hiring is challenging and are on constant look out for new partners.



- The need for refrigerated trucks and keeping everything temperature controlled is key to avoid wastage of food yet is the biggest challenge.
- Apart from the logistics issues, figuring out who is doing what programs and not duplicating their work, rather allowing others to build on theirs is another challenge faced by communities.
- Issues related to unawareness of food and safety measures that needs to be taken by the food donors holds the progress down.

Needs

- There are lot of initiatives on food recovery, but it is important to develop an app connecting all food service providers including local restaurants to chains and hospital cafeterias to ensure success of the program.
- Marketing is important. This is because even if we have the database, platform, and connection to make the program a success, but if people in need don't know about it, it is as good as useless.
- Forming Neighbor voices groups, which is an assembly of people who have utilized such services in the past can help to get their feedbacks and better understand what worked and did not work for them when in need and what were the potential barriers for them.
- It is important to educate the food donors regarding the food safety process and requirements that need to be met for donating surplus food.
- Legal barriers are often getting in way of this initiative. Situations where people are reluctant to do surplus food donations due to the legal responsibilities often results in surplus food reaching landfills. Policy changes are required to tackle this issue.

2. Community gardens and Local Farming

Many representatives from the cities had community gardens in which they grow vegetables which they either donate to the local food pantries and food bank or sell in farmers market. These projects were able to bring together the people in community and work towards a common goal either with limited or no funding. A successful ongoing project is developing local community garden and donating food to local food pantries and food banks. They donated over 6,000 pounds in 2020. Growing vegetable garden in schools and colleges is another initiative happening in north Texas to create an inclusive food system.

Challenges



- Availability of manpower is a serious challenge as few volunteers are available to work in community garden, especially post pandemic.
- At micro level projects are working fine but to meet the requirement of locally grown healthy food for larger section of community, scaling is necessary. This requires a systemic, almost factory level approach from having seedling farms to hydroponic farms that works in all seasons, farmers and trained apprentices and professional growers which will require heavy investments.
- Lack of capacity to have dedicated staff person assigned for these initiatives is another challenge faces by cities.
- Difficult growing seasons and lack of enough farmers to go around are challenging.
- Finding markets for the locally grown food and vegetables and keeping pace to meet the demands of market is vital and challenging
- Optimizing the food retail environment in a way that healthier food options are the ones that are easy for people to make.
- Finding land for agriculture is tough due to outdated zoning regulations.

Needs

- Building collaborative relationships among the officials, stakeholders and people in community is necessary to build a sustainable local-food systems and give fair access to nutritious food choices.
- Recognize strategies for aiding discussions and recognizing appropriate food-system projects and policies within your own community.
- Beginning farmer-rancher training program to educate farmers and provide them with some of the basics to get them started will be crucial.
- Urban Agriculture faces challenges due to city processes and outdated zoning regulations. These acts as barriers and hence policy change should be made to accommodate the current needs.
- Building a community-based grocery store that emphasis on healthier offerings and fresh produce from local farmers will enhance success of local farming and community gardens.

3. Building food resilience during disaster

The pandemic showed us that the existing systems were underequipped to feed the large populations that were food insecure during such disasters. The cities are focusing on bringing food resilience, community-led processes, and improving community-wide communication and commitment. Several ongoing projects includes



- Double up food bucks program: This program doubles the value of snap dollars for the purchase of fruits and veggies from the grocery stores. Currently one farmer's market and three grocery stores are part of this initiative.
- Fresh food distribution at community centers for youth and the seniors.
- Distributing Healthy Heart-Healthy food boxes including recipe with them to the needy people.
- Inviting universities to share about the research they are doing on food resilience and how they are educating and training their students to create a sustainable future without food insecurities.
- Promoting urban farming and maximizing the efficiency by focusing on grow boxes for individual homes and making visit to local community garden to grow better and produce professional farmers and replicate the farm in the franchise model of multiple farms to increase resiliency.
- Healthy food pantries are operated to provide healthy food options for community.
- A future plan includes disruption and eventual eradication of food deserts, (food apartheid) and building a community-based grocery store that emphasis on healthier offerings, fresh produce, with an adjacent bistro type restaurant served by a commercial kitchen, serving healthy takeout or grab and go food. The commercial kitchen will be made available to community cooks interested in forming real food entrepreneurship.
- Promote sharing tables in schools through green school recognition program.

Challenges

- Finding the existing gaps in food system is not easy, but crucial.
- Food deserts can reduce people's life span and it is an injustice which needs to be fought at all levels. Apart from providing quality and nutritious food, people should be educated on the importance of providing healthy food to family.
- One of the biggest challenges would be the funding of different approaches to hunger solutions and making sure that all are seen as an equal opportunity to work on the same problem with different approaches.
- Communities having equal access to healthy local food.
- Educating people out of their comfort zone by training and teaching people how to do food distributions and build pantries.

Needs

- Looking at antipoverty and finding the real root causes of what's going on and creating holistic, sustainable food systems in a city.
- Curating land and talent to implement more access to fresh food.
- Establishing new policies or practices to access that land and convert vacant lots to gardens and urban farmlands.



- Supporting nonprofits and organizations, working in the field and communicating with stakeholders will help to think outside the box and get creative when solving these issues.
- Working with groups that the communities are already comfortable will help to gather information and open an easier path to communicate and ensure equity and food resilience.

4. Managing food waste

Approximately 30% of waste going to the landfills in Texas is food waste and it is above the national average. With the increasing concerns of global warming and climate change it is necessary to keep out the food waste which is a major source of methane generated from landfills and find alternate ways to utilize them.

Projects going on

- Food waste to Energy programs: A feasibility study is being conducted to channelize food waste out of landfills and utilize it to produce renewable natural gas and alternative fuel for vehicles using anaerobic digesters.
- Veggie scrap/Pilot food waste pickup: These programs focus on collecting food waste from the people directly and composting them to prevent it from reaching landfills.
- Community education and outreach programs to help community understand the importance of food waste management.
- Trash-Free waters: This campaign focuses on reducing the use of single use plastics like straws and cups that eventually ends up in oceans and other waterbodies.

Challenges

- Lack of awareness from consumers and lack of concern about the issues are the major challenges in managing food waste.

Needs

- Developing consumer subscription models where food waste will be picked up at doorsteps and dropped off at specific locations assigned for it will help solve the waste mixing issue.
- Building awareness among the people is the key to solve the issues related to food waste management. Conducting campaigns and outreach programs are essential steps to be taken by cities.