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How ancestral knowledge will improve food systems: The Global-Hub on Indigenous Food Systems

Executive Summary

Evidence from indigenous peoples' food systems can play a significant role in informing the transformation of food systems, making them more sustainable and respectful of nature. The COVID-19 pandemic has triggered a global reflection to deepen our understanding of the balances between generating and producing foods and maintaining the natural resource base and biodiversity. Indigenous peoples, estimated over 476 million, are the custodians of 80 percent of the remaining biodiversity and of 4 000 of the remaining spoken languages. Their food systems have sustained indigenous peoples for thousands of years, generating food in harmony with nature thanks to their ancestral knowledge and their unique territorial management practices.

As part of the United Nations Decade of Action on Nutrition, FAO organized in 2018 a High-Level Expert Seminar on Indigenous Food Systems. The experts concluded that there was an urgent need for the creation of a Global-Hub on Indigenous Food Systems to preserve indigenous peoples' food systems and leverage ancestral and scientific knowledge.

The Global-Hub on Indigenous Food Systems will bring together universities, research centres, indigenous organizations and FAO Members around a common platform that will facilitate exchange of knowledge to generate evidence that will inform research and policy agendas. As of today, 14 institutions from across the world have confirmed their membership to the Global-Hub.

The Global-Hub will contribute to different global and regional processes, in particular to the 2021 UN Food Systems Summit and the Voluntary Guidelines on Food Systems and Nutrition of the Committee of World Food Security (CFS).

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I. Introduction

1. Evidence from indigenous peoples' food systems can play a significant role in informing the transformation of food systems, making them more sustainable and respectful of nature.
2. Indigenous peoples are gatekeepers of cultural diversity, comprising over 476 million people, speaking 4 000 languages and belonging to 5 000 different peoples spread across seven regions¹. Their food systems have sustained them for thousands of years, generating food in harmony with nature while preserving the environment², from the Amazon forests to the Arctic Tundra, from the Sahelian deserts to the Himalayan peaks. Today they are custodians of 80 percent of the world's remaining biodiversity³, their territories often coinciding with the best-preserved areas.
3. Indigenous peoples' territorial management systems provide for their livelihoods and food security, and often depend on collective rights to their ancestral lands and natural resources. Their traditional knowledge, governance, and customary systems have proven to be dynamic, results-oriented, and site-specific.
4. The disappearance of indigenous peoples' knowledge is accelerating. Despite prevailing for centuries, indigenous peoples' food systems are today affected by climate change, extractive industries, displacement, intensive livestock-agriculture and land-use changes. The COVID-19 outbreak has increased food insecurity and exacerbated violence against indigenous leaders. There is need for urgent actions to preserve indigenous peoples' knowledge, learn from it and reverse this trend.
5. In 2015 Indigenous representatives meeting at the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), requested FAO Management to facilitate the creation of a working-group on Indigenous Food Systems. Led by the Partnerships Division this working-group with support from the Nutrition Division, the Strategic-Programme 3 and external partners, organized at FAO in 2018 a High-Level Expert Seminar on Indigenous Food Systems⁴.
6. Gathering 200 participants, including 70 panellists from 22 indigenous peoples and 20 research centres/universities, the Seminar's main outcome was the agreement on the need to create a Global-Hub to improve knowledge sharing on indigenous peoples' food systems.
7. At this 27th Session of COAG, FAO is launching *the Global-Hub on Indigenous Food Systems*. The Global-Hub will provide evidence of the potential for Indigenous Peoples' Food Systems and their ancestral knowledge in protecting biodiversity while informing the transformation of food systems to be more sustainable.

II. The Global Hub: Objectives and membership

8. The Global-Hub on Indigenous Food Systems will bring together universities, research centres, organizations and FAO Members to contribute to make food systems more sustainable in the context of the United Nations Decade of Action on Nutrition.
9. The Global-Hub's objective is to facilitate an exchange of evidence that bridges the gap between scientific and indigenous peoples' ancestral knowledge, thus aligning research agendas that can inform the food systems debate.

¹ United Nations. 2009. State of the World's Indigenous Peoples. New York.

² From United Nations 2017. Harmony with nature: report of the Secretary-General.

³ Garnett et al. 2018: A spatial overview of the global importance of Indigenous lands for conservation. *Nature Sustainability* (1), pp. 369–374.

⁴ http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/user_upload/partnerships/docs/LAST_FINAL_REPORT_HLESIFS_2018_01.pdf

10. The founding members of the Global-Hub are Bioversity-International⁵, Center for International Forestry Research – World Agroforestry (CIFOR-ICRAF), the French National Research Institute for Sustainable Development (IRD), the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII), Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact (AIPP), and FAO.

11. Partners working on food systems and indigenous peoples like the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the United Nations Organization for Education, Science, and Culture (UNESCO), the Indigenous Partnership for Agrobiodiversity and Food Sovereignty (TIP), Gaia Amazonas, the International Network of Food Data Systems (INFOODS), the Fund for the Development of the Indigenous Peoples of Latin America and the Caribbean (FILAC), Massey University and the Centre for Indigenous Peoples' Nutrition and Environment (CINE) of McGill University have approached FAO to join the Global-Hub.

12. The FAO Indigenous Peoples Unit (PSPI) will act as secretariat of the Global-Hub, whose members will meet once per year and also tele-interact quarterly. FAO Technical Divisions are invited to join the Global-Hub, contributing with their expertise and resources.

13. The Global-Hub's secretariat will provide updates on indigenous peoples' food systems to High Level Panels of Experts, technical committees, and the countries of the Rome Group of Friends of Indigenous Peoples.

III. The Global Hub's Four Pillars

14. The Global Hub's four pillars are:

- a) Knowledge-Bearers' Platform, creating a space for sharing ideas and knowledge on indigenous peoples' food systems, their sustainability and climate resilience. This knowledge will include scientific and traditional knowledge, indigenous innovations, experimentations, know-how and skill-sets often transmitted orally from one generation to another.

Expected output: The platform will coordinate and align the research agendas of universities, research centres, Indigenous organizations, United Nations, and other stakeholders working on indigenous peoples' food systems to influence transformation towards more sustainable food systems.

- b) Database of publications and research papers shared by members of the Knowledge-Bearers Platform, respecting the principle of Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) and the intellectual property rights of indigenous peoples. Designed as a knowledge repository, this database will be available for indigenous organizations, policymakers, practitioners and scientists through a dedicated webpage. By providing insights and evidence about indigenous peoples' food systems, it will contribute to the preservation of traditional knowledge at risk of disappearing.

Expected output: Collectively-generated online database on indigenous food systems, their sustainability and climate resilience.

- c) Advice in Policy. Dialogues at international and national levels regarding indigenous peoples' food systems and traditional knowledge. The Global-Hub will provide evidence on the sustainability and climate resilience of indigenous peoples' food systems to influence technical and policy discussions, which may affect their livelihoods and food security. The Global-Hub will analyse the data and knowledge generated by its members, providing inputs to ongoing policy discussions on sustainability, climate resilience, nutrition, and food systems.

⁵ In 2018, when discussing about the need for the Global-Hub, Bioversity-International was not named yet as "Alliance of Bioversity International and CIAT".

Expected output: Evidence based-inputs, from indigenous peoples' food systems to inform transformation of food systems.

- d) Create synergies to drive the design of multidisciplinary and participatory research on indigenous peoples' food systems. Following FPIC and jointly planned, carried out, published and owned with indigenous peoples, this research will support better understanding of food systems and ancestral knowledge.

Expected output: Enhanced understanding of indigenous peoples' ancestral knowledge and food systems, their sustainability and climate resilience, informing their preservation and promotion thanks to advocacy for additional research and funding.

IV. Contributions

15. The Global-Hub is timely, generating knowledge in the context of the United Nations Decade of Action on Nutrition to contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Zero Hunger and FAO's efforts in the transformation towards more sustainable food systems.

16. Its core principle of knowledge co-generation with indigenous peoples is original, ensuring connections and information sharing that will create understanding and respect between stakeholders operating at different levels, thus enriching policy dialogues on climate change.

17. The Global-Hub's inputs will support the 2021 UN Food Systems Summit and the Voluntary Guidelines on Food Systems and Nutrition of the Committee of World Food Security (CFS), as well as initiatives such as Decade of Indigenous Languages; Decade on Family Farming; and Decade of Ecosystems Restoration.

V. FAO and Indigenous Food Systems

18. FAO Nutrition Division and CINE-McGill University laid the foundations of FAO's work on indigenous peoples' food systems, publishing in 2009 *Indigenous Peoples' Food Systems: The many dimensions of culture, diversity and environment for nutrition and health*, and in 2013 *Indigenous Peoples' food systems & well-being. Interventions & policies for healthy communities*.

19. With the creation of the Indigenous Peoples Team⁶ in 2014 and the working group on indigenous food systems in 2015, the FAO Indigenous Peoples Unit (PSPI) took the lead in coordinating FAO's work on Indigenous Peoples' Food Systems.

20. In 2017 the FAO Indigenous Peoples Unit, Bioversity-International, IRD, and TIP developed a methodology based on FAO's Self-evaluation and Holistic Assessment of climate Resilience of farmers and Pastoralists (SHARP) to profile indigenous peoples' food systems and their territorial and environmental management.

21. In 2018, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), in its Report on the UNPFII XXVIIth Session⁷, requested FAO to enhance indigenous peoples' participation in technical committees, and particularly in COAG.

22. As an example of the Global-Hub's expected contributions, this paper includes initial research-findings from the upcoming publication by FAO- Alliance of Bioversity International and the International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT), *Indigenous Peoples' Food Systems: Insights on nutrition, sustainability and resilience from the front line of climate change*. These findings are

⁶ The Indigenous Peoples Team became a Unit in 2020

⁷ <https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/unpfii-sessions-2/2017-2.html>, Report, par. 112

presented at COAG to reflect the importance that indigenous peoples give to this technical committee and its deliberations⁸.

23. The upcoming publication details eight indigenous peoples' food systems and their ancestral territorial management practices: the Baka in Cameroon; the Tikuna, Cocama and Yagua in Colombia; the Maya Ch'orti' in Guatemala; the Khasi, Bhotia and Anwal in India; the Kel Tamasheq in Mali; the Inari Sámi in Finland; and the Melanesians in Solomon Islands.

Initial findings from the upcoming publication:

Indigenous Peoples Food Systems. Insights on nutrition, sustainability and resilience from the front line of climate change

1. Indigenous peoples preserve and restore ecosystems through their food systems:

- The sustainability of indigenous peoples' food systems is maintained by traditional and ancestral knowledge systems. The Tikuna, Cocama and Yagua have developed a responsible fishing calendar from the elders' knowledge.
- Seventy percent of the Inari Sámi's foods are still traditional and locally sourced. The Kel Tamasheq core diet relies on their meat, milk and milk products. Eighty percent of the protein intake of the Tikuna, Cocama and Yagua is sourced from traditional fishing.

2. Resilience of Indigenous peoples' food systems:

- Indigenous peoples have developed safety-nets based on social organization and customary governance. The Tikuna, Cocama and Yagua call the minga, a solidarity mechanism of communal work. In times of food scarcity, the Bothia and Anwal share food, practicing barter amongst themselves and with neighbouring communities.
- Indigenous women are guardians of traditional seeds. The Bhotia and Anwal have established an *in-situ* seed-bank benefitting indigenous peoples and communities in the Himalayan region.

3. Indigenous food systems can broaden the existing food base with nutritious foods:

- Indigenous peoples' food systems can exceed 200 food items generated by their system that are either harvested, collected or produced, while maintaining high biodiversity and species-count in their territories.
- The Khasi manage 5 land usages for food, generating 188 food plants. The Melanesians' food system provides 253 varieties of crops and animal species, 51 of which are aquatic.

4. Indigenous peoples' food systems and cultural heritage:

- Indigenous peoples' unique cultures, amalgamate their vision of nature, traditions, customs, symbolism, and cosmogony.
- The Inari Sámi in Finland developed specific vocabulary depicting whitefish' behaviour. The Baka hunter-gatherers develop their knowledge of natural resource management by worshiping the spirits of the forest and communicating with them in dreams.

⁸ FAO. 2015. Indigenous Food Systems, Agroecology and the Voluntary Guidelines on Tenure: A meeting between indigenous peoples and FAO. <http://www.fao.org/3/a-i4549e.pdf>