

Third Meeting of the Ministers of Agriculture of Central Asia on Innovation in Food Systems: The Road to the 2021 Summit on Food Systems

Virtual meeting hosted by the Minister of Agriculture, Water Resources and Regional
Development of the Kyrgyz Republic

15 March 2021

Background

Fifty years ago, food systems – comprising all functions and actors and their interlinked value-adding activities involved in the production, processing, distribution, consumption and disposal of food products – were characterized by local production for local use using low external input production techniques. Food insecurity was quite common, the quantity of food available was inadequate and countries adopted policies to increase production and improve food supply systems. Today's food systems by contrast, connect food producers to consumers who may live far away, usually in urban areas and who are generally wealthier than their predecessors and demand a greater variety of food. Food today is produced using petrochemical and chemical based inputs as well as electricity, all of which release greenhouse gases (GHGs) heavily. Methane emissions from livestock rearing have also increased sharply.

As a result of these changes to food systems, food production has expanded enormously over the past 50 years, outstripping population growth. Malnutrition has declined, while changing in character. In Central Asia today, malnutrition is increasingly a matter of unbalanced food consumption leading to obesity and adult onset chronic diseases rather than inadequate food consumption.

But modern food systems also pose some serious problems. About a quarter of all GHG emissions from human activities come from agriculture, a figure that is likely to increase to about half by 2050. Soil erosion and salinization, agricultural biodiversity loss and environmental contamination are rapidly growing problems, particularly in Central Asia. Livestock farms that rear large numbers of animals in confined spaces spread antibiotic-resistant bacteria because of the prophylactic use of antibiotics as well as their use as growth promoters. The COVID-19 pandemic has reminded us that the spread of farming to formerly untouched natural habitats can cause pathogens to spread to human populations. There are also concerns about the socio-economic sustainability of food systems in Central Asia in view of widespread out-migration from rural areas and dependence on remittances in some countries. The COVID-19 crisis also showed how vulnerable long value chains are to disruption. Gender imbalances in food systems are an important challenge.

Keeping in mind the need for innovative changes to food systems that would make them environmentally, socially and economically sustainable, the UN Secretary-General decided to convene the 2021 Food Systems Summit in September of this year. The Summit has the aim of launching bold new actions to transform the way the world produces and consumes food, delivering progress on all 17 Sustainable Development Goals. It will be guided by five Action Tracks that bring together key players and draw on the expertise of actors from across the world's food systems. A number of Food System Summit Dialogues are planned leading up to the summit, including Member State Dialogues organized by national Governments. The Issue-based Coalition on Sustainable Food Systems (IBC-SFS) for Europe and Central Asia is supporting national governments to conduct Member State Dialogues at the national level. The materials and training resources being developed by the IBC-SFS will promote a common approach to sustainable food systems and guide further support to be provided by the IBC-SFS, by UNCTs, or individual UN agencies if requested by the conveners of the national dialogues.

It is anticipated that the Summit will conclude with a declaration, and countries are encouraged to agree on a pathway through which they continue to develop and transform their food systems to enhance sustainability and resilience.

In this context, the third virtual Meeting of the Agricultural Ministers of the Central Asian countries will be organized on 15 March 2021 involving also FAO officials, representatives of other UN agencies, and of International Financial Institutions.

Objectives

The principal objective of the Meeting is to deliberate on identifying innovative ways to transform food systems towards sustainability. An additional objective is to discuss ways to participate effectively in the 2021 Food Systems Summit taking into account regional cooperation in this regard. Specifically, the Meeting is expected to:

1. Achieve a shared understanding of the concept of sustainable food systems and their importance in shaping diet, nutrition and health, socio- economic and environment outcomes.
2. Achieve a shared understanding of the objectives and structure of the 2021 Food Systems Summit.
3. Identify the key challenges in the Central Asian region for continuing to improve their food systems as well as some promising agricultural policies aimed at creating an enabling environment that encourages innovation.
4. Share the examples of innovative approaches, already implemented in the countries of Central Asia.
5. Share the status of the country level preparations for participating in the Summit, especially the Member State Dialogues and the role of the Issue-based Coalition for Food Systems in this process. In this context, the ministers may wish to deliberate on what they want to focus on in the national dialogues.

Participants

The meeting will be co-organized by FAO and the Ministry of Agriculture, Water Resources and Regional Development of the Kyrgyz Republic. The other participants will include (regional) representatives of other UN agencies, the IBC-SFS and IFIs such as the Eurasian Development Bank, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, IFAD, Islamic Development Bank, World Bank and possibly others.

Working language

The working language of the Virtual Conference will be Russian with simultaneous translation into English.

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The zoom link will be sent by email one day prior to the meeting.