



DICASTERY FOR PROMOTING  
INTEGRAL HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

**PRE-SUMMIT of the UN FOOD SYSTEMS SUMMIT 2021 (26-28/07/2021)**

**RED ROOM**

**INDIGENOUS FOOD SYSTEMS: GAME-CHANGING SOLUTIONS FOR THE WORLD**

## **Indigenous Food Systems & Natural Diet**

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Since this *Pre-Summit on Food Systems* is taking place in Italy, I cannot help but recall the holding of a *Food Expo* in Milan in 2015 and relate it to this *Pre-Summit*. Both events are about food: one, the Food-Expo was more commercially motivated and held in the commercial capital of Italy. The other: this *Pre-Summit* is motivated more by a moral vision of a humanitarian crisis and is being held in the cultural and religious capital of Italy. But even there, at the Food Expo in Milan, the role of indigenous, informal and rural food production was recognized. The Charter of Milan said: “*Knowledge and practical experience of both traditional and advanced production methods is critical to the efficiency of agricultural systems, from family farms to the industrial farms.*”

And committed to: “*Giving value to local small-scale producers as protagonists of an advanced form of development, and promoting direct relationships between producers, consumers and territories of origin.*” (Carta di Milano, April 2015).

Thus, from Italy’s religious and cultural capital, this *Pre-Summit* may be said to be driven by “*hope to turn the awareness of the world’s experience of hunger, worsened by the covid-19 pandemic and its current and dominant forms of food*

*production and distribution, that leave millions hungry and malnourished<sup>1</sup> into our own personal suffering; and to recognize the great value in the revaluation of feeding practices (diet) and food systems forgotten or guarded by indigenous populations.*

✚ Disappearance of a natural diet: *The Decline in Quality of Food Items.*

It seems many crops grown with vast amounts of petroleum energy are prone to suffering a decline in quality. The use of oil-based energy in agriculture has gotten to the point where one would almost talk of growing rice, for example in "oil patch" rather than in "paddy". Farming under the open sky has virtually disappeared because agriculture today has been degraded to the manufacture of petroleum-derived foods; and the farmer has become a seller of false goods called "nutritional foods". The destruction of agriculture can be seen, for example, in the transition of farmers from open cultivation of vegetables to hothouse horticulture. This began with the seeding and growing of melons and tomatoes in soil within hotbeds or vinyl houses arranged in neat rows.

Artificial cultivation leads ultimately to the total synthesis of food. The creation of factories for purely chemical food synthesis that would render farms and gardens unnecessary is already on the way. This will make agriculture an activity *entirely unrelated to nature.*

✚ Discovering *Indigenous Farming & Food Production* :

- Several researches and study of indigenous food production have highlighted the food-producing potential of indigenous agriculture even under land-use and climate changes, and the great value of their restoration in the future. Indigenous people have been able to protect the knowledge that has allowed

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.fao.org/3/ca0147en/CA0147EN.pdf>; <http://www.fao/family-farming/detail/en/c/12172134/>

the perpetuity of their agri-food systems over time; and this knowledge can be used in those territories with food poverty.

- In her study of Hawaiian indigenous food production, Natalie Kurashima & colleagues observe that “Many indigenous/traditional agroecosystems are productive, adaptive and ecologically principled, but are largely overlooked by planning in terms of their potential to meet current and future food needs. ... Indigenous agroecosystems manage *disturbance regimes and landscape mosaics* (patches of tended forests) to increase food abundance, biocultural diversity, and other ecosystem services in ways that minimize uncertainty and increase resilience.”
- In Australia, the *Aboriginal Foodways Movement* for a “return to native foods in Australia, promotes a biodiversity of local flora and fauna, adapted to its temperatures and environmental constraints. In its current experience of increased droughts, bush fires, severe loss of bio-diversity and impoverished soils, Australia seeks the regenerative and environmentally harmonious cultivation of native plants which can do with the moisture of Australian climate, require no fertilizer and are adapted to local pests (no pesticides). The principal benefit of the aboriginal food system is the fostering of a better relationship between people and their food, which consists in fresher food, better environmental practices, reduced food miles and the support of local farmers and economies, (farmers’ markets, community gardens, food-to-table cuisines .... (Anne-Marie Szabo, 8/2/19).
- The Hawaiian and the Australian experiences show that *domestication* or the *ancestral home* of crops is critical to the vitality and resilience of indigenous and traditional food crops and species. The introduction of foreign species and their requirements (fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides), however badly compromises the vitality and resilience of indigenous food crops; and local traditional farming in Africa shows it.

- The greatest *diversity in the crop's gene pool* initially is in its area of domestication (its *ancestral home*). However, the place of domestication is often not the place where the crop is mostly grown. Commercial farming has created new habitats for crops. In the process, it either makes them *intrusive* in their new habitats or it creates new habitats, which may be deleterious to indigenous species, such as, the need to use chemical fertilizers (effective only when the soil is dead), pesticides (effective only for protecting unhealthy plants) and farm machinery (useful only when one has to cultivate a large area).
- Another way of saying the same thing is that these methods are ineffective or even detrimental on fertile soil, healthy crops and small and local seeds. However, economic interests drive some of these *ecocidal* practices!
- As you can see, indigenous agroecosystems/food systems (indigenous, informal, rural) are really not limited to food production. They are philosophies of life, which underlie food production and feeding: how they grow and consume food! They include all of the land, air, water, soil and culturally important plant, animal and fungi species that have sustained Indigenous peoples over thousands of years. All parts of Indigenous food systems are inseparable and ideally function in healthy interdependent relationships to transfer energy.
- Thus, they consist in the *adaptive capacity of a system of beliefs, values, practices, customs/celebrations and traditions, bound up in symbolic relationships*, in a specific area to manage changes to create environments that ensure the *common good: individual and collective wellbeing*.
- Accordingly, the UNESCO, IFAD and the FAO have launched studies into the connection between indigenous languages and feeding practices: between the *performative character of indigenous languages, identity, resources and food systems* (Cf. Fifth Global Meeting of Indigenous People's Forum at IFAD [2-

4,15 February 2021 and UNESCO, 9 February 2021 "Indigenous languages for eradication of hunger and support of indigenous food/feeding systems).

- According to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, it would be necessary to increase food production worldwide by more than 50% to supply the more than 9 billion people projected to inhabit the planet by 2050,<sup>2</sup> especially, in countries with agricultural systems sensitive to climate change (e.g., variability of rainfall, temperature, drought, floods). In view of this, indigenous food systems must be promoted. A permanent knowledge dialog needs to be established with the indigenous/traditional peoples worldwide that enables the design of global public policies to *give value to indigenous and traditional small-scale producers as protagonists of a global action to combat food poverty*.
- To this end, as you know, the FAO has identified seven sociocultural regions to represent the indigenous peoples of the world: Africa; Asia; Central America, South America, and the Caribbean; the Arctic; Central and Eastern Europe, Russian Federation, Central Asia, and Transcaucasia; North America; and the Pacific. A follow-up action would be to identify and to apply the informal institutions that have allowed food systems to persist over time and arrange the food systems of these regions in their development through time.<sup>3</sup>
- *Given that much of the world's lands are INDIGENOUS SPACES*, the restoration of effective biocultural resource management systems worldwide must include the maintenance, and in some cases the reestablishment, of indigenous institutions at multiple levels. (Natalie Kurishama et alii).

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<sup>2</sup> FAO, *The future of food and agriculture-alternative pathways to 2050*, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. FAO, Bélanger J, Pilling D, editors. *The state of the World's biodiversity for food and agriculture*. 2019.