

CHAPTER FIVE



Agenda for the Transformation of Food Systems: Perspectives and Actions of Indigenous Peoples and Nations of the Americas

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Indigenous food practices and knowledge are increasingly recognized, documented, and valued globally, yet they are not always fully understood, are rarely implemented at national level, and may even be unknown within their own territories. Moreover, Indigenous populations are increasingly exposed to climate change, which, together with the sociopolitical instability of their countries, among other pressures, has led to a rise in the number of people experiencing food insecurity in recent years.

This document is a synthesis of the reflections and exchanges that took place at the meeting held in Yunguilla, Ecuador, in May 2024, titled “Transformation of Food Systems: Perspectives of Peoples and Nations of the Americas.”

This event brought together representatives from ten Indigenous peoples and nations, from territories ranging from Canada to the Peruvian Amazon. During this gathering, a variety of topics were discussed to foster an understanding of Indigenous food systems in the region and develop a common agenda.²⁵



FOOD SYSTEMS THAT NURTURE CULTURES

Indigenous food systems and their possibilities for transformation are described by peoples and nations of the Americas around four cross-cutting themes: culture and biodiversity in interdependence, health and cultural nutrition, rights and political advocacy, and challenges and opportunities in a context of globalization.

²⁵ The complete document can be reviewed at the following link: <https://rimisp.org/agenda-for-food-system-transformation-perspectives-of-and-actions-by-indigenous-peoples-and-nations-of-the-americas/>

01 Culture and biodiversity in interdependence:

Food systems are strongly linked to worldviews that conceive of nature as an active agent with which relationships of reciprocity are maintained. Cultural practices (planting, hunting, gathering) sustain biological diversity and promote eco-system regeneration, relating food to the care of land and sea.

02 Health and cultural nutrition:

Health is associated with both the physical and spiritual dimensions and is manifested in the food itself, which has preventive and curative functions. Caring for the environment is associated with health care at different levels. A significant aspect of Indigenous food systems is their reliance on locally sourced and artisanally produced resources, without excluding foods produced at great distances. Food systems are not closed; they integrate foods from different peoples. The transition toward diets based on ultra-processed products has resulted in problems such as diabetes, obesity, and nutritional deficiencies, raising concerns about the “loss” of ancestral foods and their benefits for health.

03 Rights and political advocacy:

Among the peoples of Latin America, International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples are key to safeguarding Indigenous sovereignty over productive systems, access to natural resources, and territorial governance. The exercise of food sovereignty implies the possibility for peoples to make decisions about and manage their own modes of production in coexistence with other forms of large-scale production. For their part, Canadian Indigenous peoples have emphasized the need for national legislation to be consistent with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP, 2007), in order to guarantee their rights to lands, waters, ice, and air. In 2021, the federal government passed Bill C-15, which sought to affirm the nature of UNDRIP and align Canadian legislation with its content. Within this framework, the government developed and jointly implemented, together with Indigenous peoples, the 2023-2028 Action Plan announced in 2023. It is currently being implemented and is viewed with cautious optimism by Indigenous peoples, who continue to assert their rights.

04 Challenges in a context of globalization:

A common issue shared by peoples throughout the Americas is the introduction of foreign dietary practices which, like industrialized consumption and production, have hindered the recovery, preservation, and prosperity of Indigenous food systems. One challenge identified by Indigenous peoples is that food production should primarily respond to local food needs and not to external demands that threaten their food security. The growth of industrialized agriculture and livestock farming entails ecological pressure that limits the availability of fertile land and affects biodiversity. The intense presence of processed foods leads to the adoption of new consumption patterns that are removed from ancestral culinary knowledge and poor in nutritional value.



POTENTIALITIES AND CHALLENGES OF FOOD SYSTEMS

The Indigenous peoples and nations of the Americas share a common vision regarding the potentialities of their food systems and jointly identify challenges to realizing these potentialities.

01 They preserve sustainable cultural heritages, but face the weakening of traditional knowledge:

Ancestral agriculture is itself a repository of knowledge that promotes the reproduction of culture and generates crafts, gastronomy, and rituals; meanwhile, the erosion of food practices is attributable to external factors (industrialization or changing consumption habits) and to the decline in new generations interested in continuing these traditions.

02 They strengthen biodiversity and resilience to crises, but are affected by ecological degradation and climate change:

Indigenous peoples have developed adaptation strategies, thanks to the connection of their food-related activities with climate variability and the sustainable management of biodiversity. Today, however, phenomena such as deforestation, water pollution, and species loss have led to a crisis that threatens the balance of their environments and livelihoods.

03 They promote a holistic approach to health, but greater public recognition of this integrative perspective is needed:

The concept of cultural nutrition articulates the importance of foods that are biologically and spiritually appropriate for each people, in contrast to the mass consumption of processed products. Nevertheless, public health and education systems do not usually consider traditional practices and remedies. The lack of guidelines for nutritional policies that integrate multicultural perspectives, together with the easy access to ultra-processed foods, highlights the need to strengthen the protection of food systems with regulatory tools and to implement strategies to educate about nutrition that is both nourishing and culturally appropriate.

04 They offer opportunities for local economic development, but it is necessary to strengthen Indigenous governance and the exercise of rights:

Another significant potential attributed to the deployment of Indigenous food systems is the diversification and innovation of income sources. Tourism, cultural industries, and the commercialization of native products are avenues for expanding income and projecting culture into a global market. The challenge lies in maintaining Indigenous autonomy and sovereignty, and not falling into modalities that displace community decision-making or provoke an unbalanced dependence on state or private entities.



STRATEGIES TO STRENGTHEN INDIGENOUS FOOD SYSTEMS

The dialogue that took place at the Yunguilla meeting made it possible to gather a broad repertoire of strategies, practices, and experiences from Indigenous communities for the protection and appreciation of their food systems, which require coordination with actors both within and outside of the communities.

01 Education and knowledge transmission for cultural recovery and economic strengthening:

Cultural practices and ancestral knowledge regarding food are at the center of strategies to protect and adapt Indigenous food systems. Among the experiences shared, the development of educational projects, production incentives, and participation in local markets are highlighted. Some examples include peasant schools in Guatemala, cultural recovery initiatives, traditional dish competitions, recipe manuals, and spaces for intergenerational dialogue with knowledge holders, as well as the use of participatory methodologies that include the contributions of grandmothers and grandfathers. There are numerous examples of action-research in the areas of agroecology, gastronomy, and traditional medicine.

02 Promotion of holistic health and community care:

Strategies aimed at promoting a holistic concept of health focus on the recovery of medicinal plants, nutritious diets, and an approach to health and food that understands them as components of collective well-being. For example, community and medicinal gardens, which serve to exchange seeds, foods, and healing plants, simultaneously foster social cohesion and adequate nutrition. Emphasis is also placed on the need for institutions to recognize the importance of cultural nutrition and the potential of traditional medicine.



03 Strengthening and articulation for institutional advocacy:

Strategies include a focus on strengthening communities and promoting networks and leadership, as well as creating dialogue tables that can give rise to collaborations and commitments. One particularly important strategy for articulation with public and private-sector actors is working with health and education institutions to expand and preserve knowledge, promote local leadership, conduct research, and plan actions regarding food security and sovereignty.

04 Technological innovations for access to natural resources:

The development of technologies involves the articulation of actors, resources, and capacities that are often difficult to access in many communities in Latin American countries. Nevertheless, technological innovations have demonstrated viability and have had significant impacts on the transformation of food systems. Examples include climate monitoring, as in Bolivia, and the implementation of dry toilets and rainwater harvesting to reduce costs, as in Mexico.



OPPORTUNITIES FOR INDIGENOUS FOOD SYSTEMS

Along with identifying potentialities, challenges, and strategies, the Indigenous peoples and nations of the Americas envision opportunities for deepening and transforming their food systems.

01 Opportunities in academia and research to promote their own culture and biodiversity:

Research offers the opportunity to advance the deepening, recovery, revitalization, and dissemination of local food heritage and related ancestral community knowledge. Examples include studies of culinary traditions, inventories of medicinal plants, and analyses of traditional diets. In these studies, community leadership must always be maintained, with youth and local elders participating in the collection and analysis of information about food and medicinal uses.

02 Opportunities in improving public policies and increasing state resources for the exercise of political rights:

Opportunities for promoting modifications of public policies, based on community priorities, aimed at making viable the production, consumption, and commercialization of locally produced foods, are of particular relevance for the Indigenous peoples and nations of the Americas. Local institutional agencies, such as municipalities and district offices, are key actors, as they issue certifications and patents, and plan land use and natural resource management. Federal and national authorities and international agencies (for example, food safety inspection agencies and the FAO) are also important, as they can grant recognition to local products and facilitate authorization for the handling, transport, and commercialization of local products.

03 Opportunities in local and international civil society organizations, to enhance Indigenous influence in the public policy sphere:

Opportunities also exist in connection with civil society groups, including the private sector, NGOs, academia, and international philanthropic organizations. Examples include developing proposals for international funding in packages that include short, medium, and long-term initiatives; prioritizing mechanisms that promote alliances between communities and organizations at various scales; and accessing international funds with specific financing to support Indigenous communities, among others.



CONCLUSIONS: AN AGENDA FOR TRANSFORMATION



The Agenda for the Transformation of Food Systems underscores that Indigenous peoples and nations are key actors in achieving just and sustainable food environments. Their food systems simultaneously nourish culture, biodiversity, and the holistic health of the community, yet they are under increasing threat because of globalization, the loss of territorial rights, and the pressures of climate change.

Indigenous food systems are the result of the coevolution of cultural practices, spiritual values, and natural ecosystems. This concept highlights the interdependence among community relationships, the reciprocal relationship with nature, biodiversity as a cultural reservoir, and its articulation at both local and global levels.

Collaborative and mutualistic relationships among individuals and communities are highly visible and fundamental to social life. Productive practices such as the milpa, or consumption practices such as pamba miky, are examples in which the individual benefit from labor and food is understood as dependent on cooperation. Several practices involved in Indigenous food systems, which reinforce and activate this communal dimension, have a strong ritual component and activate a circuit of symbolic interdependent relationships.

Indigenous food systems mobilize a relationship of interdependence with nature. In this relationship, nature is understood as an active agent, participating in reciprocity with human action in the development of Indigenous food systems. Thus, a relationship prevails that is based on knowledge, collaboration, and gratitude toward nature, which partly explains the high adaptability of food systems to specific ecological niches.



The Indigenous peoples and nations of the Americas attribute great value to the preservation of biodiversity, not only for its role in the sustainability of food systems and society, but also because biodiversity represents a true cultural reservoir, which connects ways of life and knowledge.

A defining aspect of Indigenous food systems is their interdependence with development models that link the scale of localized practices with the balances of planetary ecosystems. Indigenous food systems are not closed: they are interconnected with other food systems, other ecosystems, and other forms of production and consumption.

Finally, youth and ancestral Indigenous knowledge are closely related and guide many current strategies and future actions for strengthening food systems in the short, medium, and long term. The agenda highlights the benefits of forging alliances with various stakeholders on the essential condition that every process be led and decided by the Indigenous communities and peoples themselves. In this way, the aspiration is for a future in which food systems re-affirm the life of the territories and the dignity of their peoples, safeguarding the cultural and natural diversity that distinguishes the Americas.