

## Promise of the Commons for Sustainable and Equitable Food Systems

Co-organized by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) and the Foundation for Ecological Security (FES, India) with the University of South Australia and Azim Premji University

The UNFSS Dialogue on Women, Work and Food Systems identified a game-changing solution on management of commons: natural resources that are held and used collectively. The commons support food systems through direct production and provision of water, food, fuel, fodder, pollination, and other key ecosystem services, as well as important sources of resilience for communities. They thus contribute to nature-positive solutions and advance equitable livelihoods. Yet the commons are under pressure from encroachment and overuse. This side event presented evidence from a new study of the value of ecosystem services from the commons in India, as well as how strengthening governance of the commons can support equitable food systems. Harpinder Sandhu, Senior Lecturer at the University of South Australia, presented the collaborative study, followed by an overview of the FES Promise of Commons initiative by Senior Program Manager Pratiti Priyadarshini. Harini Nagendra, Director of Research Center at Azim Premji University, and Insa Theesfeld, in her capacity as the president of the International Association for the Study of the Commons, discussed the importance of safeguarding and restoring the commons and going beyond economic valuation of ecosystem services.

### Valuing the commons: the foundation of food systems

- ▶ A third of India's population, especially marginalized groups, depends on the commons. Yet, common lands have faced significant decline over the past 50 years, resulting in biodiversity losses, land degradation, and acute water scarcity.
- ▶ Most commons are undervalued: their economic worth is unknown, and they are not considered in national accounts or GDP. Valuation of the many ecosystem services they provide can help estimate their contribution to livelihoods and the planet.
- ▶ The study, which is based on a systematic review of the literature, identified 34 ecosystem services (12 provisioning, 12 regulating, 6 cultural, and 4 supporting services) provided by the Indian commons.
  - ▷ Food, water, fish, honey, fuelwood, and fodder are some of the provisioning services that contribute directly to food systems. The 6 supporting services (such as soil formation, nutrient cycling, and habitats for species gene pools) and the 12 regulating services (such as pollination, climate regulation, and soil fertility) play an essential role in creating those provisioning services for food systems.
- ▶ The study estimated that the 66.6 million ha of commons in India provide ecosystem services worth at least \$US90.5 billion per year. In comparison, agriculture generates \$271 billion of gross value from 159 million ha.

### Repositioning the narrative of the tragedy of the commons

- ▶ Communities often lack secure tenure to the commons, which are frequently perceived as "wastelands" and converted to other land uses, despite providing value to community and society, sequestering carbon, and contributing to agriculture.
- ▶ FES aims to convert a narrative of tragedy of commons to Promise of Commons by positioning communities as stewards of commons, working directly with thousands of communities in 10 states and partnership with government and others.

- ▶ Valuation of commons is key to drawing attention to commons and soliciting support from policymakers.
- ▶ In India, directing funds from the rural employment guarantee scheme toward restoration of commons is a benefits multiplier.

### Avoiding a reductionist approach to valuing commons

- ▶ Commons play a foundational role as inputs and outputs in food systems along agricultural value chains.
- ▶ Commons are important not only in rural areas but also in peri-urban and urban areas.
- ▶ All panelists stressed that the social and ecological values of ecosystem services are even more important than the economic values, however economic valuation is a powerful argument for policymakers to show what is at stake.
- ▷ Any estimates of ecosystem services are underestimates; new measures are needed to capture other valuable spill-over effects of ecosystem services, including mental health.