

Reflections and Lessons Learned from JRT's Engagement with Frontline Food Systems Representatives

Overview

Reflecting on the past five years of the Just Rural Transition Initiative (JRT), our team is grateful for the several opportunities to convene diverse stakeholders and humbled by the deep trust we have built through our relationships with representatives across continents, knowledge systems, and advocacy priorities guided by a common vision of joining a collective movement towards food systems that benefit people, nature, and climate.

Farmers, Indigenous Peoples, women, youth, and their organizations are at the core of a Just Rural Transition. Effective and intentional engagement with each of these constituencies is vital to the success and equitable outcomes of policy implementation and reform, business-local partnerships, repurposing subsidies, collaboration platforms, and international and regional decision-making forums. Through our work, JRT has cultivated relationships with key stakeholders and their organizations to better understand their priorities, identify opportunities for funding and mutual collaboration with other partners, and ensure that the communities living and working at the frontlines of climate change, community resilience, and food systems transformation can share their positions, needs, and wisdom before global audiences and decision-makers.

Housed at Meridian Institute, JRT engagements are guided by **Meridian's Justice, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (JEDI) principles** to design and deliver collaboration that brings people together, intentionally include diverse perspectives as an essential foundation of our work, and support each other in a journey of co-learning and growth. Our **Just Rural Transition Principles** build from the JEDI principles to help food systems actors – governments, businesses, investors, farmer organizations, Indigenous Peoples, labor unions, international organizations, civil society organizations, and rural communities – promote a global food system that works better for people, nature and the climate.

This brief is a compilation of the lessons learned and reflections from the JRT team, partners, and frontline representatives emerging from our in-person and remote engagements, capacity building programs, communications efforts and strategies, and financial and logistics support to frontline representatives. Our intention is that these key findings serve the JRT community and beyond as a source of inspiration for effective and intentional engagement of frontline representatives, new collaborations with global and local constituencies, and partnerships to continue building the momentum for a Just Rural Transition.

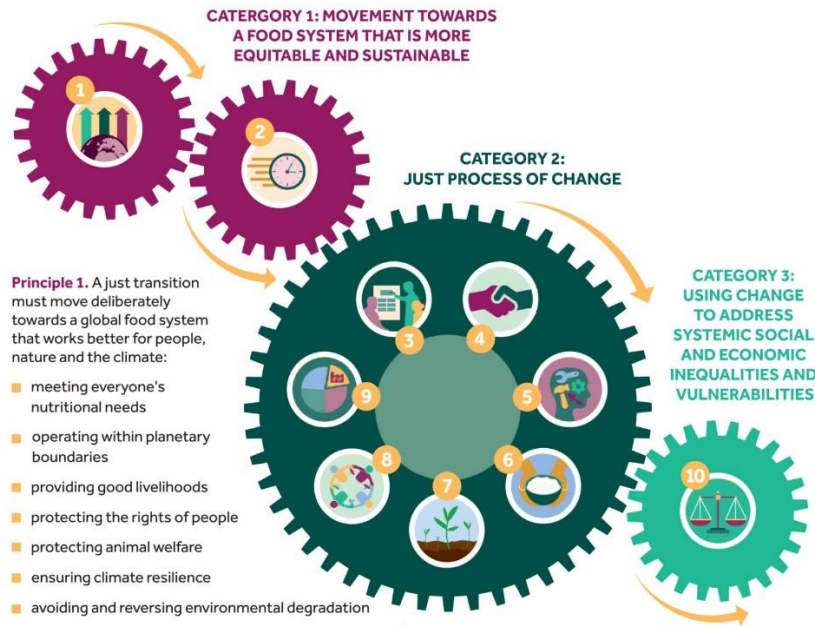
Just Rural Transition Principles

Effective and intentional engagement of frontline representatives is at the heart of a Just Rural Transition and the JRT team and our partner organizations' efforts. The **Just Rural Transition Principles Report** guide our actions and initiatives when driving collaboration for the benefit of

people, nature, and climate. These principles gain relevance in JRT’s engagement practices as our team fosters meaningful and mutually beneficial relationships with key stakeholders and community leaders. By following the JRT principles, our team has been able to co-learn and advise partner organizations on effective ways to lead their engagements.

The JRT principles below served as the north star of our engagements with frontline representatives:

10 GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR ACHIEVING JUST FOOD SYSTEM TRANSITIONS



Principle 1. A just transition must move deliberately towards a global food system that works better for people, nature and the climate:

- meeting everyone’s nutritional needs
- operating within planetary boundaries
- providing good livelihoods
- protecting the rights of people
- protecting animal welfare
- ensuring climate resilience
- avoiding and reversing environmental degradation
- avoiding and correcting power imbalances in food value chains and in rural areas.

Principle 2. Structural changes in food systems must occur without delay, recognizing the urgency of the need for change.

Principle 10. Efforts to transform global food systems should address the root causes of social and economic inequality, food insecurity, environmental injustice, public health risks, and vulnerability.

Principle 3. The planning and implementation of transitions must be socially inclusive, ensuring there are ongoing opportunities for wide stakeholder involvement in, and influence over, the transition process itself and ongoing socio-economic development planning.

Principle 4. Food producers and their communities must be supported in bearing the costs of changing practices to align with a more ecologically sustainable food system, and in managing the wider socio-economic impacts of transition.

Principle 5. Those who are unable to continue farming or working in food value chains should be supported to reskill and find new livelihood opportunities and have access to social safety nets.

Principle 6. Consumers should be able to meet their nutritional needs during the transition, and not experience hunger or hardship due to increases in the cost of food.

Principle 7. Historical environmental degradation associated with the food system should be remediated, with priority to reversing harm that continues to affect local people’s health, livelihoods and/or ecosystems – applying the “polluter pays” principle.

Principle 8. Priority for financial and other external support should be given to those regions, industries, workers and citizens who are most vulnerable and who face the greatest risks or challenges and have least capacity to fund transformation.

Principle 9. On a global scale, in the near term, the burden of shifting to more sustainable, low-GHG food production and consumption should be borne mainly by those with the greatest resources and the most cumulative responsibility for environmental harm.

Reflections and Lessons Learned

From our experience hosting global, regional, and local convenings as well as supporting groups of frontline leaders to participate in decision-making forums, we outline the following lessons learned and reflections to share with the JRT community, partners, and interested organizations.

Frontline communities are not a homogeneous group. JRT engages with different organizations and communities to listen and understand their key priorities working at the frontlines of climate action, community resilience, and food systems transformation from local and grassroots organisations that support family farmers, Indigenous communities, and specific sectors of civil society to highly organized labor unions, associations, and platforms. From each of these unique engagements, we identify suitable opportunities for collaboration, relevant networks, and potential partnerships to advance frontline leaders' priorities.

Frontline representatives are holistic actors that play multiple roles in food systems transformation. Frontline leaders are producers, knowledge-holders, land stewards, educators, economic actors, and consumers among multiple other roles in food systems. This notion is critical to ensure that their engagement is not limited or compartmentalized to a specific sector, value chain, or issue.

Meet frontline representatives where they are. Both in geographic and conceptual terms, meeting frontline representatives where they are helps balance the scales in the power dynamics between specific actors.

- **Geographic:** Visiting representatives in their communities, forums, and general assemblies with their consent and invitation helps organizations better understand the realities, opportunities, and key priorities for each community as well as brainstorm together about the best ways to develop processes that are meaningful for both parties' positions. Joining these spaces shows an organization's commitment to step out of their comfort zone to creatively identify mutually beneficial opportunities grounded on the values and principles of each group. In addition, these efforts show reciprocity between organizations, as it is common for well-resourced institutions to host frontline leaders at their venues and events where they participate as guests of a larger convening focused on the host organization's values and objectives.
- **Conceptual:** Frontline leaders hold unique and immense knowledge and expertise from their communities, territories, and biodiversity, and in many cases across several generations. Leading with empathy and understanding of different knowledge systems as well as respect for how these values relate to other constituencies and wider global socioeconomic systems is crucial to establish meaningful engagements. To meet frontline leaders where they are, both sides in the discussion need to commit to dedicating considerable time to learn about each other's ways of interpreting a specific issue, terminology, governance mechanisms for decision-making, and legitimacy to speak on behalf of others. Pre-read materials, interviews, capacity-building sessions, and partnerships with organizations that hold trusting relationships with frontline leaders can help bridge these gaps in knowledge to ensure effective and meaningful engagement.

Engage via each organization's preferred communication avenues and with their internally legitimized representatives. Farmers, Indigenous Peoples, local communities,

women, and youth congregate, divide responsibilities, and align priorities through their preferred organizations and leaders who are identified internally through their own established processes to represent them in external discussions, events, and forums. Generally, a member of the organization can speak for themselves and share their individual perspective but not on behalf of the organization or a larger constituency unless previously agreed through internal processes. When inviting frontline representatives to participate in an event or decision-making process, it is crucial to notify the organization for them to identify the best-suited representative to speak on behalf of the organization and the preferred avenues to continue the engagement. Some organizations work informally via social media, others prefer contact via institutional email accounts. Although this approach can take longer to reach one's objectives, it helps prevent internal conflicts on how the information is shared and with whom and strengthens the trusting relationship between organizations.

Engage frontline representatives early in the process and respect their timelines and due processes. If a specific process/output is intended to be of service to or presented on behalf of frontline organizations, it is necessary to include frontline representatives in the early stages to 1) make sure that the intended outcomes are truly for the benefit of the community/organizations, 2) co-design the scope, impact, and nature of the process, and 3) monitoring and learning mechanisms as well as data collection is owned equally across organizations. For this engagement to take place from the early stages, partners should ensure that frontline representatives are adequately compensated and have the means to effectively participate in all the stages of the process from co-design to delivery. In addition, like any organization, frontline representatives have their respective timelines and due processes to consult their members, sign-off on outcomes, and approve next steps. Intentional engagement processes build these milestones within project timelines to ensure that all participants can effectively represent their constituencies' objectives.

Dedicate time and resources for effective and meaningful engagement. Intentional and meaningful engagement emerges when frontline leaders are and feel like equal decision-making actors around a table, knowledge-holders in research efforts, and valuable speakers in public events. Organizations ought to dedicate capacity, time, and financial resources to develop relationships with frontline representatives and actively listen to their priorities and perspectives in order to support inclusive participation in decision-making processes. This practice ensures that frontline leaders benefit from the engagement opportunities and that their contributions influence other participants' views and positions.

Learn more by partnering with organizations that hold close relationships with frontline representatives. Through the JRT initiative, we have advised dozens of businesses, investors, philanthropies, governments, research institutions, and civil society organizations as well as frontline representatives on best ways to engage other stakeholders and facilitated connections between each of them through their preferred engagement avenues.

Logistics support, technical assistance, and financial resources should adequately address the needs and priorities of frontline representatives. Building trust also requires a commitment to ensure a level playing field in decision-making forums. Especially for in-person meetings that involve travel, accommodation, local transportation, food, interpretation, or previous knowledge/skills to engage effectively, understanding the needs and context-specific experience of each participant is crucial to ensure their meaningful participation as well as committing the necessary financial resources that accommodate each participant adequately. In some cases, this involves reimbursing for incurred costs, facilitating visas and health insurance, assigning a per-diem amount to account for the working days missed for attending a convening,

preliminary information sessions on a topic and trainings, and staff member/s to attend to the requests of the participants before, during, and after the convening. Operational support is equally as significant as the content of the convening in terms of building long-lasting trust with frontline representatives.

Final Considerations

The content of this document represents the Just Rural Transition team's key takeaways from our work with different organizations and individuals working at the frontlines worldwide. This document should not be considered as a prescriptive list of demands for organizations nor as the specific asks and priorities from frontline representatives in general or in particular. Our intention is to shed light on some of the practices that have resulted in success for our team with the hope that it inspires others to build from them, share learnings from their effective engagements, and help us move together towards meaningful collaboration to transform food systems together.

Annex 1: Challenges that Prevent Effective and Meaningful Engagement

In the words of our trusted networks of frontline representatives, engagement is challenging, tokenistic, and extractive when representatives are

- The only member of their constituency in a room, panel, or decision-making forum.
- Asked to speak, issue recommendations, and legitimize processes on behalf of an entire constituency.
- Singled out as the only voice for a topic or community and consistently asked to represent stakeholders that have not formally delegated this responsibility on their shoulders.
- Conceived as representatives of homogenous groups with identical value systems, priorities, and needs, ignoring the diversity of their communities.
- Involved in processes where other participants ignore or lack substantial knowledge of the inherent dynamics of engaging with leaders working at the frontline of key issues, their preferred ways of working, priorities, and needs, and the preliminary foundations to establish a trusted process, including **Free Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC)** for Indigenous Peoples and local communities.
- Entered into processes without clear intentions and previous knowledge or capacity building on the topic with little-to-no opportunities to influence outcomes and discussions, including the inability to co-host sessions and events.
- Requested to participate in events in other languages without proper interpretation services and facilitation support for their effective participation or relying on other stakeholders who are not professionally trained or know their background to paraphrase contributions, which unequivocally affects the meaning, intention, and content of their contributions.
- Called at the end of a process for sign-off when there were no preliminary instances for feedback and guidance on the final outcomes of the process.
- Forced to adapt their established processes to other stakeholders' timelines, priorities, and milestones.
- Put against each other based on third party priorities in a territory or issue because external parties did not engage through the established and legitimate processes of each organization, including early communications and FPIC.
- Invited to events that require significant personal/organization/community investments for travel, accommodation, and related costs and do not account for the financial loss of being away from their daily responsibilities to their families and community whose livelihoods depend on. (i.e., cycles of harvest, employment, local forums).