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*Pathways for advancing good work in food systems: Reflecting on the international Good Work for Good Food Forum*

Susanna Klassen, Lydia Medland, Poppy Nicol, and Hannah Pitt

**Abstract:**

The crucial roles that workers play in our food systems have come under renewed attention in recent years, especially seasonal and migrant workers. The coronavirus pandemic resulted in food workers being recognized as critical or essential workers in many countries. In 2021, this coincided with the UN International Year of Fruits and Vegetables (IYFV), highlighting the importance of horticultural crops to healthy lives globally. Yet, workers' quality of life in this most labor-intensive form of food production is often disregarded, or in the case of the UN IYFV, misconstrued. The agriculture-migration nexus, on which food systems depend, remains recognized as a challenge, yet there is limited debate about how it could be ameliorated, or articulation of desirable alternatives. While alternative food and peasant movements propose food system transformation and alternative labor futures based on *agroecology*, labor lawyers and other advocates propose *regulation and formalization* of workplace regimes to ensure fair working conditions. Most recently, a third possibility has emerged from agri-tech innovators: a *techno-centric* future with far fewer agricultural workers. These three archetypes of agricultural labor futures (agroecological, formally regulated and techno-centric) have the potential to leave food scholars and activists without a unified, coherent vision to advance. Addressing this gap, this paper reports and builds on insights harvested from the international *Good Work for Good Food Forum*, organized by the authors with the aim of shaping consensus on positive visions for work in food systems. Around 40 scholar-activists across three continents discussed the current

challenges facing food workers and crafted a collective vision for good food work. This vision is documented in the form of nine principles supported by a framework of seven enabling pathways. We conclude by emphasising the need for a people-centred incorporation of technology and a re-valuation of food workers' contributions to global food systems. We offer the vision as a collective platform for action to advocate for and organize with workers in food systems.

**Keywords:** Labor, Food Workers, Good Food, Good Work, Decent Work, Migrant Workers, Agri-tech, Food Justice, Horticulture

## 1. Introduction

For those concerned with the nature and justice of food work, the year 2021 presented a plenitude of cautionary tales for reflection. The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic brought public attention to the vital role of food producers and others who work in the supply chain to keep food available and moving. Recognition of the essential nature of food workers brought new public and political appreciation of their value to society, in stark contrast to how hidden food work typically remains. Coronavirus outbreaks at food production and processing facilities (See for example Douglas, 2020) highlight the extent to which food workers have been vulnerable to the virus and its impacts (Klassen & Murphy, 2020). Conditions at many farms and food processing facilities make it difficult to control such risks, and workers' frequently precarious, unfree or undocumented status makes it difficult for them to speak up about their concerns (Wozniacka, 2020). In some European countries, the domestic population responded to calls to work in the fields, creating an unprecedented surge in interest in seasonal horticultural work (Wax, 2020). Ongoing and overlapping crises caused by war, conflict and climate change have further underscored the vulnerability of global agri-food supply chains (Clapp, 2022, p. 2022), and the essential roles that workers play in keeping them functioning. Could this be a moment of change - an opportunity to seize on new awareness of what (and who) it takes to produce, process, transport and make good food available to eaters?

2021 was also declared the International Year of Fruits and Vegetables (IYFV) by the United Nations (UN) General Assembly. Led by the FAO, the aim of this initiative was to "raise awareness on the important role of fruits and vegetables in human nutrition, food security and health and as well in achieving UN Sustainable Development Goals" (FAO, 2020). Workers crucial to these horticultural supply chains were strangely absent from this celebration. Where

the people behind the produce are acknowledged - including in many photos of them smiling - it is the positive impacts which are highlighted: “Cultivating fruits and vegetables can contribute to a better quality of life for family farmers and their communities.” The “can” in that sentence is doing some heavy lifting, given what is known about the work conditions that are characteristic of horticultural work globally. Far from the decent work agenda envisioned by the International Labour Organization (ILO) and laid out in the UN Sustainable Development goals, workers involved in fruit and vegetable production are particularly vulnerable to exploitation, unsafe work conditions and terms representing modern slavery (Gertel & Sippel, 2017; Gray, 2014; Holmes, 2013; Howard & Forin, 2019). The FAO’s expectation is that such problems be resolved by businesses’ due diligence (FAO, 2020, pp. 43–44), but the long history and extent of poor work in the fresh produce industry suggests this approach is woefully insufficient.

As one of the most labor-intensive modes of food production, horticulture has often been where pressures on work and workers emerge, but patterns of disempowerment stretch across food sectors. Academics and scholar-activists have explored the injustices faced by agricultural workers from many perspectives, backgrounds and countries. They have shown that even producers meeting ecological standards do not necessarily provide better working conditions (Dumont & Baret, 2017; Harrison & Getz, 2015; Soper, 2019; Weiler et al., 2016). Many minority world countries struggle to balance reliance on migrant food workers with a desire to limit immigration (Rye & Scott, 2018). Labor-related inequities disproportionately impact people of colour (Freshour, 2017; Liu & Apollon, 2011; Sachs et al., 2014; Weiler, 2022), and both the legacies and contemporary forces of colonialism and racism limit access to becoming a food producer (Levkoe & Offeh-Gyimah, 2020). While technological solutions to labor shortages have gained further support in light of the pandemic, they are far from a panacea (Reisman,

2021), and risk exacerbating injustices within food systems, for example, as increased automation of tasks perceived to be highly skilled may result in more farmers relying on racialized migrant workers (Rotz et al., 2019). Current scientific paradigms upon which much of industrial agriculture depends create a divide between those who “know” agriculture and those who “do” agriculture (Coolsaet, 2016). Despite systemic inequities and dis-empowerment, food workers find ways of taking action and asserting control, through mutual aid, collective action, and consumer campaigns (Gottlieb & Joshi, 2010; Minkoff-Zern, 2014; Sbicca, 2017).

While the contemporary challenges of food production work are well documented and articulated, this can result in a sense of intractable problems, lacking identified pathways forward towards more just futures. In this context, and at a moment ripe with opportunities for change, we the authors, convened the *Good Work for Good Food Forum* (hereafter the Forum) in May 2021. As organizers, we were brought together by our shared interests and expertise in jobs, work, labor and training in food production; early discussions revealed common appetite for fostering international exchange and embracing diverse perspectives. Based on these shared interests and goals, the authors conceived and planned the Forum. Our vision for this was to go beyond detailing what is wrong with work in food systems, and to begin shaping a collective vision for what good food work can and should be. By convening discussion amongst this group of international experts on the topic, we aspired to build consensus on this and pathways towards it.

Building on the insights that emerged from the Forum, this article summarizes current challenges to good food work as highlighted by its participants, describing three archetypes for labour futures. It outlines a collective vision for good food work that goes beyond these archetypes, including pathways and priority actions to advance the vision. The next section

provides more background on the Forum itself; section 3 draws from its presenters, citing their contributions and work accordingly. Sections 4 and 5 are the result of the author's analysis of insights and discussion from the Forum, and thus represent synthesis compiled by the authors. While the focus of the authors' and many Forum participants' research is labor in food production, we intentionally frame our vision and recommendations in terms of food work more broadly, as the structural inequities and barriers to improvements impact workers across the food chain.

## 2. Background: The Good Work for Good Food Forum

The *Good Work for Good Food Forum* took place in May 2021, a one-day online gathering for researchers and scholar-activists to explore together what good food work is and can be. In light of the UN IYFV, we chose to highlight work centred on fruits and vegetables, while recognising connections across the food system and common struggles and structural inequities facing all food workers. As organizers we initially defined good food as: healthy, culturally appropriate, accessible for all and produced in ways which are ecologically sustainable and socially just. We also proposed a working definition of “good food work” to be expanded and refined through the Forum: decent jobs producing, processing and distributing food which are fairly rewarded and personally rewarding, with jobs and training accessible to all, in safety and with dignity.

Registration was open, with participants invited through our professional networks and based on our knowledge of current scholarship exploring labour, work and jobs in the food system. The programme was designed to foster interactive discussions towards shared priorities for future action, and to establish global connections. Four speakers were invited to offer provocations on the topic drawing on their expertise and country contexts: Dr. Lucila Granada,

Prof. Julie Guthman, Dr. Joanna Howe and Dr. Laura-Anne Minkoff Zern. Granada is the Chief Executive of the Focus on Labour Exploitation (FLEX), a UK-based research and policy organization, and has extensive experience with feminist and labour organizations in Latin America. Guthman is a geographer, Professor of Social Sciences at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and an award-winning scholar on agri-food capitalism, alternative food systems, labour, and agricultural technologies. Howe is an Associate Professor at the Adelaide School of Law and a leading expert on the legal regulation of temporary labour migration. Minkoff Zern is an Associate Professor of Food Studies at Syracuse University whose research explores the interactions between food and racial justice, labor movements, and transnational environmental and agricultural policy. Administrative and facilitation assistance for the Forum was provided by Cardiff University, supported by funding from a Sêr Cymru II Research Fellowship held by one of the organizers.

On the day, over 40 participants from North America, Europe and Australia joined, with the make-up of the live audience changing as the working day shifted around global time-zones. Recognising that much is already known about “bad food work”, we sought to develop a collective framework for understanding the barriers to and constraints on good food work prior to the Forum. Participants were invited at event registration to articulate what they see as the biggest challenge in relation to good food work. The organizers analysed 61 responses<sup>1</sup> to generate an overview of the issues and current understanding. A synthesis of these responses - a list of six key challenges and associated needs - was shared in advance with Forum participants, then used as a basis for discussions. Groups were guided through discussion of what good food work is and what needs to change in relation to current challenges, before prioritising actions

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<sup>1</sup> Not all of the 61 who submitted comments was able to attend the workshop synchronously.



required across different domains of action (e.g. government or civil society). The Forum ended with an open space for all to reflect on priorities and aspirations. Recordings of presentations and discussions were shared with all who expressed interest in attending. All who registered remain able to access online notes of discussions created by participants, organizers and the facilitation team.

It is important to note that although the Forum was open to all, its reach was limited by the organizers' networks and resources, resulting in participation skewed to the UK and North America. Although some participants brought insight from work in global majority countries, representation from these countries was limited. This was also partially due to a lack of capacity for quality translation meaning that discussions were limited to English. Furthermore, in planning the Forum we considered whether and how to actively involve food workers, but felt our chosen format was not best suited to seeking their direct participation or offering a sufficiently rewarding experience to justify asking for their time. Instead, we sought to involve scholar-activists and organizations who work alongside workers and worker-led movements to reflect their interests in discussions. We recognize this as inadequate to the task of hearing workers' voices, and suggest attention to how researchers can meaningfully and equitably support worker participation in scholar activism as an area for future action and continued attention.

Following the Forum, the organizers worked to digest and reflect on the discussions. We have sought to summarize the consensus that developed, and highlight key issues that emerged. While we draw on contributions made during the Forum, including the speakers' presentations, it remains our perspective on them. A draft of the vision for good food work was shared with speakers and participants for comment and input. This culminated in an open letter addressed to

the FAO and other UN agencies connected with food work and workers which called on them to promote a vision for good food work and work towards food systems which better enable it (Good Work for Good Food Forum, 2021). This was signed by Forum participants, then opened to wider support, resulting in more than 100 signatories. Before outlining the content of the vision and enabling pathways for good food work, we outline why it is necessary to address current challenges and inspire coordinated collective action. The following sections share key insights from the Forum speakers and discussions.

### 3. Why food work isn't good: Summary of current challenges

Without wanting to rehearse challenges well known to students of agri-food systems, it is important to have a clear sense of what prevents many food workers from having safe, dignified and rewarding work to identify where change is needed most. In this section we focus on current barriers to good food work according to those involved in the Forum, reflecting assessment of the challenges grounded in their collective expertise. As apparent in Table 1, barriers to good food work are seen to be deeply rooted and extensive, arising from food systems' neoliberal capitalist imperatives and the legacies of their colonial history. These are knotty problems, often not visible to or understood by consumers, hence a lack of pressure on retailers to make changes in their supply chains. At the same time, those most harmed - food workers - are effectively prevented from challenging their conditions as they often have precarious jobs and immigration statuses.

Perspectives from opposite sides of the globe revealed how seasonal workers in horticulture are in particularly vulnerable positions, failed by current regulatory regimes. Recent research by FLEX and the Fife Migrants Forum (2021) shared by Dr. Lucila Granada focused on the UK's Seasonal Workers Pilot, a temporary labor migration programme intended to address

labor shortages in agriculture. FLEX’s investigation directly engaged with seasonal workers in Scotland for first-hand insights and to identify risks of human trafficking by applying the ILO’s indicators of forced labor. They found that many recruits take on debt to travel to work in the UK, and the threat of withdrawal of work and subsequent lost income effectively coerces workers into accepting unsafe and unfair conditions. Although technically free to leave an employer, in practice worker requests for transfers are often not delivered. This and unresolved complaints about living conditions show how seasonal workers lack influence, a situation Dr. Granada highlighted to be reinforced by lack of inspection and rigorous oversight of the scheme.

The UK’s Seasonal Workers Pilot is reminiscent of programs in North America, Australia and Europe, which similarly disempower and devalue migrant workers, resulting in dangerous conditions (Gertel & Sippel, 2017; Mešić & Wikström, 2021; Weiler et al., 2020). The work of Dr. Joanna Howe draws attention to inadequate enforcement of labor regulations in Australia, where there are similar efforts to meet labor needs through managed migration schemes (Howe et al., 2020). In her presentation at the Forum, she called Australia’s seasonal worker program the “front doors” of labor migration into horticulture. However, in many cases there are also semi-legal “side doors”, and illegal “back doors”, through which employers employ undocumented workers who lack labor law protections while risking the punitive force of migration law.<sup>2</sup> A primary role of labor law is to offer safeguards for workers in unequal relationships with their employers, whereas migration law fundamentally restricts individuals’ membership to states, and therefore their labor markets. In practice, the punitive power of migration law tends to override the protective force of labor law, meaning migrant workers

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<sup>2</sup> Dr. Howe also applies the front, back side and trap door metaphor to migration pathways for care workers in Australia and New Zealand (Howe et al., 2019)

receive more harm than protection from state regulatory powers (Costello & Freedland, 2014). This imbalance needs addressing if the law is to protect migrant workers and their role within food systems. A labor market with multiple doors of entry creates segmentation, and a hierarchy in which some workers have more rights, better conditions and earning capacity (Howe et al., 2020). These underlying conditions have strong parallels elsewhere in the Global North, and trace back to the supermarket shelf. Farmers who use the most regulated paths for employment (which provide migrant workers more entitlements) face higher labor costs, thus incentivising informal hiring practices. Retail prices exert downward pressure on farmers, encouraging them to pay workers as little as possible (Rye & Scott, 2018).

Current regulatory systems are failing seasonal workers and protective regulations are not sufficiently enforced where they do exist. There is a need for increased independent controls such as workplace inspections and consultation with workers. Over and above regulation, how and whether workers are racialized as non-white also affects their treatment. In Australia, workers racialized as white are treated better than those racialized as Asian, across different avenues into the labor market (Underhill & Rimmer, 2016). Workers feel the harsh impacts of this racialization in their bodies because their lives are treated as subservient to those of the plants or animals they tend. For example, in California's strawberry production, harvesting is so physically extreme that workers' bodies are contoured and remade according to the needs of intensive production systems (Blanchette, 2020). Drives for efficiency, leading to incredibly fast, time-pressured work significantly impact workers' bodies – bodies which are less likely to be white (Guthman, 2019; Holmes, 2013).

Portraits of marginalized food workers who are segmented by migration law, unprotected by inadequate regulatory controls, and devalued in the market-driven race to the bottom were

familiar to Forum participants. Familiar too is the difficulty of knowing where to begin picking apart the tangle of threads which pull power away from workers. It is this complexity to which Dr Laura Anne Minkoff-Zern turned our attention, with her urging to think about labor justice from a food systems perspective. She began with the questions: Is it possible to build a food system that is devoid of human exploitation and suffering? What would it take to do so? She cautioned that academics and researchers seeking answers have tended to focus on specific parts of the food system, especially on agricultural workers. But labor injustices abound across the food chain, and she reminded that “struggles of farmworkers in the field are inextricable from those of servers and bussers being paid tipped wages, and Uber Eats drivers working in the gig economy.” Minkoff-Zern’s contribution, drawing on her collaboration with Theresa Mares (Minkoff-Zern & Mares, *Under Contract*), underscored how working *with* the connections between all workers in the food system will combat the segmentation of workers, and enable collective struggle against common forces hurting workers.

This food systems approach to labor is apparent in social justice and worker organizations’ applied research such as that of the Food Chain Workers Alliance and Race Forward (Food Chain Workers Alliance, 2012; Liu & Apollon, 2011). Some academic work also follows a food systems analysis of labor (Besky & Brown, 2015; Levkoe et al., 2016; Lo & Jacobson, 2011, 2011; Minkoff-Zern, 2017; Sbicca, 2015; Wald, 2011). Minkoff Zern and Mares’ vision of scholar-activism resonated with Forum participants for its inclusion of food-based work that takes place both inside and outside the home (i.e. reproductive labor). It also seeks to counter current fractures between movements and actors, with work to support, reflect and enable coalitions between food workers. Minkoff-Zern also highlighted the need for such coalition building beyond the food system, such as for the labor movement to address disparate

food sectors, and for food movements to better address demands and concerns of the labor movement.

So far we have shown Forum speakers highlighted that, while possibilities for different futures are apparent in the margins, good food work remains largely unrealized. At the root of the barriers explored during the Forum are unjust power dynamics which tend to work against workers' interests. There is growing recognition of the need to address power imbalances within food systems, as highlighted by the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food Michael Fakhri and others concerned with corporate domination of the recent UN Food System Summit (Clapp, 2021; Clapp et al., 2021; Fakhri, 2021). As Clapp notes, a small number of large companies bear huge influence on how food is produced and conditions for food system workers, with profit prioritized over livelihoods (2021: 404). And if corporations continue to consolidate their position they gain greater bargaining power, further driving down wages and labor conditions (Autor et al., 2017; Khan & Vaheesan, 2017; LeBaron, 2020). So, what is the alternative, and what can we do to help achieve it? In the next section we lay further groundwork for the vision for good food work by turning to why such visions are important.

#### 4. Three archetypes of food labour futures

Professor Julie Guthman's contributions to the Forum galvanized our efforts to agree a vision of good food work, by highlighting visions which are gaining prominence amongst decision makers and those who hold power in agri-food systems. She urged attention to new technology-focused actors in food systems – including data scientists and app builders, alongside those working on food technology. Their “techno-centric” vision entails automated production environments – such as indoor or vertical growing – where many agricultural workers are replaced with drones, robots, artificial intelligence and “professionalized” labor, such as cell

biologists, IT specialists, food scientists and nutritionists. Under current governance and regulatory regimes, this would likely result in a highly capitalized, industrialized, and biologically simplified agricultural production model (e.g. input-and energy-intensive monocultures).

Automation of food production through technology such as robots, AI and indoor growing was advocated by many industry actors as a solution to problems revealed or exacerbated by the pandemic (Reisman, 2021). But as critical agri-food scholars have highlighted, tech-centric trajectories are far from politically neutral, and may entrench food system inequalities, meaning they require careful consideration (Reisman, 2021; Rose & Chilvers, 2018; Rotz et al., 2019). Techno-centric labour futures would be heavily reliant upon industries to produce technological equipment (Lakhiar et al., 2018), so might simply displace dirty dangerous jobs from food supply chains to other workplaces(Reisman, 2021). At present innovations towards data-driven digital farming are usually corporate-led, so tend to serve corporate interests (Birner et al., 2021; Carolan, 2020; Duncan et al., 2022), and rarely seek to advance ecologically diversified or socially just alternatives to industrialized food production (Wittman et al., 2020), risking potentially adverse lock-ins with undesirable consequences (Clapp, 2021). Many of these agri-tech solutions remain inaccessible to global smallholder farming populations or farmworkers (Mehrabi et al., 2021; Rotz et al., 2019). Also, the automation required to replace the most numerous agricultural jobs such as harvesting are thought to be at least a decade away, with no guarantee they will become widely accessible or practical. The risks that agri-tech innovations exacerbate inequities and unsustainable food systems should be central within discussion of their potential, with social and political dimensions considered alongside technical potential (Rose & Chilvers, 2018). Crucially, rapid

transition to more technified and mechanized agriculture is not likely to serve the workers who currently depend on these jobs, yet their interests are rarely represented in agri-tech fora (Reisman, 2021).

As Guthman outlined, this techno-centric trajectory is garnering support in policy and commercial circles, and it presents new questions regarding what constitutes good food work. Why push for more dignified, better protected food jobs, when there is a very real prospect of those jobs disappearing? And how can advocates call for the protection of food jobs from automation without defending the poor nature of current working conditions? At the heart of Guthman's provocation was the question of whether the food movement has a vision clear and compelling enough to counter that of the "techno-centric" labour future. In the absence of a unified and comprehensive vision for food labour that is just, sustainable, and people-centered, techno-centric visions serving the interests of corporate actors while ignoring food workers will continue to gain influence, and might preclude alternatives.

Through discussions at the Forum, subsequent reflection and analysis by the authors, a sketch emerged of two visions typically at play in minority world food movements that act as alternatives to the "techno-centric" vision. First, is what we might call an "agroecological" approach to food work espoused by alternative food movements and cooperatives, such as those advancing food sovereignty, agroecology, and local food systems. Proposals in this archetype are often grounded in agrarian values of smaller scale family or subsistence landworkers, and are often detached from status quo and capitalist food systems. Actors and movements such as La Via Campesina strive for autonomy from a system of "race to the bottom" business approaches and micro-controlled workplace environments. Instead, they aspire to building self-sufficiency, localising food systems, learning, preserving bio-cultural heritage, and enacting new modes of



equality in both the productive and reproductive spheres of living. These systems are often labor-intensive, due to crop diversity, less mechanization, and using manual practices in lieu of inputs to control pests (Finley et al., 2018; Jansen, 2000; Montt & Luu, 2019). Given the increased labor requirements of agroecological farming systems, scholars have argued for training an ecologically skilled workforce to steward them (Carlisle et al., 2019), and that work opportunities on these farms have the potential to advance more just working conditions due to the variety of tasks and opportunities for learning (Timmermann & Félix, 2015). However, as work on agro-ecological production has shown, this vision can perpetuate its own forms of exploitation (Ekers et al., 2016; Ekers & Levkoe, 2015; Galt, 2013; Pilgeram, 2011; Weiler, 2022; Weiler et al., 2016), and there remain many unanswered questions about to what extent they offer a more fair alternative in terms of labour.

This “agroecological” vision for food work does not usually involve contracts, fixed working hours or employment benefits such as pensions, hence the significance of the second archetype, what we might call the “formally regulated” workplace. Formal workplace procedures, entitlements and employment benefits like these are considered important aspects of job quality (Kalleberg, 2013). Though rarely applied to agricultural work – due in part to the pervasive logic of agricultural and migrant worker exceptionalism (Getz et al., 2008; Weiler & Encalada Grez, 2022) – these characteristics of good quality jobs are another component of a vision for food work, with strong linkages to labor law, unionization and industrialization. This vision is a reality for some food workers, such as those who have been able to leverage collective bargaining power through unions like the United Food and Commercial Workers Union; however, there remain serious barriers to such improvements for significant groups of food workers, especially seasonal migrant workers.

This second vision of the “formally regulated” labour future is of waged workers working for good employers within the status quo food system, under good regulatory protection. But as Guthman suggested: “both [alternative visions] are inadequate and are also flip sides of the same thing, which leaves the core of the food system untouched. The task of imagination is to think beyond both”. Productive re-imagining of better labour futures, she suggested, must seek to go beyond these archetypes, and consider how to challenge the status quo and repair harms it has done.

These contrasting visions for the future of food work (techno-centric, agroecological and formally regulated) sit amongst many possibilities, each with shortcomings and advantages. We recognize, for example, the shortcomings of an overly optimistic view of labor in the alternative food sector, which is not exempt from the inequities of food work (Harrison & Getz, 2015; Weiler et al., 2016). Due to lack of state provision of specialist training and the challenges agro-ecological growers face, un- or low-paid traineeships are currently a key developmental pathway, which risks being exclusive and exploiting those who volunteer their time (Pitt, 2022). Public investment in quality training pathways would help remedy this as an interim solution until these production systems are economically robust enough to generate living incomes. We also recognize the benefits of formal workplace procedures and benefits, but at the same time, we see both views need to be complicated by the messy reality of food work, including the prevalence of sub-contracting, differential arrangements for workers within a shared workplace, and the hidden non-waged work happening in homes and elsewhere.

Neither participants nor organizers espouse the view that technology is inherently bad, rather we amplify the concern that workers’ interests must feature more prominently in assessments of innovation, and calls that agri-tech transformations should not foreclose diverse

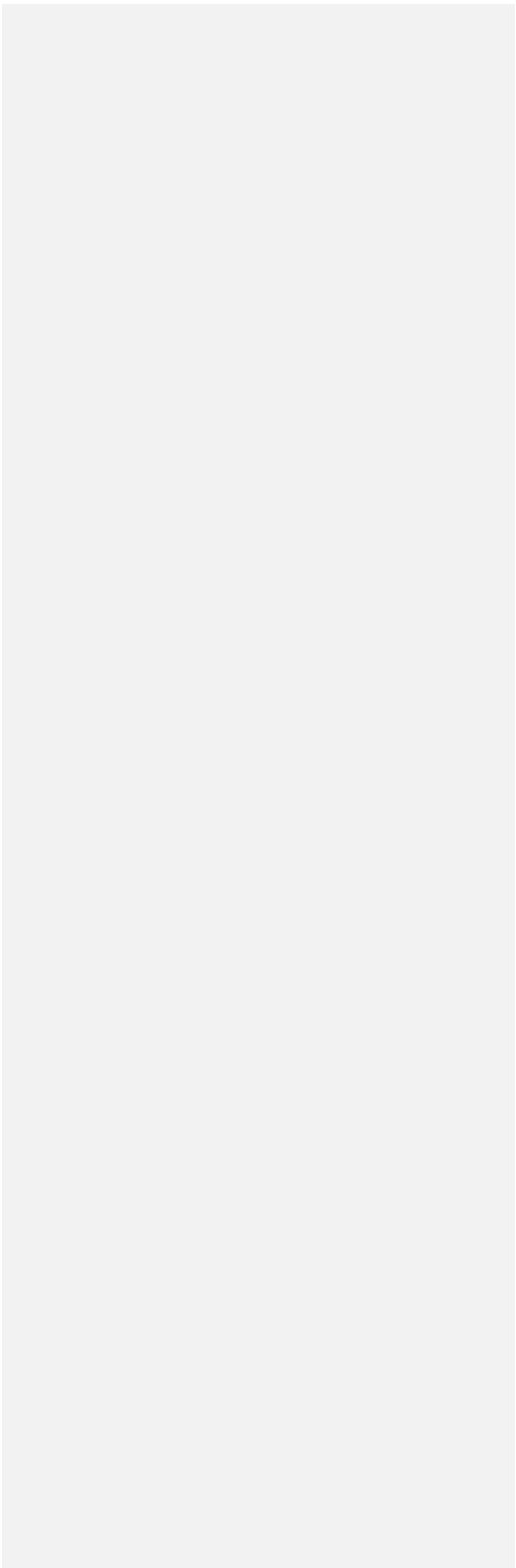
ways of doing and owning food production. As well articulated by Matt Huber: “What parts of these automated technologies can be repurposed to create agroecological growing systems rather than monoculture-plantation profit machines?” (Huber, 2020). The Forum’s vision therefore includes consideration of how future food systems can harness technologies that enable worker wellbeing and more sustainable and humane food production models.

### 5. Outcomes: A vision and pathways for good food work

Our objective for the *Good Work for Good Food Forum* was to craft a shared vision for good food work. To develop a comprehensive and nuanced vision, we had to negotiate tradeoffs between what we outline in the previous section as the three competing archetypes for labor in food systems. The discussions summarized in the previous sections highlighted that a vision for good food work may be even more urgently needed than we realized when conceiving the Forum.

Our proposed vision for good food work within just and sustainable food systems (Figure 1) rejects the view that the best way to deal with the indignities and inequities of food work is to eradicate it. Instead, we advocate a more critical examination of the potential of technology in creating the conditions for good food work. We seek to go beyond what existing employment standards and regulatory controls should achieve to propose a comprehensive vision that lays out what food workers deserve, now and in future. This vision was crafted by the authors based on insights that emerged from the Forum, and shared back to all Forum attendees for feedback and approval. As such, we consider it a collective vision endorsed by Forum participants. It is important to highlight that the workers currently laboring in food systems have immediate needs which should be met as a matter of urgency – for them better work conditions are not a distant dream imagined for some vague future. We also recognize our privileged position as academics

who can think and write about visions for better worlds of work without having to suffer the injustices and harms of living current labour regimes.



Our vision is to expand and build upon the existing legal standards and best practice in the sector with aspirational principles for how work in food systems can protect, reward and celebrate those making their livelihoods from this important sector. The principles we propose emerged from the *Good Work for Good Food Forum*, and in response to concerns regarding visions for food systems which often eclipse, rather than prioritize the rights of food workers.

Good food work across all sectors and all scales should:

1. Be recognized as valuable and skilled;
2. Be fairly paid, often well-paid, and personally fulfilling;
3. Be available to everyone regardless of personal identity or immigration status;
4. Be safe, and carried out in a healthy and supportive environment;
5. Use technology where it assists workers;
6. Include opportunities for skills development and career progression;
7. Provide workers with access to social security support;
8. Have conditions and terms determined together with workers; and
9. Enable workers' freedom of association and engagement in collective action.

These nine principles should be underpinned by appropriate international law, enforced by nation states, respected by private actors and open to scrutiny by trade unions and civil society groups. Furthermore, it is important that actors whose role it is to protect and enforce labor standards, such as labor inspectorates, be independent of migration enforcement agencies who may undermine their protective roles and decrease workers' trust in them. In order for labor standards to be enforced, national labor inspectorates should be given sufficient resources to undertake this work, in line with ILO targets<sup>a</sup>.

**Figure 1.** A collective vision for good food work.

a. These targets are: 1/10,000 in industrial market economies; 1/15,000 in industrializing economies; 1/20,000 in transition economies; and 1/40,000 in less developed countries. ILO. 2006. Strategies and practice for labor inspection. Document GB.297/ESP/3. Governing Body, 297th Session, Geneva, p.4. Microsoft Word - GB297-ESP-3-2006-10-0196-1-En.doc (ilo.org)

Having identified fundamental principles of a vision for good work, participants at the Forum considered where change is most urgently required to achieve this vision, and the barriers to this. The main outcomes of these discussions are summarized in Table 1: the first column identifies the main challenges (see section 3 above) which currently prevent good food work from becoming a reality, and conditions underpinning them. The second column suggests enabling factors required to make good work the norm across food systems; the third characterizes the change sought to realize this element of the vision. As suggested by challenge 7, all aspects of the problem are highly inter-connected, and deeply embedded in global social and economic patterns. Any analysis and plan of action therefore requires a systems approach which considers all parts of a food system, and how they interact with wider socio-ecological systems.

**Table 1: Barriers and pathways to good food work in the broader food system.**

Barriers to good food work	Pathway to enable good food work	Key pathway for change
<p><u>1. The capitalist neo-liberal organization of the food system</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Food system under pinned by capitalist inequities, including ethno-racial and gender hierarchies</li> <li>• Focus on producing commodified food</li> <li>• Alternatives outside capitalism struggle to thrive</li> <li>• Access to land and resources to produce food are confined to those with capital</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Decolonized labor relations</li> <li>• Collective organization of workers</li> <li>• Thriving grassroots movements for agroecology and human rights</li> </ul>	<p>Challenge structural forces, capitalism and racism</p>
<p><u>2. Fractured movements, groups and constituencies</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Disconnections between food, labor and environmental movements, and from the fight for racial justice</li> <li>• Uncoordinated good food initiatives</li> <li>• Non-waged food work (e.g. peasant and reproductive labor) is overlooked</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unions that are relevant to diverse social and cultural realities of peoples’ lives</li> <li>• Alliances (but not uniformity) beyond the food system and food movements</li> <li>• Movements that challenge the focus on waged work; inclusion of reproductive work</li> <li>• Labor struggles connected to racial justice struggles</li> </ul>	<p>Build alliances and solidarity</p>
<p><u>3. Food workers positions as precarious and devalued</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Food work (including domestic labor) perceived as unskilled and low value</li> <li>• Workers lack recognition and voice in the system that creates their conditions</li> <li>• Lack of collectivization increases workers’ vulnerability to exploitation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Food work is viewed as life-giving, knowledge-intensive and highly skilled, and as including all activities that reproduce life</li> <li>• Workers are centered in civic life</li> </ul>	<p>Elevate and empower food workers</p>
<p><u>4. Indifference of the general consumer</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Education and knowledge about food justice and food labor are limited and poorly understood</li> <li>• Food systems lack transparency so eaters cannot hold industry to account</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Eaters act on and care about injustices faced by food workers</li> <li>• The public recognize food workers as central for human flourishing</li> </ul>	<p>Educating and Galvanizing the Public</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consumers are aware of food production conditions and their roots in a drive for efficiency</li> <li>• Multiple approaches to education about food systems and labor for all life stages</li> </ul>	
<p><u>5. Complex nature of regulations, protections and standards in globalized food systems</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Independent labor inspectorates lack power and separation from immigration systems</li> <li>• International labor standards are inadequate and weakly enforced</li> <li>• Migration systems drive labor exploitation, and undermine worker protections</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All workers protected by citizenship or residency status</li> <li>• International standards and conventions set high standards for food work, backed by national and regional regulations</li> <li>• Employers comply with local regulations and laws because enforcement is strict</li> <li>• The UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants is upheld</li> </ul>	Governance and Policy for Worker Rights
<p><u>6. Farmers/employers squeezed by high costs and low prices</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• International markets drive a race to the bottom in worker conditions and rewards</li> <li>• Power and profit are overly concentrated with retailers, with less returned to producers</li> <li>• Social and ecological costs are displaced to peripheral regions or marginalized groups</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Businesses of all sizes enabled to invest in good working conditions</li> <li>• Public investment in just and sustainable food production along rights-based frameworks</li> <li>• New routes to market supported by policy and development</li> </ul>	Supply chains enable possibilities for good food work
<p><u>7. Complexity and interconnectedness of food security &amp; labor injustice issues</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consumption of 'good food' is too often inaccessible to those with low incomes</li> <li>• Solutions struggle to make systemic impact due to the complexity of food systems and tensions between various injustices</li> <li>• Wellbeing of workers, nonhumans and consumers are traded against each other</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All eaters are empowered to make choices based on their needs, preferences and place</li> <li>• Enhanced dialogue between food system actors</li> <li>• Systems that reflect the interconnectedness of all life (including animals, plants, workers and everyone else) and between human, animal and planetary wellbeing</li> <li>• True cost accounting that captures human and non-human dimensions</li> </ul>	Imperative to take a systems approach to addressing challenges



It should be apparent from the aspirations in Table 1 that making positive progress requires action both to undo what is “bad” in current systems, and to shape alternatives which enact what is “good”; prefiguring alternatives while leaving flawed food systems in place is insufficient. Discussions also highlighted that some enabling controls and regulations exist which should further the cause of good food work, but currently do not due to inadequate implementation or weak enforcement. Applying such regulations more robustly is an obvious action for immediate attention.

Discussions during the Forum also worked to identify priority actions, and who might be well placed to initiate them. Participants identified actions in four key domains associated with key actors and spheres of influence: Government, Civil Society, Private Sector, and Research (Table 2). The actions and enabling pathways most relevant for international agencies such as the UN FAO, ILO and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights were captured in our open letter, which highlighted actions relevant to the UN IYFV and beyond (Good Work for Good Food Forum, 2021). Given the international participation and purview of the discussion, it was clear that any action would need to be adapted to territorial context while taking a multi-faceted approach targeting all parts of the system.

**Table 2.** Priority actions to advance good food work for key actors in government, civil society, private companies and researchers.

Actor	Priority Actions
Governments	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) ensure that the number of labor inspectors meet minimum targets set by the ILO;</li> <li>2) ensure national labor inspectorates are sufficiently resourced and independent from migration enforcement;</li> <li>3) implement labor law with remedies and mechanisms of redress for migrant/seasonal workers; and</li> <li>4) support seasonal and migrant workers to access remedies for contravention of labor law.</li> </ol>

Civil Society	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) build solidarities and alliances across movements, especially between food and labor movements;</li> <li>2) follow workers' leads, and centre their demands and experiences; and</li> <li>3) advocate comprehensively for all needs across the good food work agenda across food systems.</li> </ol>
Private Companies	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) ensure transparency in labelling and information to enable informed consumer choices;</li> <li>2) prioritize unionized sourcing;</li> <li>3) implement true cost accounting of social and environmental costs; and</li> <li>4) create jobs and career pathways offering permanence and full employment rights.</li> </ol>
Researchers	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) deliver transdisciplinary work to build understandings of how to support good food work;</li> <li>2) take action on worker precarity within university spaces; and</li> <li>3) conduct comparative policy analysis to identify best practices across countries.</li> </ol>

**Commented [L1]:** I think that these two are separate and it also looks better if we give work to ourselves as well as to others!

While the Forum identified opportunities for action, some notes of caution that emerged from our discussions should be acknowledged. Firstly, there are concerns about the limitations and problematic nature of consumer focused solutions such as product labelling to certify better working conditions, as they tend to act weakly on worker conditions and emphasize individual action and care for self, rather than the collective action and care for others (Brown & Getz, 2008). A second note of caution was sounded in relation to potential for small-scale agroecological farming as a transformation pathway. Increasingly promoted by the FAO as having an important role in post-pandemic food system resilience, agroecological and localized food systems can improve environmental and health outcomes (FAO, 2018; HLPE, 2019; Wittman et al., 2017). But there remain unanswered questions around the politics, ethics, and sustainability of labor relations that feature heavily in this production (Dumont & Baret, 2017; Ekers et al., 2016; Weiler et al., 2016). Finally, a third unresolved tension that surfaced was whether and how unwaged reproductive labour – an essential part of food systems – features and

is accounted for in a good food work agenda. These caveats highlight that there is unlikely to be a single, or simple pathway towards good food work. However, it is our hope that the preliminary vision, pathways and priority actions we present here can be another step in advancing work towards more fair and sustainable labour futures.

## 6. Conclusion

The objective of the Forum was to facilitate dialogue between international scholar-activists working on food labour, and to coalesce around a vision for good food work. The vision we share here is offered to scholar-activists and others who seek to both advocate for better work across food systems, and to counter visions which fail to consider implications for workers. While not presenting here examples of the vision or pathways in action, participants in the Forum noted positive practices during our discussions; learning about and from such initiatives is a future aspiration for the network emerging from the Forum. This collective learning, and awareness of alternatives to current food work regimes provides hope that better food work is possible.

In addition to the proposed vision and pathways towards it, this work has surfaced questions and tensions that we and others need to grapple with in order to make progress towards good food work. How do we help elevate the voices and power of food workers, making them visible in the context of exploitative structural forces, including capitalism, racism, xenophobia, and sexism? And, how do we do so in ways that do not tokenize their participation, and that are based in trust? How can we better contribute to the development of governance and policy for food workers' rights, especially for (im)migrant workers? What are creative ways that scholar-activists can better bridge academic, social movement and policy spaces through our work?

While work in agriculture and food service are well-studied, transportation, online retail, gig work, haulage and logistics are under-researched forms of food work. Fuller attention to these is required to enable a fully systemic view on food work. Forum participants also highlighted the need for further interrogation of feminist perspectives on food labor in the home, and for decolonial perspectives on the global peasant movement which oppose the neoliberal industrial food system and its corporations. Both these important forms of food work remind us to consider the value and needs of workers beyond those engaged in paid labor, for whom the nature of good work may be quite different. But care is required to ensure that a vision inclusive of unpaid labor does not dilute or undermine demands for enforceable protections for waged workers.

The Covid-19 pandemic revealed the brittle nature of our food system (Hendrickson, 2020), and the ways that labour inequities undermine resilience (Klassen & Murphy, 2020). The urgent need for changes regarding food work were made abundantly clear, representing a possible opening to make some of these. In her contribution to the Forum, Minkoff-Zern described similar historic moments of heightened public consciousness of food labor injustices which tended to be short-lived, as public awareness of workers' plight gave way to individualistic consumer interests around food health or safety. How do we ensure that the current moment to improve conditions for food workers is not lost? Such a challenge can seem overwhelming, but perhaps our best start point is as Guthman urged: "We need lots and lots of organizing!" Given the scale of the challenge, and that collective action seems the most fruitful path forward, it is heartening that the participants in our Forum expressed a will to continue cooperating. We must begin by finding effective, fair ways to learn from and act in solidarity with food workers themselves.



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