

# Is big bet philanthropy capable of scaling food systems transformation?

*This talk explored how transforming and redesigning existing financial systems, partnerships and innovative solutions can better support global agricultural development, particularly focusing on empowering farmers in the Global South. Through speeches and panel discussions, the event emphasized the importance of cross-sector collaboration and long-term impact in addressing issues related to agriculture, climate change, and food systems.*

Time (minutes)	Section
00.00 - 04.00	Opening Remarks by Gladys H. Morales
04.00 - 07.38	Video recording by IFAD President Alvaro Lario
07.38 - 08.15	Comments by Gladys H. Morales
08.15 - 15.18	Keynote Speech by Tonya Allen
15.18 - 16.37	Introduction of Panelists Sonia Medina, Masego Madzwamuse and Anna Lappé
16.37 - 57.31	Panel Dialogue and Q&A
57.31-58.39	Closing Remarks by Ron Hartman
58.39-59.31	Event closes

## As a kick-off, Gladys H. Morales,

**Global Head of Innovation at IFAD** highlighted the need to adjust and redesign financial rules to better support global farmers, especially those from developing regions. She emphasized how partnerships between philanthropy and financial systems are critical to scaling solutions for food systems transformation.

The event then featured a video message from **Alvaro Lario, President of IFAD**. Dr. Lario underscored IFAD’s commitment to bringing positive transformations to rural communities through innovative solutions. He highlighted key partnerships with major philanthropic organizations such as the Gates, Rockefeller, and Visa Foundations, focusing on enhancing the resilience of smallholder farmers. Dr. Lario concluded by emphasizing the need for inclusive, impactful, and sustainable investments to achieve the transformation of food systems.

## Keynote speech by Tonya Allen:

**Tonya Allen, President of the McKnight Foundation**, emphasized the transformative potential of “big bet philanthropy” in rural development and food systems. She stressed the importance of co-designing solutions with local communities, particularly farmers, and highlighted that financial resources alone aren’t enough. True impact requires rewriting financial systems and empowering those closest to the challenges. Allen advocated for disrupting traditional practices in philanthropy and ensuring that investments are driven by genuine intentions and collaboration, ultimately aimed at sustainable, equitable outcomes.

## Insights from Sonia Medina:

**Sonia Medina** emphasized the urgent need for “big bets” in philanthropy to address the significant disparities in agricultural subsidies versus climate financing for agriculture and called for collective action to create lasting systemic change. She outlined three key points:

1. Unite diverse perspectives to create a shared vision for food systems aligning nutrition and climate goals.
2. Encourage diverse agriculture to reduce reliance on large-scale livestock.
3. Collaborate to reform harmful subsidies, ensuring support for sustainable agriculture.

### Speakers and panelists at the event

- Moderator: Gladys H. Morales, Global Head of Innovation, IFAD
- Alvaro Lario, President, IFAD
- Tonya Allen, President, McKnight Foundation
- Ron Thomas Hartman, Director, Global Engagement, Partnership and Resource Mobilization, IFAD
- Sonia Medina, Chief Ecosystem Development Officer & Executive Director, Climate Change, Children's Investment Fund Foundation
- Masego Madzwamuse, Director of the Environment Programme, Oak Foundation
- Anna Lappé, Executive Director, Global Alliance for the Future of Food

### Insights from Masego Madzwamuse:

**Masego Madzwamuse** discussed the need for centering justice, equity, and inclusion in transforming food systems, especially in the Global South. Masego pointed out that beyond focusing on increasing production, it's essential to improve the quality of life and ensure the self-representation of small-scale farmers. She highlighted the disparities in how philanthropic resources are distributed, with far less flexible funding reaching the Global South, and called for a rebalancing of resource flows. Finally, Masego stressed the importance of building trust and better relationships between philanthropic organizations and local institutions to ensure that funding effectively supports long-term, sustainable change.

#### *Key takeaways from the panel discussion:*

- **Collaboration and Co-design:** Emphasized the importance of working closely with local communities, particularly smallholder farmers, to co-design solutions for lasting impact.
- **Reforming Agricultural Subsidies:** Highlighted the urgent need for policy reform to redirect harmful subsidies towards more sustainable agricultural practices.
- **Equitable Resource Distribution:** Stressed the importance of rebalancing philanthropic funding to ensure it reaches marginalized communities in the Global South, fostering trust and equity in partnerships.

#### *The event aimed to answer the following questions:*

- Can philanthropy live up to the challenge of increasing and shifting financing for food systems? What are some challenges and/or opportunities?
- How can a shift in partnership and investment modalities innovate philanthropic practices that lead to the transformation of food systems?
- How can philanthropy complement traditional efforts to help countries in the financing of their food systems investment strategies?

### Insights from Anna Lappé:

**Anna Lappé** emphasized the need for philanthropy to play a key role in scaling sustainable food systems. She highlighted that food systems are major contributors to both climate change and biodiversity loss, and urgent transformation is required. Anna stressed that philanthropy should not only focus on moving money but also on how and where it's allocated, ensuring investments prioritize social justice and equity. She also underscored the importance of empowering local communities and advocates to push for systemic change, ensuring public dollars are spent on sustainable food and agricultural practices.

The panelists agreed that while financial resources are essential, long-term success will depend on addressing underlying systemic and political issues. They called for deeper collaboration, flexible funding, and a strong focus on equity to ensure that philanthropic investments lead to sustainable, inclusive, and impactful changes in food systems globally.

*“As we look toward the future, the question at hand extends beyond whether big bet philanthropy can effectively scale food systems transformation. It must be about how – and how we can ensure that these investments remain sustainable, inclusive, and impactful at the scale we need”*

**Alvaro Lario**

*“The transformation of food systems requires more than financial resources – it demands the co-design of solutions with local communities to drive lasting change.”*

**Tonya Allen**

*“Reforming agricultural subsidies is essential to ensure resources support sustainable practices and empower smallholder farmers in the Global South.”*

**Sonia Medina**

**During the Live Q&A**, Anna Lappé emphasized the need for philanthropy to scale investments in sustainable food systems, grounded in social justice and equity. Sonia Medina highlighted the importance of coherent regulatory frameworks for scaling innovations and called for distinct strategies for industrial agriculture and small-scale farming. Masego Madzwamuse stressed the importance of reaching marginalized communities through trusted intermediaries and emphasized the need for big bets in philanthropy. All panelists reinforced the importance of collaborative efforts, differentiated strategies, and investing in relationships to drive transformative change in global food systems.

**During his closing remarks, Director Ron Hartman** emphasized the importance of collaboration, integrated approaches, and empowering local communities. He stressed that philanthropy should support both funding and partnerships to drive sustainable, systemic change.

*If you are interested in the discussion with the audience, please consult the event [recording](#) on the [event page](#).*

## **Missed the event? Watch it online!**

- A recording of the event can be found [here](#).
- If you would like to skip directly to certain sections of the event, the times are listed in the table in the first page.
- For more information about the McKnight Foundation, please contact [communications@mcknight.org](mailto:communications@mcknight.org)
- Read The Global Alliance's report Cultivating Change – A Collaborative Philanthropic Initiative to Accelerate and Scale Agroecology and Regenerative Approaches. It calls for a ten-fold increase in funding for regenerative and agroecological transitions to address urgent global agricultural and environmental challenges <https://story.futureoffood.org/cultivating-change/index.html>
- For more information about the Oak Foundation, please visit their website: <https://oakfnd.org/>
- Join the [IFAD Innovation Network](#) to receive our updates and to contribute to the knowledge sharing and learning of our innovation community of practice: <https://ifad.dgroups.io/g/IFADInnovation>