

REWRITING THE PROTEIN NARRATIVE:

Trust, Shared Vision, and Sustainable Solutions

*Post-Event Report from the
World Food Prize Borlaug
Dialogues 2025*

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Prepared by

Food Systems for the Future Institute

1. OVERVIEW AND PURPOSE



The global conversation on protein has become increasingly polarized, often framed as a contest of animal versus complementary, innovation versus tradition, climate versus culture. This event challenged that false binary.

Convened during the 2025 World Food Prize Borlaug Dialogue, Rewriting the Protein Narrative brought together leaders across science, policy, industry, advocacy, and youth networks to move beyond division and toward a shared vision; one that recognizes the essential role of both animal-source and complementary proteins in achieving nutrition security, rural livelihoods, and planetary health.

The dialogue sought to:

- Reframe how we talk about protein so it invites partnership instead of hostility.
- Highlight shared sustainability, equity, and innovation goals across sectors.
- Identify practical pathways to build trust, dismantle misinformation, and accelerate climate and nutrition progress.
- Lay the groundwork for a multi-partner white paper to inform future policy and collective action.



SPEAKERS AND PANELISTS



Keynote speaker:
Jack Bobo
Executive Director,
UCLA Rothman Family
Institute for Food Studies



Closing remarks:
Prof. Appolinaire Djikeng
Director General,
International Livestock
Research Institute



Moderator:
**Ambassador
Ertharin Cousin**
CEO and Managing Director,
Food Systems for the Future



Sheila Voss
*Senior Vice President of
Communications*
Good Food Institute



Paul Newnham
CEO
SDG2 Advocacy Hub



Divine Ntiokam
*Founder and
Executive Director*
Climate Smart Agriculture
Youth Network Global
(GCSAYN)



Nicole Jenkins
*Manager, Beef and Poultry
Sector, EDF + Business*
Environmental Defense Fund



Sam Wildman
Director, Strategic Projects
Meat Institute

2. OPENING REMARKS: FRAMING THE CHALLENGE

Ambassador Ertharin Cousin opened the session by setting the tone for collaboration: *“How we produce and consume protein will shape both the health of our people and the health of our planet.”*

She emphasized that rewriting the protein narrative is not about taking sides but about building trust across science, markets, and communities. A sustainable future must be inclusive, evidence-based, and collaborative, recognizing that both livestock and complementary proteins contribute essential value when properly managed.

Ambassador Cousin framed the discussion as a practical exercise in problem-solving rather than ideology—one that would feed directly into a multi-partner white paper designed to influence global food, climate, and investment conversations.

3. KEYNOTE ADDRESS: “THE AGE OF OUTRAGE” — JACK BOBO

In his compelling keynote, Jack Bobo explored how narrative and communication shape the fate of food systems.

3.1 The “Age of Outrage”

Bobo observed that polarization in food and agriculture arises when people believe:

1. Their future is being taken from them.
2. The system is rigged against them.
3. Their identity is under attack.

When one group names another as “the villain,” he warned, “you automatically become the villain of their story.” The problem isn’t faulty science; it’s divisive storytelling.

3.2 Polarization as a Systemic Threat

The World Economic Forum identifies polarization and disinformation as top societal threats. Together they paralyze action. “You can’t solve big problems without working together,” Bobo said, “but collaboration has never been harder.”

3.3 Replacing a Failed Narrative

The prevailing storyline; things are bad and getting worse,” has become a failed narrative. It breeds apathy, not action.

A more empowering frame is: “Things are good and getting better, but not fast enough.”

This framing invites participation, positioning farmers and innovators as agents of acceleration, not obstacles to progress.

3.4 Evidence and Hope

Using historical data, Bobo demonstrated that progress is real:

- UK CO₂ emissions are still high at 5.5 tons per capita; “the sort of thing that makes young people despair.” But they are also at a 150-year low and ~40% below 1990 levels, even as GDP rose ~40%. That reframes the story: “We can have a better future and a more sustainable future at the same time.”
- Global child mortality is at the lowest point in recorded human history.
- Global hunger persists; ~10% of people still go to bed hungry, which is “completely unacceptable.” But 60 years ago, it was ~30%. Progress is real, but incomplete, but it proves that change is possible.

We should believe that change is possible. The past should inspire us to do great things in the future, not out of apathy, but to drive action.

3.5 Protein and Equity

Protein debates must account for global inequities: many in low-income countries lack sufficient animal protein to prevent stunting, while many in wealthy countries overconsume. There is an opportunity in considering distribution, diet quality, and balance.

3.6 A Call to Build, Not Defend, the Future

“Stop preparing for the future you expect. Start creating the future you want. Stop asking people to sacrifice for the future. Invite them to embrace it.”

This call to optimism framed the rest of the discussion: real progress depends on trust, shared purpose, and inclusive narratives.

4. PANEL DISCUSSION: TURNING IDEAS INTO ACTION

Moderated by Ambassador Cousin, the panel expanded on Bobo's ideas, grounding them in practical examples from across the protein ecosystem.

4.1 From Scarcity to Shared Value

Paul Newnham urged a mindset shift from competition to co-creation: "It's not my protein versus your protein; it's about complete diets."

High-income countries face fiber and micronutrient gaps more than protein shortages, while many low-income regions still struggle with undernutrition. The solution lies in the diversity of diets and the diversity of solutions, not a single "hero protein."

4.2 "It's an AND, Not an OR"

Nicole Jenkins (EDF) highlighted how methane reduction and protein production can advance hand in hand when opportunities are tailored to specific contexts. She emphasized EDF's focus on "triple-win" solutions such as improving animal health and productivity that simultaneously strengthen livelihoods, enhance nutrition, and deliver climate benefits. Nicole also discussed how blended protein innovations that combine meat and plant sources offer practical "both/and" models, driving progress across business, environmental, and nutritional goals.

She concluded by underscoring that no single solution can address the complexity of our food system challenges; rather, we must harness the full range of tools and innovations available to us.

4.3 Building Systems, Not Silos

Sam Wildman (Meat Institute) reminded participants that sustainability must work at a system level: "We can't build silos—we have to build systems."

He highlighted that 90% of Meat Institute members are family-owned and 80% have fewer than 100 employees, underscoring that "the meat industry" includes thousands of small rural enterprises critical to local economies. Sustainable transformation, he said, must strengthen these rural economies while improving safety, animal welfare, and climate outcomes.

4.4 The Language of Partnership

Sheila Voss (Good Food Institute) argued that progress depends on how we talk; she called for language that invites collaboration, speaking in "we" terms and "let's" terms: "Let's create new market opportunities for farmers."

Let's create more jobs and reasons for young people to stay."

She pointed to real-world examples: new alternative protein centers in Janesville, WI, Richmond, IN, and North Carolina State University as proof that collaboration generates local jobs and shared benefits.



Her message: people trust what they can see; real jobs, real facilities, real local impact.

4.5 Youth as Partners, Not Beneficiaries

Divine Ntiokam (GCSAYN) stressed that youth inclusion must be operational, not symbolic:

"There is no development without sustainable inclusion."



GCSAYN's 170-country network has localized the SDGs into 60 languages and works with NASA on soil mapping and climate-smart tools. Divine urged funding for youth-led implementation, starting from primary school engagement.



4.6 From Prohibition to Invitation

Newnham concluded with the "Beans Is How" campaign, an example of narrative done right:

"It doesn't shame. It invites."

The campaign reframes climate-friendly eating as joyful, affordable, and culturally rooted, promoting legumes as "a beautiful, complete, and familiar food for all."

"Be pro-solution, not anti-someone."

5. AUDIENCE Q&A: WHERE IS THE PROTEIN DEFICIT?

The discussion turned to the global protein gap; audience questions grounded the discussion in reality: Where is the protein deficit, and what's being done to address it? Panelists noted:

- The deficit is most acute across Africa and Asia, but uneven within countries.
- School meal programs are leading solutions. Governments (not just donors) are funding school meal programs that focus not only on calories but on diet quality, including protein and micronutrients. Brazil, for example, now mandates that 30% of school meal procurement come from smallholder farmers, improving both diets and rural economies.
- 2.6 billion people globally cannot afford a diverse diet, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia; the nutritional justice lens we have to keep in front of us.

The takeaway: the challenge is not only production, but distribution and affordability, and solutions must be contextual and just.

6. CLOSING REFLECTIONS: PROF. APPOLINAIRE DJIKENG

Prof. Djikeng, ILRI's Director General, anchored the conversation in equity and science-based pragmatism.

6.1 Put the Deficit at the Center

He challenged the room to stop talking about averages. "You can take two in Africa, and 98 in the U.S.—the average is 50. We are good. But we are not." He emphasized that averages hide inequality, and that failure to address the protein deficit perpetuates stunting, wasting, and lost potential. "We must explicitly ask: where is the protein deficit, who is living that deficit, and what are the consequences?"

6.2 Shape the Future We Want

Echoing Bobo, he urged participants to actively design the future rather than react to it, through honest communication, inclusive collaboration, and recognition of diverse realities.

6.3 Balance, Justice, and Inclusion

Transformation must ensure:

- Balanced diets, not just “more protein.” Protein quality and role within the whole diet matter.
- Resilient and just food systems that uplift rural producers.
- Genuine inclusion of marginalized groups: pastoralists, people with disabilities, youth, and women within leadership and implementation.

6.4 From Dialogue to Coalition

Prof. Djikeng invited participants to stay engaged with the multi-partner white paper and coalition work led by FSF, ILRI, EDF, and others. He emphasized that the white paper should reflect global perspectives, not just those of a few co-authors, and encouraged attendees to contribute insights, data, and case studies.

Ambassador Cousin closed by reaffirming: “Rewriting the protein narrative isn’t about declaring sides; it’s about building trust between science, society, innovation, tradition, producers, and consumers.”



7. KEY CROSS-CUTTING INSIGHTS

1. **Trust is the Core Currency**—without it, no solution will scale.
2. **Zoom Out to Diet Quality**—the issue extends beyond protein to overall nutrition and fiber/micronutrient balance.
3. **“Both/And” Is Already Reality**—blended and complementary products are reshaping markets and are succeeding commercially; a proof point that “animal vs. alternative” is a manufactured divide.
4. **Rural Economies Matter**—sustainable protein must translate to viable rural livelihoods.
5. **Youth Inclusion Is a Prerequisite**—move from symbolic panels to funded participation and leadership.
6. **Narrative Strategy Drives Policy**—stories of progress, not doom, open pathways for action.

8. EMERGING CHALLENGES

- Polarization and misinformation are now structural risks; they erode trust and stall policy.
- Distributional inequities are hidden by global averages.
- Climate ambition framed as threats alienates producers.
- Local actors and youth remain under-resourced and under-consulted.
- Technical successes (e.g., methane mitigation, blended products) need clearer, trusted communication.

9. PATHWAYS FORWARD

- **Reframe the Mission:** Shift from “protein competition” to a shared pursuit of nutrition security, resilient livelihoods, and climate stability.
- **Normalize Complementary Protein Systems:** Recognize both animal-source and alternative proteins as context-specific tools for balanced diets and economic inclusion.
- **Invest in Trust-Building Infrastructure:** Expand transparent alliances and cross-sector convenings that demonstrate collaboration.
- **Design for Equity, Not Averages:** Map the protein deficit by geography; prioritize interventions where undernutrition and inequity are greatest.
- **Empower Youth and Local Actors:** Fund youth-led pilots, local innovation hubs, and inclusive research-to-action pipelines.
- **Communicate in “We” and “Let’s” Language:** Use inclusive, actionable storytelling: “Let’s create jobs, let’s improve soil health, let’s build better diets.” Replace guilt with agency.

10. NEXT STEPS

The event was explicitly designed as the launchpad for continued collaborative work. The following next steps were identified:

- **Contribute to the White Paper** – FSF, EDF, and ILRI are consolidating evidence, narratives, and practical examples for the global report.

- **Strengthen the Coalition** – Stay engaged through shared data, case studies, and dialogue.

- **Focus Future Convenings** – Next sessions will spotlight “Where is the protein deficit?” to anchor equity in action.

- **Carry the Message Forward** – Integrate this “diversity of diets, diversity of solutions” lens into institutional agendas.

11. CONCLUSION

This session made one thing unmistakably clear: **The future of food will not be defined by a single protein, but by the diversity of solutions we build together.**

Animal-source foods will continue to matter for nutrition, for culture, and for livelihoods, especially in regions where child stunting and undernutrition are still a daily reality. Complementary proteins (plant-based, microbial, blended, and cultivated) will continue to matter for climate resilience, diversification of income streams, and public health in places of overconsumption. Both will matter for rural economic stability. The challenge and the opportunity are to align these systems under one shared goal: healthy people, thriving producers, and a stable planet.

For more information about this work and how to get involved, please contact:
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