

For Release: Oct. 7, 2016
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UB Food Lab, UN FAO to lead training session at United Nations conference in Ecuador

Session on World Food Day, Oct. 16, will focus on food systems planning and policy

BUFFALO, N.Y. – The University at Buffalo Food Systems Planning and Healthy Communities Lab (Food Lab) has partnered with a United Nations agency to lead a training session on food systems planning and policy as part of an upcoming UN conference that happens once every 20 years.

The session will be conducted Oct. 16, which is World Food Day, one day prior to the official start of the Habitat III Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development. The four-day conference is expected to draw 40,000 world leaders, city mayors, academics and grassroots activists, among other participants, to Quito, Ecuador.

Among its goals are to secure renewed commitment from global leaders for sustainable urban development, address poverty and identify and address new and emerging challenges. The urbanization stakes are high: Conference organizers estimate that by mid-century, 4 out of every 5 people in the world might be living in cities and towns.

UN member states attending the conference will ratify a document called the New Urban Agenda, which conference organizers describe as “an action-oriented document which will set global standards of achievement in sustainable urban development, rethinking the way we build, manage, and live in cities through drawing together cooperation with committed partners, relevant stakeholders, and urban actors at all levels of government as well as the private sector.”

The training session being conducted by UB’s Food Lab and the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) will provide participants with information on community-led food systems planning techniques that have been used successfully in North America, particularly Buffalo and Seattle. Space is limited, and seats are being apportioned to ensure equitable access to participants from across the Global South and Global North; attendees are encouraged to RSVP at <https://goo.gl/forms/qDxSigeqPol94Abo3>.

The training will focus on planning tools that strengthen the capacity of local governments in supporting food security and agricultural viability, as well as information and strategies for how the New Urban Agenda can be implemented.

Samina Raja, principal investigator of the Food Lab, believes that Buffalo as a case study can offer workshop participants plenty of examples on the importance of food systems planning in local government, particularly in poorer communities.

“Buffalo’s experience shows how community-led efforts can inform policy change. Buffalo is especially important as a case from the U.S. because, unlike more affluent communities, Buffalo is strengthening the food system with very few economic resources,” says Raja, who recently wrote about a group of “Rust Belt radicals” who transformed Buffalo into an urban agriculture leader.

The training will be geared toward representatives of poorer Global South countries. “The UB team recognizes that like many local governments in the U.S., planning and development departments in the Global South have limited information on how to use planning tools to strengthen communities’ food systems,” explains Raja.

The workshop is expected to attract policy makers, representatives from the Global Parliament of Mayors, the U.S. Conference of Mayors, grassroots organization members and non-governmental organizations.

Presenters from the UB team include Raja; Alexandra Judelsohn, a UB master of urban planning graduate and Food Lab research associate; Food Lab research assistant Danielle Vazquez, who is also an MBA/master’s in public health student at UB; and Food Lab research collaborators Kimberly Hodgson and Jennifer Whittaker. Hodgson is founder and principal consultant for Cultivating Healthy Places. FAO representatives include head of the delegation as well as staff members.

The idea for the workshop stems from Raja’s participation on an FAO-organized expert panel organized by Jorge Fonseca and Cecilia Marocchino that prepared a response to a draft of the New Urban Agenda. After the group met in New York in May, Raja asked FAO staff if they would be interested in partnering on a training at the conference and Habitat III organizers accepted their proposal.

In addition to Food Lab staff, Camile Brown, an environmental design student in UB’s School of Architecture and Planning, will attend the conference. She received an award from UB’s Community for Global Health Equity to attend Habitat III.

Headquartered in Rome, FAO aims to eradicate hunger, food insecurity and poverty, while advancing sustainable management and utilization of natural resources. The Food Lab is housed in UB’s School of Architecture and Planning.

Habitat II took place in 1996 in Istanbul. Habitat I was held in 1976 in Vancouver.