



POLICY BRIEF | JULY 2021

# THE UN FOOD SYSTEMS SUMMIT: OBSTRUCTING THE TRANSFORMATION OF CORPORATE FOOD SYSTEMS<sup>1</sup>



**FIAN**  
INTERNATIONAL



*The present policy briefing is addressed to governments and aims to raise awareness about the false solutions for food-system transformation promoted by the UN Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) taking place in September 2021.*

*This document includes specific requests governments should make during the summit in order to mitigate the worst possible outcomes and support a genuine transformation of corporate food systems in order to achieve healthy people and a healthy planet.*

## CONTEXTUALIZATION

The world is in the midst of multiple crises: Hunger has been rising continuously since 2014 and currently affect up to 811 million people,<sup>2</sup> the consumption of ultra-processed edible products has triggered a pandemic of obesity and other non-communicable diseases, climate change is adversely affecting the livelihoods of millions of people and biodiversity loss is alarming. **The current food production and distribution model is extremely dysfunctional, and the externalities of this model entail high costs for public systems.**

When the first cases of COVID-19 made headlines a year and a half ago, what started as a public health crisis, quickly turned into a crisis of livelihood and food for many. Governments across the globe adopted drastic measures, which were often applied indiscriminately, leading millions of people to lose their jobs and income – especially day laborers and others working in the informal market. With no, or inadequate, social protection networks in place, these measures pushed a large section of society to the brink of survival. In the wake of the resulting food crisis, the number of those suffering from

hunger has risen drastically by up to 161 million in just over a year.<sup>3</sup>

A wide range of demographics all over the world are calling for greater justice, and the number of protestors is growing. Governments must listen to their people and meet their rightful demands. **Taking people's demands seriously and implementing tangible practices to overcome the crisis would also allow government resources to be used in a much more sustainable, healthy, and just way.**

The UN Food Systems Summit (UNFSS), scheduled for September 2021, is designed to address the current problems plaguing food systems. However, the Summit does not intend to address the COVID-related food crisis, nor the structural causes of unsustainable, unhealthy, and unjust food systems. Instead, the UNFSS aims to create an illusion of change without actually changing anything, that is, the status quo of the industrial, globalized, corporate-controlled food production and distribution model shall remain unchecked.

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<sup>1</sup> With “corporate food systems” we refer to the dominant food systems which are characterized by the agro-industrial model and increasingly globalized value chains and serve the interests of a few powerful countries and large corporations.

<sup>2</sup> Figures from 2020 from FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP & WHO 2021. The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2021: Transforming Food Systems for Food Security and improved nutrition. Rome, FAO.  
<http://www.fao.org/3/cb4474en/online/cb4474en.html>

<sup>3</sup> ibid

# WHY IS THE SUMMIT PROBLEMATIC?

## 1. THE UNFSS IS PROMOTING FALSE SOLUTIONS TO TRANSFORM FOOD SYSTEMS

The Summit may further consolidate current patterns of investment in industrial food systems, global value chains, and market-based solutions, including the fast-tracking of digitalization, high-input agriculture, and (false) technology-driven solutions to sustainability. These so-called “solutions” sideline human and peoples’ rights and pave the way for the co-optation of real transformative pathways such as agroecology. They are capital-intensive and a far cry from attending to the needs and realities of countries

in the Global South. **The solutions pushed in the Summit will exacerbate dependency on global value chains and transnational corporations, and further promote “farming without farmers”, which is the opposite of what countries in the Global South need, which is to recover their autonomy over their food systems and ensure functioning and resilient local food systems that can remain stable in times of crisis.**



## 2. THE UNFSS FAILS TO ADDRESS THE PUBLIC DIMENSION OF FOOD SYSTEMS

**The Summit treats food like a commodity and not as a commons or a human right.** Unfortunately, the UNFSS has a strong corporate bias, which is clearly manifested in the partnership of the UN with the World Economic Forum (WEF) and the announcement of the President of Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) as its Special Envoy.<sup>4</sup>

This situation may further marginalize public institutions and communal organizations in the realms of food and agriculture, even though the COVID-crisis has demonstrated the pressing need

to strengthen public systems and institutions. Moreover, the UNFSS is failing to provide a space for states to discuss how they could improve the fulfillment of their human, environmental, and labor rights’ obligations in terms of adequate regulation of trade, investment, and corporations in the public interest. **Leaving food to the whims of the market only serves to perpetuate and foster the current situation of injustice and health problems, where access to and quality of food depends on purchasing power, and small-scale food production is in danger of extinction.**

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<sup>4</sup> [Letter to UNSG in March 2020.](#)

### 3. THE UNFSS IS NOT FIRMLY ANCHORED IN HUMAN RIGHTS, NOR IN THE RIGHT TO DEVELOPMENT AND SELF - DETERMINATION

**The UNFSS creates an illusion of inclusiveness, yet it remains unclear how and by whom decisions are made.** The UNFSS organizers have deliberately sidelined existing mechanisms of participation, failing to respect the autonomy and self-determination of civil society and Indigenous Peoples, while preferring to handpick civil society participants without clear and transparent criteria for their selection.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, the Summit preparatory process has not put the people most affected by hunger, malnutrition, and ecological destruction at its center; nor has it prioritized the right to development and self-determination, particularly of the Least Developed Countries. **Instead, a handful of governments from the North, business associations representing the interests of transnational corporations, philanthropies and international NGOs promoting corporate interests dominate the proceedings of the Summit.**



### 4. THE UNFSS IMPOSES MULTISTAKEHOLDER GOVERNANCE AS THE PATH FORWARD

The Summit is not an extension of a member-state decision as previous World Food Summits have, and although the name “Summit” is usually devoted to intergovernmental meetings, only a handful of national governments are part of its Advisory Committee. Instead, the UNFSS follows a strongly multi-stakeholder approach, which puts governments, corporations, other private sector actors, philanthropies, scientists, and international NGOs on equal footing.<sup>6</sup>

**The failure to recognize the structural determinants of the current crises paves the way for underestimating governance reforms, which are necessary to ensure democratic accountability**

**(including corporate liability) and safeguard public policy making spaces from the undue influence of corporations.** It is also important to note that the Summit strongly promotes voluntarism and multi-stakeholder coalitions of action. This attitude legitimizes the corporate sector as part of the solution, when it is actually responsible for many problems; while it also impedes adopting binding regulations for transnational corporations and increasing accountability for powerful states. **It is particularly concerning that multistakeholder forms of governance are marginalizing the Least Developed Countries in international decision-making.**

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<sup>5</sup> For a more in-depth analysis of the problems of the Summit, please consult the analysis paper of the CSM [“What is wrong with the UNFSS”](#).

<sup>6</sup> For more information on why we consider multistakeholder initiatives dangerous, see this [Briefing note on Multistakeholder Initiatives](#).



## WHY THIS STRONG FOCUS ON “FOOD SYSTEMS”? WHAT HAPPENED TO FOOD SECURITY AND TO THE RIGHT TO FOOD? WHERE IS FOOD SOVEREIGNTY?

The concept of food systems has become omnipresent in the discourse about food security and nutrition and the UNFSS is further amplifying its use. However, its widespread use is notable for its lack of clarity as to its exact meaning,<sup>7</sup> while at the same time it is taken for granted that we are all referring to the same thing. Firstly, the framework of food systems may represent a paradigm shift that moves beyond agricultural productivism and market-based solutions, towards holistic policies and practices that reclaim food systems as public goods. **However, the mainstream approach to food systems, which is central to the Summit, is based on the interests of corporate food systems.**

Faced with this confusion of terminology, it is important to clarify that the definition of a food system is, first and foremost, descriptive. Broadly speaking, it describes how food is produced, distributed, consumed, and disposed of in a certain

area, and the impacts and drivers these activities have. But it does not entail a direction for changing food systems, it is not normative.

Food security is the formerly core concept that has been sidelined by the food-systems discourse. Food security is normative, but it does not necessarily include instruments of accountability and enforceability.

**The clearest instrument is the human right to adequate food and nutrition (RTFN), which entails state obligations and provides a prescriptive framework for food-systems transformation.<sup>8</sup>**

**The concept of food sovereignty is also key when talking about prescriptive direction for food-systems transformation.** It emphasizes democratic control over food systems and tackles root causes of hunger and malnutrition, putting the issue of power at the forefront.

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<sup>7</sup> The only place where the food-systems paradigm was discussed internationally is in the Voluntary Guidelines on food systems and nutrition (VGFSyN) that were adopted in February 2021 by the CFS. However, the VGFSyN fell far short of expectations as the first negotiated document capable of guiding food system transformation and were therefore [not endorsed by the CSM](#). The negotiations of the VGFSyN have clearly shown that most powerful member states do not want to let the food-systems paradigm unveil its full potential.

<sup>8</sup> The international community of states formally recognized the RtFN in article 25(1) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, and then in the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (art. 11) as part of the right to an adequate standard of living. The precise content of this right and corresponding states' obligations were subsequently spelled out in General Comment No. 12 of the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) (1999), and then later with more detail in the FAO Right to Food Guidelines of 2004.

# REQUESTS TO GOVERNMENTS: HOW TO ADVANCE A HOLISTIC UNDERSTANDING OF FOOD SYSTEMS BASED ON THE RIGHT TO ADEQUATE FOOD AND NUTRITION AND ON FOOD SOVEREIGNTY TO MAKE REAL TRANSFORMATION HAPPENING?

## 1. PROMOTING REAL TRANSFORMATION : STRENGTHENING LOCAL, RESILIENT, AGROECOLOGICAL FOOD SYSTEMS

Localized food systems based on the recognition of the positive contributions of small-scale food producers and that food and agricultural workers are the ones that preserve and regenerate the environment, protect and increase biodiversity, strengthen sustainable smallholder food production and preserve traditional knowledge and allow for dialogue (or co-creation) of knowledge.

**Support for agroecology, as understood as practice, knowledge and movement, are fundamental as it plays a major role in ensuring the resilience of local food systems and promoting food sovereignty.** At the same time, trade, agricultural inputs, and relevant markets need to be regulated to ensure that they do not undermine the capacities and health of local food providers and local food systems more broadly.

## 2. PUBLIC INTEREST FIRST! RECOGNIZE FOOD SYSTEMS AS MATTER OF PUBLIC INTEREST AND FOOD AS A COMMONS

A holistic food systems approach recognizes the complex interrelated dynamic of food systems with other sectors (health, agriculture, environment, politics, culture) and systems (such as ecosystems, economic systems, socio-cultural systems, energy systems, and health systems) and thus, that food systems combine and can serve multiple public objectives such as the protection and regeneration of nature, health and well-being, protection of labor and livelihoods, culture and knowledge, and social relations.

**In this regard, food systems offer a critical entry point for public policies and investment, wherein public interest must be protected over private.** This also means that the transformation of food systems requires coordination among different policy domains and must tackle structural drivers such as power imbalances and undemocratic governance. Food should be considered an essential resource that requires management as a social mandate to guarantee the right to adequate food for all – as a commons. **Therefore, public institutions and communal organizations must be strengthened, and corporate power dismantled, and corporations and financial capital must be regulated.**



### 3. PUT THE HOLISTIC UNDERSTANDING OF THE RIGHT TO ADEQUATE FOOD AND NUTRITION (RTFN) AT THE HEART OF A REAL TRANSFORMATIVE FOOD SYSTEMS APPROACH

The holistic understanding of the RTFN goes beyond the food security perspective and entails the following key elements:

- **Indivisibility of human rights** as guiding principle
- **Special attention to women's rights and gender equality**
- **Putting food sovereignty at the core of transformation**, which asserts the rights of peoples, nations, and states to democratically define their own food, agriculture, livestock, and fisheries systems, and to develop policies guiding how food is produced, distributed, and consumed
- **Holistic approach to nutrition beyond the mere consumption of food**, understanding nutritional wellbeing as connected to the social dimensions of eating practices and to the health of the soil and the planet as a whole
- **Recognition and implementation of extraterritorial state obligations**, especially the obligation to regulate domestic corporations to comply with human rights abroad and cooperation among governments to ensure human rights are guaranteed



### 4. STOP MULTISTAKEHOLDERISM! CLARIFICATION OF ROLES AND IMPLEMENTATION OF ROBUST SAFEGUARDS AGAINST CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

**UN agencies must receive adequate funding so that they can function independently. They must be democratized, to ensure meaningful participation of rights holders. The human rights approach also entails clarifying roles within food systems:** states need to adopt policy frameworks that clearly distinguish between and ensure appropriate roles for different actors in public policy making and program implementation (rights holders and duty bearers) and to ensure the meaningful participation of those most affected by hunger and malnutrition in public decision-making and program implementation.

**They also need to adopt robust safeguards to protect against conflicts of interest resulting from inappropriate relationships with and influence of the corporate sector.** States are to ensure transparency in their actions and put clear frameworks and mechanisms in place through which they can be held accountable by their people for decisions and actions they take in relation to food systems. **At the same time, they should establish clear regulations and accountability frameworks for holding private actors, including corporations, accountable for actions that undermine human rights.**

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