

The UN Food Systems Summit – the wrong way to respond to the global food crisis

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The COVID-19 pandemic and its related crisis of public systems have pushed millions of people to the brink of survival. With the number of those suffering from hunger increasing by up to 161 million from 2019 to 2020 – amounting to 811 million people globally¹ - the pandemic resulted in an exacerbation of pre-existing inequalities.

The increasing corporate capture of food systems is the main machinery to expand the dominant model based on the industrialization of agriculture and food production and distribution. This model demolishes our populations and planet through existential threats, including the climate crisis, deforestation, loss of biodiversity, land degradation, water pollution and countless human rights violations. It has been at the core of triggering zoonotic diseases such as COVID-19, while also making people sick with conditions that increase the risk of severe COVID-19 related

infections and deaths.

On the other hand, the pandemic has shown the resilience of the community-based, localized and diverse food systems, despite their being under constant attack by the dominant industrialized and globalized food system.

It is in this context of crisis and tension between two alternative views of food and food systems that the United Nations is holding a Food Systems Summit (UNFSS). Scheduled to be held in September 2021 during the UN General Assembly meeting in New York, the UNFSS is supposed to address the current problems plaguing food systems. However, this Summit does not intend to address the COVID-related food crisis, nor the structural causes of unsustainable, unhealthy, and unjust food systems. Instead, it is pushing for an agenda that will not help to overcome current shortcomings of the globalized food system but deepen its problems.

Since the Summit's announcement in December 2019, it has received backlash from over 550 civil society organizations due to close ties of the summit organization

with corporate actors, especially through the partnership of the UN with the World Economic Forum (WEF) and the announcement of the president of the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) as its Special Envoy.

The UNFSS follows a strong multi-stakeholder approach, which puts on equal footing governments, corporations, other private sector actors, philanthropies, scientists and international NGOs. While Summit organizers aim to create an illusion of inclusiveness, it remains unclear who is in control of taking decisions and by what procedures decisions are made, creating serious problems of accountability, legitimacy and democratic decision-making at the UN. Moreover, the announcement of the Summit was conveyed by the UN Secretary-General instead of being agreed through intergovernmental processes as done by previous Summits. This creates a dangerous precedent in the United Nations, giving corporations a special entry point to global food governance without clear rules, and sidelining existing democratic multilateral and human rights-based bodies such as the Committee on World Food Security (CFS).

1 FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO (2021): The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2021: Transforming Food Systems for Food Security and improved nutrition. Rome: FAO.

One of the concrete outcomes of the summit are the so-called ‘coalitions of actions’, which are multi-stakeholder coalitions around a specific set of goals upon which governments, foundations, NGOs and business associations agreed.

However, the definition of those concrete actions is not based on a deliberation process in the hand of UN Member States, but rather exemplifies the risks of multi-stakeholderism. The processes to define those actions lack transparency, while they also appear to bypass the existing power imbalances when inviting ‘everyone to sit at the table’. These are evident features of processes and related emerging ‘concrete actions’ that will continue to value the voices of the most powerful over the voices of those most marginalized.

It is still unclear what the official final outcome of the Summit will be, and how this will be achieved. In particular, no intergovernmental negotiation process seems to be foreseen for this final outcome document, putting in serious question whether the Summit results can be sufficiently legitimate for them to be infused within the existing global food governance mechanisms.

What seems to be the Summit follow-up processes might also have severe implications on the governance ecosystems as the architecture of the Summit preparations may encroach, displace and undermine existing legitimate

intergovernmental institutions. Instead, to preserve multilateralism and democratic governance within the UN itself, the UNFSS’ outcomes should be framed in the same terms as its inception, namely a Secretary- General’s statement only.

These illegitimate mechanisms enable and accelerate the validation of content within the Summit that put forward solutions which clearly serve corporate interests. These are based on a biased problem analysis which ignores both the structural determinants of hunger, climate crisis and inequality, and the solutions from the ground that already exist.

Consequently, the Summit focuses on ‘solutions’ that are mainly technological, market-based and capital-intensive such as digitalization and high-input agriculture. These will exacerbate dependency on global value chains and transnational corporations and further promote ‘farming without farmers’ while also pushing for further financialization of nature, associated with land grabbing and displacement of populations. For instance, Bayer, Syngenta and the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD) – an international organization with more than 200 companies working on sustainable development – propose a set of “opportunities to invest in soil”,²

reducing soil to a monetary value as a carbon sink.

The Summit’s agenda further confuses the real transformative pathway of agro-ecology with the greenwashing of corporations such as through nature-based solutions or sustainable intensification while failing to address social and political dimensions for transformation. It treats food as a commodity and not as a human right and part of the commons, leading to solutions that might further marginalize public institutions and communal organizations even though the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the pressing need to strengthen public systems and institutions.

From a transversal analysis of both process and content, criticism of the UNFSS have been expanding and results, today, in an opposition to it as being a “train going into the wrong direction”. Social movements and civil society organisations articulated through the Autonomous People’s Response to the UN Food Systems Summit have organized therefore online and in-presence counter-mobilizations all over the world to denounce the corporate food systems agenda promoted by the UNFSS, but also to defend the work done over the past 70 years to build a multilateral, democratic and civic space for human

² https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/unfss_at3_synthesis_propositions_round1.pdf

rights that is the United Nations.³ Under the struggle for a real transformation of the food system based on human rights, food sovereignty and agroecology, the food justice movement, together with the health and climate justice advocates, among others, are uniting in solidarity and globally to resist the advancement of corporate capture within the United Nations.

3 The counter-mobilizations took place from 25 to 28 July 2021 online, but also counting recordings of presential protests at national level to denounce corporate food systems. The programme and recordings of the events can be accessed here: <https://www.foodsystems4people.org>