

Policy Brief on the upcoming Food Systems Summit and its implications

Liaison Group of the People's Autonomous Response to the UN Food Systems Summit
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Observations on a failing Summit

Deep concerns about the UN Secretary General's Food Systems Summit have been expressed during the past months by an ever-increasing number of actors from civil society, small-scale food producers' and workers' organizations, indigenous peoples, women, youth, governments, academia, UN, and people outside and inside the Summit process.

Despite claims by the organizers that this is a People's Summit, the event and the convoluted, corporate-friendly processes leading up to it, fail the People. They completely fail to address the most important drivers of growing world hunger and climate crises, especially COVID-19, industrial agriculture, and corporate concentration in food systems. With its narrow focus on finance, corporate technologies and innovation as solutions, the summit is poised to exacerbate a huge range of structural problems such as intellectual property rights in seeds and knowledge, data grabbing and land grabbing, especially in the global south.

The Summit is also failing Member States: The corporate dominated *multistakeholderism* concept that has been applied to the organization of the Summit, and that risks being prolonged in its follow-up, fail to recognize that the UN Member States – who derive their legitimacy from the people - are the decision-makers in the United Nations. If Member States lose control over what is under their responsibility as duty bearers, they can - and should - withdraw their confidence in and support for the Summit.

It is clear that some governments, especially from OECD countries, together with some corporate networks and philanthropies, have wielded strong influence on the Summit process and content, while most governments and social actors have not. This deepens already existing power imbalances in the UN system, undermines trust and conditions for consensus, and represents a step back in building international cooperation.

We cannot afford a UN System that does not ensure the primacy of public interest before corporate interest, or that first serves the agendas of wealthy nations, and donors. The world needs a strengthened UN to address the multiple crises of our times, with a robust agenda to defend the marginalized against the powerful, and those affected by discrimination against the drivers of discrimination.

Crucially, we cannot accept a Summit that fails human rights: A non-normative UN Secretary General's event cannot undermine existing human rights norms, instruments, and human rights-based institutions. Critiques on the weak human rights grounding of the Summit have been expressed eloquently and frequently by many actors from inside and outside the Summit process throughout the process, but have been consistently ignored.

The world does not need a Summit that undermines the hard-fought achievements of inclusive global food governance, such as the UN Committee on World Food Security and its High-Level Panel of Experts. The fact that the CFS and HLPE have had to be defended from the very beginning against the Summit is a telling indicator of the problematic set-up of the Summit.

The follow up-proposals presented in the latest draft Statement of Action of the UN Secretary General confirm the fears expressed by many during the last two years: the corporate-driven redesign of global food systems governance is taking shape, and it is shameful that such an

implosion of inclusive multilateralism is promoted from the highest offices of the UN, without any intergovernmental deliberation and mandate.

The implications of the UN FSS follow-up on the existing Global Food Governance Architecture

The description of follow-up plans in the latest draft of the UN Secretary General's (UNSG) Statement of Action (14 September) is deeply worrying, as is the [public statement](#) by FAO Director General (15 September) on how the FAO intends to follow up on the Food System Summit.

The UNSG does not have a mandate to establish follow up mechanisms for this Summit. Member States are the decision makers in the UN system. Member States did not request or agree to put these new structures and mechanisms in place.

We do not recognize the multistakeholder national food systems pathways without emphasis on the differentiated responsibilities. Most of the Summit's national and independent dialogues largely excluded the groups most affected by hunger and malnutrition, and key food system actors such as small-scale food producers and workers. Most dialogues were as opaque as the whole Summit.

Further, the FSS organizers - the Deputy Secretary General (DSG) in particular – committed to not creating new structures. Yet the announcement that the Rome-based Agencies - FAO, IFAD, WFP - will jointly lead a “coordination hub” that draws on wider UN system capacities to support follow-up to the Food Systems Summit, points to significantly altering the existing global governance of food and agriculture with far reaching implications. This Rome based hub and a newly established “Advisory Group” are supposed to strengthen linkages to other priority global and intergovernmental processes relating for example to the Environment, Climate, Food Security, Health and Nutrition, as well as key intergovernmental fora such as the High-level Political Forum (HLPF), and Financing for Development Forum.

Such a change in the existing governance architecture without any intergovernmental deliberation and mandate is completely illegitimate and unacceptable.

Such a “coordination hub” and its newly created “Advisory Group” would encroach into the functions of the CFS, which is precisely the UN Committee mandated to ensure inclusive policy development, coherence, coordination, and convergence across the UN systems on issues of food security and nutrition.

This proposal of change in global food governance architecture bypasses Member States and the CFS, and has the potential to destroy the CFS and its unique mandate and processes. The UNSG as well as the heads of the Rome-based agencies, if they support such suggestions, are clearly acting outside their mandates.

Third, there is no need to conduct a global stock-taking in two years to review progress in implementing the outcomes of a Summit which did not have the mandate to make any formal commitments.

The public statement released by the DG of FAO is also quite alarming. FAO is unduly diverging from its mandate in the direction of a corporate-driven agenda very much aligned with the FSS agenda. Prioritizing technology, innovation and data will clearly fail its mandate that is grounded in attaining the right to food for all, and redirect financing towards corporate private sector at the cost of public programmes. As a UN agency, FAO is bound by the international human rights framework, and must serve public interest and give centrality to

the weakest – yet essential – actors of food systems: small-scale food producers and workers.

Proposals going ahead

- 1) Based on these reflections, we call on Member States to consider the possibility to express their disagreement with the UN SG draft Statement of Action on the FSS. Content-wise, it does not guide us to the transformation towards just, inclusive, and sustainable food systems that we need. It reflects a process that did not meet the basic requirements of legitimate, intergovernmental, and transparent UN procedures. Regarding implementation and follow-up, it undermines the mandates and roles of the most important inclusive intergovernmental and international platform of global food governance, the CFS, and the most innovative Science Policy Interface in this field, the HLPE.
- 2) We believe that the upcoming Plenary of the CFS must become the place for a bold, open, honest - and even controversial - debate about the Summit process. A participatory, collective assessment of the Summit by all relevant actors, members, and participants in the CFS, can illuminate how this Food System Summit has generated so much friction, fragmentation and frustration. This debate should not be led by a moderator who has been serving or supporting the Food Systems Summit. The moderation must be independent, fair and unbiased. It should allow for an interactive discussion, with speaking time duly allocated to all Member States and categories of participants.
- 3) We call upon Member States to promote such open and honest debates throughout the entire UN system, including the governing bodies of the Rome-based agencies and the relevant bodies in New York. We urge Member States to adopt robust safeguards against conflicts of interests in the CFS, FAO, IFAP, WFP, CGIAR (and the entire UN). Corporations and their front groups and networks must not participate in public policy making. Moreover, we urge Member States to develop and adopt robust corporate accountability legal frameworks in food governance. Corporate impunity must stop.
- 4) We need to strengthen and further democratize the United Nations, our public institutions and food systems, and defend them against corporate capture. We count on Member States to take seriously their roles and responsibilities, and to fulfill their obligations to the people of the world in both letter and spirit. You as governments and we as rights holders and societies must join hands and work together, to ensure that we do not continue to fail the people and the planet.

For more information: <https://www.foodsystems4people.org/>