

Open Call for Engagement to Respond to the UN Food Systems Summit

The call is promoted by the Peoples and organizations participating in the Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples' Mechanism for the Relations with the CFS

(October 2020)

This call is an open invitation to join a process of building joint strategies around essential issues for the life and wellbeing of our Peoples and communities: food, health, nature, people's sovereignty, and economic, social, gender and climate justice. It is a call launched by Indigenous Peoples, social movements and grassroots organizations of small-scale food producers, peasants and family farmers, pastoralists, fisherfolks, food and agricultural workers, landless, women, youth, consumers and urban food insecure and other civil society organizations (CSOs) who have been fighting for decades to protect food sovereignty and defend food as a fundamental human right .

At the current juncture, the need to radically transform unhealthy, unjust and unsustainable food systems towards food systems shaped around agroecology and human and Peoples' rights is even more urgent. The UN Secretary General called for a UN Food Systems Summit (FSS) though its genesis, political framing and governance do not correspond to the rights-based, legitimate and inclusive multilateral policy process that would be required to justify such a name. These concerns have been articulated and expressed in a [formal letter co-signed by several hundred organizations](#). While pretending to address the challenges that unsustainable food systems pose to climate and biodiversity, the Summit may instead promote the increasing corporate capture of the intersection of food and climate policy-making and advance the interests of corporations and finance capital. This Summit is structurally and systemically linked to the well-articulated corporate strategies to deny rights, appropriate resources and capture democratic spaces which Indigenous Peoples', social movements, unions and campaigns all over the world have been combatting.

This call invites other movements, networks and organization, either directly concerned with food and its many dimensions or engaged in all interrelated domains of our lives, to join forces into a collective process to challenge the FSS. We believe it is important to organize ourselves on our own independently from the Summit and create our autonomous space to deepen our analyses, articulate our proposals and mobilize for our solutions.

If your network/organization is willing to join this convergence and movement-building process, **please express your interest at the following link**. Should you like any additional information to consider your participation, please do not hesitate to contact us at the following email address: call4actionfss@gmail.com.

What are the problems that we are facing?

The number of hungry and malnourished people is on the rise worldwide. The COVID-19 crisis has exposed how industrial and increasingly globalized food systems are significantly contributing to ecological destruction and the emergence of zoonotic diseases, as well as increasing the vulnerability to infections due to unhealthy food and living environments. In some countries, governmental measures to contain the pandemic are resulting in unprecedented loss of livelihoods and jobs for fisherfolk, Indigenous Peoples, workers throughout food systems, migrants, peasants and pastoralists, affecting working-class consumers and weighing disproportionately on women. COVID-19 has shown to the whole world the depth of the structural inequalities, discrimination, exploitation, racism and sexism prevalent in our societies.

Despite the increasing recognition that industrial food systems are failing on so many fronts, agribusiness and food corporations are trying to maintain control. On the one hand, they are coopting our language: the World Economic Forum is also calling for a transformation of food systems, while the FSS is portrayed as a “people’s summit”. On the other hand, they are deploying digitalization, artificial intelligence and other information and communication technologies to promote a new wave of resource grabbing, wealth extraction and labor exploitation; and to re-structure food systems towards greater concentration of power and even-more globalized value chains. In this respect, it is important to note that these structural challenges and corporate capture attempts are not unique to the food domain, but they equally characterize in the fields of health, environment, climate and energy, social services, economic governance and many more. However, many movements have confronted apparently different but actually common challenges in a fragmented manner. This process might offer an opportunity to connect some of our struggles.

Who is launching this call?

This Open Call is launched by organizations of those most affected by hunger, malnutrition and ecological destruction: Indigenous Peoples, workers, landless people, fisherfolk, peasants and family farmers, pastoralists, urban food insecure people, consumers, youth and women in these constituencies. Small-scale food producers organized in the International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty (IPC) have been asserting their rights to organize autonomously and to speak for themselves since they presented their vision of food sovereignty at the World Food Summit in 1996. Democratizing food policy making and strengthening food sovereignty is a central element of this vision and shaped the reform of the UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS) in 2009. The CFS, the foremost inclusive international and intergovernmental platform on food security and nutrition with a clear mandate to achieve the progressive realization of the right to adequate food, recognized the principles of self-organization and autonomy of civil society organizations. On that basis, the Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples’ Mechanism (CSM) for relations with the CFS was formally established. The CSM gives priority to the organizations and movements of those most affected by food insecurity and malnutrition and recognizes that small-scale food producers are the most important contributors to food security and nutrition worldwide. It respects pluralism, autonomy, diversity and self-organization and strives to ensure balance of age groups, genders, constituencies and regions. Peoples and organizations participating in the CSM are launching this call.

What is our vision to transform industrial food systems?

After more than 20 years of collective work the initiators of this call have developed a vision to radically transform industrial food systems, which we invite you to reinforce and further enrich.

Food as a fundamental right rather than a commodity

Food is the expression of values, cultures, social and ecological relations, and community’s self-determination. The act of feeding oneself and others embodies our sovereignty and autonomy. When nourishing ourselves and eating with our family, friends, and community, we reaffirm our cultural identities, interdependence with nature, control of our life course and human dignity. Food is not a commodity but a human right, intrinsically linked to all human rights and many dimensions of our lives.

Food Sovereignty

The vision of food sovereignty asserts the rights of Peoples, nations and states to define their own food, agriculture, livestock and fisheries systems, and to develop policies on how food is produced, distributed and consumed in order to provide everyone with diverse, affordable, nutritious, healthy and culturally appropriate food. It emphasizes the democratic control and management of natural resources and local development, ecologically sound and sustainable production methods, and social

and gender justice. It is a vision rooted in action that invites peoples to exercise their agency and capacity to organize and improve their conditions and societies together, as well as their ability to regain self-reliance and assert food autonomy. As such, it represents the widest framework for exercising the right to food and nutrition and connected human rights (such as the right to health and the rights of women, workers, Indigenous Peoples, Peasants and other people working in rural areas).

Agroecology

Food sovereignty offers concrete proposals to be put into practice for systemic change across the food system. Most prominently among them is agroecology. Agroecology is a way of producing food, a way of life, a science, and a movement for change encompassing socio-economic, socio-political, and biological/ecological and cultural dimensions. It is based on principles that may be similar across the diversity of communities and their territories, but are practiced in many different ways, depending on local realities and cultures, while always respecting nature and common, shared values. While agroecology embraces ancestral production systems developed over millennia by small-scale food producers and consumers, it is a living concept that continues to evolve as it is adapted to diverse realities. It provides a holistic understanding of our place in natural cycles, and how food systems must adapt to and restore the biocultural systems on which they depend. Agroecology goes well beyond agricultural production to embrace the entire food system, and calls for paradigm shifts on multiple fronts, including in research, distribution, consumption and policy-making.

Food systems

The notion of food systems offers the opportunity for a paradigm shift to a holistic, systemic approach that moves beyond agricultural productivism and reclaims food systems as public goods that cannot be left to market-based solutions only: not only they require full peoples' participation and sovereignty, but also place the wellbeing of people and the planet at the center. The rights of all workers throughout food systems to a safe workplace, to potable water and decent sanitation and housing, to form unions and bargain collectively, to health care and social security protection must be respected. We understand food systems as webs of actors, natural resources, processes, and relationships involved in gathering, fishing, growing, hunting, herding, processing, distributing, preparing (cooking, feeding, caring), consuming and disposing of foods. A holistic food systems approach is concerned with how these processes interact with one another, and how ecological, social, cultural, political and economic contexts constantly shape and re-shape food systems, whilst recognizing the particular role of power, gender and generational relationships. It also recognizes the complex interrelatedness 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). Food systems hence need to be understood in their multidimensionality and circularity, because they combine and can serve multiple public objectives such as the protection and regeneration of nature, health and well-being, protection of labour and livelihoods, culture and knowledge, and social relations.

Governance of food systems

Transformation of food systems is not possible without transforming the governance of food systems. This transformation has to be shaped by the following principles, which are equally applicable to other spheres of governance:

- Centrality of human rights holders;
- Gender equality and the rights of women;
- Autonomy, self-governance and self-determination of local communities, grassroots social movements and their organizations, and Indigenous Peoples;

- Strengthening of institutions shaping territorial food systems, in particular customary institutions, different forms of self-government, collective forms of managing lands and territories, social forms of accountability and intergenerational responsibility;
- Democratization of decision-making, strengthening legitimate public institutions at all levels, including the adoption of robust safeguards against conflict of interest and corporate capture;
- Rooting governance in public interest and well-being, and liberating it from the imperatives of economic growth, resource extraction and power of financial capital and transnational corporations;
- Primacy of human rights over trade, investment and finance; and,
- Strengthening of accountable multilateral regional and international institutions with mandates rooted in human rights obligations.

Our critique to the Food Systems Summit (FSS)

We believe that the Summit is not building on the legacy of past World Food Summits, which resulted in the creation of innovative, inclusive and participatory global food governance mechanisms such as the CFS. The FSS follows a strong multi-stakeholder approach, which puts on equal footing governments, corporations, other private sector actors, philanthropies, scientists, and international NGOs. While FSS 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. As the participation of Indigenous Peoples and civil society organizations is concerned, the FSS secretariat has deliberately decided to not go through existing platforms but rather handpicked those invited to participate in the advisory committee, champions' group, action track working groups and other bodies without clear and transparent criteria for their selection and with no consideration with well-established principles of self-determination in defining civil society participation. The fact that the current President of the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) is leading the process of organizing the Summit presents clear conflicts of interest with regards to the stated purposes of the process. Thus the genesis, political framing and lead players of the FSS could hardly be further away from our collective understanding of how to advance a human rights-based, legitimate and inclusive multilateral policy process which would respect the autonomy and self-organization of small-scale food producers, civil society and Indigenous Peoples. These concerns have been articulated and expressed in a [collective letter co-signed by nearly 550 organizations](#), which remains unanswered until today. Since then, the FSS Secretariat has sought to whitewash the narrative of the initiative, while keeping its core elements intact. The recently announced composition of the Advisory Committee and Scientific Group – featuring people who are well-known for being the architects and main proponents of the 'modernization' and industrialization of food, not to mention the several cases that may present evident conflicts of interest – shows clearly that the FSS proponents are worried about the transformative potential of the food systems framework. We are deeply concerned that their intent might possibly be that of using the FSS process and the legitimacy of the UN multilateral system to capture and distort the notion of food systems in order to further entrench the existing *status quo* and its deeply rooted political economies.

Our way forward to challenge the FSS

Against this background, we invite other movements, networks and organizations which are concerned with food and its multiple connections with other essential domains of our lives, and are denouncing corporations' efforts to undermine human rights, disrupt territories and communities, and capture legitimate democratic spaces for private interests, to join us in building a collective process to challenge the FSS. We hope that other small-scale food producers' organizations, social movements, feminists movements, youth movements, climate justice movements, trade and workers' unions, Indigenous Peoples, migrant organizations, grassroots organizations and other civil society

organizations would want to join us in this struggle. The intention is to build convergence between efforts focused on responding to the threats posed by the Food Systems Summit and other processes targeting global policy spaces which are equally threatened by corporate capture and the destructive attacks of populist nationalism.

There is no predetermined format for the range of potential actions and we look forward to imagining together old and new forms of mobilization, campaigning and advocacy. We are well aware that the pandemic forced grassroots organizations to prioritize the local/national political agenda and that it continues to be difficult to meet and organize for large international gatherings. However, we believe that this could also provide us with a good opportunity to decentralize campaign building efforts, which might help us reaching more organizations, networks and movements.

While this call will remain open overtime so that others may decide to join us at a later stage, we would invite initial expressions of interest by October 28. A virtual planning meeting will then be organized in early November.

The possible roadmap for future actions, with a timeframe spanning the next 12-14 months, needs to be shaped together in our collective planning. However, first steps might include the identification of key topics around which we want to structure our conversation and the organization of a series of online dialogues.