

# What is wrong with the Food Systems Summit (FSS)?



The global community pledged, through Agenda 2030, to end hunger and poverty on earth over the next ten years. Yet, the number of hungry and malnourished people is on the rise worldwide. Decades of free-market neoliberalism have caused rising poverty and inequality, resource grabbing as well as environmental, economic and social injustice. 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 peoples' vulnerability to infections and disease 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, migrants, peasants and pastoralists, affecting working-class consumers and weighing disproportionately on women.

COVID-19 is a crushing blow for vulnerable and marginalised communities. The pandemic has shown to the whole world the depth of the structural inequalities, discrimination, exploitation, racism and sexism prevalent in our societies. Yet, extensive corporate capture of policy spaces often prevents adequate regulatory efforts to tackle the root causes of this marginalization and discrimination. These structural challenges and corporate capture attempts are not limited to the food domain. They also characterize the fields of health, environment, climate, energy, social services, economic governance and virtually every aspect of our lives.

In this context, food systems provide a double dividend: not only are they fundamental to ensure food sovereignty and the realization of the right to adequate food, but they also embody communities' relations with their ecologies. They are critical spaces where social relations and knowledge are shaped. They are the cornerstone of domestic economies and the key locus where large segments of populations derive their livelihoods. However, rather than recognizing that food systems are a critical space for public policies and investments, most governments have abdicated their responsibilities and regulatory functions in favour of market-based mechanisms.

It is more urgent than ever to radically transform unhealthy, unjust and unsustainable food systems towards food sovereignty shaped by agroecological principles and based on human and Peoples' rights (where the latter refers to the inalienable rights of Indigenous Peoples), is more urgent than ever. Meeting this challenge requires the convergence of different struggles to build joint strategies to protect the life and wellbeing of our Peoples and communities, especially regarding to food, health, nature, and economic, social, gender, environmental and climate justice. It also calls for movements to confront political spaces of decision-making and representation, including the United Nations (UN), defending them from corporate capture and demanding their democratization.

It is within this broader context that we want to analyze the

organization and implications of the Food Systems Summit. This input paper intends to contribute to building a shared understanding of what is wrong with the FSS and what, instead, is needed to advance an agenda for systemic change. We see three main problems with the FSS:

- It is grounded neither in human and Peoples' rights nor in system change for justice;
- It is dominated by corporate interests;
- It aims at replacing (international) public institutions with multi-stakeholder platforms.

Instead, what we need is:

- Solutions for the multiple crisis based on people's proposals from below;
- Dismantling corporate power and regulating corporations and financial capital;
- Democratizing and reclaiming public institutions.

## 1. The Summit is not grounded in human and Peoples' rights

The FSS lacks a coherent and comprehensive human and Peoples' rights approach. It refers to the right to food in one of its action tracks<sup>1</sup> but this reference is marginal. The rights of women, Indigenous Peoples, workers, peasants, pastoralists, the landless, small-scale family farmers, fisherfolk, urban food insecure, consumers, youth and future generations are clearly not at the centre of this Summit.

Instead, the FSS conflates human and peoples' rights holders with stakeholders, putting all actors on the same footing regardless of their very different nature and role. The FSS decision-making structure is opaque and clearly lacks accountability mechanisms. It obscures the fact that states are duty bearers under their human and Peoples' rights obligations. Furthermore, the FSS does not respect the autonomy and self-determination of civil society and Indigenous Peoples, since it deliberately ignores their existing platforms and prefers to handpick civil society participants without clear and transparent criteria for their selection. This goes against the well-established principle of self-determination in defining civil society participation. Finally, there is marginal involvement of key UN bodies that ought to play a key role in the transformation of food systems, such as the UN Human Rights system, the bodies promoting Indigenous Peoples' rights, and international institutions with strong rights-based approaches such as the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) and the International Labour

<sup>1</sup> In the lead up to the Summit, the FSS will follow these so-called action tracks: Ensuring access to safe and nutritious food; shifting to sustainable consumption patterns; boosting nature-positive production; advancing equitable livelihoods; and building resilience.

Organisation (ILO).

*What are the threats of not having a FSS grounded in human and Peoples' rights?*

- Further exclusion of marginalized communities, which could result in a reduction of political participation and the exercise of self-determination at international and national levels;
- Division, polarization and co-optation of civil society actors, including the attempted co-optation of the youth constituency and 'voice'; and,
- Further weakening, marginalization and de-legitimization of multilateralism as embodied in the UN Human Rights system and international bodies with a strong rights-based approach (CFS, ILO).

## 2. The Summit does not embrace the urgency of deep system change for justice

Between 83 and 180 million more people could be pushed into hunger because of the pandemic, raising the overall number of food insecure to over 2 billion. Bold actions are required to reverse this trend. Promoting food as a commodity is not an option, given the catastrophic impact of industrial agriculture and livestock on people and ecosystems. Food sovereignty is the only solution to this crisis.

However, many of those challenging the FSS with the language of food sovereignty feel like they are talking to a brick wall. The FSS process, while co-opting the transformation narrative, seems to be primarily concerned with maintaining and deepening the roots of the status quo and further advancing current trends of technology driven food system development, digitalization and financialization.

Quite the opposite of the FSS narrative, the notion of food systems actually offers the opportunity for a paradigm shift to a holistic, systemic approach that reclaims food systems as public goods that cannot be left to the free market and its productivist agenda. They require full peoples' participation and sovereignty and place the wellbeing of people and the planet at the centre. 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. It appreciates how ecological, social, cultural, political and economic contexts constantly shape and re-shape food systems, whilst recognizing the role of power, gender and generational relationships. Such a definition 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 multi-dimensionality and circularity, because they combine and serve multiple public objectives such as the protection and regeneration of nature, health and wellbeing as well as the defense of labour and livelihoods, culture and knowledge, and social relations.

Such an understanding of food systems could unlock the full potential of the vision of food sovereignty, which asserts the rights of Peoples, nations and states to define their own food, agriculture, livestock and fisheries systems, and to develop policies guiding how food is produced, distributed and consumed in order to provide everyone with diverse, affordable, nutritious, healthy and culturally appropriate food. Food sovereignty offers concrete proposals to be put into practice for systemic change across food systems. Most prominently among these is agroecology, as a way of producing food, a way of life, a science, and a movement for change encompassing socio-economic, socio-political, biological/ecological and cultural dimensions. Agroecology goes well beyond agricultural production to embrace the entirety of food systems, and calls for paradigm shifts on multiple fronts, including in research, distribution, consumption and policy-making.

*What are the threats of not having a FSS focused on system change and driven by the search for justice?*

- Reduction of the food systems framework to an extension of the conventional value chain approach that has dominated agricultural policies over the past decades, abandoning the transformational potential of rethinking food systems as the key space where public policies and programmes can promote social, gender, economic and climate justice;
- Disregard for power asymmetries and political economies as key drivers shaping policies and investments, leading to the underestimation of governance reforms that are needed to ensure democratic accountability and safeguard public spaces from conflicts of interest; and,
- Consolidation of current patterns of investment in industrial food systems and global value chains, including the fast-tracking of digitalization, high-input agriculture and (false) technology-driven solutions to sustainability, continuing to foster the marginalization of small-scale producers, the exploitation of natural resources and the promotion of unhealthy and unsustainable diets.

### **3. The Summit is dominated by corporate interests**

The FSS has a strong bias in favour of the corporate sector, rendering it a showcase of conflicts of interests. The involvement of the World Economic Forum (WEF) since the early design of the process, the appointment of Ms. Agnes Kalibata, current President of the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA), and the extensive participation of large corporations and corporate initiatives in the FSS bodies and action tracks are all notable examples of how influential corporate actors are encroaching all aspects of the process. A more detailed list of examples is available in annex.

The transnational corporate sector may well fail to welcome the idea that food systems support many public objectives and should be reclaimed as a fundamental space for rights-based public policies. The extensive influence of corporate actors in the FSS genesis and structure (unsurprisingly) contributes to reorient the framing and content of the FSS and its action tracks to reflect their interests. For instance, rather than looking at diets as ways to reconnect the many actors and multiple dimensions of food systems, business interests may promote a narrow focus on the affordability and nutritional content of food as a global market commodity, implying the need for incentives to markets and corporations to off-set the costs to scale-up technologically-driven transitions. Instead of focusing on truly healthy, agrobiodiverse and sustainably produced food, the narrative is being twisted towards providing more public support to making unhealthy industrial food conform with artificially constructed notions of health, while co-opting and neutralizing narratives around agroecology, the role of small-scale food production, equity, human rights and justice.

In the context of the COVID 19 induced crisis, global value-chains have been shown to be far more vulnerable than local food systems. Small-scale food producers have demonstrated once again, despite obstacles and limitations, the critical centrality of their agency to ensure food security. The importance of food sovereignty, as opposed to dependency on the corporate industrial food system, has been underlined. Yet, many governmental responses have continued to show significant bias in favour of the false solutions offered by corporate agribusiness, for instance by strengthening large distribution channels and further advancing processes of automation and digitalization.

*What are the threats of a Summit dominated by corporate interests?*

- Further consolidation of corporate power in the United Nations; 'preferential access' for transnational corporations undermining the mandate of the UN as well as its independence, impartiality and effectiveness in holding businesses to account;

• Legitimizing a new narrative and new framework in which the corporate sector is at the core of the solutions needed.

More specifically:

- o The focus is on harnessing the opportunities of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (digital transformation) for the benefit of transnational corporations and global financial capital; and,
- o Data on food systems and digital platforms play a central role in FSS, alongside of “science-based evidence”, overriding people’s evidence and reality as lived on the ground<sup>2</sup>;
- Strengthening the trend of States to abdicate their law-making and regulatory power over corporations and financial capital. In the context of COVID 19 (but also throughout the 2008 financial crisis and the subsequent wave of fiscal austerity), corporate capture of public institutions is deepening with the result of diverting public funds into the corporate sector (in the forms of tax-breaks, public corporate bailouts, and financial supports);
- Further reduction of policy spaces to tackle multiple intersecting crises and to advance systemic reforms based on strengthening the public sector and communal institutions shaping food systems and other systems essential for people, and promoting further liberalization of and public support for global markets.

#### 4. The Summit replaces (international) public institutions by multi-stakeholder platforms

The corporate sector knows that it has a strong deficit of legitimacy due to the intersecting social, ecological and economic crises for which it is largely responsible. It is trying to capture the UN and other governmental spaces to fix this legitimacy deficit and encroach on the normative space, so that policy orientations and programmes continue to retain and deepen the structures of privilege and exploitation that are currently in place. Thus, it seeks to redesign global governance from a corporate lens. The FSS is an expression of this attempt in the field of food, with significant health, ecological, climate and economic ramifications.

The increased participation of the corporate sector in public policymaking is promoted through three interlocking narratives. Firstly, it is argued that the complexities of today’s problems make it impossible to rely on a single actor – the State – and that everyone must work together to achieve change. Secondly, there is an assumption that corporations have gained such power that changes (including the improvement of poor company behaviour) can be achieved only when they are invited to the table and become ‘part of the

solution’. Lastly, it is argued that corporations are rich and that multistakeholder platforms provide an opportunity to tap into these vast human, material, and financial resources. Unfortunately, these narratives are supported by confusion, also within civil society, between multistakeholder platforms (where decision-making is shared on an equal footing among States, private sector, civil society and other actors) and various models of consultation with social groups and societal constituencies (where these groups and constituencies have the opportunity to voice their opinions but decisions rest firmly with States). Even the CFS tends to be described as a multistakeholder platform, given the structured participation of society, the private sectors and other constituencies. While the CFS remains far from being perfect, for instance considering the notable absence of clear conflict of interest safeguards, its decision-making is firmly and clearly in the hands of UN Member States.

While different terms are used in attempts to label one model over the other, the continued increase in the participation of the corporate sector in public policy spaces has been a gradual and fluid process, featuring an evolving transition on how these spaces are structured and how convening is organized, who sets the rules and decides the agenda, who gets to speak, and who is able to exercise excessive influence on outcomes, often through parallel and informal channels. Such a fluid process has often been supported, if not facilitated, by non-governmental organizations and academics that have embraced a positive narrative on the engagement of the private sector.

Multistakeholder platforms are a fundamental building block in the corporate redesign of global governance<sup>3</sup>. Instead of organizing policy making in the realm of clear rules and binding law, with states taking decisions as the duty bearers of human rights obligations, with clear mechanisms of participation and accountability, multi-stakeholder platforms bring multiple “stakeholders” to policy discussions without clear rules of engagement.

The Summit could generate greater legitimacy of the corporate sector in the following ways:

- By setting the discourse/narrative about corporate-centred solutions. Corporations are trying to co-opt and redirect the discourse about “transformation of food systems” in order to neutralize its potential impact. For instance, they are using a narrative of transformation, while keeping intact the corporate model and financial capitalism. On the contrary, a holistic and systemic approach to food systems transformation would highlight the need to tackle structural drivers such

<sup>3</sup> See <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2010/11/the-global-redesign-summit/> and <https://www.tni.org/en/publication/multi-stakeholderism-a-corporate-push-for-a-new-form-of-global-governance>

<sup>2</sup> See for instance: <https://foodsystemsdashboard.org/>

as power asymmetries and undemocratic governance, and focus on the public policy nexus between ecology, health and well-being, modes of production and exchange, gender relations, and knowledge and culture. Instead, the food system concept has been narrowed down to a re-edited version of the conventional market-based approach, mainly focused on food production but adorned by lots of seductive adjectives, such as sustainable, healthy, etc., all emptied of their real meaning;

- By promoting the replacement of international public institutions with multi-stakeholder platforms<sup>4</sup>. Here, big data and “scientific evidence” (often regarded by mainstream circles as the only valid forms of knowledge, regardless of whether such knowledge is free of conflict of interests from corporate interests) are increasingly displacing people’s direct participation and subjective knowledge in democratic deliberations within policy-making spaces. At the same time, multi-stakeholder platforms tend to be oriented towards “seeking solutions” to cherry-picked problems, and are therefore characterized by a mix of pragmatism and urgency, which does not allow the uncovering of root causes and unjust power structures. Furthermore, the portrayed solutions continue to be based on voluntary initiative and willingness, rather than on regulations involving clear obligations.

- o The Summit clearly intends to set up these kinds of platforms at all levels, eventually reaching the subnational level. This is made possible and facilitated largely using digital platforms through the Food Systems Dialogues;

- o This type of Food Systems Dialogues was established in 2018 as an initiative of five partners – EAT, Food and Land Use Coalition (FOLU), the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN), the WEF and World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD) - to promote a business agenda and business solutions. The Summit has adopted this same blueprint for conducting its dialogues, fostering their replication at national and subnational levels potentially creating large follow-up platforms.

*What are the threats of replacing public institutions by multi-stakeholder platforms?*

- Creating legitimacy for the corporate sector
- Co-opting and neutralizing the discourses of small-scale food providers and their organisations, threatening decades of work of developing concepts such as food sovereignty and agroecology which reflect the lived experiences, knowledge and practices of grassroots communities;
- Reconfiguration of governance in the food and agriculture domain (and beyond) from multilateralism to

multistakeholder platforms:

- o Further strengthening a system-wide attempt to re-shape the governance of food, including for example: (a) the initiative led by the Gates and Syngenta Foundations to restructure public research focused on the Global South by “unifying” the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR), resulting in a single corporate entity with stronger-than-ever connections to agribusiness; (b) the plans for an international platform on digital food and agriculture hosted by FAO which would entrench Big Data as the solution to all food-agriculture related issues. The ETC group warns that the risks lie in how those three processes interact: “The Summit provides the framework; CGIAR is the delivery system; and Big Data is the product.”<sup>5</sup> This should be seen in the broader context of growing corporate take-over on a global scale promoted by the Gates Foundations and their ilk;

- o Further weakening bodies such as the CFS, ILO, UN Human Rights system, undermining existing efforts to strengthen the public sector and communal institutions and precluding any possibility of re-architecting governance mechanisms, conducting structural changes and enforcing solutions that are not based on global markets and corporate leadership.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/11/food-systems-agriculture-sustainable-sdgs/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.etcgroup.org/content/three-big-battles-global-food-policy-looming>

## ANNEX

Here we list the most influential corporate actors in the Summit:

- World Economic Forum (WEF):

This involvement is part of a broader UN-WEF strategic partnership agreement signed on 13 June 2019. The WEF “provides a platform for the world’s 1000 leading companies”<sup>6</sup> ;

- Special Envoy:

Ms. Agnes Kalibata, is the current President of the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA), an institution founded in 2006 promoting the interest of agribusiness to encourage agricultural production models based on a Green Revolution approach;

- Other corporate actors prominently involved:

- o World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD):

Members such as: Bayer, Danone, Dow, Dupont, Kellogg’s, Nestlé, PepsiCo, Rabobank;

- o EAT Forum:

Founded by Stordalen Foundation, Stockholm resilience Center and the Wellcome Trust;

Members of Board of Trustees: Potsdam Institut for Climate Impact Research, WEF, and others;

Engagement Allies: WBCSD, Google Food Services, Nestlé, and others;

- o Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN):

Partnerships with private sector: WBCSD, the US Council for International Business Foundation (USCIB), the International Food and Beverage Alliance (IFBA), the Consumer Goods Forum and others;

Co-host of Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Business Network & Part of SUN executive committee;

Partnership with AGRA;

Member of Food Fortification Initiative (FFI);

Participating in global policy networks such as the EAT Foundation, the Food and Land Use Coalition (FOLU), the WEF and Food System Dialogues (4SD);

- o Food and Land-Use Coalition (FOLU):

Core partners: AGRA, EAT, GAIN, WBCSD and others;

o Food Action Alliance (an initiative led by the International Fund for Agricultural Development, Rabobank, and the WEF);

o Philanthropies: the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation and the Stordalen Foundation.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.weforum.org/about/world-economic-forum>