This document has been drafted by the Liaison Group, anchored within the Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples Mechanism (CSIPM) for relations with the Committee on World Food Security (CFS), based on inputs from the global counter-mobilization process Autonomous People’s Response to the UN Food Systems Summit. Comments and further information are welcome as this is an open document and analysis.

For further information about corporate influence in the UNFSS please see the research report, infographics and illustrations Exposing corporate capture of the UNFSS through multistakeholderism.

The objective of this document is to serve as an overview to alert and raise awareness about the risks that the UN Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) and its aftermath are posing to global food governance, as well as to local and national democratic and human rights based transformation of our food systems. While several of the dynamics identified in this paper have been in progress before the UNFSS, the UNFSS process and its aftermath will intensify their effects.

I. CONTEXTUALIZING THE UN FOOD SYSTEMS SUMMIT IN GLOBAL FOOD GOVERNANCE

The history of global food governance and its failure to adequately address the causes of hunger

Global food governance refers to what decisions about food are made and implemented at a global level, how, where and by whom. Food governance is characterized by a divergence of views. On one hand, there is the continuous struggle to recognize food as a human right that must be fulfilled for everyone. On the other hand, there is a strong push for treating food as a market good or commodity, which regrettably, is dominant among many countries and international institutions.

Since World War II, food governance has been shaped significantly by the tendency to outsource public responsibility to markets and corporations, to the detriment of the majority of the world’s population and the environment. Further, neo-liberal policies introduced from the 1970s have reduced the policy space of governments of ‘developing’ countries, while opening their domestic markets to transnational capital, and exposing their small-scale producers to unfair competition from subsidized agricultural and food products from wealthy countries. The expansion of global trade and the cementing of agriculture trade rules through the World Trade Organisation (WTO) have favoured large-scale, industrial agricultural production over human rights and environmental considerations, and enabled agribusiness/agrifood corporations to gain influence in global policy making.

This productivism-oriented vision paired with the trade interests of powerful political and economic actors have determined a focus on value chains as what needs to be governed, further promoting the perspective of food as a commodity rather than a human right. This orientation continues to surface in moments of crisis despite its evident inadequacy, as seen with the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is clear that the responses from institutions tackling food governance have not sufficiently addressed the cumulative structural causes of past and present food crisis, such as unfair distribution of land and other productive resources, discrimination against women, and concentration of power by agrifood corporations. The UN Food and Agriculture Organization’s (FAO’s) The State of Food and Nutrition Security (SOFI) in the World 2021...
The reform of the CFS is a bright spot for global food governance

The reform of the UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS) in 2009 has been unique in attempting to acknowledge the structural causes of food crises and the need to seek policy solutions through political negotiations among countries, with the public sphere taking responsibility for regulating private sector activities in the public interest. Since the reform, the mandate of the CFS has been guided by the objective of the realization of the human right to adequate food for all. Through an unprecedented inclusive process of reform, the CFS has become the foremost multilateral space for inclusive global food governance within a multilateral human rights framework by assigning priority voice to those actors most impacted by the policies under discussion, while retaining final decision-making by governments and hence ensuring their accountability. The CFS is unique among multilateral spaces in that civil society, social movements and Indigenous Peoples can participate directly in the shaping of policy processes here. This participation is self-organized through the Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples Mechanism (CSM). The CSM prioritizes the voices of those most affected by hunger and food insecurity, organized through 11 constituencies and 17 sub-regions across the world.

The political context post CFS reform and the push for multistakeholderism

An opposing vision to the inclusive multilateralism as practiced in the CFS has been elaborated since 2010 by the World Economic Forum (WEF) through its Global Redesign Initiative (GRI). Dubbed ‘multi-stakeholderism,’ the GRI framework proposes replacing what WEF leaders judge to be a clumsy, ineffective multilateral system with a series of ‘coalitions of the willing and able’ charged with addressing burning global problems. Each of these is led by corporate actors who are presumed (by WEF participants) to have the necessary know-how, managerial capacity and resources to take action, but without the willingness and mechanisms to be accountable for the outcomes of what does happen. This proposed change in governance approach can be seen not only in the food, agriculture and nutrition domain, but also in a broader range of areas.

Corporate influence on public policy making behind closed doors has a long history, and the concept of multi-stakeholderism itself is not new. What is new about the WEF espoused multistakeholderism is that corporations are officially part of national, regional and international policy making and their related governance, which gives them additional room for steering decision-making in the direction of their own interests.

The global political context has continuously worsened since the time of the CFS reform. Corporate power in food and agriculture systems has continued to grow, and financialization is converting food and land into objects of speculation. World-wide, there is a trend towards shrinking space for civil society and reduced ambition for defending human rights. The primacy and legitimacy of the public sector is increasingly threatened by corporate interventions.
capture of policy processes and a development narrative that assigns a lead role to private sector investment, while multilateralism is under attack from virulently populist nationalism and corporate-promoted multistakeholderism.

Held in September 2021, the UNFSS is a benchmark of corporate capture and multistakeholderism. It fits perfectly in the WEF’s GRI and is an example of what the UN Secretary General is promoting as ‘networked multilateralism’, although it misleadingly presented itself as a ‘People’s Summit’. Early indications of corporate influence were clear when the CFS was completely ignored in the summit’s preparatory process (the CFS was only invited after pressure by civil society) and the President of the Alliance for a Green revolution in Africa (AGRA), Dr. Agnes Kalibata, was nominated as Special Envoy of the Summit.

In the context of the new layer of global food crisis due to the war in Ukraine, some UN institutions, agro-exporting countries and agri-business corporations have claimed the food price increases only a result of production loss, fuelling a further push towards increased productivism and industrialization of food and agriculture. This narrative is based on a biased analysis which – as the UNFSS did - ignores a number of underlying and structural factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic, supply chain disruptions, power concentration in supply chains, rising energy prices, increasing social injustices and poverty, as well as climate disasters, exacerbated by the financialization of food and agriculture and speculation.

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Responses and resistance from civil society

In the past three decades there has been a growth of an increasingly robust, diversified and articulated network of small-scale food producers, workers and other social actors ill-served by the corporate-led globalized food system who advocate for a radical transformation of food and agricultural systems based on food sovereignty. These movements have been resolutely engaged in defending and building ecologically and socially sustainable, and territorially embedded food provisioning arrangements that tend to be termed ‘alternative’, although they are responsible for up to 70% of the food consumed in the world.
II. KEY THREATS ARISING FROM UNFSS THAT IMPACT FOOD GOVERNANCE AT MULTIPLE LEVELS

The UNFSS took place in September 2021, and the follow up process is embedding and institutionalising its outcomes in the Rome based food governance agencies, as well as in national and regional processes and various multistakeholder coalitions. This is happening despite the lack of any intergovernmental decision to do so (see section 3 for details on the UNFSS follow up). In this section we outline the major threats to food governance arising from the UNFSS and its follow up:

1. The UNFSS promotes multistakeholder governance at the expense of multilateralism and human rights

The UNFSS has enhanced and consolidated corporate influence over global food governance, aimed at replacing multilateralism with multistakeholderism.

Among the core principles of multilateralism is the understanding that states lead processes of deliberations and decision-making, and non-state actors are regulated in the public interest and have clearly defined roles and responsibilities. The fact that states are unequivocally the decision-makers in multilateral processes means that they can be held accountable for their decisions, especially in a Human Rights framework in which states are duty-bearers.

Multistakeholderism, on the other hand, implies that all actors in a process have equal say, but without the identification of roles, responsibilities and power imbalances among them, so the most powerful actors inevitably dominate the decision-making. In this setting states are not the decision-makers and accountability disappears. Multistakeholderism blurs the distinctions between public interest and private profit and between human rights and corporate interests, and enables corporations to dominate decision making about critical development issues while evading legal-material accountability for their operations and for the consequences of decisions taken in multistakeholder settings.

A key question for civil society actors is whether to participate in such asymmetrical processes to try to influence them from inside, or remain outside, not extend any legitimacy to such processes, and guard against being co-opted.

UNFSS outcomes are sidelining existing inclusive multilateral institutions. Highly publicized UNFSS follow-up actions are tending to occupy the global food governance scene, overshadowing the existing spaces, such as the CFS, where decisions on food systems transformation are being taken legitimately. This is particular so regarding the CFS, since it has already been a target for several years of attacks by powerful economic interests and commodity exporting countries who would like to downplay the authority of its inclusive and human rights-based deliberations. The magnitude and visibility of UNFSS follow up actions create the impression - for member states and for multilateral institutions and forums like the CFS - that they must participate because otherwise they will become irrelevant, and so they are pushed to decide to be involved.

THREATS TO FOOD GOVERNANCE ARISING FROM THE UNFSS

Promotes multistakeholder governance at the expense of multilateralism and human rights

The outcomes will dissolve the accountability of state and non state actors

Concepts of sustainability are being co-opted with corporate-friendly interpretations

Promotes a vision of food systems transformation that serves corporate interests

Multistakeholderism blurs the distinctions between public interest and private profit and between human rights and corporate interests.

States cannot be held accountable for actions they do, or not do, because they have not officially committed to take particular actions.

These create additional obstacles to building policy acceptance and support for real solutions to food systems transformation.

The UNFSS advances a limited understanding of food systems and promotes a corporate friendly approach to transformation that maintains the status quo of market domination.
The expansion of multistakeholderism in global governance will weaken, marginalize and possibly even delegitimize multilateralism as embodied in the UN Human Rights system, and in international bodies and programmes with a strong rights-based approach such as the CFS, International Labour Organisation (ILO), World Health Organisation (WHO) UN Women and OHCHR. This will reduce the effectiveness of policy spaces seeking to tackle multiple intersecting crises and advance systemic reforms oriented towards strengthening the public sector and community-based institutions and initiatives.

Dominated by corporations, multistakeholder initiatives in global governance will promote agreement by member states to undertake further economic and financial liberalization, neoliberal markets and ‘preferential access’ for transnational corporations (TNCs) in policy making. Not only will TNCs be able to consolidate power in the UN system but, equally serious, the mandate, independence, impartiality and effectiveness of the UN in holding businesses to account will be further undermined.

Past experience of multistakeholder initiatives shows how TNCs can use their financial power and political access to divide, polarize and co-opt civil society organisations, social movements and affected communities, especially in the face of increasing state authoritarianism. The expansion of the UNFSS genre of multistakeholderism will diminish meaningful political participation and self-determination of marginalised communities to defend their rights.

In the absence of robust human rights based multilateralism and pressure from civil society and social movements, the current trend of states abdicating binding regulatory power over corporations and finance capital will be strengthened, and power asymmetries in food systems and in food systems governance will be exacerbated.

Multistakeholderism blurs the distinctions between public interest and private profit and between human rights and corporate interests, and enables corporations to dominate decision making about critical development issues while evading legal-material accountability for their operations and for the consequences of decisions taken in multistakeholder settings.

The UNFSS outcomes will result in tensions between governments and dissolve the accountability of state and non-state actors

The lack of intergovernmental processes in the run-up to and during the summit, and hence the non-negotiated outcomes of the summit indicate that the UNFSS did not result in coherent, multilaterally agreed strategies and directions for food systems transformation. Instead, the summit outcomes are unclear and even contradictory: for example, the USA led coalition on sustainable productivity growth is contrary to the EU Farm2Fork strategy. This shows lack of consensus between member States, negatively impacting multilateral processes, as already seen in the recent CFS Plenary in October 2021.

The non-negotiated outcomes of the summit also imply that governments can pick and choose the actions they want to take. This will cause fragmentation and dissolution of accountability: states cannot be held accountable for actions they do, or not do, because they have not officially committed to take particular actions. Also, initiatives for follow-up actions from the summit will depend on the opportunities and resources that the ‘coalitions of action’ can offer to governments, shoring up the power of those who can fund and influence these coalitions.

Differences and controversies among member states that arose in the UNFSS process will have negative impacts on multilateral institutions and decision-making. The absence of multilaterally negotiated agreements will allow governments and TNCs to implement coalitions of action without transparency, accountability and adequate consideration of people’s demands.

The UNFSS promotes a vision of food systems transformation that serves corporate interests, and enhances concentration of power by corporations and rich countries

Through the UNFSS, the attention to food systems has gained prominence in global food governance discourse. A food systems approach has the potential for a profound and systemic transformation of the way we produce, consume, share, trade, prepare and dispose of food, if it is based on understanding food as a human right and the many public objectives of food systems. However, the UNFSS advances a limited understanding of food systems and promotes a corporate friendly approach to food systems transformation that maintains the status quo of market domination.
An important mechanism for shaping and promoting the UNFSS vision is the political manipulation of science. In the period leading up to the Summit, the Scientific Group for the UNFSS presented a narrow, exclusionary version of science as the basis for policy making that favoured green revolution technologies, biotechnology, big data and global value chains. It justified so-called expert knowledge and independent science financed by agrifood corporations, ignoring conflicts of interest and the political economy of different forms of knowledge.

The UNFSS vision for food systems transformation emphasizes action through public–private partnerships in which, blended public financing and policy changes create a ‘favourable environment’ for corporate investments – without which, it is assumed, no solutions to hunger can be found. The vision highlights the effectiveness of technological innovations and market-led solutions in spurring economic growth, belying the evidence of steadily increasing inequalities within and between countries.

The UNFSS advances a corporate vision for food systems transformation rather than one based on human rights and public interest as demanded by civil society and social movements. This vision limits food systems to an extension of the global value chain model that has dominated agricultural policies over the past decades, and consolidates current patterns of investment in industrial food systems, including the fast-tracking of digitalization in food systems, high-input agriculture, and (false) market and technology driven solutions to sustainability. This vision will perpetuate the marginalization of small-scale food providers, exploitation of natural resources, and the promotion of unhealthy and unsustainable diets. It will deepen dependency on global value chains and transnational corporations instead of building resilient local food systems that can remain stable in times of crises.

The emphasis on global value chains and market driven solutions to the grave challenges that the world is facing will further the existing disregard for power asymmetries and political economies in shaping policies and investments. This in turn will lead to an underestimation of governance reforms that are needed to ensure democratic accountability and safeguard public spaces from conflicts of interest.

The UNFSS vision will be bolstered by and justify the establishment of a parallel Science Policy Interface (SPI), which will legitimate a narrative and framework that place corporations, the private sector and markets at the core of strategies to address hunger, malnutrition, climate change and economic crises. Such an SPI will sideline the High Level Panel of Experts (HLPE) of the CFS, which recognizes the diversity of food systems, plurality of knowledge systems and evidence, and the social and political dimensions of science, technology and knowledge.

Concepts of sustainability are being co-opted with corporate-friendly interpretations, inhibiting their real transformative potential

The UNFSS is legitimizing the co-optation of concepts of sustainability developed and advocated by social movements and civil society. Foremost among these is agroecology, as agribusinesses excise some agronomic practices from the holistic agroecological approach, and repackage them as their particular ‘brands’ of agroecology, alienating the concept of agroecology from social, cultural, ecological and political contexts. Similarly, corporate designed, market friendly, high-technology proposals for agricultural production and addressing climate change are presented as nature positive production and nature based solutions. These create additional obstacles to building policy acceptance and support for real solutions to food systems transformation.

The co-optation of concepts of sustainability, and the knowledge systems and innovations of small-scale food providers and their organisations, neutralizes the growing demands for urgently needed radical food systems transformation. It creates legitimacy for corporate green and blue washing, and conceals the continuing exploitation of nature and people through technical jargon and deceptive labels. It marginalises and threatens generations of work by grassroots communities and social movements in developing concepts such as food sovereignty and agroecology that reflect their lived experiences, and dynamic, situated knowledges and practices.
III. OUTCOMES AND FOLLOW UP OF THE UNFSS

Due to the massive counter mobilisations by civil society in the run-up to the summit, a lot of attention was focussed on the illegitimacy of the UNFSS structure and processes. Now in the aftermath of the summit, the strategy of UNFSS organisers and supporters to ignore past controversies and legitimize the summit’s corporate dominated agenda, is becoming apparent.

The UNFSS did not end after September 23 2021. Its outcomes will be reproduced in different international, regional and national spaces and platforms. Corporations, who have now gained recognition by the UN in international bodies, are already using their financial and political influence to integrate their proposals in official programmes and initiatives. In order to track progress of implementing the “outcomes” of the summit, the UN Secretary General will submit an annual report to the UN High Level Political Forum (HLPF) and hold a stock-taking event every two years until 2030.

The UNFSS follow-up includes continuation of its past infrastructure, which is resulting in the creation of parallel structures in the UN system that represent a major change in global food governance: the UNFSS secretariat is transitioning to the FAO based coordination hub (see below); the former action track leaders have put together a New Food Forward Consortium that will have the mandate of convincing and helping member states to implement UNFSS outcomes; the Scientific Group will continue (see below), and: civil society engagement will be kept alive through different channels. It is important to note that these changes are being rolled out despite the absence of intergovernmental decisions on summit follow-up mechanisms and processes.

The Coordination Hub 19, 20

The coordination hub is the core mechanism to continue the UNFSS and advance its narrative and outcomes, as it is the successor of the UNFSS secretariat. It will encroach onto key functions of the CFS while coordinating policy processes. Although UNFSS leadership claimed that the UNFSS would not create parallel structures, it is difficult to see the coordination hub otherwise.

The hub will be led by the UN Secretary General and the FAO Director General. It will be staffed by six UN Agencies, Funds or Programmes and its oversight will fall on a Steering Group comprised of the Principals of the Rome-based Agencies (RBAs), the Development Coordination Office (DCO); and the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) as the initial Chair of an evolved UN Task Force 21.

The hub is a clear example of a shift from the intergovernmental system towards a secretariat-led mechanism at the level of UN technical agencies. Normally UN agency secretariats provide technical and operational support to implement policies and programmes decided by member states, and they report back to the intergovernmental body that mandated them. There is no intergovernmental mechanism for political oversight of the hub’s work. This amounts to less transparency and accountability for the actions taken.

Moreover, FAO’s hosting of the hub is particularly worrying given FAO’s direction in recent years with the opening up for private sector engagement as stipulated in FAO’s Strategic Framework 2022-2031 and its new Strategy for engagement with the private sector. An example is its partnership with CropLife International.

Coalitions of action

At the heart of the summit outcomes are the Coalitions of Action, which are multistakeholder alliances around different topics that were created in the run up to, during and after the summit in an opaque way 22.

The Coalitions mirror the structural flaws of the summit organization: lack of meaningful participation by small-scale food providers, social movements and governments; lack of human rights grounding, and; undue corporate influence. For example, the Coalition for Better Data Better Decisions for Nature-Positive Production counts the WEF as a member and has drawn interest from Unilever and Google. The Coalition of True Value of Food counts the support of Rabobank and the Rockefeller Foundation.

It is unclear how these Coalitions will take action, to whom they are accountable and how their progress will be reviewed. An FAQ document states that Coalition members (state and non-State actors), are expected to independently monitor, report, and mobilize resources towards the implementation of their planned activities 23.

What is clear though is that powerful corporate actors have been orchestrating the Coalitions: many can be traced back to earlier WEF initiatives that will now deliver private sector solutions under the guise of UN approved programmes. The UNFSS aftermath shows that the UNFSS has provided a convergence space for a number of market-oriented initiatives which were at least in part, already in existence.
The Scientific Group

The Scientific Group, under leadership of Joachim von Braun, remains in place as a key engine for follow up actions, supporting corporate friendly narratives and channelling research funding for industrial agriculture. It emphasises proprietary innovation, technologies and investment; valourises corporations as holders of solutions (never as creators of problems), and; derides those who do not support gene-editing and high-end digital technology as being ‘left behind.’ It argues that vulnerable populations, especially women, children and Indigenous Peoples need access to technology, rather than respect and protection of their rights.

National Pathways and Evidence of Corporate Capture on the Ground

An especially important dimension of UNFSS outcomes is the implementation of proposals from Coalitions of Action and other UNFSS inspired initiatives at national levels. While the language of multistakeholder platforms/initiatives is vague in terms of responsibilities, obligations and accountability, past experience shows that proposed actions have to land in particular country, geographic, demographic and sectoral contexts to present themselves as successful outcomes.

UNFSS OUTCOMES AND FOLLOW UP

The UNFSS did not end after September 2021. Its outcomes will be reproduced in different international, regional and national spaces and platforms.

The Coordination Hub

Is the core mechanism to continue the UNFSS and advance its narrative and outcomes.

Coalitions of action

Multistakeholder alliances around different topics that were created in the run up to, during and after the summit in an opaque way.

We need to gather evidence on how the outcomes are shaping food related research, narratives and approaches, how they are influencing policies, regulation, corporate-state accountability, and their cumulative impacts on peoples’ rights and agency, sustainability and our struggles to build human rights based, democratic, territorially embedded food systems.

The Scientific Group

A key engine for follow up actions, supporting corporate friendly narratives and channelling research funding for industrial agriculture.

National Pathways and Evidence of Corporate Capture on the Ground

The UNFSS outcomes will facilitate corporate capture of local-national food systems and food system governance at multiple levels.

It is crucial that social movements, civil society and academics who participated in the Autonomous People’s Response to the UNFSS monitor how the UNFSS outcomes are landing in our territories, sectors and areas of work.
REFERENCES


5 See the CSM positioning as regards the Voluntary Guidelines on Food Systems and Nutrition and the Policy Recommendations on agroecological and other innovative approaches.


12 See for instance the letter co-signed by 500 organizations directly to UN Secretary General already in 2020; and a letter by the CSM addressed to the CFS Chair in March 2021.

13 https://www.foodsystems4people.org


15 https://agroecologyresearchaction.org/scientists-boycott-the-2021-un-food-systems-summit/


18 https://focusweb.org/257-groups-say-no-to-nature-based-solutions/

19 Latest updates on the hub from April 2022, including its preliminary structure, can be found here: https://www.fao.org/3/ni483e/ni483e.pdf

20 An earlier organigram and further information on the hub from November 2021 can be found here: https://www.fao.org/3/ng896en/ng896en.pdf

21 The Chair of the UN Task Force will rotate among interested UN agencies with strong connections to the work of the Hub (see point 6: https://www.fao.org/3/ni483e/ni483e.pdf)

22 Initial list of coalitions of action, published right after the summit took place: https://foodsystems.community/?attachment=11381&document_type=document&download_document_file=1&document_file=779

Coalitions of action on UNFSS website: https://foodsystems.community/coalitions/


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May 2022

Outcomes and follow up of UNFSS