

Press Statement

The UN Food Systems Summit is hogwash. It is a threat to peoples' food sovereignty

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Harare:

La Via Campesina is among scores of other social movements of organized small-scale food producers, workers and indigenous people boycotting the United Nations Food Systems Summit (UNFSS), slated to take place in New York - September 23rd, 2021. Peoples' movements are united in condemning the illegitimacy of this 'summit' and in denouncing the attempt by transnational corporations to usurp the institutional spaces within the United Nations.

Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples' Mechanism (CSM) that comprise social movements including La Via Campesina has pointed out that the pre-summit events held in July are now erecting parallel governance structures. UNFSS is undermining the existing institutions and multilateral bodies responsible for developing global policy frameworks for food and agriculture. Several member states are left wondering what this Summit intends to achieve and whether its outcomes would be binding upon developing national policy frameworks. It will override the existing institutions such as the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) and forebodes a corporate takeover of the global food governance.

For sure, the global food systems must undergo a radical overhaul. Rising hunger, ecological harm from food production, including deforestation, soil degradation, loss of biodiversity, decimated fisheries, polluted waters, growing rural poverty, the continued repression of peasant and indigenous movements worldwide, displacement and climate crises - all point to the need for urgent transformation. The demand to transform the global food system and skew it in favour of small-scale food producers has been a long-standing one, stated first during the Civil Society Forum in Rome in 1996.

Yet when the Secretary-General of the United Nations announced two years ago that a Food Systems Summit (FSS) would be held in late 2021, the news was puzzling. Why did the Secretary-General initiate this food summit in partnership with the World Economic Forum - a private sector body - when the FAO hosted all the previous editions after specific mandates from the Members States? To leave no further doubt about the corporate interests driving the Food System Summit, the Special Envoy appointed for the Summit, Agnes Kalibata, is the president of Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA). This Gates/Rockefeller funded agency is pushing high input, high tech agriculture and GMO seeds. Founded in 2006, this Alliance has worked in 13 African countries to increase productivity for 30 million smallholder farming households by encouraging industrial farming

adoption. Despite AGRA's promises of doubling crop productivity and incomes while halving food insecurity by 2020, backed by billions of donor dollars, it has been unable to provide documentation of delivering on these goals. AGRA's failures on the continent and Ms Kalibata's apparent conflicts of interest in her role as UNFSS Special Envoy resulted in broad resistance from social movements and civil society.

The farce of 'inclusiveness.'

The Summit organizers follow a multi-stakeholder approach as against a multilateral arrangement. Multilateral Summits, based on human rights, with transparent decision-making processes and accountability mechanisms, are meant to prioritize the voices of rights-holders and hold governments responsible for upholding those rights. But this "UN Food Systems Summit" is based on the idea of "multi-stakeholder" - treating all stakeholders as equal, without considering power imbalances or their position in the system. This fiction of equality leaves the powerful both unchallenged and unaccountable, hiding or ignoring any conflicts of interest. By conflating private corporate interests with the public interest, it overrides and erases the latter. To advertise "inclusiveness", it has proliferated a dizzying array of platforms, dialogues, consultations, committees, documents and forums for participation. Private citizens and governments are being drawn into these processes. Some of these are open, but many are for invited participants, bypassing and undermining autonomous, democratic organizations while favouring hand-picked individuals. The entire process lacks transparency and legitimacy. Who is making decisions? On what grounds? Who is accountable? To whom?

The guise of progressive language

In July this year, La Via Campesina was among the members of the CSM that co-organized counter mobilizations - to call out the unacceptability that has come to define this year's food systems summit. A wide variety of attendees came together and catalyzed and amplified a counter-narrative to the official proceedings. With critical articles and pieces published in major media outlets, and several thousands of #FoodSystems4People posts on social media seen by potentially 10 million users, the counter-mobilization succeeded in reaching a broad public with its vision for genuine transformation of unsustainable food systems.

This organized resistance rattled the organizers of the official Summit. In response, they have now ramped up the use of progressive language ("sustainability", "nature-positive-solutions", "planetary boundaries", "women's empowerment", etc.) and references to human rights in their documents. But the primary orientation of the FSS remains firmly rooted in the corporate interests that initiated it rather than the demands and rights of people producing food and those most impacted by current food systems. It continues to confirm a narrow range of scientific partisans data while ignoring the traditional and experiential knowledge of small-scale farmers, indigenous, peasant, and rural peoples. Digitalization, genetic modification, precision agriculture, and other chemical-, capital-, and fossil fuel-heavy approaches are taking centre stage because these so-called solutions are the most profitable to corporations (at the expense of the environment and farmers' livelihoods).

As the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food notes, "Intensive industrial agriculture relies on high-input, high-output agricultural systems, dominated by large-scale specialized farms. Ever since Governments started adopting the Green Revolution in the 1950s, the world's food systems have been increasingly designed along industrial models, the idea being that if people can purchase industrial inputs - synthetic fertilizers, pesticides and carbon-reliant machines - then they can

produce a large amount of food. Productivity was not measured in terms of human and environmental health, but exclusively in terms of commodity output and economic growth.”

Unfortunately, the UN Food Systems Summit ignores all these warnings and continues to bat for an intensive corporate-led agricultural model that masquerades as “solutions”.

Forebodings of a new global governance structure?

This Summit attacks from the front and will undermine existing global policymaking spaces and institutions like FAO and the CFS. Instead, it erects a parallel architecture to suit agribusiness interests. The Summit organizers are now encouraging stakeholders to form “coalitions of action” to implement “solutions”. Governments are encouraged to develop “national pathways” with stakeholder coalitions, many of which will inevitably be dominated by those who can afford to fund them. Middle and Low-income countries are vulnerable to entering “coalitions” with investors and philanthrocapitalists, such as the Gates Foundation, to carve out “national pathways” profitable for their coalition partners.

The resistance to this parallel structure is coming from within the official Summit too. In her resignation letter (dated August 25/21), Dr Kristy Buckley, Chair of the UNFSS Governance Action Area, derided the attempts to view the global food governance “through the lens of innovation, finance, technology and data, with no regard to human rights, gender, and Indigenous Peoples”. Her statement is a vindication of what social movements have been warning for a long time.

The real solution to climate crises, hunger, distress migration and extreme poverty lies with the people. It must emerge from the principles of food sovereignty and social justice. It must recognize food as a fundamental human right and not as a commodity for speculative trade. It must respect the diverse agroecological small-scale food systems that exist in our territories.

The “UN Food Systems Summit” of 2021 is an anti-thesis to these principles and threatens peoples’ food sovereignty. La Via Campesina will not remain silent. The UNFSS has no mandate, legitimacy, or authority to extend beyond September 23rd, 2021. We must prevent the Summit’s corporate affiliates from further embedding the multi-stakeholder structure into the UN food and agriculture agencies. Throughout this week, La Via Campesina’s member organization will hold counter mobilizations in Asia, Africa and Europe. Our North American members and allies will be holding a virtual counter-summit on September 23rd to expose the real agenda behind this Summit while also presenting the elements of the radical transformation we seek in the global food systems.

Globalize the Struggle! Globalize Hope!

La Via Campesina

P.S.

• La Via Campesina. 22 September 2021:
<https://viacampesina.org/en/the-un-food-systems-summit-is-hogwash-it-is-a-threat-to-peoples-food-sovereignty/>