

## Withdrawal from the UN Food Systems Summit

### Memo from the IPES-Food panel, 26 July 2021

From the outset, the UN Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) raised major concerns. Its origins were opaque, its relationship to existing global fora unclear, and its governance poorly defined (i.e. who is in charge, who participates, and how decisions are made). We were able to put these concerns temporarily aside in the hope that they would be addressed by the time key milestones were reached. However, the pre-Summit has now arrived, and the concerns, raised so clearly and consistently by farmers' organizations, social movements, civil society, Indigenous Peoples, and independent scientists, have not been addressed.

From the start, the Summit threatened to replace democratic debate with increasingly unaccountable modes of decision-making. These concerns were fueled when the Summit organizers bypassed the UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS). Reforms in 2009 made the CFS the foremost democratic space for discussing the future of food systems, with a comprehensive commitment to the right to food, mechanisms for involving civil society and the private sector while respecting their autonomy, and a High-Level Panel of Experts (HLPE) regularly providing cutting-edge reports. By bypassing the CFS and hastily constructing a new architecture, the Summit organizers showed little interest in genuine participation.

Moreover, the Summit's rules of engagement were determined by a small set of actors. The private sector, organizations serving the private sector (notably the World Economic Forum), and a handful of scientific experts kick-started the process and framed the agenda. That has meant a focus on scalable, investment-friendly, 'game-changing' solutions. As stated by three current and former UN Special Rapporteurs on the right to food, governments and civil society groups were [invited to come to a table that had already been set](#).

These concerns have not been addressed, and recent developments suggest heightened risks of the Summit being captured by a narrow set of interests. The UNFSS Science Days (July 8-9) clearly showed that the [Summit is being used to promote a new science panel](#) – an 'IPCC for Food' – that would undermine the HLPE and the body it serves, the CFS. The Scientific Group of the UNFSS, which serves as an 'early experiment' for the new science-policy interface, falls short in several respects: it is non-transparent; imbalanced in its composition and biased in its perspectives and sources of knowledge; unreflexive about the relationships between food systems and society; and is pursuing a business-oriented 'technology and innovation' agenda.

Opportunities have also been missed to establish clear rules of engagement. The Summit leadership has suggested that individual companies have been excluded, alongside assertions to the contrary (that the Summit cannot exclude any party), and despite the fact that corporate networks and trade associations – which exist to represent the for-profit interests of their members – are clearly welcomed.

Furthermore, those who wish to act on ideas or opportunities arising from the Summit ('solution clusters') can mobilize support ('coalitions') and proceed with an effective mandate from the Summit. In reality, this means that well-resourced groups will have the organizational capacity and networks to mobilize a sizable 'multi-stakeholder coalition' and roll out their solutions with a rubber stamp from the Summit. Other ideas that rely on acquiring resources from governments, the UN system or elsewhere in order to proceed will struggle to gain traction among the myriad of self-funded 'solutions' on offer.

These inconsistencies undermine the work being done in good faith by many actors within the UNFSS process. Furthermore, they set a dangerous precedent for the entire UN System, and threaten to usher in a new era of corporate-led 'multi-stakeholderism'. A key milestone – the pre-Summit – has been reached without any resolution of these fundamental issues. Members of IPES-Food are therefore stepping down with immediate effect from roles held within the Summit process.\*

We do so with regret: the world urgently needed a food systems summit, but not this Summit. In withdrawing, we note the important progress on agroecology, and congratulate States and other allies for bringing attention to its transformative potential and ensuring it has a place on the pre-Summit agenda. We will continue to deliver critical inputs on the issues at stake in the Summit, and will continue to support the re-engagement of UN bodies with agroecology, the emergence of government commitments to agroecology through the CFS, and various configurations in support of that outcome.

*\*Olivier De Schutter has served as co-lead on the 'Sustainable Management' pillar of Action Track 3: Boosting Nature-Positive Production at Sufficient Scales; Mamadou Goïta has served as vice-chair of the Champions Network; Emile Frison has been co-leading the Solution Cluster on Agroecology and Regenerative Agriculture and will continue to support coalition-building in this area in his individual capacity.*

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