

The UN Committee on World Food Security: An opportunity to counter the ongoing corporate capture of FAO

To the Editor:

In this letter to the editor, I suggest how the UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS) is a good example within the United Nations (UN) of how to continue urging for human rights based and multilateral decision making in global food governance, especially now when 134 million more people, compared to 2019, cannot access a healthy diet¹. Contrary to what the recent article entitled “Is the Committee on World Food Security fit for purpose?”², published by Devex, which seems bent towards only pointing out the failures of the Committee, I rather suggest making a case for how the CFS ought to succeed.

While negotiations within the CFS can be lengthy and complex, this inter-governmental platform offers a uniquely inclusive space within the UN system. Civil society and Indigenous Peoples are entitled to speaking slots almost on an equal footing with CFS Member States, something rarely seen in other UN governing bodies. Within the CFS and through the Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples’ Mechanism (CSIPM) for relations with the CFS, social movements, civil society and Indigenous Peoples’ organizations collectively contribute to CFS decision making and negotiate “tête-à-tête” with other CFS participants and Member States. Since its reform in 2009, the CFS has had a chance and responsibility to listen to the voices of the people most affected by hunger and malnutrition, highlighting the important role and agency of social movements and civil society and indigenous peoples’ organizations in channeling the demands and supporting proposals for the progressive realization of the right to adequate food -- the main mandate of the CFS. Under this inclusive format, Member States can directly listen to the voices of food producers and consumers bringing in their experiences in the territories on both the challenges they are facing and the solutions they are advancing³, in order to decide on recommendations or guidelines on various aspects of food security and nutrition. The CFS strives to make a clear difference in setting responsibilities for decision-making. The nature of the documents that emerge from it are voluntary, but their legitimacy - given their endorsement by both Member States and participants – has the potential to strengthen ownership by all these actors at the national and regional levels.

In contrast with this experience is the recent push for imposing a multistakeholder approach in global governance, particularly for food⁴. A clear example is the UN Food Systems

¹ FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO. 2023. *In Brief to The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2023. Urbanization, agrifood systems transformation and healthy diets across the rural–urban continuum*. Rome, FAO. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cc6550en>

² Teresa Welsh, Is the Committee on World Food Security fit for purpose?, *Devex*, July 31, 2023, <https://www.devex.com/news/is-the-committee-on-world-food-security-fit-for-purpose-105771>

³ CSIPM. 2022. Voices from the Ground 2: transformative solutions to the global systemic food crises. Popular Consultation on Grassroots Impacts of COVID-19, Conflicts, and Crised on the Right to Food and Food Sovereignty. <https://www.csm4cfs.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/layout-CSIPM-report-EN.pdf>

⁴ Multistakeholderism and the corporate capture of global food governance. What is at risk in 2023? May 11, 2023. https://www.foodsystems4people.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/EN_Analysis-report-2023_FS4P.pdf

Summit (UNFSS) that has been hostile to the human rights agenda since its very inception⁵ in 2019. The Autonomous People's response to the UNFSS -- initiated by and anchored in the CSIPM, and now supported by more than 400 international, regional and national organizations -- denounced this blatant disregard of the structural causes of the hunger and malnutrition crisis by the UN FSS.⁶

A major reason for such a response to the organization and follow-up of the FSS is that multistakeholder initiatives such as the UNFSS fail multilateralism and the public interest as they distance themselves from democratic and intergovernmental processes -- where it is States that decide⁷. This bluntly opens the door for corporate interests⁸ to step in. In July 24-6, 2023, a "stocktaking moment" for the UNFSS, also known as UNFSS+2, was held to question and demand a rectification of the absence of an intergovernmental negotiated outcome in 2021. It intended to legitimize the UNFSS by simulating governments' support to the initiative through the presence of high-level government representatives at a massive event. However, the outcome lacked, once again, a common declaration or action plan by Member States and the Coordination Hub (the governance structure of the UNFSS, though it currently has no government representation in its architecture). To simulate support from governments, the UNFSS+2 attempted to invite Member States to present what was achieved through their respective national pathways individually, disregarding the fact that these pathways -- born from the UNFSS in 2021 -- rarely utilized an inclusive format or relied on rights-based organizations. Indeed, most countries invited presented a framing that would further entrench the agro-industrial food model⁹.

In the author's opinion, the UNFSS and other multistakeholder initiatives -- such as the World Food Forum led by FAO -- represent clear attempts to overshadow and overtake the CFS, indeed to create obstacles to the inter-agency and other coordinating efforts of the CFS. In addition, it should be pointed out that the UNFSS Coordination Hub has more than double the CFS budget¹⁰. The limited budget for the CFS flies in the face of its stated role of fostering inclusive participation of organizations working for food sovereignty -- as clearly stated in its reform document¹¹. Indeed, the UNFSS has proven on multiple occasions that its rules and modalities of participation are unclear, shift over time, and thus do not challenge the status-quo of power imbalances in decision making, given the increasing corporate sector involvement.

⁵ Michael Fakhri, "The Food System Summit's Disconnection from People's Real Needs", *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics*, 35, no. 16 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10806-022-09882-7>

⁶ Autonomous Peoples' Response to the UN FSS, Social Movements and Indigenous Peoples' Oppose the UN Food Systems Summit and Call for True Food Systems Change, July 17, 2023, <https://foodsystems4people.org/press-release-2023/>

⁷ Jomo Kwame Sundaram. "UN Must Reclaim Multilateral Governance from Pretenders", IPS, August 24, 2023. <https://www.ipsnews.net/2023/08/un-must-reclaim-multilateral-governance-pretenders/>

⁸ IPES-Food, 2023. Who's Tipping the Scales? The growing influence of corporations on the governance of food systems, and how to counter it. https://www.ipes-food.org/_img/upload/files/tippingthescales.pdf

⁹ African CSIPM Popular Consultation Space, African Civil Society Assessment of the UNFSS National Pathways, Policy Brief, July 2023, https://www.csm4cfs.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Policy_Brief_UNFSS_Africa_25-July.pdf

¹⁰ Multistakeholderism and the corporate capture of global food governance. What is at risk in 2023? May 11, 2023. https://www.foodsystems4people.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/EN_Analysis-report-2023_FS4P.pdf

¹¹ Committee on World Food Security, Reform of the Committee on World Food Security, Article 7, October 14, 15 and 17, 2009, <https://www.fao.org/3/k7197e/k7197e.pdf>

Under such conditions, the marginalization of the voices of countries and of the people most affected by the crisis is perpetuated. An example is the ‘Stakeholders’ Contribution Document’ or UNFSS+2 Shadow Report, aimed to report the results of a survey on the implementation and support to “food systems transformations leading up to the UNFSS+2”. It was produced by an editorial group of 9 members, 4 of which were from the Private Sector, including the World Business Council for Sustainable Development, 3 from the Indigenous Peoples, Youth and Women constituencies, and 2 from the World Farmers’ Organization¹², which closely collaborates with Bayer¹³, a huge player in global industrialized agriculture after its acquisition of Monsanto.

Questioning whether the CFS is fit for purpose² is thus unhelpful if all of these factors are overlooked.

The CFS is a platform where priority should be given to finding a common ground between Member States and other participants in an effort to eradicate hunger and malnutrition. These collective efforts are urgently needed to find international agreement on how to address the rising levels of food insecurity (especially given the threat of climate change) while keeping the centrality of people’s human rights and planetary health. Initiatives that proliferate and that promote individual action in silos, rather than fostering cooperation and global consensus, will hardly confront the major challenges of the 21st century and for the future generations.

The general policy direction for food systems, unfortunately, thus is veering towards the advance of the agro-industrial model at the detriment of the practice of millions of people in their territories for solutions of transformation that put people and planet at the center, such as in the case of agroecology¹⁴. Even within the CFS, this trend can be seen, particularly through the process to develop Voluntary Guidelines on Food Systems and Nutrition (VGFSyN), where the methodology used during negotiations favored the interest of agro-exporting countries rather than a demanding a holistic understanding of sustainable healthy diets for adequate nutrition for all. The CSIPM withdrew from these negotiations in protest to the attempts to undermine the international legal system by restricting the authority of UN Declarations adopted by the UN General Assembly and the decision to prioritize the dissemination of its own vision document over the VGFSyN.¹⁵ This failed opportunity could have provided a boost for the UN Decade of Nutrition, which, coming to its end in 2025, has provided too little space for serious commitment by States.

When a train is going in the wrong direction, its rails being fixed, it is impossible to change its course. The train of the UN FSS has already departed. The CFS has been trying to set progressive steppingstones to its course by instead offering its unique platform to address the same problems. However, the missed opportunity to utilize one of these steppingstones, the VGsFSN, does not necessarily mean that the CFS is not fit for purpose. Instead, an urgent

¹² Stakeholders’ Contribution Document to the UN Food Systems Summit +2 Stocktaking Moment , “Shadow Report to the UNFSS+2”, July 4 2023, <https://www.unfoodsystemshub.org/docs/unfoodsystemslibraries/stocktaking-moment/stakeholders/unfss-2-stakeholder-contribution-report.pdf>

¹³ https://www.wfo-oma.org/wfo_news/wfo-and-bayer-announce-the-third-edition-of-the-gymnasium-high-level-capacity-building-program-for-young-farmers/

¹⁴ “Transforming food systems for healthy people and a healthy planet”, Global Health Watch 6, In the Shadow of the Pandemic, 2022.

¹⁵ https://www.csm4cfs.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/EN_CSMPositioningVGFSyN_FINAL.pdf

call is needed for Member States and social movements, civil society and indigenous peoples' organizations that pursue the fulfillment of the right to adequate food and nutrition, to demand stronger actions that will address the crises that are currently being addressed by the faulty multistakeholder approach, including the World Food Forum and the follow-up measures of the FSS. Only when time and methodologies are sound, can spaces for discussion on how to advance sustainable and healthy diets be pursued so as to achieve the profound transformation of food systems needed at all levels. The Committee on World Food Security has been a major achievement in providing this space. It must be defended against corporate attempts to replace it with the FSS' or the World Food Forum's influences. The issues at stake are far too urgent for such a unique potential for global cooperation to be rejected. Now is the time to use CFS and strengthen it for the wellbeing of people and planet, and for the sake of increasingly moving toward a human-rights based UN.

Best regards,

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