

# Seeds that Can't Be Buried

**A counter-mobilization event in July 2021 united social movements, indigenous peoples and civil society organizations opposed to the UN Food Systems Summit**

**F**rom 2019 until 2020, according to the State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2021 report, the number of those suffering from hunger increased by 161 mn to total 811 mn people globally. While hunger has been on the rise since 2014, the COVID-19 pandemic is exacerbating pre-existing inequalities, pushing millions of people to the brink of survival and demonstrating the ongoing crisis of public systems.

Moreover, the multidimensional crisis that populations around the world are facing has exposed the longstanding tension between two alternative views of food and food systems. On the one hand, there is the increasing industrialization of agriculture and food production and distribution, which goes hand in hand with increasing corporate capture of our food systems.

This dominant model threatens the survival of all species, including our own, through existential threats, including the climate crisis, deforestation, loss of biodiversity, land degradation and water pollution, and countless human-rights violations. On the other hand, community-based, localized and diverse food systems have shown their resilience in the face of climate-crisis-induced extreme weather events, as well as during the COVID-19 pandemic.

These food systems are clearly the way forward for regaining people's control over the food they produce and consume.

It is in this context that the United Nations held the Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) on 23 September 2021. Organized alongside the UN General Assembly in New York, the Summit's goal was to maximize the benefits of a food-systems approach across the

entire 2030 agenda, to mitigate global hunger and climate change. However, the UNFSS does not intend to address the food crisis caused by COVID-19, nor the structural causes of unsustainable, unhealthy and unjust food systems. It does not seek to redress the underlying power imbalances in food production, distribution and consumption.

**... community-based, localized and diverse food systems have shown their resilience in the face of climate-crisis-induced extreme weather events...**

Since the Summit's announcement in December 2019, there has been a backlash from over 550 civil society organizations (CSOs) due to the close ties of the Summit's organizers with corporate actors, especially through the partnership of the UN with the World Economic Forum (WEF) and the appointment of the president of the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) as its Special Envoy. This protest culminated in a mostly virtual counter-mobilization from 25 to 28 July 2021, when some 9,000 people gathered to oppose the UNFSS Pre-Summit.

## **Corporate agenda**

During the counter-mobilization, social movements, Indigenous Peoples and CSOs, through the People's Autonomous Response to the UNFSS—a platform of 330 organizations—denounced the corporate food-systems agenda promoted by the UNFSS, and defended the work accomplished over the past 70 years to build a multilateral, democratic and civic space for human

*This article is by **Magdalena Ackermann Aredes** ([mackermann@sidint.org](mailto:mackermann@sidint.org)), Policy and Advocacy Officer, Food Systems, Nutrition and Agroecology, Society for International Development (SID); **Charlotte Dreger** ([dreger@fian.org](mailto:dreger@fian.org)), Policy and Advocacy Officer, Sustainable Food Systems, FIAN International; and **Marion Girard** ([marion.girard.cisneros@csm4cfs.org](mailto:marion.girard.cisneros@csm4cfs.org)), Communications Officer, Secretariat of the Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples' Mechanism (CSM)*



Civil society in Germany protest against the UN Food Systems Summit. Policy discussions and decisions should be made in the Committee on World Food Security (CFS), which has established mechanisms for inclusivity and accountability

32

rights within the UN. The alternative forum drew together a wide variety of attendees and was able to catalyze and amplify a counter-narrative to the official proceedings, while also showcasing its vision for genuine transformation of unsustainable food systems.

The “people’s counter-mobilization to transform corporate food systems” provided a space for dialogue about the threats posed by increasingly corporate-controlled and globalized food systems, and the already existing viable solutions to overcome them. An opening declaration summarizing the demands of the People’s Autonomous Response was officially released to contest the lopsided multi-stakeholder approach followed by the UNFSS. This approach is concerning in that it puts on equal footing governments, corporations, other private sector actors, philanthropies, scientists, CSOs and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Moreover, the declaration emphasizes, the Summit organizers aim to create an illusion of inclusiveness, while remaining unclear about who is in control of taking

decisions and by what procedures decisions are made, creating serious problems of accountability, legitimacy, and democratic decision making in the UN. It urges policy discussions and decisions to be made in the UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS), the only multilateral space with established mechanisms for inclusivity and accountability.

The counter-mobilization kicked off with an eight-hour-long global virtual rally. This event saw a large number of participants and featured messages, declarations, artistic performances and live mobilizations by hundreds of individuals and organizations from all continents, representing smallholder farmers, pastoralists, fisherfolk, Indigenous Peoples, agricultural and food workers, landless peoples, women, youth, consumers, the urban food insecure, NGOs and academics.

### **False solutions**

The second day of the global event included a series of round-table discussions aiming to unmask the false solutions proposed in the Summit and its attempts to open the doors for the

corporate capture of food governance and science. In particular, the Summit's so-called "game-changing solutions" were identified as not resulting from an inclusive and transparent deliberation process in the hands of UN Member States. Rather, the Summit exemplified the risks of multi-stakeholderism: The lack of transparency in the process and the disregard for existing power imbalances were highlighted as problematic aspects of the Summit.

Against these illegitimate mechanisms, the counter-mobilization continued building momentum with 15 virtual dialogues on its third day, on topics ranging from reclaiming Africa's seed sovereignty, feminist economies, building justice-based alternatives through agroecology, human rights and food sovereignty, and how democratization of food systems can prevent corporate control. The Summit focused on 'solutions' that are mainly technological, market-based and capital-intensive such as digitalization and high-input agriculture, exacerbating dependency on global value chains and transnational corporations and further promoting 'farming without farmers'. The counter-mobilization, on the other hand, celebrated people's visions for reclaiming power and radically transforming the industrial food systems.

The counter-mobilization ended with statements from indigenous leaders and representatives of social movements, as well as a Zapotec 'mystica' ceremony. "They wanted to bury us so that we would disappear, but they didn't know we were seeds," said Saúl Vicente of the International Indian Treaty Council (IITC) in his closing message of hope. This and other interventions during the ceremony highlighted that opposition to the Summit is not the whim of a couple of organizations, but a popular sentiment of proportions that cannot be ignored.

It is still unclear what the official outcome of the Summit will be, and by which process it will be achieved. No intergovernmental negotiation process seems to be foreseen in the final outcome document, seriously casting doubt over the Summit's capacity to



Demonstration in Rome, Italy, against the UN Food Systems Summit. The mobilization highlighted both, the threats from and solutions to corporate-controlled food systems

provide results that can be sufficiently legitimate as to be infused within the existing global food-governance mechanisms. It remains to be seen what implications the Summit and its follow-up process will have on international food governance and whether it will undermine existing legitimate intergovernmental institutions.

### Binding rules

The People's Autonomous Response will assess the outcomes of the UNFSS and monitor the process as it unfolds. However, it is already unequivocally clear that the Summit has not addressed fundamental issues, like binding rules to force agribusiness corporations to respect human rights and protect the environment, end pesticide use, and end the monopoly over the global seed market. These are just some of the issues that civil society and food producers' organizations have demanded be addressed with urgency. ↴

### For more

#### Secretary-General's Chair Summary and Statement of Action on the UN Food Systems Summit

<https://www.un.org/en/food-systems-summit/news/making-food-systems-work-people-planet-and-prosperity>

#### CFS Voluntary Guidelines on Food Systems and Nutrition

<https://www.fao.org/cfs/vgfsn/en/>

#### Declaration of the Autonomous People's Response to the UN Food Systems Summit

<https://www.csm4cfs.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Declaration-EN-2.pdf>

#### Interim report of the Special Rapporteur on the right to food, Michael Fakhri

<https://undocs.org/A/76/237>