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FOOD SYSTEMS TRANSFORMATION: IN WHICH DIRECTION?



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1. KEY MESSAGES

- While there is growing recognition for the urgent need for food system transformation, there is no agreement into which direction this should head. The heart of the ongoing controversies lies in the clash between the perpetuation of corporate-driven industrial food systems and the imperative for a human rights-based, agroecological food system transformation.
- The deliberate omissions and blocking of decisive action in response to the ongoing systemic food crisis in terms of effective global policy coordination and profound food systems transformation have had deep impacts on communities all over the world, fostering hunger and malnutrition, structural inequalities and systemic discrimination.
- The main stumbling block for taking action towards more resilient, diversified, localized and agroecological food systems are the economic interests of those who drive and benefit from corporate-driven industrial food systems. The scandalous profits made by large companies from the ongoing crises are illustrative examples of the cynicism embodied in the system.
- On the governance dimension, the current controversy is primarily between two different approaches: attempts to further democratize multilateralism, as advanced with the reform of the UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS) vs. attempts to replace multilateralism by multistakeholderism, as advanced during the Food Systems Summit (FSS) and through the World Food Forum.
- The common priority agenda of the China-US led FAO has established an unprecedented open-door policy for the corporate sector, an industry-favouring multistakeholderism approach, as applied with the FSS Coordination Hub and the World Food Forum, and the Hand-in-Hand Investment Initiative.
- The FSS+2 Stocktaking Moment aims to address one of the main deficits of the Summit itself: the fact that there was no intergovernmental process and outcome. There is widespread concern that the FSS+2 is a 'buy-in' trap where governments, through their high-level attendance, facilitate a de facto and ex-post-legitimation of the UNFSS process, thereby accepting its double structures and corporate-driven food systems agenda.
- Many actors from civil society, small-scale food producers' and workers' organizations, Indigenous Peoples, women, youth, academia and from governments and inside the UN continue to express strong concerns about the FSS process and its political bias which, from the beginning, have also undermined the achievements in democratic multilateralism made with the reformed UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS).
- In these times of multiple and intertwined crises, it is more urgent than ever that governments and the UN listen to the voices of the most affected constituencies, change direction, and support their demands and efforts for real food systems transformation, based on the respect to all human rights and care for people and planet, to advance agroecology, food sovereignty, biodiversity, gender justice and diversity, youth agency, climate justice, economic and social justice, in all dimensions of food systems.





2. INTRODUCTION

This report aims to describe overarching developments in the discussions on food system transformation of the last three years, starting with the outbreak of the COVID-pandemic in 2020, covering key discussions within the UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS) on the different layers of global food crisis, and exploring controversies around Food Systems Summit (FSS) 2021 and its Stocktaking Moment 2023. The underlying hypothesis of this brief analysis is that a dispute about different directions of food system transformation is at the core of the ongoing controversies.

“This crisis demands fundamental, systemic change”, demanded UN Secretary General António Guterres in his introduction of the [Global Report on Food Crises](#) published in May 2023. The report estimates that 258 million people were facing acute levels of hunger in 2022, up from 193 million in 2021 and 155 million in 2020.¹

While there is growing recognition for the urgent need for profound food system transformation, there is no agreement into which direction this should head.

The directionality debate embraces several domains and complex questions, and this report will focus on three major themes:

- How the dispute about the direction of food systems transformation has been at the core of the controversy around the Food Systems Summit and its Stocktaking Moment.
- How the response to the systemic global food crisis became fragmented and weak. This section examines the attempts towards a globally coordinated policy response and the impacts of the crises on exacerbating structural inequalities and systemic discrimination.
- How global food governance is being reorganized, and in which direction of Food System transformation. This section investigates the controversy between multilateralism and multistakeholderism, and the dispute between the consolidation of a corporate-driven industrial food systems and a human rights-based agroecological food system transformation.

¹ FSIN and Global Network Against Food Crises, [Global Report on Food Crises 2023, Rome 2023](#)

These reflections are embedded and discussed within the more general question of how public institutions, especially the UN, relate to the demands of people, communities, peoples, and their organizations vs. the interests of corporate actors and their front groups, in addressing the multiple, multilayered, and intertwined crises of our times and the near future.

While this report looks mainly at the period since the outbreak of the pandemic in 2020 and its consequences, the controversies about the UNFSS in 2021, and the new layer of crisis following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, it also relates to long-standing trends and overarching developments which had shaped the current context over decades.

The many distinct and often opposing views correlate with hugely different analyses of the problems, their causes and systemic drivers. The ways structural problems are understood, identified, not named, or ignored frame the path of thinking about solutions.

The report builds on and explicitly refers to much of the work and analysis done in the context of the Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples' Mechanism (CSIPM) for relations with the CFS, and more specifically the Liaison Group for the People's Autonomous response to the FSS.

3. AT THE CORE OF THE CONTROVERSY AROUND THE FOOD SYSTEMS SUMMIT PROCESS: THE DISPUTE ABOUT THE DIRECTION OF FOOD SYSTEMS TRANSFORMATION AND GOVERNANCE

Scheduled on 24-26 July in Rome, the [UN FSS +2 Stocktaking Moment](#) is an event of the United Nations Secretary General (UNSG), hosted by Italy and organized in collaboration with the Rome-based UN agencies.² This gathering will be attended by various prominent figures including from UN Leadership, several Heads of State, and other high-level representatives of Member States.

The UNFSS+2 Stocktaking Moment is poised to repeat the failures of the Food System Summit itself, further advancing industrial food systems and opening the door of the UN to even greater influence from large private companies and their networks, all without a corporate accountability framework in place.

A CRITICAL RETROSPECTIVE ON THE FOOD SYSTEMS SUMMIT

Two years ago, the UNFSS faced an [unprecedented countermobilization](#)³ with [more than 9.000 participants](#) challenging the Pre-Summit in July 2021⁴. A huge number of actors from civil society, small-scale food producers' and workers' organizations, Indigenous Peoples, women, youth, governments, academia, UN, as well as experienced individuals from inside and outside the Summit expressed strong reservations about its structure, political orientation and organizing process which, from the beginning, undermined the achievements

² Website of the UN Food Systems Coordination Hub: [UNFSS +2 Stocktaking \(unfoodsystemshub.org\)](https://unfoodsystemshub.org)

³ Website of the People's Autonomous Response to the UN Food Systems Summit: [Resources \(foodsystems4people.org\)](https://foodsystems4people.org)

⁴ [Thousands mobilize to call for food systems that empower people, not companies - CSIPM \(csm4cfs.org\)](#)

in democratic multilateralism made with the reformed UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS).⁵

However, the “People’s Summit” (as the organisers called it) and the convoluted, corporate-centric processes leading up to it, disappointed the very people it was supposed to serve. The **Summit failed to address the most important drivers** of the growing world hunger and climate crises, especially the COVID-19 pandemic, industrial agriculture, and corporate concentration in food systems.

With its [multistakeholderism](#) approach⁶, the **Summit also failed Member States and multilateralism at large**. While a group of UN senior officials, some governments, especially from OECD countries, together with several corporate networks, philanthropies and aligned corporate-friendly academics and NGOs wielded strong influence on the Summit process and content, a great number of Member States, especially from the Global South, played a marginal role.

Crucially, **the Summit failed human rights**. Critiques on the weak human rights grounding of the Summit were expressed eloquently and frequently by many [actors](#) from inside and outside the Summit but were consistently ignored.⁷ In parallel, the Summit undermined the hard-fought achievements of a more democratic global food governance, such as the UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS) and its science-policy interface, the High-Level Panel of Experts (HLPE).

TWO YEARS LATER: NO CHANGE IN DIRECTION

Following the UN Food Systems Summit in September 2021, important steps were taken to ensure its follow-up, even though the **Summit’s Plan of Action was only a UN Secretary-General Statement** which had not been negotiated nor approved by an intergovernmental process.

Despite [explicit promises](#) by the UN Deputy Secretary-General before the Summit **that no new structures would be created**⁸, a **new UN Food Systems Coordination Hub was established**, hosted by FAO and jointly led by the UN Deputy Secretary-General and the heads

⁵ The [Political declaration](#) presented to the UNFSS in [September 2021](#), was endorsed by more than 700 international and national organizations, and more than 300 academics and activists. The key concerns of the countermobilization were also echoed through hundreds of academic papers, articles, publications on social media and mentions in media outlets across the world such as the BBC, Al Jazeera, Italian state TV Rai, Le Monde, El País, The Guardian, Deutsche Welle, etc. More information available at: [Resources \(foodsystems4people.org\)](#)

⁶ Liaison Group of the People’s Autonomous Response: [Multistakeholderism and the corporate capture of global food governance – what is at risk in 2023](#), May 2023

⁷ Michael Fakhri, Hilal Elver and Olivier De Schutter, [The UN Food Systems Summit: How Not to Respond to the Urgency of Reform | Inter Press Service \(ipsnews.net\)](#)

⁸ Dialogue between the UN Deputy Secretary General and the CSM Liaison Group on the UN Food Systems Summit: [Multilateralism and Transformation of Corporate Food Systems: Different Visions, Different Pathways - CSIPM \(csm4cfs.org\)](#)

of the FAO, WFP, IFAD, WHO and UNEP.⁹ The [new structure](#) is equipped with a biennial budget of USD 14 million, more than **double the budget of the CFS**.

Notably, the [architecture](#) of the Coordination Hub **does not include national governments in its governance structure**. It includes a new Scientific Policy Interface (the [Scientific Advisory Committee](#)), as well as a new Stakeholder Engagement and Networking Advisory ([SENA](#)), which appears to duplicate the functions of the CFS and HLPE. However, it adopts a biased agenda towards reinforcing the corporate-friendly approaches of the Food Systems Summit, where discussions on regulation or limitations on corporate expansion and concentration are conspicuously absent.



The **main aim of the FSS+2 event** is to address and overcome one **main legitimacy deficit** of the original Summit: the fact that it was **not held as an intergovernmental Summit**, as the UN Food Summits in 1996, 2002 and 2009, and hence did not conclude with an intergovernmentally agreed declaration and action plan. Member States were asked to elaborate national pathways, but only some of the States were marginally involved in defining the outcomes of the Summit.

There is widespread **concern that the FSS+2 is a 'buy-in' trap** where governments, through their high-level attendance and eager to display their national food system strategies, will lend support to the FSS process. This will occur regardless of the extent to which their national pathways have been developed through inclusive consultations, in which direction they head, or whether they have been implemented at all.

The FSS+2 does not foresee an intergovernmentally agreed outcome and overlooks the urgent need for globally concerted responses to systemic food crises. Instead, the event aims to create the illusion of widespread governmental support, **leading to a de facto and ex-post-legitimation of the UNFSS**

process, thereby legitimizing its double structures and perpetuating its corporate-driven food systems agenda.

Recent analyses assessed the FSS+2 within a broader context of [growing corporate influence over global food governance](#).¹⁰ There is [evidence](#) of FAO's unprecedented Open-Door Policy

⁹ Website of the UN Food Systems Coordination Hub: [Structure| UN Food Systems Coordination Hub \(unfoodsystemshub.org\)](https://unfoodsystemshub.org)

¹⁰ IPES Food Report, Tipping the Scales, [tippingthescales.pdf \(ipes-food.org\)](https://www.ipes-food.org/tippingthescales.pdf), April 2023

for the corporate sector, the World Food Forum, the Hand-in-Hand Initiative, and a generalized approach of multistakeholderism and controlled participation.

Over the past three years, multiple groups - social movements, Indigenous Peoples, youth, women and gender diverse people - have offered concrete [proposals and demands](#)¹¹ for the advancement of agroecology, food sovereignty, biodiversity, [gender justice and diversity](#),¹² [youth agency](#)¹³, climate justice, economic and social justice in food systems. These proposals have consistently been disregarded.

The UNFSS+2 is designed to ignore, once again, the need for deep structural transformations of food systems based on human rights and agroecology, emphasizing instead a model that prioritizes corporate-friendly solutions over public interest.

In conclusion: The heart of the controversy around the UNFSS lies in the clash between the perpetuation of corporate-driven industrial food systems and the imperative for a human rights-based, agroecological food system transformation. On the governance dimension, it has become an outstanding illustration of how multistakeholderism can undermine the hard-won achievements of democratic multilateralism.

4. THE SYSTEMIC GLOBAL FOOD CRISIS: HOW TO RESPOND TO IT?

AN ANNOTATED TIMELINE OF ACTIONS AND OMISSIONS

2020/2021

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 implied a dramatic increase in world hunger. The estimates of the [State of Food Security and Nutrition report 2021](#) indicated that as many as 161 million additional people experienced chronic undernourishment in 2020 as the pandemic took hold, with the number of people facing chronic hunger rising from an estimated 650 million in 2019 to between 720 and 811 million people in 2020.¹⁴ The [High-Level Panel of Experts](#) (HLPE), upon request of the CFS Chairperson, continuously monitored and analyzed how the pandemic impacted in food security and nutrition.

The HLPE reports [recommended action](#) in six areas: 1) implement more robust targeted social protection programmes, 2) ensure better protections for vulnerable and marginalized food system workers and farmers, 3) better protection for countries that depend on food imports, 4) Strengthen and coordinate policy responses to the COVID-19 pandemic impact on food systems and food security and nutrition, including the international level, 5) support more diverse and resilient distribution systems, including shorter supply chains and territorial markets, and 6) support more resilient food production systems based on agroecology and other sustainable forms of food production.¹⁵

¹¹ Website CSIPM on [Global policy response to food crises - CSIPM \(csm4cfs.org\)](#)

¹² Website CSIPM on [Women and Gender Diversities - CSIPM \(csm4cfs.org\)](#)

¹³ Website CSIPM on [Youth - CSIPM \(csm4cfs.org\)](#)

¹⁴ FAO et al, [The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2021 \(fao.org\)](#), July 2021

¹⁵ HLPE, [CFS 2021/49/INF/22 - Impacts of COVID-19 on food security and nutrition: developing effective policy responses to address the hunger and malnutrition pandemic \(fao.org\)](#), September 2021

The HLPE [2020 Report](#) was very explicit: “The CFS is the obvious and appropriate policy coordinating body at the international level to lead in the development of a global policy response to COVID-19 and its impact on food security and nutrition”, and recommended actions in this regard.¹⁶

The recommendation for **a leading role of CFS in a globally coordinated response** was strongly supported by a number of actors in the CFS, particularly the CFS Chair from Thailand himself, the representatives of the African Regional Group, Mexico, Spain, Iran, Switzerland and Hungary, as well as the [UN Special Rapporteur of the right to food](#)¹⁷ and the Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples Mechanism for relations with the CFS.

However, **strong objections** from some agro-exporting countries, led by the United States and the Russian Federation which had a longstanding common agenda to weaken the CFS, its human rights grounding and its key role in global food governance, combined with obstructive efforts of the then CFS Secretary and the indifference of other actors, **blocked the CFS** from effectively taking on its role as global coordination platform to respond to the new dimensions of food crisis.

After the outbreak of COVID, the constituencies of the CSIPM realized **comprehensive popular consultations in all regions** on the impact of the pandemic on the communities in their territories. As a result, a [global synthesis report](#) “Voices from the Ground”¹⁸, the CSIPM Women’s WG [Report on “Gender, COVID-19 and Food Systems”](#)¹⁹, as well as the CSIPM [Youth political declaration](#)²⁰ were published in October 2020.

These reports presented complex analyses of diverse realities affecting their constituencies and communities, documenting a **universe of examples of how structural discrimination, inequalities, violence and dependencies played out and deepened** during the pandemic, with women, youth, refugees and migrants, workers, small-scale food producers, Indigenous Peoples, gender diverse persons, landless and urban food insecure among the most affected.

The evidence from the territories also demonstrated the strength, solidarity and resilience of people responding to the multiple crises affecting them. The CSIPM reports [called for a radical transformation of food systems, based on human rights and care for people and planet](#), and provided many concrete suggestions and demands on how to advance systemic change towards agroecology, food sovereignty, biodiversity, gender justice and diversity, youth agency, climate justice, economic and social justice. They reaffirmed the primacy of the public interest over corporate profits and the need to strengthen human rights-based global food governance with the CFS at its center.²¹

¹⁶ HLPE [Impacts of COVID-19 on food security and nutrition: developing effective policy responses to address the hunger and malnutrition pandemic \(fao.org\)](#), September 2020

¹⁷ Michael Fakhri, [Will the CFS prevent the pending COVID-19 hunger crisis? | Food | Al Jazeera](#)

¹⁸ CSIPM, [CSM Global Synthesis Report on Covid-19 is out! - CSIPM \(csm4cfs.org\)](#), October 2020

¹⁹ CSIPM, [The new Report of the CSM Women Working Group is out! - CSIPM \(csm4cfs.org\)](#), October 2020

²⁰ CSIPM, [Youth Demands for a Radical Transformation of our Food Systems - CSIPM \(csm4cfs.org\)](#), October 2020

²¹ CSIPM Website, [Global policy response to food crises - CSIPM \(csm4cfs.org\)](#)

The **Food System Summit process did not include a response to the deepening food crisis in its agenda**. The FSS process was designed before the pandemic, and its leadership did not seem able to understand the profound new challenges and structural urgencies arising with the impact of the crisis. The fact that the UNFSS leadership decided to not tackle the impact of the pandemic on food systems as one of its main areas and therefore practically ignored an ongoing unprecedented food crisis, is a stunning example of its alienation from the reality of communities struggling against hunger and malnutrition.

The HLPE assessed in [September 2021](#): “Thus far, there has been a **lack of international policy coordination and response to the COVID19 pandemic’s impact on food security and nutrition**.”²²

“Distressingly, the food systems summit has offered governments nothing substantive to tackle the devastating impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the food crisis that it triggered. The summit has offered people nothing to help overcome their daily struggles to feed themselves and their families”, [wrote](#) the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food²³. In his [Thematic Report presented to the UN General Assembly](#) in October 2021, he offers a detailed chronology and critical assessment of the Food Systems Summit process and outcome.²⁴

The total lack of a globally coordinated response to the new dimension of food crisis triggered by the pandemic contributed to the **grim picture at the end of 2021**, as indicated by the [State of Food Security and Nutrition 2022](#) report which estimated: that **828 million** people were affected by hunger in 2021 – **46 million** people more from a year earlier and **150 million** more from 2019. The gender gap in food insecurity continued to rise in 2021 - **31.9 percent** of women in the world were moderately or severely food insecure, compared to **27.6 percent** of men. Almost **3.1 billion** people could not afford a healthy diet in 2020, up **112 million** from 2019, reflecting the



²² HLPE, [CFS 2021/49/INF/22 - Impacts of COVID-19 on food security and nutrition: developing effective policy responses to address the hunger and malnutrition pandemic \(fao.org\)](#), September 2021

²³ Michael Fakhri, [The UN summit on food systems took two years to plan. It’s offered nothing to help feed families | Food security | The Guardian](#)

²⁴ UN Special Rapporteur on the right to Food. Report to the UN General Assembly, UN General Assembly document A/76/237, p. 9-17.

effects of inflation in consumer food prices stemming from the economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the measures put in place to contain it.²⁵

2022/2023

In 2022, Russia's invasion of Ukraine added another layer to the systemic food crises, as food and fuel prices soared. The readings of this new dimension of crisis, and accordingly the scope and emphasis of action, are very different among the relevant actors. For several months attention primarily centered on the [FAO Food Price index](#), and concerns over disrupted supply chains for food, fertilizer and fuels, with strong calls from FAO leadership to keep global value chains open and refrain from export restrictions.

The UN Secretary General convened a [Global Crisis Response Group on Food, Finance and Energy](#) (GCRG).²⁶ On the GCRG food workstream, activities focussed on the [Black Sea Initiative](#) and to unlock fertilizer trade and production. The Secretary General proposed a two-pronged approach in his [Second Brief](#) on the crisis: 1) “bring stability to global markets, reduce volatility and tackle the uncertainty of commodity prices and the rising cost of debt” and 2) “Increase people and countries’ capacity to cope. This means helping the most severely exposed countries help their poor and vulnerable populations, by increasing countries’ fiscal space and liquidity access”.²⁷

Although UN senior management recognized the multilayered nature of intertwined crises, the proposed actions are mostly shaped in a crisis management mode, which do not address the structural and systemic vulnerabilities of food, trade and financial systems – no new mistake in the history of UN and other humanitarian and development agencies.

For [CSIPM](#), Dee Woods from the UK Landworkers Alliance and La Via Campesina stated at a Joint High-Level event of CFS and the UN General Assembly in New York in July 2022: “**This is the third food price crisis in 15 years.** Failure to deal with the structural causes of the crises in 2008 and 2011 means we are once again facing the unacceptable situation of millions more being pushed into hunger. Each crisis exposes not only the inability of the agro-industrial food system to respond to successive crises, but also that it has contributed to creating them. Countries that suffer from debt and dependency on food imports are particularly affected leaving them with no means to cope.”²⁸

IPES Food pointed in a [first assessment](#) from May 2022 to **four structural weaknesses that are leaving food systems vulnerable to price shocks**: 1) food import dependencies, 2) path dependencies in production systems, 3) opaque, dysfunctional, and speculation-prone grain markets, and 4) vicious cycles of conflict, climate change, poverty, and food insecurity. “These flaws were already visible in the 2007-2008 global food price crisis, the subsequent 2010-2012 price spikes, and in the 2020-2021 COVID-induced disruptions. The failure to reform food

²⁵ FAO et al., [The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2022 \(fao.org\)](#), July 2022

²⁶ Website of the [Global Crisis Response Group - United Nations](#)

²⁷ UN Secretary General, [Global impact of the war in Ukraine: Billions of people face the greatest cost-of-living crisis in a generation](#), Briefing June 2022

²⁸ CSIPM, [Ending the food emergency and preventing future crises through transformative policies - CSIPM \(csm4cfs.org\)](#)

systems and address these flaws has left millions of people critically vulnerable to shocks, which are likely to mount and intensify over the coming years.”²⁹

The CSIPM started a second popular consultation with all regions to understand the impact of this new layer of crisis on communities and territories and to gather their guidance for articulating political demands and proposals at the global level. The new global report [Voices from the ground 2: transformative solutions to the global systemic food crises](#), published in October 2022, synthesized the rich analysis and recommendations that emerged from the consultations, providing evidence from people and their realities that starkly contrasts with the dominant narratives regarding the nature of the current food price crisis.³⁰

The report highlights how, amid the food crises of recent years, governmental support disproportionately favored the corporate sector, while neglecting small-scale food producers. Despite some state measures, solidarity actions undertaken by local communities and organizations of food producers, workers, women and Indigenous Peoples took over the state’s duty of realizing human rights. The key contributions of small-scale food producers, engaged in food sovereignty and agroecological transition, remain unrecognized and unsupported.

The emergence of this new layer of crisis, intensified calls for [a globally coordinated policy response](#).³¹ The CFS Plenary 50 Ministerial Segment was held under this topic, but the new geopolitical tensions made it impossible to conclude the discussions. Finally, in December 2022, a reconvened CFS Plenary found a [minimal compromise](#), acknowledging and leveraging the convening power of the CFS to foster policy coordination at global scale.³²

The ongoing discussions on the new CFS Multi-Year Plan of Work in 2023 have demonstrated a strong support from Member States and other participants in **the CFS to finally take on a global policy coordination function in addressing food crises** through specific mechanism and actions. It is expected that the CFS Plenary in October 2023 will adopt a decision, one that should have been taken three years earlier.

EXACERBATING STRUCTURAL INEQUALITIES AND SYSTEMIC DISCRIMINATION

In his [Thematic report to the UN Human Rights Council](#) in 2023, UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food assessed the many forms and impacts of violence and conflict in food systems. “Systemic violence and structural inequality in food systems are a central feature of a global economy that is supported by relationships of dependence among individuals, countries, international financial institutions and corporations.”³³

The Rapporteur emphasized that “human rights law requires scrutinizing how people are made poor, vulnerable or marginalized. How is inequality produced? Structural inequality is not a natural occurrence or anomalous. It is produced by systems, including food systems.”

²⁹ IPES Food Report, [Another perfect storm? \(ipes-food.org\)](#), May 2022

³⁰ CSIPM, [Voices from the ground 2- transformative solutions to the global systemic food crises](#), October 2022

³¹ HLPE, [The Impacts on global food security and nutrition of the military conflict in Ukraine](#), April 2022

³² [A CSIPM update on the reconvened CFS 50th plenary session - CSIPM \(csm4cfs.org\)](#), December 2022

³³ UN Special Rapporteur on the right to Food. Report to the UN Human Rights Council, A/HRC/52/40

The report further examines how food systems rely on a political economy of multiple dependencies, extractivism and discrimination.

Cui bono? This very short Roman question asks: For *whom* is this good? Attorneys and judges, any person interested in issues of justice, are frequently asking this question. Who is benefitting from the situation? **Who are the crises profiteers?** Investigative research on this question has uncovered scandalous findings, and they seem to be only the tip of the systemic iceberg.

- **Profiting from pain.** An [Oxfam's research report](#), published in May 2022, found that:
 - Billionaires have seen their fortunes increase as much in 24 months as they did in 23 years.
 - Billionaires in the food and energy sectors have seen their fortunes increase by a billion dollars every two days. Food and energy prices have increased to their highest levels in decades. 62 new food billionaires have been created.
 - The richest 10 men have greater wealth than the poorest 40% of humanity combined.
 - The richest 20 billionaires are worth more than the entire GDP of sub-Saharan Africa.
 - Total billionaire wealth is now the equivalent of 13.9% of global gross domestic product (GDP), up from 4.4% in 2000.³⁴
- **Food speculators.** Analysis shows hedge funds were some of the biggest winners from the global food price spike that followed Russia's invasion of Ukraine. A group of ten leading 'momentum-driven' hedge funds made an estimated \$1.9 billion trading on the food price spike at the start of the Ukraine war that drove millions into hunger, a [recent analysis](#) by *Unearthed* and Lighthouse Reports has found.³⁵
 - Olivier De Schutter, UN special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, [commented on this report](#): "Hedge funds and financial speculators have made obscene profits by betting on hunger and exacerbating it. That cannot be right. At the start of the Ukraine war, financial investors piled into grains and commodities in large numbers, seeking to capitalise on uncertainty and rising food prices, and they hit the jackpot."³⁶
- **Pension Funds Fuel Hunger Crisis:** An analysis by Lighthouse Reports of the accounts of more than 70 major European pension funds showed some of them may have benefitted from the food price crisis. The related article in the Dutch outlet Follow the Money opens with a quote from the annual report of the Rabobank Pension fund: "2021 was an excellent year for the commodities category." Its investments in commodities, such as energy and agricultural products, provided the fund with a

³⁴ Oxfam, [Oxfam Media Brief - EN - Profiting From Pain, Davos 2022 Part 2.pdf \(oi-files-d8-prod.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com\)](#), May 2022

³⁵ Greenpeace, [Top hedge funds made \\$1.9bn on grains before Ukraine war food price spike - Unearthed \(greenpeace.org\)](#), April 2023

³⁶ Lighthouse, [Exposed: the hedge funds cashing in on the food price spike - Lighthouse Reports](#), April 2023

return of 43 percent, around six times as much as the average total return of Dutch pension funds.³⁷

- **Hunger profiteers:** A “[giant leap](#)” in [global food prices](#) caused by Russia’s invasion of [Ukraine](#) has helped three members of the super-rich Cargill family, who majority-own one of the world’s largest food and meat processor companies, join the ranks of the world’s 500 richest people.³⁸ Already the year before, the crop giant Cargill reported its [biggest profit](#) in 156-year history.³⁹



- **A corporate cartel fertilizes food inflation:** A recent research from IATP and GRAIN for 2022 shows that the world’s largest fertilizer firms ramped up their margins and more than tripled their profits from US\$14 billion before the COVID-19 pandemic to US\$28 billion in 2021, and then to astounding US\$49 billion in 2022.⁴⁰

- **Energy crisis profiteers:** According to BBC, oil and gas giant [Shell has reported record annual profits](#) after energy prices surged last year following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Profits hit \$39.9 billion in 2022, double the previous year's total and the highest in its 115-year history.⁴¹

The [Guardian reported in October 2022](#) that profits at the world’s seven biggest oil companies have soared to nearly \$173 billion so far this year as Russia’s war on Ukraine pushed up energy prices, according to estimates from analysts.⁴²

- While the Human-driven climate crisis is [fueling the worst drought in 40 years at the Horn of Africa](#), with five consecutive years of below-average rainfall, [private jet sales are likely to reach highest ever level in 2023](#). The global fleet has more than doubled in two decades, with more private jet flights made last year than ever before.

³⁷ Lighthouse, [Pension Funds Fuel Hunger Crisis - Lighthouse Reports](#), October 2022

³⁸ The Guardian, [Soaring food prices push more Cargill family members on to world’s richest 500 list | The super-rich | The Guardian](#), April 2022

³⁹ Bloomberg, [Crop Giant Cargill Reports Biggest Profit in 156-Year History - Bloomberg](#), August 2021

⁴⁰ IATP and GRAIN, [A corporate cartel fertilizes food inflation | IATP](#), May 2023

⁴¹ BBC, [Shell reports highest profits in 115 years - BBC News](#), February 2023

⁴² The Guardian, [Profits at world’s seven biggest oil firms soar to almost £150bn this year | Oil and gas companies | The Guardian](#), October 2022

All these unconceivable situations are happening in a time that has been called by the UN Secretary General the “[largest cost-of-living crisis of the Twenty-First century to date](#)”.⁴³ Yet for some, this has been the largest profit-making period of the century.

Given that these examples of corporate greed and abuse are open to the public, and demonstrate the deep contradictions between the ultra-rich corporate world and the hundreds of millions of households struggling with food inflation, energy prices, increasing rent and the cost-of-living, **what should we expect from the UN as a global public institution?** At a minimum, decisive efforts towards corporate regulation and accountability, economic and tax justice, a profound reform of the debt architecture, and protecting the UN itself against corporate capture.

In 2023, with [the FAO global food price](#) index showing slow and steady decline, there was some hope in the air. However, **food price inflation remains a significant burden** for the less wealthy population in many countries. Moreover, the systemic food crisis is further compounded by the **systemic debt crisis**, particularly impacting countries with high external debts and heavy import dependencies. Consequently, these nations face an ever-shrinking fiscal space, limiting their ability to implement national programs for social security and support for small-scale producers and other vulnerable constituencies.

An [in-depth analysis published by IPES Food](#) in March 2023 points to extremely worrying developments: about 60% of low-income countries, and 30% of middle-income countries, were considered at high risk of (or already in) debt distress. Global public debt is at its highest levels in almost sixty years, with the world's poorest countries having seen debt servicing costs surge by 35% in 2022.⁴⁴ With **debt servicing costs projected to keep rising into 2024**, the report warns the worst is still to come.⁴⁵ The report identifies four main drivers in the **vicious cycle between unsustainable debt and unstainable food systems**: 1) import dependencies and dollar dependencies, 2) extractive financial flows, 3) boom-bust commodity cycles and corporate consolidation, and 4) climate breakdown.

What does all this mean for people and communities in their territories? The results from the [CSIPM consultations in 2020 and 2022](#) do not leave any doubt:

- The dramatic increase in inequality across and within all regions is one of the most prominent effects of the failing global economic and food system. Among those most affected are small-scale food producers, food and agricultural workers, health workers, Indigenous Peoples, women and youth. Many of them were classified as “essential workers” during the pandemic and were at the forefront of feeding populations; yet they continue to face low wages, food insecurity, and lack of access to health services and social protection.

⁴³ UN Secretary General, [Global impact of the war in Ukraine: Billions of people face the greatest cost-of-living crisis in a generation](#), Briefing June 2022

⁴⁴ IPES Food Report, , [Breaking the cycle of unsustainable food systems, hunger, and debt](#), March 2023

⁴⁵ The Report indicates estimates from Finance for Development Lab which suggest that total debt servicing costs will peak at \$377 billion in 2024, and slightly decline to \$361 billion in 2026, close to 2021 levels. However, in three regions – East Asia & Pacific, Middle East & North Africa, and Sub-Saharan Africa – debt servicing is projected to keep rising through 2026.

- Multiple inequalities often combine discrimination based on class, social privilege, race and ethnicity, caste, gender, occupation, religion and age. Evidence shows that, despite the urgent need for universal access to social protection, and entitlements to fundamental rights, including the human right to food and nutrition, states failed to deliver.
- Because gender inequalities persist, women, girls and non-binary people are particularly at risk in times of crises and scarcity. Although the majority of frontline health workers in the world are women, they still face tremendous inequity in wages, health services and social protection. Moreover, many suffer from labor market discrimination, which pushes them into informal and casual employment.
- In a context of intensifying crises, conflicts and wars, sexual and gender-based violence increased. Domestic violence against women and girls intensified, often leading to unwanted pregnancies. Yet the world is now seeing a dramatic regression in terms of sexual health and reproductive rights. The recently concluded [CFS negotiations on gender equality and women's and girls' empowerment](#)⁴⁶ showed how global food decision making on the UN level is still profoundly [embedded in deeply patriarchal and discriminatory attitudes](#).⁴⁷
- Indigenous Peoples in all regions faced increased displacement from their territories and attacks on their environments by corporate interests. Indigenous Peoples frequently face greater institutional neglect than other populations, which translates into more migration of Indigenous youth to cities in search of subsistence, with the consequent loss of knowledge and traditions.
- Many migrants travel on deadly routes, enduring abuse, unsafe working conditions, and extortion. Those in conflict zones are forced to flee, seeing their fields and food infrastructures destroyed. Migrants, refugees, and displaced persons face discrimination and lack of protection in many forms.⁴⁸

The ongoing **systemic food crisis is a product of policy failures and omissions**. It has been framed as a **cost-of-living crisis**, but it is **also an inequalities and dependencies crisis, and strongly linked to the global debt and climate crises**. The lack of robust regulation of financial markets, food speculation and corporate concentration and accountability has significantly contributed to the new layers of systemic food crises. The dominance of unjust and unsustainable debt regimes, coupled with unfair trade regimes and structural import dependencies, has led many countries into debt distress, leaving them without fiscal space. The weakness of national and global policy responses to effectively stop the main drivers of climate change is leading to catastrophes, now and the future.

⁴⁶ CSIPM, [Women and Gender Diversities - CSIPM \(csm4cfs.org\)](#)

⁴⁷ CSIPM, [Women and Gender Diversities Working Group Statement on CFS Gender Equality and Women's and Girls' Empowerment - CSIPM \(csm4cfs.org\)](#), October 2022

⁴⁸ CSIPM, [Voices from the ground 2- transformative solutions to the global systemic food crises](#), October 2022

While there is no lack of analysis, demands and proposals for global policy coordination to help steer food system transformations into a new direction, powerful interests and forces persist in perpetuating the consolidation of industrial, corporate-driven food systems. Complacently embracing “[strategically silent](#)” regarding corporate power, as it was coined in the context of the UN FSS⁴⁹, is not an option. Systemic analysis and change cannot shy away from existing power and wealth asymmetries, they must be confronted to find true solutions.

As three UN Special Rapporteurs on the Right to Food pointed out in [a joint article](#): “For over a decade, farmers, fishers, pastoralists, and food workers have been demanding a food system transformation rooted in food sovereignty and agroecology. This vision is based on redesigning, re-diversifying, and re-localizing farming systems. It requires that economic assumptions be questioned, human rights be protected, and power be rebalanced.”⁵⁰

In conclusion: The deliberate omissions and blocking of decisive action in the fields of global policy coordination and profound food systems transformation have had deep impacts on communities all over the world, fostering structural inequalities and systemic discrimination. The main stumbling block for taking action towards more resilient, diversified, localized and agroecological food systems is the economic interests of those who benefit from further consolidating the corporate agenda. The scandalous profits made by large companies from the ongoing crises serve as illustrative examples of the cynicism embodied in the system.

5. HOW TO REORGANIZE GLOBAL FOOD GOVERNANCE: TOWARDS WHICH DIRECTION OF FOOD SYSTEM TRANSFORMATION?

MULTILATERALISM VS. MULTISTAKEHOLDERISM

The current controversy is primarily between two different approaches: attempts to democratize multilateralism vs. attempts to replace traditional multilateralism by multistakeholderism.

ATTEMPTS TO DEMOCRATIZE MULTILATERALISM

In response to the Food price crisis 2007/08, **the UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS) was reformed and re-established in 2009** as the foremost inclusive intergovernmental and international governance platform on food security and nutrition, with a strong mandate for the progressive realization of the right to adequate food. Since then, the CFS has been a space of a more democratic and inclusive multilateralism, providing an effective global policy platform to debate issues of food security and nutrition among Member States and all relevant actors. It has produced a number of policy outcomes through

⁴⁹ Clapp, J., Noyes, I. & Grant, Z. The Food Systems Summit’s Failure to Address Corporate Power. *Development* 64, 192–198 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41301-021-00303-2>

⁵⁰ Michael Fakhri, Hilal Elver and Olivier De Schutter, [The UN Food Systems Summit: How Not to Respond to the Urgency of Reform | Inter Press Service \(ipsnews.net\)](#)

inclusive policy convergence processes that have collectively shaped a new global narrative on food security and nutrition.

The CFS, while seen by many as **the most advanced version of inclusive global governance** as it transformed the status of the most marginalized groups in decision-making from observers to active participants. However, some influential governments and senior representatives of Rome-based agencies and the UN consider it a problematic setting. They argue that the CFS has **opened the door too much to the autonomous and self-organized participation** by constituencies of peasants and smallholder farmers, pastoralists, fisherfolk, Indigenous Peoples, agricultural and food workers, landless, women, youth, consumers, urban food insecure and NGOs that participate in the CFS through the CSIPM. Due to these concerns and objections, the governance model of the CFS has not been replicated in any other governing body or technical committee linked to the Rome-based agencies.



The clear division of roles and responsibilities between **Member States as the decision makers** and the other key actors as participants, **the huge and continued engagement of social movements**, civil society and Indigenous Peoples in the Committee's deliberation processes, and the firm anchoring in a **human rights mandate** can be seen as key strengths of the CFS and its model of democratic governance. While policy processes and discussions have never been easy in the CFS, mirroring the common weaknesses of multilateral negotiations and often the geopolitical tensions among Member States, it has been a first attempt for a more democratic and inclusive global food governance structure, and has been effectively defended so far by those members and participants who appreciate its strengths by acknowledging its shortcomings.

ATTEMPTS TO REPLACE TRADITIONAL MULTILATERALISM BY MULTISTAKEHOLDERISM

During the past two decades, the corporate sector and its front groups have pushed for increasing influence in global food governance, especially in the United Nations.⁵¹ **The governance proposal to advance this corporate agenda is 'multistakeholderism'**, as it

⁵¹ See for a more detailed analysis: Liaison Group of the People's Autonomous Response: [Multistakeholderism and the corporate capture of global food governance – what is at risk in 2023](#), May 2023

has been called by its critics⁵², or ‘**networked multilateralism**’ as it has been called by its promoters. It contains an elaborate and subtle narrative: “We are all in the same boat in confronting the multiple crises of the planet. We should all sit around at the same table; nobody should be excluded. The corporate sector has become so critical and relevant to the system, they must become part of the decision-making structures to find sustainable and effective solutions. The resolution to the huge planetarian problems requires financial resources that governments cannot gather alone.”

The **corporate and associated philanthropic sector is attractive to the United Nations** because they can provide new resources that the multilateral system needs, due to the increasing reliance of the UN on voluntary financial contributions. For big corporate actors, it provides an opportunity to distract from their reputation problems as systemic exploiters, polluters and crisis profiteers by grabbing the legitimacy of the UN and obtain UN-backed support for their allegedly SDG-compliant investment strategies. Usually, the term “private sector participation” is used in these contexts, but the leading voices in these discussions undoubtedly have been the [big corporate actors and their front groups](#).⁵³

Multistakeholderism blurs the distinctions between public interest and corporate profit, between the rich and the excluded, and between governments and companies. When everyone is equally responsible, it becomes impossible to effectively track states' obligations, especially their human rights obligations. As a result, accountability and liability are out of reach. Power asymmetries and conflicts of interest are ignored. In this sense, multistakeholderism is an attempt to legitimize and institutionalize the corporate capture of global food governance.

Making the case: The Food System Summit

One decisive and alarming development in **anchoring the multistakeholderism approach in the food domain** was the [UN Food Systems Summit \(UN FSS\)](#).⁵⁴ On the other side, the [countermobilization to the UNFSS](#) was a **huge and unprecedented expression of protest** against this approach, defending the foremost inclusive intergovernmental and international governance platform that was achieved with the reformed UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS).⁵⁵

The [UN Food Systems Summit](#) (UN FSS) marked a decisive and alarming milestone in **anchoring the multistakeholderism approach** within the food domain. In opposition, the [countermobilization](#) to the UNFSS was a **huge and unprecedented expression of protest** against this approach, staunchly defending the reformed UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS) as the foremost inclusive intergovernmental and international governance platform.⁵⁶

In his [detailed assessment of the FSS](#), the UN Special Rapporteur observed: “the Food Systems Summit has been driven by an understanding of science and policy that reflects a particular hierarchy of values. The process began with corporate-friendly policymakers, natural scientists

⁵² People’s Working Group on Multistakeholderism, [The Great Takeover | Transnational Institute \(tni.org\)](#), January 2022; FIAN, [Briefing Note on Multi-Stakeholder Initiatives](#), April 2020

⁵³ Liaison Group, [Exposing Corporate Capture at the UNFSS](#), 2021

⁵⁴ See more details in Section 3 of this report

⁵⁵ Webpage of the Autonomous Response to the UNFSS, [Home \(foodsystems4people.org\)](#)

⁵⁶ Webpage of the Autonomous Response to the UNFSS, [Home \(foodsystems4people.org\)](#)

and economists. Later, Member States were brought into the process to work within a set of parameters determined by that original corporate-friendly group. Human rights were introduced very late in the process. The Summit process omitted proposals tackling two fundamental areas: corporate power and trade policy.”⁵⁷

The [FSS and its role in resetting power in global food governance](#) has been critically assessed by a significant number of academic and journalistic articles in 2021 and 2022.⁵⁸ A central area of attention was the Summit’s [failure to address the concentration and expansion of corporate power](#) and its impact on global food governance and multilateralism⁵⁹ in general.

The unwritten storyboard of the FSS+2 is very likely to unfold as follows: Member State representatives will congratulate the UN Deputy Secretary General for leading the process as well as the new and old FAO Director General for being re-elected. They will present their own achievements on the national level, mindful of their audience at home. A series of special and side events will showcase the illusory richness of the multistakeholderism approach. As in 2021, there will once again not be an intergovernmentally agreed outcome. However, it will appear as if all (or close to all) governments are in support of the process, collectively leading to a de facto and ex-post-legitimation of the FSS. The UN Deputy Secretary General and the FAO Director General will report the large support of member states to the 2023 SDG Summit in September in New York, thereby justifying and advancing the multistakeholderism approach taken by the Summit itself.

The **critical questions** on this approach will be left for informal talks in the FAO corridors, and for the interested actors who prefer to stay outside. Some of these questions are:

- Can you explain to me what the concept of the “UN” means in this context? Is anything that is included in the multiple FSS Coalitions of Actions now under the UN brand? Who made these decisions, based on what criteria, and where and when were they made? To whom are these Coalitions accountable?
- Can the UN afford to organize such a Summit in these times without using it to achieve an inter-governmentally agreed response to the enormous challenges this aggravated food crisis poses on people, countries, and ecosystems?
- Why is it that there are no discussions foreseen about regulation of financial markets and food speculation or addressing concentration of corporate power in food systems?

The Autonomous Response to the Food Systems Summit will continue to express its deep concerns and strong demands, and will hold [public events](#) before the FSS Stocktaking moment in July 2023.

⁵⁷ UN Special Rapporteur on the right to Food. Report to the UN General Assembly, UN General Assembly document A/76/237

⁵⁸ Montenegro de Wit, M., Canfield, M., Iles, A. *et al.* Editorial: Resetting Power in Global Food Governance: The UN Food Systems Summit. *Development* 64, 153–161 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41301-021-00316-x>

⁵⁹ Clapp, J., Noyes, I. & Grant, Z. The Food Systems Summit’s Failure to Address Corporate Power. *Development* 64, 192–198 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41301-021-00303-2>; See also more articles under: [Resources \(foodsystems4people.org\)](#)

INDUSTRIAL FOOD SYSTEMS CONSOLIDATION VS. HUMAN RIGHTS BASED AGROECOLOGICAL TRANSFORMATION.

The way food governance is organized is intrinsically linked with the question of directionality, as it involves crucial aspects of participation (who is there with which interest), and power dynamics (who shapes the agenda and who decides).

DIVERGENCE AND CONVERGENCE: WHICH PRINCIPLES PREVAIL?

All actors in the food domain have their own perspectives, intentions, and proposals, and it would be naïve to assume that all of them voluntarily or automatically head into the same direction, or that the sum of all these perspectives will be a symphonic stream without major tensions and contractions.



Therefore, policy convergence building towards common principles and policy guidance among all actors is a very difficult exercise, as the CFS negotiations have shown. This challenge has become particularly evident over the past four years. If basic principles of the common space, such as the human rights mandate of the CFS and the United Nations, are put into question, while other UN principles, such as taking decisions by consensus, are observed, the process gets trapped.

In such situations, the risk -and, in fact, the severe damage that has been caused- is that small groups of countries can practically hijack the CFS by objecting to specific human rights language, language under the guise of the consensus principle. This has resulted in significant harm, as witnessed in the recently concluded CFS negotiations on gender equality and women's and girls' empowerment. Religious governments impeded progress by opposing language on intersectionality and gender diversities. Similar situations have arisen in past negotiations, such as those related to youth, where a bloc of countries denied the recognition of peasants' rights or Indigenous Peoples' rights, despite the alignment with respective Declarations of the UN General Assembly. These actions have severely undermined the integrity of the process.

While it is understandable that not every demand can be accepted by all Member States, fundamental principles, such as human rights, must not be undermined. Failing to uphold these principles results in the perpetuation of structural discrimination and systemic violence that deprives affected constituencies of their rights.

The directionality debate between industrial, corporate-dominated food systems vs. human rights-based and agroecologically-oriented food systems was at the heart of the two major

CFS negotiation processes on food systems and nutrition and on agroecological and other innovative approaches.

Since there was no consensus on using the concept of “food systems transformation” and strong objections to using the term “transforming unsustainable food systems”, governments found an almost unreadable compromise text which faced criticism from the CSIPM, but got support from the Private Sector Mechanism:

“The process towards achieving sustainable food systems that meet the dietary needs of populations, recalling that transformation of food systems should be encouraged in a coherent manner, as appropriate and in accordance with and dependent on national contexts and capacities, require policy, institutional and behavioral changes which are context-specific among food system actors.”⁶⁰

In its [comprehensive assessment](#), the CSIPM came to the conclusion that the new Guidelines failed to pave the way to profound food systems transformation.⁶¹

THE TRANSITION FROM INDUSTRIAL TO AGROECOLOGICAL FOOD SYSTEMS

A growing wealth of literature can be consulted on this topic. The imperative to change course from uniformity to diversity and to realize a paradigm shift from industrial agriculture to diversified agroecological systems was well described in an [IPES Food Report in 2016](#).⁶²

A comprehensive process of global and regional [consultations on agroecology was held by FAO between 2014 and 2018](#), with [impressive work](#) on many levels⁶³ resulting in the negotiation and adoption of the [10 Elements of Agroecology](#) by FAO Council in 2019.⁶⁴

Agroecology gained prominence at the CFS in 2016/17, following years of persistent efforts to include the topic on the agenda. It garnered significant support among Member States, which led to the request of the CFS Plenary in 2017 for the HLPE to produce its [Report on “Agroecological and other innovative approaches for sustainable agriculture and food systems that enhance food security and nutrition”](#), published in 2019⁶⁵. Agroecology also held a prominent position in the HLPE report on Promoting youth engagement and employment in agriculture and food systems, [published in 2021](#).⁶⁶

While these reports provided ample evidence, as well as ambitious and feasible pathways for the agroecological transition, the negotiations within the CFS were very difficult. Brazil and Argentina joined the established bloc of the USA, Canada, New Zealand, Russia and the

⁶⁰ CFS, [Voluntary Guidelines on Food Systems and Nutrition](#), January 2021, Paragraph 24,

⁶¹ CSIPM, [Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples: New CFS Voluntary Guidelines on Food Systems and Nutrition fail to pave the way to profound transformation - CSIPM \(csm4cfs.org\)](#), April 2021

⁶² IPES Food, [From Uniformity to Diversity](#) - A paradigm shift from industrial agriculture to diversified agroecological systems, 2016

⁶³ FAO, [FAO’s work on agroecology](#)

⁶⁴ FAO, [The 10 elements of agroecology \(fao.org\)](#), December 2019

⁶⁵ HLPE, [Agroecological and other innovative approaches for sustainable agriculture and food systems that enhance food security and nutrition \(fao.org\)](#), 2019

⁶⁶ HLPE, [Promoting youth engagement and employment in agriculture and food systems \(fao.org\)](#), 2021

Private Sector Mechanism, systematically attacking the agroecology approach and successfully lobbying for heavily watered-down policy recommendations.

Jointly, this bloc protected corporate interests by limiting the scope and support to agroecology within the policy recommendations, ensuring that no wording would be agreed to that could damage the corporate agenda. They effectively blocked the inclusion of terms around reducing or phasing out pesticides, limiting or regulating corporate power or market concentration, or giving any preference to peasants, small-scale food producers, their rights, local food systems or territorial markets. The CSIPM Working Groups conducted a comprehensive [assessment of the Agroecology](#) and the [Youth policy](#) processes, indicating the severe blockades on key topics and the shortcomings in terms of outcomes.

These developments in the CFS mirror the advancing consolidation of the industrial food systems agenda in the larger Rome context, with a particular lead of FAO. In his [speech to the FAO Council](#) on 24 April 2023, the **Director General** hailed the increased collaboration with the corporate world: “The past year has seen great progress in FAO’s engagement with the private sector. As we build on lessons learned and prioritize new directions, 2023 will be a year of expanded and transformative private sector engagement.”⁶⁷

He particularly underlined the importance of a newly established Private Sector Advisory Board and of the **World Food Forum** and suggested “to change the scale of the Forum for it **to become the world event on food and agrifood systems issues**, with a strong focus on youth, private sector partnership and investment, and science and innovation.”⁶⁸ It is worth noting that the World Food Forum, with strong pressure from FAO leadership, has displaced the CFS Plenary from the most visible global day in Rome, the World Food Day on 16 October.

This approach is fully supported by **Deputy Director-General Beth Bechdol, responsible for FAO Private Sector Strategy**. In her words to the recently appointed FAO Private Sector Advisory Group, she encouraged the representatives, several of them from multinationals and their front groups, to “point to possible opportunities and areas of improvement to complement each other’s strengths to jointly tackle global challenges and achieve ambitious goals.”⁶⁹

Chief Economist Maximo Torero has never left any doubt about his full support to this strategy, and foresees that “[The Second Green Revolution will be digitized](#)”.

For the top leadership in FAO, and despite the geopolitical rivalry between China and USA, the further support for **corporate-driven industrial food systems has become a major institutional priority** during the past period and will be enhanced and consolidated in the next years.

Remarkably, this ever-increasing corporate influence in FAO and its bias towards the globalized market value chain model enters an **institution that lacks a robust**

⁶⁷ FAO Director General, [Speech at 172nd Session of the FAO Council Opening Statement](#), 24 April 2023

⁶⁸ FAO Director General, [Speech at 172nd Session of the FAO Council Opening Statement](#), 24 April 2023

⁶⁹ [FAO - News Article: FAO Director-General addresses first meeting of the informal Private Sector Advisory Group](#), 31 January 2023

accountability framework for corporate actors, clear rules for full transparency for the ways of engagement, as well as effective safeguards against conflict of interest.

While prospects for broad and sustained support from FAO for transformational change towards agroecological food systems are not promising, the **realities in the territories are different**. The majority of world's small-scale food producers have been working without substantive public support for generations, in often adverse national and local conditions.

The agroecology movement will continue to grow, and to get broader public support, since localized, diverse and ecologically and socially sound food systems are more resilient to crises. With the advancing climate collapse, industrial food systems will get under greater public scrutiny, and agroecological approaches will get increasing acknowledged. It is a pity that FAO is unwilling to support the movement, despite the great work that this same institution started in times past.

Another source of hope is the work on human rights and the right to adequate food. Despite being side-lined in the FAO for several years now, resurging interest from a number of Member States can help to promote renewed commitment and facilitate the shaping of a new agenda. This momentum will be further strengthened within the context of the approaching 20th anniversary of the [Right to Food Guidelines](#), adopted by FAO Council in 2004.⁷⁰

As outlined in a [recent Op-ed](#) by the UN Special Rapporteur, the President of the Brazilian Food and Nutrition Security Council and the Secretary General of FIAN, the Right to Food Guidelines have shown how to address structural drivers of discrimination and inequalities in food systems. These guidelines pioneered the national implementation of economic, social, and cultural human rights and have inspired countless national policies and legal reforms. The guidelines also sparked the development of a full body of human rights-based norms and policies adopted by the UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS), UN human rights bodies, and the UN General



⁷⁰ FAO, The Right to Food, [Guidelines | The Right to Food | Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations \(fao.org\)](#)

Assembly, including the rights of [women](#), [peasants](#), [Indigenous Peoples](#), [fishers](#), and [other constituencies](#).⁷¹

Together, they built an [enriched normative framework](#) which definitively gives substantial guidance for how to direct food systems transformation in a human rights perspective.⁷² The HLPE Report on Building a global narrative on food security and nutrition points in this direction.⁷³

In many countries, a combination of international and national efforts have translated this new global narrative on food security and nutrition and the enriched right to food and human rights framework into a broad range of national public policies and programs, including: overcoming gender and racial discrimination, ensuring decent incomes and social protection, school meal programs sourced from family farms, securing land and water rights of women, peasants, Indigenous Peoples, pastoralists, and fisher communities, and initiatives to support agroecology and food sovereignty, with active participation of grassroots social actors.

The 75th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Right in December 2023 could be an important moment for changing direction. The UN High Commissioner for human rights has proposed a “[human rights economy](#)”, with a new emphasis on economic, social and cultural rights. The UN Special Rapporteur recalls the pending promise of article 1 UDHR: “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. Nonetheless, the world is rife with discrimination and inequality.”⁷⁴

In this era of multiple, complex and interconnected crises, the necessity for governments and the UN to heed the voices of the most impacted constituencies has never been more critical. A shift in direction is imperative, endorsing their pleas and initiatives for a genuine transformation of food systems. This transformation must be rooted in the respect for all human rights and the care for people and the planet, and should be directed towards agroecology, food sovereignty, biodiversity, gender justice, diversity, youth empowerment, climate justice, and both economic and social justice, across all facets of food systems.

⁷¹ [A Human-Rights Approach to the Global Food Crisis by Michael Fakhri, Elisabetta Recine and Sofia Monsalve - Project Syndicate \(project-syndicate.org\)](#), June 2023

⁷² CSM, [Civil Society Report on the use and implementation of the Right to Food Guidelines - CSIPM \(csm4cfs.org\)](#), October 2018

⁷³ HLPE, [Food security and nutrition: building a global narrative towards 2030](#), June 2020

⁷⁴ UN Special Rapporteur on the right to Food. Report to the UN Human Rights Council, A/HRC/52/40, December 2022

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