



The Food System Summit's Disconnection From People's Real Needs

Michael Fakhri^{1,2}

Accepted: 15 March 2022 / Published online: 17 August 2022
© The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Nature B.V. 2022

Abstract

The United Nations (UN) Food Systems Summit held in September 2021 has left the world with a jumble of ideas and no clear path forward for transforming the world's food systems. The Summit was touted as the ultimate place to provide the world with solutions – but it never clarified the problems with the dominant food systems leaving participants with no coherent or cohesive framework. Most distressingly, the Food Systems Summit did not put the COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing food crisis anywhere on its agenda. In this Policy Perspective, the author, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, provides his first-hand account of the effects of the Summit not focusing on people's immediate needs during a food crisis. The author briefly touches upon the Summit's role in the global debate around meat consumption. This debate exemplifies how the Summit did very little to change the substance of global food debates. Instead, the Summit can be understood as an inter-corporate contest that did not have any substantive regard for social justice or human rights.

Keywords Global governance · Human rights · Sustainable intensive agriculture · Meat consumption

Introduction

As the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, in this Policy Perspective, I describe my experience of and thoughts about the 2021 United Nations Food Systems Summit (henceforth referred to as the 'Summit'). I explain why I believe that the

✉ Michael Fakhri
mfakhri@uoregon.edu

¹ University of Oregon School of Law, Eugene, USA

² Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Geneva, UN, Switzerland

world will be better off if it moves on from the 2021 Summit. Communities, peoples, and governments will do well to focus their efforts on issues of power in the current food systems and the root cause of the problems within those systems.

The Idea of a Food Systems Summit

On 16 October 2019, World Food Day, the United Nations (UN) Secretary-General announced that he would convene in the year 2021 a Food Systems Summit. The Secretary-General highlighted the fact that both hunger and obesity rates were on the rise (UN, 2019). International summits are a way that the Secretary-General can influence the global political agenda, and this was his opportunity to direct the world's governments towards the common objective of increasing access to nutritious food and eliminating hunger (under the UN Sustainable Development Goals).

Little did the Secretary-General know that a few months after his announcement, the SARS-CoV-2 virus would emerge and strike the world, immediately raising the stakes of the Summit. The international consensus is that the pandemic exposed the pre-existing fragilities within food systems and the immediate effects of climate change. As the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, I saw the response of governments and businesses to the pandemic. I witnessed how their response amplified injustice and inequalities, with women and children from low-income households and marginalized communities bearing the brunt of the impact and economic shock. Pandemic policies and market disruptions made it harder for small-scale food producers to access the resources that they needed and sell their products. In some cases, it led to an increase in evictions and large-scale land acquisitions. At times during the past two years, food prices rose to record-breaking levels. The closure and disruption of schools caused an increase in hunger amongst children. Lack of adequate social and safety protection measures combined with restrictions of movements disproportionately negatively impacted frontline food producers and workers. While they are essential workers, they tend to be poorly paid and treated as expendable.

Witnessing the Summit

The Summit was ultimately held in September 2021 in New York, USA. Over an 18-month period, I witnessed the Summit being organized. This was because as the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, I was invited by the Summit Secretariat to provide my independent advice to the people leading different parts of the Summit preparation. Based on the scope of my mandate as defined by the Human Rights Council and General Assembly, I felt that I had little choice but to accept the invitation.¹

¹ For my official assessments of the Summit process see Fakhri, M. (2020, December 24). *Vision of the Special Rapporteur*. UN General Assembly. Retrieved March 3, 2022, from <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/46/33>; Fakhri, M. (2021, July 27). *Food Systems and human Rights*. UN General Assembly. Retrieved March 3, 2022, from <https://undocs.org/A/76/237>.

During the entire time eighteen-month period, no one could clearly articulate the purposes and goals of the Summit. Moreover, the process behind organizing and structuring the Summit was notoriously opaque (Andersson et al., 2022). Governments were confused, people were confused, and at times, the Summit leadership was confused. By engaging with all aspects of the Summit, I was a centre point for discussions amongst the Summit organizers, governments, international organizations, advocacy groups, and social movements.

Some people went into the Summit hoping that it was a real opportunity for change. Previous international food summits focused on food security issues, attending primarily to questions of agricultural production and hunger. By framing the issue in terms of food systems, the 2021 Summit appeared to have set its sight on a more ambitious scope of societal and economic transformation. The Summit did bring to the attention of governments the importance of developing coherent national food plans. National food plans could be transformative because food is central to every aspect of life and cuts across many sectors. Because most countries do not have a coherent national approach to governing food, thousands of people were attracted to the Summit preparation process to share and develop their ideas about how to transform food systems for the better.

Power Play and The Marginalization of Human Rights

The Summit was touted by its organizers and the UN Deputy-Secretary Amina Mohammed as based on an innovative approach for organizing UN conferences. The Summit was led and designed as a “multi-stakeholder” process in which businesses, civil society, and governments were formal equals. In reality, the Summit was led entirely by individual experts working in non-governmental organizations. The experts were primarily drawn from corporate-friendly organizations who collaborated through the World Economic Forum with close relationships with mega-philanthropies, such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation. Governments played a very minor role in the lead up to and the Summit itself.

Oscillating Between Ambivalence and Hostility Towards Human Rights

When it came to human rights, the Summit leadership oscillated between hostility and ambivalence. This contradicted the sixty-year history of UN food summits, a period during which the right to food gained prominence on the agenda and civil society organizations gained clout within the process. Because the Summit was an affront against this progress, over 500 social movements representing peasants, Indigenous peoples, fishers, pastoralists, and workers along with advocacy groups (all combined comprising at least 300 million members) boycotted the Summit and organized counter-mobilizations.²

² Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples' Mechanism for relations with the UN Committee on World Food Security. (2021, May 18). *What's wrong with the United Nations Food Systems Summit in CSM's view*.

It is therefore no surprise that the Summit has left many people and governments feeling disappointed. After approximately 24 million US dollars and two years, all the Summit has offered the world is a jumble of ideas and no clear path forward. The Summit was touted as the ultimate place to provide the world with solutions – but it never clarified the nature of the problem with the current food systems, leaving participants with no coherent or cohesive framework. Remarkably, the COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing food crises was not addressed at any point during the Summit.

Although the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN has been charged with carrying out the post-Summit process, it remains unclear as to what happens between now and the post-Summit review by the UN Secretary-General in 2023 (and every subsequent two years until 2030) (Guterres, 2021). There is a risk that the Summit may have redirected attention away from more human-rights friendly institutions like the UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS) and International Labour Organisation (ILO). The new Chair of the CFS, however, is working to build stronger relationships with human rights institutions like Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the ILO. The point is that the international institutional landscape around the global governance of food is in a moment of significant flux.

Assuming Industrial Agriculture and Food Production is Part of the Solution

The Summit organizers assumed that corporations are part of the solution. However, as I have detailed in my UN report on food systems, corporations and industrial agriculture are the primary drivers of the problem with the current food systems (Fakhri, 2021a). Industrialized agriculture and food production have been a breeding ground for pathogens. Meatpacking plants around the world have fostered the pandemic, spreading the virus to nearby communities owing to poor working conditions and environmental abuses. By treating food like a commodity, industrialized agriculture has demanded greater biological homogenization. This is because the reduction of genetic diversity enables faster growth of animals and plants, and their harvesting or slaughter, and transportation to and entry into the marketplace. This is a form of monoculture that increases productivity through the simplification of nature, but it also creates ecological conditions that facilitate disease. By prioritizing efficiency, industrial agriculture drives a constant demand for more territory and large-scale monocrop farms, which pollute land, air, and water, and debase animal life. It also encourages employers to prioritize profits over workers' rights and treat people like replaceable units.

Industrial intensification was also designed to make farmers dependent on the expensive inputs provided by agrochemical companies. Four agrochemical companies control 60 per cent of the global seed market and 75 per cent of the global pesticides market (IPES, 2017; Howard, 2018). Such market concentration means that a small number of companies will unfairly control the price of seeds. Any increase in seed prices will increase the cost of farming, making it harder for farmers to turn

Retrieved March 3, 2022, from <https://www.csm4cfs.org/14024-2/> ; Global People's Summit on Food Systems (n.d.) Farmers, not corporations, feed the world. Fight for Just, Equitable, Healthy, and Sustainable Food Systems!. Hungry 4 Change. Retrieved March 3, 2022, from <https://peoplesummit.foodsov.org/>.

a profit. A higher input cost makes it harder for small farmers to access seeds. The “Big Four” seed companies also produce most of the agrochemicals associated with genetically modified seeds. Those agrochemicals reduce biodiversity, which lowers agricultural resilience, making farms more vulnerable to climate change shocks.

Ultimately, this high concentration of corporate power allows a relatively small group of people to shape markets and innovation in a way that serves the goal of shareholder profit maximization and not the public good. A number of articles have detailed the corporate sector's attempt to use the Summit to dominate UN food system governance (see, for instance, Canfield et al., 2021; Clapp et al., 2021; Dorado et al., 2021; McMichael, 2021) and others have outlined what a more democratic process for the next Summit with a focus on the CFS could look like (Guttal, 2021; McKeon, 2021).

Sustainable Intensive Agriculture vs. Industrial Agriculture

I have suggested that the 2021 Summit can also be understood as an inter-corporate contest between the newer “green” agri-food businesses (practicing so-called sustainable intensive agriculture) versus the older industrial intensive agrifood sector – with both parties substantively ignoring social justice and human rights (Fakhri, 2021b). The world's food systems have been dominated by corporations and marked by crisis for at least the last 60 years. Only now with climate change reaching a tipping point are some actors in the corporate agrifood sector deciding to change their ways. The problem they face is that current food systems are locked into patterns that pollute the environment, violate people's human rights, and maximize profits. After destroying many of the world's food systems, some transnational corporations know they have to become more sustainable, more “green.” Whereas other corporate actors are committed as much as possible to not changing their ways.

Sustainable *intensive* agriculture tries to better align with ecological goals such as soil health and increased biodiversity. Nevertheless, its methods are more of a reform of existing industrial agriculture than a transformation of food system. At best sustainable intensive agriculture redistributes power and profits away from old industries to new industries. But it does not undo the structures that put power in the hands of a small number of entrepreneurs and experts rather than the people who make food possible – the peasants, pastoralists, fishers, and workers, and mainly women from poorer households and marginalized communities. Both sustainable intensive and industrial intensive agriculture rely on capital-intensive processes and technologies, thus reflecting the status quo of the current global political economy of the food system. Both frame the problem primarily in terms of production, farm size, and scale of operation. Both rely on a theory of knowledge in which, for the most part, scientists and experts deliver knowledge to farmers.

The debate around meat at the Summit provides an example of this inter-corporate contest between industrial intensive agriculture and sustainable intensive agriculture. Indeed, moral debates and social rules about the taking of animal life, meat processing, and eating meat are some of the longest standing issues in human cultures. When it came to global policy about meat at the Summit, the green corporate sector made

very little gain over the older industrial intensive sector. And we are still left with no clear way of discussing and debating the issue of meat production and consumption through the language of human rights.

The Meat Industry's Reaction to EAT-Lancet's "Solution"

In 2019, *The Lancet* (a highly regarded, peer-reviewed medical journal) in conjunction with EAT (a well-funded non-governmental advocacy group based in Norway) organized a commission comprising of "more than 37 world-leading scientists from across the globe who share the goal of developing recommendations for a sustainable, healthy diet supported by a sustainable food system."³ The EAT-Lancet report asks the world to fundamentally shift how everyone produces, consumes and disposes of food (Willett at al., 2019). The report offers global policy recommendations, such as increase in free trade, removal of farming subsidies, decrease in livestock production and meat consumption, reclaiming unused pastureland, improved governance of land and water, decrease in food waste, and promotion of healthy plant-based diets.

The EAT-Lancet report was immediately criticized by advocacy groups and social movements that are committed to food system transformation. In sum, despite the EAT-Lancet's good intentions, the message that came out from all the well-produced images and expertly written text was, "Let them eat vegan cake." Because EAT and some of the reports' authors were disengaged from actual communities and peoples' organizations, the final report was disconnected from reality, including the challenges that people in different parts of the world face given their particular context and income level (Abhyankar, 2019; Drewnowski, 2020).

The intended audience of the report, however, may not have been the public. The report called for a "new agricultural revolution that is based on sustainable intensification" (EAT, 2019). It threw down the gauntlet challenging the existing food systems that are dominated by corporations that employ industrial intensive methods of agriculture and food production.

When the global meat industry learned that the founder and executive director of EAT, Gunhild A. Stordalen, was appointed as one of the principal Summit organizers,⁴ it immediately went into crisis management mode. Their biggest fear was that Summit would promote reduced meat consumption, vegetarianism, and veganism. Through the intrepid work of investigative journalists like Zach Boren⁵ and Lisa Held,⁶ the public learned that the global meat, dairy, and feed industries

³ EAT (n.d.). The EAT-Lancet Commission in Food, Planet and Health. EAT. Retrieved March 3, 2022, from, <https://eatforum.org/eat-lancet-commission/>.

⁴ EAT. (n.d.) *EAT at the UN Food Systems Summit 2021*. EAT. Retrieved March 3, 2022 from, <https://eatforum.org/learn-and-discover/eat-at-the-un-food-systems-summit-2021/>.

⁵ Boren, Z. (2021, September 21) *Meat industry pushes UN food summit to back factory farming*. Unearthed. Retrieved March 3, 2022 from, <https://unearthed.greenpeace.org/2021/09/21/un-food-systems-summit-meat-climate/>.

⁶ Held, L. (2021, December 9) *At an Annual Sustainability Gathering, Big Ag Describes its Efforts to Control the Narrative*. Civil Eats. Retrieved March 3, 2022 from, <https://civileats.com/2021/12/09/at-an-annual-sustainability-gathering-big-ag-describes-its-efforts-to-control-the-narrative/>.

felt threatened by the EAT-Lancet report and the Summit. The reporters provided a detailed account of how those industries came together to counter any suggestion for reduced meat consumption and successfully dominated discussions about meat production and consumption at the Summit. The industrial meat producers' opening position was to reaffirm the status quo of the global meat markets and frame any other approach as anti-scientific and ideological. They authored the first draft of the Summit position paper on meat and literally shouted down any opposition. They threatened to abandon the entire Summit process if they did not get their way.

Resistance to Human Rights-Based Approaches to Food Systems

Meanwhile, Summit leaders bristled at the demands of social movements, making it difficult for anyone to include human-rights based approaches in the Summit processes (Lakhani, 2021). Agroecology is the most popular alternative to intensive production-oriented approach and has been found to be the approach most likely to fulfil people's human rights (De Schutter, 2010). The Summit leadership was initially against including agroecology on the agenda, but relented after a handful of governments (with a significant degree of advocacy by food experts and social movements) pressured the organizers. While agroecology was eventually included, it remained at the margins of the Summit.

Agroecology's primary goal is to mimic ecological processes and biological interactions as much as possible. It relies heavily on experiential, situated, local knowledge, more commonly described as traditional knowledge. It is also driven by social movements and starts with the question of power dynamics. As a result, agroecological investigations into underlying causes of food insecurity and malnutrition are framed as matters relating to control over the food system and access to knowledge and resources. Agroecology is a scientific discipline that includes experimental, situated, local knowledge with a focus on the ecology of agricultural environments. New research suggests that if we calculate productivity in terms of per hectare and not for a single crop, and in terms of energy input rather than output, agroecology is often more productive than intensive industrial techniques for agriculture (Global Alliance for the Future of Food, 2021).

Why the Summit Failed

In sum, Summit leaders conceded from the start to industrial meat corporations allowing them to initiate the terms of the debate within the Summit process; the meat industry ultimately held their ground. Whereas Summit leaders initially excluded and marginalized different parts of the human rights community; that community fought and gained ground by getting agroecology on to the peripheries of the Summit's agenda.

In more tactical terms – if we understand Summit leadership as dominated by sustainable intensive agriculture organizations, they lost their fight against the industrial intensive meat sector and revealed themselves as proponents of a “green” pol-

itics that is unreceptive to people's human rights demands. It remains to be seen which national and global policy makers will continue supporting industrial intensive agriculture, which will find sustainable intensive agriculture more appealing after the Summit, and which will align with the human rights community and turn more towards agroecology.

On Not Ignoring The Elephant in The Room

Finally, I am still baffled as to why the Summit leaders chose to ignore all aspects of the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic has affected not only the health of individuals and communities, it has had profound implications on different dimensions of food security and nutrition. If statistics provide any guidance, in 2020, the number of people who did not have access to adequate food rose by 320 million to 2.4 billion – nearly a third of the world's population. The increase is equivalent to that of the previous five years combined. An estimated 720–811 million people faced hunger in 2020, an increase in the range of 70–161 million from the previous year. Approximately 660 million people may still face hunger in 2030, in part due to lasting effects of the pandemic on food security, in particular because of the lack of access to adequate food (FAO, 2020). In 2020, 41 million people in 43 countries were at risk of famine, up from 27 million in 2019 (UN, 2021).

How the world responds to the pandemic and its impacts on our food security over the next few years will determine the future of our food systems for decades to come. Ultimately, people will be better off if the Summit recedes into the background as an event that happened and passed. Communities, peoples, and governments will be better off if they focused their efforts on addressing people's immediate needs. And the path leading to a better future will be clearer if everyone gives due regard to questions of who has power in the current food system and who caused the problems we are facing today.

Statements and Declarations The author volunteered as an independent advisor on the Food Systems Summit integrating team in his capacity as UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food.

References

- Abhyankar, L. (2019, April 2). *EAT-Lancet Recommendations Have Value, but Are They Feasible?* American Academy of Family Physicians. Retrieved December 14, 2021, from <https://www.aafp.org/news/blogs/freshperspectives/entry/20190402fp-eatlancet.html>
- Anderson, M., Hoey, L., Hurst, P., Miller, M., Montenegro, & de Wit (2022). M. Debrief on the United Nations Food Systems Summit (UNFSS). *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, 11(2), 1–5. <https://doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2022.112.008>
- Canfield, M., Anderson, M. D., & McMichael, P. (2021). UN Food Systems Summit 2021: Dismantling Democracy and Resetting Corporate Control of Food Systems. *Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems*, 5:661552. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fsufs.2021.661552>
- Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples' Mechanism for relations with the UN Committee on World Food Security (2021, May 18). *What's wrong with the United Nations Food Systems Summit in CSM's view*. Retrieved March 3, 2022, from <https://www.csm4cfs.org/14024-2/>

- Clapp, J., Noyes, I., & Grant, Z. (2021). The Food Systems Summit's Failure to Address Corporate Power. *Development*, 64(3–4), 192–198. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41301-021-00303-2>
- De Schutter, O. (2010). *Agroecology and the right to food*. Human Rights Council. Retrieved March 3, 2022, from <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/16/49>
- Drewnowski, A. (2020). Analysing the Affordability of the EAT–Lancet Diet. *The Lancet Global Health*, 8(1), e6–e7. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2214-109X\(19\)30502-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2214-109X(19)30502-9)
- Dorado, D., Monsalve, S., Naik, A., & Suárez, A. M. (2021). Towards Building Comprehensive Legal Frameworks for Corporate Accountability in Food Governance. *Development*, 64(3–4), 236–244. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41301-021-00319-8>
- EAT (n.d.). *The EAT-Lancet Commission in Food, Planet and Health*. EAT. Retrieved March 3, 2022, from <https://eatforum.org/eat-lancet-commission/>
- EAT (2019). *Summary Report of the EAT-Lancet Commission*. EAT. Retrieved March 3, 2022, from https://eatforum.org/content/uploads/2019/07/EAT-Lancet_Commission_Summary_Report.pdf
- Fakhri, M. (2020). *Vision of the Special Rapporteur*. UN General Assembly. Retrieved March 3, 2022, from <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/46/33>
- Fakhri, M. (2021a). *Food Systems and human Rights*. UN General Assembly. Retrieved March 3, 2022, from <https://undocs.org/A/76/237>
- Fakhri, M. (2021b). A Trade Agenda for the Right to Food. *Development*, 64, 212–219. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41301-021-00305-0>
- FAO (Ed.). *Transforming Food Systems for Food Security, Improved Nutrition and Affordable Healthy Diets for All*. FAO. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cb4474en>
- Global People's Summit on Food Systems (n.d.) *Farmers, not corporations, feed the world. Fight for Just, Equitable, Healthy, and Sustainable Food Systems!*. Hungry 4 Change. Retrieved March 3, 2022, from <https://peoplesummit.foodsov.org/>
- Global Alliance for the Future of Food (2021). *The Politics of Knowledge: Understanding the Evidence for Agroecology, Regenerative Approaches, and Indigenous Foodways*. Global Alliance for the Future of Food. Retrieved March 3, 2022, from <https://futureoffood.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/GA-Politics-of-Knowledge.pdf>
- Guterres, A. (2021, September 23). *Secretary-General's Chair Summary and Statement of Action on the UN Food Systems Summit*. United Nations. Retrieved March 3, 2022, from <https://www.un.org/en/food-systems-summit/news/making-food-systems-work-people-planet-and-prosperity>
- Guttal, S. (2021). Re-imagining the UN Committee on World Food Security. *Development*, 64(3–4), 227–235. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41301-021-00322-z>
- Howard, P. H. (2018, December 31). *Global Seed Industry Changes Since 2013*. Retrieved March 3, 2022 from <https://philhoward.net/2018/12/31/global-seed-industry-changes-since-2013/>
- IPES-Food (2017). *Too big to feed: Exploring the impacts of mega-mergers, concentration, concentration of power in the agri-food sector*. Retrieved March 3, 2022 from https://www.ipes-food.org/_img/upload/files/Concentration_FullReport.pdf
- Lakhani, N. (2021, September 23). 'Corporate colonization': small producers boycott UN food summit. The Guardian. Retrieved March 3, 2022 from <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/sep/23/small-producers-boycott-un-food-summit-corporate-interests>
- McKeon, N. (2021). Global Food Governance. *Development*, 64(3–4), 172–180. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41301-021-00326-9>
- McMichael, P. (2021). Shock and Awe in the UNFSS. *Development*, 64(3–4), 162–171. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41301-021-00304-1>
- UN (2019, October 16). *Obesity rates soar due to dramatic global diet shift, says UN food agency*. UN News. Retrieved March 3, 2020, from <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/10/1049361>
- UN. *Famine knocking at the door of 41 million worldwide, WFP warns*. UN News. Retrieved March 3, 2022, from <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/06/1094472>
- Willett, W., Rockström, J., Loken, B., Springmann, M., Lang, T., Vermeulen, S., & Garnett, T. Zurayk, R., Rivera, J. A., Vries, W. D., Sibanda, L. M., & Murray, C.J.L. (2019). Food in the Anthropocene : The EAT-Lancet Commission on healthy diets from sustainable food systems. *The Lancet*, 393(10170), 447–492. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(18\)31788-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(18)31788-4)