

HUMAN RIGHTS AS A LEVER OF CHANGE

Preface by the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food, Michael Fakhri

The Food Systems Summit identified human rights as one of its levers of change that would cut across all aspects of the Summit preparation and outcomes. It was pledged that the Summit's work on human rights would "focus on action and implementation, and on identifying new ways to build upon the foundations of multilateralism and human rights".¹ As the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food, I provide my independent observations as to whether the pledge has been met and provide my advice on the way forward.

The accompanying human rights policy brief, prepared by the Food Systems Summit secretariat, provides an overview of how human rights can help identify patterns of discrimination and inequality that are often root causes of hunger and food insecurity. This brief on its own, however, does not make the Summit a truly transformative, rights-based, and multilateral event. To realize the Secretary-General's professed objectives to hold a "people's summit" and "make food systems work for people, planet, and prosperity" will take more than a technical human rights brief included in a compendium.

In the least, the 2021 Food Systems Summit should have done the same as the 1996 World Food Summit, its five-year follow-up Summit in 2002, and the 2009 reform of the Committee on World Food Security by providing small food producers, workers, Indigenous peoples, and human rights organizations an autonomous space to develop their own proposals. This would have allowed people to use human rights as a common language to work together in solidarity and generate the knowledge and political energy necessary for transformative change. Compared to previous UN food summits, the 2021 Summit has been regressive.

I was a centre-point for discussions amongst the Summit organizers, governments, international organizations, social movements, advocacy groups, businesses, and individuals committed to promoting human rights at the Food Systems Summit. I followed the preparation process closely and regularly provided Summit organizers with recommendations on how to address a number of reported shortcomings. Summit participants raised concerns that the Summit organizers were substantially ignoring COVID-19; turning a blind eye on structural causes of failed food systems; disregarding corporate influence on decision-making in the UN; disregarding corporate concentration of power in food systems; and diluting people's right to effectively participate by employing a so-called multistakeholder approach.² Other experts and organizations have raised similar concerns

¹ <https://www.un.org/en/food-systems-summit/levers-of-change>

² [A/HRC/46/33; A/76/237;](https://www.oaklandinstitute.org/sites/oaklandinstitute.org/files/pdfpreview/2021_0113_fakhri_letter_to_sg_envoy_fss.pdf)

https://www.oaklandinstitute.org/sites/oaklandinstitute.org/files/pdfpreview/2021_0113_fakhri_letter_to_sg_envoy_fss.pdf; <https://www.ohchr.org/en/issues/food/pages/foodindex.aspx>

about human rights, governance, and science-related challenges facing the Summit.³ Those recommendations unfortunately fell on deaf ears.

The Food Systems Summit provides Member States and people with a short menu of ideas that they may choose from when reforming their food system. Even if we assume these are some good ideas, the Summit has not provided an explanation of what is the problem or a clear plan for how Member States and people should work together to transform the world's food systems. Indeed, if human rights were at the core of the Summit, everyone would have had a systemic overview of what is wrong, a guide on what needs to be done, and a plan on how to redistribute power more equitably and transform food systems. Indigenous peoples, smallholder farmers, peasants, fishers, pastoralists, workers, women, and trade unions have already made many clear demands.⁴ They have already outlined how to transform food systems in a way that fulfils everyone's human rights. At the core of their demands is not just the fulfilment of the right to food but also the enforcement of human rights instruments, including the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and other People Working in Rural Areas, and the relevant International Labour Organization treaties.

A growing number of people and governments are realizing that the high degree of corporate power in food systems lies at the root of the problem. These concerns are not new and were raised by some delegates at the 1974 World Food Conference. The 2021 Food Systems Summit, however, fails to address the lack of corporate accountability in food systems. The Summit may also open doors to regressive food policy measures and divert critical public funds to transnational agri-food corporations and a narrow set of corporate-friendly scientists. Moreover, the discord created by the Summit may undermine the ability of the UN system to maintain the trust and commitment of people who are the most essential in food systems across the world.

In sum, the Food Systems Summit has elevated public discourse about the importance of food systems to accomplish the Sustainable Development Goals. Nevertheless, considering the major concerns independently raised by many different groups, Member States must proceed with caution and judge the Summit's results against human rights obligations and people's demands.

³ <http://www.ipsnews.net/2021/03/un-food-systems-summit-not-respond-urgency-reform>; <https://www.devex.com/news/time-for-action-indigenous-group-says-of-food-systems-summit-100494>; <https://theconversation.com/human-rights-could-address-the-health-and-environmental-costs-of-food-production-166480>; <https://blogs.bmj.com/bmj/2021/09/01/un-food-systems-summit-leaders-must-not-remain-silent-on-its-inadequate-rules-of-engagement-with-commercial-actors/>; <http://www.ipes-food.org/pages/FoodSystemsSummit>; <https://www.oneplanetnetwork.org/op-ed-2021-food-systems-summit-has-started-wrong-foot>; <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fsufs.2021.661552/pdf>; <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.abj5263>; <https://www.devex.com/news/opinion-why-reinvent-the-wheel-on-food-security-and-nutrition-99929>; <https://www.csm4cfs.org/counter-mobilizations-against-a-un-summit-failing-people-and-the-planet-continue/>.

⁴ Working Group on Global Food Governance of the Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples' Mechanism, *Voices from the Ground: from COVID-19 to Radical Transformation of our Food Systems* (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, October 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted what we have known for decades – hunger, malnutrition, and famine are not caused by inadequate amounts of food. They are caused by the political failures and shortcomings in governance that restrict people’s access to adequate food.⁵ Even at the peak of the pandemic, the greatest threat to food security and nutrition was not because food was unavailable. Many people were not eating or not eating well because they lost their livelihood or home, could not afford to buy good food, and had inadequate social protection. Famine and the risk of famine struck a growing number of communities because of armed conflicts, protracted crises, and financial instability. To date, it is still unclear whether States will cooperate through a multilateral process and tackle the current food crisis during the pandemic.

The Food Systems Summit fails to fully recognize that people and governments are already transforming their food system during the pandemic out of necessity. The pandemic was the crumbling blow to all of the world’s food systems and the Summit should have directly focused on capturing what was happening in real time. Hunger, malnutrition, and famine will unlikely be eliminated by a set of ideas, generated through an opaque process, which are then taken up by coalitions that have formed around those ideas. It will be the relationships that people develop to tackle the current food crisis and the ideas that come from those relationships that will build a better future.

⁵ Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* (Oxford, United Kingdom, Oxford University Press, 1981).