

HOW ARE CORPORATIONS CAPTURING THE UN FOOD SYSTEMS SUMMIT?

UNVEILING THE MECHANISMS OF CORPORATE POWER OVER GLOBAL FOOD GOVERNANCE

As time advances towards the final event of the UN Food Systems Summit in September 23rd, the preparatory phase has revealed a mounting political role of corporations in the whole process. The analysis of these strategies sheds light to new power configurations throughout the global food governance. The UNFSS is becoming a living lab in which corporate control deploys different forms to exert political power.

CONTEXT

The way forward to the UN Food Systems Summit (UNFSS), conveyed by the UN Secretary General in 2021, is steered by a pressing need to transform food systems with a zero-hunger goal and the integration of sustainability. Yet, the development and architecture of the UNFSS challenges the vision of public global governance to make room for corporate control. A three-dimensional analytical frame¹ -*instrumental, structural and discursive*- to approach corporate power helps us to unpack the mechanisms permitting a growing political role of corporations in the global rule-making that governs food worldwide.

INSTRUMENTAL POWER: DIRECT CORPORATE CONTROL

First, the instrumental dimension of corporate power pinpoints a functional and linear causality of influence. The pressure of some actors over others changes policy outcomes. The agro-industrial cluster ensured its front seat since the Summit groundwork through the appointment of key associates occupying strategic roles for decision making like Dr. Agnes Kalibata, David Navarro and Professor Joachim von Braun.

Dr. Agnes Kalibata has been appointed as the Special Envoy to lead the Summit. Former president of the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA), Dr. Kalibata's debarked with the idea to transform food systems similar to the promise of rescuing Africa from hunger and poverty by means of a technology-driven input-intensive food production model.

Navarro's organisation 4SD is in charge of developing and supporting the dialogue approach of the Summit, comprised of Global Summit Dialogues, Member State Dialogues and Independent Dialogues. His ties with corporate coalitions, where AGRA is a co-partner, and his role as advisor of the World Business Council for Sustainable Development brings an increasing influence of the private sector into the proposals put on the table for dialogue.

¹ Fuchs, D. and Clapp, J., 2009. Corporate power and global agrifood governance: Lessons learned. Corporate Power in Global Agrifood Governance. MIT Press, Cambridge.

Joachim von Braun², nominated as the Chair of the Food System Summit's Scientific Group is also a member of the AGRA Board and former director of the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), which receives funds from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. As a chief scientist of the UNFSS, he is a determined advocate to reform food governance by bringing a new *efficient* scientific approach.

All these three designations with close connections to the private sector, and in particular with AGRA, appeared as the first signal of a direct influence of corporate power to frame the political process in which the Summit is embedded.

Box 1: AGRA and its false promises

AGRA was launched in 2006 as a USD-\$1 billion joint venture between the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation. It promoted packages to revolutionise African agriculture in the form of input subsidy programmes (FISPs). It presented an ambitious objective to double incomes and yields for 30 million small-scale farmers by 2020, however little evidence demonstrates its accomplishment.

An independent research³ focused in the 13 AGRA target countries disclosed that far from improving the food security in the region, AGRA has worsened it at the expenses of making profit from hunger. It reveals there has been a 30% increase of hungry people in the focus countries. And food security has even deteriorated due to a decline in nutritious and resilient crops, the acidification of soils under monoculture and the indebtedness of participating small-scale food producers.

Despite its visible failures (see Box 1), AGRA is projected as an example to transpose public-private partnerships at global scale and enlarge Gates Foundation's tentacles into food systems governance. Gates' sponsors proprietary technological fixes as win-win solutions and promotes its transfer from North to South via national policy changes. These changes entail approving public subsidies and intellectual property rights protection. However, AGRA's incursion in the UNFSS is not the only channel of corporate direct control in global food governance.

The UN-World Economic Forum Partnership and the FAO agreement with CropLife International⁴ in 2019 grants transnational corporations' preferential access to the UN system at the expense of public interest actors. It remains still uncertain how these interferences will operate, either through donations or in the form of expert advice. What

2 von Braun, J. and Kalkuhl, M. (2015). International Science and Policy Interaction for Improved Food and Nutrition Security: toward an International Panel on Food and Nutrition (IPFN). ZEF Working Paper 142. Center for Development Research, Bonn.

3 Wise, T. (2021). AGRA Update: Withheld Internal Documents Reveal No Progress for Africa's Farmers. Washington, DC: Institute for Agriculture & Trade Policy. Available at: <https://www.iatp.org/blog/202102/agra-update-withheld-internal-documents-reveal-no-progress-africas-farmers> (accessed August, 2021).

4 International Network for Economic, Social & Cultural Rights. Background Document - Corporate capture of the United Nations, February, 2021. Available online at <https://www.escri-net.org/news/2021/background-document-corporate-capture-united-nations> (accessed August, 2021)

is clear is the fact that collaborations between UN system and corporations indicates how a private profit-driven approach is openly impregnating the outcomes deciding the future transformation of food system and dangerously weakening the role of the States in safeguarding the right to food.

STRUCTURAL POWER: TACIT CORPORATE CONTROL SWITCHING LEGITIMATE GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES

As globalisation consolidates, corporate actors have been steadily supplementing traditional actors such as States and global institutions in economic and institutional structures to make governance decision themselves. Corporate players have taken a key role beyond a direct access to decision-makers for setting the agenda. They have progressively gained a seat around the table where rules affecting their activities are drafted. This form of power is structural as it influences the input side of the political process, allowing corporations to gain control in the definition of focus and content of the frames regulating their activities.

In this line, the UNFSS is promoting new multi-stakeholder platforms in an attempt to side-line the existing UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS)⁵, and disregarding the international efforts already done on framing food systems and defining pathways to solutions in three ways. First, the announcement of this summit did not genuinely come from the UN General Assembly or the CFS but from the unilateral initiative of the UN-Secretary General. Given the governance structure of the CFS, many would have expected that the CFS is the best placed forum to host the next UNFSS 2021.

Second, the architecture of the conference seems designed to imitate the CFS structure in an attempt to replace it as the global recognised body guiding food policy-making. The UNFSS has been conceived as a multipart structure of political and scientific advisory bodies, combining them with 5-Action track piloting thematic discussions (access, consumption, production, equitable livelihoods and resilience). Nevertheless, the form how all these dialogue outcomes will input the final roadmap resulting from the Summit has not yet been detailed in any of the background documents nor in the latest synthesis reports published in July.

The selection of leaders, experts, and participants have been cherry-picked and their roles unclear, failing to meet again transparency standards and accountability mechanisms to those most affected by food insecurity.

Third, the recurrent lack of transparency and the erosion of accountability are engrained in the multi-stakeholder approach the summit is endorsing for food governance. Multi-stakeholder initiatives (MSI) have mushroomed for the past two decades for addressing

⁵ At present the [CFS](#) reformed in 2009, is the inter-governmental body which holds a mandate rooted in the human right to food and is legitimised as the multilateral arena of public global food governance. Its one-country-one-vote systems and its inclusive composition (Member States, the Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples' Mechanism (CSM) and a Private Sector Mechanism (PSM)) allows to assert itself as the "foremost inclusive international and intergovernmental platform for all stakeholders to work together to ensure food security and nutrition for all".

global policy complex issues raising multiple human rights concerns⁶. Who is invited and what role each can play in decision making require democratically defined criteria. On the contrary MSIs are conceived by the UNFSS process to operate on a voluntary basis and participation depending on resources each one has available for taking part, turning out to be exclusionary spaces for those with less human and financial resources.

Without prioritizing voices of right-holders affected by food insecurity and ensure their participation in the decisions which concern them, the most powerful and well-resourced participants will likely dominate the debate on how transforming food systems.

By opening the door to corporate actors to sit around the table for setting the standards to defend the right to food and the planet health, UNFSS ignores power asymmetries and conflict of interests. The debates will lean to proposals refraining to affect private profit-making and avoiding to touch upon political contested issues causing hunger and poverty. *Multi-stakeholderism* buries critical perspectives and hide alternative solutions prioritizing food as a matter public interest.

DISCURSIVE POWER: CORPORATIONS CAPTURE NARRATIVES AND CONTROL SCIENCE

A third approach to power explores the discursive dimension of the political process. This analytical perspective showcases how policy decisions may respond to narrative disputes over the framing of problems and solutions according certain norms and values.

The process of UNFSS discloses a mounting influence of corporations in shaping the public perception around food-related problems and offers solutions in a way that privileges global value chains, technological innovation and profit-making over local-based agroecological systems, human rights and public interest.

While the concept of food system offers analytical lens to disclose the different elements that compound it from production, distribution to consumption, it does not provide guidance on what is needed to make the change happens. The narrative for transforming food system into a sustainable path promoted by the key voices of the Summit escapes from being grounded onto a right-based approach in all its preparatory phase. Instead, the discourse promoted in the Summit is being geared in favour of one type of approach to food systems that prioritizes one type of knowledge, primarily experimental science, and one type of policy that relies on market-based solutions⁷.

This concern has been raised not only by the People's Autonomous Response to the UN Food Systems Summit⁸ but also by the three former UN Special Rapporteurs on the Right to Food and Nutrition. The UN rapporteurs openly expressed their criticism to the

⁶ see this Briefing on Multistakeholder Initiatives prepared by FIAN International at <https://fian.org/en/publication/article/briefing-note-on-multi-stakeholder-initiatives-msi-2507> (accessed in August, 2021)

⁷ Right to food: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the right to food, Michael Fakhri (A/HRC/46/33). Available online at <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/46/33>

⁸ Available online at <https://www.csm4cfs.org/letter-csm-coordination-committee-cfs-chair/> (Accessed August 2021)

Summit⁹ for not putting the right to food at the front-center of the debate and for omitting agroecology as the paradigm shift to reform food systems into social and ecological just. Michel Fakhri, current UN Special Rapporteur for the Right to food, in his report for the 46th Session of the Human Right Council reproved that:

“Early Summit preparation material reflected the language and framework of the World Economic Forum project to transform the food system”

The group of academics following the UNFSS¹⁰, offered an analysis on how the narrative embedded in the Summit builds on a rationale of food and knowledge scarcity. It creates an imaginary of gaps (evidence gaps, policy gaps, technology gaps) requiring to be filled by scientific-experts in alliance with corporate actors. These collaborations are entrenched in a discourse that sponsors market-driven technological innovations in detriment of existing traditional knowledges gained through centuries of feeding the world population.

New conceptualisations are created, such as “nature-based solutions” and “climate-smart agriculture (CSA)”. These novel frameworks of thinking advocate for major shifts in valuing nature to offer win-win solutions and for which a mechanistic approach to science is required to meet the twin challenges of climate change and food security. Conversely, agroecology is attacked for being ideological and unscientific.

In that regard, UNFSS encourages a narrow concept of science and paves the way for the generation of a new Science-Policy Interface (SPI) aiming to replace the existing High-Level Panel of Experts (HLPE)¹¹ of the CFS. A novel SPI¹² is envisioned to better align with a one-dimensional understanding of food systems and to deal with food as a commodity rather than a human right.

CONCLUSION

As time advances towards the final event of the UNFSS in September 23rd 2021, the preparatory phase has revealed a mounting political role of corporations in the whole process.

The employed mechanisms are not any more limited to traditional lobbying that secures close allies in strategic positions of the summit. The novelty stems from the

⁹ See <http://www.ipsnews.net/2021/03/un-food-systems-summit-not-respond-urgency-reform/>

¹⁰ Montenegro et al (2021). UN Food System Summit Plants Corporate Solutions and Plows Under People’s Knowledge. A brief prepared by academics following the UN Food Systems Summit and committed to critical analysis and public education. [Accessed in agroecologyresearchaction.org](https://agroecologyresearchaction.org)

¹¹ The HLPE has a clear mandate rooted on the right to food and is based on a consultative approach that compiles inputs from multiple constituencies. It is the most internationally recognized and respected science-advisory body which provides assessment of evidence-research guiding food-system related policies

¹² Clapp et al. (2021). AN 'IPCC FOR FOOD'? How the UN Food Systems Summit is being used to advance a problematic new science-policy agenda. Briefing note 1 on the Governance of Food Systems, July 2021. at http://www.ipes-food.org/_img/upload/files/GovBrief.pdf

institutionalisation of corporate power via *multi-stakeholderism* and the capture of “food system transformation” narratives influencing the input side of the political process.

Democratic global governing structures for food security and nutrition - the CFS/ HLPE- are under threat and with them the know-how of Indigenous, experiential, farmers’ and women which are now more than ever needed to deal with uncertainty and co-create just and sustainable food systems.

An effective response to the further consolidation of the corporate power in food systems is urgent for avoiding damaging implications for food security and the planet health. It can only come from the *People's Autonomous Response to the UN Food Systems Summit*¹³ as legitimate right-holders claiming back the role of the State as the sole duty bearer for the implementation of the right to food.

Any counter-strategy should therefore obstruct simultaneously these three facets of corporate power advancing via the UNFSS to capture global food governance. In the realm of instrumental power, safeguards on conflict of interests and transparency mechanisms should apply. In the terrain of structure, multi-stakeholder platforms cannot replace multi-lateral spaces with clear procedures addressing power asymmetries and definition of roles and obligations according rights. And last but not least, in the terrain of knowledge and science is necessary to construct counter-narratives that delegitimise the false solutions benefitting few in the process of food systems transformations and in defence of public interest and human rights over profit making.

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¹³ For more information see <https://www.csm4cfs.org/final-declaration-of-the-counter-mobilization-to-transform-corporate-food-systems/>