

**United Nations Food Systems Summit 2021
Pre-summit, Rome, 26-28 July 2021**

Who will decide what we will be eating in the future?

by George-André Simon¹

Last week took place, in Rome, the Pre-summit on food systems. During this event, most of the participants repeatedly declared that food systems must be changed. However, so far, there has been no agreement on how to succeed in the best way and the general feeling from the discussion is one of confusion and disagreement.



The context

In 2021, the UN Secretary-General is convening a [Food Systems Summit](#) as part of the Decade of Action to achieve the [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs) by 2030. The Summit will gather key players from the worlds of science, business, policy, healthcare and

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academia, as well as farmers, indigenous people, youth organisations, consumer groups, environmental activists, and other important stakeholders. Before, during and after the Summit, these actors will come together to bring about tangible and positive changes to the world's food systems.

The Summit will take place in September 2021 in New York in the framework of the UN General Assembly. The Summit will awaken the world to the fact that we all must work jointly to transform the way the world perceives, utilises, produces, transports, processes, consumes, prepares, cooks and thinks about food.

The Summit will launch bold new actions to deliver progress on all 17 SDGs, each of which relies to some degree on healthier, more sustainable and equitable food systems.

The Summit should originally have taken place in 2020 but was postponed due to the pandemic. This offered those interested an unusually long preparation period. This enabled thousands of people around the world to inform themselves, study, participate in exchanges, express their point of view, learn about the others' as the pandemic facilitated online contacts.

The General Secretary has set four major objectives for the Summit:

1. Generate significant action and measurable progress towards the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.
2. Raise awareness and elevate public discussion about how reforming our food systems can help us all to achieve the SDGs by implementing reforms that are good for people and planet.
3. Develop principles to guide governments and other stakeholders looking to leverage their food systems to support the SDGs.
4. Create a system of follow-up and review to ensure that the Summit's outcomes continue to drive new actions and progress.

A myriad of actors, thus, having to address many different arguments and issues which are interdependent, even if not usually viewed as such.

What is meant by 'Food Systems'?

Louis Mallassis², a French agronomist considered as the father of agri-food economy was among the first to define food systems in 1994. He presented it as 'The way men get organized in space and time to obtain and consume their food'. More recently one could hear about 'from farm to fork'.

To better understand the whole concept of the food system, it is useful to refer to the work carried out by the Economic Research Service of the US Department of Agriculture. This research led to the publication in 2017 of what they called the 'Food Dollar'.

The Graphic hereunder shows the breakdown of a food expense of one US dollar between the different components of the food system. Data refer to the USA and the year 2015.

² Louis Malassis, Nourrir les hommes. Paris, Flammarion (coll. "Dominos" 16), 1994.



One of the first pieces of information that stands out is that less than 9 percent of food expenditure goes to the agricultural producer. This means that 91 percent of food expenditure goes to other components of the food system. These may comprise food processing; packaging and wrapping; transport; wholesale and retail trade; various food-related services and distribution; energy; finance and insurance; advertising and other sectors.

The food system can thus be understood to encompass all the activities that enable us to feed ourselves. Recently, it has also been suggested to include food waste (almost a third of the food produced on earth is wasted).

Food systems are therefore more complex than it first appears, and contrary to what was stated by one of the participants at the Rome 'pre-summit', society is not divided into two constituencies: food producers and consumers.

Reducing hunger and food insecurity has been a concern of mankind for nearly a century.

The Food Systems Summit is thus part of a long series of reflections and meetings regarding food security. Together with John D. Shaw ([World Food Security: A History since 1945](#)), I consider that the first global concerns about worldwide food security date back to the work of the League of Nations. In the early 1930s, a member of the League of Nations (Yugoslavia), noting the importance of food for health, proposed to study the food situation in member countries.

In 1935, a report, prepared by public health and nutrition specialists from the Health Division of the League of Nations, highlighted the serious food problems facing many countries. Unfortunately, other more economic and political priorities and the war did not

allow the League to go further, but it did recognize the need to produce more food to improve health and enable economic development, mentioning the importance of the 'marriage between health and agriculture', a union that has not yet been achieved and is thus often referred to as 'the impossible wedding between health and agriculture'.

The establishment of the United Nations and of FAO as one of its specialized agencies has resulted in our minds, and for decades, as the fight against hunger being linked to increased agricultural production. We are finally beginning to break out of that linkage. And indeed, for more than half a century, global agricultural production has fed billions of additional people on Earth. In 70 years, from 1946 to 2016, we have fed 5 billion more people.

But at what price? For Earth and all those living on it?

To eradicate hunger, production is not enough

For decades, and rightly so in the beginning, we were told to increase agricultural production to fight hunger. When Amartya Sen, in the late 1970s, explained that lack of food was not the only cause of hunger, but that poverty was another, it took several years for his message to get through, to be put into practice, and even more years for him to come to the FAO and explain it. Yet some people understood his message could be used to shift some of the large resources mobilized to fight hunger from the agriculture sector to that of the combat against poverty.

So, in addition to the impossible wedding between health and agriculture, the relations between agriculture and fight against poverty were somehow complicated. So many efforts made to arrange reconciliations!

As Rome is recognized as the world centre of agriculture and of food security, several world summits on these subjects have been held in the Italian capital, usually at the invitation of the United Nations and the Italian government.

This time, however, the Summit will take place in New York, far from Rome, which was offered the consolation prize of hosting a 'pre-summit' from 26 to 28 July 2021.

In a world where too much food is produced, in a world where a third of the food produced is wasted, it has become difficult to argue that we must increase food production to fight hunger.

On the other hand, food-related issues affect almost all human activities and need to be addressed in a more holistic way and not only based on a food production approach. Hence the food systems approach.

No one disputes that food production is a necessary condition for food security, but it is recognized that it is not a sufficient condition.

As early as 1996, the World Food Summit, held in Rome, drew attention to this point, explaining that another necessary, but not sufficient condition is that people should have the resources to access these food products, and finally that the third necessary, but not sufficient condition, is that the food products should be of good nutritional quality and meet the choices and habits of consumers. If we add that these three conditions must be permanent, then we have defined a situation that can be called food security.

But this was not enough to bring the advocates of increased agricultural production to their senses.

The crucial role of the Committee on World Food Security

When the [Committee on World Food Security](#) was established in Rome in 2010, a more multidisciplinary approach was born. The Committee and its [High-Level Panel of Experts on Food Security](#) (HLPE) have done an incredible amount of work to advance scientific and policy knowledge in the area of food security.

The High-Level Panel on Food Security produced 16 reports endorsed by the Committee on World Food Security. Several of these have resulted in the creation and approval of practical voluntary guidelines to facilitate implementation by governments of the recommendations adopted by the Committee.

These reports have dealt with numerous themes relating to food security: prices, land tenure, agro-ecology, small-scale farming, fisheries, livestock, forests, but also climate change, social protection, biofuels, food waste, water, nutrition, youths and, finally, a global vision for 2030. These are all issues that are at the forefront of the preparatory discussions for the summit of September 2021.

Now that the knowledge is available and often the voluntary guidelines for using that knowledge are also defined, the time has come to take action, as so many participants in the Rome 'pre-summit' have repeatedly said.

However, the recommended action is no longer to satisfy the international agro-industry by inviting additional investment to increase agricultural production. The recommended actions imply great political courage, a redistribution of income, a delicate task in a period of low or even negative growth.

Stalling tactics to avoid action and protect vested interests?

Some are therefore tempted, following a fairly classic pattern in international relations, to use the occasion of the Summit to assert that we must start again from scratch in a different framework and, why not, create a new institution, which could start a new reflection. This would be a welcome excuse for having to wait for this new knowledge and new recommendations, before taking action. Tricky actions, as has been said, that some would prefer to see postponed at least until the end of their mandate. Some private sector representatives clearly supported this proposal during the Rome 'Pre-summit', while governments were more discreet.

With the exception of a few individuals who claim that the (food) system we live in is the right one, since it has allowed for an overall enrichment of the population over the last few centuries, most of the participants at the Rome 'Pre-summit' chorused that we must change the food system. There is a need to move away from the economic imperatives of a food system based solely on profit and lacking in respect for the planet and its inhabitants, some delegates said. In this respect, the question of human rights and the right to food was certainly omnipresent throughout the speeches, debates and discussions, demonstrating that it is both one of the fundamental pillars of the reflection on Food Systems and a point on which there is no unanimity among participants in the debate. This lack of agreement, in my opinion, is often due to a misconception of the

issues related in particular to the right to food, which must therefore be explained and re-explained tirelessly.

'We are heading for the wall' and thus we cannot continue like this without fundamental changes, said most of the attendants in the 'Pre-summit'.

What will come out of the current confusion?

Unfortunately, beyond this near-unanimity, there is some confusion. In the run-up to the Summit, several coalitions or alliances have been formed that bring together people and institutions with common interests.

Agricultural producers are not happy with losing the leading role, especially as many of them consider their current situation to be unacceptable, and not without reason. 'Agricultural producers are not the problem, they are the solution', said one of their representatives at the 'Pre-summit'. In fact, this summit may be about making it clear that they are neither. But are they ready to implement changes and to question habits that are sometimes presented as a somewhat idealized ancestral knowledge, also because of the presence of representatives of indigenous peoples? These people left behind by the modern world represent a perhaps outdated, although very useful model of a world where the food system is effectively reduced to producers and consumers, or even to producers only and their own consumption!

Women, the main workforce in agricultural production, are assembling to defend their right to empowerment in a juster world.

The young people, to whom the doors have been opened, are getting organized to share their dreams and hopes. They too want a better and fairer world.

Consumers and their sometimes influential associations are also coming together to share their experiences and draw conclusions for transforming food systems.

The private sector, representing as much as possible a myriad of different activities and companies whose objectives and interests are not always compatible, is present. They, too, have their contradictions, and while it is argued that many firms have begun to implement changes to behave in a more environmentally, consumer- and worker-friendly way, it is noted that they, too, are having difficulty in reaching a common position and it is likely that, as elsewhere, their final commitment, which will be presented to the Summit in September, will be a compromise without much substance and will ultimately commit them to little.

The nutritionists, whose exclusion from the debate since the creation of the FAO after the Second World War was referred to above, want to make up for lost time. They have been conceded to no longer talk about Food Security without mentioning 'Food Security and Nutrition', almost implying that one could imagine food security without adequate nutrition, which is absurd. Nutritionists at the Rome gathering argued about 'putting nutrition back at the centre of food systems'.

All want to be at the centre.

There are many other groups, coalitions and alliances that do very valuable internal work. The [Food Coalition](#) gathers some 40 countries, as Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi

reminded us. Such alliances also bring together individuals and communities concerned about climate change, the situation of children, health, the use of food subsidies, education, etc.

Controversy and dissension

The 'Pre-summit' also had its challengers. The '[Civil Society Mechanism](#)' (CSM) is an extraordinary success story, bringing together thousands of non-governmental organizations that have managed, in order to participate in the work of the Committee on World Food Security, to do what the 200 or so States of the World cannot do for their Security Council, namely to agree on a common structure and governance.

Some of the CSM members disassociated themselves from the 'Pre-summit' by saying that they could not accept the control of private companies over the processes, nor their involvement on an equal footing with governments, when they are responsible for many of the problems that the Summit is supposed to solve, that they rejected systems based on profits rather than human rights, that they criticized a lack of transparency and a fictitious inclusiveness that does not give a voice to the victims of the food systems.

This is reminiscent of the Civil Society 'counter-summit' organized by NGOs in 1996 in the old slaughterhouses in Rome, while government representatives were attending the World Food Summit in the FAO premises, a few hundred metres away. This 'counter-summit' coined the concept of 'Food Sovereignty', which is still a source of useful discussion and reflection. It must be acknowledged that since 1996, enormous progress has been made in the field of governance, in particular thanks to the exemplary role played in this area by the Committee on World Food Security.

Among the 'protesters' is also [IPES-Food](#), the International Panel of Experts on Food Systems.

This group, which has a fundamental role in the development of knowledge in the field of food security, has decided to withdraw from the preparatory process of the World Summit. This is a wake-up call that should be taken very seriously.

The reasons for this withdrawal are manifold and deserve the attention of Member States and of all participants in the processes. Among other arguments, IPES-Food explains that the Summit organisers bypassed the Committee on World Food Security by replacing a democratic debate with increasingly non-transparent decision-making processes. The Panel also indicates that the rules of engagement of the Summit were determined by a small group of actors. The private sector, private sector organisations (including the [World Economic Forum](#)) and a limited number of experts initiated a process and set the agenda. As a result, the focus has been on 'innovative solutions' that are scalable, commercial and investment-friendly. The Panel also points to the aforementioned attempts to promote a new scientific panel, an 'IPCC for food', which would undercut the High-Level Panel of Experts (HLPE) and the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) that it serves, and which would be flawed in several respects. IPES-Food stresses that all these inconsistencies undermine the work done in good faith by most actors in the Summit preparation process [[read the IPES-Food paper](#)].

These warnings should be taken very seriously, especially as the preliminary stage of the 'Pre-summit' has been completed without these fundamental issues being resolved or even clearly addressed.

Remain vigilant

It will therefore be necessary to remain very vigilant in the coming weeks to ensure that the forces resulting from the desire of certain governments to avoid having to take difficult decisions, combined with the interests of the private sector, do not result in the Food Systems Summit being diverted from its objectives.

In terms of practical preparations for the Summit, what has yet to be done now is to develop a dialogue between the different alliances and coalitions so that they can find a common language to approach the Summit in September 2021.

In her closing remarks, UN Under-Secretary-General Amina Mohamed stressed that after the summit, the Committee on World Food Security, FAO, WFP and IFAD would have an important role to play in the follow-up process to the summit. Reassuring words or reasons for hope: time will tell.

(29 July 2021)

To know more:

- [UN Food Systems Summit](#). Website.
- IPES-Food, [An 'IPCC For Food'? How the UN Food Systems Summit is being used to advance a problematic new science-policy agenda](#), 2021.

Selection of articles on hungerexplained.org linked to the topic :

- Opinions: [Personal reflections on food summitry](#) by Andrew MacMillan, 2021.
- Opinions: [Struggle for the Future of Food](#) by Jomo Kwame Sundaram, 2021.
- Opinions : [Rethinking Food and Agriculture – New Ways Forward](#), a review by Andrew MacMillan, 2021.
- [Sustainable food systems: 2021 may be a turning point for food, ... or it may not](#), 2020.