

Food Systems Summit's Scientific Threat¹

By Jomo Kwame Sundaram²

Timely interventions by civil society, including concerned scientists, have prevented many likely abuses of next week's UN Food Systems Summit (UNFSS). The Secretary General (UNSG) must now prevent UN endorsement of what remains of its [prime movers'](#) corporate agenda.

Summit threat

The narrative on food challenges has changed in recent years. Instead of the 'right to food', 'food security', 'eliminating hunger and malnutrition', 'sustainable agriculture', etc., neutral sounding 'systems' solutions are being touted. These will advance transnational corporations' influence, interests and profits.



¹ First published on Interpress Service, on 14 September May 2021 on <http://www.ipsnews.net/2021/09/food-systems-summits-scientific-threat/> and on <https://www.ksjomo.org/post/food-systems-summit-s-scientific-threat>.

² Jomo Kwame Sundaram, a former economics professor, was United Nations Assistant Secretary-General for [Economic Development](#), Assistant Director-General of the [UN Food and Agriculture Organization](#) (FAO) and received the [Wassily Leontief Prize for Advancing the Frontiers of Economic Thought](#) in 2007.

The call for the Summit supposedly came from the SG's office. There was little if any prior consultation with the Rome-based UN food agency leaders. However, this apparent 'oversight' was quickly addressed by the SG, which led to the preparatory commission in Rome last month.

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) was created by the UN-led post-Second World War multilateral system to address food challenges. Later, the World Food Programme (WFP) and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) were also established in Rome under UN auspices.

President Donald Trump's sovereigntist unilateralism accelerated [earlier tendencies](#) undermining UN-led multilateralism, especially after the US-led invasion of Iraq. A proliferation of ostensibly 'multistakeholder' initiatives – typically financed by [transnational agribusinesses](#) and philanthropic foundations – have also marginalised UN-led multilateralism and the Rome food agencies.

Thus far, the Summit process has resisted UN-led multilateral follow-up actions. To be sure, UN system marginalisation has been subtle, not ham-fisted. Besides the Rome trio, the UN Committee for World Food Security (CFS) and its High-Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition (HLPE) have been casualties.

The CFS has evolved in recent years to involve a broad range of food system stakeholders, including private business interests and civil society. The latter includes social movements – of farmers, other food producers and civil society stakeholders – largely bypassed by Summit processes.

Through the FSS, World Economic Forum (WEF) and other [initiatives](#) have been presented as from the UN. In fact, these have minimally involved UN system leaders, let alone Member States. Many refer to the Summit without the UN prefix to reject its legitimacy, as growing numbers cynically call it the 'WEF-FSS'.

Science-policy nexus takeover

The proposal for a new science-policy interface – “either by extending the mandate of the Summit's Scientific Group, or by establishing a permanent new panel or coordinating mechanism in its mould” – is of particular concern.

The FSS Scientific Group overwhelmingly comprises scientists and economists largely chosen by the Summit's prime movers. Besides marginalising many other food system stakeholders, its biases are antithetical to UN values and the Sustainable Development Goals.

Their assessments barely consider the consequences of innovations for the vulnerable. Prioritising technical over social innovations, they have not been transparent, let alone publicly accountable.

Their pretentiously scientific approach is [patronising](#), and hence, unlikely to effectively address complex contemporary food system challenges involving multiple stakeholders.

Extending the Scientific Group's remit beyond the Summit, or by otherwise making it permanent, would betray the commitment that the FSS would support and strengthen, not

undermine, the CFS. The CFS “should be where the Summit outcomes are ultimately discussed and assessed, using its inclusive participation mechanisms”.³

Such a new body would directly undermine the HLPE’s established “role and remit” to provide scientific guidance to Member States through the CFS. In July, hundreds of scientists [warned](#) that a new science panel would undermine not only food system governance, but also the CFS itself.

Saving UN-led multilateralism

Just as Summit preparations have displaced CFS, the proposal science-policy interface would marginalise the HLPE, undermining the most successful UN system reform to date in meaningfully and productively advancing inclusive multi-stakeholderism.

After the 2007-2008 food price crisis, CFS was reformed in 2009 to provide “an inclusive platform to ensure legitimacy across a broad range of constituencies”, and to improve the coherence of various diverse food-related policies.

Like the [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#) (IPCC), the HLPE consults widely and openly with stakeholders on its research assessments and work priorities. Its reports are subject to extensive peer reviews to ensure they serve CFS constituents’ needs, remain policy relevant, and address diverse perspectives.

Last week, several crucial civil society leaders, working closely with the UN system, warned that Summit outcomes could further erode the UN’s public support and legitimacy, and the ability of the Rome bodies to guide needed food system reform.

The group includes UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food Michael Fakhri, his predecessor Olivier De Schutter, now UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, CFS chair Thanawat Tiensin and HLPE chair Martin Cole.

Their concerns reiterate those of hundreds of scientists, global governance experts, civil society groups, and the International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems ([IPES-Food](#)), among many. The main worry is about “the threat it poses to the role of science and knowledge in food system decision-making”.

Mindful of the [controversy](#) around the FSS from the outset, the four urge the SG, “In the wake of the Summit, it will be imperative to restore faith in the UN system... A clear commitment to support and strengthen the HLPE and the CFS would therefore be invaluable.”

They stress, “There is much to be done to ensure that the HLPE of the CFS is equipped to continue playing its crucial role at the interface of food system science and policy.” After [earlier setbacks](#), the UNSG must defend the progress CFS and HLPE represent for meaningful UN-led multilateralism and engagement with civil society.

³ <https://www.scholacampesina.org/it/open-letter-from-cfs-and-hlpe-chairs-as-well-as-un-speical-rapporteurs-to-un-secretary-general-on-the-un-food-systems-summit-2/>

Further readings:

- [The Food Systems Summit](#), Website.

Selection of articles on hungerexplained.org related to this topic:

- Opinions: [Who will decide what we will be eating in the future?](#) by George-André Simon, 2021.
- Opinions: [Personal reflections on food summitry](#) by Andrew MacMillan, 2021.
- Opinions: [Struggle for the Future of Food](#) by Jomo Kwame Sundaram, 2021.
- Opinions: [Another False Start in Africa Sold with Green Revolution Myths](#) by Timothy A. Wise and Jomo Kwame Sundaram, 2021.
- [Sustainable food systems: 2021 may be a turning point for food, ... or it may not](#), 2020.
- Opinions: [Agribusiness Is the Problem, Not the Solution](#) by Jomo Kwame Sundaram, 2019.
- Opinions: [Big Business Capturing UN SDG Agenda?](#) by Jomo Kwame Sundaram and Anis Chowdhury, 2018.