

**United Nations Food Systems Summit
New York, 23 September 2021**

A strange Summit

by George-André Simon¹

After more than eighteen months of preparation, hundreds of meetings attended by thousands of people: citizens, community leaders, politicians and scientists, the [Food Systems Summit](#) took place in New York on 23 September 2021.



In a brilliant article entitled “[Personal reflections on the food summitry](#)” Andrew MacMillan gave readers of hungerexplained.org a masterly account of the previous World Summits and argued that this new one had got off on the wrong foot.

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A show with no commitment, action plan or objectives

It was a strange "Summit", whose presentation was more reminiscent of a popular TV show than a meeting of heads of state and government, scientists and citizens to reflect on the future of the world. I was certainly not the only one to be shocked by this, as the format of the presentation was changed during the event, with Martin Frick, Deputy Special Envoy for the Summit, taking the microphone more appropriately than the journalists who had hitherto presented what the Secretary General had somewhat hastily called a people's Summit.

A strange "Summit" where the Chair of the Scientific Committee could not help but assert, against the advice of the overwhelming majority of scientists, that it would have been useful to create a new institution doubling the role of the UN Committee on Food Security's [High-Level Panel of Experts on Food Security](#) (HLPE). His conditional statement, however, made it clear that this idea would not have generated any serious enthusiasm or support.

Strange "Summit" where each country expresses itself and nobody commits to anything.

No action plan, no programme to save the world, no quantified target that would have generated an infinite number of indexes and sub-indexes to measure how each state was meeting its commitment.

Did the Secretary General want to avoid the heaviness of previous Summits, the long days and nights of negotiations on every comma of the text of a formal agreement or action plan, and the meaningless compromises?

Did the UN want to avoid a new action plan at the last minute that would have replaced the 17 Sustainable Development Goals when the aim was to facilitate their implementation?

Did some of the forces involved manage to avoid such formal and verifiable commitments that could have created disadvantages for some actors in the private sector and international agribusiness?

Maybe simply a combination of these with other factors.

In any case, we are far, very far from multilateralism and at a time when our planet, more than ever, needs coordination between national actions as well as a common global governance, we see nothing but egoism and mistrust developing.

A "success", for whom?

One should not forget that this selfishness at the geopolitical level suits the powerful: political and financial, and those who do not wish others to control and comment on their ways of operating.

In this respect, the Summit will certainly have been a success, as it will not have generated any risk of control of the flagrant abuses in the food sector. Private companies will therefore be able to continue to decide what we will eat tomorrow.

Obviously, this means a serious failure and increased risks for the most disadvantaged, the poor, the vulnerable, the malnourished of the world.

Before the Summit, some had hoped that under the leadership of the Secretary General and scientists, states would agree to approve codes of conduct to limit the abuse of unhealthy substances in processed foods; to recommend codes of conduct for food advertising; to invite researchers to think further about externalities; to promote new ways of costing food products.

This did not happen.

In an article entitled "[Who will decide what we will be eating in the future?](https://www.hungerexplained.org/who-will-decide-what-we-will-be-eating-in-the-future/)" published by [hungerexplained.org](https://www.hungerexplained.org) after the Rome Pre-summit in July 2021, I recalled the objectives of the Secretary General in convening this Summit.

The Secretary General had set four objectives for the Summit:

1. To produce concrete measures;
2. Raise awareness and inform public debate;
3. Develop principles to guide governments in the implementation of concrete measures;
4. Create a system for monitoring and reviewing the implementation of policy measures.

While it is clear that the Summit has helped to raise awareness and inform public debate by getting the food systems issue on the table, it is difficult to say that it has produced concrete measures, developed principles to guide governments in implementing those concrete measures, and created a system for monitoring and reviewing the implementation of the concrete measures, which seems to me to have been a respectable multilateral process.

A masterful evasion

Opened as a big TV show, this was strange from the beginning. It was hard not to think of the "Panem et circenses"² used by the rulers of ancient Rome to make people forget their hunger and misery.

Alternating videos and short speeches by individuals and associations, some of them closer to the agro-industrial reality than to that of the vulnerable people in the food sector, this Summit began a bit like a big popular party, in slight contradiction, however, with the tragic aspect of the subject treated.

But was the subject dealt with?

My answer is simple and direct: no! The subject of Food Systems in general and their relationship with the Sustainable Development Goals was not seriously addressed.

We were presented with a twentieth-century world, made up of a majority of poor farmers. Four and a half billion farmers, we were told. This ignores that since 2007 more than half of the world's population is urban and that the rural population, according to the

² Bread and games.

projections of the United Nations Population Division, will decrease from 3.4 billion in 2020 to 3 billion in 2050 when the urban population will represent about 68 percent - more than two thirds - of the world population.

In fact, it is understandable that the agricultural world is in disarray. Since the beginning of humanity, it has constituted the majority of the peoples of the earth, since the beginning of humanity the rural world has fed the whole of humanity. These facts, considered immutable, are changing. The majority of the population lives in cities and the cities are increasingly thinking about feeding themselves. Not through urban gardens, fun bucolic diversions for people still marked by their rural roots, but through vertical farming, cellular farming and breeding, and other modern technologies that were diplomatically avoided at the Food Systems Summit.

It is understandable that the agricultural world is in disarray. While for more than half a century it has been at the centre of all attention, succeeding, but at what cost to the planet, in feeding an additional 5 billion people, it is no longer the centre of concern. Too much food is produced on this earth, the problems are concentrated in other areas, namely access to food, the nutritional quality of that food and waste management, to name but a few.

So the topic of food systems was actually not addressed. It was not until the Secretary General's speech, after the videos and interventions I mentioned above, that we heard about human rights and various elements of food systems: transport, processing, distribution and sales of food. It was not until the Secretary General spoke about the fight against inequality that we heard that food should be considered as a public good and not as a commercial good.

The Secretary General based his speech, rather like a school teacher bringing his class to order, around three ideas: people, the planet and prosperity. People, because hunger and malnutrition are the result of human action and are not inevitable. The planet, because man must stop waging war on his planet and respect it, including for food. Prosperity because our objective is to ensure the prosperity of everyone from shareholders to those working in the food sector, including transport, advertising, information, catering, agriculture, finance, dietetics, distribution and nutrition.

The Secretary General had therefore led the way in addressing the issue but was not followed up.

It is also interesting to note the essential components of food systems that were hardly mentioned at the Summit: food processing and treatment, food information, food safety, standards for the composition of processed foods, labelling rules and consumer information, price determination, subsidies to the agricultural sector, the role of intermediaries, standards for food in general from the food street to price formation, control of speculation, consideration of externalities.

A new form of multilateralism?

The Secretary General had invited UN member states to organize broad national consultations on national issues related to Food Systems. Most member states have indeed organized such consultations.

Each national dialogue programme has led to the identification of strengths and vulnerabilities of the national food system, often calling for further collaboration on specific multi-stakeholder issues covering a range of sectors, sometimes involving more than one country, in a defined region or internationally.

Over the past few months, hundreds of individuals, governments, organizations and institutions have joined forces to study and discuss the possible transformation of food systems. They have participated in the Summit's action lines, cross-cutting levers of change and science group, which I said earlier had not really dealt with the subject. They grouped around a number of issues considered to be priorities in the transformation of national food systems: they proposed initiatives, alliances and coalitions to accelerate collective action. These emerging initiatives, alliances and coalitions have been inspired by the options explored in the national dialogues. They should advance thinking in ways that are aligned with each country's priorities and adapted to the local context.

At no time has the rule of the game for participation, functioning and feedback of these coalitions been discussed or decided within the UN. We are witnesses of a new spontaneous governance.

We can see to what extent the ideas of cooperation and multilateralism have dissolved into a web of egoism, mistrust and pretended independence. Pretended because neither hunger, malnutrition, disease, climate change, nor the questionable or unquestionable practices of agribusiness multinationals and others are stopped at a country's borders.

The initiatives, alliances and coalitions are designed to offer tailored support to countries in response to their national interests and priorities, on a strictly voluntary basis. It is therefore no longer a question of, as the Secretary General intended in his objectives, "developing principles to guide governments in implementing concrete measures; and creating a system for monitoring and reviewing the implementation of concrete measures".

There are at least twenty-five coalitions dealing with issues as diverse as zero hunger, school feeding, the true value of the food initiative, sustainable livestock, soil health, deforestation, the role of women, social protection, climate crises, humanitarian crises, etc. A set of very specific interest groups with little interaction between them.

Participation in these coalitions is (of course) voluntary: nothing can be imposed on the sovereign and independent member states. There is, therefore, no guarantee that different groups of people around the world will have the same access to knowledge and that the same problems can be tackled with the same knowledge.

This is a new and worrying approach to multilateralism.

Finally, to end on a brighter note, among the few positive points to come out of the Summit, the Secretary General suggested that we should meet again in two years' time to review the progress made.

It is also worth noting that no further reference was made to the possible creation of a new scientific institution, thus reinforcing the role of the HLPE, which has thus now enormous expectations on its shoulders.

Moreover, the momentum generated by the various national consultations will continue beyond this Summit to involve a growing number of citizens who will in turn lobby their local, national and regional authorities to facilitate the structural, policy and behavioural changes needed to ensure that the women and men of this world can feed themselves better and prosper in symbiosis with the planet that hosts them.

In her conclusions, the UN Deputy-Secretary-General, as she had done at the conclusion of the Rome Pre-summit, confirmed that the Rome-based agencies, namely the Committee on World Food Security, FAO, WFP and IFAD, would be responsible for the follow-up to the Summit.

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To know more:

- [UN Food Systems Summit](#). Website.
- [Africa responds to the UN Food Systems Summit - Let's reclaim our food sovereignty and reject the industrial food system](#), 2021.

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

- Opinions: [Food systems summit's scientific threat](#) by Jomo Kwame Sundaram, 2021.
- 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.