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July 2021



The cards depicted on this page and on p19 are from ETC Group's new card game, "Disruption!: a battle for the future of food".

To find out more about the game please visit our website: [www.etcgroup.org](http://www.etcgroup.org)

## Acknowledgements

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French and Spanish translations of this report are forthcoming and will be available on our website: [www.etcgroup.org](http://www.etcgroup.org)

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## Summary

**The Food Systems Summit (FSS) scheduled to be held in New York City in the fall of 2021 is the wrong kind of summit. It is not about changing food systems, but about spinning a story that props up and expands the industrial food chain at the expense of other food systems.**

The FSS's proponents argue that the "food system" is broken, that population growth and climate change mean that we will not be able to feed everyone, and that only new technological developments can save us. But this is a story that has been carefully constructed by those who stand to profit from it – it is intended to enable the expansion of the corporate-controlled industrial form of food production.

The summit is designed to create a specific political moment when that narrative can be significantly advanced – it is a stage on which corporations and supporting philanthropists can present themselves as heroes who can provide "game-changing" solutions that will "end hunger and malnutrition." Miraculous promises are being made about the benefits of advancing intentionally vague concepts like "precision agriculture" and the "digital frontier", "nature-positive production", "climate smart agriculture", the "blue economy", and "de-risking" and "re-routing" farming and rural livelihoods.

The underlying purpose of this summit, which will not create policies or global agreements directly, is to establish parameters, the path that governments will choose to prioritise, promote and finance in the future – and what and who they will reject.

Careful analysis shows that the myths that the FSS architects have fabricated completely ignore fundamental elements of the real world that we currently live in. They intentionally distract attention from the hard fact that it is this same mechanistic cultural approach that

has caused multiple climate and ecological crises. They obfuscate the impact that empire, colonialism and racism, and more recently neoliberal globalisation, have had and are still having on local and Indigenous food cultures around the world. The myths side-step the fact that it is peasant farmers and smallholders that feed 70 percent of the world's people. And they ignore the known impact that the industrialised, homogenised food production system is having on people's health. A detailed analysis also shows that the FSS synthesis papers are not as progressive as they claim to be.<sup>1</sup>

The FSS's backers have no intention to change the economic system at the root of current crises. Their intention is to entrench and expand it. The potential impacts of this trend could be severe and irreversible. In particular the digitalisation of agriculture across the world could rapidly erase traditional knowledge about food production, thereby eliminating food sovereignty, and the independence and agency of farmers, smallholders, fisherfolk and Indigenous people. This in turn could drive a process of agricultural de-skilling and aggravate rural-urban migration and associated societal woes. The colonisation of the oceans also spells trouble for the world's marine ecosystems, as well as its fisherfolk.

Instead of this summit's attempt to hijack global food systems, we need an entirely different summit. A genuine summit would challenge the industrial food system's impact on food, health, climate and biodiversity and have, at its very core and foundation, the interests and meaningful participation of the peasants, smallholders, pastoralists, fishers, Indigenous peoples and urban gardeners that feed the overwhelming majority of the planet's population. Its outcomes should be integrated into and help shape the deliberations of the UN's Committee on Food Security, which is already tasked with addressing the concerns the FSS purports to resolve, and has well-established mechanisms concerning the participation of rights-holders and their rights to self-organise.



## Introduction

In 2020, we analysed<sup>2</sup> three separate inter-governmental initiatives that we believe could converge to radically change the multilateral agricultural system in favour of corporate interests:

- the proposed Food Systems Summit (FSS)
- the then-impending consolidation of the international agricultural research system into “One CGIAR”
- the planned creation of an International Platform for Digital Food and Agriculture (originally proposed as an International Digital Council for Food and Agriculture)

We forecast that “the Summit provides the framework; CGIAR is the delivery system; and Big Data is the product.” In 2021, even after all the upheaval caused by the pandemic, these processes are underway, and we can already see this prediction coming true. In fact, we see these three processes marching rapidly forwards, potentially hijacking global food systems, even while the pandemic continues to turn people’s lives upside-down. Collectively, these processes are strengthening corporate interests and control over food and agriculture, especially through new corporate-controlled digitally-based technologies that will further marginalise peasants, smallholders, Indigenous peoples, artisanal fishers and local producers.

When the big bosses of food transnational companies like Unilever<sup>3</sup> talk about fixing the “broken food system”, it raises questions about which food system they are actually talking about and who benefits from repairing it. The “broken food system” should refer specifically to the industrial food chain, that part of the global food system under the control of corporate interests that depends heavily on chemical and fossil fuel inputs, promotes crop uniformity, and produces food mainly for the commercial market in developed countries and the upper and middle classes in developing countries. The industrial food chain is not

simply broken – it is actively damaging. It uses 75 percent of the world’s agricultural land, consumes at least 80 percent of freshwater and is responsible for at least 90 percent of greenhouse gas emissions from agriculture.<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, despite what the food industry would have us believe, this “food chain” is not the entire food system. In fact, the FSS’s “broken food system” narrative obscures the reality of food production for most of the world. ETC Group estimates that only the equivalent of 30 percent of the global population is fed primarily by the industrial food chain while the remaining 70 percent obtain their food primarily from local smallholder food webs. The FAO goes further and suggests that more than 80 percent of the world’s food is produced by family farmers and their networks.<sup>5</sup> The industrial food chain is actively breaking this peasant food web. By talking of simply “fixing” the food chain, the FSS threatens to undermine these more important functioning food systems, whilst propping up the real broken and irresponsible industrial food system.

The “food system” that most people involved in food and farming recognize and respect supports diverse approaches to producing, processing and distributing food, including traditional systems. However, the FSS is clearly and very deliberately steering the world away from this approach and towards a further intensification of the industrial food chain. The architects of the FSS have exploited their growing political and financial influence within the United Nations to undermine multilateral decision-making and supplant it with what they call “multi-stakeholder global governance” – which is in fact a cover for the advancement of the interests of transnational corporations.

## Box 1: At-a-glance summary

### Narratives and false solutions

The global pandemic has provided a useful cover for a planned “subtle hijack” of global food systems and related institutions. This is being led by transnational agribusiness corporations, who are increasingly linking up with Tech Titans. Corporate-orchestrated coalitions are representing their interests and lobbying on their behalf at the forefront, inventing plausible narratives that imply – wrongly – that the route they propose is the only way forward.

Key to the narrative being pushed through the FSS and related processes is the idea that the food system is completely “broken” and needs to be fixed – with the aid of heroic corporate prescriptions and technologies. There are indeed problems that need to be addressed, but this false narrative completely ignores key questions about who is responsible for existing processes that damage the climate and environment, as well as human rights and people’s wellbeing. The FSS narrative effectively turns a blind eye to the industrial food chain’s devastating impacts to date.

The focus needs to be squarely on the industrial food chain as the villain, in need of critical examination – including in light of its role in causing pandemics. But the fundamental transformation that is required cannot be shaped by the hands of those responsible for this harm in the first place. Nor should we allow these culprits to increase their control over food systems, using the same mindset as before to develop and deploy new technological tools to extract more resources and reap ever more financial rewards for their shareholders.

### What’s at stake?

Pursuing the corporate-sanctioned FSS agenda would result in further negative impacts on food sovereignty and agricultural biodiversity in farmers’ fields, and rapidly erode knowledge systems that have been developed by peasants, local communities and Indigenous

peoples through generations of sharing, exchanges and utilisation. At this moment of deepening climate crisis and biodiversity collapse, we cannot afford to be fooled into allowing critically important systems that feed us to be wrongly characterised and captured by corporations, merely to advance their self-interest.

### Actors

Agribusiness, Big Data corporations, financial speculators  
Farmers’ movements, civil society  
UN bureaucracy, governments  
Big donors that are pushing the industrial agricultural model

### Fora

Food Systems Summit (FSS): preparatory summit 26-28 July 2021 in Rome; and the actual summit in New York (perhaps in September around the 76<sup>th</sup> session of the UN General Assembly).

### Actions

Popular movements and civil society need to understand the deep implications of the new corporate biotech and digital (and bio-digital) agenda in food and agriculture, and the fact that the FSS is planned as a means of establishing a framework to advance that agenda. We also need to understand and deconstruct the false narratives that are being used to promote it. We reaffirm the key role of territorial food systems built from the bottom up by the people who already feed the majority of the global population. They are responsible for the agricultural biodiversity that provides the basis for the world’s food, maintaining the health of people and the planet and preventing further climate chaos. We need to reaffirm food sovereignty and diverse rural-urban peasant agroecological systems which collectively constitute the pathway towards attaining food sovereignty and people’s right to define their own food systems. We reject the proposed profit-driven, digitally-based corporate takeover of global food systems.

As described in our last communiqué, the FSS would originally have been the culmination of several rounds of interlinked negotiations relating to events and summits that were also originally scheduled for 2020. But as with the FSS, timetables have been scrambled, and most of these processes have been extended to 2021 and on to 2022, due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

They include COP-26 of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (CBD) which will be held in Glasgow in the UK, and COP-15 of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity, to be held in Kunming in China, as well as the soon-to-be-established International Platform for Digital Food and Agriculture (to be hosted by FAO and originally proposed by the German government), and the reform of the global agricultural research system through the consolidation of different parts of the Consultative Group of International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) under pressure from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation. At the time of writing the Food Systems Summit is now scheduled

for some time in the fall of 2021, with the UNFCCC COP-26 climate summit planned for November 2021, and the CBD's COP-15 likely to be deferred until 2022.

Taking all this together, it has become apparent that something highly significant is afoot in global food system governance, and this "something" very definitely favours the agenda of big donors, Big Ag and Big Data giants such as Amazon and Microsoft, who are moving aggressively into food, as well as other Davos Forum players.

Furthermore, it is probably not a coincidence that this emerging alignment of global players is stepping into climate and food systems governance spaces at precisely the moment in time when the UN and related multilateral food and agriculture institutions are at their weakest. This is the result of a convergence of resource limitations, assault from rising authoritarian regimes, internal weaknesses within UN institutions, and a continuing and marked disorientation resulting from the unprecedented shift to virtual negotiating mode in multilateral processes.

### Box 2: What's on the FSS agenda?...

- Climate change as market opportunity
- "Nature positive" solutions/production
- Biotechnology
- Digitalisation of food and agriculture
- Synthetic protein/meat
- Other "Fourth Industrial Revolution" technologies, such as BECCS (bioenergy with carbon capture and storage)
- Institutionalising corporate involvement in and influence over policy making on food and agriculture
- "Building back better" in terms of neo liberal economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic

### ... and what's missing?

- Food Sovereignty
- Human rights
- Indigenous sovereignty and rights
- Land rights
- Racial justice
- Countering repression and displacement of peasants, Indigenous peoples and marginalised communities
- Impact of corporate concentration on food systems

Whether these trends are a coordinated coup directed at the climate, health, biodiversity and food governance nexus or just a corporate-friendly confluence of interests and opportunism, the outcome is the same: A tremendous amount of money, political will and public relations energy is currently flowing into a set of linked governance initiatives that will facilitate corporate interests and control, as well as distracting from changes needed to produce genuine improvements in food systems.

## **FSS food governance grab via “multi-stakeholderism”**

Much of the outcry by civil society groups against the proposed summit has railed against something called “multi-stakeholderism”<sup>6</sup> – adopted by the FSS to replace “multilateralism”. To those outside UN governance processes these two similar-sounding words may sound arcane and opaque – yet they are used to describe two very different philosophies concerning how to structure and implement global governance processes and determine in whose interests they will function.

In United Nations parlance, a “summit” is a gathering of heads of UN member states to deliberate and decide issues that have global importance, charting future steps and paths that every country commits to contribute to. Conventionally, in the “multilateral” system proposals to convene a UN summit originate from a member state, a group of member states or a regional or political grouping, and this has been the case with food summits over the past 25 years. The tasks of facilitating deliberations among countries and enabling the agreed processes generally rests with UN agencies responsible for specific development areas – so, for example, FAO would be responsible for organising a summit related to food and agriculture. The food summits of 1996, 2002 and 2009, although not free from controversies and corporate influence, were all proposed by member states and organised by FAO.

Unlike its predecessors, however, the proposal to hold the FSS did not come from any UN member state – and where it did come from is the subject of some controversy. The “official” backstory is that it was conceived by the UN Secretary-General António Guterres, in conversations with the leadership of the Rome-based food agencies<sup>7</sup> during the session of the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) in July 2019.<sup>8</sup> It was officially announced by Guterres in his World Food Day address on 16 October 2019.<sup>9</sup>

Curiously, however, a full month before the HLPF, on 12 June 2019, the UK’s David Nabarro, a high-level UN bureaucrat (see Box 4 below), made an announcement at the annual EAT Conference in Stockholm that a World Food Systems Summit would be held in 2021 – which he referred to as a “secret”.<sup>10</sup> In addition to this, an anonymous concept paper about the proposed Summit was then circulated in some circles on 18 June 2019.

If the official version is to be believed, regardless of the illogical sequence of events, the summit is purely an initiative of UN bureaucrats – with no involvement from UN member states. This means that it is not a product of multilateralism. It contravenes a core principle of multilateralism within the UN, which is based on the principle of “one country, one vote” and recognises that each member state, regardless of economic power, has the right to participate in all decisions and be treated equally.

Another anomaly in the official account is that a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) establishing a Strategic Partnership Framework between the Office of the UN Secretary-General and the World Economic Forum (WEF), a global business organisation, was signed on 13 June 2019, also just ahead of the HLPF.<sup>11</sup> While the MoU is not binding and did not specifically cover food systems or agriculture, rumours persist that it was the WEF that pushed the idea of a WFSS to the UN Secretary-General.<sup>12</sup> The WEF is not a UN member



state. Yet there is no doubting the influence it has managed to build within the UN or the fact that many member states seem to consider it prestigious to be invited to the WEF's annual winter carnival in Davos.

Despite being shameless about its own leadership being made up of a small number of mega-corporations, the WEF has consistently promoted the multi-stakeholder approach to global governance as a valid alternative approach not just to advising governments, but to international cooperation itself. This

is underpinned by the fact that a year before the announcement of the FSS, the WEF was among five collaborators behind the Food Systems Dialogues<sup>13</sup> process that held regional and international dialogues on food issues amongst policy makers and stakeholders in the food systems. This dialogue process has been used as a template for the design of the FSS process.

Guterres's subsequent announcement, in December 2019, that Agnes Kalibata would serve as the Special Envoy for the 2021 Food

### **Box 3: What is "multi-stakeholderism" and what's wrong with it?**

Multistakeholderism is a relatively new process that has appeared in policy-making processes in the last 30 years. It started to take hold at the UN in the aftermath of the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development (also known as the Earth Summit) in Rio de Janeiro, with the recognition of nine "major groups".<sup>69</sup> However, these nine divisions shifted the focus away from and blurred the relative status of key rights holder groups that defend rights and public commons – such as women, peasants, workers and youth. These groups are now lumped together with many other groups, including those stakeholders that focus on for-profit interests, such as business.

Furthermore, even though this approach supposedly gathers all those involved in an issue at the same table, it actually favours the more powerful actors and groups, since it completely fails to recognise power imbalances, unequal playing fields and conflicts of interests.

Nevertheless, over the past 25 years "multi-stakeholder" participation has become a mainstay in UN processes, with the Major Groups advocating for positions, lobbying intergovernmental bodies and governments to adopt these positions, and providing their expertise in intergovernmental processes and deliberations that contribute to decision-making by governments.

Now, the FSS seems intent on taking multi-stakeholderism to a new and even more disturbing level, using it as a route to enable increased corporate involvement in governance processes. The previous approaches – focused on multi-stakeholder representation and participation, are vastly different to the governance system represented by multi-stakeholderism that aims to govern global problems in lieu of democratic decision-making by governments within UN processes.<sup>70</sup>

The multi-stakeholderism approach that is underpinning the FSS and related processes, cannot and should not supplant or displace multilateralism in global policy making.

Flawed as many of them are, most governments still have the duty of acting in people's best interests and can ultimately be held accountable to the people. Corporations and their powerful forums are entirely different: they are only accountable to their shareholders and are generally obliged to act to protect their shareholders' interests. With so much at stake, civil society and social movements, including representatives of food producers and consumers, need to act urgently to prevent governments allowing a UN-sanctioned corporate takeover of the global governance of food systems.

Systems Summit<sup>14</sup> confirmed widespread doubts about the provenance of the summit. Dr. Kalibata has been the President of the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) since 2014, and AGRA was created and has been mainly funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which has played an active role in trying to industrialise the food and agriculture landscape of Africa. Sources say that Dr. Kalibata was suggested to the UN Secretary-General by the Gates and Rockefeller foundations in an effort to shape the FSS process and outcomes.

Whether the FSS is a unilateral brainchild of UN bureaucrats or has been imposed at the behest of the World Economic Forum, it departs sharply from the tradition set by previous world food summits, that developed genuinely intergovernmental decisions influenced by grassroots organisations and civil society through inclusive and participatory processes that agreed to promote the realisation of the right to adequate food for all.

## **FSS backs corporate control of food and will undermine the Committee on World Food Security (CFS)**

In the aftermath of the global food crisis in October 2009, UN member states unanimously agreed to reform the Committee on World Food Security (CFS), originally established in 1974, to ensure that it is the “foremost inclusive international and intergovernmental platform for all stakeholders to work together to ensure food security and nutrition for all.”<sup>15</sup>

But the CFS’s mandate to address the challenges and potential threats to global food security is now being undermined by the FSS. Instead of building on the decade of legitimacy that the CFS has won amongst diverse constituents and stakeholders, including governments, the FSS is attempting to establish its own alternative replacement structure.

There is already clear evidence that this is happening. The FSS, for example, has established a Scientific Group whose mandate very much overlaps with the role of the CFS High Level Panel of Experts (HLPE). However, these two groupings are very different in nature. Whilst their mandates might overlap, their characteristics and membership are quite different. For example, the HLPE does not restrict its own definition of its role as a “scientific” body – it recognises the different kinds of knowledge needed for governing food systems.

But the FSS Scientific Group has a deliberately narrow focus, prioritising technocratic expertise. Considered as key to the structure of the FSS, the Scientific Group is composed of eminent academics and thinkers from both the North and the South tasked to ensure that the science that underpins the summit is “robust, broad and independent” to inform the recommendations and “clarify the level of ambition and commitments that emerge from the summit process.” The skewed composition of the FSS Scientific Group, only two or three of whom have a background in social sciences (with not a single one from the humanities), is a good predictor of the nature of advice the group will dispense.<sup>16</sup>

This attempt to shove aside the CFS’s existing expertise structures could have lasting impacts, beyond the lifetime of the summit itself. The architects of the FSS seem to be dreaming of a type of streamlined technocratic governance of food systems in which Big Data and scientific expertise provide technocratic prescriptions for the global food system, which can be swiftly implemented without having to take account of messy political, cultural, human rights or socio-economic factors.

In a recent briefing note the International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems (IPES-Food) similarly warned that a small group of proponents are attempting to use the FSS as a launch pad for a new global expert panel on food described as an “IPCC for Food” that

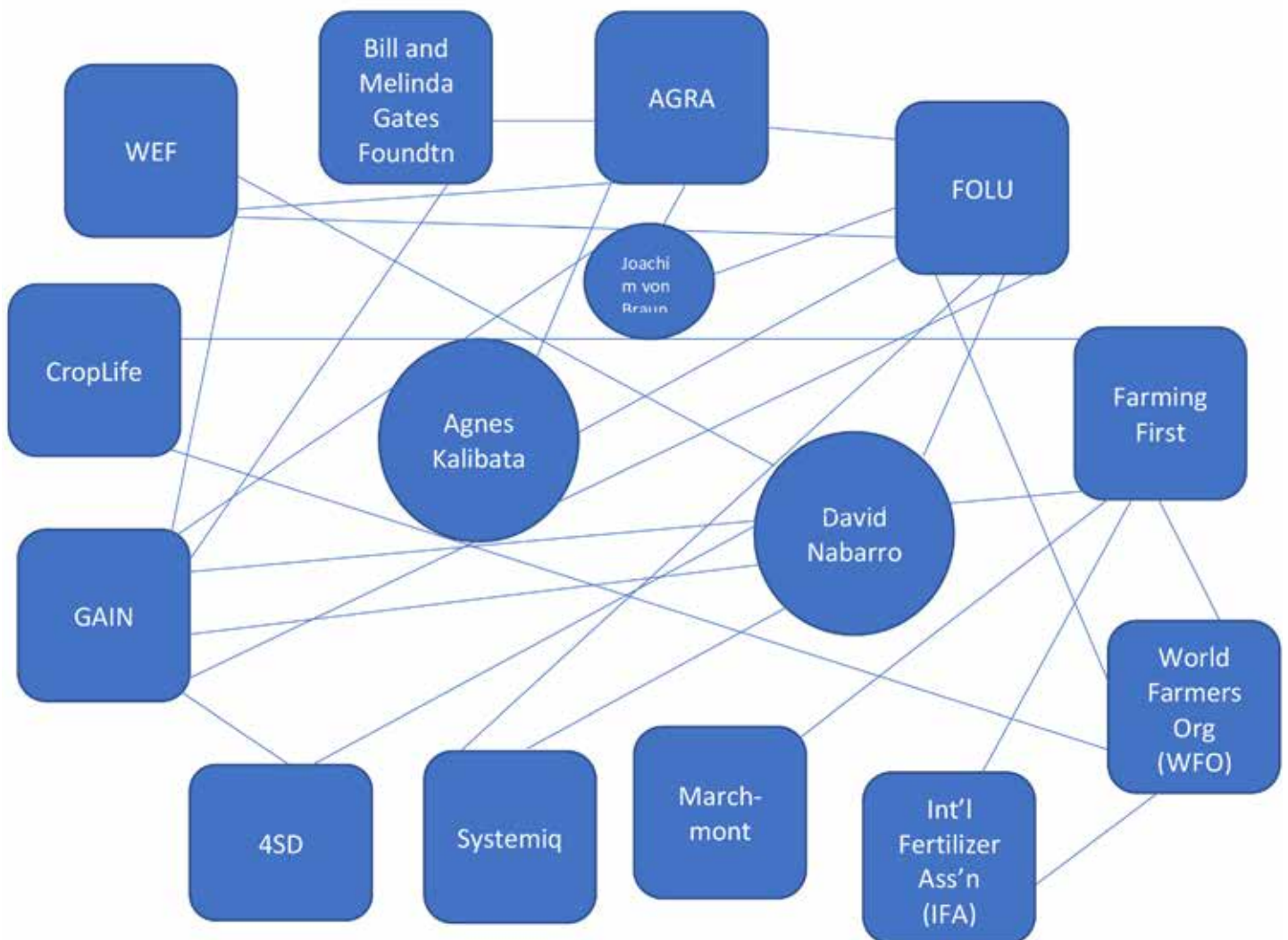
could fully dislodge the HLPE and knowledge structures of the CFS. Their briefing describes the FSS Scientific Group as an “early experiment” for a proposed new science-policy interface. It observes that this gives considerable cause for concern as it “falls short in several respects: it is non-transparent; is imbalanced in its composition and biased in its perspectives and sources of knowledge; is un-reflexive about the relationships between food systems and society; and is pursuing a business-oriented ‘technology and innovation’ agenda.”<sup>17</sup>

of a new science-policy interface for food systems.<sup>18</sup> In an open letter, they explicitly observed that the proposition will reinvent the wheel and could result in the duplication and further fragmentation of global food policy governance.

They might have gone on to mention that the FSS is not just reinventing the wheel, but the entire cart, in terms of controlling the overarching narrative, agenda and levers of power relating to food and agriculture.

Furthermore, in May 2021 members of the HLPE themselves challenged the FSS’s anticipated recommendation for the establishment

### The FSS “clique”: interlocking interests



#### Box 4: Know some of the key actors behind the UN Food Systems Summit

**Agnes Kalibata** has been appointed as the UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy to the 2021 Food Systems Summit to "lead" and "guide" the FSS process in cooperation with Rome-based agencies. However, Dr. Kalibata has a clear conflict of interest.<sup>19</sup> Since 2014, Dr. Kalibata has been serving as the President of the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA), an organisation that represents and promotes agribusiness interests in the African continent,<sup>20</sup> which was founded and so far primarily funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. However, a researcher following AGRA closely has observed that it needs to replenish its financing and will be using the summit as an opportunity to fundraise. This has been widely challenged by civil society organisations.<sup>21</sup> Dr. Kalibata also sits on various company-linked boards, councils and commissions including the Global Agenda Council of the World Economic Forum (WEF), the Food and Land Use (FOLU) Coalition, the Architecture for REDD + Transactions (ART), and the International Fertilizer Development Corporation (IFDC).<sup>22</sup>

**David Nabarro** is a key architect of the FSS. He is an international development specialist who has held various positions at the World Health Organization and at the UN headquarters. He is very close to business and industry, and advises the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD) on food systems issues.<sup>23</sup> He also plays key roles in a number of other corporate coalitions and entities actively involved in the FSS, namely 4SD (Skills, Systems and Synergies for Sustainable Development),<sup>24</sup> FOLU (Food and Land Use Coalition) and SYSTEMIQ (a small but influential London-based business consultancy that formed and hosts FOLU).<sup>25</sup> Based at Imperial College London, he was designated by the UN Secretary-General to lead the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement, which, much like the UNFSS, was criticised for its top-down,

elitist leadership, increasing the influence of the private sector on policy making, and proposing technological solutions instead of focusing on structural causes of malnutrition.<sup>26</sup>

**UN Secretary General António Guterres**, a former prime minister of Portugal, became the ninth Secretary-General (UNSG) of the UN in 2017. In his first year as UNSG, Guterres developed his policy agenda on frontier technologies and convened a high-level panel on digital cooperation co-chaired by Alibaba's Jack Ma and Microsoft's Melinda Gates, which came out with recommendations that advance multi-stakeholder governance in the digital sphere. Guterres also presided over the UN-WEF<sup>27</sup> partnership which contributed to the growing corporate takeover of the UN.

**Joachim Von Braun**, the Chair of the Food System Summit's Scientific Group, is the Director of the Center for Development Research (ZEF), Bonn University. From 2002-2009, he held the position of the Director-General of the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), a CGIAR research centre.<sup>28</sup> One of the largest funders of CGIAR is the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and one of the latest developments in CGIAR's structure has been the centralisation of its different centres into one entity, a move pushed by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the World Bank, and the US and UK governments.<sup>29</sup> Dr. von Braun is a member of the Board of the Alliance for the Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA).

Even though the **World Economic Forum (WEF)** proclaims itself to be a multi-stakeholder platform "committed to improving the state of the world,"<sup>30</sup> its membership and board<sup>31</sup> are overwhelmingly representative of and promote corporate interests: It is made up of the largest 1,000 global corporations plus other partners.<sup>32</sup> For example, board members include Mukesh Ambani, Chairman of Reliance and the richest man in India; Laurence D Fink, CEO of Blackrock; and Mark Schneider, CEO of Nestlé.<sup>33</sup> The above-named



corporations are notorious for their record in human rights,<sup>34</sup> tax evasion,<sup>35</sup> and ecological damage.<sup>36</sup> In its last annual meeting, which took place in 2020, the WEF had 3,000 participants from all over the world, including powerful political leaders like Donald Trump, Han Zheng, Angela Merkel, and representatives from international organisations including Antonio Guterres, Kristalina Georgieva, Christine Lagarde<sup>37</sup> and many others. They gathered to discuss “stakeholder capitalism” as presented in the “Davos Manifesto”.<sup>38</sup> The influence of WEF is evident in the WEF-UN strategic partnership agreement which has been criticised by many civil society organisations on the grounds that it would provide convenient access for corporate interests within the UN, and because it reduces the transparency and impartial nature of the UN.<sup>39</sup> Sean de Cleene, a member of the WEF’s Executive Committee and head of WEF’s Future of Food, is a former Vice-President of AGRA and former Vice-President for Global Initiatives, Strategy and Business Development of fertiliser giant Yara.

#### **Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa**

**(AGRA)** was established in 2006 with funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation.<sup>40</sup> Since then, it has also received funds from the US, the UK and other countries including Germany. AGRA’s plan was to introduce a Green Revolution in Africa by using high-yield commercial seeds, synthetic fertilisers and pesticides to address food security and nutrition in poor small-farming households. There is ample evidence that AGRA has failed to reach a large number of smallholder farmers, and in fact the AGRA period has witnessed an increase in the number of undernourished people in the focus countries.<sup>41</sup> As well as Dr. Kalibata’s role as President of AGRA (see above), the Chief of Staff of Dr. Kalibata as Special Envoy, Adam Gerstenmier also serves as the Chief for International Relations and Strategy for AGRA. Gerstenmier was a former Managing Director of the African Green Revolution Forum<sup>42</sup> and former Chief of Staff of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.<sup>43</sup>

The **Food and Land Use Coalition (FOLU)** was established in 2017 by the fertiliser company Yara and the multinational Unilever, two of the worst polluters within the food and agriculture sector. It was later handed over to SYSTEMIQ to manage.<sup>44</sup> The core partners of FOLU are AGRA, EAT, Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN), International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA), Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN), SYSTEMIQ, the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD), the World Farmers’ Organisation (WFO) and World Resources Institute (WRI). Their funders currently include the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation, the MAVA Foundation, Norway’s International Climate and Forest Initiative (NICFI) and the UK Department for International Development (DFID). FOLU advocates for precision farming, gene editing, Nature-based Solutions<sup>45</sup> and other market-based technofixes to complex historical and political problems, which are backed by big corporate interests and reinforce the unequal relationships embedded in our food systems.

**Farming First**, which describes itself as a global coalition for sustainable agricultural development, includes supporters from industry associations Croplife, the International Fertilizer Association (IFA) and the International Seed Federation (ISF), and coalitions like the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN) and the World Farmers’ Organization (WFO).<sup>46</sup> It is housed by Marchmont Communications, a boutique PR Firm based in London who also handle official communications for the UNFSS secretariat.

**4SD** is a Geneva-based social enterprise to provide tools to policy makers to achieve the 2030 sustainable development goals. It was established by David Nabarro who serves as its Strategic Director.<sup>47</sup> 4SD developed and provides support to the three-tiered dialogue approach of the FSS, comprised of Global Summit Dialogues, Member State Dialogues and Independent Dialogues. The FSS admits

that the design for the Food Systems Summit Dialogues was explicitly inspired by the Food Systems Dialogue spearheaded by WEF, FOLU, WBCSD, EAT and GAIN in 2018.<sup>48</sup>

**The Rockefeller Foundation** was established in 1913 to use John D Rockefeller's oil profits to gain a stronghold in international health, medicine, education, social sciences, agriculture and natural sciences.<sup>49</sup> The Green Revolution has historical links with the Rockefeller Foundation which contributed funding for it in Mexico and India. In 2006, the Foundation published "Africa's Turn: A New Green Revolution for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century" which highlighted the "inefficiency" of African farms, and proposed, as it has always done, high-yielding varieties of seeds and improved fertilisers.<sup>50</sup> The Rockefeller Foundation has always been behind efforts to introduce Green Revolution technologies to address hunger, irrespective of the well-known failure of this approach including its adverse ecological and social impacts.

**The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF)** is a philanthrocapitalist<sup>51</sup> foundation established in 2000, which is well known for its attempts to gain influence over health and agriculture sectors,<sup>52</sup> among others, by providing financial support for them. It has been pointed out that the Foundation does not address the unequal power structures that have led to widespread poverty and inequality but reinforces the economic and technological dependence of developing countries on the United States and Europe.<sup>53</sup>

Bill Gates is also known for striving to ensure continued corporate profit-making through the use of international patents, and refusing to support alternative public health policies – thus he opposed the lifting of COVID-19 vaccine patents to facilitate global vaccination.<sup>54</sup> Also known as the largest private farmland owner in the US,<sup>55</sup> Bill Gates has been behind efforts to centralise the CGIAR and gain control over seed supply.

'Vertumnus', on the left, was painted by Guiseppe Arcimboldo in 1591, and is a portrait of Holy Roman Emperor Rudolf II.

It was used as the cover of the first print edition of the [International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture](#), adopted in 2001. Twenty years later, the UK, led by Boris Johnson, is helping to spin a story that props up and expands the industrial food chain at the expense of other food systems.

Illustration Charley Hall, based on an idea from ETC Group

## A summit to destroy food sovereignty

What is a global food summit for? The first food summit in 1996 was driven by public pressure to address the gross moral profanity that is hunger and to enshrine the right to food as demanded by civil society. The 2008 Food Summit was convened to deal with the food price crisis and spiraling hunger caused by using grain production for industrial agrofuels instead of food. But the FSS has broadened and shifted the focus, locating it within the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). While the second SDG does call for zero hunger and sustainable food systems, this wider "smorgasbord" approach ranging across the SDGs opens a door for decision-makers to lose the previous food summits' concentrated focus by creating a range of de-politicised technocratic options and easy-to-manipulate indicators supposedly addressing diverse global problems.

The use of the term "food systems" also marks an important shift away from previous food summits and one that civil society needs to be careful of. While progressive food movements have long advocated for a "food systems" approach to addressing the inter-related problems of health, hunger, rights, ecology, economy, inequity and more, it is troubling that the application of a technocratically-oriented "food systems" lens in the FSS has displaced food security and hunger as the defining moral focus of debates and decision-making about food systems.<sup>56</sup>



### Box 5: FSS 'story' led from London?

There is another key player behind the FSS scenes: London. Certainly, the key architect of the FSS, **David Nabarro**, counts London as his political base. He works with Imperial College and as Senior Advisor with the high-powered London-based "think tank" SYSTEMIQ, which is in turn led by two giants of the UK establishment, Lord Turner (who headed the UK Confederation of British Industry) and Sir David King (former UK government Chief Scientific Adviser).

**SYSTEMIQ** was established by two former executives of McKinsey management in 2016 and was certified as a B Corporation in 2018.<sup>71</sup> It is dedicated to accelerating delivery of the Paris Agreement and UN Sustainable Development Goals by "transforming markets, business models, and asset classes in land use, clean energy and materials."<sup>72</sup> Like all the other actors leading the Summit, the models it proposes to address the climate crisis rely heavily on corporate-backed market-based solutions and an unquestioning approach to

multi-stakeholder partnerships.<sup>73</sup> SYSTEMIQ spearheaded the creation of the Food and Land Use Coalition (FOLU),<sup>74</sup> and runs FOLU's website, hosting its office.<sup>75</sup>

London-based private PR firm **Marchmont Communications** is charged with packaging the FSS image and narrative. Marchmont hosts the secretariat of Farming First<sup>76</sup> and its clients have included CGIAR centres, the World Bank Group, and Croplife,<sup>77</sup> the lobby group of the crop biotechnology and agrochemical industry. Marchmont's owner, former CEO and current Director, Michael Hoewel is identified as Coordinator of Farming First.<sup>78</sup>

London is also relevant more broadly: it supports the narrative tying together the climate, biodiversity and food summits around the idea of 'Nature-based Solutions' or 'Natural Climate Solutions'.<sup>79</sup> **Boris Johnson's government** seems set on re-establishing London as a global hub for speculation on carbon, biodiversity and food assets and reviving the fortunes of its post-Brexit financial sector around profitable green technology and finance.<sup>80</sup>



Corporations intent on furthering their business interests are also piggy-backing on current crises. For example, the FSS website and “about” pages spotlight climate change and pandemics as key drivers underpinning the need for their “breakthrough solutions”. In this way, the underlying narrative projected is that current food system problems are rooted in newer external shocks, which enables the deeper structural problems of neocolonialism, power relations between North and South, an unequal global trading regime, corporate concentration and structural inequality to be ignored.

In addition, and perhaps unsurprisingly, the FSS fails to draw attention to the fact that the industrial food system is the single largest factor driving both climate change and pandemics. Instead, a glossy focus on implementing technical fixes and meeting indicator targets linked to technical goals is promoted as a way to “nudge” our food systems back to a supposedly “perfect” scorecard – something that big business and governments alike can collaborate on without facing uncomfortable questions. This is the antithesis of food sovereignty.

## FSS pitfalls: what to watch out for “inside” the summit

While many progressive food movements and civil society have turned their back on the charade that is the FSS, some groups have chosen to “go inside” the process in the hope of securing greater international policy support for more transformative, sustainable and equitable policy visions relating to food. Those who have done so have to face two unusual challenges arising out of the WEF-inspired framing of the FSS.

**Policy-making-as-business pitches:** The architects of the FSS complete their “broken food system as victim” narrative with a pitch for heroic “game-changing solutions”. This con-

### Box 6: Food Sovereignty: 2007 Nyéléni Forum Declaration<sup>81</sup>

Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. It puts the aspirations and needs of those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations. It defends the interests and inclusion of the next generation. It offers a strategy to resist and dismantle the current corporate trade and food regime, and directions for food, farming, pastoral and fisheries systems determined by local producers and users. Food sovereignty prioritises local and national economies and markets and empowers peasant and family farmer-driven agriculture, artisanal-fishing, pastoralist-led grazing, and food production, distribution and consumption based on environmental, social and economic sustainability. Food sovereignty promotes transparent trade that guarantees just incomes to all peoples as well as the rights of consumers to control their food and nutrition. It ensures that the rights to use and manage lands, territories, waters, seeds, livestock and biodiversity are in the hands of those of us who produce food. Food sovereignty implies new social relations free of oppression and inequality between men and women, peoples, racial groups, social and economic classes and generations.

joining of “broken systems”, “disruption” and “breakthrough” solutions is a picture-perfect example of FSS adherence to the corporate logic, values and language of the neoliberal crowd clustered around the World Economic Forum.

The FSS’s five different “Action Tracks” – ensuring access to safe and nutritious food for



all; shifting to sustainable consumption patterns; boosting nature-positive production; advancing equitable livelihoods; and building resilience to vulnerabilities, shocks and stresses – may all sound like desirable outcomes, but they are not likely to lead to the changes they describe since the FSS is making no attempt to explore the underlying systemic challenges or identify truly transformative systemic alternatives.

Instead, they have opened the floor to brainstorming numerous glitzy “breakthrough solutions” that might gain better traction with investors (and governments seeking to replace public expenditure with private investment). The underlying assumption of this approach is that the “fix” needed for our broken system can be provided with a hail of technological silver bullets that will somehow get us through pandemics and the climate change crisis. The FSS is not looking for a fundamental rebalancing of power, governance, economics or worldview.

**New-but-still-neoliberal lingo:** Food movements have also had to navigate terminology that is new to food policy discussions – including terms such as “Nature-based Solutions” and “nature positive production”.

“Nature-based Solutions” (or NBS) is a term taken straight from climate change and biodiversity discourse to describe technical and market-based interventions in “natural infrastructure” that supposedly helps to mitigate environmental damage. Classic examples of “Nature-based Solutions” include financialising forest carbon to subsidise forest protection (so called REDD – Reducing Emissions from Degradation and Deforestation). In early 2019 and 2020, big conservation organisations and corporate lobby groups such as FOLU accelerated such talk, with a view to linking the NBS concept to agriculture and food, and tying climate, biodiversity and food governance and market mechanisms together, for offsetting purposes (see Box 8 below).

Since a key architect of the FSS, David Narbarro, also led the NBS track in the UN Secretary-General’s 2019 Climate Summit, it is perhaps unsurprising that the framing of “Nature-based Solutions” for food and agriculture began to emerge throughout 2020, as negotiations on climate, biodiversity and food summits were targeted simultaneously. However, it is important to flag up the fact that “Nature-based Solutions” has no de-

### **Box 7: FSS “breakthrough solutions” blitz distracts from need for more transformative approaches**

By mid-July 2021, the FSS website was claiming that they had received over 2,000 ideas for “game-changing solutions” that had been synthesised into more than 50 “solutions clusters”.<sup>82</sup> The lists of submissions received were mostly from governments and research institutions in the North, industry lobby groups and a wide array of corporations from across the industrial food chain under the umbrellas of lobby groups such as CropLife, Farming First, the Food and Land Use Coalition (FOLU) and the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD).

Self-serving propositions from industry lobby groups and corporations that have already helped to wreck the planet are described as “nature positive” and tagged as “game-changing solutions” in Action Track documents. For example, the US Soybean Export Council, which supports genetically modified soy production,<sup>83</sup> proposes “Boosting nature positive production in US soy industries.”<sup>84</sup> Other proposals from corporate giants include “Sustainable Beef Initiatives” from Tyson Foods, “Deforestation-free supply chains” from Nestlé and “Creation of land use footprint for specific produce” from Bayer.<sup>85</sup>

### Box 8: How and why “NBS” infected intergovernmental fora

The term “Nature-based Solutions” (or NBS) was first hatched in the early 2000s in World Bank reports on “natural infrastructure”. It was then incubated in European Union environmental policy circles, before emerging fully-fledged into climate and biodiversity governance discussions in recent years. The promotion of “Nature-based Solutions” has also been prominent in the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), which has been developing a standard for verification of what constitutes an NBS.

For climate policymakers, NBS has come to signify technical and market-based initiatives that focus on “enhancing” nature to increase its capacity to act as a carbon sink or as a means of mitigating climate change. For example, this could include paying for plantations or wetland conservation or replanting mangroves, and potentially displacing traditional communities in the process – rather than trying to transform energy, transport or built infrastructure to be more energy efficient. NBS is thus generally used to reference superficial nature-based technofixes to the climate crisis. The UNFCCC’s COP-26 climate summit, to be held in Glasgow, UK, in November, has the establishment of rules to govern a new generation of global carbon markets (under the negotiation around Article 6 of the Paris Agreement) high on its agenda. Big Northern conservation organisations see a huge potential financial windfall for their own conservation projects if those projects can be included as “Nature-based Solutions” whose carbon-sequestration could supposedly be verified (e.g. through IUCN-agreed standards) and then traded on global carbon markets.

The NBS approach then spread to biodiversity conservation policy discussions and negotiations. The poster child for “Nature-based Solutions” was the World Bank’s controversial REDD/REDD+ (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation) set of programs, which financialise conservation activities by offering carbon credits or other “Payments

for Ecosystem Services” (PES). These are ripe for fraud<sup>86</sup> and have so many loopholes that national and corporate actors can even claim credits by leaving just 10 percent of a forest uncut or by replanting with monoculture plantations that generate additional business.<sup>87</sup>

The CBD’s COP-15 summit, now likely to be held in Kunming in China in 2022, is intended to establish a Post2020 Global Biodiversity Framework. Big conservation NGOs and most industrial countries have used their muscle to migrate the concept of NBS from the climate discussions, aiming to insert it as a key part of the post2020 biodiversity agreement – again with an eye to aligning carbon markets with potential new markets in payments for biodiversity conservation. So far this has been met with much resistance from Southern delegates, Indigenous peoples and civil society, but the term has nevertheless found its way into the text of the draft decisions.

The third of the three major summits is of course the FSS (even though it may now actually happen before the others). Following negotiations in all three summits shows that the parallel emergence of “NBS language” in negotiations about food and agriculture governance (also now referred to as “nature positive production” as described above) has been enthusiastically promoted by big conservation NGOs but resisted by longstanding food justice and food sovereignty movements.

The latter movements observe that NBS proposals in food and agriculture are particularly linked to attempts to turn agricultural soils and production systems into new sources of potentially tradeable, and therefore profitable, carbon credits, at the expense of peasants and smallholders who will be further marginalised. Combined with “precision agriculture” (the digitalisation of food and agriculture), the potential for new and profitable markets, which increase commercial power and influence while promoting yet more land-grabbing is immense.

defined meaning in a food systems context. This means it can be – and is being – used to reference absolutely any generally positive sounding idea. This makes it perfect for greenwashing corporate projects. The FSS has compounded this conveniently hazy language by coining another so far undefined term “nature positive production” – an umbrella-type term incorporating all types of agriculture and food production that make green or nature-based claims – however unsubstantiated. Other “positive production” terms – agroecological, organic, regenerative, sustainable – are all being squeezed in wherever possible to make the FSS outcomes seem more palatable. This does not mean they will be part of a truly transformative process, rather that they are part of the window-dressing.

**Other linguistic tricks being used to fend off challenges to the corporate agenda:** The question of what broader vision the FSS offers food and agriculture has – eventually and unsurprisingly – become a contested battleground, internally as well as externally.

Significantly, the current leading vision from food movements, which is gaining support at FAO – the agroecology/ecological agriculture pathway – was not even mentioned in the original agenda of the FSS. Similarly, there was no reference to it when the summit was announced by the UN Secretary-General in October 2019. Rather, the original concept paper for the summit tagged “precision agriculture” and genetic engineering as important tools for addressing future food security, whilst making a hazy reference to “traditional” systems.

After unrelenting critique from peasants’ movement and civil society, and diligent lobbying from those who chose to go “inside”, agroecology is now mentioned in FSS processes. For example, the term “agroecology” now features prominently in Track 3 as an action area that took up 34 pages out of its Synthesis Wave’s 144 pages with 12 proposed actions.<sup>57</sup>

But – and it’s a big but – agroecology is mentioned on a “scale-neutral” basis, which effectively means that giant agribusiness farms can adopt “agroecology”. In addition, peasant and Indigenous agriculture is listed as a separate category that can be “protected” like exhibits in a museum, but it is not considered as the path that will lead the world away from hunger and other food- and agriculture-related crises.

It is also important to note the elevation of similar-sounding language about “regenerative agriculture”, both in the FSS and more generally by corporate lobby groups. This concept arose largely out of the Global North, and it has a narrow focus on soil health, which many large food corporations – such as General Mills, Pepsico and Nestlé – feel comfortable adopting and making commitments to, as it will not entail major changes to their damaging industries. In fact, the term “regenerative agriculture” is now used so indiscriminately by some corporations that sometimes it even refers to agriculture based on the continued use of agrochemicals and GMOs in monoculture cropping combined with livestock production.



**Box 9: A corporate dream combo: Digital Ag combined with offsetting**

The new plan to develop “precision farming” by ramping up the digitalisation of food and agriculture heralds Big Tech and Big Agribusiness joining forces to enhance their collective capacity to control on-farm operations – eg by measuring soil carbon or plant growth via sensors on farms, and then proscribing so-called “regenerative” industrial agricultural solutions through their digital farming platforms (such as Bayer’s Climate Field View or John Deere’s ‘Operation Center’).

For example, in July 2020, Bayer, which now owns Monsanto and its subsidiary, The Climate Corporation, launched the Bayer Carbon Initiative, which pays farmers who use its digital farming app if they faithfully follow its recommendations (which includes using Bayer products) to sequester carbon in their soils. Satellite imaging is then used to verify the carbon sequestration.<sup>88</sup>

Bringing millions of acres of digitally-monitored industrial agriculture monocultures into global carbon markets under the guise

of “Nature-based Solutions” would create a huge financial windfall for Bayer and the other digital farming giants. It would also help solve a major headache facing carbon credit capitalists. It has become embarrassingly clear that there is little actual capacity for “traditional” carbon sinks such as forest projects to absorb all of the offset pledges that corporations have made.<sup>89</sup> With forest carbon sequestration capacity already used up and speculative technologies such as “Carbon Dioxide Removal” still controversial and unproven, carbon traders are looking to bring agricultural soils into their trading schemes to satisfy the greenwashing promises of their corporate customers (and prevent a financial bubble from collapsing).

However, in order to do this, they may need new business-friendly governance arrangements to make “nature positive” agriculture amenable to carbon markets. This helps to explain why enabling new business-friendly global governance arrangements is exactly the order of the day at the FSS.

**Digitalisation tsunami looms over food systems**

The architects of the FSS have located their divisive attempt at a shake-up of global governance arrangements for food and agriculture in New York City. This move represents a significant departure from how the two previous food global summits were conducted. They were built upon governance processes that already existed, and were therefore organised in Rome, the seat of the FAO and CFS.

Part of the explanation for this shift may lie in growing corporate disquiet about the Rome-based agencies’ increasing acceptance of the importance of agroecology, especially within the Committee on World Food Security. A second reason clearly lies in the desire to

open up the food and agriculture sectors to carbon and biodiversity markets. However, a third, even deeper answer probably involves the significant structural and governance shifts and upheavals that would be needed in the world of food and agriculture to enable the digitalisation that corporations are planning.

In 2021, we already find the entire industrial food system becoming rapidly digitised from end to end in many regions of the world. For example, in the North and in large urban markets in the South, online grocery and food service delivery systems exploded as a result of the lockdown restrictions brought in because of the COVID-19 pandemic. This rapidly expanded the role of new digital food sector players, including Amazon, Alibaba, Ten Cent, Pinduoduo, FlipKart and others, putting them at the head of the pack of those engaged in



food retailing and distribution. These data titans, who in some cases also control the cloud services for digital farming, are now forging alliances and joint ventures with agribusiness, philanthrocapitalists and the UN system itself.

The roll out of automation and blockchains in warehousing, logistics and transportation has turned handling food and commodities into a digital enterprise. In fields and factory farms similar changes are rapidly taking place, with digital surveillance, data platforms, drones and so-called “Artificial Intelligence” (or AI) increasingly watching over and displacing workers, making farming decisions, and replacing the knowledge of farmers, pastoralists and fisher-folk.

This digital takeover of food systems is also converging with advanced biotechnology, including through new gene editing and synthetic biology technologies, which are also increasingly based on Artificial Intelligence. Each of these technological platforms brings new risks for and assaults on rights and peasant economies, including because they are being used to tighten corporate monopoly control over food systems. They are also part of a much wider biodigital takeover of the global economy that the WEF describes as “The Fourth Industrial Revolution” or “4IR”.<sup>58</sup>

However, for these planned economic revolutions to take place and for new corporate titans to assume power, old governance patterns need to be disrupted. Thus the supporters of 4IR are pushing hard for policies that enable extensive data infrastructure and surveillance, allow unparalleled cross-sectoral oligopolies, and promote the use of automation and “AI” to commandeer, deskill and replace large swathes of labour, land and culture.

These demands are entirely incompatible with advancing food sovereignty and real agroecology. They don’t even sit easily with the existing food governance architecture, in which biodiversity, agroecology, Indigenous knowledge, farmers’ and peasants’ rights and

notions of food sovereignty have been fought for over a long period of time and finally been accepted. In these spaces, Southern nations and representatives of small and peasant farmers have the chance to speak with the same weight as large OECD states and food and tech corporations.

Put simply, those working to hasten a smooth biodigital transformation of the industrial food system and wider global economy are hunting for a different form of governance that enables their interests. They are seeking something other than existing institutions like the CFS. The FSS rhetoric exalts high tech innovation generally, and digital and biodigital technologies in particular, and is being used to try to generate corporate-friendly governance systems that are detached from the Rome-based agencies, as well as attracting increased government investments and subsidies.

## **FSS invitations to engage: a poisoned chalice?**

The formal announcement of the Food Systems Summit in October 2019, was met with considerable scepticism by civil society, especially given the FSS’s shady provenance. Slowed down by the pandemic, over 550 civil society organisations and movements still managed to sign on to a strong statement condemning the FSS for its lack of transparency, undue corporate influence from the World Economic Forum and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF), and exclusion of human rights.<sup>59</sup> Another statement, initiated by the Oakland Institute, was signed by 176 organisations from 83 countries: it pointedly called for the summit to be led by someone other than Agnes Kalibata of AGRA.<sup>60</sup>

In response to these criticisms, the FSS adopted a “big tent” rhetoric. It now claims that it is “open to all, and it belongs to us all” and that it is guided by a set of principles for engagement. This seems to be mostly show and spin.

In the original concept paper, the definition of “multi-stakeholder” only included five categories of stakeholders: policymakers, investors, media, scientists, and cities and communities. There was no reference to civil society at all and no acknowledgement of Indigenous peoples; and food producers were grouped under “investors”. Other than the Office of the UN Secretary-General and the Rome-based agencies dealing with food and agriculture, the only actor that was explicitly mentioned was the WEF.

These are telling omissions, flagging up the real reason underlying the proposal for an FSS, which serve to undermine the FSS’s subsequent attempts to quell criticism by emphasising that everyone is welcome. The FSS narrative may have shifted to “You and I have a huge role in the summit”, but ambiguity about who “you and I” might be persists, since it still fails to acknowledge the fact that it is peasants, smallholders, farmworkers, pastoralists, fisherfolks and Indigenous peoples who produce the bulk of the food that at least 70 percent of the world’s population consume.

To borrow legitimacy, the FSS has sought to engage a network of “Champions” whose key task is to help drumbeat and mobilise support. Big NGOs and farmers’ organisations were actively invited to engage in the processes. They were recruited to join the Action Teams that discussed various background papers on the designated themes and deliberated on recommendations to be presented to UN member states at the FSS pre-Summit in Rome in July. It is widely known within civil society that attempts to recruit organisations, including progressive farmers’ organisations, as champions were mostly met with refusal after refusal.

Nevertheless, as of May 2021, 106 champions had been found and appointed, ranging from current and former directors of UN agencies and international organisations and thought leaders, through to youth leaders, farmers’ leaders and civil society personalities. The

champions’ role is to cheer, amplify and legitimise the spectacle, not as formal representatives of the sectors they come from, but as individuals. The details of their commentary are far less important than the fact that they are there as influencers among their peers, adding to the desired impression that the summit is real and important and that the new norm it strives for might be a legitimate and desirable one.

## **A damaging “new normal”? virtual decision-making**

The COVID-19 pandemic was the steroid needed for digitalisation to go into overdrive. Just as everyone who had place-based work plus access to smartphones, computers and the required digital infrastructure was obliged to shift to online work from home, the UN also shifted its meetings and deliberations to online mode.

In the initial months of the pandemic, online meetings of the UN were held mainly in the form of webinars, informative dialogues, and online opportunities to share views – in other words, deliberations that did not require decisions and actions. At the time, it was felt that these could be left until face-to-face meetings resumed.

However, as it became clear that there was no hope that the pandemic would finish in 2021, discussions shifted to deliberations and exchanges of view on outstanding agenda matters. By the beginning of 2021, UN agencies like FAO started to organise “hybrid” processes involving socially distanced meetings of diplomats from member states’ missions in huge meetings halls at UN centres (in cities such as Rome and Geneva) with bureaucrats and observers in capitals relegated to participation via the cold, square screens of their computers. Some UN agencies, like the UN Environment Assembly in Nairobi, took a more cautious route by agreeing to decide on procedural matters in hybrid mode, but still

reserving substantial matters for deliberation and decision-making for face-to-face meetings in 2022.

The FSS presummit and perhaps even the full summit seem set to go ahead almost completely virtually, with its outcomes being crafted online. Yet virtual meetings like this are highly likely to lead to the closing down of the voices of those who do not have access to smartphones, computers and digital infrastructure, and the potential silencing of critical voices with the click of a button. Furthermore, while minimising international transport means less atmospheric greenhouse gas emissions, it does not mean zero emissions: the digital infrastructure and gadgets that enable these hundreds of online meetings still require resource extraction and energy, along with associated emissions of greenhouse gases, to power them.

Furthermore, unlike the planned UNFCCC and CBD summits mentioned above, which are convened on a regular basis as Conferences of the Parties to their respective UN treaties, the FSS is a one-off process that aims, in just one hit, to define the future shape of global food systems. And whilst it is not intended to create policy, it could nevertheless legitimise a set of narratives and parameters that will enable and drive major change.

One key reason for this is that the FSS's preparatory processes are made up of self-designated experts representing academia, think-tanks, civil society, farmers' organisations and international agricultural research centres. It is these self-selected experts who will come up with the workstreams' background papers and recommendations for consideration by member states at the FSS events in Rome in July 2021 and New York later in the year (date to be determined).

This contrasts sharply with the subsidiary bodies of UN Conventions that meet to discuss implementation matters and provide scientific, technical and technological advice and are

made up of representatives of UN member states and experts appointed by governments.

## **A wrap-around approach: other corporate tentacles pushing and pulling in the same direction as the FSS**

As we predicted last year, other developments in multilateral food agencies could help to significantly shape the direction of global food and agriculture as well, reinforcing the path being paved by the FSS. These include the proposed International Platform for Digital Food and Agriculture and the controversial newly-centralised "One CGIAR".

### **"Promoting the product": the International Platform for Digital Food and Agriculture**

As a result of mostly online consultations during the course of the pandemic, the idea of creating an International Digital Council for Food and Agriculture, originally pushed by the German government at the Global Forum for Food and Agriculture (GFFA) in January 2019<sup>61</sup> has now morphed into a proposal for an International Platform for Digital Food and Agriculture. Naming it a platform serves to make it sound more democratic, but that shift in the order of the words is also a most telling aspect: previously it was to be a digital council about food and agriculture; now it's a platform about digitalised food and agriculture.

The initial draft of the terms of reference for this platform was presented to the 164<sup>th</sup> session of the FAO Council in July 2020, with further refinements presented at the meeting of the Committee of Forestry in October 2020.<sup>62</sup> The mission and objectives of the platform included discussion and analysis of the risks and benefits of digital technologies in food and agriculture, and formulation of recommendations to governments regarding guidelines and other non-binding instruments that can address the challenges of digitalisation. In this

way it acquires authority over matters relating to digital technologies in the food and agriculture space, including in relation to food security. This is a privilege that has not been accorded to other technologies/knowledge systems in FAO, including farmers' knowledge systems and agroecological approaches.

Critically, the operational mechanisms of this platform – including the Intergovernmental Representatives Group, Advisory Committee and the Online Multistakeholder Forum – offer very limited opportunity for CSOs and social movements to engage. Its Coordination Unit will be hosted at the office of the Chief Economist at FAO, which provides a clue to the expected framing of the initiative. Funding will come from extra-budgetary contributions, which will most likely come from its initiator, the German government. To provide an anchor within the UN, the platform has been developed with support from a mandate derived from the UNSG's strategy on new technologies plus the recommendations of the High-Level Panel on Digital Cooperation, which is co-chaired by Melinda Gates and Jack Ma.<sup>63</sup> On the recommendation of the High-Level Panel, the office of the UN Secretary-General is also planning to establish a Multistakeholder High-Level Body (MHLB) on Digital Governance, which is heavily criticised by broad civil society formations for allowing technology titans an official licence to govern digital technologies.<sup>64</sup>

Hosting the Platform at FAO falls in line with the approach of the new Chinese Director-General of FAO, Qu Dongyu, who took the helm in 2019. He has been consistently vocal in promoting digitalisation in every aspect of food and agriculture, including nutrition, and hails it as key to combating poverty and advancing agricultural development.<sup>65</sup>

### **Mega-merger of the "delivery system":**

**One CGIAR.** As we observed last year, a takeover of the CGIAR, as driven forward by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF), Rockefeller Foundation, Syngenta Foundation,

World Bank, and US and UK governments, forcing through its consolidation into "One CGIAR", was inevitable. Despite the hapless objection of three out of 15 international research centres (IARCs), the aggressive push from powerful funders to "turn many into one" became a reality in July 2020. The Board of the 12 International Agricultural Research Centers (IARCs), with varying degrees of reluctance and resistance, agreed to merge into one legal super-entity, making the takeover the largest-ever capture of international public goods.<sup>66</sup>

This mega-merger involved the integration of assets, knowledge, expertise, personnel and global presence under a cohesive organisation driven by a single mission.<sup>67</sup> To put this concretely, One CGIAR will have under its control about 8,500 employees (scientists, technicians, agricultural workers and administrators); billions of dollars in land, laboratories and facilities across the world; and US\$850 million in annual investments, with a promised increase to US\$2 billion per annum – international public goods that, spent properly, could be critical to the future of world food security.

However, unlike the widely publicised mega-mergers of giant seeds and agrochemical companies (Bayer/Monsanto, Dow/DuPont and SinoChem/ChemChina/Syngenta) in the three years prior to the pandemic, the mega-consolidation of the IARCs happened without media fanfare or public scrutiny, while most of the world was holed up in their homes.

One CGIAR is not the conventional takeover of one for-profit company by another, but a vast privatisation coup where the enormous assets of a broadly held group of public institutions are being surrendered to a tight cadre of investors who see the public assets as a bargaining chip to attract multinational agribusiness and structure a new public-private "partnership" that could ultimately see these assets drain into private hands.



The merger of 15 international public sector bodies into one does not normally come within the purview of national regulatory agencies concerned with either mergers and acquisitions or antitrust law, but it should. This merger will not only capture Southern resources and monopolise the seeds of the South; it will also transform South markets.

One CGIAR is focused on employing the high-tech approach to just nine crops plus a few species of fish and livestock, in close partnership with the biggest agribusiness and biotech companies who control the new technologies in those sectors, which will inevitably subordinate the interests of national and regional agricultural research centres. While the new relationship between One CGIAR and national agricultural research centres is based, in principle, on co-responsibility in deciding research goals, the financial power rests with the biggest and most politically influential donors of One CGIAR, led by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

As the individuals IARCs are attending to the legality of their decision to join One CGIAR in the context of their national jurisdictions, the most serious issue concerns the implication of the mega-merger for the legal status of the 768,000+ seed samples mostly collected from farmers' fields and stored in the 11 CGIAR gene banks. This invaluable asset – half of the world's unique plant breeding germplasm – is now at the disposal of the new entity. FAO has policy oversight with respect to CGIAR gene banks under a legal agreement with the centres from 1994, but the implications of the merger for the status of those gene banks urgently needs to be made clear.

While most of civil society would agree that the CGIAR should either be disbanded or massively restructured, the philanthrocapitalists and governments that hold the CGIAR purse must not be allowed to take over international agricultural research.

## The Summit we DO want

In every respect, the 2021 Food Systems Summit, as advanced by the UN Secretary-General, promotes the interlocking interests of agribusiness and philanthrocapitalist players. It is not only the wrong summit; it should not even be called a summit.

It might more aptly be termed a “big tent congress” of stakeholders with a very particular range of interests, convened to give an impression of inclusion by allowing pitches about “game-changing propositions”.

After decades of fighting for recognition of the right to self-organise, civil society risks losing substantial ground as UN bureaucrats and the FSS secretariat, working closely with corporate lobby groups, collectively organise and lead the consultations, define the agenda, set the rules for engagement and select the participants, all with a fixed agenda and outcome in mind.

This is intended to favour corporate-friendly, profit-generating technofix outcomes. It is already clear that the Food Systems Summit will not address the underlying crises that have been triggered by the industrial food chain.

The state of the industrial food chain and its impacts on people and our environment do urgently require a transformation in the governance of food and agriculture, but this summit is exactly the wrong response.

Instead, movements, civil society and governments should use this critical moment in time, building on the high degree of common opposition to the FSS, to initiate an entirely different process: the summit we *do* need.

This process could begin with mounting a call for a new people-led summit on food systems and food sovereignty that builds on the 2007 Nyéléni Forum in Mali.<sup>68</sup>

**BOX 10: The wrong summit: The summit we need v the summit planned**

<b>What</b>	A real bottom-up process, driven by food movements (including peasants, farmers, food workers, Indigenous peoples and civil society. Followed by a democratic governmental process, coordinated by CFS, with full participation of food movements.	A spectacle and diversion.
<b>Who</b>	Driven by food movements (including peasants, farmers, food workers, Indigenous peoples and civil society).	Driven by World Economic Forum, philanthrocapitalists, Northern governments, international trade associations.
<b>Vision</b>	Systemic transformation of the food system and its governance, guided by those engaged in peasant food webs and in accordance with the principles of food sovereignty and food justice.	Proposals for a list of short-term fixes' ("game changing solutions") that are mostly technofixes that favour industry but can be dressed up to seem like their primary intention is to meet the SDGs.
<b>Analysis</b>	Acknowledgement of the broad long-term problems of the industrial food system, historical and ongoing colonial injustices, concentration of power and the systemic roots of entwined ecological, health and democratic crises. Recognition of the key role of peasant food webs for food, health and climate.	Selective acknowledgement of certain aspects of climate change, biodiversity loss, gender concerns and shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic, combined with intentionally ignoring the root causes of such problems, including the role of the industrial food system in all of these crises/injustices. A privileged push for market-oriented and technical fixes.
<b>Governance and participation</b>	Democratic, multilateral, accountable, in-person processes, based on bottom-up agenda-setting, and policy making through participatory representative structures (e.g. civil society and Indigenous people's mechanism).	Multistakeholder, gimmick-packed, conference-style format of dialogues, headed by figurehead "special envoys", supported by "champions", ad hoc independent "dialogues", narrow "science expert" panel and opaque "action tracks" – all managed by appointed political career figures. Virtual online event.
<b>Biodigital transformation</b>	Developing common action to assess and address the significant social, economic, human rights and cultural impacts of cur-	Promoting profitable opportunities for digital and bio-digital technologies as "game

	<p>rent digital and biodigital transformation of global food systems; and proposing governance to ensure that any desirable technology is based on equity and safeguards food sovereignty, human rights and biodiversity, in the face of that transformation.</p>	<p>changing solutions”; without any critical view or consideration of their negative social, economic and environmental impacts; and enabling governance changes and investment to accelerate digital and biodigital transformation.</p>
<b>Solutions</b>	<p>Agroecology and Food Sovereignty (as elaborated in the Néyélini principles). Food justice, based on agroecological, local, and ecologically and culturally appropriate food production and sharing.</p>	<p>“Game changing solutions”, that promote more corporate control and new risky technologies, dressed up as “nature positive production”, “Nature-based Solutions”, “regenerative agriculture” and “digital agriculture”.</p>
<b>Political home</b>	<p>Driven from global and regional peasant food movements, linked to the Rome-based Committee on World Food Security (CFS).</p>	<p>Held in New York, designed in Davos, communications led from London.</p>
<b>Source of expertise</b>	<p>Changing and strengthening the CFS High Level Panel of Experts, to include diverse knowledge systems, including farmers’, peasants’ and Indigenous knowledge.</p>	<p>Narrow “science expert” panel, proposing expert/technocratic “IPCC for food” structure.</p>

A genuine summit must have, at its very core and foundation, the interests and meaningful participation of the peasants, smallholders, pastoralists, fishers, Indigenous peoples and urban gardeners that make up the peasant food web that feeds the overwhelming majority of the planet’s population. Its outcomes should feed into and help shape the deliberations of the Committee on World Food Security (CFS), which is the legitimate body in the United Nations mandated to deal with global food security issues, with established mechanisms for the participation of rights-holders and recognition of their right to self-organise.

A meaningful and strategic food systems summit would address the root causes of systemic hunger that continue to affect some 800 million people globally.

Equitable access to food and the means to produce food can only be achieved if we recognise and curb the immoral concentration of resources and consolidation of power in the hands of oligopolies across the food chain, and the increasing control that technology titans let loose on food systems could acquire.

Addressing corporate power in the industrial food chain and the threat it poses to the peasant food web should not be smothered with a blanket of “multistakeholder governance” that makes structural problems in food systems invisible.

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