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## All hat and no cattle: Accountability following the UN food systems summit

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### ABSTRACT

The United Nations Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) is an important moment to garner political and financial attention to the challenges that food systems face. It is a difficult moment with many competing national and global priorities including massive inequities, rapid climate change and a global pandemic. It will be important for the UNFSS to build in robust accountability mechanisms to ensure that commitments to address food systems challenges are upheld, and that these mechanisms align to already existing frameworks towards sustainable development. While the UNFSS may be impressive in its planning, without accountability of what, who, and by when, it could fall short in its execution. We, as the Editors of the Global Food Security Journal articulate the importance of accountability to ensure the UNFSS is not just ‘all hat and no cattle.’

### 1. Why is the UN food systems summit important

The upcoming United Nations Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) aims to address the most pressing issues facing food systems, including food security, diet quality, and environmental sustainability (HLPE, 2017; Swinburn et al., 2019; Willett et al., 2019). The UNFSS has emanated from the need to make food systems deliver better nutrition, health, and livelihood outcomes while limiting the significant negative impacts of food systems on the environment. It comes at a critical time as the world attempts to rebuild itself in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic (Klassen and Murphy, 2020), positioned halfway to the 2030 deadline for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and when there is a need to re-energize the importance of food security as a critical issue for the achievement of the SDGs as a whole (Herrero et al., 2021). This Summit is also relevant for the 26th UN Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP26) and the UN Biodiversity Conference (CBD), which also take place in 2021 (Clark et al., 2020; Sandhu et al., 2019; Thornton et al., 2011; Mbow et al., 2019).

The UNFSS is not the first summit to address issues related to food systems. Other historical moments in 1943, 1963, 1974, 1992, 1996, 2009, and 2014 sought to garner political will and commitments to end hunger and malnutrition (Byerlee and Fanzo, 2019). These summits were essential for various reasons, including global goal setting and alignment among nations. For example, in 1943, the United Nations conference on food and agriculture called by U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt took place in Hot Springs, Virginia, and set the goal of “freedom from want of food, suitable and adequate for the health and strength of all people.” (US Dept of State, 1943). While noble, the world has not reached that goal, with 811 million people currently facing hunger (FAO, 2021). At the 1996 summit, the definition of food security was born, which is still in use today to frame the challenge and mobilize donor resources. This meeting also helped establish the framing for the

Millennium Development Goals. However, none of these summits applied a systems lens and focused so broadly on the global food system, how food policy plays out in individual countries’ and territories’ food systems and actors, or the complexity of trade-offs associated with the decisions made (Byerlee and Fanzo, 2022).

The UNFSS is meant to garner a standard definition of food systems and a collective vision of needed changes to food systems in the 21st century (Von Braun et al., 2021). It is also expected to be informed and influenced by science, with critical discussions and agreements being evidence-based. Researchers, many of whom have published in this journal, have accumulated extensive evidence on the fragility of food systems in our current world that can inform the UNFSS (Fanzo et al., 2020). Key themes of this evidence include a better understanding of the cause and consequences of different forms of malnutrition; how food systems have lacked diversity in all facets; the rise and risk in zoonotic and other infectious diseases related to food production; the impacts of climate change, and environmental and biodiversity degradation associated with food systems and vice versa; the food-related issues of gender equality and empowerment; rural and urban poverty; social unrest and conflict; and the political economy of food politics and policy (Brands and Gavin, 2020; Breisinger et al., 2014; Glover and Sumberg, 2020; Makita et al., 2019; Micha et al., 2020; Mozaffarian et al., 2018; Rivera-Ferre et al., 2021; Webb et al., 2020). There have been many ‘canaries in the coal mine’ and calls for action, but often to little avail (Aiyar and Pingali, 2020; FAO, 2018; Headey et al., 2020; Herforth et al., 2020; Laborde et al., 2021; Webb et al., 2020; Willett et al., 2019). The UNFSS comes at a time when the need to heed these calls has never been so evident.

The crisis we are facing has been all too visible of late. The COVID-19 pandemic has had catastrophic impacts, especially in the poorest parts of the world. Global undernutrition is and will continue to increase substantially as a result (FAO, 2021). At the same time, recent floods in

Europe and Asia, and extensive fires in North America and Southern Europe, point to the need to take drastic and sustained action on climate change and the most recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report has indicated that global warming is affecting every region on Earth, with many of the changes approaching irreversible status (IPCC, 2021). Food systems have an important role to play in mitigating these catastrophes; after all, they have been estimated to contribute up to 30% of greenhouse gas emissions (Crippa et al., 2021; Mbow et al., 2019). At the same time, actions taken within food systems present a significant opportunity for climate change mitigation and adaptation (Rosenzweig et al., 2020). These events, their consequences and the untapped opportunities are an all too stark reminder of the importance of the UNFSS and the potential benefits that positive food systems transformation could bring.

However, the UNFSS is not without uncertainties and controversies (in a similar vein to the lead-up to most summits), which will likely provoke some to question the validity of its proceedings and the decisions that result. Will the UNFSS be inclusive to all relevant stakeholders and ensure that those who are without agency are consulted (Nisbett et al., 2021)? Will this be the summit that finally addresses the inequities and social injustices that have hindered progress on so many critical issues to date and even made things worse for the most marginalized and disadvantaged populations (Klassen and Murphy, 2020; Micha et al., 2020)? Has the nature of private sector engagement in the UNFSS process and its negotiations been appropriate when serious questions about some within the sector's motives and past transgressions continue (Canfield et al., 2021)? Will local action be at the center of the UNFSS rather than grandiose global political wonk talk? Will commitments be made, and will they be taken seriously? How can the research community galvanize, align their efforts, and contribute to informing and directing progress? Will all stakeholders come forth proactively, invited or not, in response to the urgency that current realities call for? There will be many entry points to commit and contribute, so will there be an accountability mechanism to track those said commitments? Is the UNFSS *'all hat and no cattle'*? These questions are legitimate, and an appropriate accountability mechanism can help ensure that the issues raised serve to inform the actions of all who seek to make a difference.

## 2. What happens the day after the Summit?

The day after the summit proceedings, the proverbial rubber must meet the road—commitments must be realized after everyone gets on a plane or signs off Zoom and goes back to their regular routines. At the time of writing this editorial, there has been no UNFSS accountability mechanism announced. What has been articulated is that further commitments for investments or other actions by governments and the private sector will be voluntary and non-binding. While there is a chance that this situation may change in the lead-up to the UNFSS in September 2021, without money on the table and no concrete commitments to joined-up actions, it is difficult to see how the UNFSS will achieve the necessary traction. Indeed, similar issues have plagued the SDGs and other summits on global food issues of the past (Cohen, 2019; Fanzo, 2018; Fehling et al., 2013). So, this begs the question, what makes the UNFSS different from what has come before (Jurkovich, 2020)?

While skepticism is perhaps understandable, it is essential to recognize that opportunities for concrete actions exist. For example, many low- and middle-income countries' (LMICs) efforts to "do things differently" are building momentum on plans for sustained change and, in many cases, leveraging existing policy frameworks to accelerate progress. Further, while COVID-19 presents enormous challenges for the world, there is growing recognition of the need to "build back better." The pandemic presents a robust case for substantial and increased investment by donors to ensure that food systems are more resilient, equitable, and sustainable (Barrett, 2020; Deconinck et al., 2020; Elías and Jámbor, 2021; Reardon and Swinnen, 2020). The recovery from

COVID-19 will be a significant draw on resources, including within high-income countries, and donor countries may not be able to meet the financial needs for sufficient recovery. Questions will also likely be asked about investments not directly related to the recovery (IFPRI, 2021). For these reasons, there is a need for the targets of the UNFSS to be closely aligned with COVID-19 recovery efforts that are fortunately very relevant; the importance of food systems to this recovery needs to be made 'loud and clear.'

## 3. What is needed to establish accountability?

To ensure that the UNFSS delivers, an accountability mechanism that tracks the fulfillment of the commitments and actions made at the Summit is a top priority. Such a mechanism should show who delivers and who does not. In addition, it should motivate action and demonstrate to the/a (skeptical) world that the UNFSS has achieved what it set out to do.

First, while many recent reports on global food systems offer a series of recommended actions, they do not identify which actions are needed by specific stakeholders. They also do not indicate how these recommendations can be translated into action 'on the ground' in the context of established interests and constrained budgets. The UNFSS must better define the roadmaps and specific steps that should be adopted by specific stakeholders and how actions can effectively align with the established interests and priorities of national and local governments, the private sector, and civil society. Some of these actions will be technical, for example, changes to production practices, while others will require effort at the business and political level, including sustainability-driven business and investment models, the realignment of budgets, and changes to governance arrangements (Herrero et al., 2021).

Second, there is a need for implementable actions backed by real investments linked to a robust accountability mechanism (Kraak et al., 2014). For example, the International Pact on Monitoring for Accountability for Action on Food Systems stresses the need to strengthen food systems by monitoring, generating evidence, translating this evidence to the real-world context, and advocating for evidence-based food systems transformation (An Accountability Pact, 2021). The Global Nutrition Report is also creating the Nutrition Accountability Framework to minimize the burden of reporting on commitments and make it easier to determine the most impactful actions and allocate resources where they are most needed (GNR, 2021). Regardless of the accountability mechanism adopted, this must be linked to specific targets or benchmarks with measurable indicators for which there is data available to track and assess performance. Researchers have a role in establishing robust indicators that can track changes in food systems across time and in diverse geographical contexts. These indicators need to focus on the structure and conduct of food systems and the performance in terms of critical outcomes. Further, there is a need for these measures to capture changes in how food systems are governed (Hulme, 2015), including the role and influence of nation-states, the private sector, and civil society. For credibility reasons, the definition of these measures and their monitoring should be independent.

Third, there is a need for significant public investments—coming from both traditional and less traditional sources—in reliable and representative national and sub-national data systems that track progress towards the summit targets. At the current time, many countries lack systems to track the attainment of the SDGs. Indeed, much of the progress towards the SDGs comes from the extrapolation data from UN agencies such as FAO (OECD, 2021). However, the collection and analysis of such data are costly, especially in the context of many of the poorest countries. Therefore, there is a need to be more innovative. For example, looking at remote sensing and cell phone-based data, crowd-sourcing could help make tracking timelier and more cost-effective by public agencies (Marshall et al., 2021). However, these types of data will require finding secure and more open ways to utilize data collected by the private sector or the latter's capabilities beyond national

information systems.

Fourth, there is a need for a recognized scientific body that brings together and validates available evidence and builds consensus around how the global food system is performing, actions, and sustainable and achievable solutions (Nature, 2021). The High-Level Panel of Experts (HLPE) serves as the scientific advisory body to the United Nations' Committee on World Food Security (CFS), a policy-coordinating body for addressing global food security and nutrition issues. They produce a series of reports on timely topics related to food systems that help contribute and strengthen the science-policy interface. Clapp and colleagues argue that developing an IPCC-like body independent of the HLPE would cause further fragmentation and confusion regarding food policy governance (Clapp et al., 2021). Conversely, others disagree and argue that there is a need for another model—an independent body outside the CFS like the IPCC (neutral with respect to policy choices) that involves many expert scientists (sometimes over 800) selected by their governments along with scientists coming from international bodies. This body would perform a balanced assessment of the full range of scientific views, and democratize participation shielded from special interests (EC, 2021; IPCC, 2013).

Fifth, the UNFSS should have an accountability mechanism tied and tethered to more extensive accountability mechanisms, for example, that relate to the SDGs, COP, and the CBD biodiversity targets (FAO, 2019; Kornov et al., 2020). Aligning commitments across these agreements is not only complex but highlights trade-offs that should be avoided. In some cases, there may be direct (or indirect) inconsistencies between commitments that are negotiated and agreed upon in isolation of one another. In addition, despite having limited data, the SDGs themselves impose a significant burden on many countries required to report on a long list of indicators annually (Gennari and Navarro, 2020). For resource efficiency, mechanisms of streamlining data collection should be explored, leveraging existing data collection mechanisms. For example, countries collect data through Demographic and Health Surveys, Household Income and Expenditure Surveys, National Food Consumption Surveys, various agriculture and market surveys, and for Africa, the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP) biennial review process. How possible would it be to leverage these existing data collection cycles at the country level? What are the investment requirements for sustained, systematic data collection? Answering such questions warrants urgent attention.

Sixth, there needs to be a serious and open discussion of the private sector's role within the UNFSS and overall, in food systems governance, in terms of interests and influence, and responsibilities for actions and investments (Swinburn et al., 2015). The Summit has laid out guidelines for private sector engagement (UNFSS, 2021). For some constituencies, the involvement of *trans*- and multi-national food businesses in the UNFSS is problematic, given their dominance over global and national food systems and a history of multiple instances of 'bad practice.' On the other hand, driven by consumer demands and more sustainability-focused investors, there are significant changes in some parts of the private sector towards environmental sustainability. Further, many small- and medium-scale businesses play a key role in the supply of food in LMICs, and especially to the poor, and their role needs to be recognized. Arguably, therefore, ignoring or excluding the private sector is unlikely to advance the food system transformation agenda constructively. The private sector, in all of its variations, must be invited to participate in the UNFSS and alongside civil society organizations. Through this process, the private sector can be encouraged to bring concrete actions to the table. At the same time, governments must establish and maintain workable relations with the private sector, including small and medium-sized enterprises, while avoiding being captured by strong corporate interests in the form of "embedded autonomy" (Evans, 2012). Further, actions by the private sector need to be monitored and reported openly, acting to ensure accountability and prevent corporate 'greenwashing.'

There is a critical role for civil society organizations, including

consumer groups, and other non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the UNFSS process. In many cases, these organizations bring the interests and perspectives of stakeholders that are under-represented and whose voices are too often not heard or muted at global summits. Usually, their role is restricted to 'shouting from the sidelines.' They also have a role to play in holding powerful interests, including governments and large private sector businesses, to account, and in implementing and monitoring agreed actions post-Summit. If civil society is not actively included in the UNFSS, the legitimacy of the Summit and subsequent follow up actions could rightfully be questioned.

With these responsibilities, however, comes the need for civil society organizations and other NGOs to themselves be open to scrutiny and be accountable for the commitments they make and their actions. Their agendas and positions must be evidence-based. Even for well-resourced larger organizations, but especially for smaller ones, limited resources often entails that work is done with short project cycles where expectations set for communities cannot be sustained when the projects end, leaving governments with challenges to address. It is therefore important that civil society efforts are embedded within government frameworks that can provide continuity. However, there is also a role for governments, academic researchers, and others to support the civil society in a manner that does not jeopardize their independence.

#### 4. What does the UNFSS mean for much of the world?

Even before the event itself, the UNFSS is calling for significant and sustained changes to food systems. Towards this end, it is for countries to design and implement food systems transformation pathways and roadmaps. These are rather grand-sounding documents. Nevertheless, what do they mean for the world's population, especially the 6.4 billion people living in LMICs? If little or no concrete actions come about, despite laudable commitments, perhaps very little. More optimistically, positive change may result if the UNFSS successfully focuses attention on the need for food systems change. Even then, however, it is not clear what this might look like. For example, the UNFSS includes a suggested Coalition of Action for Healthy Diets from Sustainable Food Systems for Children, Families and All. This Coalition, rooted in several "Action Tracks," calls on all food systems actors to consider their diverse entry points for concrete actions that can "ensure all people eat healthy diets from sustainable food systems" (Coalition of Healthy Diets, 2021). The UNFSS could use such a vision to align diverse stakeholder efforts to deliver better diets for people and the planet.

The importance of national governments, particularly in LMIC settings, on fostering positive food systems transformation cannot be overemphasized. Each country or territory's policy, program, governance, and accountability mechanisms form the scaffolding within which the needed actions by all actors will take place. Therefore, prioritizing the food systems transformation pathways and roadmaps that countries are developing will be critical for success. These roadmaps will set expectations and must therefore include how commitments will be tracked and through which accountability mechanism(s).

Many LMICs are coming to the UNFSS with already defined plans for which they will be seeking external funding. Such countries risk being beholden to donors, who will push their interests and priorities. It is hard to think of a comprehensive strategy in such circumstances. Ideally, the donors should listen to what the countries believe will make a difference and support those actions. This redirection would be a bold way of doing things and ensure that country context becomes central to decisions on which efforts to support and how.

The UNFSS needs to avoid the situation where the rich world defines the agenda and takes off-the-table issues that it considers unpalatable to its interests or a low priority, often in the light of lobbying by the *trans*- and multi-national corporations dominating the agenda. Indeed, extensive efforts by the African Union towards a unified Africa position on food systems transformation informed by multiple country-level dialogues have mostly remained invisible to the global process. Yet,



ironically, the African Union carries the voices of 54 member states.

## 5. Conclusion

We all want the UNFSS to be more than just a hat and instead have more cattle. To do that, there needs to be a robust accountability mechanism tied to guaranteed investments that hold actors to agreed actions. These actions must be immediate and address the detrimental, food system consequences on human health, the environment, and society. Furthermore, a scientific body must support this accountability mechanism that rigorously, neutrally, consistently, and openly evaluates evidence and has a robust monitoring system backed with indicators and benchmarks that the world can feasibly track.

Further, the agenda and discussions at the UNFSS need to be driven by LMICs and other voices that are often given a back seat, including citizens, consumers, and other civil society actors. While many experts have been called upon or have simply stepped up to organize and be present at the UNFSS, others may purposely stay away due to legitimacy concerns. This exclusion is a considerable loss of a critical opportunity to bring much-needed change to global food systems. Regardless of the stakeholder perspective we come from, we all have a role to play and should hold ourselves accountable to identifying our unique and diverse entry points from which we can contribute proactively.

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Namukolo Covic<sup>1</sup>, Achim Dobermann<sup>1</sup>, Jessica Fanzo<sup>1,\*</sup>,  
Spencer Henson<sup>1</sup>, Mario Herrero<sup>1</sup>, Prabhu Pingali<sup>1</sup>, Steve Staal<sup>1</sup>

*E-mail address:* [jfanzo1@jhu.edu](mailto:jfanzo1@jhu.edu) (J. Fanzo).

\* Corresponding author.

<sup>1</sup> The Editors of the Global Food Security Journal.