



# Re-imagining the UN Committee on World Food Security

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## Abstract

This article argues that the United Nations Committee on World Food Security can and must serve as a space for catalyzing and strengthening public interest-oriented food systems governance grounded in the human rights framework. This would necessarily entail confronting the fragmentation of governance and erasure of accountability promoted by corporate designed multi-stakeholderism, and democratizing multilateralism through genuine participation of rights holders, public scrutiny and participatory science. Pivotal to this endeavor is arresting the growing corporate influence in governance mechanisms and reorienting them towards reinvigorating relationships among people, communities and governments.

**Keywords** Food sovereignty · Multi-stakeholderism · Corporations · Food systems · Food governance

We are at a decisive moment in history. The convergence of the COVID-19 pandemic and accelerating climate change with their attendant economic, social, environmental and political impacts have shaken people across the world to the realization that humanity is in the grips of a mega-crisis far more profound than previously imagined. Both COVID-19 and climate change are anthropogenic phenomena closely linked to extractivism, over-consumption, chemically intensive, industrial and export-oriented agricultural production, and the pursuit of economic growth and profit maximization at the expense of public interest and the environment. Their impacts have been exacerbated by the rise of extreme authoritarian governments (many elected through democratic procedures) and deteriorating human rights conditions. They show clearly the inextricable links between food, health, environmental and economic crises, and point to the urgency of holistic, human rights-based approaches in addressing them.

The scale of destruction of natural environments, social-economic systems and collective survival capacities is not a glitch that can be fixed by tinkering with the wiring of the economic model that has brought us to this point. Radical, ‘out of the box’ thinking and systemic transformations are urgently needed for majority of the world’s people to be able to live through these times with some measure of equity, justice and dignity. Such transformations need leadership and

governance firmly committed to public interest rather than to market powers and capital, and that enable ways forward based on reality-based knowledge and experience, rather than narrow exclusionary science and corporate solutionism. In the face of increasing authoritarianism, violence and shrinking civic space in many countries, multilateralism and international solidarity have acquired additional salience.

This article argues that the United Nations Committee on World Food Security (CFS) can and must serve as a space for catalyzing and strengthening public interest-oriented food systems governance grounded in the human rights framework. This would necessarily entail confronting the fragmentation of global governance and erasure of legal, material accountability promoted by corporate designed multi-stakeholderism, and democratizing multilateralism through genuine participation of rights holders, public scrutiny and ‘participatory science’ (Moseley 2021). Pivotal to this endeavor is arresting the growing corporate influence in governance mechanisms and reorienting them towards reinvigorating relationships among people, communities and governments.

## The Crisis at Hand

The latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Report released on 9 August 2021, warns that climate change is intensifying rapidly in every region of the world and across the whole climate system, and that some of

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the changes already set in motion such as sea level rise will be irreversible over at least hundreds of years. The report finds that unless there are immediate, rapid and large-scale reductions in human caused greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, global temperature is expected to reach or exceed 1.5 °C of warming averaged over the next 20 years. Each of the last 4 decades has been successively warmer than any decade that preceded it since 1850 (Masson et al. 2021). These increases in temperature will bring about significant changes in water cycles, precipitation patterns, schedules and intensities, floods and seasonal snow covers, and accelerate permafrost thawing, glacier and icesheet melting, ocean warming and acidification, and overall sea level rise.<sup>1</sup> The implications of these on food availability and nutrition are obvious.

The State of Food Insecurity and Nutrition in the World 2021 (SOFI 2021) report shows that in 2020, between 720 and 811 million people faced hunger, up by 118–160 million people compared with 2019. Although moderate or severe food insecurity has been on the rise since 2014, the estimated increase in 2020 (almost 320 million people) was equal to that of the previous 5 years combined, and in a single year, nearly one in three people in a world of 2.37 billion did not have access to adequate food (FAO et al. 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic had a large hand in the alarming increase in hunger and food insecurity: millions of people lost jobs, livelihoods and incomes; the collapse of already enfeebled public health systems and absent social protections led to deaths, morbidity, indebtedness and increased poverty; and efforts to check the spread of the corona virus disrupted national and global supply chains of food and essential goods, creating hardships for import dependent countries.

However, the emergence, trajectories and impacts of COVID-19 and climate change have been shaped by already existing structural and systemic conditions. A study carried out by the Civil Society and Indigenous People's Mechanism (CSM) of the impacts of COVID-19 on small-scale food providers<sup>2</sup> revealed that neoliberalism has proved to be the most critical pre-existing systemic condition in determining the pandemic's impacts. Neoliberal policies have dismantled public policies and regulation, and privileged corporate dominated, global food markets over small-scale food production and territorially embedded food systems. Neoliberalism has sewn inequality into the economic, social and

political fabric of peoples' lives, exacerbating long standing discrimination and injustice.<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, the SOFI 21 identified continuing conflicts, climate variability, economic downturns, poverty and inequality as existing, major drivers of the current state of hunger and malnutrition. More than half the world's undernourished people and almost 80% of stunted children live in conditions of some form of violence, conflict or fragility. Healthy diets are unaffordable for the poor in every region, and persistent inequality increases the likelihood of food insecurity and malnutrition in all forms. An additional 108 million workers worldwide are now categorized as poor or extremely poor compared to 2019 and global unemployment is expected to be 205 million people in 2022. Here too, data shows that the COVID-19 crisis has worsened pre-existing inequalities by hitting vulnerable workers harder, for example, the world's two billion informal sector workers who do not have social protection.<sup>4</sup>

These crises have hit women disproportionately and created particular hardships, challenges and risks for them. Women are responsible for productive and reproductive work, which includes managing household finances, feeding the family, caring for children, elderly and the sick, and maintaining the social fabric. The unfolding economic and social fall-out of the pandemic has increased the burden of women's care work and stress to find new means of income, reinforced of traditional gender roles and discrimination, and increased their vulnerability to domestic violence (Claeys and Duncan 2020). Gender inequalities are aggravated by climate related disasters, greatly increasing women's workload and exposure to hazardous conditions, especially in situations where they rely directly on the natural environment for food provision, water, fuel wood, medicines and income.

Central to this scenario is the increasing power of corporations over the economy, society, politics and governance. Horizontal and vertical concentration of the agri-food sector by large private firms armed with new digital technologies is entrenching industrial food systems as never before and has profound implications for national-global food governance (IPES-Food 2017). The world's top corporations have market valuations that exceed the GDP of many countries and are using their financial might to control the locus of power in global governance through multi-stakeholderism, as corporations 'seek to draw governments, scientists and a

<sup>1</sup> Climate change widespread, rapid, and intensifying—IPCC. <https://www.ipcc.ch/2021/08/09/ar6-wg1-20210809-pr/>. Accessed 25 September 2021.

<sup>2</sup> The term includes producers, workers, gatherers, herders, vendors, etc.

<sup>3</sup> Voices from the ground: From COVID-19 to radical transformation of our food systems CSM 2020, <https://www.csm4cfs.org/csm-global-synthesis-report-covid-19/>. Accessed 25 September 2021.

<sup>4</sup> WESO Trends 2021. Slow jobs recovery and increased inequality risk long-term COVID-19 scarring, [https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS\\_794834/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_794834/lang--en/index.htm). Accessed 28 September 2021.



handful of civil society organizations into an artificial new multilateralism' (IPES-Food and ETC Group 2021).

A small number of corporations exercise a high degree of influence within and over the global food system, powered by mergers and acquisitions of one another 'to form giant 'mega-companies' that are central players in what can only be described as a profound reconfiguration of the world food economy' (Clapp 2021). The Big Six firms that dominated the agricultural inputs in the early 2000s have now become four large firms: Bayer, Corteva, ChemChina-Syngenta and BASF. Corporate concentration in agri-food supply chains have direct implications for food security and nutrition (FSN) and the right to food through: shaping markets, technologies, safety standards, and product and food labelling; controlling seeds and breeds; determining commodity and food prices, workers' wages and work conditions; increasing the availability of highly processed foods over fresh, seasonal produce; and privatizing a range of key public functions such as procurement, agricultural research and extension, school meals, maintenance of land records, etc. Such influence undermines the agency of small-scale food producers, workers and low-income consumers, who find themselves faced with poor choices regarding livelihoods, incomes and nutrition.

Corporations protect their assets such as seeds, breeds and technologies through intellectual property regimes that ensure hefty profits even as they take advantage of public financing and policies. To attract private investments, governments offer agribusinesses numerous incentives including tax holidays, land acquisition, preferential access to water, raw materials, energy and markets, and protection from legal and material liability. Over the past decades financial actors have become increasingly involved in agri-food supply chains through complex financial instruments (HLPE 2020). Finance corporations have invested in food and agricultural firms, digital technologies and firms, and large-scale land acquisitions, and are frequently the hidden faces behind land, water and resource grabbing. Market rule in food systems has been boosted through neoliberalism and financialization, giving shape to a corporate food regime central to which 'has been a broad dispossession of smallholders and conversion into casualized labour on a world scale' (McMichael 2013).

## Food Sovereignty and the Committee on World Food Security

At the World Food Summit 1996 in Rome, La Vía Campesina—an international coalition of peasant organizations—launched the concept of food sovereignty as a direct challenge to market-based food security promoted through the recently established World Trade Organization (WTO). The

rights of people to healthy, culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sustainable means, and to determine their own food systems and policies were and still are at the heart of food sovereignty. Food sovereignty asserts the autonomy and agency of small-scale food producers and workers in the face of increasing corporate power, emphasizes democratic control over food systems, confronts power asymmetries and calls for the necessary radical structural changes to build just, equal and territorially rooted food systems in harmony with nature. The analysis by food sovereignty advocates of the threats to human rights posed by the WTO resulted in the call *WTO Out of Food and Agriculture*<sup>5</sup> that was carried to subsequent WTO Ministerial Conferences, and shaped robust resistance to the neoliberal trade regime championed by the Bretton Woods Institutions.<sup>6</sup>

Since then, the food sovereignty movement has grown in strength and diversity, and birthed numerous initiatives to address historical and emerging injustices, inequalities and rights abuses. The International Forum on Food Sovereignty in 2007 in Mali (*Nyéleni*) brought together over 500 supporters from different organizations across the world. As corporate control over food, agriculture, health, industry, technology, etc. continued to be legalized through neoliberal trade regimes and World Bank-International Monetary Fund (IMF) structural adjustment policies, it was but natural that the movement focused attention to agitate for global governance that upheld public interest instead of corporate profits. The 2007–2008 food crisis presented a critical opportunity for the food sovereignty movement to push for participation and voice in global food governance, including the reform of the CFS in 2009.

The CFS was first established in 1974 as an inter-governmental body in the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) for review and follow-up of food security policies. Faced with rising hunger and food riots that peaked in 2007–2008, and the lack of past effectiveness in attempts to shape regional-global responses, CFS Member States (MSs) agreed in 2009 to an ambitious reform programme for the CFS, giving it a new vision, role and structure. The food sovereignty movement played a significant role in both, the decision to reform the CFS, as well as the shape it took, acting through the International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty (IPC), a platform of small-scale food producers' organizations, social movements and support NGOs formed to interface with the global food agencies (McKeon 2015). The new CFS aimed to be 'the foremost inclusive international and intergovernmental platform for a broad range of

<sup>5</sup> <https://focusweb.org/wto-out-of-food-and-agriculture/>. Accessed 10 October 2021.

<sup>6</sup> <https://focusweb.org/ailing-but-alive-the-wto-in-december-2009/>. Accessed 10 October 2021.



committed stakeholders to work together in a coordinated manner and in support of country-led processes towards the elimination of hunger and ensuring food security and nutrition for all human beings'. And further, 'The CFS will strive for a world free from hunger where countries implement the voluntary guidelines for the progressive realization of the right to adequate food in the context of national food security'.<sup>7</sup>

The goals of the reformed CFS included ensuring that the voices of all relevant actors—especially those most affected by hunger and malnutrition—are heard in policy debates on food and agriculture; strengthening international coordination and linkages with local, national and regional levels; and supporting CFS discussions with 'structured expertise through the creation of a High Level Panel of Experts (HLPE) so that the decisions and the work of the CFS are based on hard evidence and state of the art knowledge'.<sup>8</sup> The main roles for the CFS were defined as providing a platform for policy convergence and coordination; facilitating support and advice to countries and regions; and promoting accountability and sharing of best practices at all levels.<sup>9</sup>

In the face of intensifying food and climate crises, and dispossession of Indigenous Peoples and other rural communities by corporate-state captures of their territories, decisions at the FAO High-Level Conference on World Food Security in 2008 were a shocking nod to expanding corporate control over agriculture and the commons facilitated by the World Bank and other multilateral agencies. Instead of proposals to restore and strengthen small-scale food provision through public supports, the 'solutions' approved by MSs at the 2008 Conference included increasing productivity through private sector value chains, emissions trading and offsets, agrofuels, synthetic biology and WTO market-based governance of agriculture (Canfield et al. 2021). At the parallel civil society Terra Preta conference, food sovereignty advocates pledged to engage with governments and multilateral agencies to strengthen the right to food sovereignty, and 'chart a new model of international food and agriculture governance whose central purpose is to promote and advance food sovereignty'.<sup>10</sup>

For the food sovereignty movement, the CFS reform was a significant step towards shaping a global policy platform that committed to be contextually grounded, broaden participation in its deliberations to include social movements and

civil society, guide policymaking with real evidence rather than market ideology, and link FSN with the right to adequate food. The new CFS's claim to inclusivity was backed by an innovative structure: MSs were the final decision-makers, but negotiation processes were open for participation by actors involved in food and nutrition issues. In the case of civil society, the reform prioritized organizations representing smallholder family farmers, artisanal fisherfolk, herders/pastoralists, landless, urban poor, agricultural and food workers, women, youth, consumers, Indigenous Peoples, and relevant NGOs, and sought gender and regional balance.

This unique, blended multilateralism approach extended to the HLPE, which is constituted by experts from a diversity of academic and experiential backgrounds, and whose knowledge generating processes and products are subject to public inputs and reviews from initial conceptualization to the final outcome. The HLPE prepares independent, peer reviewed scientific assessments on topics identified by the CFS. It makes recommendations, and also seeks to identify important emerging issues for consideration by policymakers (IPES-Food 2021). In a sense, the CFS has functioned as an international public institution, with all the contestations and tensions that one might expect in a sound public process.

Social movement and civil society participants in the World Food Summits from 1996 on, organized themselves as the IPC in 2003. The IPC facilitated the participation of the global food sovereignty movement to numerous FAO policy fora, building the capacities of small-scale food producers to use regional-global spaces effectively to advocate for food sovereignty. The IPC was thus well positioned to participate actively in the negotiations of the reform of the CFS, and in developing proposals for the creation of the *Civil Society Mechanism for relations with the CFS*, which finally came into being in 2010.<sup>11</sup> The CSM is a self-organized, autonomous and essential component of the reformed CFS with the purpose of enabling the participation of civil society actors involved in food and nutrition issues. CSM participants come from 11 constituencies and 17 sub-regions to ensure wide participation and a balance of sectors, regions and genders. In October 2018, the CSM renamed itself as the *Civil Society and Indigenous People's Mechanism* as a sign of respect for the international recognition of the identities and rights of indigenous peoples and their unique systems of governance.<sup>12</sup>

Since its formation, the CSM has prioritized the participation in CFS processes of small-scale food producers,

<sup>7</sup> CFS Reform document: <http://www.fao.org/3/k7197e/k7197e.pdf>. Accessed 27 September 2021.

<sup>8</sup> CFS Reform document: <http://www.fao.org/3/k7197e/k7197e.pdf>. Accessed 27 September 2021.

<sup>9</sup> CFS Reform document: <http://www.fao.org/3/k7197e/k7197e.pdf>. Accessed 27 September 2021.

<sup>10</sup> Civil Society Declaration of the Terra Preta Forum. 5 June 2008. <https://viacampesina.org/en/civil-society-declaration-of-the-terra-pret-a-forum/>. Accessed 27 September 2021.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.foodsovereignty.org/the-ipc/>. Accessed 30 September 2021.

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.csm4cfs.org/what-is-the-csm/>. Accessed 30 September 2021.



workers, indigenous peoples, urban poor, consumers, people living in conditions of protracted crises and among them, women and youth. These are also the people who face the greatest risks of criminalization, and state and non-state violence because of their struggles for land, water, resource and workers' rights. Participation in CFS policy processes has served as a catalyst for documenting and making visible to MSs food sovereignty practices in different territories and contexts, and translating the needs and demands of CSM constituencies into policy proposals.

## A Dangerous Legacy

Despite some strategic wins for the right to food, for example, recognition of the centrality of tenure security and water in ensuring FSN, and the centrality of smallholders' roles and territorial markets in sustainable food provision and local livelihoods, the CFS has stumbled in living up to its envisaged unique character and lofty goals. As an international inter-governmental body, the CFS is subject to the same forces of economic and financial globalization, neoliberal trade and investment, and political authoritarianism that are reshaping multilateralism. The challenges of multi-stakeholderism in international policymaking were starkly visible in the negotiations on the CFS *Principles for Responsible Investment in Agriculture and Food Systems* (RAI) in 2014. Language on the right to food, importance of small-scale producers, respect for decent work and worker's rights, elimination of discrimination against women, governance and accountability were consistently undermined by language emphasizing free trade and investment agreements and rules. Even the universally recognized rights of indigenous peoples to Free Prior and Informed Consent were compromised.<sup>13</sup>

Inclusivity has not actually been realized in full for MSs with limited financial resources and few (often single) delegates in Rome who are required to engage with all the Rome based agencies and are thus unable to follow all the CFS workstreams. Nor has inclusivity resulted in correcting the power imbalance in the CFS, which remains tilted towards wealthy MSs who rule the roost in other multilateral fora, international financial institutions, and trade-investment treaties. Furthermore, MSs are in the CFS for their own strategic purposes, rather than the common purpose of promoting the realization of right to food in the context of national FSN. CFS deliberations are not immune to back room deals among MSs and private sector actors. In recent policy negotiations, some MSs openly opposed the inclusion of human

rights language and rejected references to already negotiated and agreed language in previous policy documents, if these were perceived as contradictory to their trade, investment and other interests. At the same time, a few other MSs have been pushing back with the formation of a Friends of the Right to Food group.

The steady deterioration of support for human rights in the CFS is accompanied by the rise of corporate led multi-stakeholder initiatives (MSIs), through which corporations impose their profit-making agenda onto governance processes. MSIs allow corporations to join together with governments, corporate-friendly actors (including corporate philanthropies, CSOs academics and 'expert' agencies) and vulnerable, marginalized groups in voluntary processes/platforms to 'solve' problems that they have a large part in creating. MSIs come up with a raft of 'solutions' that can include standards, techno-fixes, behavior change models, incentives for the private sector, conflict mediation processes, etc., but do not address human rights abuses and climate and environmental offenses arising from corporate operations, impunity and lack of corporate and state accountability. Using the language of participation and inclusivity, MSIs blur the lines between rights-holders (peoples), duty-bearers (states) and other stakeholders, while keeping intact power asymmetries and erasing mechanisms of legal accountability and justice.

Actual experience in and examinations of MSIs show that they threaten public interest, participatory democracy, equality and justice, and are the wrong model for food governance, or for governance of any sector imbued with public welfare and interest (Gleckman 2020; MSI Integrity 2020; Canfield et al. 2021). Based on a decade of research on MSIs, the Institute for Multi-Stakeholder Initiative Integrity concluded, 'MSIs should no longer be viewed as institutions that robustly ensure that their corporate members respect rights, provide access to remedy, or hold corporations accountable for abuses. They are simply not sufficiently resourced or structured to carry out these difficult functions. Regulation is needed for these purposes' (MSI Integrity 2020).

Alarming, it is this model that permeates the United Nations (UN) strategies to meet the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), address hunger and malnutrition, and tackle climate change. While MSIs are not new to the UN system, the UN Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) embodies a significantly more advanced model of multi-stakeholderism designed, led and governed by a corporate eco-system built by the World Economic Forum (WEF). This model aims to redesign global governance through the 'Great Reset' and instigate 'stakeholder capitalism',<sup>14</sup> that that would 'embed

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.csm4cfs.org/policy-working-groups/agricultural-investment-rai/>. Accessed 9 October 2021.

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/06/now-is-the-time-for-a-great-reset/>. Accessed 2 October 2021.



corporations within systems of governance without compromising regulatory control' (Canfield et al. 2021).

The nearly 2-year long UNFSS process has been criticized by numerous social movements, CSOs, academics and human rights experts for its lack of grounding in human rights and justice; its domination by corporate interests; its aims to replace international public institutions with multi-stakeholder platforms; the narrow, elite and corporate friendly 'science' that constitutes its knowledge base; its failure to recognize and adequately address the roots of food system crises and the COVID pandemic; the absence of proposals to tackle corporate power and trade policy; and its emphasis on private proprietary technologies, products, science and knowledge as 'solutions' (IPES-Food 2021; Montenegro de Wit et al. 2021).<sup>15 16 17 18</sup>

One of the gravest concerns about the UNFSS has been that the UN system is being used to undermine multilateralism by crowding multilateral spaces with corporate multi-stakeholder initiatives and platforms, which would alter the very notion of public interest to serve market and business interests. This concern is being borne out. The UN Secretary-General's (UNSG) Chair Summary and Statement of Action on the UN Food Systems Summit on 23 September 2021 lays out the post Summit plans for food systems transformation a'la the 'Great Reset'. It proposes a new governance structure coordinated through a hub led by the Rome based Agencies FAO, IFAD and WFP to follow up UNFSS outcomes, with partners and 'champions' that include corporations, civil society, and 'experts.' Shining through the verbiage of sustainability, transformation, resilience, interconnectedness, etc. is the model of stakeholder capitalism in food systems governance through MSIs, private financing, global trade and investment, innovation and 'science-based' solutions. In stakeholder capitalism, corporations claim to create value for all the stakeholders involved in their operations, not only their shareholders, ensuring long term financial gains. It is a key motif in the WEF's Great Reset.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Interim report of the Special Rapporteur on the right to food, Michael Fakhri. UNGA 27 July 2021. A/76/237 <https://undocs.org/A/76/237>. Accessed 15 September 2021.

<sup>16</sup> Exposing corporate capture of the UN Food Systems Summit through multistakeholderism. <https://www.foodsystems4people.org/multistakeholderism-report/>. Accessed 24 September 2021.

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.foodsystems4people.org/resources-2/>. Accessed 3 October 2021.

<sup>18</sup> Cementing Corporate Capture of Food Governance, Focus on the Global South. <https://www.rosalux.de/en/news/id/45050?cHash=04bb1ccb34ad944e28794f82293dcdf5>. Accessed 3 October 2021.

<sup>19</sup> Secretary-General's Chair Summary and Statement of Action on the UN Food Systems Summit 23 September 2021. <https://www.un.org/en/food-systems-summit/news/making-food-systems-work-people-planet-and-prosperity>. Accessed 5 October 2021.

The UNFSS' stakeholder capitalism legacy was already in evidence in the negotiations on the *Voluntary Guidelines on Food Systems and Nutrition* (VGFSyN) that were concluded in February 2021. The negotiations were accelerated to create a policy product to contribute to the UNFSS, and were marred by careless methodologies, power plays, and palpable hostility to human rights and regulation of trade, investment, financial markets and corporations. Instead of embracing a holistic, rights based food systems lens and recognizing the public purpose of food systems, the VGFSyN uphold the interests of agricultural exporting countries, highlight the role of the private sector and global value chains, and advance market led solutions to address FSN concerns.<sup>20</sup> The recently concluded negotiations on *CFS Policy Recommendations on Agroecological and other Innovative Approaches* were similarly subjected to time pressures to fit the schedule of the UNFSS Pre-Summit in July 2021, which resulted in sessions without interpretation, and unequal participation by MSs and the CSM, thus subverting inclusive consensus building. The adopted document conflates agroecology with diametrically opposed approaches such as sustainable intensification and the use of agrotoxics.<sup>21</sup>

The CFS may now inherit the legacy of UNFSS follow-up through 'coalitions of action' and a structure that most of its MSs had no hand in creating, but which it's institutional home—FAO—has fully embraced. The UNFSS' Scientific Group—which positioned itself as a potential new Science Policy Interface (SPI)—promotes a narrow, technocratic, market-based approach to food systems that serves the interests of large-scale producers and agribusinesses. Such an approach would exclude the diverse, situated knowledges, and contextual realities and evidence that are essential in formulating and monitoring responsive public policies (IPES-Food 2021).

## The CFS We Want

In the face of expanding market-based governance that embodies stakeholder capitalism, it is vital that we use every possible multilateral forum to reinvigorate multilateralism. The CFS acquires particular importance in this endeavor because its reform was guided by the recognition that the public sphere (governments and international public institutions) must govern in favour of the public interest, and

<sup>20</sup> [https://www.csm4cfs.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/EN\\_CSMPositioningVGFSyN\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.csm4cfs.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/EN_CSMPositioningVGFSyN_FINAL.pdf). Accessed 6 October 2021.

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.csm4cfs.org/csm-positioning-on-the-cfs-policy-recommendations-on-agroecological-and-other-innovative-approaches/>. Accessed 12 October 2021.



regulate the economy and the private sector (McKeon 2021). For the food sovereignty movement, the reformed CFS signaled the potential for confronting and staving off the worst excesses of the corporate food regime.

But the CFS is in a hard place now. While it cannot reject outright the UNFSS' dangerous legacy, embracing it fully will weaken its claims to inclusivity, upholding the right to food and multilateral food governance. The CFS and CSM are charged with 'informing accountability for all stakeholders, including the private sector' in the UNSG's Statement of Action. But how can they deliver on this in a fragmented, fractured climate of global governance where the interests of wealthy, powerful actors ride roughshod over the well-being of the majority?

In its current form, the CFS risks becoming minimized by well-funded MSIs supported by wealthy MSs that are able to deliver outcomes more 'efficiently'. But it also risks becoming irrelevant for many MSs in the Global South for whom multilateralism is the only systemic safeguard against global marginalization. CSM constituencies see the CFS as a space where they can engage meaningfully in global governance of FSN and food systems. But if their proposals are repeatedly disregarded by MSs who do not welcome civil society participation in global governance processes, and human rights and public interest are repeatedly undermined by neoliberal trade and investment, the CFS may turn out to be not worth defending.

This is an opportune moment for the CFS to make changes in its approach and operational processes to retain the trust and support of those whose needs it committed to support during its reform in 2009. However, the CFS is not a monolith, and without addressing the power asymmetries among MSs and other participants, the chances of strengthening its public interest reorientation are bleak. The global food sovereignty movement has a sense of justified ownership over the CFS because of its active involvement in the CFS reform process and wholehearted participation in CFS processes and governance through the CSM. Ongoing discussions in the CSM on food governance are generating a range of ideas for strengthening the CFS, as well as the ability of the CSM to confront the threats to multilateralism in a post UNFSS scenario. Drawing from them and other experiences in multilateral fora, I present below my own articulation of the directions that I consider pivotal for the CFS to be able to fulfill its mandate.

One direction is offered by the realm of world view and core values. Foremost here is deliberately and visibly placing human rights at the center of all CFS policy processes. The right to food is inseparable from other rights, and from social, economic and environmental justice. Governments as duty bearers have legal obligations to ensure that these rights are upheld. The Voluntary Guidelines for the Right to Food are a major policy product of the CFS, and remind

us that all human rights are universal, indivisible, interrelated and interdependent.<sup>22</sup> The right to food would serve as the unifying element across the different policy processes, not be subject to 'trade-offs' and provide the impetus for integrating human, and collective rights enshrined in other multilateral conventions and declarations (for e.g., CEDAW, UNDRIP, UNDROP, ILO conventions, etc.) in relevant policy processes. The right to food and FSN cannot be achieved without ensuring the full respect, protection and fulfilment of workers,' women's, peasants', fishers' and indigenous peoples' rights, and the dismantling of patriarchal, feudal, racial and neoliberal power relations. The structural social, cultural and economic barriers to the rights of women and girls, and respect for their rights to self-determination must be addressed in all CFS policy processes (Claeys and Duncan 2020).

In the same vein, it is vital that we foster understanding and acceptance among all CFS actors that food is multi-dimensional, food systems have a public purpose that go beyond FSN, and both food systems and FSN are affected by changes in every sphere. To facilitate meaningful policy convergence, the CFS needs to broaden its policy framework. The HLPE has proposed four critical, complementary policy shifts that reinforce a FSN policy approach grounded in a sustainable food systems framework (HLPE 2020):

- Support for a radical transformation of food systems as a whole to improve FSN and achieve agenda 2030.
- Recognition of the complex interlinkages between food systems and multiple sectors and systems that drive change in food systems.
- Focus on hunger and all forms of malnutrition.
- Take the diversity of situations into account and propose variable and context-specific solutions.

These policy shifts would bolster the CFS to advance food systems thinking with human rights at its center and contribute to shifting narratives on FSN away from global value chains and markets, and towards public interest. Such policy and discursive shifts are pivotal to enabling meaningful participation of those most affected by hunger and all forms of malnutrition, as well as those who are at the forefront of food provisioning for the majority of the world: small-scale food producers, workers, indigenous peoples, women, youth, and small-scale local enterprises. This would entail a shift in the balance of power among CFS participants: the voices and experiences of rights holders must have

<sup>22</sup> Voluntary Guidelines to support the progressive realization of the right to adequate food in the context of the national food security. <http://www.fao.org/cfs/policy-products/vgr2f>. Accessed 30 September 2021.



priority over the private sector and given greater weightage in policy negotiations.

As the CFS embraces a public interest orientation, special attention needs to be given to the impacts of corporate concentration, trade, investment and economic partnership agreements, and financialization on the right to food, food systems and FSN (HLPE 2017). The importance of explicitly recognizing and addressing these links has been raised by the Special Rapporteur to the Right to Food, among others.<sup>23</sup> A task team could be established to set up the parameters of this work and monitor and report on these issues.

This brings me to a second set of directions: it is important that the CFS be a space where regional-global problems and trends that threaten the capacities, agency and rights of small-scale food providers, workers and indigenous peoples are examined and addressed. These include patent and intellectual property regimes, biopiracy, violations of workers' rights, environmental contamination through agrotoxins, occupational health, etc. These can be discussed in seminars, special events and sessions, etc., and would be enriched by the participation of different relevant agencies. Such discussions would make the CFS a more dynamic and relevant space for food systems governance.

A third direction would be strengthening the CFS' roles of coordination and policy convergence by actively engaging with other inter-governmental spaces regionally and internationally, especially on crucial current issues such as COVID-19, climate change, digitalization, migration, etc., and not shying away from controversial debates. There is growing consensus in the CFS about the need to respond to two developments with far reaching consequences: the hunger crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic and the implications of the UNFSS for the future of the CFS and global food governance. A virtual seminar in September 2021 co-organized by the government of Mali, CSM, ILO, WHO and OHCHR pointed to the urgency of formulating a coordinated, global policy response to the impacts of COVID-19 under the auspices of the CFS. Regarding the UNFSS, the Special Rapporteur to the Right to Food has called on governments to conduct a human rights assessment of the UNFSS in a recently released report.<sup>24</sup> Paradoxically, the UNFSS has opened a path for food sovereignty advocates to organize against corporate capture of food systems in multilateral spaces, and for social movements and grassroots

groups to make connections between their local-national struggles and global governance issues.

Another important direction for the CFS would be strengthening its knowledge dimension. Several innovative policy proposals in CFS products such as the Global Strategic Framework, the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Land, Fisheries and Forests (VGGT) and Connecting Smallholders to Markets among others need to be highlighted and understood better by MSs and participants through discussions in seminars and events. For example, the concept of territorial markets captures the complexity and multi-dimensionality of local and regional markets, and has proved to be especially salient in times of the COVID pandemic.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, the unacceptable outcomes of the *CFS Policy Recommendations on Agroecological and other Innovative Approaches* notwithstanding, convening deeper discussions of the potential of agroecology in building sustainable food systems, strengthening local economies, livelihoods and resilience, and revitalizing biodiversity in the face of industrial, climatic, public health and economic shocks would be an especially significant contribution by the CFS to FSN and the right to food.

The establishment of a new Science Policy Interface should be vigorously opposed by CFS MSs and participants. The HLPE needs to be better supported with adequate funds and greater latitude to initiate reports on emerging issues and rapidly changing/evolving global conditions, as it did on the impacts of COVID-19 on FSN, and the urgent transformations needed in food systems to end hunger and malnutrition (HLPE 2021). The HLPE could be further strengthened through the direct inclusion of knowledges of indigenous peoples and local communities, and participatory action research. The HLPE is possibly the best example of 'participatory science' in an international, inter-governmental context and its interface with global policy processes should be more vigorously promoted (Clapp et al. 2021; Moseley 2021).

Corporate multi-stakeholderism has fragmented and fractured governance at multiple levels. Through its emphasis on individuated interests, it is undermining the possibility of the collective, of the defense of the public sphere. The CFS is subject to the same political and economic forces that are aggressively pushing corporate multi-stakeholderism, but at least for now, it has multilateral backing from countries whose interests have been marginalized in market based global governance, and from civil society and social movements committed to food sovereignty, who have an interest in democratizing multilateralism rather than allow it to be

<sup>23</sup> The right to food in the context of international trade law and policy. Interim report of the Special Rapporteur on the right to food, Michael Fakhri. UNGA 22 July 2020. A/75/219. <https://undocs.org/en/A/75/219>. Accessed 11 October 2021.

<sup>24</sup> Interim report of the Special Rapporteur on the right to food, Michael Fakhri. UNGA 27 July 2021. A/76/237 <https://undocs.org/A/76/237>. Accessed 15 September 2021.

<sup>25</sup> Connecting Smallholders to Markets: an analytical guide. 15 October 2016. <https://www.csm4cfs.org/connecting-smallholders-markets-analytical-guide/>. Accessed 20 October 2021.





captured by business interests. A bolder, more dynamic CFS would be in the interests of both.

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