



The Food Systems Summit's Failure to Address Corporate Power

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Abstract

Based on analysis of documentation associated with the UN Food Systems Summit process, we identify three main ways in which the Summit failed to address the problem of corporate power in food systems in a meaningful way. First, the Summit was 'strategically silent' on the problem of corporate power, mentioning the problem only very infrequently and in a way that failed to identify corporations as holding disproportionate power in food systems. Second, it advanced technology and innovation-based solutions that benefit large agrifood companies rather than seeking structural transformation of food systems. Third, it gave corporations a priority seat at the table by engaging them in various settings in the lead up to the Summit.

Keywords Corporations · Strategic silence · Technology and innovation · Food systems governance

The 2021 Food Systems Summit sought to address key problems in food systems including the rise in both undernutrition and overnutrition, unsustainable food production methods associated with climate change and environmental degradation, as well as social inequities in food systems. Yet as we show in this article, the Summit largely failed to engage with one of the key sources contributing to these problems: growing corporate concentration and power in the food system. We base our analysis on UNFSS documentation, including Scientific Group papers and published articles, summaries from the five Action Tracks, and the programmes and deliberations for both the Science Days and Pre-Summit events.

We identify three main ways in which the Summit failed to engage meaningfully with corporate power. First, the documentation associated with the Summit was strategically silent with respect to corporate power as a key problem within food systems. Corporate concentration and market power within food systems were mentioned infrequently and when they were referenced, it was often in a vague way that

tended to put corporations on equal footing with other food systems actors such as small-scale farmers and consumers. Second, the Summit placed extensive emphasis on 'solutions' rather than identifying sources of problems. Yet the presentation of solutions fell largely on strategies such as the advancement of technology-based innovations that will benefit some of the sector's largest corporations and lend them further power. Corporations were most often presented as enablers—that is, investors and innovators—without recognizing the need for fundamental transformation of unequal structures within food systems. Third, the primary events leading up to the summit—the Science Days and Pre-Summit—included a prominent role for large corporate actors, even as the UNFSS leadership claimed that individual corporations would not have a defining role in terms of the outcomes. The UNFSS branded itself as a 'people's summit', but significant questions emerged about representation and corporate influence in the Summit process.

Why Corporate Concentration and Power Matters in Food Systems

Corporate concentration in the agri-food sector has been a feature of industrial food systems since the early 1900s. This concentration is becoming more pronounced in recent decades with a spate of mergers and acquisitions that have led to a situation where a handful of firms dominate at multiple points along agri-food supply chains (IPES-Food 2017). The

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farm inputs sector, food production, processing, commodity trade, and food retail are all dominated by 3–5 large companies (Howard 2016). Some of the biggest corporate mergers in recent decades, for example, have been in the agri-food sector (Heinrich Böll Foundation et al. 2017). These include, in the food processing sector, the mergers of Kraft and Heinz and the combination of Anheuser-Busch and SAB Miller, the latter of which created the largest beer company in the world. In the agricultural input sector, three massive mergers have taken place since 2015, including the merger of Dow and Dupont (which then spun off the new company Corteva Agriscience), Bayer's purchase of Monsanto, and ChemChina's acquisition of Syngenta (Clapp 2018). Two of the world's largest fertilizer firms also merged (Agrium and Potash Corporation), to create Nutrien, now the largest fertilizer firm in the world. In the inputs sector, for example, just four firms now hold some 60% of the world market for seeds and 70% of the world market for agrochemicals (Clapp 2021).

Firm size does not necessarily equate to problematic practices. The problem is when corporate concentration results in an excess of power held by dominant firms that enables them to advance their own interests in ways which can impose costs on other actors in society as well as the natural environment. The food system is often portrayed as resembling an hourglass—with many producers on one end, many consumers on the other end, and just a few corporations at the choke point in the middle (Vorley 2003). When that middle space becomes smaller, as fewer corporations dominate in any given sector, those firms are able to exert more power to control the ways in which food and agricultural commodities and inputs pass through. In other words, they are able to set the terms of how commodities are grown, at what price they exchange hands, the methods by which they are processed, and how they are marketed. The largest and most powerful firms typically have the capacity to set the parameters of these markets in ways that smaller firms, and small-scale agricultural producers, cannot.

For example, in the agricultural input sector, a number of studies have found that highly concentrated markets for seeds are associated with higher prices (Shi et al. 2010; Torshizi and Clapp 2021). Such an outcome has direct negative implications for food system equity, as farmers are either forced to absorb the cost of higher input prices or pass those costs on to consumers. Concentrated firms can also control the prices agricultural suppliers receive. Highly concentrated food trading, processing and retail firms can set the terms of purchase from farmers, who often are forced to sell at lower prices because they have few options available to them. This kind of 'buyer power' is especially prevalent in markets for commodities grown in the Global South where millions of small-scale producers are seeking to sell their products to just a handful of firms (De Schutter 2010). It also exists in

other sectors, such as the meat and livestock industry, where just a few large meat packing firms tend to dominate markets and where farmers have few choices in terms of selling their product (Kelloway and Miller 2019).

Concentrated firms can also utilize their position to set the terms of labour conditions in the agri-food sector. Buyer power often pressures farmers and producers to cut costs where they can, which can lead to problematic forms of labour such as child labour, forced labour, and fewer protections for seasonal migrant labour (LeBaron 2020). As we learned with the unfolding pandemic, labourers in the highly concentrated meatpacking industry, as well as workers in other food processing facilities and migrant farm labourers, have also faced poor pay and difficult working conditions that have put them at increased risk of infection and death from COVID-19 (Klassen and Murphy 2020).

Corporate concentration in the agricultural inputs sector also shapes innovation pathways that have important implications for society and environment. Rather than invest in low external input agricultural practices such as agroecology, the corporations that dominate the input sector concentrate their efforts on high-tech practices such as the use of agricultural biotechnology and gene editing, synthetic fertilizers and herbicides, and emerging digital technologies tied to sophisticated farm machinery (Clapp and Ruder 2020). The lock-in of high-tech agricultural practices has led to an increased reliance on herbicides in industrial agricultural systems, which has led to the development of herbicide-resistant super weeds and increased exposures to herbicides (Bonny 2017; Clapp 2021).

Consumer choices are also affected by corporate concentration, as large processing and retail firms play an enormous role in determining what foods appear on supermarket shelves. Although many products and brands appear to be available, often these brands are owned by a small handful of food processing firms that market them under different names (Kelloway and Miller 2019). Food processing firms also tend to market foods based on claims of nutritional or health benefits (Scrinis 2016), or in ways that tend to construct consumer desire by marketing powerful brands and producing foods which are highly addictive (Nestle 2007; Moss 2013). Most of these products, however, are highly processed foods, which raise important health concerns and have been associated with a rise in obesity and a wide array of chronic non-communicable diseases (Stuckler et al. 2012; Monteiro et al. 2013).

Concentrated firms can also exercise power in ways that shape policy and governance to serve their own bottom lines. They can exert this type of influence in visible ways, such as via lobbying, either directly or through industry associations (Nestle 2007). They can also influence policy in less visible ways, through their structural power as providers of jobs and investment that can encourage governments to avoid



regulations that may lead them to relocate, and through their influence over narratives that shape public discourse on issues related to food and agriculture (Clapp and Fuchs 2009).

The Summit's Strategic Silence on Corporate Power

Many civil society actors expressed concern about the potential for corporate influence in the Food Systems Summit from the time it was first announced, especially because its leadership has a history of close ties to corporate-friendly food system initiatives (Canfield et al. 2021). The Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples' Mechanism (CSM) of the Committee on World Food Security (CFS), for example, raised these concerns very early on and notified Summit leadership that its participation was contingent on the Summit explicitly tackling the problem of corporate power through an Action Track specifically dedicated to the topic (CSM 2021). This request went unanswered and the Summit proceeded without CSM participation. In the absence of oversight from many civil society organizations that work with the CFS, the Summit paid very little attention to corporate actors and concentration in food systems throughout the preparatory process leading up to the Summit. As a result, the documents and other outputs of the Summit process—from its Scientific Group papers and Action Track materials to the agendas for the Science Days and Pre-Summit events—were largely silent on issues of corporate power.

As we reviewed in the previous section of this article, there is a wide literature on the problems associated with concentrated corporate power in food systems, and it is highly unlikely that the Summit leadership was unaware of these issues. Rather, as we suggest here, the silence on these issues in the context of the UNFSS appears to have been largely strategic (Brummett 1980; Maor et al. 2013). As defined by Harlow (2018: 1), 'Strategic silence is the choice of an empowered actor who remains silent in an attempt to advance a strategic interest.' Such silence can manifest not just as a failure to communicate, but also as giving a less complete story than might be the case otherwise, in order to encourage a particular outcome. In this case, remaining silent on issues of corporate power in Summit documentation and events enabled Summit leadership to portray a certain picture of food systems as being highly diverse with a range of actors all having equal responsibility to act. There are several ways in which this kind of strategic silence manifested in the context of the UNFSS.

First, the documentation coming out of the Summit largely ignores questions of corporate dominance and power in food systems. In the few instances where the documents raise issues related to corporate concentration and

power are raised, it is often in a way that fails to explicitly identify corporations as holding disproportionate power in food systems.¹ The Scientific Group's paper on food systems, for example, mentions inequities 'across classes, regions, rural–urban contexts, and social groups' (von Braun et al. 2021: 10), but fails to mention inequities between corporate actors and agricultural producers and consumers. And while this same paper briefly mentions 'market power' (von Braun et al. 2021: 10), as well as policies such as antitrust that might address it, the text is silent on who holds market power and with what impact. A commentary piece by the leadership team of the Scientific Group that summarizes the key lessons from its work also steers clear of any mention of corporate power (von Braun et al. 2021b: 30). These same tendencies to only vaguely reference power imbalances without identifying corporate actors is evident across the various Action Track documents (UNFSS 2021a: 45; UNFSS 2021d: 2), and both the Science Days and the Pre-Summit also carefully avoided inclusion of any panels specifically focused on corporate power (UNFSS 2021f; UNFSS 2021 g).

Second, the overall framing of the Summit, particularly around the concept of 'food systems' in the plural, de-emphasizes the dominance of the global industrial food system and the role of transnational corporations within it. Throughout Summit documentation, food systems are almost uniformly treated as coequal, while also emphasizing their diversity across regions and scales. While food systems are indeed highly diverse, the Summit gave little consideration to power dynamics between and within different types of food systems. The Scientific Group's defining paper on food systems also emphasizes normative goals for food systems going forward, rather than analyzing who holds power within food systems today (von Braun et al. 2021: 3). This approach of equalizing all food systems and focusing on future goals effectively closes off space to discuss the dominance of the corporate controlled industrial food system and the ways in which it shapes the conditions under which food systems in other contexts and at other scales must operate. Framing food systems in the plural also regionalizes and localizes the proposed solutions without reference to the constraints imposed by the global industrial food system, such as the way that corporate investment and activity in global agrifood supply chains shape decisions about what food is grown where, and how, and where that food ultimately ends up via patterns of international trade. Actions

¹ Two of the papers produced by the Scientific Group do mention corporate power explicitly, one with respect to seeds (Herrero et al. 2021: 11) and the other with respect to processed foods (Neufeld et al. 2021: 7). In both cases, rather than address the source of those problems through a transformation of power relationships, these papers advocate for voluntary and market-based mechanisms to address it.



at the local level cannot easily change these power dynamics at the global scale.

Third, when the private sector and corporate actors are mentioned in these various outputs from the Summit, they are typically listed alongside other actors such as small-scale farmers and consumers, effectively putting all of these actors on equal footing when in fact corporate actors have far more power within food systems. This strategy deemphasizes the significance of corporate concentration and power in food systems, and its wider effects, while stressing that all actors have equal responsibilities to address those problems. For example, the Summit's Action Tracks proposed a variety of farmer-focused initiatives that place the burden on farmers to bring about changes in food systems. Farmers are called upon to adopt technologies to increase yield through mechanization, fertilizers, and high-yield crop varieties, as well as adoption of innovative data and financing mechanisms (UNFSS 2021a: 12–17). The Action Tracks also presented solutions to malnutrition as a matter of consumer choice: '[...] in order to build a marketplace in which responsibility for healthy and sustainable consumption is shared more evenly between stakeholders, and in which consumers are empowered to make better choices' (UNFSS 2021b: 19). As a result, the Summit failed to present solutions that specifically address the behaviours of corporations—the very actors that mediate the relationships between farmers and consumers.

The Summit's Promotion of Technology and Innovation Further Strengthens the Corporate Hold on Food Systems

While it was silent on the ways in which concentrated corporate power contributes to problems within food systems, the Summit process paid disproportionate attention to 'technology and innovation' as solutions to what it sees as the key problems facing food systems. The Scientific Group, for example, was charged with ensuring scientific integrity of the Summit's underlying analysis. However, it consistently bundled 'science' with 'technology and innovation' (STI), despite the fact that technology and innovation are not once mentioned in the Terms of Reference for the Scientific Group (UNFSS Scientific Group 2020). The conversion of 'science' into STI only further strengthens the power of large transnational agrifood corporations that develop and market those very technologies, especially since Summit documentation frequently portrays the private sector as the source not only of innovation for food systems, but also as key sources of investment (UNFSS 2021a; UNFSS 2021d). These dynamics unfolded in ways that prioritize techno-fixes

within existing food system structures while underplaying the need for structural change to transform food systems.

Much of the pre-Summit documentation reveals a pro-industry tendency, with the first session of Science Days, for example, focused explicitly on 'Science, Technology and Innovation (STI) for Food Systems Transformation' (UNFSS 2021f). Papers from the Scientific Group, the Action Tracks and the Science Days and Pre-Summit event programmes also demonstrate a techno-fix mindset, consistently referring to institutional and 'technology-based innovations to catalyze, support, and accelerate food systems transformation' (von Braun et al. 2021b: 4). Although the documentation is careful to note the importance of both social and technological innovations for food systems transformation, the latter takes center-stage. The high-tech solutions put forward include explicit promotion of genetic engineering, genome editing, digital farming, and the use of blockchain technologies. Often these technologies are presented in Summit documents as useful for reducing inequities within food systems, specifically by making these technologies more accessible to women, Indigenous peoples, and other marginalized groups within food systems, so that these communities are not 'left behind' (UNFSS 2021a: 59). One of the Scientific Group's overview papers, for example, promotes blockchain ledgers to protect land rights of smallholders by tracking land ownership and credit (von Braun et al. 2021a: 14).

Bioscience, engineering, and digital innovations are frequently promoted in Summit documentation (von Braun et al. 2021b) without acknowledging that such technologies are largely the product of a highly concentrated corporate landscape (Clapp 2021). The Summit documentation justifies this approach as being 'scientific' while glossing over the fact that these technologies are highly controversial and far from universally accepted, even within scientific literatures (Rotz et al. 2019; Clapp and Ruder 2020). It also ignores the fact that such technologies are the product of an increasingly privatized agricultural innovation system (Fuglie et al. 2018), and if widely adopted will directly benefit those same corporations.

While the Summit documentation fixates on STI as a key means of food systems transformation, it contains little discussion of transformation via a restructuring of social and market relationships within food systems. Language of 'inclusion' and 'empowerment' of small farmers, women, and Indigenous peoples is frequent (UNFSS 2021c: 48; UNFSS 2021e), but little attention is paid to fundamentally transforming unequal power dynamics. A human rights-based approach, for example, is a viable alternative to science, technology and innovation, but this approach received little attention in the Food Systems Summit (Canfield et al. 2021; Fakhri 2021). As a result, the powerful role corporations play in these relationships (e.g. as concentrated sellers of inputs; as concentrated buyers and traders of agricultural



products in global value chains; as dominant food processors) is strengthened rather than problematized. The result is that existing systems of inequity were silently entrenched in the Summit's vision of the global food system.

Corporations Given a Priority Seat at the Table

Although the UN Special Envoy and Chair of the UNFSS, Agnes Kalibata, promised that corporations would not have major roles in leading the work of the Summit or in defining its outcomes (Kalibata 2021), corporate actors appear to have been offered a priority seat at the table and plenty of spaces to shape the agenda (Fakhri et al. 2021). The UNFSS private sector engagement guidelines (UNFSS 2021h) are explicit that the multi-stakeholder approach welcomes private sector actors as key stakeholders in food systems. Yet those guidelines specify that private sector actors should engage via business associations—and not as individual corporations—in certain settings, such as the Advisory Committee and Food Systems Champion Network, as well as Action Track Leadership Groups. Individual corporations were, however, welcomed in UNFSS Dialogues.

Individual corporate representation was abundant at the high-profile Science Days, Pre-Summit and Summit events. Many individuals from major agrifood firms, including those who are active in the World Economic Forum (WEF), which partners with the world's 1000 largest corporations, were invited as prominent speakers at these events. For example, executives from major agrifood firms Nestlé, Unilever, PepsiCo, Danone, and Olam were on the programme at the Pre-Summit, and Bayer Cropsience and other digital farming firms were featured as part of the Science Days event, while CEOs from Syngenta, PepsiCo, Unilever, and Yara were given airtime in various videos featured at the final Summit (UNFSS 2021f, g). Meanwhile, the head of the WEF's Food Systems Initiative played a prominent role in shaping the Summit as chair of the 'Innovation' Lever of Change for the UNFSS.

While the Summit was clear in its vision and principles of multi-stakeholder inclusivity, the presence of individual corporations and the WEF in these events appears to go against the spirit of the Summit's own guidelines on private sector engagement because it featured powerful corporate inputs in events that were meant to reflect and shape the Summit's direction (Nisbett et al. 2021). The Pre-Summit, for example, featured a panel on 'Private Sector Priorities' that gave corporate executives a platform to portray themselves as leaders of transformational change. A representative of Unilever Foods acknowledged, for example, the need for more sustainable and equitable food systems, yet maintained that innovation through private sector engagement is

the key to success: 'Innovation will help us do this— create a fairer, healthier, and more sustainable global food system. [...] This requires investment from the private sector—that's a role we play' (Unilever Representative 2021). Similarly, a Science Days panel featured a representative from Bayer Cropsience who touted the firm's technological advances, including genetically altered seeds, crop protection chemicals, drones and remote sensing, while lamenting that the lags in adoption were due to the reluctance of farmers rather than any fault of the technologies (Bayer Cropsience Representative 2021).

Although the UNFSS was presented as a 'people's summit' by the UN, the prominent role of corporate actors as well as the powerful and business-friendly WEF in official events appears to affirm the space that was been made available to corporate interests to put their stamp on the Summit. This high level of engagement enhanced corporate power to shape governance, through both their direct involvement as well as by shaping the discourses emerging from the Summit that do not involve any significant change to their current practices and strategies.

Conclusion

The Food Systems Summit failed to address corporate power in global food systems in a meaningful way. As our analysis of UNFSS documentation shows, the Summit largely ignored the problems that emanate from power differentials between private sector actors and citizens, including small-scale food producers, within food systems. The lack of engagement with corporate power can be seen as an instance of 'strategic silence' (Brummett 1980), in which the Summit painted an incomplete picture of the causes that have led the food system into its present state of failure. Returning to the analogy of the food system as an hourglass (Vorley 2003), the solutions presented by Action Track proposals ignored the centre of the hourglass, that is, the corporations and regulations that structure the systems within which consumers and farmers operate. Furthermore, the artificial level playing field of responsibility in the Scientific Group's analysis did not differentiate between large- and small-scale private sector actors, whilst it put different levels of government on equal footing. Thus, the hierarchies that exist in terms of influence to shape systems were strategically ignored.

This strategic silence led to a Summit focused on a technology-driven transformation of food systems that would further entrench problematic power dynamics, rather than a rights-focused approach that seeks to address structural power imbalances in food systems. This approach was reinforced by the fact that corporations appear to have played an outsized role in the pre-Summit events and enjoyed the flexibility granted to them with respect to the engagement



guidelines. In convening a Summit that did not engage with power dynamics in food systems, and instead directed global food systems reforms towards science, technology, and innovation to the exclusion of other possible approaches, the UNFSS failed to engage in the due diligence and due process that would have made it the 'people's summit' that it claimed to be.

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