



CFS, Implications of the UN Food Systems Summit

Introduction: The Committee on World Food Security (CFS), as reformed in 2009, is the central United Nations political platform dealing with food security and nutrition, drawing upon three key guiding principles: inclusiveness, strong linkages to the field, and flexibility in implementation.¹ The United Nations Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) scheduled for September 2021 will have profound implications for CFS, in particular its role and relevance, due to the interlinkages between the broad mandate of the Summit – i.e., *food systems* - and the mandate of CFS – i.e., *food security and nutrition*. These implications deserve to be better understood and discussed. The Summit, with its broad focus on *food systems* (vice ‘*food security*’), its five ‘Action Tracks,’ cross-cutting ‘levers,’ Scientific Group, and other components should, ideally, build upon and benefit from the experience, reports, and policy convergence products of CFS and its High-Level Panel of Experts (CFS HLPE). So far, there has been little public debate about the relevance of, and role for, CFS and its constituent elements in the Summit, before, during, and/or after. Nor has the CFS Bureau or membership debated the full implications of the Summit, or how best to position CFS - particularly with respect to follow-up, in terms of the global governance architecture around food/agriculture, an appropriate science/policy interface mechanism relevant to food systems transformation, and/or structured participation by civil society, the private sector, and other core constituencies of CFS. This paper is intended to prompt an inclusive discussion on these topics and highlight key issues and questions for further consideration and debate.

Core Issues: The 2021 UNFSS will focus international attention and action on global *food systems*, with a scope that goes well beyond SDG-2 into the full list of SDG’s that either impact - or are impacted *by* – food/hunger/malnutrition, such as climate change, human and environmental health, land, water, oceans, etc. By focusing on transformation of food systems, the Summit aims to put the global community back on track to fulfil the entire 2030 Agenda. As the UN system’s unique global platform for inclusive policy debate on SDG-2, CFS represents a core component of global food systems governance in the UN system, and – by definition – has a great deal to offer on food systems and their transformation towards sustainability in all three of its dimensions (social, economic, environmental). Along with its inclusive, multi-stakeholder composition, its policy documents and scientific reports, CFS also plays a critical “platform” role, bringing together ministers and key stakeholder communities each year for substantive debate on pressing food security and nutrition topics. For these reasons, it would seem appropriate to have included CFS as a corner-stone of Summit planning from the very early stages and to take into due account its ground-breaking work.

¹ CFS Reform Document, 2009

Nevertheless, the Summit's organization and objectives raise several valid questions about CFS's role and capabilities vis-à-vis food systems transformation and the 2030 Agenda beyond SDG-2 - with its limited focus on food security and nutrition. For example has CFS, with its multi-stakeholder structure and negotiated policy convergence products had sufficient impact on ending hunger and malnutrition, especially at regional, national, and local levels? Does the Committee's Advisory Group limit participation by certain key constituencies, as suggested by a 2017 independent evaluation? Has the CFS HLPE met the full ambitions of the 2009 UN Food Summit where it was first launched? These questions and others warrant discussion about CFS's overall effectiveness and impact on global hunger and malnutrition. This paper, therefore, questions not only the role for CFS in the Summit, but also whether CFS, in its current state, is prepared to take on any additional responsibilities and functions after the Summit.

CFS Reform and Global Food Systems Governance: Created in 1974, and overhauled in 2009, the CFS closely mirrors the past half-century of UN summitry on food and agriculture issues. Born from a food crisis at the time, and later reformed to foster multi-stakeholder and multi-sectoral collaboration and policy convergence, CFS was re-engineered as the UN System's central meeting-place to address zero hunger and malnutrition. Over the past eleven years since its reform, CFS has produced a wide variety of policy products, including negotiated recommendations and guidelines – the latest being “Voluntary Guidelines on Food Systems and Nutrition.” Nonetheless, with progress toward zero hunger and malnutrition rapidly reversing, the UN Food Systems Summit was conceived to address the complex linkages between food, health, poverty, biodiversity loss, environmental damage, etc. As summit planning proceeded, questions began to emerge around the omission of CFS from Summit planning, including the absence of its Chair in its Advisory Committee, and its HLPE from the Summit's Scientific Group, the exclusion of CFS's civil society mechanism (CSM) and private sector mechanism (PSM), and the complete oversight of CFS's flagship products including its Voluntary Guidelines on the Progressive Realization of the Right to Food, Guidelines on tenure governance (CFS VGGT), and its Principles of Responsible Agricultural Investment (CFS RAI), among others. While some of these concerns have since been addressed, it would be important to clarify the causes behind past omissions and to verify whether they were due to a lack of knowledge of, or lack of confidence in, CFS and its inclusive, science-driven structure.

Monitoring Effectiveness of CFS and its Products: An independent [evaluation](#) of CFS in 2017 found a “lack of clarity in CFS about its monitoring role” and “little progress made” in monitoring its main products and policy recommendations. The evaluation cited, among other issues, insufficient and unpredictable funding, low levels of trust within and between some CFS structures, “inflexibility” as a platform, “slow(ness) to respond to changing conditions” and a failure to translate its products into widespread use and application at regional, country, or local levels. Despite success in negotiating a number of important global policy products, CFS's overall impact on reducing and/or eliminating hunger and malnutrition is unclear. Furthermore, notwithstanding improvements since the 2017 evaluation, CFS reform seems to have stalled out between Phases One and Two, with little appetite among members to move things forward. These may well be the reasons why CFS was not put at the center of the Summit's structure and planning efforts. The question stands open as to whether a Committee of 138 member states with an Advisory Group that does not fully represent the voices of parliamentarians, farmers, indigenous peoples, foundations, regional financial institutions, and youth, is capable of ushering

in a global food systems transition. And, whether, a Committee with a weak monitoring system, non-binding consensually-negotiated recommendations, insecure financing, and no direct implementation capacity is up to the task of championing systemic food systems reform.

CFS Science-Policy Interface and Food Systems: Arguably one of the most successful and reliable components of CFS is its High-level Panel of Experts. Modeled after the Inter-Governmental Panel on Climate Change, and designed to ensure state-of-the-art, independent, scientific expertise as the basis for diplomatic negotiations within CFS, the 15-member HLPE Steering Committee and its various project teams have produced 15 outstanding reports, an Issues Paper on COVID-19, multiple papers on critical and emerging issues, and many other contributions to public debate at CFS’s annual plenary sessions. In short, the HLPE has served for eleven years as the UN’s only formal science-policy interface on food security and nutrition issues. The reasons why the Panel was not the starting point for the Summit’s Scientific Group should be clarified, along with the reasons why its Chair was invited only in his personal capacity, and not as representative of the Panel. Also, why the HLPE’s report #12 on “Nutrition and Food Systems” and report #15 on a “Global Narrative Towards 2030” were not utilized as a starting point for the work of the Summit’s Scientific Group. Considering that food systems encompass a wider scope than that assigned to the CFS HLPE, would it not have been reasonable to simply enlarge the CFS panel and assign it tasks consistent with a food systems approach? This would seemingly be in line with the Summit organizers’ publically-declared intention not to create any new, costly structures from the Summit.

UN Food Systems Summit Follow-up, CFS Capabilities: With the Summit fast approaching, the question about what will become of the “National Dialogues” generated as a result of the Summit still awaits clarification. Specifically, the question about who will be assigned to track progress and how will commitments be reported on, monitored, and evaluated/assessed, once the 100+ governments which have committed to holding them have done so. Will the UN High-Level Political Forum take on this role, one or more of the Rome-based agencies, or should CFS and its annual plenary accommodate such a role? If so, are the CFS Bureau, Advisory Group, HLPE, and Secretariat prepared and properly constituted to deliver upon expectations? Likewise, will the Summit’s five Action Tracks with their hundreds of ideas and “game-changing solutions” have a home for tracking, reporting, and supporting their ‘champions’ who will take forward these ideas toward 2030? And, given the crucial question of financing for food systems transformation to end hunger, where will funding come from, who will make funding decisions, and should CFS have any role in debating such issues? Last, where will the work performed by the cross-cutting levers of change teams (gender, finance, rights, and innovation) be housed post-Summit, and does CFS have any role to play in terms of follow-up?

Conclusion: If the CFS is to play a significant role in fostering food systems transformation, CFS’s 2009 reform document may need to be reviewed in order to strengthen its role, vision, structures, and modalities of operation and make it suitable to implement the legacy of the Food Systems Summit. The discussion is open for further consideration and debate.