



# Cutting the Hand That Feeds: Is the UN Silencing the Voices of Farmers and Indigenous Communities?

By Carol Thompson



The United Nations Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) invokes the UN Sustainable Development Goals to demonstrate its purpose—namely, goals 2.1 and 2.2 (to end hunger and malnutrition). At the same time, however, the summit is obstructing another of those goals: goal 2.3 (to increase resources for smallholder farmers).

Because of this contradiction, the summit, planned since 2019 to be held at the UN Headquarters in New York, will now be exclusively virtual (September 23), a measure intended to maximize control and minimize dissent. During the last year, more than 500 indigenous and farmer organizations across the continents have raised their voices to expose the summit as advocating only one food system, the one that is polluting the soil, water, and air, and killing vital pollinators.

In contrast, the food system that feeds 75 to 80 percent of the human population—smallholder farmers practicing biodiverse cropping (in line with the principles of agro ecology)—was only added to the agenda after months of criticism. Those in opposition to the summit say it is advancing industrial agriculture, which is the core problem, not solution, for addressing climate change, malnutrition, and hunger.

A second criticism is that corporations are trying to replace the UN system of one country-one vote with “stakeholders,” a euphemism that may sound inclusive but really only invites those “who think like us” to the table. Smallholder farmers, who produce the majority of our food, are not invited.

This food summit is about the global business of agriculture, not the livelihoods of those who produce nutritious, biodiverse foods. Governments’ attempts to regulate global food corporations (e.g., labeling unhealthy foods, taxing sugar products) meet strong opposition from these industries. Yet the corporations profited massively from the 2008 food crisis and strengthened their global “food value chain,” contributing to the consequences that over 23 percent of Africans (282 million people) still go to bed hungry every night.

This focus is in stark contrast to the stated aims of the summit. As the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food [explained](#) in August 2021:

Hunger, malnutrition, and famine are caused by political failures and shortcomings in governance, rather than by food scarcity .... How will the [Summit] outcomes identify the root cause of the crisis and hold corporations and other actors accountable for human rights violations?

A third criticism of the UN Food Systems Summit is that it heralds technological advances as the primary answer to overcoming continuing hunger in an era of climate change. Most of us applaud multiple revolutions in genetics while we queue for vaccines, but genetic manipulation of seeds threatens the future of food, because ownership of the technology controls ownership of the seed. Industrial agriculture expands corporate profits from commodification of seed (beginning early 20th century), from the financialization of seed (speculative trading, late 20th century) and continuing today, through the digitalization of seed.

To the industry, a seed is merely a genome, with its genes representing digital points. The genes can be cut and pasted (by enzymes, e.g., CRISPRcas9), much like we edit text. A seed is no longer a living organism representing thousands 1000s of years of careful selection by expert farmers. For example, biologists today say they no longer need the germplasm of Oaxacan corn from Mexico to access its drought-resistant characteristics.

Promoters of these technologies rarely admit that they are very imperfect, with uncontrolled “off-target mutations.” Further, a seed variety needs its biome to flourish. It is farmers who understand the intricate interactions, who experiment with changing micro-climates (often in one field) to cultivate adaptive seed varieties.

No farmer denies the importance of scientific advances. But industrial agriculture giants are denying the value of farmers and their knowledge, saying they no longer need them: digitalized seed can be planted, watered, fertilized, and harvested by machines, run via satellites (this is called “precision agriculture”). Taste is irrelevant, because it is chemically added as crops are processed into food products.

Success in derailing the “corporate capture” of UN processes (e.g., UN Committee on World Food Security) to address increasing hunger arises from global, organized resistance by smallholder farmers, pastoralists, and fisher folk. After appeals to transform the agenda, many of these farmers and advocates decided to boycott the summit. This “outside resistance” [included African voices](#), who stated:

The current UNFSS process gives little space to traditional ecological knowledge, the celebration of traditional diets and cuisine . . . ....Indigenous and local community Africans have

experience and knowledge relevant to the current and future food system. Any process or outcome that does not recognize this is an affront to millions of African food producers and consumers.

The “inside resistance” worked to advance farmers’ voices within the official pre-summit dialogues, holding a series of webinars among the farmers in Southern Africa, and then globally (July 28). This trajectory was possible because of allied support within the UN Food and Agriculture Organization. As stated by one of the convenors of these official dialogues, Andrew Mushita, “African smallholder farmers are not beneficiaries of the corporate [agriculture] industry but rather co-generators of innovations and technologies adaptive to ecological agriculture, farmers’ needs—within the context of sustainable agriculture.”

To follow the end result of the summit, go [here](#).

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