

# *UN Food System Summit Plants Corporate Solutions and Plows Under People's Knowledge*

*A brief prepared by [academics following the UN Food Systems Summit](#)  
and committed to critical analysis and public education.*

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## **Setting the scene**

The UN Food Systems Summit (FSS) aims to identify solutions and advance action to make progress on the Sustainable Development Goals. In so doing, it gives considerable attention to major food system problems, including hunger, loss of biodiversity, and the degradation of nature. These problems are indisputable.

However, the solutions being put forward by the FSS to address these problems are predominantly new extensions of old approaches, cloaked in rhetoric of “innovation.” Since the proposed solutions are silent on the underlying drivers of the aforementioned crises, they are unlikely to address the root causes of food insecurity: systemic inequality, concentrated power, and governance that works for corporations and elites rather than to support workers and ecological integrity. Indeed, FSS solutions are very likely to backfire. Innumerable examples exist of large-scale agricultural investment schemes which were touted as “transformative” yet which delivered ecological and social harm instead, from the Southern Agricultural Growth Corridor (SAGCOT) of Tanzania<sup>1</sup> to commercial shrimp operations in Bangladesh,<sup>2</sup> among many others.

Of particular concern, agroecology (see definition below) was initially ignored by the FSS and only included under strong pressure from some participants. But it is being rolled into the mix of “Solution Clusters” offered by the FSS in a way that reduces it to a technical innovation strategy and bundles it together with precision farming, Big Data, biotechnology, artificial intelligence, and other investor-friendly solutions. In this brief, we analyze the underlying logic of Summit solutions, contrast it with agroecological principles, and demonstrate how an “all the tools in the toolbox” argument is incoherent and undermines agroecological and food sovereign solutions.

## **Inventing scarcities and gaps that don't exist**

Going beyond narrow “boost yield” claims of industrial agriculture, the FSS takes on the challenge of sustainability in food systems, alongside diversity, equity, and more. As a result, the Summit showcases complex and often contradictory trends, in which the global finance community is working on action tracks to “mobilize private capital,” while claims are being made to “elevate gender equality,” “support youth empowerment,” and “ensure human rights.”<sup>3</sup> In terms of agriculture, documents emerging from the FSS thus far point to a rebranded Sustainable Intensification strategy: technological and productivity-oriented capital-intensive innovations are

said to improve resource efficiency while reducing the negative environmental and health impacts of current food systems. The underlying rationale remains rooted in a longstanding narrative of “scarcity”— of food, knowledge, and development itself. These presumed scarcities give rise to a proliferation of gaps: “knowledge gaps,” “technology gaps,” “evidence gaps,” “investment gaps,” and “policy gaps” — all to be filled by scientific experts, science-policy advice, and the corporate sector. The role of public policy is primarily to ensure an environment friendly to private investment.

The real knowledge gap, however, is that FSS solutions fail to recognize the reality of small-scale, peasant, and Indigenous food production practices around the world. Such practices exist in spite of, not because of, mainstream neoliberal “development” agendas. It is an indisputable fact, well documented in UN publications, that approximately 5 billion people on the planet are involved in diverse mixed production systems (far more than in “modern” intensive food production systems).<sup>4</sup> Even though industrial and globalized agriculture is seen as “feeding the world,” a comprehensive analysis has estimated that small and medium sized farms provide food to an estimated 2/3 of the world’s population, produce 51-77% of all food and nutrients, and show greater production in diverse landscapes.<sup>5</sup> This is the fundamental basis of the global food system; yet the rights, agency, and expertise of those who nourish most of the global population are not the foundation of the FSS discourse — and this is inexcusable.

The FSS approach is underwritten, above all, by the interests of powerful economic players. The World Economic Forum (WEF) signed a strategic partnership agreement with the UN prior to the announcement of the FSS, and has developed an explicit agenda to “reset” global governance in the mold of “stakeholder capitalism.” The FSS’s leader, Dr. Agnes Kalibata, President of the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA), also reflects this private-sector driven vision of food systems transformation. AGRA has engaged in extensive policy advocacy and grantmaking to expand markets for corporate agro-inputs through multi-stakeholder and public-private partnerships.

“Nature-positive production” is a new label put forward without articulation of fundamental principles nor documentation of successful applications of the actions proposed. Reference to the term can be traced to WEF reports from 2020,<sup>6</sup> advocating for major shifts in thinking about the value of nature and for new, highly profitable business models enabled by Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) technologies. Nature-positive production belongs to a family of related concepts that have been proposed to counter agroecology (climate-smart, precision farming, nutrition sensitive), which the High Level Panel of Experts (HLPE) of the UN Committee on World Food Security identified as part of the Sustainable Intensification paradigm.

The Sustainable Intensification family of approaches contributes primarily to yield and stability but doesn’t address social, cultural and political dimensions of transitions to sustainability, including power dynamics and governance.<sup>7</sup> Although the FSS is trying hard to avoid such associations, given the baggage of critical analysis, nature-positive production is old wine in new bottles. It is promoted as a climate change adaptation and mitigation strategy, without recognizing the differentiated responsibilities for the crisis. As such, it is poised to push smallholders across the Global South either out of agriculture altogether or into adopting “climate-smart” farming and “digitalization” — to solve problems that industrial food systems and consumption patterns in the North have caused or exacerbated.

What is the more effective approach? It has many layers: It starts with considering the historical and ongoing role of colonialism, global capitalism, and corporate concentration in creating an unequal distribution of power and productive resources. It recognizes crises and conflicts that generate lack of access and instability — even when production is plentiful. It acknowledges that women’s

education, territorially-embedded markets, access to water and sanitation, agricultural income, and changes in gender relations are the most relevant pathways for improving food security and nutrition at the household level.<sup>8</sup> It grapples with the historical and ongoing violence of land dispossession enacted by capitalist agriculture and centers the expertise and agency of Indigenous peoples, peasants, and smallholder communities worldwide who are at the forefront of agroecological innovation today. Solutions that fail to address these issues and to promote food sovereignty — the ability of people to determine their own food systems — will fail to advance equitable and sustainable food systems for all.

## **The case for agroecology: solutions from the ground, backed by evidence**

Turning to small-scale, peasant, and Indigenous agriculture, we find that solutions are already underway. Substantial evidence shows that the adoption of agroecology can lead to improvements in food security and nutrition.<sup>9</sup> In addition, farms that are more agroecologically advanced exhibit advantages including: higher on-farm biodiversity; healthier soils; similar revenues to conventional systems but fewer expenditures on inputs, resulting in better net incomes; greater connectivity with natural landscapes; more diverse diets; greater self-sufficiency; and better linkages to local markets.<sup>10</sup> Agroecological approaches explicitly aim at transforming food and agriculture systems by addressing the root causes of problems and providing holistic and long-term solutions<sup>11</sup> that consider the complexity of farming systems within their social, economic and ecological contexts.<sup>12</sup> Agroecological approaches have a long history of innovation, as they are grounded in Indigenous and farmer-based practices and a “dialogue of knowledges” (*diálogo de saberes*) that puts Western science into a role of mutual learning with social movements and traditional ecological knowledge keepers.<sup>13</sup> Agroecology recognizes that knowledge is not something to be “owned” or filled as a gap. It is collectively held, created in relation to living landscapes, and rooted in multiple valid ways of knowing and being in the world.

In contrast to “silver-bullet solutions,” agroecology relies on universal-yet-adaptable principles, recognizing that agroecological systems vary based on their ecological and socio-cultural context. According to the HLPE: “Agroecological practices harness, maintain and enhance biological and ecological processes in agricultural production, in order to reduce the use of purchased inputs that include fossil fuels and agrochemicals and to create more diverse, resilient and productive agroecosystems.”<sup>14</sup> Documents emerging from the FSS process are increasingly referring to agroecology as an important innovation. Yet they ignore the fundamental understanding, also elaborated in the HLPE report, that innovation for sustainable food systems requires: (i) inclusive and participatory forms of innovation governance; (ii) information and knowledge co-production and sharing among communities and networks; and (iii) responsible innovation that steers innovation towards social issues.<sup>15</sup> Without these, as has happened too often in the past, food security and nutrition cannot be achieved by the communities that need it the most.

It is essential that agroecological principles not be used selectively to bolster certain “innovations,” but applied holistically. In the 2015 Nyéléni Declaration of the International Forum for Agroecology, social movements from around the world affirmed a “common understanding of agroecology as a key element in the construction of Food Sovereignty.”<sup>16</sup> Social movements that are practicing agroecology and food sovereignty should be the ones to lead the development of both. More than 800 organizations and individuals have signed a [letter calling for the 13 indivisible principles](#) of agroecology derived from the Nyéléni Declaration to underlie any solution coming out of the Summit.

## **How agroecology is being coopted: the “all the tools in the toolbox” claims of nature-positive production**

Prominent Summit participants argue that we need “all the tools in the toolbox” (e.g. that we need both genetic engineering and agroecology, coexisting).<sup>17</sup> However, some tools will destroy the ability to use other tools, and some tools are completely inappropriate to the task at hand. Moreover, the “tools” metaphor doesn’t work well for food systems: it implies that problems can be solved mechanistically, rather than holistically. This engineering approach ignores not only relationships between tools but a full set of forces “outside the toolbox” that shape how any tool within it can possibly function. These include political economy (e.g., patent rights, trade liberalization, and other structures in which tools are embedded); path-dependency (e.g., historical lock-ins of certain types of science, technology, and industry in agricultural development); and entanglement (e.g., the interconnectivity of all social-ecological relations).<sup>18</sup> In addition, the toolbox metaphor evades governments’ obligations to protect, respect, and fulfil human rights, both nationally and extraterritorially. In particular, it obscures how corporate solutions are seldom compatible with the right to food, because they are based on making profits from agricultural commodities, not the aims of socially and environmentally just food systems, rights to self-determination and development, and redressing human rights violations.

Despite embracing “food systems,”<sup>19</sup> the FSS continues to operate with this mechanistic toolbox mentality. But solutions will not materialize by throwing different, often antagonistic, approaches together and calling them nature-positive. Agroecology is not a tool: it is a science, practice, and movement to transform mindsets, eliminate power imbalances, and integrate principles of wellbeing and dignity into interactions between countries, territories, peoples, and the living world.

### **Conclusion**

In contrast to the slim evidence for technological and investor-based solutions, robust and time-tested evidence exists for solutions that communities have used to feed themselves sustainably for millennia — solutions rooted in small-scale producer and Indigenous practices and worldviews. The FSS is poised to foster the cooptation of agroecology by reducing agroecology to a few practices that can be easily adopted by industrialized agriculture, hitched to digital platforms, and used to accelerate monopolistic control of the food system. Intense involvement by the Gates Foundation and WEF, with little transparency or accountability in the FSS decisionmaking process, further suggest a threat to the existing multilateral governance frameworks of the UN.<sup>20</sup> This shift towards multistakeholderism undermines the international obligations of states to respect, protect and fulfill the rights of citizens, migrants, refugees, Indigenous peoples, and agrarian communities worldwide.

The FSS cannot be allowed to further marginalize people who are producing most of the world’s food, who hold unrivaled expertise about agroecology in practice, and yet who suffer most from violations and abuses of their human rights. To achieve the SDGs, countries and institutions must actively support and fund food system transformations grounded in agroecology’s principles, affirmed in the Nyéléni Declaration of the International Forum for Agroecology and the HLPE, within the framework of food sovereignty. Together, agroecology and food sovereignty provide an evidence-based roadmap for rights-based, sustainable, and equitable solutions.

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