

UN Food Systems Summit: Multistakeholderism requires good governance

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NCD community reflections ahead of the UN Food Systems Summit +2 Stocktaking Moment

The current unsustainability of global food systems is fuelling many of the world's most pressing challenges: malnutrition, climate change, and excessive waste. Malnutrition in all its forms—including undernutrition, obesity and diet-related noncommunicable diseases (NCDs)—must be addressed by making our food systems more sustainable and healthier, providing primarily nutritious foods through policies safeguarded from conflicts of interest and undue influence from commercial actors.

In the mid-term context of the UN Decade of Action on Nutrition (2016-2025), the UN Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) was convened in September 2021 to accelerate action for **more inclusive, resilient, equitable, healthy and sustainable food systems**. However, concerns around appropriate governance and rules of engagement, allowing food industry interests to undermine the objectives of the Summit, persisted throughout the UNFSS process. These concerns were raised with the UN Secretary-General in a [letter](#) [1] signed by an Ad-Hoc Committee on UNFSS Governance and culminated with a [BMJ opinion](#) [2], including authors involved in the UNFSS process.

To review progress made since 2021, the [UNFSS +2 Stocktaking Moment \(UNFSS+2\)](#) [3] is taking place 24-26 July 2023 in Rome, Italy. But the governance concerns – which have not received a formal response, nor been addressed – are persisting. Some of the main outcomes from 2021 included commitments made by governments, their national pathways, and the coalitions established to support delivery. However, the problem of corporate power in food systems was not addressed in a meaningful way. The Summit has been '[strategically silent](#)' [4] on corporate power, while advancing innovation-based solutions that primarily benefit large agribusinesses. It also gave multinational food corporations a priority seat, engaging them in various settings ahead of the UNFSS.

"The UNFSS was supposed to be 'the People's Summit' but its governance has consistently favoured

corporate interests and marginalised critical voices. An unwillingness to address conflicts of interest meant that the Summit would inevitably fail to tackle key challenges around power and equity, and the process has advanced tokenistic voluntary initiatives rather than meaningful efforts to transform food systems.” -Prof. Jeff Collin, Director of Global Public Health, University of Edinburgh

For instance, the so-called “shadow report” [Stakeholders’ Contribution Document](#) [5], a main output of the UNFSS+2, was largely developed by private sector stakeholders, and highlights that “several Business and Industry stakeholders have also been part of some of the coalitions launched by the UNFSS”. This reaffirms civil society concerns around these coalitions’ terms of engagement. Moreover, the [UN Food Systems Coordination Hub](#) [6] places private sector as a key actor, without mentioning the role of civil society.

The issue starts with the current cross-border power imbalances

The food and beverage industry (including large agrobusinesses) is increasingly concentrated within large multinationals that have enormous political, economic, and social power over countries. For instance, the top-10 food and beverage companies [control 80% of store-bought food products worldwide](#) [7], with over US\$100 billion in combined profits every year; and 75% of these companies obtain most of their revenues from ultra-processed foods.

The recent [Lancet series on commercial determinants of health](#) [8] argues that these power imbalances ensure corporate capture of public policy, with the costs of commercial activities externalised to states and societies – from the harms that products cause, to biodiversity loss and other environmental impacts – thereby maximizing profits.

This is especially concerning for countries whose food systems face specific vulnerabilities, including Small Island Developing States (SIDS) as recognised in the recent [Bridgetown Declaration on NCDs and Mental Health](#) [9]. In many SIDS, over 80% of food is imported, fuelling these islands’ food systems with highly profitable ultra-processed foods and undermining their food sovereignty. Large food corporations have yearly net incomes above the annual GDP of many SIDS – giving them huge leverage which they use to block healthy food and nutrition policies.

“The recent and ongoing deliberation on octagonal front-of-package warning labels on foods in the Caribbean has revealed the significant power of the regional food industry and the wider commercial sector. Food and nutrition security in the Caribbean will only be fully achieved if governments forcefully address the commercial determinants of diet-related NCDs, which at its very minimum requires strong conflicts of interest policies as part of good public health governance.” Maisha Hutton, Executive Director, Healthy Caribbean Coalition

This leads to interest imbalances that put public policy at risk

The same corporations that have a track record of deterring, delaying and weakening healthy food and nutrition policies are the ones prioritised in the UNFSS agenda. SDG Goal 17 on partnerships and the importance of multistakeholderism should not be confused with a lack of terms of engagement and governance mechanisms.

The UN system can build on existing frameworks to lead the way towards healthy food systems, such as the [UNICEF Programme Guidance on Engaging with the Food and Beverage Industry](#) [10]. This key document sets clear parameters for engaging with the food and beverage industry from a children’s (human) rights perspective.

“Health, sustainability and social justice are intrinsically intertwined and should be at the heart of food system transformation discussions – there is no plan(et) B. Brazil is currently discussing a major and necessary fiscal reform with lobbying from the Parliamentary Agrobusiness Front (funded both by large agrobusinesses and ultra-processed food corporations), leading to the risk of them getting even larger fiscal benefits including subsidies for exports instead of giving incentives for healthier, fairer and more sustainable agricultural systems, including agroecology.” Paula Johns, Co-founder and Director, ACT Promoção da Saúde

Resulting in voice imbalances at the UNFSS and UNFSS+2

Large food corporations, including their trade associations and front groups, have the resources to attend in-person and lobby against UNFSS processes that prioritise public interest over profits. Civil society faces a different scenario, with capacity and resource restraints to engage in UNFSS processes and a limited voice.

This led some civil society actors in 2021 to boycott the Summit and organise counter events, including [The People's](#) [11] counter mobilization to transform corporate food systems, which focused on amplifying unheard voices. More recently, the International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems launched a [paper asking for a UN-wide corporate accountability framework to ensure results](#) [12], and encourage autonomous governance spaces that prioritise the voices of communities most affected by malnutrition.

*"NCD civil society is keenly aware of the power imbalances and corporate capture that are derailing the much-needed transformation of food systems. After the boycott of the UNFSS in 2021, there have been efforts toward a two-fold strategy. On the one hand, continuing with the counter mobilisation, to challenge the lax governance that has allowed undue influence by large corporations. On the other hand, strengthening the participation of civil society to encourage governments to reject the solutions that perpetuate the same failed model we are trying to replace." **Beatriz Champagne**, Regional Coordinator, Healthy Latin America Coalition (CLAS)*

This ultimately results in solution imbalances

The UNFSS process is falling short on governance and therefore on tackling the root causes of unsustainable food systems. This process has had a strong focus on food production and quantity, rather than on sustainability and both quantity and quality in order to promote environments that enable healthy and nutritious diets, for instance through the [WHO's NCD 'best buys'](#) [13].

As highlighted by the recent [Health and Climate Network call for sustainable, healthy diets for all](#) [14], food systems must ensure equal access to enough calories from sustainable and healthy diets through a re-balance of power and influence, and respond to the many voices of the world, including youth, women, Indigenous peoples, small scale farmers and consumers.

Sustainable food systems and nutrition patterns have been identified as [one of the six major entry points for the SDG transformation agenda](#) [15]. It is urgent to ensure these power, interest, voices and solution imbalances are redressed through UN-wide governance mechanisms, building on existing UN frameworks to safeguard the UNFSS process from conflicts of interest and undue influence from the food and beverage industry. NCD Alliance will bring these messages with us to the UNFSS+2 next week.

About the author:

Liz Arnanz ([@lizarnanz](#) [16]) is NCDA's Policy and Advocacy Manager on NCD Prevention, she is responsible for coordinating our policy and advocacy work on the main NCD risk factors, upstream determinants, and health promotion more broadly. Prior to this, Liz worked at FDI World Dental Federation, advocating for the integration of oral health promotion and care within health systems, and she also worked for NCDA's partnerships and membership team.

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- [3] <https://www.unfoodsystemshub.org/fs-stocktaking-moment/en>
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