

# Multistakeholderism and the corporate capture of global food governance.

## WHAT IS AT RISK IN 2023?

### Purpose of the paper

This paper assesses how the trend towards multistakeholderism and the corporate capture of global food governance will evolve and possibly deepen in 2023, putting further at risk previous achievements of the food sovereignty movement such as the reformed Committee on World Food Security (CFS) and certain democratic inroads into the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO).

The analysis aims to help different organizations and platforms of social movements, Indigenous Peoples and civil society to understand how multistakeholderism is expanding globally and provide elements for developing strategies to confront it.

Photo: Greenpeace



## KEY MESSAGES

### How is multistakeholderism promoting the corporate capture of global food governance?

- Corporate power, the industrialization of agriculture, livestock, fisheries and aquaculture, and market concentration in food systems have advanced tremendously during the past decades on national, regional and world levels. Communities, social movements and Indigenous Peoples have consistently fought against these dangerous trends and policies in their territories.

- The governance proposal to advance **corporate capture of global food governance** is 'multistakeholderism'. Multistakeholderism blurs the distinctions between public interest and corporate profit, between the rich and the excluded, and between governments and companies.

### How is the follow-up to the UNFSS consolidating multistakeholderism?

- One clear step forward for the anchoring of this captured governance was the UN Food Systems Summit (UN FSS), held in 2021. The countermobilization to the UNFSS was a huge expression of protest against this approach and in defence of the foremost inclusive inter-

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governmental and international governance platform that was achieved with the reformed UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS).

- The **institutionalization of the UNFSS** is advancing and its multistakeholderism agenda are being consolidated through the Coordination Hub and its structure, culminating in 2023 with a big conference called Stocktaking Moment, 24-26 July in Rome.

- The deep concerns expressed against the UNFSS are being confirmed by these developments: **A new parallel structure to the CFS is being built**; multistakeholderism without effective intergovernmental control is being promoted, at the expense of multilateralism and human rights accountability; the predominant narrative points to a corporate-friendly vision of food systems reforms and aims to prevent any regulation to corporate expansion and concentration.

## Multistakeholderism and corporate capture in FAO

- The **World Food Forum (WFF)** is a relatively recent mega-event in Rome, firstly organized in October 2021 with a strong youth focus and then, since 2022, organized around three main pillars: the Global Youth Forum, the Science and Innovation Forum, and the Hand-in-Hand Investment Forum. The platforms and initiatives that had been involved in the Food Systems Summit are largely as well engaged in the WFF.
- For the **Senior management in FAO, multistakeholderism and a comprehensive open-door policy to corporate actors have become institutional priorities** of FAO during the past years and shall be enhanced and consolidated in the near future. The partnership signed between FAO and the World Economic Forum in September 2022 is just one of many other significant steps.
- The ever-increasing corporate influence in FAO and its tendency towards the globalized market value chain model come into an institution that **lacks a robust accountability framework** for corporate actors, clear rules for full transparency for the ways of engagement, as well as effective safeguards against conflict of interest.

## How do these developments threaten important achievements of the food sovereignty movements?

- The food sovereignty movements have fought against corporate capture of natural resources and food systems in their territories. For many years, the food sovereignty movements made important achievements in advancing and shaping global political discussions and negotiations. Within the new constellation, the risk is that many of these achievements get lost.
- On the global governance level, important achievements in terms of democratizing decision-making were made through the CFS reform and the gradual opening of FAO. Initiatives such as the **UN Food Systems Summit and the WFF represent clear threats** to these important achievements.
- With this, the **essential principles of autonomy and self-organization** of civil society, social movements and Indigenous Peoples are threatened. The **space for the political**

agendas of the food sovereignty movements in these global institutions is shrinking, while the so-called consensus of multistakeholderism **moves towards market and corporate interests.**

## Geopolitical impacts on these developments in FAO

- While the growing rivalry between US and China appears to become the overarching parameter of global politics, there seems to be an **operational arrangement** within the FAO senior management, between the DG from China and the influential Deputy DG from the US, to **work on a common agenda.**
- The **open-door policy for the corporate sector**, multistakeholderism, the UN Food Systems Summit Coordination Hub, the World Food Forum, and the Hand-in-Hand Initiative are part of the common agenda of a China-US-led FAO for a corporate reform of food systems with a digital face, not with a peasant's face.

## The UN Summit of the Future and the reform of the UN

- With the **UN Summit of the Future process**, important actors promote a system-wide application of the multistakeholderism governance model for the entire UN, in the same direction as the UN Food Systems Summit has been promoting it for the food domain.

## Key questions for social movements, Indigenous Peoples and civil society

- Democratizing decision-making around food systems is at the very core of the food sovereignty movement. **How do the food sovereignty movements assess the risks and threats associated with the trends described above?**
- **How to counter the corporate capture of FAO?** What kind of strategies can be developed to **defend and strengthen existing spaces of inclusive global food systems governance, such as the CFS?**
- Building on their fundamental narratives on food sovereignty and human rights, social movements, Indigenous Peoples and civil society groups could engage in processes to think about their **visions and strategies for inclusive global food governance and the democratization of the United Nations** in a broader sense.

# 1. What's the problem with **multistakeholderism**, and how is it driving the **corporate capture** of global food governance?

Corporate power, the industrialization of agriculture, livestock, fisheries and aquaculture, and market concentration in food systems have advanced tremendously during the past decades on national, regional and world levels. Communities, social movements and organizations, Indigenous Peoples and trade unions have consistently fought against these dangerous trends and policies in their territories.

Corporate-dominated food systems do not only ensure a deeply unequal and unfair share of revenues to the wealthy within and among countries. They foster land, water and natural resources grabbing, extractivism, climate change, biodiversity loss, poverty and social and economic inequality, and essentially continue and deepen the structural oppression, discrimination and exploitation against Indigenous Peoples, women, small-scale food producers and providers in all their diversities, food system workers, and promote aggressive marketing of largely unhealthy foods to consumers.

During the past two decades, this project of corporate food systems has pushed for increasing influence in global food governance, especially in the United Nations. The corporate and associated philanthropic sector is attractive to the United Nations because they can provide new resources that the multilateral system needs, due to the increasing reliance of the UN on voluntary financial contributions. On the other side, big corporate actors can reduce their reputation problem as systemic exploiters, polluters and crisis profiteers by grabbing the legitimacy of the UN, and obtain UN-backed support for their investment strategies. Usually, the term "private sector participation" is used in these contexts, but the leading voices in these discussions undoubtedly have been the big corporate actors and their front groups.

The governance proposal to advance this corporate project is 'multistakeholder governance', or 'networked multilateralism', or 'multistakeholderism', as it has been called by its critics.<sup>1</sup> It contains an elaborate and subtle narrative: We are all in the same boat in confronting the multiple crises of the planet. We should all sit around at the same table; nobody should be excluded. The corporate sector has become so critical and relevant to the system, they must become part of the decision-making structures to find sustainable and effective solutions. The resolution to the huge planetarian problems requires financial resources that governments cannot gather alone.

This approach is deeply flawed in many ways. First of all, it avoids a structural analysis of the causes and main drivers of the systemic crises that people and the planet face today. The huge damage and harm generated by corporate sector actors and industrial food systems for people, health, ecology, climate, social, gender and economic justice and democracy cannot be denied and ignored. The lack of corporate accountability and liability leads to impunity which encourages the continuation and reproduction of harmful practices.

The key concept of inclusiveness is misused for the interest of Big Business, a sector that has always been embedded in power, almost everywhere. The emphasis on inclusiveness in governance structures is based on the recognition of the fact that marginalized groups and constituencies have been systematically excluded from decision-making in the food arena, especially the peasants, pastoralists, fisherfolks, landless, workers, women, youth and Indigenous Peoples.

Multistakeholderism blurs the distinctions between public interest and corporate profit, between the rich and the excluded, and between governments and companies. When everyone is equally responsible, it becomes impossible to effectively track states' obligations, especially their human rights obligations. As a result, accountability and liability are out of reach. Power asymmetries and conflicts of interest are ignored. In this sense, multistakeholderism is an attempt to legitimize and institutionalize the corporate capture of global food governance.

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1. People's Working Group on Multistakeholderism, [The Great Takeover | Transnational Institute \(tni.org\)](#), January 2022; FIAN, [Briefing Note on Multi-Stakeholder Initiatives](#), April 2020

One clear step forward for the anchoring of this captured governance was the [UN Food Systems Summit](#) (UN FSS), held in 2021<sup>2</sup>. The [countermobilization](#) to the UNFSS was a huge expression of protest against this approach and in defence of the foremost inclusive intergovernmental and international governance platform that was achieved with the reformed UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS)<sup>3</sup>.

## 2. How is the **follow up-process to the UN Food Systems Summit consolidating the project of multistakeholderism and the corporate capture of food governance?**

Since the UN Food Systems Summit was held in September 2021, important steps were taken to ensure a comprehensive follow-up to it, even though the Summit's Plan of Action was not negotiated among governments and therefore only consisted of a Statement of the UN Secretary-General. Senior UN and FAO Management appropriated the coordination and leadership function away from the intergovernmental process and therefore the direct guidance of UN Member States. Despite promises in 2021 by the UN Deputy Secretary-General that no new structures would be created, past and current developments demonstrate what the Liaison Group of the CSIPM had already foreseen in its analysis report<sup>4</sup>: "The UNFSS did not end after September 2021. Its outcomes will be reproduced in different international, regional and national spaces".

### Key elements of this follow-up are:

- The establishment and consolidation of a UN Food Systems Coordination Hub, hosted by FAO and jointly led by the UN Deputy Secretary-General and the heads of the Rome-based agencies (FAO, WFP and IFAD), WHO and UNEP are clear indicators of how the follow-up to the Food System has been institutionalized. A [new structure](#) was created, despite many promises from UN leadership that no new structure would be created by the FSS.
- The [architecture](#) of the Coordination Hub organigram includes a new Scientific Advisory Committee (SAC), a Stakeholder Engagement and Networking Advisory (SENA) Group, with representatives from Youth, Indigenous Peoples, Producers, Women and the Private Sector, and an Ecosystems of Support.
- National governments are not part of the governance structure of the Hub. This is a critical point that undermines the centrality of intergovernmental decision-making and then opens the way to the corporate sector and the de-facto shift from the intergovernmental process to a nebulous and opaque grey zone where everyone is invited to join in. The leading role of Senior UN staff in such moves faces increasing criticism from several member states.
- While member states are not in the global decision-making, they are involved in national implementation. The Hub [informed](#) that by end of 2022, 117 countries have developed [food systems national pathways](#), which are supported by the Coordination Hub. The Hub is also currently working with [28 coalitions](#) to support food systems transformations.<sup>5</sup>
- A UN Food Systems [Stocktaking Moment](#) will be held from 24-26 July in Rome, "To build on the momentum of the 2021 Food Systems Summit and to create a conducive space for countries to review commitments to action that were made during the Summit, share stories of success and early signs of transformation".<sup>6</sup>
- The planned biannual budget of the Hub is USD 14,302,784, according to a 2023 [Submission](#) of the Hub to the FAO Programme and Finance Committee.<sup>7</sup> For comparison: the [CFS Budget forecast](#) for 2022 was USD 3,015,677, which means that the Hub has more than double the budget of the CFS.

2. Montenegro de Wit, M., Canfield, M., Iles, A. et al. Editorial: Resetting Power in Global Food Governance: The UN Food Systems Summit. *Development* 64, 153–161 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41301-021-00316-x>

3. Webpage of the Countermobilization: Home ([foodsystems4people.org](https://foodsystems4people.org))

4. Liaison Group of the CSIPM, Risks of the increased systemic corporate capture fueled by the UN Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) and its follow-up process. [https://www.foodsystems4people.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/UNFSSAnalysisReportMay2022\\_FS4P.pdf](https://www.foodsystems4people.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/UNFSSAnalysisReportMay2022_FS4P.pdf)

5. FAO, [Update on the work of the UN Food Systems Coordination Hub](#), January 2023

6. UN Food Systems Coordination Hub website, [Stocktaking Moment \(unfoodsystemshub.org\)](https://unfoodsystemshub.org)

7. FAO, [Update on the work of the UN Food Systems Coordination Hub](#), January 2023

These facts confirm that the institutionalization of the UNFSS is advancing and its multistakeholderism agenda is being consolidated through the Coordination Hub and its structure, the follow-up to coalitions and national pathways and the Stocktaking Moment. The architecture of the Coordination Hub, where decisions on the way forward for the UNFSS seem to be taken, distances itself from the concept of multilateralism in which governments are at the center of any decision-making.

**The [deep concerns](#) expressed by the critics of the FSS are being confirmed by these developments:**

- **A new parallel structure to the CFS is being built and recent attempts are trying to conflate the CFS with this new parallel structure;**
- **multistakeholder governance without effective intergovernmental control is being promoted, at the expense of multilateralism and human rights accountability;**
- **the predominant narrative points to a corporate-friendly vision of food systems transformation and aims to prevent any regulation of corporate expansion and concentration.**

### **3. The [World Food Forum](#) as an FAO-led initiative to promote multistakeholderism in food and agriculture**

The World Food Forum (WFF) is a relatively recent mega-event in Rome, firstly organized in October 2021 with a strong youth focus and then, since 2022, organized around three main pillars: the [Global Youth Forum](#), the [Science and Innovation Forum](#), and the [Hand-in-Hand Investment Forum](#). FAO reported that the [2022 Forum](#) gathered more than 2000 in-person participants with more than 100 events organized<sup>8</sup>, which “fostered dialogue and debate among relevant stakeholders, ranging from the young and the youthful, farmers, small-scale producers, Indigenous Peoples, policymakers, agri-investors and scientists”.<sup>9</sup>

The World Food Forum provides the main annual platform for the [Hand-in-Hand Initiative](#) which has become, since 2019 a flagship policy of FAO and one of its core priorities, supporting at the beginning of 2023 major investments in 60 countries. The Investment Forum as part of the WFF provides “a platform for national authorities, global and national public and private entities, along with multilateral development banks and donors to discuss opportunities to finance the Hand-in-Hand Initiative.”<sup>10</sup>

The self-description of the WFF says that they are an “independent, youth-led global network of partners facilitated by FAO.” “The WFF serves as the premier global forum to harness the passion and power of youth to identify solutions and incite positive action for agrifood systems. It aligns with the 2021 United Nations (UN) Food Systems Summit, acts as a major youth platform in global food governance, and serves as a global think tank that fosters youth-led solutions in innovation, science and technology.”<sup>11</sup> The World Food Forum has created a Youth Action Assembly and a Youth Mechanism to organise youth engagement in the WFF, but also in other fora, as foreseen in the Action Plan. The Youth Mechanism has been recognized as the Youth representation in the UN Coordination Hub on the Food Systems Summit Hub. Youth engagement is open to individuals and representatives of organizations.<sup>12</sup>

The way how the Youth participation has been set up within the UN FSS and has then been consolidated into a Youth representation mechanism with the institutional support of FAO generates many questions

8. [FAO, World Food Forum wraps up five days of melding diverse perspectives to transform agrifood systems](#) (fao.org), press release 21 October 2022

9. [World Food Forum | 2022 Flagship event](#) (world-food-forum.org)

10. [FAO, The Hand-in-Hand Initiative](#) (fao.org)

11. [World Food Forum | About us](#) (world-food-forum.org)

12. [World Food Forum | Youth Action Assembly](#) (world-food-forum.org)

and doubts about how important principles such as autonomy and self-organization of civil society and Indigenous Peoples can be upheld against institutional attempts of cooptation and controlled participation, and how disruptive and divisive effects of these attempts can be resisted and overcome by the currently most targeted constituencies, such as Youth and Indigenous Peoples.

The importance of the World Food Forum for the FAO Senior Management was made clear at the FAO Council Meeting and the reconvened CFS 51st Plenary in December 2022, when they explained to the Member States that the WFF Food Forum shall be held in conjunction with the World Food Day on 16 October, substituting the CFS is being held on this date. Despite strong concerns from member states voiced by South Africa and others, FAO Senior Management insisted on keeping the WFF on the most prominent date of the year. The new 'biggest show in town' will be the WFF, not anymore the CFS Plenary as it had been since its reform in 2009, which signals a significant shift in the importance of the CFS.

The [platforms and initiatives](#) that had been involved in the Food Systems Summit are largely as well engaged in the WFF. While FAO's role at the beginning of the Food Systems Summit process was rather reluctant and partly sceptical due to the strong role given to New York, Senior Management took over leadership and full control after the Summit. FAO worked hard to bring the FSS "[back from New York to Rome](#)"<sup>13</sup>, with the Coordination Hub under its control, and its spirit into the World Food Forum as a regular mega-event. It is an open secret that the World Food Forum can count on the personal commitment of both the FAO DG and the Chief Economist. The combination of its three priorities: the Hand-in-Hand Investment initiative, the Science, Technology and Innovation stream; and the Youth dimension makes the World Food Forum an outstanding annual highlight for FAO Senior Management.

#### 4. FAO's comprehensive Open-Door policy for the Corporate Sector

The deepening influence of industries over the past years has been thoroughly documented in the research paper on "[Corporate Capture of FAO](#)", published in May 2022, with particular attention to FAO's Letter of Intent with CropLife International. Since then, the documents produced by FAO staff for the institution's governing bodies and the public domain show a further consolidation of this trend and a kind of "normalization" of highly problematic patterns of behaviour of a UN institution which shall be based on and bound to the public interest:

- The [Update](#) on the FAO Private sector engagement shared for the FAO Programme Committee in March 2023 provides strong evidence for the institution's full-fledged policy of open doors with companies and their front groups.<sup>14</sup> The Update reaffirms that also in 2022, 90 per cent of FAO's private sector engagements were informal and indicates that 44 formal engagements were active by the end of 2022.
- The [CONNECT Portal](#) shows most of the formalized engagements, including the ones with [CropLife](#), [Danone](#), [GAIN](#), [Google](#), [International Chamber of Commerce \(ICC\)](#), [International Fertilizer Association](#), [Mars](#), [Rabobank](#), [Syngenta](#), [UNILEVER](#), [World Economic Forum](#);
- A [new FAO Private Sector Advisory Group](#) was set up at the end of January 2023. The FAO Director-General pointed out that "one example where FAO's collaboration with the private sector can have a transformational impact is the Hand-in-Hand (HiH) initiative, launched as a new business model for matchmaking investments with development opportunities" illustrating this approach with the leveraging support of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to the HiH investment in Bangladesh.<sup>15</sup>

13. [FAO, Transforming agrifood systems requires changing policies, mindsets, and business models \(fao.org\)](#), press release 12 January 2023

14. [FAO, Update on FAO's private sector engagement](#), February 2023

15. This collaboration is also targeted as the [first demonstration project country](#) for FAO's "[One Country One Product](#)" ([OCOP](#)) [Action Plan](#) through the promotion of the production and marketing of jackfruit. The OCOP Action Plan looks at promoting "inclusive, profitable and environmentally sustainable agri-food systems through the green development of [Special Agricultural Products (SAPs)]. SAPs are defined as not having "yet fully benefited from agricultural and rural development programmes [...] with the potential of integration into mainstream and high-value domestic and international value chains and markets". The Action Plan also refers to SAPs as closely related to products featuring Geographical Indication (GI), which "are protected by intellectual property rights" (citations from hyperlinked website).

FAO Deputy Director-General Beth Bechdol, who is leading this area of work within the institution, encouraged the new Private Sector Advisory Group to “point to possible opportunities and areas of improvement to complement each other’s strengths to jointly tackle global challenges and achieve ambitious goals.”<sup>16</sup>

## FAO: A BROKER TO UNLEASH CORPORATE SECTOR INTERESTS?

In September 2022, FAO and the [World Economic Forum](#) (WEF) signed a [Letter of Intent](#) to foster collaboration and “facilitate more structured channelling of private-sector resources.” The cooperation [explicitly aims](#) at “enhancing public-private sector dialogue for increased investment, engaging and leading a data and digital coalition, and promoting work towards inclusive, efficient, sustainable and healthy agrifood systems, including through support to food innovation hubs.”<sup>17</sup> The [Data and Digital Coalition](#) is one of the major initiatives promoted through the UN Food Systems Summit. The FAO [press release](#) explicitly links the collaboration with the WEF with the Hand-in-Hand Initiative.

The Hand-in-Hand Initiative (HiH) has become, since 2019 a flagship policy of FAO and one of its core priorities: The most recent [internal report](#) for the FAO Program Committee in March 2023 and FAO Council in April 2023 provides a comprehensive overview of the activities under this FAO Flagship program now operating in 60 countries.<sup>18</sup> The African region is strongly involved, with 34 countries participating. The report specifically mentions the link of HiH with the African Union/Africa Development Bank [Summit “Feed Africa”](#), held end of January 2023 in Dakar which was [heavily criticized](#) by the Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa for its “continued reliance on colonial thinking – to raise production of staple crops using imported farm inputs, chemical fertilisers, pesticides, and hybrid and GMO seeds.”<sup>19</sup> The next World Food Forum and several national and regional Investment Forums will continue to feature and foster this narrative: FAO as a broker to unleash private and public investment for innovations which may lead to an even greater dependency of national food systems from imported inputs.

- One of the main directions of FAO’s private sector engagement proposed to the FAO Council Session in April 2023 is “[leveraging targeted investments at scale](#)” which means that FAO seeks to mobilize financial support from the private sector for investments in Member states, “rather than direct fundraising for FAO-managed programmes or projects. The notable exception to this is engagement with philanthropic foundations that provide funding for humanitarian and development activities.”<sup>20</sup> It is therefore foreseeable that most private funding brokered with FAO will be invested in support of governments and a significant increase of contributions from philanthropic foundations to FAO’s budget.
- The growing dependency on voluntary contributions makes the FAO open to any kind of new donor: “The total FAO Budget planned for 2022-23 is USD 3.25 billion. Of this amount, 31 per cent comes from assessed contributions paid by member countries, while [69 per cent is expected to be mobilized through voluntary contributions](#) from Members and other partners.”<sup>21</sup> In such conditions, FAO’s programmes, projects and other initiatives depend increasingly on the predefined

16. FAO - News Article: [FAO Director-General addresses first meeting of the informal Private Sector Advisory Group](#), 31 January 2023

17. [FAO, FAO and World Economic Forum bolster collaboration to transform agrifood systems](#), press release 19 September 2022

18. [FAO, Update on the Hand-in-Hand Initiative](#), February 2023

19. [AFSA, Statement on Dakar 2 Summit](#), 2 February 2023

20. [FAO, Update on FAO’s private sector engagement](#), February 2023

21. [FAO’s Budget | FAO | Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations](#)

interests of donors from wealthy countries and private sector philanthropies, with severe risks to democratic, participatory and transparent decision-making processes within the institution.

- Risk assessment: the “Engagements and Partnerships Committee” (EPC) reviews and decides all engagement proposals from the private sector. According to the reports for [2021](#) and [2022](#)<sup>22</sup>, a total of 120 proposals were reviewed, with 29 considered high risk. A total of 107 applications were approved, among them 18 were considered high-risk. No further details are disclosed about these assessments.

The previous sections and this information indicate that for the current top leadership in FAO, multistakeholderism and a comprehensive open-door policy to corporate actors have become institutional priorities of FAO during the past years, and shall be enhanced and consolidated in the near future. It is also evident that this ever-increasing corporate influence in FAO and its tendency towards the globalized market value chain model come into an institution that lacks a robust accountability framework for corporate actors, clear rules for full transparency for the ways of engagement, as well as effective safeguards against conflict of interest.

## 5. How do these developments **threaten** important achievements of the food sovereignty movements?

The food sovereignty movements have fought against the corporate capture of natural resources and food systems in their territories. This includes struggles for public policies in support of small-scale food producers, agroecology, human rights, social, gender and economic justice, biodiversity and full and effective participation in policy-making processes.

On the global level, important achievements in terms of democratizing decision-making were made. The participation of small-scale food producers, Indigenous Peoples and social movements in CFS, through the CSIPM, and in different FAO committees and processes, through the IPC, are the most salient ones. The principle Nothing about us without us was paramount in guiding the interactions between CSOs, FAO and CFS. However, these achievements have come under permanent attack during the past years.

Multistakeholder initiatives such as the UN Food Systems Summit and the WFF represent clear threats to these achievements. The FSS Coordination Hub, as it is now installed in FAO, is a parallel and counter structure to the CFS and seeks to promote the corporate-friendly model of food system reforms of the Summit itself.

The second threat is on the essential principles of autonomy and self-organization of civil society, social movements and Indigenous Peoples. The way organizations were coopted into the Food Systems Summit process, disrespecting existing platforms, is part of a disruptive approach that builds on the principle of divide et impera: the usual tactic is that UN officials first contact civil society groups that are politically aligned to them, offering leadership roles. Other organisations are then left with the difficult question of whether to participate in those spaces or not, often without adequate time for consultations. Once a critical mass is reached, they claim that civil society, youth and Indigenous Peoples are participating, and refer to the others as non-constructive. As a result, there is a functioning policy of ‘controlled participation’ with a divisive effect, which is the precise opposite of autonomy and self-determination.

In consequence, the third threat is shrinking space for the political agendas of the food sovereignty movements in these global institutions. Once the inclusive governance platform is weakened or/and the principles of autonomy and self-organization are disrespecting, it becomes easy to block or just ignore the

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22. The Engagements and Partnerships Committee (EPC), a decision-making committee established at the core leadership level in late April 2021, reviews and decides all engagement proposals with Low (ad interim), Medium and High risk, and provides policy guidance on the Organization’s approach on engagements with the private sector. The Project Support Service Division (PSS) is in charge of due diligence screenings and risk assessments based on evidence and supports the EPC.



political demands for agroecology and policies in support of small-scale food producers, gender equality and diversity, human rights, while the opportunities for corporate-led influence in institutional policies increase. For many years, the food sovereignty movements made important achievements in advancing and shaping global political discussions and negotiations. Within the new constellation, the risk is that many of these achievements get lost.

Another threat is that in these Multistakeholder spaces, so-called consensus on policies and programs moves towards market and corporate interests, and because corporations have money, they finance structures – systems to implement these policies.<sup>23</sup> The work of movements committed to real social, economic, gender, environmental and climate justice, and food sovereignty, becomes doubly hard: the proliferation of parallel spaces makes it impossible for social movements to participate, while bigger international NGOs have these resources. And these new initiatives tend to undermine rights and social programs that were won through long struggles and promote spaces and debates getting further and further away from the robust public economies the world needs.

## 6. How does the **geopolitical reconfiguration** impact these developments?

The geopolitical tensions and reconfigurations arising from Russia's invasion of Ukraine have significantly changed discussions and interactions at the Rome arena on many levels, among country delegations, within FAO governing bodies, between DG and Member States, as well as within CFS. Within FAO Council, specific resolutions on the war in Ukraine were adopted by the majority and not by consensus. The CFS 51st Plenary Session could not be concluded in October due to geopolitical tensions and had to be reconvened in December 2022. The entire web of interaction between Ukraine, NATO and their allies, Russia and its allies, and a majority of countries from the Global South that is not willing to take a side in these geopolitical tensions, is going through a profound reconfiguration with a still unclear destination.

However, while the growing rivalry between US and China appears to become the overarching parameter of global politics, there seems to be an operational arrangement within the FAO senior management, between the DG from China and the Deputy DG from the US, responsible for the private sector strategy, to work on a common agenda. The open-door policy for the corporate sector, multistakeholderism, the UN Food Systems Summit Coordination Hub, the World Food Forum, and the Hand-in-Hand Initiative are part of the common agenda of a China-US-led FAO for a corporate-friendly reform of food systems with a digital face, not with a peasant's face. The key concepts of this agenda are investment, technology, innovation, digitalization, and resource mobilization with the private sector, not the transformative potential of agroecology, democratic participation of small-scale food producers in governance, or human rights.

Regarding the role of the G-77 in Rome, the situation is complicated since it has been very difficult to articulate and strongly defend a common ambitious agenda. Collaboration has been punctual rather than substantial, but when it worked on certain issues or candidacies (such as the election of the current FAO DG), they could usually win the vote easily, representing up to 135 countries in the room. However, on global food governance issues and CFS, it is notable that South-South solidarity and broad participation from G-77 countries are not as strong as they could be.

The open-door policy for the corporate sector, multistakeholderism, the UN Food Systems Summit Coordination Hub, the World Food Forum, and the Hand-in-Hand Initiative are part of the common agenda of a China-US-led FAO for a corporate-friendly reform of food systems with a digital face, not with a peasant's face.

23. A well-studied example is the multistakeholder initiative "Scaling-Up Nutrition" (SUN). See the publication FIAN International, IBFAN and Society for International Development (SID): [When the SUN casts a shadow \(fian.org\)](https://www.fian.org/en/publications/when-the-sun-casts-a-shadow), February 2020

## 7. From the UNFSS to the **Summit of the Future** and the reform of the UN.

In 2021, in preparation for the 75th Anniversary of the United Nations, the UN Secretary-General presented his report “[Our Common Agenda](#)”.<sup>24</sup> In this report, he also presented his “vision on the future of global cooperation through an inclusive, networked, and effective multilateralism”. With this report, he also announced the Summit of the Future, originally foreseen for 2023, and now rescheduled for 2024, but starting the intergovernmental negotiation process on its conclusions with an Inter-ministerial Meeting on 18 September 2023 in New York.

Some discussions within the Summit of the Future process and particularly the proposals for generalized multistakeholderism governance within the UN resonate significantly with major controversies around the UN Food Systems Summit. Influential actors from UN leadership, member states and the corporate sector seem to see the Summit of the Future as an opportunity to push for a system-wide application of a multistakeholderism governance model which the UN Food Systems Summit has been promoting for the food domain.

The Summit of the Future process presents the platform to discuss the governance architecture of the United Nations for the next 25 years. The intergovernmental process is co-facilitated by Namibia and Germany, and a [High-Level Advisory Board \(HLAB\)](#) co-chaired by former presidents of Liberia and Sweden will present proposals for the future of multilateralism. It is in this context, that the controversy about the future of multilateralism and the proposals for multistakeholderism will have a prominent forum in 2023 and 2024.

The fifth [Statement of the HLAB](#) Co-Chairs makes a clear point: “Over the course of our consultations, the loudest and clearest call was for the multilateral system to become more effective by becoming more inclusive, meaningfully involving a broader range of actors in global decision-making. We have listened to this call and will make a set of recommendations to enable more direct participation of civil society (including faith actors, youth, and local/regional governments) and the private sector in global governance.”<sup>25</sup> They presented their full report on effective multilateralism on 18 April 2023.<sup>26</sup>

The UN Secretary-General outlined the process in a [speech to the UN General Assembly](#) on 13 February 2023. [A roadmap for 2023](#) was presented by the co-facilitators at a first round of consultations with Members States and Major groups and other Stakeholders held on 14 and 15 February.

It seems clear that the Summit of the Future could deeply affect the entire architecture of the United Nations, including the institutions dealing with food, agriculture and human rights.

However, it is important to note that, at these first consultations in New York, the positions between OECD countries and the G-77 on the future governance architecture of the UN were quite opposed: the G-77 expressed strong concerns against multistakeholderism, while OECD countries generally pushed for it.

## 8. What kind of **alternative visions for the future of global food governance** could be developed?

Building on their fundamental narratives on food sovereignty and human rights, social movements, Indigenous Peoples and civil society groups could engage in processes to think about their visions for inclusive global food governance and the democratization of the United Nations in a broader sense.

24. [UN Secretary-General's report on “Our Common Agenda” \(un.org\)](#)

25. [Fifth Statement by the Co-chairs of the High-Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism - High-Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism \(highleveladvisory-board.org\)](#)

26. “A Breakthrough for People and Planet”, report by the High-Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism (April 2023): available at [https://highleveladvisoryboard.org/breakthrough/pdf/56892\\_UNU\\_HLAB\\_report\\_Final\\_LOWRES.pdf](https://highleveladvisoryboard.org/breakthrough/pdf/56892_UNU_HLAB_report_Final_LOWRES.pdf)

The complex interrelation of growing, multiple and intertwined crises and their systemic impacts on communities, peoples and territories require new reflection, learning and strategizing processes for the organizations and platforms that deal with global institutions.

One concrete way of learning would be, as already discussed in the CSIPM, to promote inter-platform dialogues among platforms that interface with UN bodies in different domains, such as health, climate, finance, biodiversity, desertification, human rights, women's rights and gender, labour, trade, SDGs, peace and conflict, etc., in order to share analysis and identify areas of common concerns and priorities, and develop new forms of collaboration across policy domains. One step of that way could be to develop specific collaborations on topics of common concern, such as strategies to counter increased corporate influence in the United Nations, common strategies to counter growing inequalities or the development of visions for participatory multilateralism and the democratization of the United Nations.

The Nyéléni process towards 2025 could also be a space for bringing together the experiences, reflections and visions of social movements, Indigenous Peoples and civil society groups for the strengthening of democratic public institutions on all levels, a profound democratization of global food governance and the three Rome-based agencies, strong rules to ensure corporate accountability and safeguards against conflict of interest, and promoting new alliances among social movements and Indigenous Peoples from different sectors and political agendas.

Building on their fundamental narratives on food sovereignty and human rights, social movements, Indigenous Peoples and civil society groups could engage in processes to think about their visions for inclusive global food governance and the democratization of the United Nations in a broader sense.

## Key questions to social movements, Indigenous Peoples and civil society

Democratizing decision-making around food systems is at the very core of the food sovereignty movement. The trends identified above represent a major threat to the achievements in the past two decades in the food systems domain, with similar developments going on in the health, finance, climate, biodiversity, oceans, trade, investments and other areas.

- 1 How do the food sovereignty movements assess the risks and threats associated with the trends described above?
- 2 How to counter the corporate capture of FAO? What kind of strategies can be developed to defend and strengthen existing spaces of inclusive global food governance, such as the CFS?
- 3 How can the food sovereignty movements contribute with their experience and analysis to the discussions about multistakeholderism and the future of multilateralism in the context of the critical actions around the Summit of the Future process?
- 4 What capacities should be increased to share analyses, discuss connections between local struggles and these global developments and build common strategies?



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[www.foodsystems4people.org](http://www.foodsystems4people.org)