



United Nations Food Systems Summit 2021: The People's Summit in a nutshell

23rd September 2021, New York. The [United Nations Food Systems Summit 2021](#) (UN FSS) will be held during the 76th UN General Assembly. Convened by UN Secretary-General António Guterres, the Summit has not only the ambition to provide the foundations to transform our food systems, but also to make them the catalyst for bold actions towards achieving the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), while meeting the challenges of climate change.

Revolutionising the way we produce, process, transport and consume food in a single day?

With the official UN FSS programme still "[pending](#)", the 23rd will mainly consist of a full-day of Member State video-statements announcing their commitments and/or their national pathways towards transformative change, with the occasional statements by leaders from a diversity of stakeholder groups (incl. Indigenous Peoples, Youth, researchers, private sector, finance leaders – to name a few). In short, we should not expect too many surprises.



The shape of Hue ©Alice Young/Unsplash

However, the real backbone of the so-called People's Summit actually lies on the two-year inclusive preparation process, where government bodies, the scientific community and a wide range of stakeholder groups all over the world gathered in public forums and in [Food Systems Dialogues](#) (FSDs) to share their perspectives on how our food systems should be, and to collect ideas on how to get there. This Dialogue and consultation phase culminated in the [Food Systems Pre-Summit](#) in July 2021, a hybrid 3-day event in Rome that was open to the public.

Food Systems Pre-Summit and the road ahead

The **Pre-Summit's main goal** was to consolidate and assess evidence-based and scientific approaches to reform our food systems, which were elaborated based on the actionable solutions proposed along [5 Action Tracks](#) during the Dialogues. More than 2000 ideas were collected over 18-months of engagement with hundreds of thousands of people across all constituencies from around the world, who debated how to address some of the world's most burning challenges, from hunger and poverty to climate change. These ideas were then grouped into [15 Action Areas](#)

covering ca. 50 solutions clustered around common themes. These served as a basis for the discussions during the Pre-Summit.

One of the **main outputs of the Pre-Summit** was identifying the [5 priority Action Areas](#) as the overall Summit Portfolio of Action. This is where the UN will place particular focus, lead the role of linking the local to the global level, and support country-level implementation to maximize impacts on the 2030 Agenda. Within these priority action areas, *Coalitions* are to be formed, where Member States and other constituency leaders can engage and focus their efforts in accelerating action. Some have already emerged, such as the [Coalition for Action for Safe Food for All](#), led by the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN). Further developments in the coalition space should unfold ahead of the Summit.

During the UNFSS, the Secretary-General will give a Statement of Action that will set a vision for the Decade of Action to achieve the 2030 Agenda, where food systems will play a central role. The Summit itself is not the end point though, it is rather the beginning of constituencies and individuals across boundaries, gender and generations, taking action for the future of food, for their own future and that of the planet.

Post-Summit, governments will move ahead with their National strategic Pathways for Food System Transformation, which are based on their respective National Food Systems Dialogues process. In addition, Regional Pathways for Food Systems Transformation will be developed and consolidated around common areas of focus across many countries, or which can only be addressed through cross-boundary efforts. After the Summit, the UN will mainly lead in an advisory and support capacity, where specific mechanisms will be set in place to ensure that national pathways take into account the voices of priority constituencies (i.e. women, Indigenous Peoples, youth, producers) and allow them to follow up on the progress of Pathways and commitments. The Secretariat will also produce a Compendium on the knowledge base gathered throughout the Summit's process to document the wide range of inputs and to ensure that no good evidence-based ideas are lost or discarded.

In the meantime, to further build public global mobilisation and gain momentum towards actionable commitments ahead of the Summit, the UNFSS launched an official [Commitments Registry](#), where governments, organisations, partnerships and individuals can publicly submit their commitments towards more sustainable, inclusive and equitable food systems.

UN FSS – an inclusive process?

With over a thousand Dialogues registered on the official [UN FSDs Gateway](#), the UN FSS preparations have undeniably generated a wealth of discussions and debates across actors and sectors on the challenges we face in adequately, sustainably and sufficiently feeding the world. Most importantly, it has raised international awareness on the importance of considering food as a *system*, highlighting the necessity to break silos across sectors. It also fostered public-private

UNFSS Glossary

5 Action Tracks – objectives and areas of debate to address trade-offs and identify solutions that can deliver synergetic benefits

- > Ensure access to safe and nutritious food for all;
- > Shift to sustainable patterns;
- > Boost nature-positive production;
- > Advance equitable livelihoods; and
- > Build resilience to vulnerabilities, shocks and stress

Levers of Change – cross-cutting areas of work to bring upon positive change

- > Gender
- > Human Rights
- > Finance
- > Innovation

15 Action Areas – collection of ideas from stakeholder dialogues into 50 solution thematic clusters

- > Basis for the Pre-Summit Coalitions for Actions

5 Priority Action Areas – areas of commitment towards achieving the 2030 Agenda through food system transformation

- > Nourish All People;
- > Boost Nature-Based Solutions for Production;
- > Advance Equitable Livelihoods, Decent Work & Empowered Communities;
- > Build Resilience to Vulnerabilities, Shocks and Stresses;
- > Support Means of Implementation (Finance; Governance; Science & Knowledge; Innovation; Technology & Data; Capacity; Human Rights)

and intergenerational dialog and brought to light new issues, as well as new solutions and opportunities – might that be for government officials, civil society, entrepreneurs, finance leaders, or common folks. Finally, the UNFSS has given a platform to the unheard and the unseen, within their own borders and across the world, while creating space for actionable measures with the world-wide consensus on the close interlinkages between our food production and consumption patterns, biodiversity, climate, and human health.

However, the Summit has been criticised for lack of transparency, for the encroachment of private interests in its design – in particular Big Agro-business, while side-lining the UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS), the policy tool *par excellence* to address key global food issues. Finally, discussions have neglected already marginalised groups, i.e. small-scale farmers, fishers, farmworkers, peasants, pastoralists and Indigenous people (see for e.g. this [opinion piece](#) by the UN special rapporteur on the right to food). Accordingly, many stakeholder groups have boycotted the Pre-Summit and organised a series of parallel events in protest to the UNFSS.

There is a long way ahead of us until 2030, yet nine years can fly by in a blink of an eye. Transformative change will require a profound reflexion on the *status quo* to reimagine new systems, including shifting to new ways of producing, consuming, governing and [trading](#) food, with human rights at the forefront. Systemic change can come at great costs for some, but the benefits that we will all reap from this process are sure to outweigh the costs – we are talking about the survival of billions of people, if not our civilisation, after all. Meanwhile, every single action counts, from the individual to the international level. So, be part of the Decade of Action, and not that of Inaction. ***Be the change.***



Photo: Krishnasis Gosh / Bioversity International

The SDC independent Food System Dialogues - Results

The SDC GPFS & A+FS Network, with the support of [HELVETAS](#) and [HAFL](#), organised a series of [independent Dialogues](#) in English, French and Spanish between late-April and early-June.

In total, **290 participants**, representing a broad spectrum of stakeholders across 69 countries, discussed and explored the future of food systems along 12 vision statements. The goal was to collectively identify targets and actions to progress towards more sustainable and healthy food systems, as well as areas of action for Swiss funded development actors to shape their programmes and activities.

The discussions highlighted **three core needs**:

1. Inclusive and facilitated **dialogue platforms** (digital and in-person) to bridge knowledge gaps;
2. Reducing the gap between consumers and farmers and change behaviour through **awareness raising** campaigns; and
3. Fostering **enabling policies and environments** to deliver progress on the SDGs.

Participants also stressed the central role of appropriate and responsible **co-production and use of agricultural data** (production, logistics, demand, weather, etc.) in the solutions and necessary actions they discussed.

More comprehensive summaries of the discussion for each language-specific events are under way. Stay tuned!

Pre-Summit: Our Team's Highlights

With 100+ videos on the UNFSS, between [video-statements](#) and [sessions](#), and other side-events, combing through all the content can be somewhat overwhelming. Here is a selection with the Swiss delegation's top-picks:

Events with a *Swiss touch*:

1 Strengthening Food Systems Transformation through Agroecology

Affiliated session organised by Switzerland (27th July) –

View [Recording](#)

[Agroecology](#) is one of the key areas of Switzerland's engagement, and the core component of the [GPFS 2021-24 Programme Framework](#). In view of the UN FSS, the Swiss National FAO Committee (CNS-FAO), a multi-stakeholder consultative body that advises the Swiss Government on food systems, food security and sustainable agriculture, published a paper to identify [solution pathways to advance agroecology](#), referencing practical examples, supporting and strengthening the concept of agroecological systems for the UNFSS.

2 Mountain Partnership – Food systems as a key pillar of sustainable development in mountains

Parallel session – view [recording](#)

Moderated by Switzerland's Special Envoy Sustainable Agriculture, François Pythoud

This might come to a surprise to you, but Switzerland *loves* mountains. Unsurprisingly, this event caught the eye of our team. Pun aside, SDC has been active in promoting nutrition-sensitive agriculture in mountainous regions around the world to ensure that communities have access to diversified, nutritious and affordable food. Find out more about the [Nutrition in Agro-Ecosystems](#) (NMA) project in a dedicated article in this edition!

3 Innovative and Youth Inclusive Food Policies: an open discussion between Member States and Young People from Act4Food Act4Change

Affiliated event, view [recording](#)

Featuring Madeleine Kaufmann, FAO-coordinator at the Swiss Federal Office of Agriculture, and Mari-Clair Graf, our Swiss Youth Champion

An interactive dialogue between youth and Members States to get a glimpse into how youth are mobilising to transform food systems.

[Youth](#) is a central area of engagement for Switzerland. GPFS has notably funded the youth-led movement [Bites of Transfoodmation](#) (BoT). In June, BoT participated to the Youth Consultation to the UN FSS and will also be present at the upcoming Summit.

Other thematic events of interest aligned with the GPFS' focus areas:

NB: All recordings of the following events are available on the [Pre-Summit video repository](#)

4 Unleashing the Power of the Plate – for the Health of People and Planet

Focus area: [Healthy Nutrition](#)
Pre-summit session | Day 2 – 27th July, 11:30am – 01:30pm

5 Human Rights – A Unified Framework for Food Systems Transformation

Focus area: Human Right to Food
Pre-Summit session | Day 2 – 27th July
Featuring UN special rapporteur on the right to food, Michael Fakhri

6 City and Local Food Systems

Focus area: [Urban-Rural dynamics](#)
Pre-summit session | Day 3 – 28th July, 09:00am – 10:30am

Additional resources:

More on Switzerland's engagement towards more sustainable food systems

- [Darling, we need to talk \(about food\)](#) – insights into the Swiss National Dialogues
- [Food Systems impact on the climate, water and health – and vice versa](#) – interview with Christine Schneeberger, deputy head of the SDC, right before her departure for Rome to attend the Pre-Summit

Wrap-up of some of the main discussions during the Pre-Summit: "[Pre-Summit Gathering Highlights Food as Powerful Tool for SDGs](#)"

The science community's perspective on how to move forward: "[Food Systems: seven priorities to end hunger and protect the planet](#)"

Explore the Future of Food Systems with the [Devex Food Policy Series](#)