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Why food systems governance must be grounded in human rights

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Body

From 27–29 July 2025, governments and other stakeholders from across the world will convene in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, for the United Nations **Food** Systems Summit Stocktake (UNFSS+4). The event aims to assess progress on transforming **food** systems and meeting the United Nations (UN) 2030 Agenda. The UNFSS+4 will be the first global **food** summit to be organized in Africa.

As governments meet to coordinate action towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG2: zero hunger, human-made famines in Gaza and Sudan are pushing millions to starvation, foreign aid budgets are being slashed, and industrial **food** systems continue to wreak havoc on human health and the environment. Amid these escalating crises, political will and coordinated global **food** governance are needed more than ever. Yet, it remains deeply uncertain whether the summit can rise to the urgency of this moment.

Since the UNFSS process was launched in 2019, it has drawn sustained criticism from civil society organizations and human rights experts due to a lack of transparent decision-making processes and an array of fragmented, often uncoordinated, initiatives. Critics argue that the summit's multi-stakeholder structure sidelines a rights-based approach and enables well-resourced private sector actors to dominate, marginalizing public interest voices and shaping narratives and outcomes to serve corporate agendas that are deeply invested in maintaining the status quo^{1,2}.

The Coordination Hub — steered by an Oversight Steering Group, with participation from the UN deputy secretary-general — has sought to address some of these concerns. Despite some progress, three key tenets of a rights-based approach — namely transparent governance, direct participation by affected rights holders in decision-making processes, and accountability grounded in the obligations of duty bearers — have not been integrated or taken up meaningfully. Failing to do so leaves the stocktake at risk of entrenching — rather than dismantling — the structures that perpetuate contemporary **food** system crises.

First, transparency relates to knowledge about how decisions are made, and by whom. Transparency in governance processes is essential for legitimacy, but it can also assist in enabling internal accountability. In contexts that are complex and technical, transparency is equally critical for ensuring the open and accurate disclosure of information to foster trust and accountability. The UNFSS has been critiqued for a lack of transparency from its inception through to the preparation, structure and outcomes of stocktaking events³. Despite the creation of the Coordination Hub, there remains little clarity regarding how partnerships are formed, how funding is sourced and allocated, how members of committees are selected, or how the various ongoing processes — regional follow-up meetings, coalitions and dialogues — are integrated into agenda setting and decision making. This lack of transparent governance undermines legitimacy and trust and runs counter to human rights-based approaches.

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Second, the UN recognizes that small-scale **food** providers and workers — those most affected by hunger and **food** insecurity — should be at the centre of efforts to realize SDG2, but these groups also face substantial barriers to meaningfully engage in decision-making processes. Meaningful participation requires governance mechanisms to address equity and power imbalances, so that marginalized groups have “the right and capacity to speak, to be heard and influence the decisions”⁴. From the outset, the UNFSS leadership has emphasized its inclusive and participatory approach — adopting language of power asymmetries, conflicting values, and the need to remove barriers for the participation of marginalized groups — but it has failed to institutionalize these principles. The so-called Stakeholder Engagement and Networking Advisory (SENA) Group, created by the Coordination Hub, lacks a clear governance structure; instead, it operates through a managerial approach in which individual participants are hand-picked by UN officials, who decide where and how delegates can participate.

Finally, a human rights-based approach to accountability requires a clear articulation of the responsibilities of duty bearers, entitlements of rights holders and mechanisms of redress. In response to criticisms that the UNFSS process has lacked meaningful accountability, the Coordination Hub recently developed a Corporate Accountability Framework or ‘Roadmap and Guidance’⁵. However, accountability in the roadmap is rooted in voluntarism; instead of suggesting binding regulations to prevent harm and protect communities, the roadmap reduces the role of governments to ‘incentivizing’ good corporate behaviour. It effectively discourages states from taking a more proactive regulatory role in protecting **food** producers and consumers from human rights violations perpetrated by private sector actors⁶.

With climate change, rising authoritarianism and major geopolitical tensions, coordinated global governance of **food** systems is required now more than ever to address the needs of people. Instead, the UNFSS has adopted an ‘inclusive’ approach that privileges private sector-led actions. This is insufficient to address the structural roots of the **food** system crisis. More broadly, this signals a fundamental and troubling departure from its core mandate of fostering policy convergence and legitimate intergovernmental decision-making in favour of a narrow, investment-driven agenda and multi-stakeholder platforms that advance action devoid of accountability, transparency and genuine participation. This may further undermine the possibility of coordinated global **food** governance by, first, drawing resources and attention away from more legitimate forums such as the UN Committee on World **Food** Security (CFS) and, second, fragmenting an already hyper-fragmented governance landscape. Powerful actors might in turn be allowed to evade responsibility by exploiting regulatory loopholes, shifting blame and forum shopping. It also weakens the ability of small-scale farmers, fishers, pastoralists and other **food**-insecure populations — who often lack institutional support and resources — to meaningfully participate and hold decision-makers to account.

Some contend that the UNFSS and the associated initiatives generate momentum, expand participation and stimulate action for **food** systems transformation. However, as we have argued, the approach adopted by the UNFSS represents a weakening of rights-based governance. In doing so, the UN is laundering its own legitimacy to the private sector, which not only undermines its credibility but also jeopardizes the possibility of transforming **food** systems in an equitable and sustainable way.

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