

ENGLISH VERSION

2021 session
13 July 2021 – 16 July 2021
Agenda item 5
ECOSOC High-level Segment

High-Level Political Forum 2021

Written statement submitted by Europe – Third World Centre (CETIM), a non-governmental organization in general consultative status in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

Food: a central issue for sustainable development

1. The policies imposed at the economic and social level over the past decades, in the context of neoliberal globalization, are the cause of the increase in poverty and the aggravation of inequalities.
2. The international health crisis resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic has worsened this situation. This crisis has turned out to be a lens through which one can assess a single-minded development model that spawns poverty, inequality, discrimination, wide-scale human rights violations and crises that are both systemic and multifaceted (democratic, political, economic, social, financial, environmental, alimentary, health, cultural). This can be explained by the nature of the prerogatives of the dominant economic system based on competition, the pursuit of profit at all costs and of maximum profit for the economic elites. The decisions thus made have weakened public prerogatives, which remain essential, to the exclusive benefit of private capital, and shrunk budgetary allocations for the public sector (in particular in health, peasant agriculture, education, culture etc.). Thus, states are dispossessed of the primary political ways and means that would ordinarily underpin a capacity of resilience and response in the face of shocks such as the current pandemic.
3. In this context, the conditions for a development model that is truly sustainable from an economic, social and environmental point of view are undermined. This is the case for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of Agenda 2030, and especially the goals regarding economic, social and cultural rights (in particular goals 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 8, 10), which are from the outset inexorably at a disadvantage.
4. In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is particularly disturbing to notice the worsening of the food crisis throughout the world. According to FAO projections, most of the indicators of hunger and malnutrition show a deterioration of the situation as a result of the international health crisis. To the 750 million persons suffering from severe food insecurity at the end of 2019 can now be added more than 100 million in 2020. Regarding “moderate/severe” hunger and malnutrition, the figures show more than 2 billion persons. Paradoxically, the majority of persons suffering from hunger are food producer and work in rural areas. This situation is the result of the architecture and the

functioning of current food systems, subjected to the whims and interests of major transnational agribusiness corporations, to the detriment of the family peasantry and rural communities.

5. The theme of the ECOSOC's 2021 High Level Political Forum indicate a willingness to contribute to orienting our societies to the construction of an inclusive way forward to the realization of Agenda 2030 and sustainable development models, especially in the face of the international health crisis. For us, the construction of this road means, imperatively, the promotion of resilient, sustainable and egalitarian agricultural systems based on food sovereignty and the promotion and respect of peasants' rights. To attain these goals, it is essential that states invest in agriculture and protect rural areas and family peasantry, while encouraging multilateral international cooperation.

6. In this regard, we are deeply disturbed that transnational agribusiness corporations' lobbies are orienting the preparation of the United Nations Food Systems Summit, planned for autumn 2021. This multilateral event could and should, on the contrary, constitute an opportunity to reinforce our food systems, to direct our societies toward a sustainable recovery after the COVID-19 pandemic and to realize the goals of Agenda 2030. Thus, we wish to include this subject and the challenges that it involves in the ECOSOC High Level Political Forum.

7. The United Nations Summit on Food Systems was organized within the framework of the Decade of Action to attain the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030 and to progress in the realization of the 17 goals that, as one can read on the Summit's site, « *relies to some degree on healthier, more sustainable and equitable food systems* ». This United Nations gathering thus has as its objectives concrete measures oriented to the realization of Agenda 2030: sensitizing the public to the importance of our food systems; planning courses of action that can orient governments' policy-making and create a follow-up system to implement the Summit's results.

8. However, from the outset, the Summit's planning process has been characterized by opaqueness and marked by the influence of transnational agribusiness corporations. A handful of transnationals, "experts" known for being defenders of industrial agriculture, and certain powerful states are fashioning the Summit's content, whereas rural organizations and movements have so far been sidelined, effectively relegated to the role of on-lookers. It would seem that there is no willingness to integrate into the process organizations advocating the overhaul of our food systems in line with sustainability and equality. The international peasant movement La Vía Campesina has drafted an analysis titled, "A Summit Under Siege. Position paper on UN food systems summit 2021", in which it denounces these manoeuvres.

9. Following the current trajectory, the Summit's construction process would allow the agribusiness sector to exercise an undue influence over multilateral public space, to orient that space in accordance with its strategic commercial interests, and to legitimate itself as the leader and architect of food systems. For this sector, it is a matter of keeping this position of strength in order to protect and increase profits and shareholders dividends.

10. It is worth recalling that the Summit is the result of a joint initiative between the United Nations Secretary-General and the World Economic Forum (WEF). It is no secret that the latter is a space conceived by and for transnational corporations and international financial institutions, with the unwavering support of several powerful states and several major "philanthropic" entities. It is the hub of initiatives seeking the privatization of public services and the commodification/financialization of all productive sectors and natural resources, including, of course, food systems.

11. Thus, the appointment of Dr Agnes Kalibata as the Secretary-General's special envoy to oversee the Summit is not surprising. On the contrary, it confirms our analysis. In fact, Ms Kalibata is the current president of the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA), an organization at the center of controversies and criticism by African social movements owing to her support of the promotion of highly intensive industrial agricultural models. The choice of this "expert" demonstrates how the particular interests of the agribusiness sector intertwine with the desire to control, indeed "capture", the Summit to their own advantage.

12. We observe with deep disquiet that the Summit seems concentrated exclusively on an approach to food systems based on market economy solutions – which, moreover, have turned out to be incapable of resolving the problems of hunger, inequality and the climate crisis – while ignoring the sustainable solutions of peasant food systems such as agro-ecology, now enshrined in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas. Agro-ecology seeks an ecological balance within rural areas, as well as acting as a vehicle for social justice and empowerment of local communities autonomy.

13. The United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Feed, Michael Fakhri, is also concerned about the Summit reparations because they are oriented to *«one type of policy, namely sustainable intensive agriculture, also known as the new green revolution »*. For the UN expert, *« both sustainable intensification and industrial intensification rely on capital-intensive processes and technologies, thus reflecting the status quo of the current political economy of the food system »* (voir A/HRC/46/33).

14. Further, it is undeniable that during the first year of preparation for the Summit, precisely owing to the preference accorded to the market-solution approach, human rights were excluded from the discussions, whereas these are an integral part of United Nations goals. In response to pressure from social movements, civil society organizations and certain academics, human rights have now been integrated into the program, but they remain on the margins of the discussion. Yet, their inclusion is fundamental, for it makes possible placing human needs ahead of the economic and financial needs of the business sector – one way of recalling the simple slogan, "People before profit!" Moreover, this integration could incite states to act to change and democratize food systems in such a way as to respond to the needs of humanity.

15. Preceding food crises, and in particular that of 2008, have shown that agribusiness, and the business sector in general, do not represent a way forward to solve hunger and malnutrition, nor to achieving the SDGs. On the contrary, they are often at the origin of the problem: they promote agricultural systems oriented to exports that undermine the prerogatives of subsistence farming, thus increasing malnutrition among small-scale food producers; they advocate monoculture systems, which harm biodiversity, soil quality, food and nutritive inputs of local populations; they encourage stock market speculation on agricultural products and natural resources and cause financial bubbles and dramatic food crises for entire populations, while filling shareholders' pockets. It is unacceptable that a major gathering such as the United Nations Food Systems Summit be left to the good will of these sectors, whose priorities are aggravating both the international food crisis and the COVID-19 health crisis.

16. The impact of the pandemic on food systems has been considerable: world food supply chains have been badly disrupted, inequality within rural communities as well as between them and urban centers has increased along with food insecurity, which was already progressing relentlessly before the health crisis, including in urban areas. This crisis has made manifest the inequality within the

world's food systems as well as their dwindling resilience. It is high time to remedy this by refashioning food systems through deep structural changes.

17. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas should be the legitimate point of departure for this Summit, in particular for the realization of the Summit's stated objectives. The Declaration must also be placed at the center of states' agricultural and food policies, as a road map for sustainable rural development, inclusive and non-discriminatory, based on the needs of peasants and other rural communities and, ultimately, all humanity.

18. In view of the preceding, we urge the Economic and Social Council member states and all United Nations member states to rise to the challenge of holding the United Nations Food Systems Summit and to take it into account in their future activities, especially in the context of the United Nations Economic and Social Council High Level Political Forum 2021. We further urge all states to act so as to assure that the Summit really contributes to the transformation of food systems with a view to reinforcing their resilience in the face of the challenges imposed by the world food and health crises. As well, we call upon states to guarantee that rights holders, in particular peasants, Indigenous peoples and other rural communities, be placed at the heart of the summit. These are indispensable conditions for this gathering to contribute to a sustainable recovery and for the tangible realization of the objectives of Agenda 2030. In this regard, the ECOSOC, by virtue of its vocation, could and should actively contribute to the work of the Summit.

19. In conclusion, the United Nations member states have an obligation to put an end to the strangle-hold of transnational corporations and financial institutions on UN multilateral instances. This is a matter of the integrity of the United Nations as a multilateral organization of public interest, as well as matter of its credibility, independence and impartiality.

NB: This statement was published in the ECOSOC document "Statement submitted by organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council" (p. 127-134) in English and French: <https://www.un.org/ecosoc/sites/www.un.org.ecosoc/files/files/en/2021doc/2021-ECOSOC-HLS-Written-Statements-by-NGOS-in-ECOSOC-Consultative-Status.pdf>