

Short Communication

THE UNFSS+2 STOCKTAKING MOMENT: TRACKING PROGRESS AMIDST ABSENT GLOBAL TARGETS?

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ABSTRACT

This short communication discusses the need to transform food systems towards sustainability and focuses on recent political events. Especially the United Nations Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) from 2021 and the respective stocktaking event, which took place in July 2023, are presented and critically analyzed as the process has faced criticism for its lack of transparency, corporate influence, and perceived disregard for human rights frameworks. In this context, the recent UNFSS +2 Stocktaking Moment (STM) in Rome aimed to assess developments in 2021. While over 100 countries presented their progress, many reports focused more on intentions rather than measurable achievements. The outcomes of the STM were perceived as mixed messaging, as no binding agreement or declaration was signed by member states. A major point of criticism is the absence of comparable targets and indicators for tracking and comparing progress across countries, which hinders effective global stocktaking. The paper also underlines the need for universally agreed-upon targets and indicators to provide a clear direction for food systems transformation. It proposes the development of a roadmap with intermediate targets and gradual steps. Alignment with international frameworks such as the Agenda 2030 and the Rio Conventions is also recommended. Collaboration among policymakers, marginalized groups, civil society, scientists, and business leaders is highlighted as being crucial, ensuring inclusive participation and addressing diverse perspectives. Furthermore, the importance of addressing food systems injustices (such as unfair trade practices, exploitative working conditions, and the disproportionate impact of climate change), particularly in Africa, is highlighted. Overall, the paper highlights the challenges and complexities involved in transforming food systems towards sustainability and calls for concerted efforts to address these issues at both global and local levels.

Key words: Food systems, Governance, Stock taking, UNFSS, Targets, Africa

INTRODUCTION

The term “food systems” emerged in the 1970s, but the idea to holistically transform food systems towards sustainability gained momentum in the last decade [1, 2]. Calls for transformation became louder with the increasing recognition that changing the way we produce and consume food has tremendous impacts on achieving sustainable development goals (SDGs), encompassing areas such as health, incomes of small-scale food producers, land use change, greenhouse gas emissions, and biodiversity [3–5]. In Africa, the challenge is particularly mounting, with 20% of the population, or 290 million people, affected by hunger in 2022— a percentage notably higher than that observed in other regions of the world [6]. This issue is further exacerbated by the rising cost of food, with 78% of the population unable to afford a healthy diet in 2021 [6]. Compounded by extreme weather events and conflicts, the region is grappling with a critical situation of malnutrition and food insecurity. This underscores the urgency of transforming food systems on the continent as well as globally, given the interrelations of various food systems, including trade relations [7].

A commonly used definition is that a “food system gathers all the elements (environment, people, inputs, processes, infrastructures, institutions, etc.) and activities that relate to the production, processing, distribution, preparation and consumption of food, and the outputs of these activities, including socio-economic and environmental outcomes” [8]. The definition highlights the daunting task of transformation. The complex dynamics and interlinkages between different sectors, actors, and scales within the food system pose a significant hurdle to bring about structural changes on political, societal, and economic fronts [9]. Transferring theoretical frameworks crafted at a broader, macro-level to specific local or regional contexts can be particularly challenging [3]. This complexity underscores why food systems transformation is often classified as a “messy situation” [4].

UNITED NATIONS FOOD SYSTEMS SUMMIT

The United Nations Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) was launched in 2021 to generate action and measurable progress towards the SDGs, with a particular focus on “healthier, more sustainable and equitable food systems” [10]. Even though promising at first sight, the UNFSS generated controversy and faced boycotts, particularly from civil society groups. Their critique included concerns about the summit’s lack of transparency and accountability in its decision-making processes, domination by corporate interests, undermining of existing democratic governance structures such as the UN Committee on World Food Security, and a

perceived absence of a solid grounding for the summit in a human rights framework [11].

UNFSS +2 STOCKTAKING MOMENT

Recently, between the 24th and 26th of July 2023, the UNFSS +2 Stocktaking Moment (STM) took place in Rome, Italy. The conference sought to measure progress since the first UNFSS in 2021 and counted more than 3,000 participants, including delegations from 182 countries [12]. More than 101 countries presented their progress on food systems transformation [13]. Yet, many reports included intentions rather than actual measurable progress [13]. As the main outcome of the event, UN Secretary General António Guterres launched a Call to Action for accelerated food systems transformation [14], which included several objectives, among them the demand to embed food system strategies in national policies, the establishment of food system governance with a whole-of-society approach, including full participation of marginalized groups, and more investments. No binding agreement or declaration signed by member states was developed. Thus, the outcomes of the STM were perceived very controversially by observers, Teresa Welsh from DEVEX, for example, summarized the outcomes as mixed messaging [15].

Global stocktaking in the absence of comparable targets

The transformation of our food systems is a tremendous challenge. Yet, the complexity of challenges cannot be an excuse for the disappointing results of the summit in 2021 and the STM this year. The call to action is transferred solely to the national level without any underlying framework, and tracking and comparing progress across countries remains a difficult undertaking. Indeed, some initiatives at least attempt gathering and comparing data (cf. the Food Systems Dashboard¹ by GAIN, FAO and Columbia University), but specific targets and indicators for the SDGs are widely absent. In two years, when the next stocktaking event (+4) will take place, there is a high likelihood that a stocktaking event without commonly agreed and comparable targets will take place again.

Moving forward

While it is evident that only two years after the inaugural UNFSS, there is limited progress to report, the endeavor still necessitates universally agreed-upon targets and indicators. These would serve to provide a clear direction for the transformation of food systems. A “roadmap with intermediate targets and gradual

¹ [Food Systems Dashboard](#)

steps,” as suggested by the editorial board of Nature Food [16], is one good suggestion in this regard. Similarly, various stakeholders call for enhanced alignment of the UNFSS process with widely agreed international frameworks such as the Agenda 2030 and its SDGs, as well as the Rio Conventions [17, 18]. The integration of the food systems agenda with other global goals, however, necessitates harnessing synergies while effectively managing trade-offs and contradictions. Achieving this entails close collaboration among policymakers, civil society representatives, marginalized groups, scientists, and business leaders. Participation in such collaborative endeavors must be truly inclusive, ensuring that marginalized voices are heard and that is firmly rooted in the right to food. Notably, polarized views on the way food systems must be transformed among such diverse stakeholders need to be honestly addressed. Only when we candidly address the vested interests and underlying ideologies guiding our actions can we reach a consensus on concrete targets and indicators that shape pathways for food systems transformation. Considering the African continent, this would mean addressing food systems injustices such as unfair trade practices, exploitative working conditions of small-scale food producers, and the disproportionate impact of climate change.

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