



OFFICE OF THE SPECIAL ENVOY OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL  
FOR THE UNITED NATIONS FOOD SYSTEMS SUMMIT

**Information Note April 2020**

As a part of the *Decade of Action for the SDGs*, the **United Nations Secretary-General is convening a Food Systems Summit in 2021** aimed at empowering people to leverage food systems as accelerators of progress to realize the vision of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

This Information Note follows up on the previous one issued in January and **is intended to provide an update on the current framing of the Summit, particularly in the current context, as well as an update on preparations at this early stage of inception following the Special Envoy inception meeting with Rome based Permanent Representatives.** The impact of COVID-19, has led to significant delays in the setup of the Secretariat and Summit support structures. Nevertheless, reflection on the current and future impacts of COVID-19 only underscores the imperative need to build more resilient and inclusive food systems to accelerate progress towards the SDGs.

**CONTEXT**

Rich or poor, young or old: Everyone needs to eat. Food is essential to life on Earth. Nutritious and safe food allows for healthy and productive lives. It's as important as the air we breathe and the water we drink.

People produce food. Many farmers create vibrant livelihoods out of food production, while others struggle. All become stewards of the natural system on which food production is based. The methods by which food is produced and delivered to our plates – and even where our leftovers go – are an integral part of the global economy and affect every person on earth.

Yet today, the world's current food systems are in need of transformation – for people, for the environment, and for our shared future. **The COVID-19 pandemic is only further exposing dangerous deficiencies in our food systems and actively threatening the lives and livelihoods of people around the world, particularly the most vulnerable and those in fragile contexts.**

Even before the onset of the current crisis, the evidence for transformation had never been clearer. Despite living in an age of unprecedented wealth and progress, where we produce more than enough food for everyone, poverty and hunger remain stubborn and often inter-linked challenges. **Over 820 million people are hungry**, even as one-third of all food is either lost or wasted. Despite a 300 per cent increase in global food production since the mid-1960s, **malnutrition** in all its forms is now the number one factor contributing to the global burden of disease and reduced life expectancy. More than 2 billion people are overweight or obese. **Food systems contribute up to 29 per cent of all GHG emissions**, including 44 per cent of methane, significantly contributing to climate change. Agriculture is

also responsible for up to **80 per cent of biodiversity loss**, and continues to overuse increasingly limited natural resources – including water, forests and land. Indeed, **agriculture accounts for up to 70 per cent of all freshwater use and 80 per cent of all deforestation**, and **more than one-quarter of the energy used globally** is expended on food production and supply. In addition, ongoing political crises continue to undermine the building of inclusive food systems in fragile contexts. The emergence of this evidence is no coincidence: food systems as they currently operate at the global and local level are having negative effects on the climate, environment, human health, and social welfare. This is only getting more difficult with continued population growth in parts of the world, changes in diets, and increasing challenges from climate change.

The COVID-19 pandemic threatens to undermine the progress we have made and only reinforces the importance of food systems, from how we produce food to the supply chains that bring it to our homes. The stress put on our food systems by this crisis underscores the fragility of these systems and the interconnectedness of global challenges and their impacts on people, planet, and prosperity.

To change course and meet the SDGs by 2030, there is a need to bring new voices and actors to the table, to innovate, and to collectively move to scale up food systems approaches that are working for all people and the environment, supercharging the pace of our progress. **The time is now to renew our ambition and move at the scale and speed required to achieve our shared objectives.** Pursuit of these objectives can also support the Secretary-General's call to “build back better” from COVID-19 as it relates to our food systems.

Indeed, solutions exist to change the unsustainable patterns of our food systems in a way that enhances inclusive economic growth and opportunity as well as human health and well-being, while also safeguarding the global ecosystems that sustain life. **Food systems transformation has been identified as one of the single strongest tools we have to achieve all of our goals for the planet and the people who inhabit it.** Since food systems affect every aspect of human life, actions to transform them are necessary to sustainable development in all its dimensions.

## THE SUMMIT VISION AND EXPECTED OUTCOMES

The UN Secretary-General's Food Systems Summit offers a critical opportunity to raise global ambition, to understand the problems we must solve, and to set a course to radically change the way in which we produce, process, and consume food. This must not be ‘just another conference’. We must act. The Summit will provide an opportunity to unleash ambitious new actions and plans to transform our food systems and leverage these shifts to deliver progress across all of the SDGs.

In this inception period of the Summit, the aim is to understand from global stakeholders – each one of you – what I will take to achieve this vision. It is important to hear as many views as possible to make this “A Solutions Summit” where we focus on driving positive change, and to make this “A Peoples Summit” where everyone is expected to act.

For now, it is envisioned that the Summit would have at least the following **outcomes**:

1. **Raise awareness** of how central food systems are to the whole sustainable development agenda and the urgency of food system transformation - never more

important than in the wake of a global pandemic, not to mention resource scarcity, growing conflicts, ecosystem degradation and climate change.

2. **Align** stakeholders around a common understanding of a food system framework as a foundation for concerted action.
3. **Recognize** that governance of food systems must be inclusive governance and involve innovation.
4. **Motivate and empower** stakeholders who actively and appropriately support food systems transformation at all levels through the development of improved measurement, and analysis.
5. Most importantly, **Catalyze, Accelerate and Scale** action to transform the current Food Systems into a healthier more inclusive, equitable and environmentally sustainable Food System.

This will be done by bringing together a combination of the best scientific evidence, impactful interventions, innovations, political leadership, widespread advocacy, smart investments, and a strong mutual accountability system. Our ambition must be -to move measurably closer to the SDGs by 2030 and put the world on a new trajectory within a generation.

## THE SUMMIT ENGAGEMENT PROCESS

The 2021 Food Systems Summit offers an opportunity to accelerate our collective drive towards 2030 in light of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

To achieve this, the process must be inclusive, informed, and evidence-based. It will be decentralized to draw on the best evidence, ideas, and commitments from around the world. There are communities and countries already charting the course around the world that offer valuable opportunities to learn and further scale. Everyone is part of the food system and everyone can join in creating the change we need. So we will engage governments, private sector, research institutions and think tanks, implementing agencies, and, most of all, civil society, farmers, fishers, herders, indigenous peoples -- those who have most to gain or lose from the way our food systems function.

The Summit is more than an isolated event; it is a process that will deliberately build on other ongoing efforts and events to most efficiently and effectively move to common understanding and action. The Summit will build on agreements, commitments, and collaborative actions defined through these other global events and processes. While the COVID-19 pandemic is forcing shifts in the timing and nature of many relevant processes and initiatives, the process will continue to look for synergy between these to support the transformation of food systems. The Summit Secretariat is actively engaging the leadership of many linked processes to ensure dynamic and complementary links.

**Progress:** Since the meeting with Permanent Reps in February, the Special Envoy has had a number of engagements, with CFS, countries, knowledge institutions, civil society, farmers' organizations, private sector and UN institutions. These have all reaffirmed the timeliness of the Food Systems Summit due to what many call 'a broken food system'. More importantly, as a result of the Coronavirus, there is a new realization of the fragility of our global food systems. Many insist that the imperative for the Summit has never been greater.

I am happy to say that in all the engagements there was general alignment 1) that the Summit will focus on how to transform global food systems to deliver on the SG's Call to

Decade of Action and, 2) on the emerging action tracks for the Summit as summarized below even as these are still areas of consultation:

**Food for All** – End Hunger around the World in line with Zero hunger under SDG2.

**Healthy People** – End Malnutrition and Stem the Increase in Obesity Rates

**Nature Positive Agriculture** – Ensure Agriculture is climate neutral or even has a net positive impact on Climate emissions.

**Environment and Biodiversity** – Significant reductions in land degradation and biodiversity loss due to agriculture.

**Fair and economically efficient and resilient food systems** - providing healthy diets at stable, affordable prices while reducing the excessive waste in our current food systems.

Further on engagement, we have engaged an even wider outreach through Media as seen below:

- 1) Reuters op-ed: <https://news.trust.org/item/20200228170821-3dow7/> picked up by other outlets including AllAfrica and shared over 400 times on social media channels.
- 2) Statement video (one long, one short) on social media reached nearly 9000 views: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&v=tvccIUtCtOY>
- 3) Twitter chat with SDG2 Advocacy Hub- **2445 tweets from 10-14 April with reach of over 38 million**
- 4) Joint op-ed with CFA was picked up in Russian, Spanish, Arabic and English outlets worldwide: <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/covid19-threatens-to-unleash-global-food-insecurity-by-thanawat-tiensin-et-al-2020-03>; Preliminary number from Project Syndicate indicates a readership of more than 250,000-English outlets only.
- 5) EFE feature interview picked up by 18 Spanish-language media outlets: <https://www.efe.com/efe/espana/sociedad/enviada-especial-de-la-onu-no-nos-olvidemos-los-hambrientos/10004-4195838>

The combination of in-person engagements, teleconferences, and media engagement has given us a very good sense of what the Food Systems Summit represents to a lot of people.

## GOVERNANCE

The Summit will benefit from the contributions and feedback of the following multi-stakeholder support structures:

**The Summit Advisory Committee** is delayed due to the ongoing distraction from Covid - 19 but I am happy to note that the UN Deputy Secretary-General has already written to the Regional Group Chairs in New York to invite regional nominations to serve on this Committee. She will chair the Committee whose function will be to provide input on key considerations and decisions related to the Summit's vision, development, and implementation, as well as provide strategic leadership across the areas of action to ensure the Summit achieves its intended outcomes. The Advisory committee will meet as soon as the team comes together.

**The Scientific Group** will work closely with RBAs, but will also bring in science from across a huge complexity of institutions including at global, regional and country level. There is good progress here; the UN Deputy Secretary-General has appointed a Chair for this group who will then work with RBAs, the secretariat and consult widely to bring in the best scientists globally that will bring to bear the foremost evidence and helps expand the base of shared knowledge about experiences, approaches, and tools for driving sustainable food systems that will inform the future.

**The Champions Group;** the update here is that we are currently consulting different stakeholder to determine the most effective way of structuring the group. We would like to see very high level championship that is able to draw in Heads of States and heads of major Global institutions. At the same time, we would like to see representation from other categories of stakeholder enough to ensure the process engages all key global constituencies and is able to harness the widest possible ideas that are critical to driving a new coalition for change and collective action that will chart transformative change for sustainable food systems for the future.

**A UN System-wide approach:** to engage the rest of the UN system in the leadership of the Summit and to take full advantage of the assets across a multiplicity of UN institutions that impact directly or indirectly the food systems, a UN wide mechanism will be put in place. This will include leveraging existing structures, such as the UN Sustainable Development Group, as well as standing up new structures as needed and integrating the System throughout.

## **NEXT STEPS**

The most important next step is to widen consultations and ensure reach and engagement at country level, across institutions and different stakeholders. I am reaching out to ask you all to let me know if there are organizations you would like us to gather information and feedback from. I would also like to know from you the best way to get your input into the Summit process as we go forward. The goal is to be as inclusive as we can.

The second point has to do with the means available to me, my team and other Summit organs to deliver this work; my team has done a great job. We have engaged different stakeholder and pretty widely with great feedback, strong interest generated around the Summit with many offering to leverage their networks. However, most of these engagements were opportunistic- taking advantage of other meetings and thus little cost to the secretariat. As you can see from above, we are putting together the beginnings of a communications plan.

At this stage, we are dependent on volunteer labor and input. We need resources. I recognize that this is a challenging climate in which to be asking for resources. On the other hand, it has become crystal clear that our global food system is inequitable and that it is fundamental not only to achieving the SDGs, but to our lives and livelihoods. Alongside the RBAs, we will be sending out a request for resources to fund the activities of the secretariat and the summit process. I will need your support with your headquarters to ensure the Summit is funded.

My last point is on standing-up the secretariat: We now have a decent size team ready to get on board through secondment from RBAs and other institutions. We have identified a deputy who is available and ready to take up post in Rome to help coordinate with the RBAs and would be our main contact to the PRs in Rome. I am grateful to the RBAs for the staff support and would encourage them to come through on pending secondments, issuing staff contracts and providing resources to get the Secretariat off the ground.

A multi-donor trust fund is now formally in place hosted by the World Food Program on behalf of the Summit, and it is in need of initial resources to allow work to get underway. The three Rome-Based Agencies are looking to commit initial investments for this purpose subject to their approval processes. I am looking forward to these being fast tracked for us to be able to work.

I want to end by addressing a question you and other stakeholders have asked frequently; the timing and location of the Food Systems Summit- a decision by the UN leadership has been delayed due to the ongoing pandemic. As the impact of the pandemic becomes clearer and more information has been gathered and reviewed by the Advisory Committee, a final decision will be taken and you will all be informed.

Thank you for the opportunity to engage you all last February and for the interest and enthusiasm you have shown for the Summit. I will intend to update you on a quarterly basis as I informed you in our first meeting.

For queries, contact [spokesperson@unfss.net](mailto:spokesperson@unfss.net)

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