



## Editorial

## The imperative to transform global food systems

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Never before, perhaps, has there been greater consensus that our food systems need to be radically reimagined and transformed. However, there is also much contention among those working to advance these transformations over the solutions and futures that ought to be pursued. So, while there is great opportunity to enact truly radical actions that reduce hunger, rebuild and steward biodiversity, and redress the many harms and dispossessions of colonialism and extractive development, there is also great risk that the need for rapid change will be coopted by powerful elites as a shroud for advancing technocratic agendas and gaining further control of global food systems.

These opportunities and tensions were on full display this month; on September 23, the United Nations held its much-anticipated 2021 Food Systems Summit: a self-proclaimed “people’s summit” that sought to set the stage for making major advancements toward achieving the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. On the same day, however, a counter-summit, organized by the People’s Coalition on Food Sovereignty and 21 other organizations, culminated in a variety of protests led by rural peoples in various countries across the Global South. In their declaration, the organizers of this “Global People’s Summit on Food Systems” decried the UN’s summit as being captive to corporate agendas; in their words, “[it] turned a blind eye to structural causes of failed food systems, ignored the worrisome corporate concentration of power, ... and lacked transparency and meaningful opportunities for people to participate.”<sup>1</sup>

This critique was not entirely absent from within the proceedings of the UN summit. In his opening statement, noted economist Jeffrey Sachs offered a blistering critique of corporate influences in the global food system:

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<sup>1</sup> <https://peoplessummit.foodsov.org/gps-declaration/>

We have a world food system. It's based on large multinational companies. It's based on private profits. It's based on ... extreme irresponsibility of powerful countries with regard to the environment... and a radical denial of rights of poor people. ... We cannot turn [our food systems] over to the private sector because we already did, 100 years ago. ... The private sector is not going to solve this problem. ... We need a different system, and the different system has to be based on principles of human dignity, in the Universal Declaration, principles of sovereignty, principles of economic rights.<sup>2</sup>

Despite his passionate words, the summit proceeded largely as its critics expected, emphasizing solutions based in technological advances and the expansion of international markets for large-scale agribusiness. Neither agroecology nor food sovereignty, for which fishers, farmers, and other members of world's largest peasant movements have been calling for years, received noteworthy attention.

The failure of our food systems to feed people is a natural consequence of the colonial agenda to extract and consolidate as much capital as possible from the Global South (Hickel, Sullivan, and Zoomkawala 2021). It is not a technological failure but an ethical one; the same constellation of moral values that allow hunger to persist are those that have advanced widespread deforestation, turned a blind eye to ongoing slavery around the world, and that justify the inhumane treatment of livestock in confined feeding operations. These ethical failings cannot be solved in a piecemeal manner because they all derive from a set of core modernist assumptions about economic growth and cultural supremacy.

This is the same supremacy that on display in the failure of the leaders of the UN summit to truly engage with the agendas, ideas, and priorities of the world's largest peasant and Indigenous groups. They don't listen because they believe that they know better.

Sustainable food systems must be ethical food systems (Lam and Pitcher 2012). There can be no social justice without a food system that starts from a recognition of basic human rights and which sees the massive consolidation of wealth and power that currently exists in the world as fundamentally incompatible with those rights (Alkon and Agyeman 2011). Likewise, there can be no ecological justice if we do not acknowledge that these rights must be extended to water and many the more-than-human beings with which we share this planet (Leonard 2020; Beacham 2018).

Achieving ethical food systems will require a fundamental reorientation of power in our societies, one wherein people are empowered to demand and implement a wholly new ethical framework based on both social and ecosystem justice. In practical terms, this means wresting our collective food sovereignty back from the elites. It means returning jurisdictional authority over the lands that produce or foods to the world's peasant and Indigenous communities and

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WZ1xc491mnU>

empower them to rebuild food systems based on healthful, reciprocal, and regenerative relationships with those places.

These issues are not only relevant to the Global South. They matter for Canada's food systems as well. I write these concluding words on September 30, the first national day of Truth and Reconciliation in Canada. If we want to honour the spirit of this day, and the goal of reconciliation in general, we must acknowledge that Canada's lucrative agricultural and fisheries industries are built entirely on stolen land and seascapes. No matter what steps we take to make these industries more sustainable or climate friendly, whether achieving Marine Stewardship Council certification or enacting regenerative ranching practices, these acts will only serve to further entrench the legacies of colonial harm and dispossession unless they are paired with acts that restore Indigenous jurisdictional authority (Pasternak, King, and Yesno 2019).

"Land Back" not an aspirational chimera but a legitimate theory of change. Indeed, Indigenous communities in North America are already out-performing settler governments when it comes to addressing fossil fuel abatement via active resistance and protest (Indigenous Environmental Network 2021). Indigenous peoples are also the first regenerative farmers (Loring 2020), and many today are taking great strides in remaking food production and food systems from the inside out, based on values of reciprocity, restorative justice, and regenerative relationships (Arcand et al. 2020). If the COVID-19 pandemic has taught us anything, it is that the grip of the dominant, agro-industrial complex is more tenuous and vulnerable than its proponents are willing to admit (Stoll et al. 2020; Garnett, Doherty, and Heron 2020). So, while the imperial machinations of the status quo may seem daunting, I believe that there has never been a better time to push for truly transformative change.

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