

THE MOMENT IS NOW

A convergence of pressing need and promising opportunity for advancing sustainable development

Two major summits addressing food and nutrition are being held in 2021. Our authors argue that this offers a golden opportunity to boost action towards improving nutrition and enhancing food systems, especially in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals, all of which are ultimately affected by the issues on the summit agendas.

By Stella Nordhagen and Lawrence Haddad

Food systems are fundamental to improving nutrition. Encompassing all the people and activities that contribute to producing, processing, transporting, supplying and eventually eating food, they influence diets by shaping what food is available and accessible, as well as how desirable and convenient it is perceived to be. While aspects outside the food system – such as water, sanitation, and hygiene systems and health services – are critical, optimal nutrition for the human population simply cannot be achieved without a food system that makes sufficient safe and nutritious food available to all.

Beyond their influence on nutrition, which directly affects attainment of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2 (Zero Hunger) and 3 (Good Health and Well-being), food systems are also central to the achievement of numerous other SDGs. For example, through the livelihoods they maintain – including an estimated 500 million smallholder farms, supporting about two billion people, plus employees and entrepreneurs throughout the post-farmgate value chain – they contribute to reducing poverty (SDG 1) and providing decent work and economic growth (SDG 8). Well-functioning school meal programmes can increase school attendance, enabling greater educational attainment (SDG 4). Food systems use energy and environmental resources and emit greenhouse gases and other pollutants – but also create opportunities for resource conservation and regeneration and climate change mitigation, making their sustainable management central to achieving SDGs 12 (Responsible Production and Consumption) and 13 (Climate Action). Their ability to damage biodiversity but also to conserve it similarly gives food systems a crucial role in achieving SDGs 14 and 15, on life below water and on land. And women are key actors throughout any food system, which means that food systems are one promising in-road for improving gender equity (SDG 5).

Indeed, given the essentiality of food systems to all of human life, connections can be drawn between food systems and every SDG – as well as the targets and commitments established in the UN conventions on climate change, biological diversity and combating desertification.

A unique opportunity: Two summits, overlapping goals

For those who care about improving nutrition and achieving the SDGs, 2021 offers a rare opportunity for galvanising action to improve nutrition and make food systems more sustainable, resilient, equitable and supporting of health. The year features not one, but two summits that can contribute to these goals. The United Nations Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) will take place in September, virtually, and the Nutrition for Growth Summit (N4G) is currently planned for Tokyo in December. The Summits have several key differences. N4G is one of a series of quadrennial summits linked to the Olympics. Historically, N4G has focused on improving (mostly financial) commitments to supporting nutrition; these come from domestic sources, overseas development assistance and foundations, as well as innovative financing mechanisms. Private-sector commitments have also been leveraged, and for 2021, there is a greater focus on understanding how business investment and practices can safely contribute to improving nutrition. N4G is organised by a host country government (Japan in 2021, following its hosting of the Tokyo 2020 Olympics) and historically supported by development donors. N4G aims to reduce malnutrition in all its forms (i.e. undernutrition, including stunting, wasting, and micronutrient deficiencies; overweight/obesity; and diet-related non-communicable diseases, such as diabetes). Food systems are one of five routes seen as leading to improved

nutrition; the others are nutrition interventions delivered via health systems, stronger financing and data for nutrition programme scale up, a stronger focus on fragile and conflict-affected contexts, and improved accountability mechanisms.

The UNFSS, in contrast, is a one-off event convened by the UN Secretary-General. UN member states play a central role, and the process is supported by five thematic working groups (known as Action Tracks and Levers), an independent Science Group and a large group of designated Champions. According to organisers, the UNFSS process was intended to reach out to those whose voices are not normally heard, aspiring to be a 'People's Summit' that engages a broad range of grassroots stakeholders. One channel for doing so has been organising a series of country and independent dialogues to bring together stakeholders around specific food system issues or within specific contexts; as of late July 2021, over 1,200 of these had been organised, on every continent but Antarctica. While N4G's goals are nutrition focused, the UNFSS sees transformed food systems as a way to advance the entire SDG 2030 agenda and aims to contribute to achieving a set of ambitious, intertwined goals including the reduction of hunger and malnutrition in all its forms, improved food safety, enhanced biodiversity, reduced greenhouse gas emissions, reversing environmental degradation, reducing food loss and waste, stronger livelihoods, greater equity, improved resilience and reduced vulnerability. Improving gender equity, empowering youth, and respecting the knowledge and rights of Indigenous Peoples are all noted by organisers as being central to the goals of the UNFSS.

In sum, N4G is a time-bound nutrition-focused campaign, specifically aiming to deliver



more money for nutrition programmes and more nutrition outcomes for the money spent through stronger programmes. The UNFSS, in contrast, is much broader: through a cross-sectoral process, it seeks to define game-changing solutions that can put food systems on a pathway towards achieving the SDGs in 2030 and to galvanise coalitions of action around those solution sets.

A pressing need

Both sets of actions are urgently needed. The world is off track to meet the World Health Assembly targets for all forms of malnutrition, diet-related non-communicable disease prevalence is rising, and three billion people cannot afford a healthy diet. In 2020, world hunger increased for the first time in five years, with about 770 million people estimated to be facing hunger – an increase of 118 million on the previous year. Moreover, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic threaten to undo ten years of progress in reducing malnutrition by increasing rates of stunting and wasting, affecting the wellbeing and future prospects of tens of millions of children. Foodborne disease is an oft-forgotten negative health outcome of food systems, causing an estimated 600 million illnesses and 420,000 premature deaths annually and costing about 20 billion US dollars a year, and in low- and middle-income countries (where 75 per cent of these deaths occur), food safety is expected to worsen before it improves. These trends represent gross violations of the right to food, as inadequate food intake is at the core of all these forms of malnutrition and food-related illness. And while food systems do support millions of livelihoods, longstanding power asymmetries and the legacies of colonialism and conflict have given rise to entrenched inequities throughout food systems and in the drivers that influence them. Too many farmers, fishers and livestock keepers continue to live in poverty and themselves suffer from hunger, and too many jobs throughout food supply chains do not pay a living wage or offer dignified employment within which workers are treated equitably and have agency. This is particularly true for women, lower-income workers, Indigenous Peoples and minorities. Food systems work is often hazardous, and about 70 per cent of the world's child labourers are engaged in agriculture.

At the same time as food systems fail to deliver on supporting optimal human health and wellbeing, they are also degrading our shared environment and complicating achievement of the Paris climate commitments. Food production

currently uses 70 per cent of global freshwater, accounts for 21–37 per cent of greenhouse gas emissions, and releases nutrients that contribute to pollution, including eutrophication (excess nutrient content that can damage ecosystems by encouraging excessive algae growth). Food production also drives ecosystem conversion and biodiversity loss both on land and in water. Additional negative environmental impacts arise throughout the post-production stages of the food chain, including through transport and trade. Food systems are also highly vulnerable to shocks, and increased resilience is needed to ensure food and nutrition security amid pandemics, conflicts, natural disasters, and economic and political crises. Furthermore, activities within food systems contribute to antimicrobial resistance and zoonotic disease transmission – including spill-overs of disease from animals to humans, as may have been the cause of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Harnessing the moment

The need is thus great, and the opportunity is there. How can we seize this moment? We must make the most of these two summits by harnessing them to create lasting, snow-balling momentum for improving nutrition and transforming food systems. We have the opportunity to link solutions to improve nutrition to other major environmental and health challenges, to engage a broad set of stakeholders, and to set an agenda for decisive action. With different stakeholders involved in each summit, the two are complementary, and the communities behind each can gain from the other. For N4G stakeholders, the UNFSS is an entry point to find organisations, networks, and people who are potentially interested in nutrition. This will enable nutrition stakeholders to grow the movement to end malnutrition. The UNFSS can benefit from N4G because stronger health systems are a necessary precondition for improving nutrition (and reducing foodborne disease and zoonotic disease spill-overs) but will not be a strong focus of the UNFSS. The two summits of 2021 thus need each other – and nutrition and food systems need them both.

Through the UNFSS, we can hope to see new coalitions built (and existing ones strengthened) to support food systems transformation. This will include, for example, a Coalition of Action for Zero Hunger, which will seek to advance evidence-based actions to empower the excluded, support food producers and move food from producers to consumers, based on seminal work by leading research institutes.

This coalition will seek to advocate for hunger reduction, align existing resources around hunger reduction, and add resource commitments, mobilising a strong sense of collective purpose. This is one of over a dozen coalitions envisioned as emerging for the Summit, with others focused on sustainable and nutritious diets, such as the Coalition of Action for Healthy Diets from Sustainable Food Systems.

From N4G, we can expect to see continued support to scale-up proven nutrition actions. For example, we would hope to see action on wasting and anaemia, two manifestations of malnutrition that have seen little improvement in prevalence numbers in the past ten years.

Of course, summit commitments are mere platitudes if they don't translate into action – and history makes it clear that this does not happen automatically. Strong and independent post-summit accountability mechanisms will thus be needed in both cases, to track progress on commitments and ensure that all actions taken are supportive of human rights and inclusive and empowering of women, youth, Indigenous Peoples and other oft-ignored voices.

The resources and knowledge already exist to end hunger and provide nutritious diets to a growing world population while ensuring that food systems workers have equitable and high-quality livelihoods, and it is biophysically possible to accomplish this within environmental limits. Doing so, however, will require substantial and systemic transformations. These can only be achieved through political and financial commitments, leadership and action across all levels of the food system, and, perhaps most importantly, the food systems community uniting around the optimistic vision that such change is possible.

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