



Photo: Author

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“ We cannot leave the battleground to corporations and market interests ”

Large corporations are playing an increasingly important role in food systems throughout the world, also with regard to assets such as land and water. In this interview, Shalmali Guttal calls for a greater focus on the public purpose of food systems and food.

Ms Guttal, what are the main problems of our food systems at the moment?

Before getting to this point, let's talk about the positive aspects regarding food systems. There is a huge diversity of food systems in this world which were developed by people and communities in very diverse micro-climates, geographic territories, socio-economic and political conditions. And these food systems ensure the survival of the majority of the world's people – not only through the availability of nutritious and culturally appropriate food, but equally by providing livelihoods, employment, incomes and also nurturing our ecosystems, communities and biodiversity. And this isn't a romantic notion. The crises we are facing show us the interdependence between resilience, local knowledge, innovation, adaptation, health and sustainability. They also make clear that there are planetary limits, and we have to prioritise and strengthen domestically homegrown food systems which are within these planetary limits.

Another very important positive aspect of our food systems is that the majority of the world still eats seasonally. Again, there is a clear symbiosis between cuisines, ecosystems and cultures. Of course, in many urban areas, people don't necessarily eat seasonally, but seasonal foods are often our comfort foods and foods that sustain people in the long run.

And what about the shortcomings?

I would consider shortcomings and threats together. One major shortcoming – and threat – is corporate-led globalisation and the globalisation of corporate-dominated food supply chains. This has been accelerated through neo-liberalism over the last forty to fifty years, together with the expansion of globalised trade, and free trade and investment agreements that benefit big corporations and wealthy countries that are home to these corporations. There have also been changes in national and international regulations regarding subsidies, public financing and support, intellectual property rights, social security, access and security of tenure of land and forests, privatisation and so on. In the counter sum-

mit organised by the Autonomous People's Response to the UNFSS, one of our speakers mentioned a very important point. In the last thirty to forty years, which rights have actually become legally protected by hard law? It's intellectual property rights in trade agreements, not human rights. The protection of human rights – despite international human rights agreements endorsed in the United Nations – has been relegated to soft law. But such intellectual property rights benefit corporations, not peasants, fishers or Indigenous Peoples. There is also legal protection of the 'rights' of corporate investors through Investor State Dispute Settlement – or ISDS – mechanisms, but no such protection of public interest and people's' rights.

At least over the past 40 years, we have seen corporations entering many aspects of food systems: production inputs, seeds, equipment, financing, storage, distribution, processing, packaging and retail, giving them increased influence and control over our food systems. And more and more, large agri-food corporations are controlling the source of their food products through plantation agriculture and contract farming. And at least in the South, these monocultures have led to severe agrarian crises, distress migration, dispossession of rural peoples and the increased fragility of local and indigenous food systems. Agrarian distress and dispossession leads to large-scale displacements of rural populations, who are forced to migrate and work in factories, industrial farms, construction, and so on, often in slave-like conditions. So what has happened is that on the one hand, those who have nurtured and built local food systems are perhaps still working in food-related jobs, but without any agency and in exploitative conditions. They are working for large monocultural, globalised food systems. And on the other hand, the food systems which they have nurtured and which so many people depend on are becoming more and more fragile.

Another threat is that since the food price crisis in 2007–2008 and the financial crisis in 2008–2009, food has become a strategic asset. Everybody needs to eat. And food, in turn,

depends on assets such as land, water, forests and other natural resources, knowledge, technologies, infrastructure and so on. All these are being captured by large corporations and wealthy countries. The control over and capture of nature, land, water and resources are enabled by changes in regulations, and the more corporations capture land and the productive resources of a territory, the more economic power they have, which enables them to acquire political power. And with more political and economic power, they are able to influence regulations. So there is sort of a vicious cycle here that serves corporate interests and undermines public interest, especially the needs and rights of already marginalised and vulnerable people.

The UNFSS is meant to bring about solutions to turn our food system to the better. It was supposed to be a ‘People’s Summit’, with ‘the doors open to everyone’. Why did many civil society organisations, including yours, decide not to take part?

This food system summit is very different from the previous ones. It is a multi-stakeholder summit, not a multilateral summit. It is not based on human and people’s rights, but on large business and market interests. Right from the beginning, the process of organising the summit was opaque. It sidelined basic human rights actors and institutions, legitimate platforms of organised civil society and Indigenous Peoples, and even the Committee on World Food Security, which has a multilateral mandate to guide policy-making to advance the right to food. The Summit leaders talk about hunger, sustainability, climate change and peace, but conflicts, and wars and occupations are not on the agenda, and neither are the pandemic and the structural causes of hunger and climate change. Analysing the Summit structure and actors driving the Summit, it was clear to us that the reframing of narratives presented through the Summit process are a dangerous and more insidious way to allow the intrusion of corporate interests into food systems governance. In 2019, a strategic partnership was announced between the World Economic Forum and the UN Secretary General’s office. And look at the actors who were brought in to lead the Summit processes – the World Business Council for Sustainable Development, the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa, the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition, EAT, the Scaling up Nutrition initiative, Food and Land Use Coalition, and a whole bunch of agribusiness corporations, all with very close links to the World Economic Forum. Another very important issue for us is the model of governance the Summit process promotes, which is multi-stakeholderism.

Isn’t it a good idea to bring several parties with different interests around the table?

The problem with multi-stakeholderism of this kind – which has been expanding over the last 20 to 30 years, for example the Round Table on Responsible Soy and Sustainable Palm Oil or the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative – is that it does not distinguish between rights-holders, duty-bearers and business interests, that it presents all stakeholders as equal, and obfuscates power asymmetries and injustices. Can we really say that the power of rural communities or work-

ers to influence policies and regulations equals that of large corporations which have huge amounts of money, lobbying power and lawyers? Look at land disputes, and disputes between a large corporation and peasants over intellectual property rights. Look at labour disputes with workers seeking the right to organise in a plantation or in a food processing factory. These stakeholders are anything but equal. Multi-stakeholderism completely ignores such asymmetries and injustices, and allows imbalances in power to continue. And it denies rights-holders their right to be rights-holders.

So is multilateralism the system of choice?

I’m not saying that the multilateral system is perfect. Even in a multilateral system, our governments are sitting up there far away from people and negotiating. And pretty often, we do not agree with what they say. In a recent address to our Counter summit, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Michael Fakhri, put it very well: in the case of multilateralism, governments have power, but they get legitimacy from people to exercise that power. So there is a relationship between the rights-holders and the duty-bearers, an issue of democratic accountability – not only at the national level, but at multiple levels. In multi-stakeholderism, this is completely absent. Here, nobody is accountable. There are no clear obligations, no clear commitments and no clear liabilities. Regarding the outcomes of the food system summit, who is responsible for what? Who would be held accountable for what? Who would be liable for what? We believe that this kind of multi-stakeholderism entering the UN at such a high level is a very big threat to the multilateral system and reflects a trend of corporate capture in the UN, which we are not willing to accept.

You expressed your concerns in an open letter signed by over 550 civil society organisations and sent to the UN Secretary General in March 2020. Did you feel your concerns were being heard?

No, we didn’t. On the contrary, I would say our concerns are being wrongly presented as an unwillingness to participate. In fact, we presented an entire set of proposals to the leaders of the Food System Summit, but they were not accepted.

There has also been criticism regarding the work of the Scientific Group of the UNFSS ...

Yes, because it frontally attacks the existing High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition of the CFS. The HLPE has a clear mandate to serve as a global food and science-policy interface. It works through a participative process. Every time the governments give it a mandate, the HLPE develops the terms of reference. It goes through a consultation process with governments, policy-makers, civil society and other academics – it’s an open process. The idea is to bring many different knowledge systems together to converge in a common report and platform and to have a debate. Many of us in civil society don’t agree with every HLPE report. But when you can agree or disagree, you can have a debate, which is absolutely impossible with the Scientific Group informing the Food Systems Summit.

A number of very well-known academics and researchers from all over the world who joined the Science Days of the Summit in July were shocked at how narrow and inept the whole definition of science was in that forum, and about the very exclusive approach to knowledge and science. The food systems that I mentioned earlier come from diverse sciences all over the world, from people's innovations, people's adaptations and people's knowledge – and these are not represented in this Summit. So we have strong reasons to believe that the outcomes from this Summit are set to further marginalise small-scale producers. All in all, the Summit is building a narrative that supports industrial food systems, characterised by ultra-processed foods, high technologies, artificial intelligence, industrialised livestock production, deforestation and intensive use of monocultures, all of which cause soil deterioration and contamination, and irreversible impacts on biodiversity and on people's health. We believe that these problems are expanding because of the industrialised system. You can already see that if you look at the so-called game-changing solutions discussed in the Pre-Summit.

Could you give an example?

Let's take net zero partnerships among governments. You can't pollute and continue high carbon emissions in one place, and plant some trees somewhere else and say you are net zero. The transformation envisaged by the Summit isn't looking at the structural roots and enablers of the problems. It doesn't seek to rebuild local food systems and the diversity and resilience they encompass but goes in a completely different direction, promoting highly digitalised technologies and market mechanisms as "game-changing solutions" for food system transformation, which is really dangerous, because it doesn't stop the industrialised food systems from polluting, destroying, contaminating and exploiting. And it doesn't reduce carbon footprints – it offsets. But offsetting is not the same as reduction.

Food and food systems have a public purpose. But the Summit solutions will divert financing, public support and energies away from public purpose and public interests. The Summit does not provide solutions to combat malnutrition or hunger or even the climate crisis – it just ignores them. Access to justice is one of the most fundamental rights that has to be realised in any kind of food systems transformation. We need economic restructuring, redistribution of land and financing, progressive taxation, strong public health, social protection, education and justice systems. Redistribution of wealth needs to happen in order to reduce inequality and hunger. The workers need living wages, safe and decent workplaces and work conditions and good quality healthcare, and this is only possible with strong public health systems. All these issues are connected and are important for the transformation the world needs.

**Let's get back to your criticism regarding the involvement of the private sector. Isn't having the private sector on board when it comes to designing future food systems a good decision?
Isn't the private sector part of the solution, given its important role in food supply?**

Here, we have to distinguish. In many societies, there are local private sectors – local processors or local groceries – which

are very different from corporations. But due to the power of corporations, many of these private sector enterprises are being edged out. And there are many corporations that are responsible for the problems our local, national, territorial food systems are facing. But corporations are not willing to assume their responsibility and be held responsible for the social and environmental harm they do. Instead, they want to continue to have public subsidies and public support. I don't think it is possible for this kind of private sector to be part of real, meaningful solutions unless corporations radically change their ways of working. We are not saying that companies shouldn't make a profit. But they shouldn't make one at the cost of public purpose.

You already mentioned the counter summit you were organising in late July. What is the main outcome of the event?

Through the four days of the counter summit, we were able to reach about 11,000 people. This is a very significant achievement for us. It shows that there are many people in the world who are interested in a different vision of change than that promoted by the UNFSS. We will continue to engage in the process. We will continue to monitor the impacts of the Summit outcomes on the Right to Food, human rights and food governance, and to put forward our proposals for change. And we will continue to work with our governments to insist on a defence of multilateralism and to shift multilateralism into a more democratic direction. The response to our concerns about the UNFSS has been immense across the world. We see the coming together of a diversity of actors, organisations and movements, also from different sectors and different backgrounds as well as different generations. And we have been joined in our efforts by academics and researchers, who used their intellectual authority to step up and highlight the problems of the Summit. Even government representatives and parliamentarians are talking about it.

You have been involved in discussions on food systems, human rights, etc. for such a long time – are you more optimistic or more pessimistic as to the future?

Well, I like to be an optimist. There is so much capacity in this world, so much capability, so much talent and knowledge, so much innovation. And food systems are so dynamic because they depend on people and ecosystems, both of which depend on each other. There is a symbiosis there. And at least for the people that we work most closely with, we see this dynamic and these talents. Yes, the challenges are immense. But more and more people in the world are waking up and saying that the current ways of consumption are just not an option any more. The crises we are facing, be it the climate crisis, be it the pandemic, are an opportunity to try to change mindsets and push for a deeper transformation. I feel that this is an important nexus moment in history, and this is also the reason why my own organisation and I put so much energy into mobilising on these issues. We cannot leave the battleground to corporations and market interests.