

# 2 Outcomes of the United Nations Food Systems Summit

## 2.1 Overview of the United Nations food systems process

The United Nations Food Systems Summit was announced by the United Nations Secretary-General in 2019 as part of a decade of action focused on achieving the SDGs by 2030. A pre-Summit was held on 26–28 July 2021 in Rome, followed by the main Summit in New York on 23–24 September 2021, in which over 90 heads of state and many other stakeholders participated.

Analysis and engagement for the Summit was structured around five **Action Tracks**. Actors from across the food system were invited to contribute **game-changing solutions**, form **alliances or coalitions** for food systems change and make **commitments**, all of which were catalogued and made available on the Food Systems Summit website. Framed as a “people’s summit,” the process of preparation leading up to the Summit involved extensive engagement with stakeholder groups at national and global levels through **food systems dialogues**. At the national level, Member States were invited to develop and submit **national pathways** for food systems transformation, which were generally informed by the national dialogues. The main elements and outputs of the FSS process are summarized in **FIGURE 3**.

Not all stakeholder groups and individuals were supportive of the FSS process, which was criticized for a perceived lack of transparency and inclusion, in particular by a significant group of civil society organizations. This resulted in the organization of a **Global People’s Summit on Food Systems**, held in parallel with the FSS. It gathered more than 100 movements and civil society organizations and produced a **People’s Declaration** and an accompanying **People’s Action Plan**, with a focus on the struggle for just, equitable, healthy, sustainable, diverse and local food systems.

**FIGURE 3**  
**Elements and outputs of the United Nations Food Systems Summit**

FSS PROCESS	DESCRIPTION	OUTPUTS
Action Tracks	Analysis and engagement for the Summit was structured around five Action Tracks, each of which had multistakeholder working groups and produced background and synthesis papers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <u>5 Action Tracks</u></li> <li>- <u>400 people involved</u></li> <li>- <u>200 representatives from governments</u></li> </ul>
Dialogues	<p>The process leading up to the Summit involved extensive engagement with stakeholder groups at national and global levels through food systems dialogues. Links to the final synthesis reports can be found here:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <u>Third Member State Dialogue Report (September 2021)</u></li> <li>- <u>Third Synthesis of Independent Dialogues Report (September 2021)</u></li> <li>- <u>Synthesis of Global Dialogues</u></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <u>10 global dialogues</u></li> <li>- <u>Over 550 national dialogues</u></li> <li>- <u>Over 900 independent dialogues</u></li> </ul>
Game-changing solutions	Game-changing solutions were submitted by stakeholders to the Summit process during two waves in 2021. The game-changing solutions are propositions for policy innovation, institutional transformation, technological change and private sector initiatives.	- <u>2,200 game-changing solutions</u>
Scientific Group	To facilitate and drive the collation and integration of relevant evidence, a Scientific Group was convened by the Secretariat in 2020. Members participated in the leadership of each Action Track and contributed a scientific paper for each.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <u>Science Reader for the UNFSS</u></li> <li>- <u>Science Days, 5-9 July 2021</u></li> <li>- <u>7 peer-reviewed reports</u></li> </ul>
Coalitions	The FSS encouraged the formation of <u>coalitions</u> - groups of people or institutions (state and/or non-state actors) to champion integrated, systemic and scalable actions to address specific food systems issues. Coalitions aligned themselves with one of the Action Tracks.	- <u>26 coalitions</u>
Member State pathways	The FSS invited Member States to develop national pathways for food systems transformation. The Member States collaborated with United Nations Country Teams and other stakeholders, framing the pathways around the national food systems dialogues in many cases.	- <u>110 Member State pathways</u>
Commitments	The Summit opened a Commitment Registry for Member States and other stakeholders to register multistakeholder commitments to accelerate action for food systems transformation to achieve Agenda 2030.	- <u>234 commitments registered</u>

## 2.2 Where did the Food Systems Summit leave us?

There is widespread acknowledgement that the Summit was very successful in putting food systems high on the international agenda, engaging numerous interest groups and having heads of state articulate the need to transform food systems to achieve the SDGs. A common sentiment in public statements and among individuals interviewed for this white paper is that the FSS successfully “changed the narrative” around agriculture, food and development. However, it needs to be acknowledged, post-Summit, that some, including some members of the GDPRD, felt that the Summit did not lead to a sufficiently clear road map for change nor ambitious enough international commitments to action. Views on this global level appear to vary depending on understanding about the purpose of the Summit.

Shifting to the language of food systems is not just semantics. It provides a foundation for more inclusive, integrated and cross-sectoral development

programming, policymaking and investments. Several donors emphasized that they felt that food systems issues are now on the radar of their political leadership in a way that is new and distinctive, both because the United Nations convened the FSS and because the food systems framing creates opportunity to highlight linkages between food and other policy priorities.

Clearly there is much of value that has been achieved by the process leading up to the Summit and by the Summit itself. However, maintaining momentum and reaping the dividends from this will be highly dependent on the effectiveness of coordinated follow-up action. It was noted that in some policy and political contexts, “food systems” remains a hard sell, and the concept of food security (arguably one of the outcomes of a well-functioning food system) is more immediately understood. There is also uncertainty about how the shifts in language can be incorporated into policy decisions related to on-the-ground investments and programming.

A common view is that the Summit has “exploded” a tremendous diversity of issues, ideas, perspectives, ambitions and networks. However, these have not yet coalesced into sufficiently clear frameworks of agreed priorities and directions at either national or global levels. Some Summit participants felt that this opening up of multiple and at times conflicting or incompatible perspectives is an essential and critical part of bringing about systems change and cannot be rushed.

Others felt that the lack of clear international agreements and commitments for change was a lost opportunity potentially undermining the significance of the Summit and its future impact. Some donors thought that a United Nations-led summit should have concluded with Member State commitments and accountability mechanisms in place. Some frustration was voiced about the Summit process being insufficiently clear to Member States and other actors, and sidelining or undermining the CFS, an existing key multilateral institution dealing with food systems, contributing to the difficulty of arriving at more defined and shared outcomes and commitments. Concern was also expressed about an insufficient link between the Summit and the COP26 Climate Conference, with reflections on the important opportunity for a much more direct focus on food systems and climate change at COP27.

The value of the broad-based stakeholder engagement and the extensive dialogue process of the Summit should not be underestimated, despite the expressed concerns and limitations. Food systems transformation cannot be driven in a top-down way and will require understanding and buy-in across interest groups and sectors. In this sense, the Summit has been an ambitious attempt, albeit not fully satisfactory, of the sort of state and non-state actor engagement that will be needed to make progress. The FSS has also given significant legitimacy to thinking and acting from a systems perspective, which should not be undervalued given how siloed, sector-based and discipline-oriented much of society’s problem-solving and policymaking remains.

### SYSTEM WIDE APPROACH OF THE SUMMIT<sup>1</sup>

“It’s not just agriculture. It’s also health and nutrition, environment and other stuff, with human rights all over the place... there’s a real interest in multisector, multistakeholder, multilevel action to take it forward.”

*FSS organizer*

### “FOOD SYSTEMS” IS AN OPEN TERM

“There is no absolute definition of a food system and of ideal food system performance. Everybody comes to the Summit with a different point of view. And that’s healthy and good.”

*FSS organizer*

<sup>1</sup> Quotes have been edited for readability and conciseness.

