

**KALINGA SENEVIRATNE**

The Heads of State and Government from more than 90 countries are expected to announce their commitments to transform food systems to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at the historic UN Food Systems Summit this week held virtually from New York. But many civil society and farmers' groups are sceptical about the international community being able to recognise the rights of small-scale farmers to their land and peoples' access to affordable food, which are essential to achieving food security and associated SDGs.

The World Food Systems Summit (WFSS), the first of its kind and takes place during the UN General Assembly in New York from September 23, is due to hear from world leaders on how they would tackle the growing problem of food security, especially in the post-COVID pandemic recovery era.

United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres in a pre-summit message to world leaders has reminded them that food security is essential to achieving the SDGs by its target year of 2030. "A well-functioning food system can help prevent conflict, protect the environment and provide health and livelihoods for all. In food, there is hope," he said, adding, "Food can help us accelerate actions and bring in solutions to achieve all of the Sustainable Development Goals and recover better from COVID-19."

Guterres' optimism is not shared by the Malaysia-based Third World Network (TWN). "The Summit regrettably does not address the COVID-related food crisis, nor the structural causes of unsustainable, unhealthy and unjust food systems," notes TWN, which accuses the UN of pandering to corporate interests.

A handful of transnational companies dominate the current global food and commodity trade. Two multinational companies – Dow Dupont and Monsanto-Bayer Crop Science – hold a 53 percent market share in the seed industry, while just three firms own 70 percent of the global agrochemical industry that manufactures and sells chemicals and pesticides used on crops. While they control the food production and consumption chain, these corporations are now entering into partnerships with Big Tech firms to digitalise the global food system to cement their dominance.

Meanwhile, smallholder producers, including indigenous peoples and local communities are responsible for producing 60-80 percent of the food worldwide. The International Land Coalition argues that land inequality directly threatens the livelihood of an estimated 2.5

billion people involved in smallholder farming.

"Yet, when it comes to defining the future of our food system, guess who gets invited by the UN to conceive and construct the plan, principles and content of the global summit. It is big agribusinesses," warned Elizabeth Mpofo, a small-scale organic farmer from Zimbabwe and Edgardo Garcia, from the Nicaragua Land Workers' Association, in a commentary published by Al Jazeera.

Citing a policy brief from FIAN International, the Malaysian think tank TWN argues that the WFSS needs to make a clear policy

## World Food Systems Summit:

# THE NEED TO RECOGNISE RIGHTS OF FARMERS



decision for the global community that the human right to adequate food and nutrition entails state obligations. TWN thus asks governments to "put public interest first by recognising food systems as matter of public interest. Public institutions and communal organizations must be strengthened, and corporate power dismantled, and corporations and financial capital must be regulated."

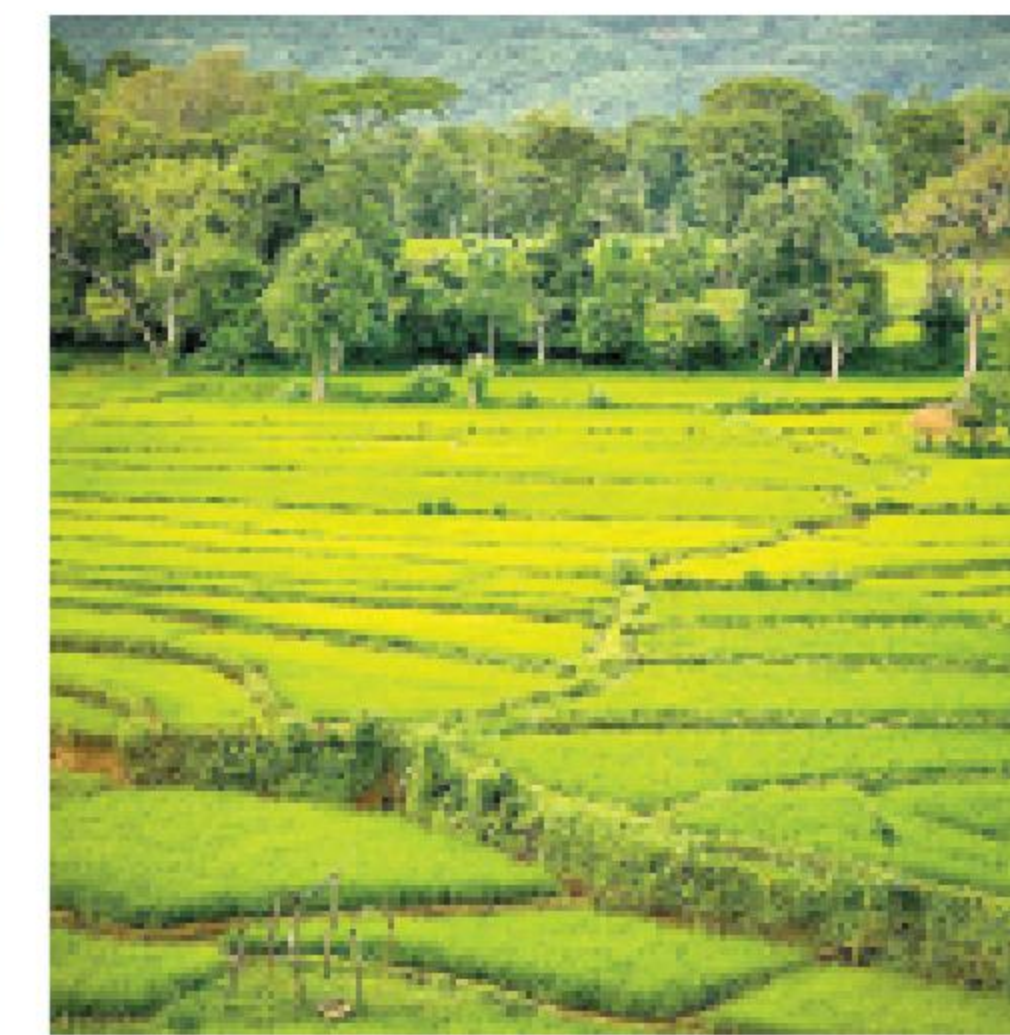
A civil society process has been gathering steam during the year, and especially in July, when over 40,000 people from across the world met virtually in about 850 dialogue sessions preparing policy briefs and statements to assist in this week's Summit.

According to Michael Quinn Patton of Blue Marble Evaluation Network, major themes that emerged encompass "transformations that means major, significant, deep and broad change beyond piecemeal reforms." This means making equity a priority and treating everyone as stakeholders in the food system, including empowering historically excluded voices such as women farmers, indigenous people and smallholder farmers. "Dialogue participants consistently emphasised localised food systems, in which different solutions will be needed for different contexts," says Patton.

In July, Gilbert F. Houngbo, President of the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) in a statement ahead of the UN Food Systems pre-Summit held in Rome said: "Rural people have long been sidelined in food value chains. While they toil to produce much of our food, too often they receive a pittance for their efforts and are left vulnerable to shocks." He noted that

this is a critical moment to address the inequity of our food systems. "Without concrete actions that result in real changes for rural producers, hunger and poverty will only grow, and increased instability and migration will follow," he warned.

Qu Dongyu, Director-General, Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations, in a statement marking this week's UN meeting, said the WFSS is timely with the world's hungry growing today, after decades of decrease. He argues that the world's agri-food systems are not functioning properly. "Transforming our global agri-food systems rests ultimately with actions at the country and local levels," he adds.



Yet, civil society and farming groups are not convinced that the UN is going in the right direction. Explaining why the Summit has been criticised for its links to big business groups, Professor Molly Anderson, a member of the International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems (IPES-Food) explained to 'The Current' news portal, that "they (UN and its partners) want digitalisation and gene editing and precision agriculture, which won't help the poorest and hungriest people in the world very much, and will make the gap between the very poor and hungry and the wealthy even wider than it is now."

This is why civil society and farmers' groups have decided to fight from outside rather than, as they say, "sit on a table that is already set." They argue that the FAO and the UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS) that were involved in organising earlier food summits have been sidelined, and Guterres has set up the summit in close consultation with the World Economic Forum that represents corporate interests.

Sylvia Mallari, global co-chairperson of the People's Coalition on Food Sovereignty, a civil society initiative representing the interests of small food producers told 'The Current': "It was important to take the position that if the UN cannot reorient itself into placing the interests of people over profits, we would have a counter-summit and make our intervention from the outside."

Thus, civil society groups and farmers' associations from across the world have organised a series of virtual meetings this week called 'Global Peoples' Summit on Food Systems' originating from Malaysia, Guatemala, Venezuela, Australia, Pakistan, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Cambodia and India, culminating in an online 'Global Day of Action and Speak Out'.

(IDN-InDepthNews)