



Dili, 14 July 2021

## Briefing to the Ministry of Agriculture on the UN Food Systems Summit

### Introduction

The United Nations is facilitating the Food Systems Summit (FSS) with the goal of establishing a pathway to realize the Sustainable Development Goals, and creating an action plan and measurable goals to strengthen food systems. The FSS will consist of a pre-summit in July, followed by the formal Summit in September in New York, at which the results of the summit will be announced. The Summit will produce a joint declaration and plan for future actions, which UN agencies can then further develop or implement.

In June 2019, the UN signed an agreement with the World Economic Forum (WEF) to jointly carry out the Food Systems Summit.

The unfortunate reality is that many nations, including Timor-Leste, continue to face problems that emerge from food systems dominated by large companies whose goal is to make a profit, rather than to resolve problems of food distribution and hunger. For this reason, the FSS as a global forum could be a good opportunity to discuss and seek solutions for problems of global hunger, malnutrition and poverty in the world, including in Timor-Leste. With a food systems approach, we can understand the connections between problems of nutrition, gender relations, land rights, the environment, agriculture, and economic and social relations. Approximately 770 million people worldwide experience hunger.<sup>1</sup> Hunger, nutrition and poverty are not just technical problems that can be resolved with technical approaches, but are urgent and complex issues that require sustainable, effective, fair and honest solutions.

### Our Perspective on Food Systems

We believe that we can strengthen food systems through a sustainable and democratic approach. We see the FSS as an opportunity to promote investment in just, long-term solutions. The reality is that agro-ecology and family agriculture are ways to both achieve sustainability and increase resilience to climate change.

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<sup>1</sup> The WHO estimates that between 720 and 811 million people experienced hunger in 2020  
<https://www.wfp.org/publications/2021-state-food-security-and-nutrition-world-report-and-inbrief>

Conventional agriculture seeks to industrialize agricultural production through the use of machinery, pesticides, and hybrid or genetically modified seeds that small-scale farmers must repeatedly purchase from large, multinational companies. Due to the degradation of land, water and the environment, agriculture production becomes more vulnerable. This system will exacerbate hunger and food insecurity, and, by increasing costs of food production, will burden small-scale farmers. Studies have shown that industrial agriculture, dominated by multinational companies, does not help reduce poverty or food insecurity, and can threaten water, the environment, and human health.<sup>2</sup> The Green Revolution in Africa, for example, which focused on industrializing production using technological interventions, has for over 14 years failed to strengthen production of nutritious food or ensure food security.<sup>3</sup>

Family farming and agro-ecology are models that can conserve diversity of production, and serve as a strong foundation for further diversification. Diverse agricultural production is good for the soil and the broader environment, and is more resilient to climate change. Family farming and agro-ecology are not new concepts for small-scale farmers, and farmers' and workers' movements worldwide have long advocated for this model. Even the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) has recognized the importance of family farming, and made the decade from 2019 - 2028 the Decade of Family Farming.<sup>4</sup> The FAO recognizes that family farming is a key part of achieving the SDGs, to which Timor-Leste is committed. Family farming isn't contrary to modernization, but rather is focused on technological innovations that are effective and sustainable and adapted for local knowledge and resources.

Family farming will involve many Timorese people, and contribute to reducing social problems like unemployment and poverty. Experiences across various counties have shown that the types of agricultural development best able to eradicate poverty and realize justice in food production and distribution are grounded in high levels of participation among farmers and the "less-skilled" population. Any solution to weaknesses in food systems needs to recognize the local context and respect community knowledges and experiences. There is no one solution for every nation.

Climate change is a major threat to all agricultural approaches and is an important reason why we need to change our food system. Timor-Leste is particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, because of weaknesses in our basic infrastructure. Floods in 2020 and 2021 have highlighted issues of basic infrastructure and the importance of local food systems in natural disasters. The floods of 2021 resulted took more than 40 lives, displaced 13,000 people, and damaged 2000 hectares of agricultural land. We know that the impacts of climate change will intensify in the future, as industrialized nations continue to emit greenhouse gases and fail to comply with emissions reductions targets. Today,

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<sup>2</sup> Miguel A. Altieri & Peter Rosset, "Ten reasons why biotechnology will not ensure food security, protect the environment and reduce poverty in the developing world," *AgBioForum*, 2, 3&4 (1999), 155-162

<sup>3</sup> Timothy Wise, "Africa's choice: Africa's green revolution has failed, time to change course," *Institute for Trade and Agriculture Policy* (2020) <https://www.iatp.org/africas-choice>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.fao.org/family-farming-decade/home/en/>

emissions from the global agriculture sector are larger than every other sector except energy and electricity.

Food systems will be destroyed if we don't confront this reality. We believe that food systems policies need to address environmental issues, and need to include structural change to minimize climate change.

### **How has Civil Society Responded to the FSS?**

Large parts of global civil society view the agreement between the UN and the WEF to jointly implement the FSS as opening the door to major private sector actors participating directly in UN governance processes, while failing to engage civil society and agricultural movement representatives in developing effective and just solutions. For this reason, many civil society organisations do not believe that that FSS can produce appropriate or just solutions for farmers or the poor, or for small nations such as Timor-Leste. Civil society groups have therefore urged the FSS to refocus on people's solutions, and oppose the false solutions offered by major companies seeking to use global forums to further their own interests.

Across the world, 153 civil society organizations that are part of the People's Coalition for Food Sovereignty demand that the UN cut its ties with the WEF in the organization of the FSS. WEF participation, they argue, will reinforce structural problems that restrict our food systems.<sup>5</sup> They observe that the private sector uses forums such as the FSS to further their own interests.

The Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples Mechanism (CSM) is an umbrella coalition of 500 civil society groups worldwide, and represents civil society and indigenous groups in the UN's Committee on Food Security. This important body has refused to participate in the FSS<sup>6</sup> process, and has organized an alternative mobilization against the FSS.<sup>7</sup> They observe that the FSS is dominated by corporate interests, through the WEF, as well as by the UN's choice of participants.

Another way to include people in the FSS is through governments. Governments have a mandate to conduct consultations prior to the FSS. However, in reality many governments have failed to engage in meaningful consultations to bring the aspirations of the people to the global forum. For example, civil society groups in India report that their Government failed to invite the organisations most active in recent farmers' protests - instead conducting a narrow consultation with a select range of organisations whose views are more in line with the Government's own. In this way, we can see how the FSS will fail to include the perspectives of farmers and the broader population.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://foodsov.org/stop-the-corporate-hijack-of-the-2021-world-food-systems-summit/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.csm4cfs.org/policy-processes/challenging-the-food-systems-summit/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.csm4cfs.org/call-action-mobilization-challenge-un-food-systems-summit-re-claim-peoples-sovereignty-food-systems/>

## **The Possibility of Establishing a New Science-Policy Interface**

There are plans for the FSS to inaugurate a new Science-Policy Interface (SPI) mechanism in the UN system. The objectives of an SPI are to aid governance by facilitating research and analysis. One example of an existing SPI is the IPCC, which addresses climate change.

Through the UN's Committee for Food Security, there is already an SPI addressing food systems: the High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition (HLPE). This Committee was established in 2010, and since then has provided reports and research on food security, nutrition and related topics to the Committee for Food Security. The HLPE has a record of accommodating and consulting with civil society and indigenous groups, and many in civil society consider its accountability and participation to be stronger than other UN institutions.

Unfortunately, the FSS's plan to reduce the role of the HLPE and replace it with a new SPI will reduce accountability, as it will likely be composed of scientists and private sector actors, and less open to civil society participation. In response to moves towards an SPI to replace the HLPE, the International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems (IPES-Food) published a briefing note<sup>8</sup> setting out their concerns with the proposal; they are concerned that a new body may fail to recognize local communities and farmers as bearers of knowledge, and may promote technical solutions that overlook social, economic, and environmental relations. We agree that an effective and just approach to food systems must involve high levels of participation from farmers, and the "less-skilled" population.

The open letter from IPES-Food<sup>9</sup> has been signed by many independent scientists across the world. The letter asks Governments and other decision makers to reject the proposal for a new SPI, and to instead work to strengthen the existing HLPE, and confirm their commitment to increasing people's participation in food systems governance.

## **Timor-Leste's Perspective**

We think that Timor-Leste has a unique perspective. We are confronting many of the issues that the FSS purports to resolve: our people suffer high levels of malnutrition; agricultural lands have been destroyed by floods resulting from climate change and we will face other climate risks in the future, and our food production is insufficient to achieve food sovereignty. Timor-Leste also has often experienced agricultural and food systems interventions by international agencies.

For this reason, we believe that the people of Timor-Leste have a relevant and important perspective on the FSS which the Ministry, as a participant in the Summit, can give voice to. In accordance with the democratic principles that form the basis of our nation, we ask on behalf of civil society in Timor-Leste that the Ministry use this opportunity to fight against the domination of major corporations and their interests. The Ministry and its FSS committee represent all our people, and this includes sharing their experiences at the FSS pre-summit in Rome.

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<sup>8</sup> [http://www.ipes-food.org/\\_img/upload/files/GovBrief.pdf](http://www.ipes-food.org/_img/upload/files/GovBrief.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> The open letter can be access at <http://www.ipes-food.org/pages/FoodSystemsSummit>

As we have already noted, agencies' interventions in the agricultural sector are ineffective when they fail to include the people in project development, planning, and implementation. With this experience, Timor-Leste has the opportunity to promote popular participation in global food systems governance, in accordance with what we have learned from the reality in Timor-Leste.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

We are always available to help gather evidence for interested people to develop more appropriate policies to resolve major problems facing Timor-Leste, particularly in regard to food and nutrition. We continue to urge that solutions emerge from a process that includes the active participation of the farming population, especially in relation to policies and legislation, ensuring that natural resources, especially land, water and seeds, are used for the common good, and investment in agricultural inputs that are beyond the capacity of individual farmers.

Our recommendations to Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries Sr. Eng. Pedro dos Reis in relation to the FSS are as follows:

- We ask that the Ministry bring the voice of Timor-Leste's people to the FSS, and question the role of the World Economic Forum and the limited role of communities.
- Share Timor-Leste's experiences of family farming, sustainable and organic agriculture, and agro-ecology, and encourage participants in the FSS to promote these approaches.
- Use the FSS as an opportunity to open a conversation about the role of civil society and farmers in UN governance, and promote greater accountability and inclusion in these processes.
- Reject calls to create new Science-Policy Interface that does not include strong participation mechanisms, to replace the HLPE.
- Share Timor-Leste's experience of the impacts of climate change, to underscore the importance of responding to this threat by reducing greenhouse gas emissions and making appropriate adaptations.
- Continue to realize democratic principles and sustainability within Timor-Leste, by promoting and strengthening family farming, water conservation, popular governance and prioritizing the achievement of food security through food sovereignty, including quality nutrition for all.

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