Transformation requires effective institutions

Achieving a world without hunger is only one of the challenges which the world food system faces. In this interview, Joachim von Braun comments on the role of institutions, policy-makers, science and other factors in food systems transformation in the context and follow up of the UNFSS.

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Joachim von Braun is Chair of the Scientific Group of the UN Food Systems Summit. He is Director of the Center for Development Research (ZEF) at the University of Bonn, Germany and Professor for economic and technological change at the same institution. His research focuses on economic development, science and technology policy, poverty reduction, food and nutrition security, resource economics and trade.

Mr von Braun, what are the main problems of our food systems at the moment?

The world food system suffers from several ills. First, it is doing an inadequate job of overcoming hunger. In fact, hunger is growing. Second, it isn't preventing malnutrition, over-nutrition and the problem of unhealthy diets, all of which leads to human suffering and high health costs. And third, it is a big part of the problems that actually undermine life on Earth, because the food systems' large greenhouse gas emissions are driving climate change, while inappropriate land use is exacerbating biodiversity reduction. In addition, the food systems in their current form tolerate exploitation of small farmers, women and children. This needs more attention too, also from the consumers of food products, who benefit from low prices based on exploitative labour relations.

We haven't been aware of most of the problems only since yesterday. Do we have the wrong institutions and the wrong policies to sustainably feed humanity?

We have known about hunger and malnutrition for a long time, but we now need to address all the complex problems of the food systems in their diverse contexts at national and global levels. That is why we are having a Food Systems Summit. The Rome-based agencies – FAO, IFAD, WFP – need more resources in order to present a meaningful follow up to the summit. Regarding institutions, we must critically asses what we have. Obviously, the mechanisms in place aren't delivering what we need. Proposing that existing institutions have to be stronger is not enough. Especially at country levels, we need effective and more inclusive institutions to transform the food systems. And at global level, for instance, the trade system lacks institutional strength, while rules and their enforcement of fairness, human rights and environmental effects in food value chains are only starting to be discussed. Appropriate mechanisms for sharing of science that help people and planet are not sufficient either. One weakness of the Food Systems Summit process was to listen to the dogma of some policy-makers, stressing "no new institutions". It was often motivated by vested interests of some countries or some administrations, avoiding bold assessment of deficiencies of current institutions.

You have long called for a kind of Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change for food and agriculture at UN level to promote interaction between science and policy. Doesn't such a body already exist with the High Level Panel of Experts of the Committee on World Food Security?

An Intergovernmental Panel on Food would be desirable, but such an institution should not be a copy of the IPCC. It needs to be adapted to the food system. You asked about the CFS/ HLPE. Yes, it has the capacity to address food security, but food systems require much broader capabilities, and it does not measure up to the broad and diverse science power of an IPCC. Most importantly, the food systems require strong country-level science-policy interfaces, and that isn't offered by the CFS/ HLPE either. We need large, diverse, and different science inputs to assist policy, also including traditional knowledge, for instance from Indigenous Peoples. All relevant existing bodies should come together to map out a science-policy interface that serves the food systems, including the academies, universities, CGIAR, CFS/ HLPE, the global academic associations such as those addressing soil science and agronomy and nutrition and social sciences.

Science was given considerable importance in the preparation of the UNFSS, which is rather unusual. Do you see this as a kind of turnaround in the assessment of the role that science can play to solve global problems?

Science offers options, not solutions. But yes, this is an important change of approach. Sci-

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ence has been put to task by the UN Secretary General with the appointment of an independent Scientific Group, not appointed by governments but selected by science communities. The willingness of thousands of scientists to constructively engage pro-bono in the summit process is an important signal from science, but also a positive signal of the UN's convening and motivational power. The Scientific Group consists of only 28 volunteering scientists, but its partnering scientists and partner organisations are thousands, as is documented in the Science Reader for the UNFSS published just ahead of the Summit.

Can you briefly summarise the main outcomes of the Science Days? What key points emerged in the discussions?

The Science Days for the UNFSS organised by the Scientific Group and FAO was a first of its kind. Actually, it was a Science Week from Monday to Friday in July. When we say "sciences", we always mean both, social science and natural sciences. In about 70 sessions more than 2,000 participants from research, politics, civil society and industry came together to examine how to unlock the full potential of sciences, technology and institutional innovation to transform food systems towards sustainability. The participants also discussed: advancing science-based options for achieving more healthy diets and more inclusive, sustainable and resilient food systems; putting science to work, especially investments in institutional and human capacity, and capitalising on models and data; addressing missed opportunities and contentious issues was on the agenda, empowering and engaging key players, including youth, Indigenous Peoples, food industry and start-ups, and women; pushing the frontiers of science, especially in bio-science innovations, digital innovations, and policy and institutional innovations. The Science Days shaped the main thematic recommendations of the Scientific Group for the Summit, including means of implementation, such as innovation in finance for the food system, and capacity strengthening. Many concluded that such Science Days should be part of the follow-up assessment mechanisms to the Summit.

What role did the COVID-19 crisis and its implications play in the discussions?

The world food system is suffering from the COVID-19 shock, it cannot adequately respond to pandemics and other shocks and is therefore not sufficiently resilient. This has played a very significant role in the priority-setting discussions in the Scientific Group, in emerging coalitions and in many of the hundreds of dialogue events for the Summit. One Health is a key initiative in which coalitions are formed. Moreover, financing the food systems transformations must connect to health systems transformations. We have emphasised that the international finance organisations must consider the connections of food and health in their actions, not finance food systems and health systems change in isolation.

How about the Pre-Summit? Where was the greatest consensus, and where were the greatest discrepancies?

The great consensus is on the goal that the food systems must be transformed to serve people and planet. That consensus is also specific as enshrined in the SDGs: to end hunger and transform systems towards nature-positive production, protecting life in terrestrial and aquatic systems, and climate neutral agriculture and waste reduction.

Discrepancies are of different natures. One serious and legitimate discrepancy is over the level of ambitions – things are moving too slowly, and reforms are too timid. Action on climate and the necessary adoption of the true cost of food accounting to cut the negative side effects of the food systems are related issues. Another discrepancy is over agroecology/ low input approaches, positioned against a technology-oriented approach to solve food systems problems. Yet, there were actually only few, albeit loud, voices at the extremes. A much broader group of research and knowledge communities emphasises locally adapted innovations that must serve sustainability. This debate needs to continue in specific contexts, and also should be better addressed in analyses and food systems modelling.

What is your overall assessment of the results of the Pre-Summit? Were there any surprises from your perspective?

The Pre-Summit did help set the agenda, but its results will have to be measured by the outcome of the actual Summit. One positive development before and at the Pre-Summit was the strongly emerging voices of Indigenous Peoples completely independently of governments and independently of NGOs. I regret that there were anti-summit positions of some parts of the NGO communities from the beginning. But these were only some parts, and not

the majority. It was encouraging to see business constructively engage, not taking lobbying positions, and the Summit process showing no corporate capture. There was robust debate and as stakes are high in any food systems transformation, robust debate is needed, and should be given sufficient time. Debate must continue in the implementation phase in structured ways. The UN can provide the appropriate frameworks for that together with science and stakeholders.

A group of scientists cancelled their participation in the Summit; IPES Food also withdrew from the Pre-Summit at short notice. Concerns have been raised that the composition of the Scientific Group is not balanced, for example that – contrary to what you remarked – social sciences are underrepresented and only one direction of science is present. Can you understand these concerns?

The frequent repetition of such complaints, and their wide dissemination through social media by some campaign initiatives, does not make them true. All doors to the summit processes were wide open to every organisation. The more than 800 special dialogues, more than 150 national dialogues and our Science Days were open to all. A careful look is warranted. Most of the few organisations that said they were cancelling their participation in Summit processes may not have engaged in the first place.

Regarding the disciplinary diversity of the Scientific Group and its partners, one only needs to look at the hundreds of co-authors of the more than 50 papers and studies developed by the Group and its partners. Anyone can find out because all materials about deliberations and outputs are on the web. There is complete transparency. Comments on research drafts were invited and welcomed.

Concerns have also been raised by civil society that the Summit as a whole is too focused on increasing production and technological innovation …

Reality is demonstrated by the five Action Areas emphasised by the UN Secretary General. They are not at all over-emphasising production and technology, focusing rather on i) Nourish all people; ii) Boost nature-based solutions; iii) Advance equitable livelihoods, decent work and empowered communities; iv) Build resilience to vulnerabilities, shocks and stresses; and v) Support means of implementation with finance, innovation governance. By the way, these action areas are coherent with the proposed seven priorities for innovations by the Scientific Group.

How optimistic are you that we will achieve a breakthrough with this UNFFS?

Summits can be surprising and an element of unpredictability is a positive element of the coming together at the event. This Summit was necessary because of the large food systems issues before us – hunger, poverty, military conflicts, ecology, climate, etc. That set of issues needs heads of state at the table. They must take the food systems problems seriously. The roughly 30 per cent of greenhouse gas emissions from food systems suggest that the climate agenda cannot be tackled without more significant focus on food systems. The hunger issues so much related to poverty and to military conflict are head of state issues too. Women and Indigenous Peoples have come to the forefront and their voices need to be heard. That this bigger agenda has emerged makes one optimistic, and the clock cannot be turned back to before the Food Systems Summit process, which started 18 months ago.

What makes me concerned is that the Summit lacks sufficient emphasis on the poor and hungry and their rights. Also, I see too little mobilisation of incremental finance which is needed for food systems transformation. And there is little willingness for real system change, for instance to address the huge negative effects of the food system on health and the environment that are costing us about twice the value of food in the global market. I hope that a few months after the Summit, we will not find ourselves in a situation comparable to the one after the Copenhagen Climate Summit, which failed owing to a lack of political will to innovate and to invest in climate policy action. To avoid that we need sound follow up to this Food Systems Summit, probably with a focused Mini Summit every other year, to achieve the 2030 agenda with a world without hunger in a sustainable food system. Only serious follow up – including at country level – can bring us on a trajectory towards the monumental task of achieving a well-nourished humanity in harmony with nature.

The Science Reader can be found at: https://sc-fss2021.org/2021/09/14/scientific-group-relases-science-reader-for-the-unfss/

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