

## Personal reflections on food summitry

By Andrew MacMillan<sup>1</sup>

I joined the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) just over 50 years ago, 4 years ahead of the 1974 first World Food Conference. I was still there for the 1996 World Food Summit as well as for the follow-up meeting – the World Food Summit- 5 years later (WFS+5) - in 2002. Not surprisingly, the prospect of another global food summit – the [UN Food Systems Summit](#) (UNFSS) - later this year set me thinking about the contribution that summitry has made to the fight against hunger and malnutrition and towards a shift to more sustainable food management systems. This, in turn, led me to consider how some far-reaching but unheralded changes that have taken place in food and farming over these 5 decades might offer lessons for the upcoming Summit.



---

<sup>1</sup> Andrew MacMillan is a Scottish agricultural economist, specialised in tropical agriculture, whose work in FAO took him to over 40 developing countries. He co-authored “How to End Hunger in Times of Crises – Let’s Start Now” with Prof. Ignacio Trueba (Second Edition, Fastprint Publishing, 2013).

**Summits stimulate thinking on solutions to food systems problems and raise public awareness about them but governments' commitments to follow-up actions have mostly been short-lived.**

One of the main benefits of all the Summits was that they induced waves of collective thinking on possible technological and institutional solutions to the problems of their time, which helped to shape their final declarations and plans of action and may have accelerated the translation of some good ideas into effect. The 1974 Summit was seized upon as a splendid opportunity for creating new institutions. The International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) both date from then and have had their ups and downs but continue to play credible roles. But two other institutions – the World Food Council (WFC) and the Consultative Group for Food Production and Investment in Developing Countries (CGFPI) - failed to prove their worth and were eventually closed down.

By bringing Heads of State from most countries in the world together to share experiences and to make joint commitments to embark on measures to expand food production and to reduce hunger and other forms of malnutrition, the meetings drew a great deal of momentary public attention to the urgent need to address food-related problems. This seems to have been short-lived but is still reawakened from time to time when disasters hit the news.

Some of the Presidents and Kings attending the Summit sought to use their authority to translate their pledges into local actions, but as Fidel Castro pointed out in 1996, the goal of *halving* hunger by 2015 had little political appeal as it condemned the other half to continued misery. Henry Kissinger was clearly conscious of this when he ambitiously proclaimed at the event that “within a decade, no child will go to bed hungry”.

**Ending hunger and malnutrition is entirely feasible but it is all too easy for governments to turn a blind eye to the problem once a Summit is over. Can UNFSS hope to build more lasting commitments than previous Summits?**

In retrospect, the goals set by both Summits, though ambitious, were entirely attainable by most countries if their governments had concentrated efforts on implementing all the agreed actions. The big gaps between stated intent and what was actually achieved can be explained partly by the huge competing demands for funds and institutional capacity faced by most countries. But, behind this, now as then, is the uncomfortable fact that most people around the world don't come face to face with hunger and find it convenient to ignore its existence except when they are shocked into awareness by images of starving children when famine strikes vulnerable communities. Chronic hunger and many forms of debilitating malnutrition are all around us, but remain invisible. At a Summit any Head of State is bound to sign up to ending hunger, but, if there is little popular support for this back home, will quietly forget even their solemn pledge to get to grips with the problem.

In 2002 FAO DG Jacques Diouf convened WFS+5, as an attempt to re-energise country-level commitment and action, taking account of new opportunities – and constraints – that had emerged during the period. Just weeks before the meeting, I was

surprised to get a call from him in which he asked me to lead the writing of two of three [technical background documents](#) for briefing delegates – on *The New Challenges to the Achievement of the World Food Summit Goals*, and on *Fostering the Political Will to Fight Hunger*: these had to be ready for his review within 1 week!

Looking back now at these papers, I have been struck by how relevant many of their messages still are. Having just witnessed the absurd situation that a British government that aspires to a prominent new ‘global’ role should get parliamentary approval to cut its overseas aid budget, I was drawn to a couple of observations that I had made after being taken aback by the extent - albeit seldomly admitted - of scepticism on the approaches to ending hunger that were proposed for adoption in the draft declaration. Right now, we are witnessing a similar chasm emerging between the promises made by the leaders of rich countries to [share supplies of COVID 19 vaccines with poorer nations](#) and the reality of their actual behaviour even within days of their pledges.

On the issue of commitment, I claimed that “One of the most surprising factors in the search for solutions to hunger is that almost everyone who should be concerned with its eradication – but probably not those who are actually hungry -tends to search for a rationale for rejecting direct measures to address the problems of chronic undernourishment in favour of what they claim to be more sustainable solutions. Paradoxically, underlying this widespread aversion to direct solutions are essentially ethical concerns relating to human dignity and dependence. Yet no human state can be more damaging to human dignity or cause more dependency than persistent deprivation of food which, along with water, is the most essential ingredient for leading a healthy and fulfilling life.”

I went on to observe that “An aversion to direct solutions to hunger is also voiced by many economists and development practitioners who wrongly claim that they necessarily distort markets, remove incentives, are unsustainable, fiscally unaffordable, hold back growth and breed corruption”. In the UK – once again – it took a young footballer, [Marcus Rashford](#), to force a reluctant prime minister to expand school meals programmes to reduce child malnutrition.

It will be interesting to see whether the upcoming Summit is faced with a similar situation but succeeds better than its predecessors in getting commitments to stick.

**Hunger is not a result of global or even national shortages of food but exists when low-income families can’t afford to buy adequate food for a healthy life. In Brazil, Lula’s Zero Hunger programme showed that, even without major food system reforms, income transfers can end hunger quickly and pave the way for more egalitarian income distribution policies.**

The third background paper for WFS+5, which was prepared by my friends Kostas Stamoulis and Aysen Tanyeri-Abur, focussed on mobilizing resources to meet the Summit goals. Significantly, it was the first FAO document to make the case for a “twin-track” approach to addressing food insecurity which combined developmental and humanitarian assistance elements to promote simultaneous improvements in the

productivity of small-scale farmers and the provision of direct assistance to the world's undernourished to let them attain a “minimally adequate” level of access to food.

The opportunity to validate this approach arose surprisingly quickly. Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva had won Brazil's Presidential election 10 days before the opening of WFS+5 and one of his first moves was to invite FAO to assemble a team, including staff from the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank, to review and comment on his draft proposals for a [Zero Hunger](#) programme that he intended to launch at his inauguration on 2nd January 2003.

I was lucky to lead this team that spent about 10 days in Brasilia examining the nuts and bolts of the proposed programme, drawn up by Prof. José Graziano da Silva. We had no difficulty in giving it our endorsement even if we expressed doubts over the government's capacity to meet its hugely ambitious goals. Brazil was far ahead of FAO in its thinking on how to apply a 'twin-track' approach to ending hunger on a national scale in a vast country. Nor could any Head of State have offered more inspirational leadership than Lula who made hunger eradication the central goal of his Presidency and announced on his first day in office that “If at the end of my term every Brazilian person has three meals per day, I will have fulfilled my life's mission...”. Even if he had not been at WFS+5, he stuck to his word and garnered massive public support for a programme that met many of its objectives.

What [Zero Hunger](#) showed was that, without reforming the whole economic or food systems it was possible to bring about rapid falls in malnutrition by enabling almost all of the country's poorest families to access adequate food mainly through providing targeted cash transfers and expanding the existing school meals programme. Links were created to ensure that the resulting expansion in food demand benefited small-scale farmers.

Even if Brazil's current President has done his best to dismantle [Zero Hunger's](#) achievements, in 2002 it immediately provided a model that other countries could seek to emulate in fulfilling their Summit commitments. Under Diouf's leadership, however, the emphasis of FAO's work was directed mainly towards improving the performance of small-scale farms in Low-Income Food-Deficit Countries. It was not until Graziano took up office as FAO DG in January 2012 that it expanded its capacity to promote social protection as a vital element in its support for hunger eradication.

Over the past ten years, there has been a rapid expansion in social protection programmes in rural areas of developing countries, with support from development banks (including IFAD), many UN agencies and bilateral development assistance programmes. Much has been learnt on how to improve the design of such programmes and there is now a widespread acceptance amongst governments that they are [essential components of any comprehensive food management system](#). Now that we know a lot more about how to end hunger and many other manifestations of malnutrition, there is no longer an excuse for those who attend the next Summit to claim that they do not know what to do. Nor should they be carried away by the idea that the whole global food system has to be reformed before hunger and malnutrition can be ended.



**There is much room for improving food systems management, but the last thing the world needs is a new international food system institution. UNFSS should throw its weight behind strengthening the existing multilateral food agencies to empower them to fulfil their mandates to greater effect.**

As preparations for the UNFSS gather momentum, it seems timely to share a couple of additional reflections, particularly in relation to the preparatory work being carried out on [Science and Innovations for Food Systems Change by the Science Group](#). The draft paper for the Group's July 2021 meeting makes a good case for the involvement of 'science' in almost every facet of the food chain but is surprisingly vague about the practical measures to be taken to raise the role of 'science' in shaping future food systems.

The Group propose that countries devote 1% of their agricultural GDP to food-related research and then – with some hesitation – calls “upon governments and UN agencies to initiate a process to explore options, existing as well as new, for a global Science-Policy Interface (SPI) for a sustainable food system. As such, this would be a concrete outcome of the UNFSS.”

The UNFSS got off the ground on the wrong foot, as the impression was given that the initiative was driven by the World Economic Forum and the multinational corporations that provide much of the global supply of farm inputs as well as the trade in food commodities and that it was seen by them as an opportunity to harness 'big data' to extend their influence on the management of the global food systems. While this is not the message that comes from the Science Group, there are still [lurking concerns about any proposals for new global institutions in the food and agriculture sector](#).

My own, albeit naïve, view is that the last thing needed now is yet another international body working on food issues which competes for scarce funds and qualified staff, exacerbates the already vast problems of inter-agency coordination and seems bound to spend much of its energy in fighting turf battles. If there have to be institutional reforms at the global level, these should perhaps focus on enhancing the performance of the two cash-starved Rome-based food agencies with the ultimate objective of bringing FAO and WFP back together as the essential elements of a reunited entity that, if adequately funded, can successfully continue to lead the fight against hunger and malnutrition and foster progressive improvements in the performance of food management systems at all levels. They are both strong and competent agencies, committed to working together in the public interest especially through the work of the [Committee on World Food Security \(CFS\) and its High-Level Panel of Experts \(HLPE\)](#), but they could be all the more effective if they remarried by mutual consent and were given a generous wedding present by the Summiteers.

As on other occasions when my thoughts have turned to controversial issues relating to the global governance of food, I have looked back at the [remarkable June 1945 document](#) that underpinned the founding of FAO as an entity “born out of the idea of freedom from want”..... “which means the conquest of hunger and the attainment of the ordinary needs of a decent, self-respecting life.” It went on to say that “in world councils and international affairs, FAO speaks for those who produce – the farmers, the forest

producers the fishermen – and those who consume. FAO is predicated in the whole view as against the partial or fragmented view.” There is no good reason why this should not be the situation now.

Although much is dreadfully wrong with global and national food systems and warrants correction, it is easy to forget that, since FAO was founded, the global supply of food has consistently kept pace with the overall needs of a population that has grown at unprecedented rates, combined with the fastest growth in average individual consumption levels that has ever occurred in the history of mankind, and a rising propensity to waste food. If people have died of hunger, this is not because of shortage of food at the global level but because of conflict and economic policies that have accentuated inequality and left the poorest members of society locked in a hunger trap from which they cannot escape through their own means alone.

While the food system has risen well to past challenges, it faces huge risks, some of which are due to its own apparent successes. The rapid expansion of food production has placed huge stresses on natural resources – invading natural forests: polluting fresh water and competing for scarce supplies: damaging soils and exhausting marine fish stocks. Intensive farming systems have become a major source of the greenhouse gases that drive the processes of climate change that are already adding risks for farmers. It has also accelerated the narrowing of biological diversity generally but especially amongst the plant, animal and microbiological species on which the world's food supply depends. And paradoxically, success in meeting expanded food demands has been at the expense of the well-being of the millions of people working under the most precarious conditions in all components of the food chain.

At the root of many of these problems is widespread belief (that comes naturally to politicians in democracies who aspire to re-election) in the need to offer consumers cheap food rather than to adjust economic and social policies to improve income and wealth equality and to ensure that we all pay now for the damage caused by our food consumption behaviour rather than pass the bill on to future generations.

The point that I would emphasise is that, for as long as I have been engaged in this field, food policies, though never perfect, have been constantly evolving, responding – often with surprising speed - to new challenges, opportunities and ideas as these have emerged. This is not to belittle the value of forward planning: it is simply to acknowledge that, in the food sector, necessity has been a very effective mother of invention and precedents show that there are advantages in letting this continue rather than seeking to control it.

Perhaps, therefore, the main challenge for the Summit will be to resist the temptation which has been opened up by advances in modelling techniques to try to ‘optimise’ the design and operation of food management systems. Instead, learning from past experiences, it might in fact be better to provide more incentives and space for pluralistic approaches to innovation, including in applying advances in information technology in the public interest, rather than to seek to put in place institutions that might use their ownership of modelling tools and intellectual property to shape and possibly try to control future directions of change for their own benefit.

One of the main contributions of 'science' could be to create opportunities for accelerating the uptake of innovations that strengthen the sustainability of food systems and to better serve the food-related needs of all of the world's present and, above all, future population. Paradoxically, the COVID 19 pandemic has generated many innovative and pragmatic ways of speeding up the conduct and application of research results and has created a new generation of communication systems that can quickly spread the knowledge of successful experiences amongst those who stand to benefit from their adoption. It would be great if the Summit could throw its weight behind adapting what we have learnt from the management of the COVID 19 pandemic to speed up valid changes in elements of food systems and in managing economies to protect the most vulnerable.

**All around the world, farmers are leading the way in moving towards more sustainable farming systems, setting valuable precedents for harnessing nature that the UNFSS Science Group would do well to take seriously.**

In the eagerness to move forward, there is a danger that the quest for new solutions rushes ahead without taking stock of the many changes that are already moving in the right direction. The Science Group would do well, for instance, to look more carefully at a number of successful instances of farmer-driven innovations that are setting the lead in the move towards sustainable food production – such as the spread of [farmer field schools](#) around the world, the uptake of the [System of Rice Intensification \(SRI\)](#) by small-scale farmers, and the abandonment of inversion tillage, nurtured by the Conservation Agriculture Community of Practice (CA-CoP).

By way of example, they might look at the Conservation Agriculture revolution. [CA-CoP held its eighth Congress in Switzerland in June](#) this year, with virtual links to around 800 people in over 100 countries to celebrate their success in extending no-till farming to over 200 million hectares of arable land (15% of the global area) over the past 50 years. The idea, still perceived by many farmers as heretical, that crops should be grown without ploughing or digging, came from observations that frequent tillage of the topsoil damaged soil structure and reduced its organic matter content, limiting its capacity to absorb rainfall and retain it for crop use; exposing it to water and wind erosion, and killing off much of the biological activity that plays vital roles in maintaining soil fertility.

The significance to the Summit process of the CA experience is that it was not planned or preceded by much scientific work and that it has been spread and improved upon largely by farmers, both large and small scale, in all major crop producing areas of the world. The dissemination and enhancement of CA methods have been nudged by very light catalytic support from FAO and by a moderator, backed up by local champions who have helped to create farmers' associations and to spread the word. The incentive for farmers to convert to CA systems is that, in most cases, mainly by reducing tillage power requirements (whether machine power or manpower), they get higher and more stable net incomes, enhance the inherent productivity of their land and generate important public benefits, relating to reduced flooding, healthier ecosystems and higher carbon retention in the soil.

My engagement on the fringe of this recent CA Congress has confirmed my faith in the huge capacity of farmers, especially small-scale farmers, to seize new opportunities when they see that these are in their own interests. It also strengthened my conviction that many of the problems faced by the global food system can only be permanently solved by a seismic shift in economic management policies that would lead to a fairer sharing of income and wealth amongst the world's population now and between us and future generations. The Summit needs to address this fundamental issue.

**Summiteers must also genuinely commit themselves to taking immediate actions, without waiting for improved systems to be put in place, to ensure that the existing targets for ending hunger and malnutrition by 2030 are really met in time. We know what needs to be done for this and the world has the financial, technical and institutional capacity to make sure that all our fellow humans can eat adequately. The big test of the success of the UNFSS will be whether already agreed goals are met.**

---

To know more:

- [UN Food Systems Summit](#). Website.
- IPES-Food, [An 'IPCC For Food'? How the UN Food Systems Summit is being used to advance a problematic new science-policy agenda](#), 2021.
- World Food Summit- 5 years later (WFS+5) - [Technical background documents](#). FAO. 2002.
- United Nations Interim Commission on Food and Agriculture, [The work of FAO](#), 1945.

Selection of articles on [hungerexplained.org](#) linked to the topic :

- Opinions: [Struggle for the Future of Food](#) by Jomo Kwame Sundaram, 2021.
- Opinions : [Rethinking Food and Agriculture – New Ways Forward](#), a review by Andrew MacMillan, 2021.
- [Sustainable food systems: 2021 may be a turning point for food, ... or it may not](#), 2020.
- Opinion : [Hasn't the time come for some brave new thinking on food management](#) by Andrew MacMillan, 2014.