



25 May 2021

Mr. Million Belay
General Coordinator
Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa (AFSA)

Dear Mr. Belay and AFSA Members,

Thank you for your letter of 3 May, expressing your careful consideration of my invitation to collaborate with the Food Systems Summit as a member of the Multi-Actor Food Systems Champions Network.

As you note, the food systems transformation agenda is long overdue. We are significantly behind on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and in many cases the African continent and the world more broadly are moving in the wrong direction. COVID-19 is making this worse and the pandemic has put another bright spotlight on many of the weaknesses in our food systems, with millions of families thrown into acute hunger and their livelihoods upended.

UN Secretary-General António Guterres called for the Food Systems Summit on World Food Day in October 2019 precisely for this reason. The announcement followed his conversations with the joint leadership of the three Rome-based UN food agencies (FAO, IFAD, and WFP), as he recognized that transforming our food systems is one of the best opportunities to deliver progress across all of the SDGs for people, planet, and our shared prosperity.

We recognize the important role civil society and farmer's organizations play and must continue to play, bringing an independent voice and context to strengthen policies, programs, and investments for those working on the frontlines of our food systems.

The Food Systems Summit is the Secretary-General's contribution to catalyze awareness and action to transform food systems and accelerate the pace towards achieving all 17 SDGs, each of which relies to some degree on inclusive, healthier, more sustainable, and equitable food systems. It seeks to bring all actors and ideas to the table, recognizing that we must all act and we need to advance and scale ideas that are working. The Summit is not a space for negotiation and choosing one approach over another, as there are already national and intergovernmental processes and forums for this negotiation, such as the Committee on World Food Security (CFS), and their critical work must continue. This also includes the UNFCCC, UNCBD, and UNCCD where we recognize the important connections between their mandates and food systems. Instead, the Summit can elevate discourse and build on what has already been agreed to drive action for greater implementation and results, including CFS products. It is also designed to strengthen existing institutions, not build new ones, even as those actors outside the UN system are free to consider what they want.



As a fellow African, I understand your concern for the state of our people and our continent. My own personal motivation to accept this role as Special Envoy of the Secretary-General is to ensure that Africa's unique challenges are articulated, heard, and not forgotten, particularly the need to eliminate hunger for the millions of Africans going to bed hungry, in a context where climate change, COVID-19, and other global systems challenges are only making it harder. Your concerns about environmental and soil degradation, biodiversity loss, social exclusion and inequality, malnutrition and deteriorating health, and unemployment are well justified, and we must indeed do more to change these realities.

Nearly all regions, countries, and communities in the world are wrestling with such challenges, and so the Summit is an opportunity to elevate the urgency for change and bring together a diversity of stakeholders to understand what improved food systems should look like in their own context and take respective action towards a better future. There will not be a one-size-fits-all approach to food systems in this Summit, but rather a focus on local and context-specific experiences. In this regard, the way forward can only be shaped by those stepping up with ideas to engage in dialogues and the work ahead.

This is why we need the voices of African civil society, farmers, fishers, pastoralists, Indigenous Peoples, food workers, women, and youth shaping the ideas of the Summit. While the Summit process is not perfect – none is – the concerns you have raised over the last year along with other partners in the Civil Society & Indigenous Peoples Mechanism (CSM) of the CFS have made our process stronger, as we have sought to take onboard all ideas and refinements that we can. Indeed, in line with your request, there are central efforts within the Summit process looking at transformation through agroecology and regenerative agriculture, based on the 13 principles outlined in the HLPE report you mention. In the Summit's emerging areas of action, there are also many other priorities that you note in your letter that could benefit from AFSA's continued attention and energy along with other civil society actors, particularly in action areas around corporate behaviour and accountability; realization of the right to food and rights-based approaches; distribution of profit across the value chain; true-cost accounting of food and trade; promotion of local food systems and indigenous knowledge; public subsidies and unsustainable food production; and policies to promote the agency of the most vulnerable.

As a UN Summit, we cannot deliberately exclude any actors, but we recognize your concerns around the engagement of corporate actors, and as a result have insisted that there are no individual companies in any formal leadership structures, where we only have business networks. Instead, we have been pleased to see many other constituencies step up and make strong contributions and fill voluntary leadership roles. During the last six months, the Summit Secretariat received more than 2,000 ideas of how to improve food systems, and approximately 35% of these have come from civil society and Indigenous Peoples. Private sector, including SMEs, have put forward around 15% of the ideas. Meanwhile, the remaining 50% have come from Member States, food producers, researchers and others.



In addition to this, we have the Food Systems Champions network (100+ members from 50+ countries both from the global North and global South) which brings together different stakeholder groups in an effort to be as inclusive as possible. Most recently, we have welcomed new champions from civil society organizations, human rights, faith-based groups, cities, as well as fisheries and pastoralists groups. Champions actively support independent dialogues, allowing for greater outreach. They are also engaged in the Action Tracks and are beginning to get involved moving forward emerging ideas. As you see, we welcome engagement from all parties, and we embrace not only shared interests of actors in this group, but also the areas of divergence where we must be ready for inclusive debate of how we go about addressing the challenges we face. Whether it is private sector or other constituencies, we recognize that conflicts of interest can arise, and we are guarding against this and pushing all actors to do better.

We look to continue to strengthen this engagement in any way we can, so your letter and priorities continue to help in this regard, as have recent meetings the Deputy-Secretary General, CFS Chair, and I have held with the CSM in April. We feel the Summit is accounting for nearly all points of your letter, and while we are not able to add a new Action Track for corporate accountability along the lines suggested at this stage in the process, we certainly invite discussions and ideas around governance, standards, and accountability mechanisms within all Summit work streams.

We hope we can continue to build with you and AFSA's members in this direction, as we are stronger with your voices, ideas, concerns and constructive criticisms at the table. The door will remain open to you for deeper engagement along these lines.

Ending hunger, eliminating poverty, achieving equal rights for women and girls, averting catastrophic climate change, and beyond – these are bold goals that the world has signed up to through the 2030 Agenda. Realizing that vision is our collective ambition. This Secretary-General led Summit will continue to push to keep that promise, and we look forward to more ways to join with you and all other actors who want to join in meaningful action.

Best regards,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Kalibata".

Dr. Agnes Kalibata
Special Envoy of the UN Secretary-General for the 2021 Food Systems Summit