

St George's House Consultation Report Global Food Systems

Summary

The unfairness in the way food is grown, distributed, traded and consumed is the global moral failure of our time. Food systems are driving hunger, ill health and inequality, are forcing earth processes beyond safe planetary limits, and are destroying nature.

Global governance of food systems is a matter of social and environmental justice. Food systems transformation is both strategically important and urgent, and the scale of change needed will only be achieved by working together.

In recognition of the key role that civil society has in shaping social norms, a process of collaboration has been convened between leaders in global organisations concerned with climate, development, faith, biodiversity, health and animal welfare. A series of 6 online and in-person meetings were held from 2020-2023, involving a network of over 50 individuals from 30 organisations.

The aim has been to build strategic alignment, tackle the critical barriers to collective impact, and focus on shared solutions that mutually reinforce the case for change and calls to action. This Report is the final output of this process.

The meeting identified the following recommendations for International Civil Society Organisations, which were considered critical in developing greater collaboration to effect a just transition of food systems within the safe boundaries of Earth systems necessary for life:

1 - Framing the need: It is strongly recommended that concerted action is taken by ICSOs to reframe the purpose of global food systems.

2 - The strategic imperative: It is recommended that all ICSOs/organisations concerned with the attainment of the SDGs should review their strategies and ensure that include food systems transformation is a key goal of their current plans for action.

3 - Collective Impact: It is recommended as a matter of priority that alignment is built between organisations for collective impact on food systems that leads to deep, lasting and effective change.

4 - Narratives and power, a strategic programme for action: It is urgently recommended that ICSOs combine resources to develop the narratives,



values and frames to reclaim the food justice agenda, and to challenge incumbent power and counter-narratives.

5 - Setting the bar for high ambition: It is recommended that ICSOs work together to articulate what good looks like for food systems transformation and ambitious outcomes for governments and world leaders.

1 Why we came together

Food is a key driver of the planetary health emergency. For humanity to survive, the ways in which we produce, distribute and consume food must become part of the solution to the climate-nature-hunger crisis. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5C in 2018, the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystems Services 2019 Report, and the United Nations Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) and its Action Tracks in 2020-21 have all caused a growing number of International Civil Society Organisations (ICSOs) organisations to make food and agricultural systems a core part of their strategies and a central political issue.

This catalysed a cross-sector conversation in 2020 between leaders in global organisations concerned with climate, development, faith, biodiversity, health and animal welfare to explore how greater collective impact might be achieved. It was recognised that global food systems transformation is both strategically important and urgent, and that the scale of change needed will only be achieved by working together. There are few international fora where leaders across sectors of civil society are able to come together, and the travel restrictions of the Covid-19 pandemic have exacerbated the challenge.

2 What we did

It was agreed at an inception meeting at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, UK to convene a process to develop cross-sector collaboration. Between March 2020 and May 2023, a series of six online and in-person meetings were held, involving over 50 individuals from some 30 organisations, principally at CEO or Director of Policy level.

A significant step in this process was a St George's House Consultation on '*Global Food Systems – The Next Decade*' in May 2022, where leaders met to discuss the case for change, a future vision for regenerative and just food systems, and how to build strategic alignment and collective impact. St George's House, founded by The Duke of Edinburgh and located in the grounds of Windsor Castle, has a long track record of work at a senior level on food, farming, and climate change. Such work brings together key people from government, civil society and the public and private sectors from around the world.

To support the debate, a cross-sector review was conducted of the alignment of 14 participating organisations that are engaged in public policy and advocacy. Information from the organisations' websites was brought together to establish, as far as possible, how their respective positions on future food systems related to (i) organisational mission and purpose, (ii) objectives for food systems transformation, and the policy asks and outcomes they were advocating.

A further in-person St George's House Consultation on '*Global Food Systems – Building the Common Ground*' was held in May 2023. The focus of this meeting was on where the combined voice of civil society can be most effective, on what actions together will make the biggest impact, and on how others can be catalysed to join a call to action.

This Report is the final output of this process. All discussions and this Report are subject to the St George's House Protocol: No comments made during a Consultation are attributed to individuals as per the 'Chatham House Rule'; and the Consultation Report includes a summary of the general discussion, agreed actions, and a list of participants, and is in the public domain.

3 Key findings

3.1 The food crisis

Globally, the food system is broken. We produce more food than ever before; yet more people are hungry, and even more are impacted by waste and pollution. In a world of plenty, we have unacceptable levels of suffering. There is a mismatch between what we need, what we grow, and who can access food. There is gross over-production for the few. Inequality and injustice are rife.

We are living beyond the safe limits of the Earth's life support systems, with huge inequalities in resource consumption. A dysfunctional, unhealthy food system is delivering long term malnutrition. We are currently failing all other species on the planet, including humanity, and are on a trajectory to extinction. Our food system is central to the crises of climate, nature and nutrition (see Table 1).

Food has become commodified for profits which have been concentrated to benefit a small number of companies; the rest of humanity is paying the price. Corporations are producing lots of calories but failing to feed people with a naturally nutritious diet. Food systems are a major part of the problem and must become part of the solution. Unless harmful food systems are stopped, humanity will fail to tackle the emergencies of climate, biodiversity, health and nutrition.

There is a growing sense of urgency, injustice and righteous anger. This is not a case of simply mitigating current unsustainable food systems. They need to be replaced.

We need a transition away from an extractive, commodity-led food system that fails to meet essential human needs and exceeds environmental limits. The current model of 'Big Agriculture' is not viable within safe boundaries of Earth systems necessary for human wellbeing. This needs to be brought to an end with a just transition to sustainable models for the future. It is clear we know what works – local, diverse, resilient food systems, shorter supply chains, and regenerative agricultural practices

Transformation requires a wholesale reform of public policy in this domain, including the regulatory framework for the operation of food-based capital markets. This includes the removal of the 'lock-ins' that hold this unhealthy food system in place, such as current trade rules, financial flows and the corporate concentration of profits.

Table 1 Globally, food systems:

- Generate around 1/3 of global CO₂ emissions
- Re-mineralise sedimentary C on the ocean floor equivalent to 15–20% of the atmospheric CO₂ absorbed by the ocean, and comparable to all soil carbon emissions caused by farming
- Are the main driver of the biodiversity loss and degradation
- Use 70% of the world's freshwater
- Use 73% of antibiotics (for livestock)
- Disrupt Earth system cycles of nitrogen and phosphorus beyond safe planetary boundaries
- Drive mortality, poor health, poverty, and inequality - including food crises, malnutrition, food insecurity, disease burden, and toxic effects from pollution
- Create waste - with carbon emissions such that the human food system waste would be the 3rd largest if it was a country, and it uses an area of land on the planet larger than Russia.

... and much more

3.2 The agenda for the future – who is setting it?

Food systems transformation requires change in behaviours from individual citizens and consumers to governments and global corporations. This will need societal change in attitudes and beliefs led from civil society. To have impact on the future agenda, civil society must pool its strength to have enough power to shift social norms, from grassroots and local communities to national governments and multilateral processes. This requires sustained campaigning, advocacy and education, based on shared, over-arching narratives.

Despite an overwhelming rational case for change, civil society is failing to counter the entrenched narratives which reinforce vested interests and incumbent power. The case for a positive transformation of food systems is based on stronger evidence and deeper scientific insight, but it is difficult to get such narratives established and recognised. This requires

cross-sectoral alignment within civil society on food systems, and the development of effective frames, values and language, in order to lead the conversation on global food system transformation.

The compartmentalised processes of the UN and other multi-lateral bodies soak up the policy and advocacy capacity of many civil society organisations, which lack the space to enable the development of new, emergent and bottom-up narratives. These processes also create sectoral silos in which policy communities lack a common language, and there are large knowledge gaps between, for example, health professionals, environmentalists and local food systems actors.

Cross-sectoral collaboration on food system change is less mature than some other agendas. It is also more complex. The debate is at a much earlier stage in the journey compared to the UNFCCC and UNCBD; the climate change movement has taken decades to develop, and global narrative-building for biodiversity has taken even longer.

There was recognition and discussion of the current acute pressures and constraints on many ICSSOs to invest proactively in collaboration, despite the necessity of collective impact to effect change at a strategic level. This challenge is growing as the frequency and severity of conflict, human migration and environmental extremes increase and cascade. Participants also noted that civil society often lacks the capacity and resources of global business corporations and governments. This limits effective co-ordination and proactive preparation for the many multilateral processes and UN conferences that influence global food systems governance.

Participants highlighted the challenge that points of difference between civil society organisations can all too easily derail debate. While these barriers may be more perceived than real, they must be clearly defined and managed to develop more effective narratives. Electronic communication has increased the potential for collaboration, but the Covid-19 pandemic has demonstrated the importance of in-person meetings for co-creation and building relationships and commitment. Investment of effort is also needed to create a more common language, and to frame the evidence base in ways that are more relevant to wider socio-economic measures, such as jobs, productivity, social and environmental justice, and health.

A range of governance models were discussed for effective collaboration, ranging from tight centrally driven organisations to unbranded, 'flotilla' and distributed networks. Funding bodies and major donors also have a responsibility to enable the joint capacity across sectors of civil society, and this may require them to review their theories of change and their frameworks for impact measurement.

3.3 More in Common

Our review and discussion of organisational alignment demonstrated the potential for a much more powerful consensus over the desired destination for food systems transformation.

International civil society organisations share common ground for a vision for the future, where there is:

- Virtually universal agreement on the scale of change needed at a whole systems level, and that climate-nature-pollution-health nexus is an existential crisis.
- Broad recognition that agriculture and food systems are part of the problem, and that they must be transformed to become part of the solution.
- General consensus (implicit in many cases) that the global agenda should not treat food as a commodity and governed multilaterally principally under traditional trade agreements but, rather, it should be regarded as a universal public benefit, within the context of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and a rights-based approach.

Following on from this, there is general agreement that the objectives for food systems transformation need to address both social equity (e.g. inclusion, just transition, intergenerational equity) and the natural environment (e.g. safe Earth system boundaries, renaturing, waterway and soil restoration co-existence and respect for nature).

3.4 Shared agenda

We found that many participants were concerned with a number of key shared themes:

- i. Many organisations are explicitly aligned with agro-ecology (or regenerative agriculture) and Nature-Based Solutions
- ii. Inclusion of smallholder farmers in governance processes, the role of women, and empowerment through education and training
- iii. Redefining measures of policy success from production-based to rights-based metrics – i.e. nutrition, health, sustainability, biodiversity
- iv. Importance of transparency and democratization of information - including scale-ability of data and reporting standards, and accessible and appropriate monitoring and dissemination
- v. Governance and need for controls on power and capital – including conflicts of interest, regulation of finance, policy capture by powerful vested interests, accountability and independent oversight
- vi. The systemic and binding reform of perverse finance - i.e. subsidies/incentives/trade tariffs and barriers, financial

investment vehicles - and the need to couple these to the SDGs and a rights-based framework

A range of 'high leverage' outcomes were identified that would catalyse greater systemic change, where there was clear collective ambition to 'shift the dial', including:

- i. Finance – Reform of multi-lateral banks, debt suspension, long-term sustainable funds made viable for transition, moratorium on perverse subsidies in developed countries, and support for transition plans through the Comprehensive African Agricultural Development Programme.
- ii. The Hunger Crisis – hunger and food systems failure positioned as the biggest global moral crisis of our time, hunger emergencies declared in key countries, and the G20 convenes the 'Hunger Summit'.
- iii. National Action - legislation for the right to food, Nationally Determined Contributions include food systems plans and public health/animal protein consumption actions and enabling subnational/city level action.
- iv. Corporates – stronger and mandatory standards, adoption and implementation of transformation plans to greater sustainability, and sector financing of transition through windfall taxation on high profits

3.5 Apparent points of difference

Although there are strong foundations for common ground, there are many confounding factors which are operating at different levels. Firstly, there are higher levels issues beyond the immediate influence of civil society regarding multi-lateral governance and global geo-political power.

Secondly, there are many 2nd order issues regarding the mechanisms for transforming food systems, which often provide the day-day focus for organisations' impact through policy advocacy, campaigning and stakeholder engagement:

Frames – According to the mission of respective organisations, the focus for food systems transformation and measures of success are framed differently. This contrasts between food systems inputs (e.g. land-use for biomass, social inclusion, intensive animal rearing) and food systems outputs (e.g. health outcomes, poverty alleviation, equity).

Theories of change and positioning – There is a wide range positioning in terms of working, on the one hand, with existing governance structures and decision-makers, businesses and financial interests and, on the other

hand, seeking to challenge incumbent power and redistribute resources and control. Similarly, organisations differ over the relative importance of a range of financial mechanisms, and the role of regulation and legally binding targets.

Means not ends – While there is much consensus on the case for change and the objectives of food systems transformation, there is a wide diversity of organisational priorities in relation to mechanisms. This is possibly the source of the most problematic differences.

3.6 Collaboration

Collaborating with other organisations needs to be a core part of every ICISO's corporate strategy – it can no longer be an edge-of-desk priority. The diversity of civil society is reflected in the range of organisational priorities and emphasis - the most substantive of which are the speed of transition, the scope and scale of power re-distribution, the role of markets and corporates, and theories of change. The tensions between different organisational goals can be better managed by recognising structural differences in strategy.

Social change at a systems-level depends on a purposeful commitment of intellectual and practical resources to enable effective collaboration. This requires:

Shared hope – Leaders need to be equipped with the collaborative skills and systems-thinking to build the trust and understanding underpinning a collective aspiration for change.

High Leverage Activities – Deep change in society succeeds when momentum is collectively built through mutually reinforcing activities. Two key tactical objectives are:

- Moving the dial on perverse finance, including subsidies, trade rules and debt.
- More proactive and effective co-ordination for civil society engagement with UN COPs and other multilateral processes. This is entirely within the competency of ICISOs.

Infrastructure and investment – Purposeful collaboration is created through dedicated resources that both enable joint organisational activity and also ensure diversity and inclusion. Investment will come from pooled ICISO resources and external support funding bodies. Funders will need to re-examine whether their theories of change and impact measures are fit-for-purpose, given the level of cross-sectoral collaboration now required by the planetary health emergency.

Inclusive Engagement – This Consultation has highlighted the importance of a continuing and growing agenda for change. Immediate priorities should be the inclusion of small-scale farmers and fishers, indigenous

peoples and voices from economically and politically disadvantaged countries and regions of the world.

Strategic Learning – In an era of planetary emergency, the current cohort of ICSO leaders are having to adapt their core capabilities. Peer-group support, such as active-learning groups, can help them address these challenges. Collectively, the food systems community can learn from other social movements (eg climate) where collaboration for change is at a more advanced stage.

4 Recommendations

Throughout this process, participants have been conscious that this agenda must be much more inclusive of all strands of civil society. Resource constraints and pandemic travel restrictions have also been a challenge to convening the high-quality, in-person meetings that encourage open dialogue. The interface between civil society with governments and business is also critical. There number of networks is growing, as the significance food systems transformation is recognised globally and has been further stimulated by the UNFSS.

However, in view of the highly limited opportunities for such cross-sectoral debate, it has been necessary to start somewhere. Participants have identified a number of recommendations relevant to International Civil Society Organisations, which in discussion were considered to contribute to the much-needed development of greater collaboration to effect global food systems transition.

4.1 Framing the need

It is strongly recommended that concerted action is taken by ICSOs to reframe the purpose of global food systems.

The unfairness in the way food is grown, distributed, traded and consumed is the global moral failure of our time. The inequalities in food consumption by some are driving all to extinction. Food systems are failing those that should be the beneficiaries – all of humanity and the rest of nature. They are driving hunger, ill health and inequality, are forcing earth processes beyond safe planetary limits, and are destroying the rest of nature.

Civil society has a key role in shaping social norms and is uniquely placed to give voice to moral outrage. Global governance of food systems is a matter of social and environmental justice. This requires the public policy agenda for food to be reclaimed within a rights-based realm, and no longer simply allowed to treat food as a commodity governed by multilateral trade agreements. Responsibility should be taken globally, rather than expecting individual countries to have the competency to solve a global problem.

4.2 The strategic imperative

It is recommended that all organisations concerned with the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals should review their strategies and ensure that include food systems transformation is a key goal of their current plans for action.

There is a planetary health crisis. We are on a trajectory that is extinction for all. Famine, geophysical tipping points and social breakdown are precursors to the destination, unless there is fundamental change in global food systems. Food systems are at the crossroads of pathways for net zero climate goals, a nature-positive future, and combatting the related and growing global inequalities in poverty and human health.

There is no more time for business as usual. Real-world transformation of food systems will have to happen at global scale, in this decade, for any transition pathways to avoid a reasonable likelihood of disruptive tipping points towards planetary and societal breakdown. For instance, recent research shows global land-sector carbon emissions must be net-zero by 2030, then become negative by 10 bn t/annum by 2050 to ensure staying within a 1.5C rise in global temperature.

Any strategy that does not recognise the centrality and urgency of this agenda lacks coherence and is insufficient.

4.3 Collective Impact

It is recommended as a matter of priority that alignment is built between organisations for collective impact on food systems that leads to deep, lasting and effective change.

It is clear that many international civil society organisations recognise that the planetary crisis demands a much more radical response than is publicly acknowledged in the multilateral food systems community. It is simply irrational to continue with ways of working and expect a different strategic outcome to the current failing system.

Food systems need joint action at a higher level. However, there are many presenting problems that fully absorb the capacity of many organisations today – but unless the root causes are tackled together, these issues will simply get worse tomorrow.

Only by working together can these known - but unspoken - challenges be tackled. It is only through collaboration that civil society can hope to collectively have impact on social norms - such that the transition to safe and just food systems is enabled, and the continuing and damaging role of industrial and capital-intensive big agriculture is stopped.

ICSOs, funding bodies and major donors all have a responsibility to ensure the necessary financial and social investment is made in pooled resources and shared governance models to enable effective collaboration.

4.4 Narratives and power, a strategic programme for action

It is urgently recommended that ICISOs combine resources to develop the meta-narrative, values and frames to reclaim the food justice agenda, to challenge incumbent power, and to rebut toxic counter-narratives.

Messaging needs to articulate the problem, a shared vision and what needs to change, while avoiding the risk of co-option by those promoting the status quo. The many points of difference between civil society organisations can easily derail debate, and these need to be acknowledged and actively managed. The focus should be on the common ground. There is huge potential to leverage positive stories of change, based on the diversity of good practice by local communities around the world, that can resonate with different stakeholders from local to global levels.

4.5 Setting the bar for high ambition

It is recommended that ICISOs work together to articulate what good looks like for food systems transformation and politically ambitious outcomes for governments and world leaders.

While civil society is often at the center of designing and implementing solutions, ICISOs should not fall into the trap of being expected to map out the whole pathway for transition. This is the legitimate task of governments. Civil society's role is to name the problem and articulate a positive vision for change.

5 Next steps

Participants agreed to disseminate the findings and recommendations of the Consultation within their own organisations. It was agreed that a follow up meeting be convened for those best placed to broaden this debate with other related networks and to engage aligned funding bodies.

An immediate action for the meeting would be to strengthen co-ordination for key multilateral events in the coming year. This should include power mapping for more effective advocacy and communications, and potentially a public call for action (such as an open letter) by a High Ambition Coalition of governments for food systems transformation.

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Mike Clarke, Independent Facilitator

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CAN-UK	Real Food Systems*
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European Climate Foundation	UNEP
Fairtrade Foundation	UN Foundation*
Food, Farming and Countryside Commission*	World Obesity Federation
Greenpeace UK	World Resources Institute/Food and Land Use Coalition*
Green Alliance	WWF International
Hungry for Action*	WWF-UK*
International Alert*	YOUNGO
International Institute for Sustainable Development	Youth Negotiators Academy

*Participants in the final Consultation 'Global Food Systems – Building the Common Ground' May 2023