

# Redefining the Value of Food Systems

## We Need a Commitment to True Cost Accounting at the UNFSS

To: The Secretary General

CC: Member State Ambassadors; Agnes Kalibata; Sustainable Food Systems Advocates

Date: September 13, 2021

Thank you for your commitment to food systems transformation, and your leadership in convening the UN Food Systems Summit. The potential for significant, transformational systems change is before us.

Our organizations, which collectively represent multiple sectors, governments, advocates, investors, CSOs, and individual producers worldwide believe that to bring about change we must fundamentally redefine how we measure the real cost of our food. The UNFSS process must commit to measuring the *true costs* of food, and embrace a measurable systems approach with transparency and integrity. **We write today to urge a full and unequivocal commitment to such an approach — “true cost accounting” and to redefining the value of food as an outcome of the UNFSS.**

Food systems transformation is the most sweeping, and perhaps boldest way to deliver on the SDGs. **This is the decade of delivery — food systems transformation is the way to integrate, align, and cohere across issues that are inextricably linked.**

We seek a systems approach *in action, not just words*, that recognizes the environmental, social, and health impacts of food systems policies and practices, and use this understanding to inform decision-making. This is the time to step away from old ways of working, break from the damaging status quo and build critical mass around a vision of food systems that are renewable, healthy, equitable, resilient, diverse, inclusive, and interconnected.

Business-as-usual is no longer an option.

Solutions like “True Cost”, “True Value” and “Impact” accounting are dynamic approaches that allow decision makers to measure and assess the full costs and whole value of food systems. Going beyond outdated metrics like “yield-per-hectare”, they help improve the understanding of food systems more widely by revealing the invisible connections and interactions between agriculture and food systems, our health, the natural environment, and the treatment of workers and communities.

These approaches will provide transparent, consistent guidance for governments, investors, farmers, corporations, and other stakeholders. There are deep and damaging negative externalities of today’s food system that must be addressed, especially from industrial agriculture. These costs are ballooning: diet

related diseases, environmental contamination, carbon emissions, antimicrobial resistance, zoonotic diseases. We need to address these costs, and work to uphold the value that is created when food systems are managed well.

**To date, partners representing more than 400 multinational companies and more than 30 of the leading philanthropic organizations funding food systems, climate, hunger and the SDG agenda have committed themselves to true value approaches.** There is significant momentum building around redefining the value of food through true cost accounting -

- **An environment for change:** The recent official statement of G7 Finance Ministers committed G7 countries to “embed climate change & biodiversity loss considerations into economic & financial decision-making.” And the new Atlantic Charter signed by the U.S. President and the British Prime Minister includes a commitment to take into account the true value of the goods and services we derive from it”,
- **Growing application of “true value” approaches worldwide:** Food systems evaluation frameworks — from TEEB AgriFood to True Cost Accounting to the UN System of Environmental Economic Accounting and operational guidelines for business are in use in more than 80 countries.
- **Clear and measurable impact.** It is estimated that if allocated correctly, public and private sector investments in healthy and sustainable food systems could cultivate [an estimated \\$4.5 trillion](#) yearly in sustainable business opportunities by 2030.

But progress is not a given. Meaningful change can fall victim to inertia, greenwashing and competing priorities. The complexity is real and challenging, but should not be an excuse for inaction. Necessary transformation is often viewed as too risky even though innovation is at the heart of growth. **Let us be very clear: a system that measures the true costs and value of food systems creates a race to the top, where all competitors are measured by the same rules.** In 2021 if an industry is causing harm to the environment or public health, that calls for change — not for delaying or deferring progress.

The UNFSS has already catalyzed much-needed conversation and action around food systems transformation. As a major moment on the path to COP26, COP15, CFS-49, UNFSS presents a unique moment where actors from multiple perspectives from across the world are coming together. It is time to accelerate progress. A UNFSS that does not redefine the value of food systems will not set us on a course for the decade of delivery. Without such systemic tools and approaches, we are flying blind in our decisions to build a better, healthier, equitable, and resilient future for all.

**We are your partners — and commit to advancing True Cost Accounting after the UNFSS as a strong coalition of champions.**

Our undersigned organizations urge you in the strongest possible terms to embrace the transformational change to our food system that we know is needed — and that your leadership has positioned us to achieve.

Sincerely,

[The Global Alliance for the Future of Food](#)

[Agropolis Fondation](#)

[The Capitals Coalition](#)

[GRACE Communications Foundation](#)

[Partnership for a Healthier America](#)

[True Cost Accounting Accelerator](#)

[World Business Council for Sustainable Development](#)

Tim Crosby, Principal; [Thread Fund](#)

Emile Frison, biodiversity expert

Vijay Kumar, [RySS/Community Managed Natural Farming](#)

Kathleen Merrigan, Executive Director, [Swette Center for Sustainable Food Systems](#), Arizona State University

Danielle Nierenberg, President, [Food Tank: The Think Tank For Food](#)

Errol Schweizer, [The Checkout Podcast](#) and Sustainable Food Entrepreneur

Pavan Sukhdev, CEO, [GIST](#)

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