

People on the ground



After the UNFSS +2, it is time to look at grassroots movements and bottom-up efforts to improve food systems – and to work towards their convergence.

July made the headlines as the month of the United Nations Food Systems Summit +2 (UNFSS +2), which took place from 24 to 26 July at the Food and Agriculture Organization headquarters in Rome, bringing together hundreds of heads of state and non-state actors working on food-related issues. Their aim was to take stock of the progress achieved so far in the pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals and other objectives set out at the first summit two years earlier, as well as to advance negotiations and boost action for better food systems in different countries.

Despite receiving less media attention, August also deserves to be highlighted for two events equally relevant in ensuring more sustainable, resilient and inclusive food systems: the [UN International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples](#) on 9 August, and the sixth edition of the *Marcha das Margaridas* (or Margaridas' march) on 12 August, led by a coalition of agrarian and feminist movements in Brazil fighting injustices in the agri-food system.

Indigenous peoples' relevance to food security and the sustainability of food systems is huge and goes well beyond their own. Representing more than 476 million people in the world, Indigenous peoples own, manage or occupy more than a quarter of the global land area where 80% of the remaining biodiversity is located¹. Indigenous peoples aren't a homogeneous group, and their practices differ across contexts but are invariably based on a harmonious relationship with nature. Their centuries-old link to the land lies at the heart of their identity, well-being and culture², and defines them as stewards of the environment as well as role models for more diverse and ecological food production³. Knowledge embedded in the traditions of regional,

Indigenous or local communities are valuable sources of information from which we must learn, as research published in a recent [Nature Collection](#) illustrates, but remain largely marginalized in science and policy⁴.

The Margaridas' march was established in 2000, gathering thousands of female farmers, quilombolas (residents of settlements first established by escaped enslaved people in Brazil), Indigenous peoples, fishermen, foragers and extractivists. Like other social movements questioning power and autonomy related to food, the Margaridas' march emerged to combat dynamics of inequalities in the food system⁵. Inspired by the *Marche Mondiale des Femmes* (or World March of Women), the Margaridas' march links food security to a vast political agenda of gender imbalance, violence and power asymmetry, thus repositioning food security at the centre of many other social issues rather than treating it as an isolated problem, and defining it as a manifestation of deeper structural and systemic distortions rather than as a conjunctural matter. As such, the march empowers women and raises public awareness around struggles shared by many peasants around the world, while reminding us that hunger and malnutrition are products of societal choices.

Indigenous peoples and peasants, just like other marginalized groups facing poverty and vulnerability – especially against a history of territorial rights violation – strive for self-determination and food sovereignty. Their fight touches on several intersectional inequalities, and is echoed by a growing number of food movements – which, in the words of Motta⁶, include “alternative local food initiatives [that] react to the environmental impacts of globalized food relations; food sovereignty movements [that] highlight class inequalities and power asymmetries in the food system that affect people's rights to culturally appropriate foodways; food justice movements [that] denounce institutional racism; feminist movements [that] fight persistent gender inequalities from food production to consumption; vegan movements [that] defend animal rights.”

In contrast to those living in urban areas and often disconnected from food production, peasants and Indigenous peoples' proximity to it shapes a relationship of respect to nature and a biocentric understanding of food systems. Paradoxically, Indigenous peoples and peasants are disproportionately affected by ecological disruptions, such as environmental degradation and biodiversity loss. Fixing this paradox is a moral imperative and a recognition of these groups' relevance for environmental protection and food security, especially among people living in poverty.

Top-down political processes such as UNFSS +2 and bottom-up movements should not simply co-exist but converge – and recognize their mutual dependence. The global food system is increasingly complex and interconnected, and coordinating different interests in the face of climate change and other global challenges requires supranational bodies capable of setting guidelines at the macro level. Yet, it is the change coming through social movements and the people on the ground that confers the transformation process legitimacy and ownership, making it attuned to different people's demands and making it sustainable over time. There's no doubt that official negotiation forums should be made more democratic, transparent and participatory; real improvement, however, requires a mindset shift – from dominance and competition between different development models towards a common vision and solidarity.

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