

**To Brent Loken, WWF; Gunhild Stordalen, EAT; and Lawrence Haddad, GAIN.
From: Prof Tim Lang, City, University of London, UK
September 12 2021**

Dear Gunhild, Brent and Lawrence,

An Omni-Framework for Food Systems and Dietary Transition

I hope you are all well.

I'm writing to you as key people in the UN Food Systems Summit to see if, even at this late stage, you might back a simple idea to come from the UNFSS. This is to announce a process of creating a **common Framework** for capturing the complexity of what needs to be communicated in and about food and diet. Consumers must be engaged in what is too often hidden from them – that food choice and availability have direct impact on the environment, health, human and consumer rights. Unless consumers are helped, the SDG aspirations, let alone the COP26 (UNFCCC) and COP15 (CBD) following shortly will remain lofty aspirations.

You know well that part of the difficulty today in getting international change – even more than in the past – is **the breadth and complexity of known challenges**. A better food system needs not just to produce food but differently. It needs to address difficult issues ranging from climate to nutrition, production to consumption, social justice to biodiversity, water use to land use. We have spent our lives working on this. Consumers are not being kept up to speed on this on how their choices and actions are shaped by these issues.

The UNFSS is the moment when a new direction could be signalled. The tense discussions around the UNFSS show what is at stake. **Facing consumer change** is part of that difficulty and is why politicians can be nervous about embracing this fully. Consumers are their voters. At the same time consumer organisations, civil society organisations, food industries and policy makers now recognise consumers must be included in the change process.

Even the soft vehicles for food change such as labelling and information are not so far being adequately shared with consumers. But there is growing recognition in the food system that this is needed. Some food industries are beginning to develop logos, data, labels and assurance schemes which are partly designed to inform consumers about more than the ingredients of a product. The problem is that there is **no global or even national scheme to share with consumers the complex metrics** for judging food. There is a danger of diverse schemes thus adding to - rather than preventing - consumer confusion and distrust.

Surely, the UNFSS is a chance to propose a process of creating a common framework to share the diversity of information that sustainable food systems are now known to require. More detail is given in the **Appendix** to this letter.

You know very well that the problem of a 'good diet' or sustainable diet for the 21st century cries out for action. It is achievable but only if there is political will to develop a common framework for change. We need a simple do-able process to promote what we call in academia a *multi-criteria approach* to food. We now call this **the 'omni' approach**, a new title to signify something which commits to linking previously separated bodies of knowledge about food. Information on all these are needed and potentially available: health (nutrition), environmental impact, social

processes, nature of production, ingredients, social rights, and more. Yet there is no common framework for sharing this both across suppliers and with the consumer.

In the past, resistance to addressing the diversity of issues on which food consumption must change came from a mix of politics and vested interest, but also that technology and data were not yet there. The latter is no longer true, and opposition to new multi-criteria metrics has almost evaporated. **Industries and science are agreed** about the case for omni-metrics even if they argue about what they should be. This makes the case for sharing the complexity with consumers even more necessary.

Many of us now think it is possible to insert into the **UNFSS communiqué** a request / belief / commitment that all countries, working with diverse stakeholders, and in appropriate ways, to develop a Framework which builds a new common, multi-criteria approach to food and the diet transition in their societies.

Long-term arguments about meat and livestock have developed into delicate policy avoidance. Low income economies have different challenges to those of high-income economies. The result is a scatter-gun of reactions. Some policy actors are developing private labelling schemes; others develop 'apps'; others tussle over adding environmental or social criteria to existing national dietary guidelines. This, you know, is the daily work of food policy-making.

I have been working with what is growing into a **sizeable coalition of interests** about this. Some think specific labelling schemes are possible. Others think that many countries could not deliver this. But we all agree that somewhere in the Final Communiqué, the UNFSS could and should show that the development of consumer engagement requires an **Omni-Framework** – a recognition that the 21st century will only deliver food justice if all countries strive to achieve food systems which link key criteria for better food and food systems.

The Omni-Framework baseline is that the world should not trade off human rights for nutrition gain, or climate change for jobs, or more equitable nutrition for affordability, but instead commit to integrate different criteria into a new coherent, comprehensive Framework.

To summarise, why do we need an **Omni-Framework for Food Systems**?

- The *diversity of science data* show food systems must deliver on multiple fronts. Just producing more food is not enough. Just focussing on ecosystems or health is not enough. We need multi-criteria approaches which link known challenges. This is what the SDGs rightly showed.
- A new Omni-Framework would recognise the food system cannot ignore the *challenge of complexity*. It is an opportunity to build coherence and consensus. It helps bridge the gap between consumers and producers. It gives something practical to work on in all countries post UNFSS
- To counter critics, by proposing an Omni-Framework, the UNFSS would be accelerating support for truly *systemic thinking* which links public health with human rights, the environment with the economy, food inequalities with technical innovation.
- If the UNFSS was to conclude by recognising the need for food systems to bring diverse challenges and interests together, it will have been *a success*.

In short, what matters is not just the Summit but what it points to afterwards.

Best wishes.

TIM

APPENDIX

The ask

- A slot on the UN Food Systems Summit agenda to present the Omni-framework proposal
- Adoption by the UN Food Systems Summit of the following promise:

This Summit recommends the exploration of a multi-criteria framework to accelerate the right of consumers worldwide to engage in the SDG impacts of the food system. Consumers have the right to know what lies behind and in their food. The new Framework should reflect the range of issues of concern to consumers in production, processing, transport, packaging, retail and end of life management. The data and technologies exist to share such information. The Framework will provide consensus about delivering the necessary change.

This inaugural summit represents a unique opportunity to explore a framework that will create unifying and universal criteria to harmonise data capture metrics and methodologies throughout agrifood, supporting sustainable member state policy, investor relations, accounting, resource management, production, consumption and post-consumption.

The SDG framework will reflect environmental impact, nutrition, food safety, labour rights, and land sovereignty, with a view to reducing hunger and malnutrition, protecting the environment, and respecting the rights of all.

The case for an Omni-Framework

There is growing recognition of, and support for, the creation of **one global unifying framework**. Only the UN is able to step up into the leadership role to determine that framework. Across our coalition, all participants say "nobody benefits from disparate metrics".

The purpose: co-ordinated, coherent, comprehensive information

We want the UN to adopt a global framework for data capture that reflects the human rights impact of agri-food. Namely, improvement in and a common framework for tracking data and information which is often private, disparate and uncoordinated information on food's ingredients, yet on which consumers are expected to judge food and be able to choose and consume wisely to meet the SDGs and the challenge of knowing food's impact on the environment, labour and human rights, land use and sovereignty, nutrition and food safety.

Impact: the difference this will make

The impact will be granular, meaningful data determined by global, unifying standards across the agri-food value chain. The Scientific Group for the UN Food System Summit has expressed the food system's dysfunction in financial terms as creating a \$10.8 trillion deficit across environmental, health and social costs - \$19.8 trillion in costs versus the sector's market value of \$9 trillion. This framework provides a solution to this.

Background to the Omni-Framework proposal

The formal proposal to the Food Systems Summit made in mid-year 2021 is here:
<https://v2r4y3u2.rocketcdn.me/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/quota-omnilabel-unfssFINAL-1.pdf>

The pre-Food Systems Summit event presenting the proposal was recorded as is available here:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rPHKjWb4gCs>

The Omni-Framework coalition

Support for the UNFSS to propose an *Omni-Framework* is growing rapidly. Support comes from coalitions of diverse interests such as the WBCSD-led True Value of Food Coalition which includes the industry, NGO and policy experts across the WBCSD, Global Alliance for the Future of Food, Value Balancing Alliance, Oxford University and others.

The Omni-Framework proposal is being co-ordinated by **Ms Lise Colyer and Mr Gavin Wren of Quota Media** together with Prof Tim Lang of City, University of London. They have received positive support from people and organisations such as:

- Michael Fakhri, UN Rapporteur on the Right to Food
- World Benchmarking Alliance
- 600 attendees from 23 countries at our UN pre-Food Systems Summit event
- The 40-strong Consortium for Labelling for the Environment, Animal Welfare and Regenerative Farming ([CLEAR](#)), launched in June in the UK, which includes Sustain, the Food Ethics Council, The Sustainable Soils Alliance, Sustainable Restaurant Association, Soil Association, RSPB, and Food, Farming & Countryside Commission.
- Dutch Consumer organisation Questionmark
- Advance ESG
- Foodsteps – already producing carbon labels for food businesses via a platform, founded by Cambridge University researchers
- [Orijin.io](#) – an app already dedicated to granular data collection, transparency and fair payment in the cocoa supply chain
- IRAdvocates – human rights lawyers who have demonstrated that corporate self-monitoring is failing to protect human rights in agrifood supply chain
- WhatIf Foods – in Singapore producing mass scale, ethical, circular economy food products
- Nourish Scotland
- Legacy17
- Earth Accounting

Discussions with many other organisations, civil society interests and industry bodies are on-going and accelerating – itself a sign of growing support.

Tim Lang. PhD, FFPH
Professor Emeritus of Food Policy
Centre for Food Policy
City, University of London
Northampton Square, London EC1V 0HB
E: t.lang@city.ac.uk
Mb: +44-(0)7812-570579