

# CONSUMERS CALL FOR ACTION AT THE UNITED NATIONS FOOD SYSTEMS SUMMIT

The 2021 United Nations Food Systems Summit represents a unique opportunity to take a decisive step towards global food systems transformation, bringing together actors from across the world to develop a holistic and cross-cutting plan of action. Consumers must be at the heart of this plan, and their universal right to safe and healthy food, produced through food systems that are fair and sustainable, must be a top priority.

Urgent action is needed by governments worldwide to secure this right, and the summit is first and foremost a space for such commitments to change. However, as a people's summit, it is also a space to listen and learn; to platform the people who depend on food systems, but are rarely afforded the power to shape them.

Consumers can play a proactive role in driving food systems transformation, not merely by changing their purchasing patterns, but by sharing vital perspectives on the food systems challenges they face on an everyday basis, and on the innovative and game-changing solutions needed to overcome these. Consumer protection provides guidelines for all in responding to crises within food systems and beyond.

As governments reckon with the challenge of rebuilding economies in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, and food systems start to strain under the pressure of lost livelihoods, growing hunger, and escalating malnutrition, this summit offers a platform for people-centred solutions, which can help meet societal needs while simultaneously laying the foundations for a healthy and resilient economy.

It is therefore also essential that throughout all summit processes, robust transparency mechanisms and safeguards against conflicts of interest are in place, to ensure that public objectives are prioritised over commercial interests. Similar safeguards against conflicts of interest are also needed at national and intergovernmental level, to ensure that we are all working towards delivering just, sustainable, and healthy food systems for all.

This is an opportunity for decisive and co-ordinated international action, aligning food, agriculture, and trade policy to deliver a coherent and effective plan of action. To achieve lasting and meaningful change, consumer rights and needs must be a priority, not an afterthought, and fundamental consumer principles must be properly integrated into global food systems governance structures.

## CALLS FOR ACTION:

[Consumers International](#) is the membership organisation for consumer groups around the world, bringing together over 200 organisations from more than 100 countries. Our members [represent the consumer voice on food systems](#), combining expert knowledge on food policy and consumer rights with an intimate understanding of the lived experiences of people and communities worldwide.

Together with our members, we have put together a series of cross-cutting calls for action based on key consumer principles, to help guide commitments made at the United Nations Food Systems Summit. These calls will cover five key areas (access to food; food safety; healthy and sustainable food environments; fair and sustainable food systems; consumer information), and will seek to go beyond merely diagnosing problems within food systems, instead offering much-needed insight into what people-centred solutions can and should look like.

No single solution can be right for every geographic and socioeconomic context, and some are more urgently needed than others. By continuing to engage with consumer voices through to the summit and beyond, and by seizing this opportunity to build cross-sectoral coalitions for action, we can work together to develop these principles into productive and innovative solutions, all underpinned by a shared global commitment to putting consumer rights and needs at the heart of food systems transformation.

## 1. ACCESS TO FOOD

The [United Nations Guidelines on Consumer Protection](#) highlight access to food as an ‘area of essential concern’, emphasising the responsibility of national governments to guarantee food security for all. The COVID-19 pandemic has led to rising food prices and a widespread loss of livelihoods, leaving many without access to affordable food; meanwhile, the climate crisis continues to exacerbate food shortages in many parts of the world.

Government responses to this challenge must be based fundamentally upon a recognition of the [universal right to have access to safe and healthy food](#). Consumers International and its members call on governments worldwide to:

- **Provide food directly to vulnerable consumers** – governments must take responsibility for providing safe and nutritious food directly to all those in need of support. International aid and co-operation is also essential to meet the universal right to food even in countries and localities where governments are unable to do so.
- **Strengthen consumer purchasing power** – during the pandemic it has been clearly demonstrated that [social protection and cash transfers](#) can play a vital role in maintaining access to food; it is essential that such safety nets are not now withdrawn, as this would undermine any possibility of economic and social recovery. Purchasing power can also be strengthened through consumer-level subsidies, especially for healthy and sustainable foods, and for vulnerable consumers.
- **Guarantee food affordability** – consumers must be able to pay a fair price for food, without sacrificing their right to a healthy diet. As well as taking action to prevent price gouging and to control inflation, governments should support the development of resilient local food

systems that can provide healthy, sustainable food for all. International co-operation is once again essential to ensure that food prices remain affordable across the board.

## 2. FOOD SAFETY

Consumers have a right to expect that all food sold or supplied to them is safe to eat. This is not always the case – foodborne illness and adulteration remain serious threats, with safety standards too often ill-defined and improperly enforced. It is also important that regulation and standards keep pace with various emergent threats to food safety.

Consumers International and its members call on governments to:

- **Establish and enforce food safety standards** – the [Codex Alimentarius](#) represents a strong set of international standards for food safety, but greater efforts are needed to proactively test and enforce, and to keep developing these standards for greater consumer protection. Action is also needed at national and local level to address specific food safety challenges.
- **Proactively tackle emergent safety threats** – as global food demand continues to grow, it is essential that safety standards are not compromised in the name of increased production. Pesticides, animal antibiotics, and genetic modification must be carefully regulated in order to safeguard both public health and the environment, and it is also important that the growth of online food marketplaces does not undermine safety standards.
- **Support compliance throughout the value chain** – as well as enforcing safety standards, governments should work with food producers, suppliers, and vendors to support compliance with these standards, therefore helping to maintain food supply.

## 3. HEALTHY AND SUSTAINABLE FOOD ENVIRONMENTS

The main barrier to the uptake of healthier and more sustainable diets is not a lack of interest from consumers, but rather the marketplace constraints that often make it difficult to establish a diet that is high in fresh and minimally processed foods, and low in ultra-processed foods, especially those containing excess salt, sugar, or fat. Healthier choices are often less affordable, less convenient, and are sometimes not available at all – we need to create food environments that incentivise and enable such choices, making a healthy and sustainable diet the easy option.

To support the development of healthy and sustainable food environments, governments must:

- **Set standards for healthy food** – [establishing limits](#) on sugar, salt, and fat content of food products can help to protect consumers, and incentivise product reformulation to meet nutritional needs. These standards should also shape the public procurement of food, ensuring that healthy and sustainable options are provided in schools and in other public sector food environments.
- **Incentivise healthy and sustainable options through fiscal policy** – [increasing taxes](#) on foods and beverages with excess levels of salt, sugar, or fat can be an effective way of incentivising the availability of healthy choices. Such taxes must be accompanied by social protection

payments and subsidies for healthier and more sustainable options, to ensure that affordable food remains available for all.

- **Restrict marketing of unhealthy food** – from product design through to advertising, marketing is often used to guide consumers towards unhealthy options. [Mandatory restrictions](#) are needed on marketing and promotions to children and other vulnerable consumers, covering all communications channels, including product packaging and digital platforms. Greater regulation is also needed to protect consumer privacy online, ensuring that data rights are respected.

## 4. FAIR AND SUSTAINABLE FOOD SYSTEMS

Creating food systems that uphold consumer rights and needs will require transformation at all stages of the value chain; the development of sustainable and circular food systems is a necessary step towards meeting consumers' right to a healthy environment, and there is widespread consumer support for value chains that are fair and inclusive for all. International standards must also be developed to support fair and sustainable food systems, and to ensure greater complementarity with trade policy, so that these standards are not subject to challenge.

To promote fairness and sustainability within food systems, governments should:

- **Ensure traceability and transparency along the value chain** – there is an urgent need for global standards on value chain traceability, providing clear information on the provenance of all food products, including record of social and environmental harms. This information would allow for improved consumer information, as well as incentivising change throughout the value chain, and enabling governments to clamp down on bad practices.
- **Support the development of local food systems and agroecology** – strengthening local food systems can help reduce environmental impact, while also boosting consumer engagement with food systems, and providing greater transparency. Governments should support value chains connecting consumers directly with producers (especially small-scale and agroecological producers), and use subsidies to incentivise sustainable production.
- **Invest in infrastructure to reduce food loss and waste** – eliminating food loss and waste is essential to building more efficient food systems, but the burden of this process cannot be left to the consumer. Governments should invest in the circular economy to make it as easy as possible for consumers to recycle food waste and packaging, and take action to enforce and incentivise the reduction of food loss and waste at all stages of the value chain.

## 5. CONSUMER INFORMATION

Transforming consumer information is a vital cross-cutting element of food systems transformation. Information alone can do little to overcome the barriers of access, availability, and affordability, which constrain the choices of so many consumers – but with a growing number willing and able to make

choices that can drive change at all stages of the value chain, it is clear that the quality of information needs to improve, and that the threat of misinformation must be addressed.

Key actions needed to shape the future of consumer information include:

- **Set clear standards on food labelling** – drawing on guidance from the [World Health Organization](#) and its regional offices, governments should develop nutrition labelling standards that are independently verified and easy for consumers to understand, such as warning labels on unhealthy products, or a traffic light system. An international standard on sustainability labelling is also urgently needed, although this must be complemented by proactive efforts to clamp down on unsustainable products and practices.
- **Promote national guidelines for healthy and sustainable diets** – [national dietary guidelines](#) are a strong basis for consumer education and information, and can facilitate the setting of food standards and policy development. Even where guidelines are already in place, more needs to be done to promote consumer awareness (including through proper investment in education), and to ensure that all food systems actors are working towards fulfilling these standards.
- **Take action against misleading claims** – as well as improving the quality of information, it is also necessary to clamp down on efforts to mislead consumers, especially through marketing and advertising. Clear, independently-verified standards are needed to block misleading claims on the nutritional or environmental credentials of food products.

## THE FOOD SYSTEMS SUMMIT AND BEYOND

On the path towards global food systems transformation, this summit represents only the first step. This is a unique opportunity to develop a co-ordinated and cohesive global plan of action, but the real challenge will be putting this plan into practice at all levels. The consumer principles and calls to action outlined in this statement must be at the heart of this food systems strategy, ensuring that consumer rights and needs are a priority, not an afterthought, in the policy process.

However, the role of consumers and consumer advocates must continue beyond the summit. The success of this process will be determined by what comes next – the implementation, monitoring, and enforcement mechanisms that turn commitments into tangible action. Consumer advocates bring a wealth of expertise on the day-to-day realities of building better food systems and can offer a truly essential perspective on the solutions needed.

It is no longer viable for food systems to be governed without the input of those who are most dependent upon them. Consumer interests and voices must be built into governance structures, to ensure that the people's summit is just the first step towards the construction of a people's food system – one that delivers on the universal right to safe and healthy food, produced in a system that is fair and sustainable for all. Delivering this transformation will not be easy, and can only be achieved through co-operation between all sectors of society, working in partnership to achieve lasting and meaningful change.

Consumers International would be delighted to hear from organisations interested in exploring these solutions together towards the summit and beyond – please contact [cworthington@consint.org](mailto:cworthington@consint.org) to discuss next steps and opportunities for collaboration.