Introduction:

The “key” guiding questions tend to fall into simplistic framings which seem to avoid addressing the actual crisis that the world is facing. It is very difficult to talk about “progress”, “opportunities”, or even “monitoring implementation of strategies”, when pre-existing inequalities and vulnerabilities within food systems have been exacerbated, pushing more than 100 million people into hunger and malnutrition, particularly affecting women, and ecosystem collapse continues ramping and increases the pressure on natural resources on which small-scale food producers (providing 80% of the food consumed in the world) rely on.

The radical transformation of food systems is not only a need, but an imperative if we are to achieve SDG 2 in less than 10 years. It is high time we frame discussions on how to build resilience for present and future generations by recognizing present systemic failures and structural inequalities, rather than monitoring or tracking numbers in isolation.

If the re-emergence of a hunger increase a few years ago was a “wake-up call” to point out to the opening cracks of our systems, then the COVID-19 pandemic can only be the turning point to shift away from the unsustainable pathways and to reclaim food as a fundamental human right. With 9 years left embracing a holistic/systemic approach to food system transformation, such as the approach enshrined in the agroecological transformation promoted by small-scale food producers, can allow us to simultaneously and synergically tackle the whole spectrum of priorities of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development;

- What is the current status of the Goal or target, in terms of actual measured progress and trends?

Numerous evidence, including the SOFI report, are clear about how goals and targets have slipped, largely due directly and indirectly to COVID-19 pandemic.

The Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples’ Mechanism (CSM) for relations with the Committee on World Food Security has been collecting evidence from the ground through the following reports (October 2020):

- “Voices from the ground – From COVID-19 to radical transformation of our food systems” (CSM’s Working Group on Global Food Governance)
- “Gender, COVID-19 and food systems: impacts, community responses and feminist policy demands” (CSM Women’s Working Group - Jessica Duncan and Priscilla Claeyis)
- “Youth Demands for a radical transformation of our food systems” (CSM Youth Working Group)

These reports have pointed out how the current hegemonic food system and agro-industrial production model are not only unable to respond to the existing malnutrition problems but have also contributed to the creation of different forms of malnutrition and the decrease of the diversity and quality of food and diets, as well as to the environmental destruction and climate crisis that we are witnessing. The reports above mentioned confirm that the pandemic brought existing inequalities and vulnerabilities into sharp focus which underscores the need for systemic change towards socially just food systems with agency, sustainability and stability at their hearts. They point towards an agroecological transformation anchored in food sovereignty.
What has changed since the last time this Goal was reviewed at the HLPF?

If anything, the COVID-19 related crisis has exposed and has exacerbated the depth of structural inequalities within and between countries and the extent of fragility and vulnerability of significant segments of the population, both within so-called developing countries and even within so-called developed ones. The pandemic has exposed today’s over-reliance by many countries on a global food system based on global value chains, which particularly in times of crisis are fragile and not able to respond to people’s needs. In comparison, systems based on food sovereignty centred on the agency of small/medium-scale food producers proved to be resilient, highlighting the importance of vibrant territorial markets. Local food systems have provided critical support to their populations, signalling the urgent need to strengthen public policies and investments to shift the centre of gravity of food systems away from global and promote vibrant and inclusive local food systems. Along this same line, the High-Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition (HLPE) of Committee on World Food Security has recommended governments “to support local communities and citizens to increase local food production (including home and community gardens) through appropriate stimulus packages (in cash and kind) to enhance food resilience”. Local food systems are the key to our current and future resilience.

This reconfirms that addressing food insecurity cannot be treated in isolation from addressing food systems as a whole, and it particular their governance. A transformational food systems perspective enables to address the socio-economic determinants of discrimination and marginalization, and therefore truly respond to food insecurity. Tackling inequalities is fundamentally a governance issue, rather than a socio-economic catch-up one, and requires firm grounding into the human-rights framework. In this line, decision-making processes should be inclusive and participatory while addressing the several critical aspects of inequalities:

- **Small-scale food producers are the primary contributors to food security**, yet they remain extremely vulnerable and food insecure, being marginalized and discriminated by current policy inclinations and increasing squeezed in resource access, policy support and market access by the over-promotion of industrial agriculture and global and open trade. Yet, they continue to feed the majority of the world population, with the importance of peasant production to the most vulnerable people in their most vulnerable times (as exposed by COVID) outweighing by far any calculation of their ‘caloric’ contribution.

- **Gender inequalities, discrimination and violence** have been magnified during the crisis, although women play an essential role in agriculture, food and nourishing their families and communities, while also protecting ecosystems. Women are, and have always been, central to the creation of knowledge and politics that have the power to reconnect with nature, remake social relations and prioritize intersectional justice. However, due to patriarchal cultural norms, policies too often are not shaped to recognize this and support their women’s knowledge and essential contributions to the food security of many. In great part, this is due to the multi-layered burden on women and the stress it generated precisely on all social roles where women are over-represented and underpaid, from social reproduction to care, from daily wage earners to small business owners, from food workers and to those engaging in food distribution. And considering that women also make up 70 per cent of frontline workers in the health and social sector, like nurses, midwives, cleaners and laundry workers. The crisis has also exposed the harsh reality of gender-based violence and the extent of yet-unresolved power dynamics within households, which heavily impact on women’s levels of vulnerability, discrimination and food insecurity.

- **Another critical divide is represented by the rural-urban interface**. The 2030 Agenda features a significant urban bias and marked underestimation of the critical importance of the rural space in its own merits and dimensions, rather than framing it into an excessive vertical subordination to the urban one. Re-affirming and re-envisioning the inherent importance of rurality and rural
populations is therefore essential to tackle the roots determinants of marginalization and food insecurity;

Considering the extent of structural inequalities, food system transformation requires democratic governance at all levels, underpinning food systems as a matter of public interest, and robust safeguards to protect public policy spaces against conflicts of interest.

- **Any deviations in progress from what was expected (including due to COVID-19)?**

As commented in the previous question, we cannot talk about deviation in progress, when even before COVID-19, inequalities, hunger and malnutrition were on the rise. In the case of long supply chains and industrial agriculture, there has been considerable regression for both producers and consumers. The worst issues have been the vicious circle of loss of informal employment leading to loss of home and severe food insecurity; loss of employment/no health cover /food insecurity for agricultural workers, (especially migrant workers and those working in meat processing plants); no access to healthy nutritious agroecological food for low income groups in cities; stoppage of school meals leading to huge food insecurity for children across the globe. This is not true of short territorial supply chains.

In the case of very low unsecure jobs with no social security net, the pandemic has led to many losing their employment, their homes and any semblance of food security. Food safety nets need to be created and linked to social security nets and healthcare.

Now, more than ever, there is an urgent need to address the real challenges of entrenched interests and political economies, to ensure a food systems transformation that unlocks countries reliance on the global value chains, which contribute in great part to the ecosystems and climatic crisis the humanity is facing. The paradox is that this requires very limited financial resources: by only stopping the massive subsidies (in different forms) to industrial agriculture and global value chains, there will possibly be change left in public pockets. Long supply chains can break down if a single link in the chain fails to work. Short territorial food chains build on a logic of agroecology fight climate change and are more versatile; systems can pivot faster to ensure food reaches consumers (eg setting up home delivery of boxes from producers to vulnerable consumers shielding at home SDG 11) Build stronger links with Local Governments to ensure sustainable territorial markets and food stamps that can be used to buy fresh healthy nutritious locally grown food, including in public procurement (1,2,3,11,12 13,15,17...)

- **Additional obstacles or opportunities in implementation including through interlinkages with other Goals, and connections to related processes?**

The pursuit of such a reform agenda would, however, require a significant reconsideration of the current understanding of multistakeholderism and multistakeholder partnerships, as well articulated in many of the critiques featured by the recent report on the subject by the High- Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition (HLPE) of Committee on World Food Security. It would be necessary to restore the centrality of public policy spaces, at all levels, with robust safeguards against conflict of interest, in terms of integrity of the policy process, financial independency from private sources, including philanthropy, and trustworthiness of the knowledge and evidence used for policy making. While it would be critical to ensure active contribution by and consultation of multiple societal constituencies, participation should clearly differentiate between rights’ holders and third parties, and prevent any possible capture from corporate private interests.

- **New/promising openings for tracking progress, including from additional data sources?**
It is difficult to talk about “tracking progress”, when the world is faced with a food crisis accompanied by an environmental one, that is putting at risk day by day our natural resources, and hence the livelihoods of billions in the present, but also in the future.

Moreover, the continued focus on knowledge and data gaps provides the false impression that the lack of progress, and even the retrogression, are due to lack of proper information and analysis, therefore offering a valuable alibi for policy inaction. There is plenty of evidence to support radical shifts in food system trajectories and ensure that food systems are transformed to serve a wide variety of public needs, as previously articulated.

It is also essential to recognize the knowledge is inherently socially embedded. It would be important to track experiences that are ensuring, despite all the barriers, adequate food and healthy diets for those most marginalized. In doing so, it could support to underpin ways to address the structural barriers which are causing violations of the right to adequate food. For instance, it would be important to support the documenting of numbers of producers and consumers involved in targetted local agroecological producer to consumer schemes, numbers of children receiving agroecological locally grown school meals made in local kitchens (ie not industrially prepared meals), increase in pulses used in canteens rather than meat-based meals. This would increase the direct participation of those primarily affected by development challenges, with the centrality that community experiential knowledge should have in designing public policies, investments and interventions. In this context, it is also essential to contract the string bias for so-called scientific knowledge underscoring the potential contribution of different knowledge systems, including Indigenous Peoples’ and local communities’ knowledge, practices and ways of knowing;

Of course, this does not mean that knowledge gaps do not exist. For instance, it might be important to develop more adequate metrics to measure the externalities associated with current food systems, without falling into excessive monetization of their immaterial dimensions. For instance, the COVID-19 has shown how difficult it is for low income groups to access affordable fresh healthy nutritious local food. The real cost of such food is not excessively high as some people claim: the cost of over-processed industrial food is excessively low due to lack of decent pay and working conditions for many in long food chains, exploitation and externalisation of costs, and low cost of food that has calories rather than nutrition as its key characteristic.

It would be equally important to be able to detect and report the widespread violations of human rights, health provisions and environmental safeguards across the entire spread of food systems. And we are just taking very initial steps in a broader understanding on how the human body is an open ecosystem in close and continued interaction with the broader ecological systems – one that would hopefully lead to less anthropocentric and more biocentric view of socio-economic systems, including food systems.

- **What are promising strategies to accelerate action (by UN and partners) and to mobilize other stakeholders to advance implementation?**

The most important strategy to be established and strengthened is between governments at all levels and small-scale food producers, recognizing the centrality of their agency, knowledge and visions in food systems transformation. This strategy should support the full diversity of possibilities in territorial markets including protecting peri-urban agricultural land from speculation, urban agriculture, grow it yourself, community gardens, producers’ cooperatives, community supported agriculture and other local solidarity partnerships between producers and consumers, coop shops, farmer/fisher-run box schemes...i.e. all the alternatives to industrial agriculture and hypermarkets.
Such strategies could establish pathways to tackle the structural determinants of inequalities and food insecurity, while recognizing the centrality of citizens’ action and promote food democracy and reclaiming healthy and sustainable diets as social contracts and public goods.

In this sense, governance of food systems, and therefore food security, has already a legitimate and central intergovernmental platform, namely the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) for global food governance, particularly but not exclusively at times of crisis as the current ones. The CFS was born out of a crisis and has been established precisely to offer a global inclusive space where to negotiate a global consensus on how to ensure the realization of the human right to adequate food with the active participation of those most affected to malnutrition as well as those primarily contributing to food security. It is therefore essential that the CFS remains the central pillar the international food architecture. The exclusive authority to take normative decisions on the direction of food systems transformation should rest with UN Member States within already existing legitimate and inclusive policy processes, such as those promoted and facilitated by the CFS.

• How would one monitor action for implementing these?

Strategies to support food systems transformation should be based on human rights and the respect of our planet. The UN plays an essential role for monitoring the implementation of strategies, and instruments by States. Monitoring should center itself on States’ responsibility as duty bearers to respect, protect and fulfill the primacy human rights of all, and to monitor the possible effects that any decision made at global level might have.

States should take the necessary steps for establishing policy frameworks that foster sectoral collaboration and coherence (among sectoral policies in line with the right to food) at national and sub-national level, and also ensure coherence between their positions and policies promoted at regional and international level. It is crucial that the primacy of human rights is maintained throughout the formulation, implementation and monitoring of public policies and norms related to food systems and nutrition. This includes trade and investment policies and agreements that have potentially conflicting economic objectives.

Cross-cutting session 1 - How do we get on track to end poverty and hunger, and transform towards inclusive and sustainable economies? (SDGs 1, 2, 8, 17 and interlinkages among those goals and with other SDGs)

• How can increasing poverty and hunger be tackled while transforming economies and food systems towards increased resilience and lowered climate/environmental impacts?

As stated above, the central role must be given to the governance of food systems in order to tackle the multidimensional inequalities that have been exacerbated during COVID-19. By inclusive and participatory decision-making processes, public policies should be formulated to support local food systems based on agroecological approaches, which contribute to local economies and therefore playing a crucial role in eradicating poverty while ensuring healthy and sustainable diets for all. Solidarity economy approaches should also be taken into account, which include the following steps:

- community land trusts to protect agricultural land;
- ensuring food safety nets are in place and applied by Local Government;
- direct producer-consumer solidarity approaches of Community Supported Agriculture; provision of school meals based on local producer cooperatives access to public procurement tenders;
solidarity kitchens;
low/no packaging and elimination of fossil fuel-based products throughout the chain and agroecology as a holistic approach

How can economic recoveries be shaped to ensure more inclusive and sustainable patterns of growth that generate decent jobs and support carbon-neutrality and a better balance with nature?

Agroecology is also quite labour intensive, and local processing and development of local/territorial markets will create employment as well as access to healthy, nutritious food. This can form a virtuous circle, based on the FAO’s 10 Elements of agroecology that includes solidarity economy. Solidarity economy helps create cooperatives at local level to bring people from the informal into the formal economy, thus improving employment conditions and general wellbeing.

Cooperatives bringing informally employed agricultural workers into formal employment; food safety nets; improved access to training on agroecology for producers and awareness-raising of importance of fresh healthy agroecological food for consumers; local public procurement of agroecologically grown produce will support more family farmers and agricultural workers jobs as well as creating work for kitchen staff.

How can food systems be transformed to deliver better nutrition for all, while improving their balance with nature?

Nutrition is closely linked to fresh local agroecologically grown food. Essentially greater financial support is needed for local family farming of agroecological/organic produce. Industrial agriculture is cheap because externalities are not included and labour is often not based decent work.

What are the opportunities to be realized (and pitfalls to be avoided) in the immediate and medium terms towards these ends? How can international cooperation support?

Immediate help must support those local agroecological farms feeding inner cities. Excellent examples in Brazil of Landless Peoples farms and family farmers bring all surplus food possible to favelas. Pitfall to be avoided is handing out highly processed foods in soup kitchens. (There is an increase of 200% or more in people using soup kitchens and other charity hand-outs due to job losses).

What are some ways to create fiscal space to combat poverty and hunger and respond to the COVID-19 crisis in ways that enable more inclusive, equitable, resilient and sustainable development?
The background note that introduces the guiding questions (and maybe the HLPF Session) features a number of assumptions and conceptual limitations that need to be challenged. In particular:

- The implicit/explicit assumption that the world is confronted with the challenge to scale-up food production (first para of the executive summary). Not only this assumption is biased on many grounds, including the hard reality of one-third of food currently produced being wasted, but it generates the false impression that the pursuit of food security depends from the lack of availability of food rather than structural socio-economic determinants. This needs to be rectified in the document;
- The notion of ‘food systems’ that underpins the background note is sharply inadequate. Food systems are defined in very conventional terms, by simply extending the obsolete and inadequate value chain approach to the entire set of steps within production, trade and consumption. This misses the fundamental and transformational value of the food system approach which is rather centred on the multifunctionality of food and the multiplicity of public objectives that food systems serve and support. Hence, the food system approach re-claims the public nature of food systems versus the exclusively private approach of value-chains, and exposes the limitations – from an SDG perspective – of the exclusive reliance on the marked-based mechanisms;
- In the COVID context, it is incorrect to state (third para of the executive summary) the “near breakdown of food supply chains in many developing countries and the sharp increase in people suffering from acute food insecurity”. This formulation evokes the idea that local food systems were inadequate on many developing countries, diverging attention from the fact that the real breakdown was in global value chains, while it is local food production that is currently saving the day;
- There is a very simplistic analysis of livestock and its implications, one that does not recognise the existence of fundamentally different livestock production systems. It is the divorce between livestock and crop production that has generated the profound aberrations – in terms of animal health and rights, ecological and climate impact, antimicrobial resistance, and counting – of large-scale industrial livestock productions, while the centrality of livestock within small/medium-scale mixed systems, with its critical impact in terms of soil fertility, and the important of pastoralism in ecosystem regeneration is completely absent from the narrative;
- Lastly, but maybe most importantly from an SDG perspective, the mix of these biased assumptions leads to the false conclusion that there are trade-offs between the various objectives to be pursued. Reclaiming food as a fundamental human right and embracing a holistic/systemic approach to food system transformation, such as the approach enshrined in the agroecological transformation promoted by small-scale food producers, can allow us to simultaneously and synergically tackle the whole spectrum of priorities of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development;

Key Messages towards “Ending hunger and achieving food security for all”: 
1. The action agenda needs to tackle the structural drivers and root causes of hunger and malnutrition in all its forms, which is best done by recognising the multidimensionality of food and the multiplicity of public objectives that food systems serve. This exposes the value of food systems as transversally interlinking multiple SDGs, highlighting the power of the Agroecological Transformation to meet multiple public objectives with no or minimal trade-offs;

2. The COVID crisis exposed the critical role of local food systems and the failure of global value chains and international trade. The food system transformation should therefore place its centre of gravity on dynamic and inclusive local food systems, centred on the agency of small/medium scale food producers and diverse and vibrant territorial markets;

3. Given the fundamentally public nature of multidimensional food systems and their contribution to multiple SDGs, the democratic governance of food systems is critical to their transformation agenda, therefore contrasting current trends towards multistakeholderism and reclaiming the centrality of legitimate public spaces, at all levels, with robust safeguards to protect them against conflict of interest.

Responses to Guiding Questions
1. Which areas and socio-economic groups are especially vulnerable to poor nutrition and food insecurity and what are ways to ensure that food systems transformations leave no one behind?

2. What fundamental changes are needed to make our food systems an engine for inclusive growth and contribute to accelerating progress towards ending hunger and achieving food security for all in the Decade of Action?

1. a) How could they be designed and implemented to generate synergies and strengthen existing ones with other Goals and Targets?

2. b) What are some of the possible trade-offs from these changes and how can they be mitigated?

- Based on the responses to the first guiding question, real transformation of food systems needs to build upon and be centred on the agency of small-scale food producers, with a very critical focus on women’s rights and gender equality. But it also requires a new holistic and systemic food system paradigm, based on the multidimensionality of food and the multiplicity of public objectives served by food systems, ranging from livelihoods to health, ecology, social development, cultural heritage and knowledge systems;

- Furthermore, food system transformation is critical to tackle structural inequalities, as these requires significant socio-economic transformation, shifting the centre of gravity of governmental policies towards the domestic economy and challenging the global division of labour that imposes the continued extraction of resources, commodities and wealth from the Global South. Inequalities within countries are clearly trapped by inequalities between countries. The transformation of food systems is therefore the cornerstone of socio-economic transformation in
developing economies and needs to be supported by the democratization of global economic governance in order to remove the structural and systemic macro-economic obstacles to such a transformation;

- All these elements constitute the core of an Agroecological Transformation anchored in Food Sovereignty. Agroecology is based on a holistic approach and system-thinking. It has technical, social, economic, cultural, spiritual and political dimensions. It combines scientific ecological principles with centuries of peasant knowledge and experience and applies them to the design and management of holistic agroecosystems. Its practices are locally adapted, and diversify farms and farming landscapes, increase biodiversity, nurture soil health, and stimulate interactions between different species, such that the farm provides for its own soil organic matter, pest regulation and weed control, without resort to external chemical inputs. Agroecology has consistently proven capable of sustainably increasing productivity, ensuring adequate nutrition through diverse diets and has far greater potential for fighting hunger and poverty. Evidence is particularly strong on its ability to deliver strong and stable yields by building environmental and climate resilience;

- Importantly, food sovereignty and agroecology promote more localised food systems centred on the agency of local food producers, therefore offering a concrete alternative to the industrial food and agriculture system that is largely dominated by corporations. While agroecology draws on social, biological and agricultural sciences, peasants’ knowledge, experiences and practices are the bedrock of agroecology as a science. Agroecology techniques are therefore not delivered top-down as has been the mainstay of past agricultural technologies but are instead developed on the basis of peasants’ knowledge and experimentation, and through farmer-researcher participatory approaches. Agroecology is therefore not simply about changing agricultural practices and making them more sustainable, although this is important, but is also about creating fundamentally different farming landscapes and livelihoods, and radically reimaging food systems that are diversified, resilient, healthy, equitable and socially just. In this respect, agroecology is a science, a practice and a foundational vision for an inclusive, just and sustainable society;

- Agroecology and food sovereignty therefore offer a truly systemic approach that closely interconnects the various pillars of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in a virtuous and synergic manner, by-passing and overcoming all the claims for possible trade-offs between distinct objectives;

- In this respect, it is essential to reference existing processes within the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) to advance intergovernmental agreements, in consultation with small-scale food producers, Indigenous Peoples and civil society organizations as well as the private sector, on “Guidelines for Food Systems and Nutrition” and “Agroecological and other Innovative Approaches”. It would be extremely important to refer to these processes in the document.

3. **How might COVID-19 facilitate or complicate** the implementation of needed food systems changes?

1. a) Will it aggravate and/or reduce vulnerabilities?
2.  b) What are the changes in design and implementation of policies affecting food systems which are necessary to prevent and better deal with food security and nutrition impacts of infectious disease outbreaks and pandemics in the future?
3.  c) What of the current immediate actions we are seeing will contribute to the long-term resilience of food systems?

- Yet, this is not what is happening in many countries. On the contrary, the COVID-induced crisis has seen an even stronger-than-usual push for the digitalization of food purchases and the promotion of large-scale distribution channels. In many countries, local farmers’ and fish markets have been closed, while supermarkets and other large-scale distribution channels remained open, including by increasing online purchases and deliveries. Many small-scale food producers, including pastoralists and fisher communities, have been confronted with increasing obstacles on how to deliver their produce to families and communities. Some have been subject to lockdowns, at times imposed with brutal means. Seasonal migrant workers have been, once again, subject of marginalization and discrimination; many have also been unable to travel because of the lockdown, while other categories of “business travellers” continue to move across countries. At the same time, food workers within food processing industries continued to perform their duties, despite generalized lockdowns, often in the absence of adequate personal safety equipment. Once again, many central governmental policies have discriminated against small-scale food producers in favour of the industrialized food system. This is in stark contradiction with myriad of local solidarity initiatives and the valuable innovations by small-scale food producers in establishing new platforms to strengthen the local (rural, urban and peri-urban) territorial systems;

- Unfortunately, limited emphasis has been placed on finding adequate ways to ensure local produce, especially fresh fruit and vegetables, local dairy products, fish and other animal sourced food, could be made available through open-air markets, where possible, or new distribution channels, including online sales deliveries. Furthermore, many countries have instigated a sense of unsafety in non-industrial products and open/wet markets, framing safety concern within a significant pro-industrial bias. The immediate consequence of these policies has been a dramatic increase in food waste and plastic.