



“The People’s Summit”: A case for lived experience of food environments as a critical source of evidence to inform the follow-up to the 2021 UN Food Systems Summit

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1. Introduction

Under the direction of the United Nations (UN) Secretary General, a UN Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) took place in September 2021 prior to the 2021 UN General Assembly meeting. The Summit aimed to “launch bold new actions, solutions and strategies to deliver progress on all 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (United Nations, 2021)”, the success of each being directly linked to healthier, more sustainable, and more equitable food systems. To achieve this, the Summit was

positioned as ‘The People’s Summit’, one that aimed to bring people together in a participatory manner to collectively work “to transform the way the world produces, consumes and thinks about food”¹, ideally resulting in a “dramatically elevated public discourse about the importance of food systems” (United Nations, 2021). To this end, various Summit-related initiatives aimed to include multiple stakeholder perspectives (including from citizens) in the lead-up to the event. Similarly, when implementing specific recommendations from the Summit, the goal was to “enable (these) stakeholders to ... design policy options that

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¹ Food environments being defined here as “the interface that mediates one’s food acquisition and consumption with the wider food system, encompassing dimensions such as the availability, accessibility, affordability, desirability, convenience, marketing, and properties of food sources and products.” (Turner et al., 2018). This includes both the retail and consumer food environments.

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deliver against multiple public goods”¹.

Criticisms of the UNFSS design and engagement initiatives have been widespread. These include critiques regarding extensive corporate influence, the imbalance of power and narrow definition of equity adopted by Summit organizers, and lack of adequate breadth and representation in both its scientific committees and its engagement activities (Canfield et al., 2021; Nisbett et al., 2021; MatthewAnderson Molly and McMichael, 2021). This resulted in several hundred civil society organizations (CSOs) boycotting the meeting. However, some food systems organizations and members of the public did take the opportunity to engage through the Summit Action Tracks, the Public Forums, independent Food System Dialogues, and other related Summit mechanisms in the lead-up to the meeting. Whether or not these contributions were successful in moving the Summit closer towards achieving its stated aims remains to be seen.

Alongside, and directly relevant to these Summit engagement initiatives is a growing recognition among food system researchers (and to some extent, relevant policymakers) of the value of engaging stakeholders in the research process to document and leverage people’s ‘lived experience’ of the food system as a way of ensuring people’s voices are heard, and that the actions taken to improve the food system are reflective of their experiences, rather than relying on the knowledge of external ‘experts’. This is particularly the case for those seeking to understand the public’s perspectives on food environments¹ as the point at which they interact with the wider food system as part of daily life (UNSCN Nutrition 44, 2019). Including people’s lived experiences in decision making processes, and as a source of policy and governance mobilization, moves public contributions beyond traditional engagement approaches and effectively puts forth emic forms of knowledge as scientific evidence.

While acknowledging Summit structure and procedural concerns raised by CSOs and others (particularly those related to public engagement), our essay addresses a more fundamental limitation in the very nature of the evidence-gathering processes used to inform the Summit, its planned biennial follow-ups, and resulting UN and member state actions. In this paper, we set out why generating and communicating evidence of people’s lived experience is vital to ensure that the promise of ‘The People’s Summit’ is upheld. We identify three key reasons why, and provide recommendations on how this can be done. We recognize that the lived experiences of all stakeholders in the food system are important and relevant. However, for the purposes of this article we focus on lived experience research (LER) relating to food environments, which are considered to be a key interface where people interact with the wider food system to acquire and consume foods (Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations – FAO, 2016; Turner et al., 2018; HLPE, 2020; Ahmed et al., 2020).

Why lived experience research is vital to ensuring the UN Food Systems Summit delivers for all.

The concept of LER refers to the knowledge generated by understanding how a given person or group experiences their daily lives (Hiles and Green, 2008). When collected through systematic and rigorous research approaches (often - but not always - using qualitative methods, sometimes in combination with quantitative methods), this knowledge can provide insights into why policies and actions succeed or fail and can act as a key source of evidence to inform the design, implementation, and evaluation of interventions and policy actions to improve food environments. Additionally, this type of inquiry helps to pre-empt unintentional consequences (including widening gaps in inequality) as it explores how policy actions ‘land’ and are experienced in people’s lives. Ultimately, LER findings have the potential to help us understand the complexity of ‘policy in practice’ (Wertheim-Heck et al., 2019), and in so doing expose the need for better cross-sectoral connections and the ‘de-siloing’ and better coordination of government responses.

The vital role that LER could play in ensuring that the UNFSS delivers for people is described in the three sections below, along with relevant examples:

- 1) Understanding the problem from the perspective of the people who experience it as the starting point for exploring the systemic causes that shape the experience.

Including evidence from LER into processes of prioritizing relevant actions or developing related implementation strategies can assist in exploring how existing, as well as new policy actions ‘land’ and combine in the lives of their intended beneficiaries. In the case of evidence of how people navigate and make food choices in their local food environments, this is an important *starting point* in understanding not only how various food system-related actions and policies are ultimately experienced by consumers, but also how actions and policies (e.g., government regulations that influence the trade or marketing of food, or private retail marketing and pricing actions to promote certain food products) implemented by or through other systems (e.g., health, education, or urban infrastructure and planning) either support or hinder food system actions, specifically those that shape food environments. This sort of evidence, especially when combined or triangulated with quantitative evidence, and that resulting from other analytical methods (e.g., geo-spatial analysis or econometrics), can ultimately provide better insights into how nutrition-relevant actions can be made more coherent. This approach can also provide a more in-depth and comprehensive understanding of food systems and the drivers of food acquisition practices in diverse food environments. These valuable insights have the potential to identify leverage points within the system(s) for transformative change and resilience building, as illustrated by the following two examples:

The fields of systems thinking and system dynamics, and particularly the use of community-based system dynamics methods such as group model building workshops (Hovmand, 2014; Waqa et al., 2017), have been especially useful in serving as a starting point in gathering evidence from those with lived experience to understand the interconnected systems underlying complex problems. For example, Gerritsen et al. (2019) used this method with a group of adolescents and community stakeholders from Auckland, New Zealand to identify systemic barriers to children’s fruit and vegetable consumption, allowing the identification of actions to improve the local food environment.

The use of participatory photography approaches also provides an opportunity for greater understanding of all the drivers within the food environment and beyond, that influence dietary behaviors. One such example is from LER conducted with low-income residents of three African cities (Nairobi, Accra, and Ho), each at different stages of the nutrition transition (Pradeilles et al., 2021). By placing emphasis on understanding phenomena from the perspective of consumers via placing cameras in their hands, participants’ voices could be better represented and shared in the results of the study. Local photography exhibitions were held and attended by a range of stakeholders including the study participants themselves, local community members, Non-Governmental Organizations, representatives from national and local government, and the media. These events were instrumental in linking participants to community leaders/officials who have the power to action change and to initiate a dialogue on how change can take place. The results from the participatory photography activity were triangulated with findings from an evidence synthesis and expert consultation to produce a framework of factors influencing dietary behaviors in urban African food environments, and to inform research prioritization and intervention development in Africa (Osei-Kwasi et al., 2021).

- 2) Enabling stakeholders to hear the voice of consumer experience

Evidence from LER has proven to be highly valued by policy and other key decision makers in that it provides accurate, timely, and compelling insights into rapidly changing food environment-related contexts (Spires et al., 2021a; Brons et al., 2020) by relaying, and sometimes amplifying participant voices with regard to their experiences in these contexts. The performances of food practices and their configurations in food environments and lifestyles are dynamic,

whereby what is preferred and socially acceptable is changing over time (Wertheim-Heck and Raneri, 2020a, 2020b; Wertheim-Heck et al., 2015). LER findings facilitate understandings of this, and other real-world dynamics that can often help convince different governmental departments, usually siloed in nature and practice, to collaborate more often (and more effectively) on domain-transsecting food issues.

One key way in which perspectives of LER participants have been effectively communicated to policymakers is through representative or collective, evidence-based anecdotes or stories pulled from research findings (Spires et al., 2021b). Real life stories can evoke relatable connections, providing an effective way to gain attention around a specific issue and communicate possible ways to address it. These stories have also been shown to be useful in simplifying the complexity of the food system by representing it from people's perspectives in a succinct manner to decision makers who very often are limited by pressing time constraints.

One such example of this approach was taken by the London Childhood Obesity Taskforce who have explicitly placed children, and children's lived experiences, at the heart of their efforts:

Appointed by the Mayor of London, the taskforce (which consists of local charities, relevant government entities, and other interested parties) is responsible for improving public health towards lowering the percentage of London's children who are affected by overweight or obesity. To this end, Taskforce members created case studies, or illustrative profiles of representative children who live in London. These profiles shared the children's stories with regard to their various interactions with their food environments and how these experiences affected their ability to get or remain healthy. Associated facilitators and barriers to healthier behaviors were noted. These stories, which represented accurate experiences, played a key role in identifying and communicating existing concerns to relevant stakeholders in the city, including key decision makers that were in a position to enact change.

Similarly, a study conducted in Vietnam with the aim to inform policymakers and enlarge their capacity to design all-inclusive food safety strategies, adopted a film-essay approach to portray the everyday in-home and shopping practices of Hanoi residents (Wertheim-Heck and Raneri, 2019). The filming process allowed researchers to document the ongoing interaction of people in a specific context and aspects of the environment that structure these interactions, while preserving the temporal and sequential structure, which is characteristic of interaction (Knoblauch et al., 2006). The final film-essay (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ZiZ2xSvffY> Accessed March 15, 2023, 2023) was shared during a multi-stakeholder workshop in which a 'constructive confrontation design' approach was adopted to encourage participants to actively reflect on the perspectives shared through the research. Including the views of multiple stakeholders in the workshop strengthened resulting policy considerations for advancing the retail modernization process and future orientation.

3) Enabling opportunities to co-design policy enactment and implementation.

Not only does LER uncover valuable insights into how people interact with food environments and ways to improve them, but this rigorous involvement in co-evidence generation also has the potential to educate, build capacity, and empower members of the public themselves to more effectively influence food systems directly. Additionally, we know that citizen-consumers are skilled and knowledgeable agents (Cohen et al., 2020). This cooperative approach encouraged as part of LER acknowledges people's agency which can often be overlooked in food environment transformation debates (TezzoHsu Mon Aung Ben Belton et al., 2021; Wertheim-Heck and Spaargaren, 2016).

It is especially important to actively seek out and include the perspectives and voices of marginalized groups in this process to ensure that findings and resulting actions are fully inclusive and representative in nature. In fact, LER methods have proven to be well suited to investigate

(in)equity within the food system, providing a lens to explore individual and intermediate level causes of (in)equity in relation to wider structural determinants (Addressing Obesity in Stevenage). To this end, LER can help to identify and understand the differential needs, as well as encourage the participation of marginalized groups (Daivadanam et al., 2015).

One such example of this is the EatSafe COVID-19 response program (GAIN, 2021), under which GAIN (Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition) partnered with market associations and local authorities to improve market hygiene and the availability of safe and nutritious foods in two food markets in Dhaka, Bangladesh. The team started implementing bi-weekly rapid assessments of consumer and vendor perspectives on the availability of nutritious food, health safety information, and the resilience of markets to inform local authorities on ways to keep markets open. Based on shared findings, a Consumer Affiliation program was established to convene consumers, vendors, and the market associations to discuss the results of the market surveys and solicit feedback on how to build a safer and healthier market environment. Consumers and vendors were organized in groups and encouraged to design their ideal markets through graphic art and/or in written form, which provided a platform to share their thoughts, concepts, and components of an ideal market, and how they would wish to access healthy foods in these spaces. The program further developed a connection among the market association, consumers, and vendors, and provided important learnings for any adaptation of markets in the future. This approach has shown to be helpful in creating good governance and ultimately support market system resilience.

2. Suggested recommendations

Although an attempt to consider people's voices has been made by UNFSS organizers through various engagement initiatives, we contend that the UNFSS did not adequately consider *evidence* of lived experience as a means of ensuring the Summit delivers to people, as outlined above. In terms of how this can be done, we make the following key recommendations to Summit organizers (and others) to consider as part of their ongoing efforts to ensure the follow-up of what is positioned as 'The People's Summit' delivers for all:

Those involved in following up on actions coming out of the proceedings should make an explicit commitment to the general principle that LER will be considered as a source of evidence as part of any recommendations made, and that feedback from considering LER will be provided to demonstrate this commitment. The UNFSS can learn a great deal in this regard from looking at the UK National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) principles regarding public involvement in all research that is used to shape policy (UK Standards for Public Involvement, 2021; Centre for Research, 2021). The NIHR expects people with lived experience to be involved in every aspect of the research process, through to implementation of research evidence (NIHR, 2021; Mathie et al., 2018).

Making such a commitment, and taking such evidence into consideration would allow for a more accurate and nuanced understanding of food system realities, that perhaps otherwise might not be considered; for example: LER provides important evidence on the dynamics within the informal side of the food system (Wertheim-Heck and Raneri, 2020c) (the exclusion of such considerations in Summit build-up activities and UNFSS proceedings were central to the critiques of the Summit made by smallholder producers and Indigenous communities). This call for inclusion of LER aligns with calls for the inclusion of plural forms of knowledge and for consideration of a knowledge-policy interface (Turnhout et al., 2021).

Additionally, beyond national-level actions coming out of the Summit, we strongly recommend that LER evidence plays a key role in informing subnational food planning efforts. By so doing, those involved can gain contextualized insights into how food system actions experienced at more local levels combine with interventions or actions coming out of other systems (e.g., healthcare and spatial planning).

It is also worth noting that LER insights can also help us understand and more effectively address other SDGs; for example, how inequalities are experienced and thus can be reduced (SDG 10), or how cities and local neighborhoods are navigated and experienced and how these insights can contribute to changes that not only improve human health, but also that of the planet (SDG 11). Consequently, we strongly recommend that LER evidence be seriously considered by those involved in moving these goals forward.

3. Conclusion

It is widely understood that certain key stakeholder groups within the food system (e.g., food manufacturers and retailers) have embraced forms of lived experience research, studying the habits, tastes, aspirations, etc. of consumers to shape their products, pricing, marketing, and policies that govern their sectors. Policymakers and advocates are at a severe disadvantage in this regard, as they currently do not have the same type of evidence to improve food environments and food system governance towards better human health. To bring about effective food system transformation, policymakers need to understand how populations are impacted by planned food policies and interventions to ensure they are relevant and leverage the creative agency demonstrated by citizen-consumers. Although challenges to these sorts of approaches exist (Centre for Food Policy, 2018), evidence from LER is essential in understanding how change is being understood and experienced on the ground by those interacting with the food system via local food environments. Not only that, but failing to adequately take people's lived experiences of food environments into consideration can lead to costly intervention failures. Consequently, it is crucial that LER evidence of food environments becomes an integral part of Summit follow-ups and recommended actions in all stages of policy development, implementation, and evaluation at all levels of governance, particularly during the planned biennial UN Food Systems Stocktaking moments, starting in July 2023.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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