

# PEOPLE VS. AGRIBUSINESS CORPORATIONS

THE BATTLE OVER GLOBAL FOOD AND AGRICULTURE GOVERNANCE



The Oakland Institute



“We are boycotting the UN Food Systems Summit” said Elizabeth Mpofu, organic peasant farmer from Zimbabwe and Co-ordinator of Via Campesina in July 2021. Like Ms. Mpofu, hundreds of farmer organizations, Indigenous groups, social and economic justice NGOs and social movements have rejected the Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) organized by the United Nations in September 2021 to fulfil the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030.<sup>1</sup> With 746 million people suffering from severe food insecurity, an additional 1.25 billion people experiencing or facing moderate food insecurity<sup>2</sup> and an escalating climate crisis, the need for significant global action is urgent to deliver on SDGs. So why such an opposition to a conference that is set to realize such a noble objective?

## Failed Green Revolution Sold as the Model for the World

A first concern is the deeply problematic leadership of the Summit, with the appointment by the UN Secretary General António Guterres of Dr. Agnes Kalibata, President of the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA),<sup>3</sup> who also sits on the board of the International Fertilizer Development Center (IFDC), as UN Special Envoy to the Summit.

Given the history of AGRA, the appointment of its President to lead, prepare, and design the Summit, was seen as a sign that it would be just another forum to advance the interests of agribusiness at the expense of farmers and the planet.

Founded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation, AGRA's efforts have centered on capturing and diverting public resources to benefit large corporate interests. Their finance-intensive and high input agricultural model is not sustainable beyond constant subsidy, which is drawn from increasingly scarce public resources. Since 2006, AGRA has worked to open up Africa—seen as an untapped market for agribusiness corporations controlling commercial seeds, genetically modified crops, fossil fuel-heavy synthetic fertilizers and polluting pesticides. This is an ill-conceived



10 February 2020, Rome, Italy — FAO Director-General Qu Dongyu meeting with Ms Agnes Kalibata, Secretary General Special Envoy for Food Systems Summit, FAO headquarters. © FAO/Giulio Napolitano.





Sprayers for agrochemicals © Greenpeace.

approach focused on monocultural commodity production by large agribusiness at the expense of sustainable livelihoods, the planet, and the climate.

Recent research has exposed the failure of AGRA on its own terms. After nearly 15 years and a spend of over US\$500 million<sup>4</sup> to promote the use of commercial seeds, chemical fertilizers, and pesticides in 13 African countries, and additional US\$1 billion per year of government subsidies for seeds and fertilizers, AGRA fails to provide evidence that incomes or food security increased for smallholder households across its target countries.<sup>5</sup>

In fact, since the onset of the program, the number of undernourished people across these 13 countries has increased by 30 percent.<sup>6</sup> Even where staple crop production did increase, there was no reduction of rural poverty or hunger, but instead, often displacement of diverse, climate-resilient crops. These findings reaffirm the failure of AGRA's approach promoting monocultural commodity production by large agribusiness.

Ignoring the past failures of the Green Revolution and industrial agriculture, AGRA continues to promote the same, orienting farmers into global value chains for the export of standardized commodities. Vast power imbalances in these global chains means multinational grain traders, silo owners, transport companies, feed manufacturers, and financial institutions extract and retain the majority of value for themselves, while farmers remain trapped in cycles of poverty and debt.

Furthermore, this model of fossil fuel-based industrial agriculture is laying waste to the environment. Food systems are responsible for 34 percent of all greenhouse gas emissions, with production processes, which include inputs such as fertilizers, as the leading contributor.<sup>7</sup> Nitrogen from these fertilizers is poorly absorbed by plants, and subsequently leaches into water systems and escapes into the atmosphere in the form of nitrous oxide. Long distance transport adds carbon emissions. Family farmers, pastoralists, and Indigenous communities who are the stewards of the land and guardians of agricultural biodiversity are marginalized and forced off their land, replaced by pesticide-reliant monocultures.



Dupont maize seed in Ethiopia © New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition.





## A Top-Down Corporate Led Summit

A second concern relates to the way the Food Systems Summit was initiated and organized, overlooking and sidelining the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) and other established institutions and mechanisms of the United Nations. At the difference of previous similar international food summits, organized or co-organized by the of UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) at its Headquarters in Rome, the idea of the Summit emerged from the World Economic Forum, a private sector organization representing global corporate interests.

In the face of the widespread criticism over the appointment of AGRA's President to lead the Summit, a mere twelve individuals from development banks, academic institutions, and private firms, expressed their support of Dr. Kalibata's appointment. All but one of the affiliated institutions are funded by AGRA's primary funding source—the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.<sup>8</sup>

The composition of the Summit's Advisory Committee and Scientific Group reflected the vision and approach of its promoters. While representatives from civil society and social movements remained outnumbered, the same corporate voices that have shaped the current food system that the Summit allegedly seeks to “rapidly change,” were dominant.<sup>9</sup>

Five “Action Tracks” were announced in September 2020 to “offer all constituencies a space to share and learn, with a view to supercharging their progress by fostering new actions and partnerships and by amplifying existing initiatives.” Among the leaders of the “Action Tracks” were the Global Alliance for Increased Nutrition (GAIN), the EAT Forum, and the World Wildlife Fund (WWF).



Industrial agriculture in Southern Africa © The Oakland Institute.



Sharing several of the same major donors as AGRA,<sup>10</sup> including the Gates Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, as well as agribusiness conglomerates like BASF and Unilever—GAIN, which was appointed to lead the “Ensure Access to Safe and Nutritious Food for All” track—is a strong advocate for private-sector solutions to address nutrition issues.<sup>11</sup>

Leading the “Shift to Sustainable Consumption Patterns” Track was EAT, whose leadership<sup>12</sup> and board<sup>13</sup> is closely tied to the World Economic Forum, an organization representing the interests of the world's wealthiest. It has no incentive to dramatically change the rules of the game.

Lastly, WWF was made responsible for leading the “Boost Nature Positive Production” track, despite the organization's deeply disturbing legacy of perpetrating violence<sup>14</sup> and forced evictions against Indigenous communities in the name of “conservation” around the world.<sup>15</sup>

By pairing these organizations with United Nation's institutions to lead “Action Tracks,” the Summit was just set to perpetuate a top-down corporate approach to feed the world.

Raising even more questions was that an ad-hoc Scientific Group was established for the Summit, overlooking a preexisting international group, the High-Level Panel of Experts (HLPE), working under the CFS since 2009<sup>16</sup> and modelled after the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

These concerns suggest that the Summit was not intended to trigger the deep systemic changes necessary to address the massive challenges that we face. It was rather seen as an attempt to do more of the same—green and poor wash—to preserve and perpetuate interests of agribusiness and agrochemical corporations at the expense of people and the planet.



# The World Calls for a Radical Change of Course for Food and Agriculture...

While there were low expectations of what the Food Systems Summit could eventually achieve, an unexpected and certainly unwanted positive outcome is that it has generated and catalysed the broad and growing opposition around the world to the Western model of monocultural agriculture, highly reliant on agrochemicals and fossil fuel-based fertilizers.

In the months leading to the Summit, an unprecedented number of petitions, events, public communications and other advocacy actions took place around the world, including for instance:

- In February 2020, 176 organizations from 83 countries, wrote to the UN Secretary-General Guterres to condemn and reject the appointment of the President of AGRA as Special Envoy to the UN Food Systems Summit, warning that the Summit will just be “another forum that advances the interests of agribusiness at the expense of farmers and our planet.”<sup>17</sup>
- In March 2020, 550 civil society organizations sent another letter to the Secretary-General condemning the involvement of the World Economic Forum in the UNFSS, the appointment of the Special Envoy due to her links to corporate agribusiness, the failure of the UNFSS to elevate the primacy and indivisibility of human rights frameworks as foundational to the governance of food systems, and the necessity of civil society organizations to have an autonomous, self-organized, and equal ‘seat at the table.’
- In June 2021, nearly 500 African faith leaders sent a letter to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation<sup>18</sup> to end its damaging support for industrial agriculture. The letter rejects the Foundation’s



approach to food security, in the face of the intensifying climate crisis, as doing more harm than good on the continent. It calls on Gates and other AGRA donors to listen to small-scale farmers and stop supporting industrial agriculture.

- On July 25-28, 2021, some 9,000 people and hundreds of farmer groups and NGOs gathered for a virtual counter mobilization to oppose the Food Systems Pre-Summit. The alternative forum, hailed a huge success, drew together a wide variety of attendees and catalysed a counter-narrative to the official proceedings brought together by hundreds of civil society groups and farmer organizations.<sup>19</sup>
- During the summer of 2021, a Global People’s Summit on Food Systems was initiated by civil society organizations,<sup>20</sup> with national summits organized at country or regional level as a direct challenge to the UNFSS. For instance, in the Philippines, the SALU-SALO NA! People’s Summit called among other things for an end to the liberalization and foreign domination on food, genuine land reform, just price and wages, strengthening Filipino agriculture and rural and national industries, and farmer-led research and development.<sup>21</sup>
- The African Faith leaders’ letter to the Gates Foundation was echoed in September 2021 by another call made by two hundred civil society organizations and the members of the Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa asking AGRA donors to stop funding so-called Green Revolution programs in Africa.<sup>22</sup> This call again underlined the problematic role of AGRA as leading the UNFSS.



This unprecedented mobilization has brought together academics, scientists, farmers, NGOs and people from around the world, all united to question a failed model and call for a radical change of course in order to address the pressing challenges of hunger, environment degradation, and climate change. What the world needs to do is known and documented,<sup>23</sup> it involves the valorization of Indigenous knowledge and practices, support to agroecology, organic, low-input agriculture, crop diversification, agro-forestry, promotion of local traditional crops, of farmer-to-consumers schemes, and more.

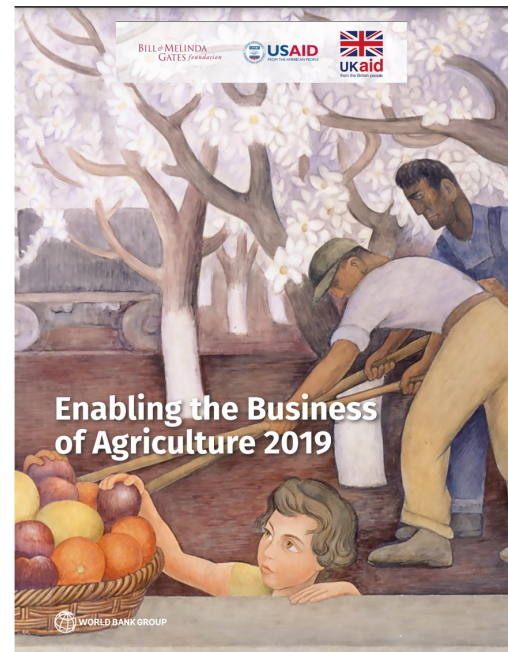




## ...And Reject Corporate-led Food and Agriculture

This historic mobilization goes beyond the rejection of a certain model of production to also call out the efforts made at the international level to promote this model by the unholy alliance of large foundations such as Gates and Rockefeller, a few Northern governments, international institutions such as the World Bank, as well as the corporations and private interests benefiting from further expansion of industrial agriculture.

In addition to AGRA, a number of international initiatives have been established in the past decade with similar goals. The now defunct New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition (NAFSN) was launched in 2012 by the G8 in “partnership” with 10 African governments, private corporations, development organizations, and aid donors. This controversial agreement aimed to “unlock private investments in agriculture in Africa” and lift 50 million out of poverty. From its very inception, it came under heavy criticism for promoting the reach of multinationals like Bayer-Monsanto, Syngenta and Yara, into African seed, pesticides, land, and fertilizer markets—to the detriment of smallholder farmers.<sup>24</sup> In the Cooperation Frameworks approved in 2012, the ten New Alliance countries initially committed to 213 policy changes across a range of agriculture and food security issues, all focused on improving the ‘investment climate’ through pro-business reforms. These



included corporate tax exemptions, reforms on seed and fertilizer policies to facilitate and increase private-sector investments, implementation of private property regime for seeds, and easing of land transfers and leases, to name a few.

Development Partners	Agricultural Suppliers & Financiers
Technical & Operational Supporters	Agricultural Producers & Buyers

Partners of the SAGCOT initiative in Tanzania in 2014.



The Enabling the Business of Agriculture (EBA) index run since 2014 by the World Bank is again financed by the Gates Foundation, the US and the UK governments with the objective to guide and monitor policy reforms made by governments not just in Africa but around the world. The EBA project was established with the explicit goal to guide governments to implement pro-business policy changes and reforms in the agricultural sector.<sup>25</sup> Policy changes and regulations promoted by the EBA relate notably to seed laws, favouring the expansion of patented commercial seeds.<sup>26</sup> In terms of land tenure, the EBA prescribes to governments in the Global South to privatize their land, which is still mostly under customary land tenure or legally considered public land.<sup>27</sup> The EBA constitutes an explicit form of aid conditionality, as countries are scored and

ranked on the reforms they conduct, which in turns informs the financing decisions of international donors.

These different initiatives have in common a handful of donors who share the same vision for food and agriculture that is largely based on expanding the use of commercial seeds and agrochemicals in agriculture, on privatizing and opening up land to large scale plantations, and attracting private investors to the sector. They also have in common an approach that uses the financial leverage of donors and international institutions to ensure governments in the Global South follow this vision in their policy making rather than putting in place the radical shifts needed to address hunger, the loss of biodiversity, and climate change.

## The Critical Role of United Nations for Policy Making for Food and Agriculture

This approach is in sharp contrast with the principles that established governance mechanisms tasked to deal with food and agriculture globally. At the genesis of the creation of the FAO in 1945 is that hunger, food and agriculture, are universal issues that have to be dealt with through multilateralism and international cooperation. This vision is very much in line with the foundation principles that led to the creation of the United

Nations, conceived as the place where common values, principles, and goals, are formalized and upheld. These principles were reaffirmed by previous World Food Summits in 1974, 1996, 2002, and 2008, which all emphasized the principles of multilateralism, solidarity, and cooperation between states to address these issues. Global institutions and mechanisms such as the FAO and the CFS were established to implement





CFS

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**AGROECOLOGICAL AND OTHER  
INNOVATIVE APPROACHES**  
FOR SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE AND  
FOOD SYSTEMS THAT ENHANCE FOOD  
SECURITY AND NUTRITION

Policy recommendations

SUSTAINABLE  
DEVELOPMENT  
GOALS

with a core focus on:



Contributes to SDG 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 14, 16 & 17

these principles and to help countries determine appropriate policies and mechanisms to deal with food and agriculture.

The CFS was thus established in 1974 and reformed in 2009 as “an inclusive international and intergovernmental platform for all stakeholders to work together to ensure food security and nutrition for all.” It has been very active over the past decade as a policy forum for food and agriculture, allowing space for meaningful consultation, negotiation, and dialogue between states, also involving civil society and producer organizations from around the world. The forum is supported by a High-Level Panel of Experts (HLPE), a group of experts widely acknowledged as competent and diverse, which has prepared comprehensive reports on a number of important policy matters.

Together the FAO and the CFS have produced critical documents of universal scope in relation to the right to food, tenure rights, access to natural resources and other rights of peasants. These include for instance the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture, the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests, and the Voluntary Guidelines to Support the Progressive Realization of the Right to Adequate Food.<sup>28</sup> The Voluntary Guidelines on Food Systems and Nutrition are the latest guidelines adopted by the CFS in February 2021. The guidelines are not legally binding but constitute an inter-governmental and multi-stakeholder negotiated policy

tool for use by governments, and their partners to develop appropriate policies, investments and institutional arrangements to address the causes of hunger and malnutrition.<sup>29</sup>

Another key document of universal scope is the UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas, which was adopted by the UN Human Rights Council in September 2018. The Declaration states as a priority to strengthen food sovereignty, the fight against climate change and the conservation of biodiversity. It calls for a rapid transition from corporate-dominated industrial agriculture to family farms working in harmony with nature and maintaining diverse ecosystems. It recognizes agroecology as a practical solution for systemic change to ensure dignified rural livelihoods and the right to healthy food and nutrition for all, while freeing farmers from cycles of debt and dependency.

A major challenge for humanity, for our ability to eradicate hunger and to fight climate change, is that the policies, guidelines and declarations prepared and negotiated by United Nations bodies, often after years of research and work by hundreds of experts, are not followed or implemented. This concern was stressed by Chris Hegadorn, Secretary of CFS, who also underlined that the “CFS suffers from chronic underinvestment”<sup>30</sup> and that resources are lacking to promote the right responses to the massive challenges of our time and assist governments in their implementation.





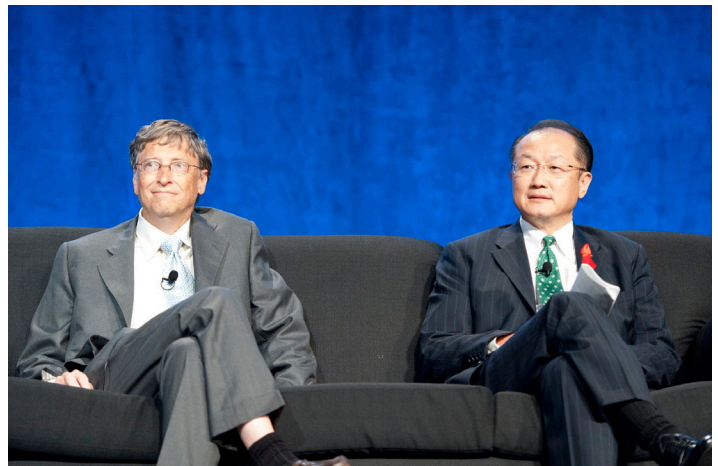
## Rich Countries and Big Foundations Sidelining the United Nations

Rich nations and particularly the US have a long history of reluctant support and distrust of the FAO. The FAO is currently led by a Chinese national, Qu Dongyu. Qu Dongyu won the nomination on the first round of voting at the 41st FAO Conference on June 23, 2019, obtaining 108 of the 191 votes cast by the 194 member countries in what was seen as a stunning defeat for the United States.<sup>31</sup> It is likely that a large majority of the countries that voted for Qu Dongyu are from the Global South, similarly to the election of the two previous directors of the organization, a Brazilian and a Senegalese.

For decades, the US has been less than supportive of FAO's emphasis on agriculture in developing countries and FAO's ties and 'kindness' to countries of the Eastern Block during the Cold War.<sup>32</sup> Like several other rich nations, the US felt that specialized agencies such as the FAO were too much under the influence of developing countries,<sup>33</sup> which were enjoying some power in an organization where each country has one vote and is governed by a body where membership had increased to 194 countries from 42 countries at the time of its creation.<sup>34</sup> As detailed in the comprehensive historical account prepared by Matthew Canfield, Molly D. Anderson and Philip McMichael, over the years, "the FAO was weakened by the creation of an alternative funding agency, the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), delinking of the World Food Program (WFP) from the FAO, and relocation of agricultural research to the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) in the World Bank."<sup>35</sup>

The US, UK, and some other rich nations and foundations such as Gates' are much more supportive of initiatives such as AGRA and international institutions they more directly control when it comes to influencing food and agriculture globally. As the first donor of the World Bank, the US largely control the Bretton Woods institution where the voting rights are proportional to the amount of funding provided. The Bank closely follows an agenda that is in line with the neo-liberal Washington Consensus and US foreign policy and economic goals, promoting policies favourable to agri-business and agrochemical corporations.

Another institution favoured by rich countries over the FAO is the World Food Programme (WFP), which heavily relies on US food aid and funding and whose Executive Director, just like the World Bank President, is traditionally a US citizen. WFP was established in 1963 as a three-year experimental program of the FAO to handle food surplus disposal by rich countries. It remained under the direct control of FAO until the end of the 1980s, and was then emancipated from its mother agency



Bill Gates and World Bank Group President Jim Yong Kim at the 2016 World Bank / IMF Spring Meetings © Simone D. McCourtie / World Bank.

after a long process, which took more than ten years and fierce fighting.<sup>36</sup> It has grown to be today the largest humanitarian organization in the world. In 2020, the year it received the Peace Nobel Prize, WFP raised US\$8.4 billion for its operations,<sup>37</sup> far exceeding the FAO budget of US\$1.5 billion for that year.<sup>38</sup> It is telling that the United Nations program in charge of the provision of emergency food aid in wars and disasters enjoys six times the resources than the FAO, which has the much broader responsibility of the world's food and agriculture.

This being said, FAO and the CFS are also battling grounds where the proponents of industrial agriculture have been aggressively pushing their agenda. The US government has for instance repeatedly undermined the negotiations on the CFS Voluntary Guidelines on Food Systems and Nutrition.<sup>39</sup> In similar fashion to US Ambassador Kip Tom's attempt to derail international policy discussions around agroecology, the US representation to the CFS has objected to the inclusion of references to the UN 2030 Agenda, human rights frameworks (specifically the Right to Adequate Food, the UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants, and ILO Convention 169 on Indigenous Peoples' Rights) references to the World Health Organization and regional public health authorities, and safeguards against conflicts of interest in public policy-making spaces.<sup>40</sup> In recent years, FAO has opened itself to the influence of agrochemical firms and announced in 2020 plans to deepen collaboration with CropLife International by entering into a formal partnership with this global trade association, which represents the interests of agrochemical companies that produce and promote pesticides. This partnership was denounced by hundreds of civil society organizations from around the world as going against FAO's mission.<sup>41</sup>





## The Way Forward for Global Food and Agriculture Governance

The 2021 Food Systems Summit initiated by the World Economic Forum and led by an organization closely tied to agrochemical interests such as AGRA appears like an attempt for the corporations that are part of the problem to have their hands on the elaboration of the solutions. As the urgency to reduce carbon emissions, halt the destruction of our planet, and ensure decent livelihoods for all, is every day more acute, these forces pushing for more technology and agrochemicals are clearly getting in the way of the major shifts that are required for our food and agriculture systems.

The good news is that a transition to truly sustainable food and agriculture systems is affordable for governments in the Global South, which spend billions of dollars every year to subsidize fertilizers and pesticides for their farmers. Instead of subsidies that end up in the pockets of agrochemical corporations, their scarce resources will be more effectively used to invest into production practices that sustain livelihoods and address the massive challenges of our time.

The intense efforts deployed by these corporations and the international initiatives that support them to influence governments actually demonstrate that change is possible provided that governments can free themselves from their influence and start implementing responsible policies. Existing United Nations agencies and mechanisms constitute important assets that can support the design of such policies and establish international cooperation to support their implementation. But this will only be possible if the United Nations remain faithful



Farmers in paddy fields in Madagascar © The Oakland Institute.

and accountable to the fundamental values that were at the basis of their creation.

With the historic global mobilization seen over the past year in opposition to the Food Systems Summit, millions of farmers and citizens from around the globe rose up to hold international institutions and their own governments accountable. Whereas the United Nations were created by states, in today's globalized and interconnected world, civil society organizations, building alliances across borders and sectors, have established themselves as a central actor to defend the universalist values and principles on which the international organization was built.



Farmer protest in the Philippines, January 9, 2021 © KMP.





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Photo p.7: Maungdaw, Myanmar—Farm laborers and livestock are seen in a paddy field in Warcha village, April 2016, © FAO / Hkun La

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