

Profiting from Hunger

Popular resistance to corporate food systems



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- mobilising support and building alliances for political action in support of human rights, especially workers' rights
- raising public awareness of the root causes of poverty, inequality and injustice, and empowering people to take action for change.

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Preface

More than a decade has passed since the publication of War on Want's 2011 report, 'Food Sovereignty: Reclaiming the Global Food System', which illustrated how corporate capitalism is driving global hunger; through the control of agricultural production, large-scale global trade and the widespread sale of agricultural 'inputs' such as genetically modified seeds and chemical fertilisers.

Since then, many of these problems have intensified and – at the same time – complex new challenges have emerged. The consequences of the 2008 financial crisis, with its austerity measures imposed by international financial institutions on governments around the world, have exacerbated poverty and inequality in many Global South countries and increased their debt, deepening their economic crises. Meanwhile, mounting militarisation around the world has heavily impacted food and nutrition, disrupting food supply chains and destroying harvests.

On top of this, the world is now in the grip of the climate crisis, which is already having severe impacts particularly on countries of the Global South, causing frequent and intense climate disasters which are devastating the lives and livelihoods of millions of people. The level of disruption to global food production is one of the many challenges deeply connected to the worsening climate crisis and illustrates how unsustainable the current global industrial food system is.

1.5°C of global heating risks crop failure of staple crops in major food-producing countries. While increased heatwaves, droughts and floods from climate breakdown are already exposing millions of people to acute food insecurity.¹ At the same time, the industrial model of food production, a legacy of colonialism extended further through the Green Revolution and neoliberal policies, is among the primary drivers of the climate crisis: **between 21% and 34% of global greenhouse emissions are related to this rigged system of food production.**

The recent Covid-19 pandemic represents another shock to the economic crisis that has been unfolding across the last decade. **This structural crisis of neoliberalism is at the root of the economic and debt crisis of the countries in the Global South: it has caused widening inequality between countries and within countries.** These worldwide macroeconomic and structural injustices are having concrete impacts on the most marginalised communities around the world, affecting the cost of primary goods such as food, fuel, and energy.

Today, the corporate food system, the same system responsible for approximately one third of global greenhouse emissions, is a major promoter of damaging false climate solutions, so-called 'nature-based' or 'nature positive' models. Multinational agribusinesses are peddling the concept that only through technological fixes, the digitalisation of agriculture and the acquisition of land for carbon markets, we will be able to come out of the climate crisis and stay below 1.5°C.

What is really being proposed by corporate agriculture is the further concentration of land into the hands of a few; and the continued dispossession of peasants, Indigenous peoples, fisherfolk, and other food producers in the Global South. If allowed, this could lead to new colonial-style land grabbing under the guise of climate solutions. All the way through the production chain, from seed to plate, the global food system is inextricably connected to the climate crisis, and tweaks to the current dominant model of food production will not meet these challenges. In fact, if left, multinational agribusinesses will continue to dominate and control climate responses to further their own agenda: radical alternatives are urgently needed.

However, there is hope. A growing movement of peasants and food producers around the world are reclaiming an alternative food system based on the principles of food sovereignty: ‘the fundamental right of all peoples, nations and states to control food and agricultural systems and policies, ensuring everyone has adequate, affordable, nutritious and culturally appropriate food’. The food sovereignty movement not only provides a response to poverty, hunger, and inequality, but a real solution to cool the planet.

Food sovereignty can take different shapes: from struggles for the right to land and agrarian reform in the face of land grabbing and displacement, to the fight for the right to use peasant-owned and traditional seeds. It can take the form of peasant agroecology – a science, a social movement, and a way of life – to local and low-cost climate adaptation and mitigation strategies. It has meant intensive work for the recognition of a UN framework and legal instrument to defend people’s rights over their land, seeds, water and other

natural resources; and daily struggles for better working conditions for farmworkers in export-oriented farms in the Global South, and in poultry factories in the Global North.

War on Want has been at the forefront of the fight against poverty, hunger, and inequality since its founding more than 70 years ago. Today, we are still working with our partners around the world to bring forward a different model of food production and distribution, based on the principles of food sovereignty.

The right to food is a fundamental human right, which protects the rights of all people to live in dignity; free from hunger, food insecurity and malnutrition. Yet, the current model of food production is failing to deliver this right, because although enough food is grown to feed the world’s population twice over, it is done so to maximise profits for the corporations which control the supply chains. Grain sits rotting in agricultural silos while people go hungry.

Meeting the challenge of keeping global heating to 1.5°C means a transformation of our global systems, including the food system. War on Want is at the forefront of advocating for a radical Global Green New Deal to transform our global economy away from systems of limitless extraction and exploitation, towards those of care and repair. A radical Global Green New Deal for food means a transition to the model of food sovereignty as the only pathway to keep global heating to within 1.5°C, respect planetary boundaries and undo historical injustices rife within the global food system.

‘Profiting from hunger: popular resistance to corporate food systems’, will cover some of the most important changes and challenges of

this decade. It will show the alternatives that peasant movements around the world are building – those who produce 70% of the world's food on less than 30% of the world's arable land – in response to the intersecting crises of climate, neocolonial corporate control, poverty, and inequality.

Food is not a commodity, and land is not a financial asset – both are fundamental human rights we must defend.



Asad Rehman
Executive Director
War on Want

Part I:

The state of the global food system

1. Introduction

World hunger is once again on the rise, following the numbers of those experiencing hunger falling between 2009-2013. This trend has now reversed, with global hunger increasing year-on-year: in 2021, more people were affected by hunger than in 2020, which had increased from 2019.²

It is because of the global agricultural and food – or agrifood – system, itself susceptible to political and economic crises, that the rural poor, who produce food, are going hungry. Hundreds of millions of small-scale food producers, from pastoralists to fisherfolk, from Indigenous forest dwellers to those tending small oasis plots face hunger and states disinterested – if not hostile – to their right to a dignified life free of hunger.

Many governments around the world continue to reject small-scale peasant farming and agroecology as a pathway to feeding their populations. The idea of a different global agrifood system based on national food sovereignty is dismissed in the belief that large corporate monopolies in agricultural and food production will be more efficient at solving the problem of hunger. Those fighting for transformation confront greedy monopolies, which also control and profit from the chemicals and machinery that go into food production. However, this model of food production, based on monoculture, the

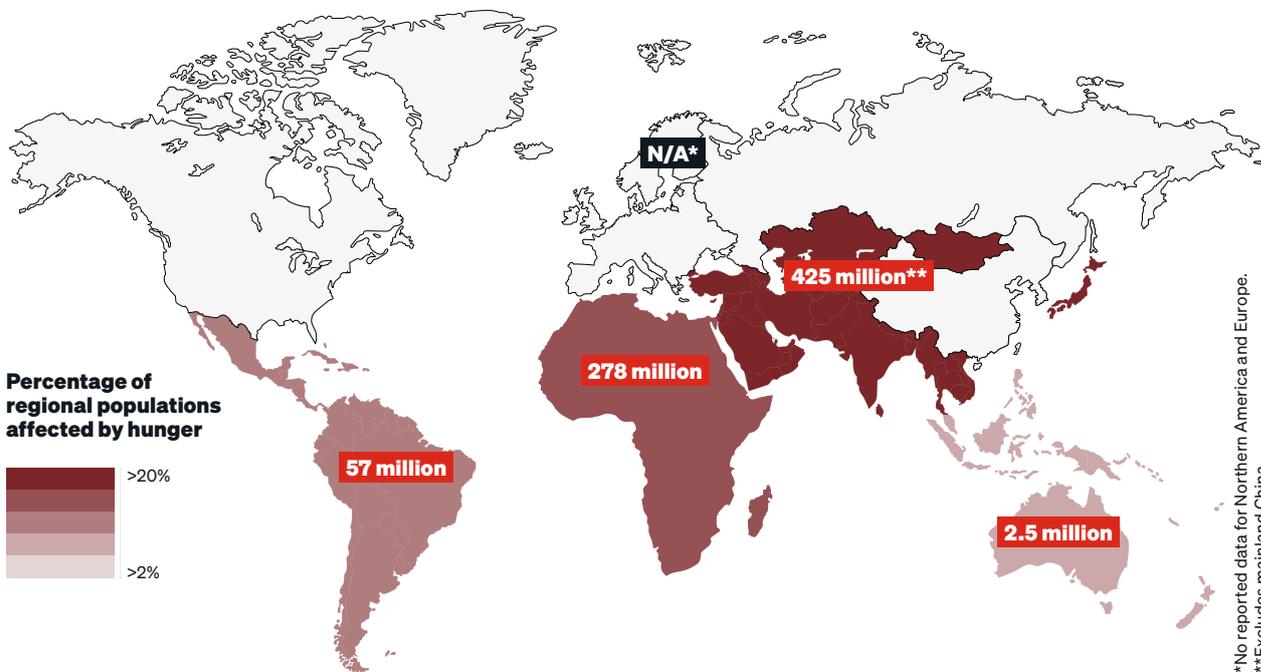
intensive use of energy and chemical inputs, and genetically modified seeds, is unsustainable both for the Earth's biodiversity, its climate, and its people.

The global food system has been completely transformed over the last 50 years. **Agrifood systems in the Global South have supported, supplemented, and supplied the North in the name of 'food security', alongside unprecedented land acquisition and hunger – despite increased production.** This is the vision of food security, promoted by governments in the Global North, supported by northern food and agricultural monopolies; with further support from Global South agribusiness elites and plantation owners, who profit from producing for the North, while draining wealth and health from people and land alike.³

This transformation of agriculture and food systems over many decades is tightly connected to the intersecting crises of poverty, inequality and injustice, and climate breakdown. This context, together with widespread inequality regarding access to land, is the long legacy of colonialism and imperialism throughout much of the Global South.⁴

Under colonial rule, farmers in many parts of the Global South were coerced into growing crops for export such as cotton, wheat and

Global hunger



768 million

↑ 46 million more than 2020

↑ 150 million more than 2019

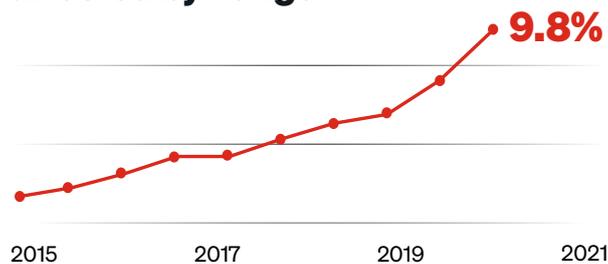
people were affected by hunger* in 2021



2.3 billion people globally

experienced food insecurity in 2021, 350 million more than before the Covid-19 pandemic

Proportion of people globally affected by hunger



Hunger: Pain and discomfort caused by undernourishment. **Moderate Food Insecurity:** Uncertain access to food — due to lack of money or other resources — leading to low quality or insufficient diet or skipped meals. **Severe Food Insecurity:** Extreme uncertainty in access to food — due to lack of money or other resources — leading to prolonged periods of hunger (going without food for a day or more).

Source: FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO., "The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2022. Repurposing food and agricultural policies to make healthy diets more affordable," (2022)

sugar, to satisfy the food demands of the colonial power, for which farmers received low prices. In recent years, food security concerns have led to large-scale land grabs by richer countries, a form of 'agricolonialism', to secure food supplies for their own populations. Added to this is the corporate capture of the whole food system from seeds to markets, with financial markets speculating on food prices and farmland entrenching a colonial mindset of relentless extraction, exploitation, and profit on enormous scale; regardless of the impact on the people working to produce food, or to the planet and our ecosystems.

With scientific studies finding that between 21% and 37% of all greenhouse gas emissions are attributable to the food system, the impact of the current industrial model of food production on the climate crisis cannot be underestimated.⁵

The climate crisis is the most pressing ethical and political issue of our lifetime, with less than ten years left to keep global heating to a maximum of 1.5°C to avoid catastrophic climate breakdown. As it stands, scientists are already indicating that measures to tackle the climate crisis will not meet the guard rail of 1.5°C.

Increased global heating will have a severe impact on biodiversity and ecosystems, including species loss and extinction. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has warned that of 105,000 species studied, 6% of insects, 8% of plants, and 4% of vertebrates are projected to lose over half of their "climatically determined geographic range", once global heating hits the 1.5°C mark. A rise of 2°C will make the situation much worse. Fewer species means dramatically reduced global biodiversity: this would place a strain on already vulnerable

food systems, especially agroecology, which relies on a functioning biosphere.

The IPCC has warned that the climate crisis is already affecting food security in a number of regions, with the risks of disruption to food systems growing.⁶ It also warns that just transitions are needed to ensure approaches to climate mitigation that do not result in competition for land with communities losing out. **Low-income producers and consumers are likely to be the most affected due to a lack of resources to invest in adaptation, mitigation and diversification measures.** The speed at which the Earth is warming means that farmers have little time to successfully transition their agricultural practices to build resilience, if that is even possible, through agroecology.

The challenges are immense, which is why a full and just transformation of the global food system to a model of food sovereignty is needed.

1.1 The colonial legacy of export-oriented agriculture in the Global South

The crisis of increasing global hunger, and of the world agrifood system itself, is not due to a lack of food, nor a lack of technology or land: it is *not* a crisis of overpopulation.

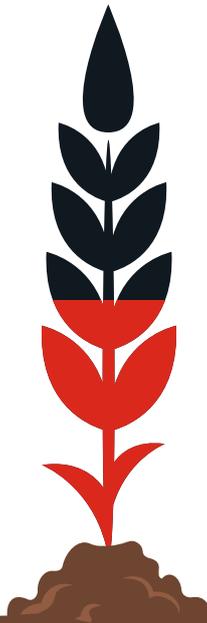
It is a crisis of how food is produced, and of sharply unequal power relations along global North-South lines, and within countries themselves. Those who are powerful enough to control food production determine who consumes it and who goes hungry. Because of this power imbalance, people are poorer and hungrier in the Global South than in the Global North, and it is in the South where struggles for food sovereignty are more pronounced.

Calories produced vs calories needed

The world already grows more than enough food to feed everyone

Food needed to feed everyone

2,250
calories
per person, per day



Food grown globally

6,000
calories
per person, per day

Source: M. Berners-Lee et al., "Current Global Food Production Is Sufficient to Meet Human Nutritional Needs in 2050 Provided There Is Radical Societal Adaptation," (2018) & FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO., "The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2022. Repurposing food and agricultural policies to make healthy diets more affordable," (2022)

The global agrifood system has its roots in colonialism, imperialism, and monopoly capitalism. In the 1970s, the combination of imperialist policies and monopoly capitalism produced a new regime called 'neoliberalism', which marked a return to colonial power imbalances. As an example, even by the end of the 19th century, poorer colonised countries including India, Sri Lanka, Ghana, Indonesia, and Brazil specialised in tropical-climate produced exports such as spices, tea, and coffee – ungrowable in northern climates regardless of technological advances.⁷

Colonialism saw the mass acquisition of land. To grow and export cash crops (crops grown for their commercial value rather than for the grower's subsistence and use) and tropical goods in countries where the native population was hungry but also powerless, it was considered logical to concentrate land in as few hands as possible.

During this period, per-capita consumption of cereals in Global South countries continuously decreased: in effect, starvation by colonialism.⁸ Existing state-centred systems of famine prevention evaporated under colonial control, leaving countries across the tropical and sub-tropical regions vulnerable to the whirlwind of hunger, poverty, and mass death.⁹

By the early 20th century, grain production began to be concentrated in countries such as the United States, Canada, Australia, as well as some Latin American countries, where land had been made available by the genocide of Indigenous peoples.¹⁰ National liberation movements erupted in the 1940s to the 1970s across Global South countries including Kenya, Algeria, and India; these movements began freeing land and taking important steps towards national agricultural models, but seldom broke with the focus on commodity exports.

The United States produced a vast amount of surplus food in this period, particularly cereals.¹¹ This overproduction saw the country embrace a new food dumping strategy, with cereals sold at reduced prices on international markets and exported globally. By the 1970s, many countries in the Global South began switching their agricultural efforts towards exports through 'free-trade' agreements with Global North countries, even while the national aspects of their agricultural and production systems were affected by costly and often imported agricultural inputs, such as fertilisers,

herbicides, tractors, and animal feed made from barley and corn, as the Global North globalised its model of capital-intensive (requiring large capital investment) industrial agriculture.¹² US food corporations grew ever more powerful.

With the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, systems of national agricultural production were mostly dismantled across the former Soviet states, which led to a huge reduction in available food per person, and mass death from hunger.¹³

Trade deals and food dumping strategies

'Free-trade' agreements exposed Global South agriculture to cereal dumping strategies from industrialised countries.

Under the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement, US capital-intensive maize production was exported to Mexico; devastating local *milpa* production, a form of peasant agriculture based on the integrated cropping of corn, beans, and squash.¹⁴ This move effectively turned Mexico into an open-air greenhouse for US fruit and vegetable consumption,¹⁵ while displaced Mexican peasants became workers in US domestic agribusinesses.¹⁶

The destruction of Mexican smallholder agricultural production through the 'opening up' and erosion of protections around domestic production facilitated large grain traders' export of crops, and local US agribusiness' import of people. The destruction of the Mexican people's right to food and a dignified life is therefore linked to cheap crops produced for the consumption of US consumers, and to massive ecological disruption.

Milpa agriculture is sustainable, and harbours abundant genetic biodiversity, with hundreds of maize subspecies often flourishing in a single plot: it is a productive, resilient agricultural practice, resistant to drought, flooding, blight, and pests. A typical full-time *milpa* farmer produces enough calories to feed around twelve people, including themselves.

By contrast, industrial US corn production concentrates profits in the hands of corporate agribusinesses. Only a tiny variety of maize subspecies are grown, making crops highly vulnerable to diseases, pests, and climate breakdown; and far more energy is used in producing the corn than the crops contain. Some researchers have characterised this as a **shift in agricultural approach from using "sun and water to grow peanuts" to "using petroleum to manufacture peanut butter"**, turning the traditional logic of agriculture upside down.¹⁷

The shift from peasant-based agroecology to corporate-based monoculture has led to a decline in crop resilience, ecological biosecurity, and energy efficiency, while increasing profits for large corporate agribusinesses.

Milpa production is emblematic of Global South communities' small-scale yet critical reliance on the environment for food production. Around 2.5 billion people live to varying degrees off the land.¹⁸ According to a recent study, small-scale farmers holding less than 10 hectares produce **a minimum 55% of the world's food supply** on 30%-40% of the world's arable land. Other research shows that **around 70% of the global population is fed or dependent on peasant farming**, on just 30% of agricultural land.¹⁹

1.2 Food waste to global greenhouse emissions: an unsustainable model of food production

The amount of waste produced by the global agrifood system is widespread and systemic. Although some countries waste relatively little food – even major economies with large populations such as China – other countries such as the US with its vast and complex

purchase, processing, and distribution chains, lose half of the food produced between farm to fork.²⁰

It is not just food itself that is wasted. Food production lays waste to the environment: while between 21% to 37% of global carbon emissions caused by human activity come from agrifood systems, the predicted greatest future increases in agrifood sector emissions will come from global supply chains, rather than farming itself.

Emissions calculations from the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO), estimate these future increases to be even greater if emissions generated from agricultural fertilizer manufacturing are included, along with food processing supply chain emissions (packaging, transport, retail, household consumption and waste disposal).²¹

Shortening and re-localising food supply chains is increasingly important. The Covid-19 pandemic illustrated how local markets and short supply chains are much more resilient amidst moments of crisis.

 Monoculture agriculture requires the use of heavy machinery and pesticides and uses a large amount of fossil fuels.



The Green Revolution of the 1950s to the 1970s promoted the intensive use of pesticides and a monoculture model of agriculture that has been proven to be unsustainable and unequal, both for the biodiversity of the planet and for peasants in the Global South. This unsustainable model of food production is based itself on the overexploitation of natural resources, which reduces soil fertility and biodiversity;²² it causes dependency on large amounts of agricultural inputs, requires vast amounts of external energy, and makes production more expensive – and peasants more economically dependent. This system is less resistant to changes in weather patterns and to the growing climate crisis. It creates increasing inequality and poverty in rural areas, as peasants are more dependent and reliant on fewer crops, and more exposed to the fluctuations of prices and external markets.

1.3 War, imperialism and hunger

War and conflict are increasingly devastating the Global South, directly affecting food production, distribution, and local populations' access to food – especially those displaced by conflict. This has resulted in widespread hunger and increased malnutrition: the decade between 2011 to 2021 saw global hunger skyrocket. In the Arab region, the continuing impact of war and protracted crises (characterised by periods of ceasefire, interrupted by open low- or high-intensity warfare) across Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen has seen hunger rise sharply.

However, the story is one of missing numbers. **Wars produce widespread hunger and famine, while undermining the capacity to accurately count and reach the hungry.**²³

People's rights and access to food in the context of war and conflict is affected by a range of factors: income, the security of food production, the state of active warfare in their country, access to global grain markets, and any international embargoes and sanctions. Yemen is one of the most war-blighted countries on the planet, yet has sufficient food stored in warehouses²⁴ and growing in fields to supply the entire population with enough food to eat. However, people are too poor to afford it. Widespread poverty, made worse by years of war, is the result of a long process of national underdevelopment and lack of support for local agriculture, along with creeping corporate-monopoly control of the Yemeni agricultural system.²⁵

The US-Saudi-led operations in Yemen's conflict have directly affected rates of poverty across the country.²⁶

Poor Yemeni farms have been directly targeted, meaning there is less food for sale on local markets, while families find themselves forced to buy what they used to be able to produce at home.²⁷ The lack of respect for the Yemeni people's right to self-determination, to self-government, has created one of the world's worst humanitarian crises, with 19 million people suffering from food insecurity.²⁸

1.4 The climate crisis and post-Covid landscape

The global food system is inextricably entwined with the Earth's biodiversity and climate. The mounting urgency of the climate crisis means food production is already seriously vulnerable to climate impacts. **The rise in global temperatures threatens to exceed planetary limits, with changes in precipitation patterns, more frequent droughts and heatwaves, rising sea**

levels and deadly floods all threatening food production.

Crops and livestock struggle to survive when conditions become too hot and dry, or too wet and cold. Extreme climate disasters such as droughts, floods and cyclones destroy crops and land, and are leading to huge numbers of displaced people in countries most at risk of catastrophic climate impacts.

According to The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), **weather-related hazards displaced 24.9 million people across 140 countries around the world in 2019**, many of whom were agricultural workers and small-scale peasant farmers, who lost both their homes and livelihoods.²⁹

For Global South countries, the impacts of climate breakdown compound increasing poverty and intensify pressure on already scarce resources, which can lead to instability and conflict.

The interconnected nature of these crises is having devastating consequences on peasant farmers, as the inability to mitigate climate impacts increases the risk of low yields, the sudden reduction in agricultural productivity, and even the complete loss of crops. Over the longer term, it can lead to the degradation of soil and large-scale damage to land, rendering some areas unsuitable for growing crops, disrupting local markets and resulting in rising food prices, further entrenching poverty and hunger.

In Tunisia, a major food importer and exporter of fruits and vegetables, many people are no longer able to buy locally-reared and grown chicken, beef, or pomegranates, amid severe inflation and soaring food prices.³⁰ The effects of the war in Ukraine, the Covid-19 pandemic, and the climate crisis have also played their part: 2020 saw Tunisia's economy contract, with cereal products rationed, and long queues forming outside bakeries. Ships bringing cereals from



A man uprooting a plant that was left behind after the floods at Singair Upazila, Bangladesh.



Spain and Romania idled outside the southern port of Sfax, as the government searched for the hard currency to pay its suppliers.³¹

Against this background of Covid-19 and conflict, **new dynamics are in play across the global food system.** New corporate entities have emerged, implementing new strategies of accumulation and techniques of co-optation. Innovation in technology has concentrated power and ensured the agrifood system continues to be dominated by monopolies. Corporations have newly entered international public policy spaces, such as the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO).

Various net-zero initiatives, such as carbon credits, are being proposed in an attempt to find ways to adapt and mitigate to the impacts of the climate crisis. However, such initiatives are developed to fit within the same model of large-scale agribusiness focused on profit, within the same approaches to international trade and trade agreements, preserving the same power dynamics; meaning large multinationals and other powerful stakeholders are dictating the terms. This risks the financialisation of land and greater land concentration into fewer hands, damaging the planet, citizens, and farmers alike.³²

The presence of the World Economic Forum (WEF) or representatives of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation at global food summits demonstrates the advancement of the monopoly capitalist agenda and the hollowing out of existing institutional spaces. 'Nature-based climate solutions' (see Chapter 3.3) and dietary interventions are promoted, as is the role of 'sustainable intensification' in supply and value chains,³³ while land grabs are naturalised.

The global model of food production has benefited large corporations based in the

Global North the most since the dawn of the Green Revolution.³⁴ In the last decade, corporate power has increased, including in global public policy spaces: corporations have either entered food spaces such as the FAO, or other United Nations (UN) organisations, or constructed their own, as with the World Economic Forum – subverting the rights to food and just development.

There is, however, some hope, as peasant movements are growing and connecting with other important struggles. Food sovereignty movements are much stronger than the scattered groups 25 years ago, organised now behind international networks such as La Via Campesina and The Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples' Mechanism at the UN Committee on World Food Security. Movements are more connected and more engaged in working in public policy spaces to make effective changes at national and global levels. They are also crucial voices in climate policy spaces.

At the 2021 UN climate summit in Glasgow, COP26, organisations representing small-scale and peasant farmers were clear in their message to world leaders:

“ Small-scale farmers are the ones already putting 70% of the food on our plates, whilst using only 30% of the global arable land. They have the know-how to work towards sustainability but not the resources to overcome the challenges put in place by those who wish to maintain the status quo for their own benefit. ”³⁵

2. Export agriculture in the Global South: the vicious circle of foreign currency and debt dependency

The current global system of food production prioritises corporate profit above the needs of the world's population and its biodiversity. A key aspect of this system is **export-led agricultural policies, with major subsidies, loans and policy architecture supporting food security-oriented strategies.**

As a result, **large areas of land in the Global South, especially the most fertile swathes, continue to be devoted to producing cash crops, which often**

cannot be produced in the Global North: biofuels, strawberries and other out-of-season fruit and vegetables, such as berries and tomatoes from Morocco, or pineapples and palm oil from Indonesia.

Alongside large plots growing crops for export are plots for subsistence agriculture and locally sold crops, which are often fragmented and less easy to farm, or of lower-quality soil, with lower yields.³⁶ At the same time, the export orientation of Global North cereal production – especially across



Tea pickers in a tea plantation, Sri Lanka. Tea production is one of the main sources of foreign exchange for the country.





 **Local fisherfolk in Morocco endure depletion of natural resources and economic difficulties facing the increased competition of large trawlers for the export fishery sector.**

the US, Canada, Europe, and Russia – creates vulnerabilities within the world agrifood system, due to dependencies on international markets and international price fluctuations.

Through the promise of the Green Revolution and ‘free’ trade, for the last fifty years Global North countries have pushed forward a model of food production which has made Global South countries dependent on northern-grown cereals such as wheat and corn, even when this was not necessary. Global South countries have been compelled to develop their economies in a way that has maintained or even increased their dependency on imports, rather than increasing home-grown crops to feed their people.³⁷ This is the case in India and countries in Northern and Eastern Africa.

Elsewhere, countries in the Global South play a different role in the global economy: in Latin America, countries including Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay produce vast amounts of cereal monocultures (such as soy, wheat and corn) through highly mechanised methods. This model of production has created large inequalities within the region.

On one hand, it has strengthened the position of national elites and international corporate power, accelerating their acquisition of land. On the other hand, it has fuelled the loss of biodiversity, and the dispossession and migration of peasants from rural to urban areas; increasing the number of people living in slums and endangering the food sovereignty of these countries.³⁸

This model of export-oriented agriculture implemented by countries of the Global South was particularly promoted in the late 1970s by international financial institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. Emphasis was placed on the importance of adhering to a model of export-led development with the implementation of structural adjustment programmes, and of new trading rules set by the World Trade Organisation. Today, both organisations still play an important role in setting international trade rules. At the same time, bilateral and multilateral trade agreements between countries have increased, accelerating the process of export-led development and exacerbating inequalities between and within countries.



Nationwide protests in Sri Lanka during the financial and debt crisis that provoked a shortage of food, fuel and medicines. July 2022.



© Reuters/Media/ON JAR

These dynamics mean that for example pomegranates and oranges are shipped out from the Global South, while wheat and soy are mostly exported from the Global North. **Agricultural production systems in most southern countries are weak and subject to vulnerability, leaving their people exposed to prices fluctuations and other markets volatilities. However, the agriculture is one of the main sources of hard currency for foreign markets.**³⁹ That hard currency, usually US dollars or euros, is central to government current account balances; and even more important to government hard foreign currency accounts – it provides access to international market goods needed for agriculture and other key sectors, or simply for consumption.

Global South countries are dependent on a trading system they do not control, one in which they receive rather than set prices, making them acutely vulnerable to rapid price increases, destabilising their food security planning strategies. In the worst cases,

countries get deeper into debt to secure the hard currency needed for the sudden steep increases in food-import costs.

Larger debt means greater interest payments in the future. **As the overwhelming majority of loans are in euros and US dollars, interest on debt must be paid in a hard foreign currency. Global South countries' export-oriented food security strategies then become even more politically, socially, and economically hardened and entrenched; since food security strategies are a conduit for hard currency to flow into the country and their national currencies are easily subject to sudden depreciations.**⁴⁰

The entire trading model hampers Global South countries' overall development, since there is less hard currency available for other needs, and increasing amounts of the state budget is diverted to cover interest payments. 'Food security' strategies become a trap.

3. The corporate capture of agriculture

3.1 Corporate mergers and new economic players 'disrupting' food systems

While major agriculture and food corporations have long held control over Global South farmland, and southern agricultures have long been export-oriented, this dynamic is becoming entrenched. The power of agrifood corporates is deepening, as the people and peasant farmers of the Global South become increasingly disenfranchised.

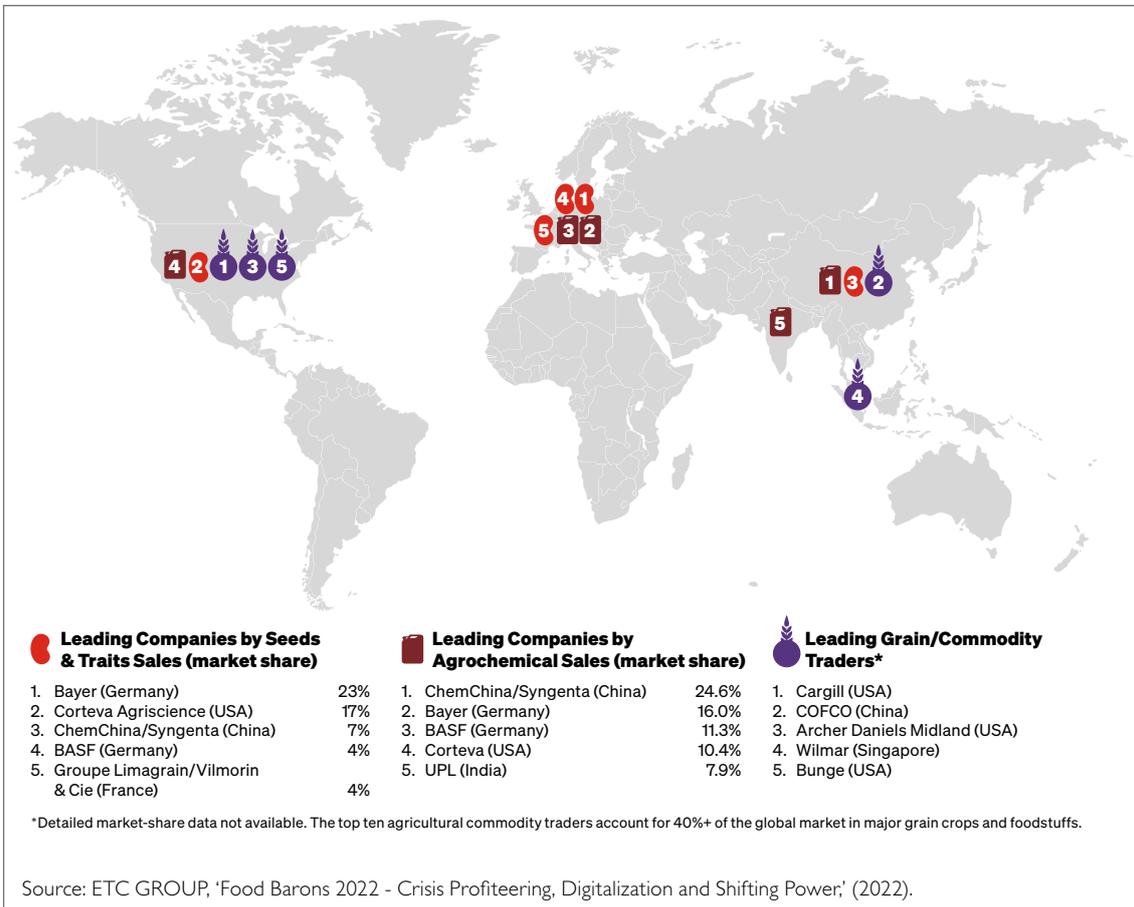
Since the 1970s, agricultural inputs such as fertilizers and seeds, farmland, and the whole agrifood supply chain beyond food production (i.e., distribution and retail) have become increasingly concentrated in the hands of just a few agrifood corporations. **Today, Global North countries and new emerging economies such as China and India host the headquarters of six major corporate conglomerates, which control 58% of the global seed market and 77.6% of the global agrochemicals market.**⁴¹



A man holds a placard which translates as 'Bayer/Monsanto, ChemChina, Dow, guilty' in Anvensan, south-western France.



Top five seeds, agrochemicals and commodities trading corporations



The last decade – particularly between 2008 and 2018 – has seen corporate mergers consolidate previously separate areas of the agrifood sector under the umbrellas of just a few powerful multinational corporations.

Manufacturers of fertilisers and agrochemical formulations, plant breeders, grain traders, and tractor manufacturers are often no longer run as separate businesses. Major corporates such as Bayer and Monsanto have simply become Bayer, and Dow and Dupont are now Corteva Agriscience, while ChemChina has incorporated the global pesticides company Syngenta.

As of 2022, at least 40% of the global trade in agricultural commodities is controlled by just ten corporations. In fact, this percentage may

be even larger: global supply chains are opaque and much of the information is supplied by the companies themselves, which are among the most powerful and least transparent in the global supply chain.⁴²

Known as the ABCD Group because of their initials – Archer Daniels Midland, Bunge, Cargill and Louis Dreyfus – just four corporations have historically influenced the supply and prices of agricultural commodities and, unsurprisingly, have experienced large, surging profits since the Covid-19 pandemic.⁴³ Recently, other new powerful companies have emerged, including China's COFCO International, second only to Cargill in terms of global market share. Wheat, corn, and soybeans are the three most profitable agricultural raw materials traded worldwide,

followed by sugar, palm oil and rice. Other important commodities include fibre, meat, and livestock.

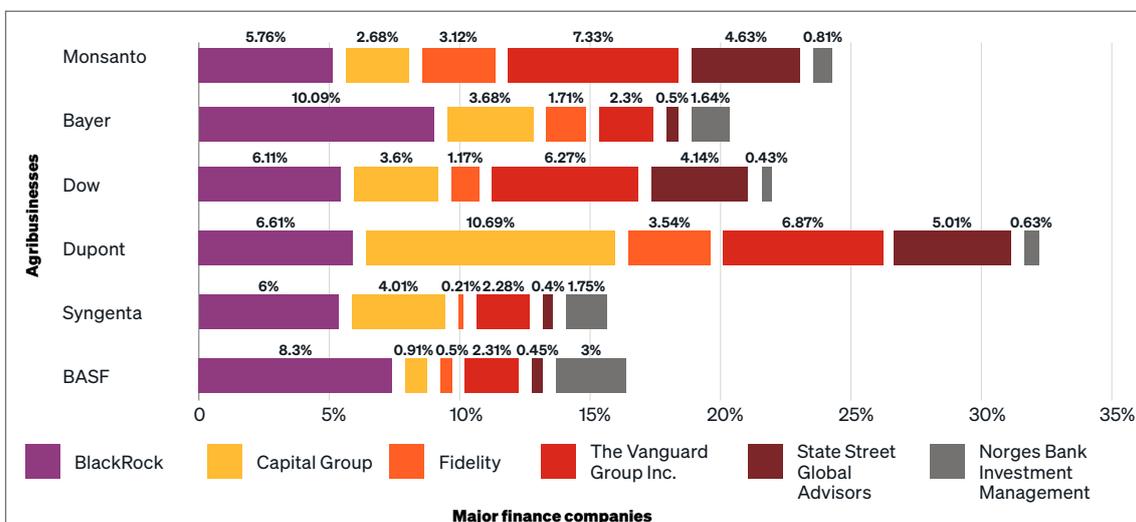
While these latest corporate mega-mergers across agricultural commodities trading, seeds, and agrochemicals are described by agribusiness corporations as a logical process of integration, this obscures the fact that **the newly merged companies are largely owned by finance and investment companies.** The shares held by these finance firms enable them to influence the agribusiness companies' decisions – including company mergers. For example, Blackrock, Capital Group, Fidelity, The Vanguard Group, State Street Global Advisors, and Norges Bank Investment Management own important shares in agrochemical and seeds companies.

The last decade has also seen the growing influence of FinTech, or financial technology, and technology corporations on the agrifood sector; through increased involvement and

investment in laboratories, fields, and the agrifood retail system. Big data has increasingly been deployed by corporations to strengthen their control of the global farming system, in which huge conglomerates have traditionally controlled strategic chokepoints of farm production. This data deployment occurs on multiple levels.

For example, technology linked to so-called 'precision agriculture' minutely monitors soil and field conditions. Drones originally developed for military purposes fly over crops, to supposedly gather real-time data. Farmers are then offered suggestions on crop irrigation, fertilisation, and the application of pesticides, as well as for general crop maintenance; based on decisions the tech's algorithm has made by analysing the collected data. Based on the information gathered, the algorithm processes the data – owned by the corporation – to obtain market intelligence and induce farmers to buy more agricultural inputs (fertilisers, seeds).

Percentage of shares in agribusinesses owned by major finance companies (pre-2017 mergers)



Source: Clapp, Jennifer 'Bigger is Not Always Better: Drivers and Implications of the Recent Agribusiness Megamergers' (2017).

Farmers are robbed of their decision-making capability over the whole production process by this new agricultural technology, whether via drone-collected data, or remotely controlled tractors.⁴⁴ Farmers are stripped of the freedom to plant traditional or other alternative seeds or apply other forms of soil fertilisers or pest control.

New digital technologies are also used in the retail sector: Amazon uses big data to gather information and target its customers more accurately. It now sells organic groceries through its own retail system Amazon Fresh, while gathering more information about the genome over on the production side, which it is becoming increasingly capable of mapping and genetically modifying through precision technology.⁴⁵ The Big Tech corporate giants, which include Amazon, are increasing their monopoly control over the intellectual property needed for farming. Farmers will be pushed further into becoming subcontractors for corporations, amidst comprehensive

deskilling and a loss of control over the intellectual property which in principle is common property, resulting from thousands of years of decentralised farming.

So far, this technology is mostly rolling out in the Global North, as the financial incentive to replace human labour with technology in many Global South countries is not yet sufficient, even though such a rollout would be profitable for big companies. However, one of the world's leading producers and distributors of pesticides and seeds, Bayer, is deploying apps across Argentina and Brazil – Latin America's agricultural colossuses – on very large plots of land, collecting farmer data in exchange for advice and discounts.

In Africa, Vodafone's subsidiary, Safaricom, is providing millions of small farmers in Kenya with digital platforms providing chatbot assistance, access to crop insurance and agricultural inputs such as seeds, pesticides, and fertilisers. Although such platforms provide financial services to rural people who



Drone operating over tea plantation.



would otherwise not have access, these platforms do not come for free. To access their own financial services, farmers must buy the agricultural inputs promoted and sold to them on the platform, via credit at high interest rates; follow the chatbot indications on crop insurance; and receive payments via a digital money app, which comes with a fee. As outlined in research conducted by GRAIN, a non-profit organisation supporting small farmers and food sovereignty social movements, this is contract farming on a mass scale.⁴⁶

Another technological trend in the Global North is the early yet **rapidly growing move to lab-grown meat substitutes**.⁴⁷ There is a rising tendency in Global North public discourse to blame carbon emissions on animal farming, while sidestepping the fact that different forms of animal farming produce vastly different emissions profiles.⁴⁸

In fact, lab-grown meat substitutes will change rather than fix underlying problems, since production is based on large-scale monoculture. Most lab-based meat requires glucose, amino acids, and vitamins and minerals produced out of inputs derived from industrial monoculture. Lab-grown meat is only being rolled out on a small scale, partly because the apparatus needed for growing organisms under controlled conditions – bioreactors – are staggeringly complex to design and build.

However, the lab-grown meat project may yet be deployed as a pretext for further theft of Global South land, as well as for new market opportunities for corporate profits. Lab-grown meat paradoxically represents a multi-billion US dollar opportunity for the very corporations controlling the industrial livestock and farming sectors. The world's largest agricultural commodities

trader, Cargill, and the largest global meat trader, JBS Foods, have heavily invested in lab-based meat and plant-based substitutes.⁴⁹

Research from the International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems (IPES-Food), found that:

“The alternative protein market is now characterised by giant companies which combine both industrial meat production and its alternatives – creating ‘protein’ monopolies. Well-meaning consumers of alternative proteins may not realise they are buying into the same giant meat companies that are operating the biggest factory farms, contributing to deforestation and forced labour, and slaughtering millions of animals every day.”⁵⁰

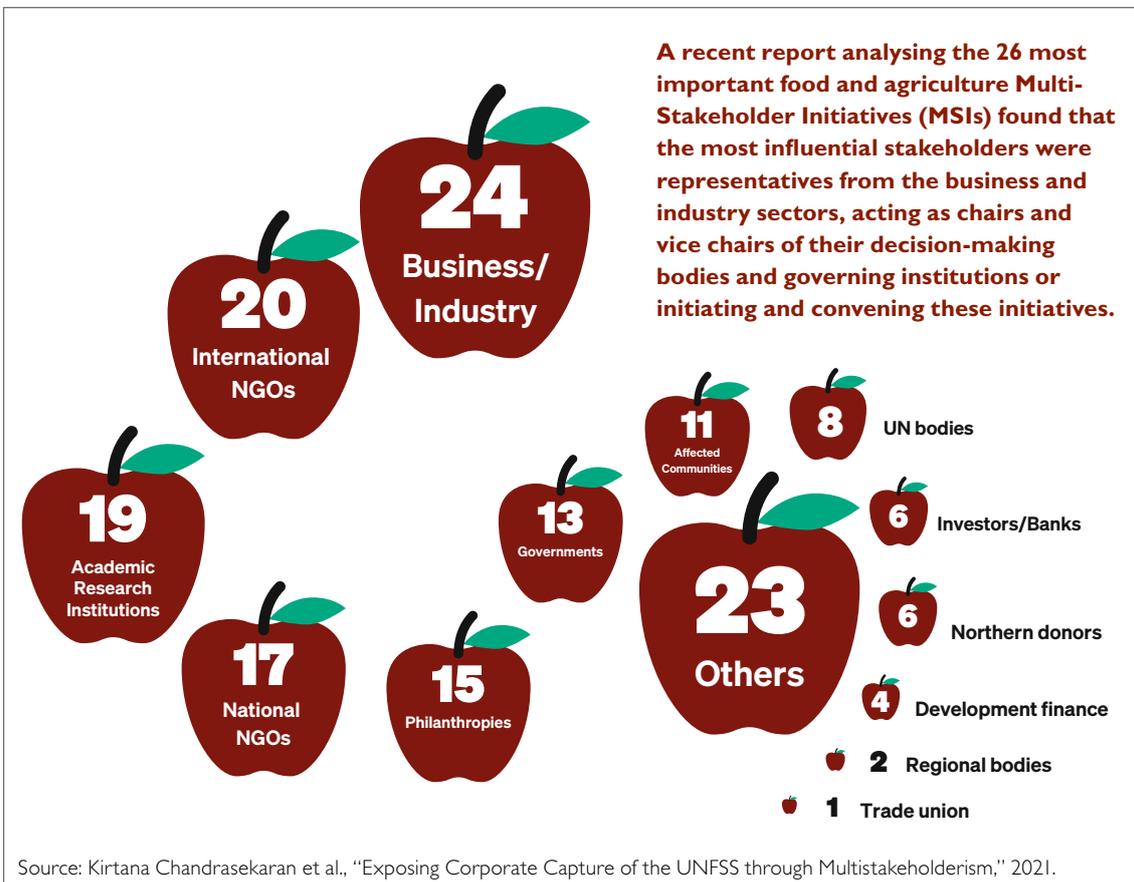
3.2 The corporate capture of UN policy spaces

The corporate capture of agriculture is occurring institutionally across policy spaces, including through rising corporate influence over the United Nations, such as at the UN Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) that was organised in 2021.⁵¹

The UNFSS has been slowly moving away from multilateral negotiations and the alliance of states of all political affiliations, towards what has been called ‘multistakeholderism’ (a type of multi-stakeholder governance), which upholds the rights of corporate monopolies as equal partners to democratic, sovereign, or representative states and peoples’ movements.

The 2021 UNFSS was heavily criticised by over 550 civil society organisations for the influence given to corporations, big data, and the financial sector in shaping its agenda –

Stakeholders in 26 food and agriculture Multi-Stakeholder Initiatives (MSIs)



including the involvement of the World Economic Forum (WEF), the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and large agribusinesses. The WEF, which is leading the development of ecological-agricultural systems, has since signed strategic agreements with the UN, one of the precursory aims of its presence at the UNFSS.

The co-option and conversion of these important influencing spaces by monopoly corporations to serve their own capitalist agenda is now proceeding at a rapid pace. The Chair of the 2021 UNFSS Advisory Committee was Amina J. Mohammed, a high-ranking UN official who happens to be on the board of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's Global Development Program;

while the UN Special Envoy to the UNFSS, Dr. Agnes Kalibata, is President of Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA), a self-identified non-profit founded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation. AGRA promotes the spread of industrial agriculture and agribusinesses in Africa. It has been heavily criticised by academics and civil society organisations for failing to meet its goals for increasing crop yields, while undernourishment increased by 30% in the countries where it has active programmes.⁵² AGRA, the WEF, and the Rockefeller Foundation – a patron of the Green Revolution – are amongst the stakeholders turning the UNFSS into a forum for corporate agribusiness.⁵³

Another force within international policy spaces is EAT, a global non-profit start-up that claims to be dedicated to “transforming the global food system through sound science, impatient disruption and novel partnerships”. It comprises EAT Forum, EAT Foundation, and the EAT-Lancet Commission on Sustainable Healthy Food Systems. EAT receives large amounts of funding from Aviva, Nestlé, Fazer, and Bayer – all of which are beginning to develop and sell plant-based products.

These corporate institutions are pushing their own agendas through one of the strategic documents of the UNFSS called Action Track 3, to “boost nature-positive production.”⁵⁴ This is how nature-based solutions and fragments of an agroecological technical agenda are able to enter mainstream policy: when presented and welded to a corporate vision.

3.3 The climate crisis and corporate greenwashing

The climate crisis and its ongoing impacts on food production are a focus for debate and resistance among peasant movements.

The last decade has seen the rise of corporate greenwashing, in the form of so-called ‘nature-based solutions’, which supposedly seek to protect ecosystems to address societal challenges. Proposed by corporations, those responsible for the majority of global greenhouse emissions, nature-based solutions are *false* solutions to the climate crisis, ignoring peasant and Indigenous people’s knowledge, and are often positioned ambiguously, allowing corporations to twist their meaning. While these new forms of corporate greenwashing are tied to climate-friendly corporate social responsibility

practices, there is a danger they are co-opted as just another strategy for corporations to increase their profits.

Yet, because many consumers and countries in the Global North are detached from the agricultural world and its means of production, so-called nature-based solutions become an alluring concept with the impacts on southern producers not taken into account. In fact, false, greenwashed solutions such as carbon offsetting require purchasing and grabbing vast areas of land in the Global South.⁵⁵ The global agriculture sector is a major contributor to global greenhouse emissions, and a hugely complex part of the puzzle to resolve. It ranges from forestry, deforestation and land management to petrochemicals and tractors, to soil erosion and carbon loss, and covers the transportation, processing, and shipping of food products the world over, from Argentina to Alaska.

Industrial agriculture creates between 21% to 37% of total net greenhouse gas emissions including carbon dioxide, methane, and nitrous oxide. These emissions result from a wide range of land-based agricultural activities and cause ecological degradation, which is being exacerbated by climate breakdown:

- **Soil erosion** is happening at 100 times the rate of soil formation in places, with climate breakdown worsening this dynamic. The total area of the world’s drylands experiencing drought is increasing yearly. Climate breakdown is particularly impacting food security in soil-degraded or desertified zones; as the weather warms, rains roam from their normal ranges, and extreme weather events from floods to droughts damage food production. Meanwhile, across the tropics and sub-tropics of the Global

South, crops move closer to the limits of their survival as yields sink. African savannahs and their pastoral populations are seeing lower animal growth rates. Across Africa, and in mountainous zones of South America and Asia, pests and diseases are infesting agricultural lands.⁵⁶ Large-scale, industrial agriculture is a major driver of these trends.

- **Widescale deforestation** of the Amazon rainforest is destroying one of the Earth's important carbon sinks; while global emissions of carbon dioxide and methane are increasing from the industrialised soy plantations and cattle-rearing operations which are replacing it, including from the fumigation and large-scale harvesting of soy. The Amazon rainforest's carbon-absorption capacity is shrinking, while agribusiness monopoly interests fatten

wallets and portfolios in Brazil and the United States. Other important areas of biodiversity in Latin America, such as the Cerrado in Brazil and the Gran Chaco between Paraguay and Argentina, are experiencing the expansion of the soy frontier, with dramatic consequences on biodiversity and local livelihoods, as local people are expelled from their land, populating new slums in cities across the continent.⁵⁷

- Elsewhere, deforestation due to **peat extraction** in the UK or for **monocrop** palm oil plantations in Indonesia is a major contributor to global emissions.⁵⁸ In Brazil and Indonesia, monocrop deserts replace vibrant polycultures, which protected biodiversity and provided people with the means to support dignified lives, and even market some of their crops.

 **The advancement of the soy frontier and deforestation of the Amazon rainforest, near Santarem, Brazil.**





Workers on a Jatropha plantation, north-western Mozambique. Jatropha has been regularly cultivated as a source of agrofuel.

Which corporate-driven climate 'solutions' are directly impacting the global agrifood system?

a) Agrofuels

Corporations are promising to deploy agrofuels, derived from plants instead of fossil fuels, to achieve 'net zero' emissions from airplanes and cars by 2030 or 2050, or in so-called 'hard to decarbonize' sectors such as steel production and concrete.⁵⁹

These 'solutions' tend to come into conflict with smallholders' need for food, driving peasants off the land and into urban slums. They rest on a narrow vision of the necessity of protecting certain sectors. There is no need to build with concrete and steel in places where wood and bamboo can be used instead.⁶⁰

b) Carbon offsets

Another false solution is carbon offsetting. The idea being carbon dioxide emissions generated through a specific activity can be calculated and paid off, or 'offset', via a scheme to remove the carbon from the atmosphere, such as tree planting. One of several 'natural climate solutions' increasingly embraced by powerful development organisations and corporations,⁶¹ **mass tree planting campaigns** are seemingly a great idea: use nature, namely trees, to turn carbon dioxide into carbon using nothing more than solar energy. In fact, the record of tree planting is abysmal, while sowing monocrops of trees is often ecologically inappropriate, not reflecting the original biodiversity. One of the largest global tree planting projects in India has almost nothing to show for it.⁶²



Firstly, tree planting can drain the water table, forcing away people whose livelihoods depend on the use of land.⁶³ Secondly, such 'solutions' often claim that land has been deforested when it was historically simply spotted with trees.⁶⁴ Thirdly, **because these 'solutions' use monocrops**, they sidestep participatory solutions, which may be less attractive and marketable, although potentially much more effective; resting on farmers growing polycultures of useful trees, rather than a narrow range of fast-growing trees to be 'banked' for carbon credits. Fourthly, **protecting existing forests ought to be a higher priority than planting new ones**, since old forests store far more carbon dioxide per hectare, while providing livelihoods for forest-dwelling peoples to use fruits, fuel, or other goods secured from agroforestry.⁶⁵

These 'solutions' – even where they truly are solutions – are frequently sold as carbon credits or turned into 'offsets'.

Nature-based solutions are excuses for corporations to continue burning valuable fossil fuels, under the guise of 'net zero' emissions. Global North corporations offload the costs of climate breakdown onto farmers and local communities in the Global South for what are often paltry sums, so that the polluters can keep on polluting. The Global South needs absolute reductions in emissions starting today, rather than 'natural climate solutions' which 'offset' the extra carbon dioxide corporations have dumped into the atmosphere.

Other 'nature-based solutions' proposed at the 2021 UNFSS included Bayer-sanctioned techniques to **sow carbon into soil (carbon farming)⁶⁶ and digital farming apps to verify and pay farmers**: satellites verify the carbon sequestration, creating a massive new carbon market and moving towards commodifying nature, such as the soil's capacity to absorb carbon.⁶⁷

c) Other technological fixes

Among the ideas brought forward and applied in Global North countries as innovative technological responses are sometimes useful solutions for small-scale use in urban contexts and urban agriculture. One example is **vertical farming**, a form of food production (mostly for horticulture) which uses very tall structures to saving farming space. Another example is the use of **hydroponics**, a modern farming technique (sometimes combined with vertical farming) to grow plants in a soil-less environment using only water. While these techniques may be useful in some contexts, the main goal of these methods is to produce food and compensate for the lack of available land. Rich corporate investors, such as Amazon founder Jeff Bezos, are investing large sums in start-ups which are using this technology.⁶⁸

However, critics fear that this model of food production has a strong political message: that land is not for those who work it and that ‘disruptive innovations’ will solve the issue of hunger or the climate crisis. The problem with this model is that it uses technological fixes that do not get to the root of the problem, the lack of land to produce food. It ignores the fact that land is being grabbed across the world and particularly in the Global South, and it is being concentrated into the hands of the few.

Technological advances have also seen the development of genetically modified seeds⁶⁹ and more recently CRISPR technology for gene editing. GM crops are now widely grown across the Americas (such as corn, soy and wheat); engineered to produce higher yields and resist changes in weather patterns or extreme climatic events.

The **real solutions** to the lack of land for agriculture would be systematic, popular and comprehensive agrarian reforms that redistribute access to land to peasants and Indigenous people, who preserve 80% of the world’s biodiversity.⁷⁰



Vertical farming for the fast production of tomatoes and sweet peppers in Bavaria, Germany.

d) Individual responsibility

Media and corporations in the Global North currently place a great deal of emphasis on individual responsibility for the climate crisis: people are told to drive less, use less plastic, go vegan, and use less energy. Although international shifts in how much people consume would lead to Global North consumers using less resources, such changes cannot be simply oriented around individual responsibility. We need planning, which means mass international social and political organising to bring about lasting, structural change.

While boycotts are a useful tool of political organising – such as the boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) movement against Israel’s illegal occupation of Palestine; and the 1970s boycott of Nestlé products, over its aggressive marketing of baby formula instead of breastfeeding in the Global South – **the fact remains that the major sources of pollution and greenhouse gas emissions are fossil fuel companies, and the agrifood monopolies and deforesters.** Placing responsibility on individuals diverts the focus away from corporations – the biggest polluters with the most responsibility for the climate crisis and ecological breakdown. It is not a solution at all.

The scale of the challenge is complex and interconnected, and narrow measures focused on individual responsibility are not solutions to the multiple crises of poverty, inequality and injustice, and global heating. There is an opportunity to rethink how the global systems for major sectors like agriculture and food could work in ways that prioritise the needs of people and the planet.

A just transition of the global food system means adopting food sovereignty as a pathway to restore the Earth’s biodiversity, protect the environment while protecting the rights of food-producing people, and protecting the rights of all people to nourishing food and clean safe water.

Only a global food system based on food sovereignty can deliver a sustainable and equitable alternative to feed the world’s people in ways that keep us below a temperature rise of 1.5°C, with everyone doing their fair share of effort to meet climate imperatives. A model based on food sovereignty is also the only way to ensure issues of inequality and poverty are addressed, including redressing historical injustices and systems of exploitation rampant in current global food production; it also offers the best way in which to ensure food production thrives within planetary boundaries.

4. Financial sector land grabs

Without land for agricultural, forest-based, or pastoral production, billions of people globally would not have a livelihood. If displaced from their lands, these people would be forced to migrate to overflowing slums surrounding cities.⁷¹

To guard against this threat, in December 2018 the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP), recognising **“the special relationship and interaction between peasants and other people working in**

rural areas and the land, water and nature to which they are attached and on which they depend for their livelihood;” and highlighting their **“contribution in ensuring the right to adequate food and food security, which are fundamental to attaining the internationally agreed development goals.”**

Against this background, the UNDROP warned of **“the increasing number of peasants and other people working in rural areas forcibly evicted or displaced every year.”**⁷²

 A new palm oil plantation encroaching into Kanneliya rainforest, south-west of Sri Lanka.



United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants (UNDROP) is the result of seventeen years of struggle and negotiation by peasant movements around the world, mobilised through La Via Campesina. It is **the first declaration of its kind that has been written by peasants, for peasants.**

This document is hugely important for peasant movements and other people working in rural areas around the world, representing for the first time a United Nations declaration recognising their human rights. The declaration's definition of rights-holders is wide and includes peasants, their dependents, Indigenous people, pastoralists, nomadic and landless people, hired workers, migrant workers, and seasonal workers.

The UNDROP sets out the obligations of nation states to respect, protect and fulfil the rights of peasants and other people in rural areas. The concept of food sovereignty is included in the declaration, as well as other important rights:⁷³

- The right of peasant women and other women living in rural areas
- The right to seek, develop and impart information about the processing and marketing of peasants' products
- The right to access to justice
- The right to land, seeds, water, biodiversity and other natural resources
- The right to food and the right to be free from hunger
- The right to food sovereignty and the collective right to a healthy environment
- The right to an adequate standard of living
- The right to social security, the right to health and the right to housing
- The right to education, and the right to adequate training suited to specific agroecological, sociocultural and economic environments in which peasants find themselves
- The right to enjoy culture and pursue cultural development freely



© MONLAR Sri Lanka



**Sri Lankan farmer
collecting the harvest.**

Although the UNDROP is not legally binding, it is an important recognition of peasants' human rights, and an instrument for peasant movements and organisations to campaign for these rights to be translated into national policies and legislation, as well as to claim their rights before courts.

The UNDROP was approved and officially adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 17 December 2018. 121 countries voted in favour of the declaration, 52 abstained and only eight countries voted against: the United Kingdom, together with Australia, Guatemala, Hungary, Israel, New Zealand, Sweden and the United States.

Between 2011 and 2021, land grabbing increased, as did the threat of land grabs under the guise of ecological management. Across the African continent, the advance of neoliberalism and the decreasing state control of land opened the way for large-scale land purchases. The US and the EU, alongside their allies the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, are closely interlinked with northern monopoly capital.⁷⁴

The purchased land produces profitable crops for outside investors, which is nothing new. **What is new is the intensity, the scale and the interconnection of corporate mergers, as is the increasing role these mergers play in the financial markets.**

Speculation driving land grabbing

Since the 2007-2008 world financial crisis, which mainly affected the real estate market, the global financial markets have repurposed their investment portfolios and diversified into new projects. Financial players, such as investment banks, asset management companies, insurance companies and venture capital funds, have now penetrated all sectors of the economy, and the logic of financial markets has been introduced into areas where it was previously absent, such as the agricultural sector.⁷⁵ This new speculation in commodities has contributed to the rise of global food prices.

New financial ‘assets’ include land, water, oceans, forests, cities, and biodiversity. The world’s common goods have been transformed into investment portfolios and opportunities, through derivatives or future contracts, entering the speculation market.⁷⁶ The futures market in food was originally set up in the mid-20th century to allow producers and anyone in the

food chain to make a contract with a dealer and ensure a decent price for the food produced. However, the liberalisation of the futures market 20 years ago means that speculators can now make money by betting on foodstuffs via financial operators who are not in the food chain. Banks are also betting on staple food prices in these unregulated financial markets and earning large profits.

Today, land has become an increasingly popular portfolio investment, and the financialisation of agriculture has had a huge effect on food prices, through speculation on agricultural futures on international markets.⁷⁷ Farmland and agricultural activities are increasingly being treated as an ‘investment play’. Between 2005 and 2017, approximately US\$45 billion was invested in farmland by institutional investors such as pension funds, endowment funds, insurance companies, and high-net worth individuals.⁷⁸ Bill Gates, for example, is now the largest farmland owner in the United States.

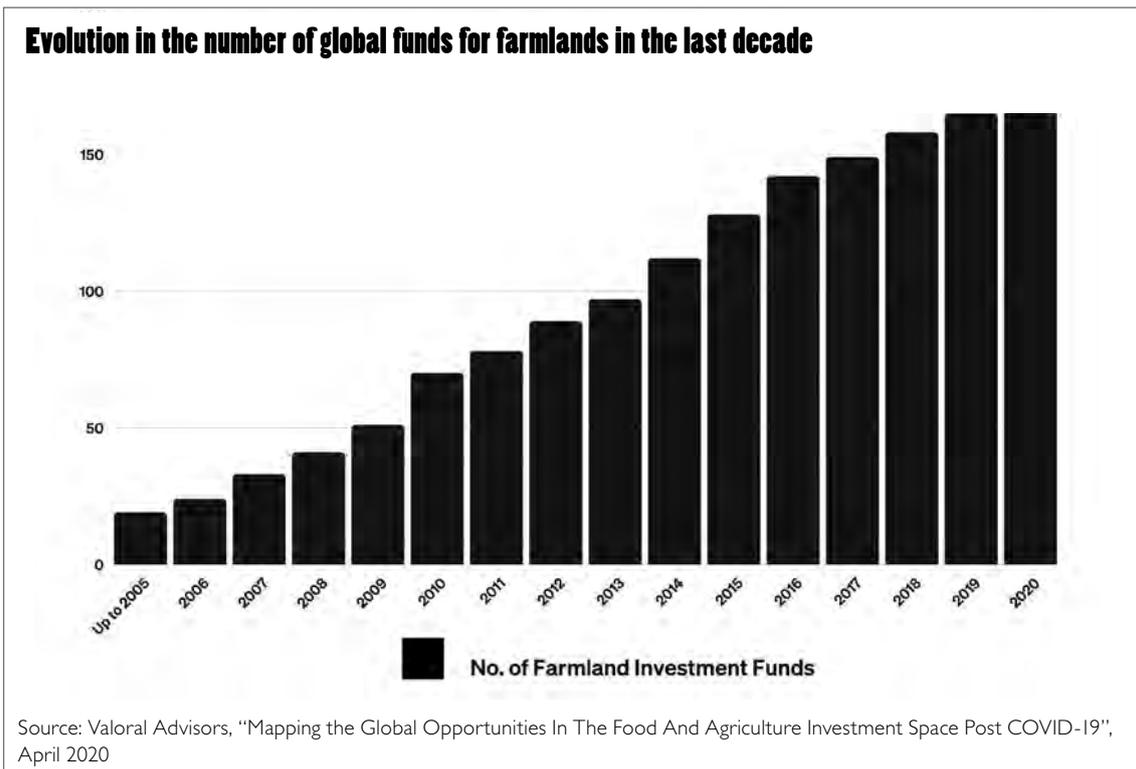
In the same period, the number of global investment funds specialising in food and agriculture assets skyrocketed from 38 to 446, with current assets under management surpassing US\$73 billion, excluding timber.⁷⁹

The US-based NCREIF Farmland Income Index (National Council of Real Estate Investment Fiduciaries) is one of the few sources of institutional farmland investments focused on US-based investment. This index (Figure 1) increased from US\$1.1 billion to US\$8.1 billion between 2008 and 2017, with similar upward trends reported from other major crop-producing regions on a global scale. The amount of farmland funds on a global level has also increased dramatically, making it one of the most desired food and agricultural assets for international investors (Figure 2).⁸⁰

Figure 1: Evolution in the number of global funds for farmlands in the last decade (2005-2020)



Figure 2: The global land grab: financial markets threatening the right to land



This financialisation of agricultural land threatens the entire basis of farming. It drives up the global price of farmland and demands that farmers produce what is most profitable, rather than what is most needed. It also threatens the right to land and risks the displacement of peasants and Indigenous communities.

Elsewhere, concern for biodiversity and conservation threatens further land grabbing in the form of the **Half-Earth Project**: a plan to set aside half of the planet. Other international

proposals call to protect at least 30% of the planet to save the Earth's biodiversity.⁸²

However, these plans would be hugely harmful to the many land-dependent people currently living on the designated areas if they are not involved in conservation planning. Whether Half-Earth is the appropriate framework for conservation is another question, given the widespread examples of landscape management which meet both biodiversity and human needs, such as the tapestry-like 'nature's matrix' approach.⁸³

UK pension funds and land grabs

UK pension funds are among the main financial companies heavily investing in land and driving the financialisation of agriculture, while making huge profits. At least £37.3 billion was invested by UK pension funds in land grabs worldwide, according to a 2014 report from Friends of the Earth. The research found that the top 10 UK private pension funds had combined direct investments of £1.8 billion in 23 high-risk and land grabbing-associated companies, and that 17 asset management firms had total investments of £35.5 billion in shares and bonds.⁸⁴

The report named the top 10 UK private pension funds as: BP Pension Scheme, Universities Superannuation Scheme, British Airways Pensions, RBS Group Pension Fund, Lloyds Banking Group Colleague Pensions, Railways Pension Trustee Company, Barclays Bank Pension Fund, BT Pension Fund, National Grid UK Pension Services and Royal Mail Defined Contribution Plan. Most of the investments were in biofuels, food and beverages, plantations (palm oil, trees), extractives (oil and gas, coal, steel), agricultural inputs (seeds, fertilisers, chemicals) and grain traders.

5. Corporate agriculture and the right to health

Health has been a major issue in the struggle for food sovereignty and just national food systems, in several ways: firstly, the effects of food quality and accessibility on rates of hunger; secondly, the relation of the agrifood system to epidemics; and thirdly, how the conditions of food production affect workers' health, in particular the use of pesticides, which has been a major argument for agroecology.

Food quality and nutrition

Driving these health concerns is the shift towards homogenisation and corporate monopoly control over the agrifood system, which produces poor quality, nutrition and vitamin-free staple crops in unhealthy ways and processes them into less healthy food.

This dynamic has two sides, which have devastating impacts on nutrition and on the development of new pathogens. The first is the Green Revolution-prompted shift from nutritionally dense varieties of wheat and other crops to the overproduction of nutritionally-light, fast-growing cereal varieties, to the detriment of other traditional cereals such as sorghum and barley. One example is the use of corn, which is being mass-produced into almost genetically identical varieties and processed into high-fructose syrup, for use in the highly processed fast-food industry. The consumption of food stuffs such as high-fructose syrup causes obesity and diabetes in the millions, and since many people do not

have access to enough food, the result is mass hunger.

In Tunisia, obesity is rising as the nutritional value of affordable food decreases, with families surviving off mixed vegetable oil, onions, and white flour baguettes made with less nutritional wheat varieties. In Mauritius, obesity is rising amongst adolescents and middle-aged, post-menopausal women. Poorer communities in Global South countries are forced into eating energy-dense food, rich with trans-fats and cheap vegetable oils, which is all that is affordable.

The overproduction of certain crops, which are dumped into the international markets through the ultra-processed food industry, is the result of rising corporate monopoly penetration of Global South markets. Mexico, a major producer of processed food with sales of US\$124 billion in 2012, is dominated by Global North corporations such as PepsiCo, Unilever, Danone, and Nestlé, all of which have infiltrated local distribution networks, including convenience store chains. The results have been catastrophic for human health.

The numbers of Mexican women aged 20-49 and classified as overweight increased from 25% to 35.5% between 1988-2021, with those categorised as obese surging from 9.5% to 37.5%; while 29% of Mexican 5-11-year-olds were categorised as overweight.

Healthy diets become more unaffordable

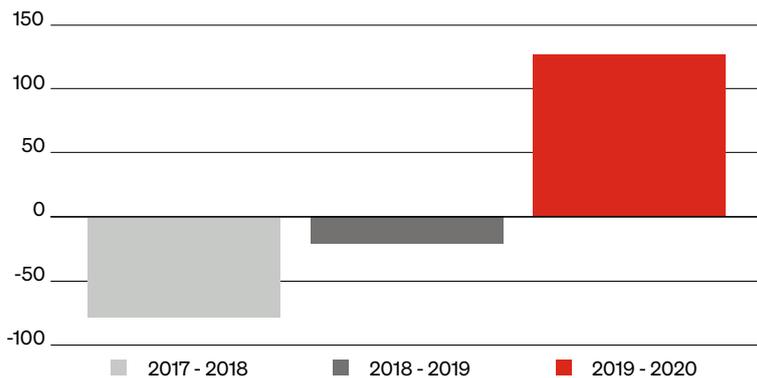
\$3.54 ↑ **3.3% higher than 2019**
↑ **6.7% higher than 2017**

Average daily cost of a healthy diet globally, per person, in 2020 (\$USD)

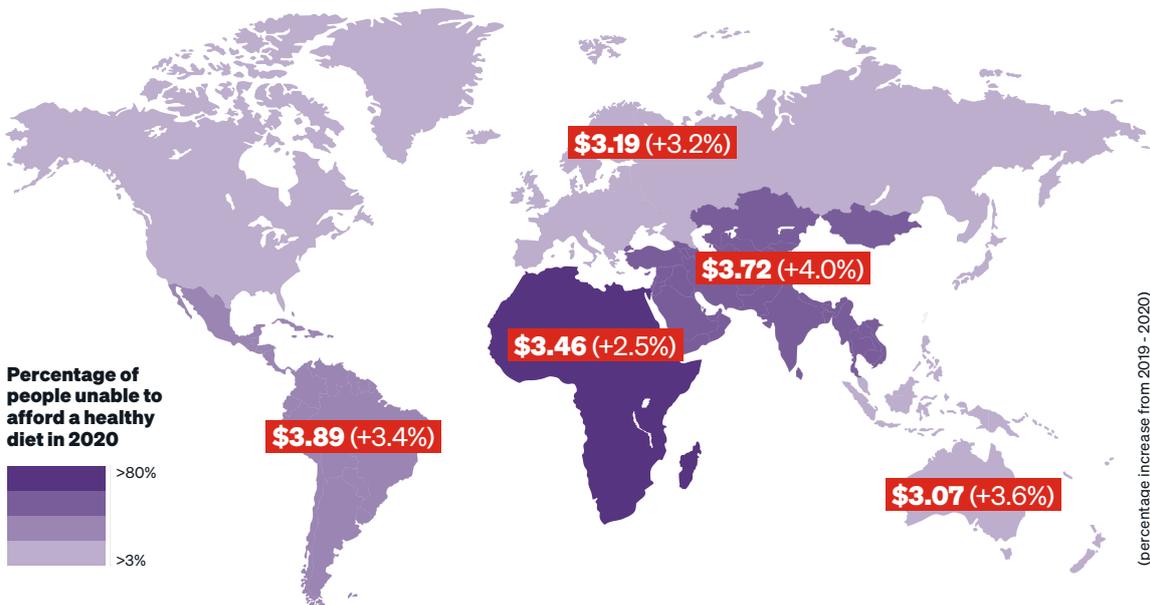


3.1 billion people could not afford a healthy diet in 2020

Change in numbers globally who cannot afford a healthy diet (in millions)



Cost of a healthy diet in 2020, and percentage increase since 2019



Source: FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO., "The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2022. Repurposing food and agricultural policies to make healthy diets more affordable," (2022)

In 2015, 10 million people in Mexico suffered from diabetes, which is closely linked to obesity. This is a staggering 7% of the population, and 21% of those aged 65-74. In 2012, Mexico ranked sixth in the world for diabetes deaths.⁸⁵

Food production, pathogens, and epidemics

Poor production processes (such as intensive farming with high levels of antibiotic residues) in the global agrifood system cultivate pathogens and bacteria, such as Salmonella and Campylobacter, which are harmful to human health.

Other diseases have emerged from production measures linked to agribusiness. Malaria in India has been linked to the construction of dams for irrigation of capital-intensive export crops. Forest frontiers are increasingly spotted with megafarms where, as the biologist Rob Wallace writes:

Novel zoonotic pathogens are spilling over out of previously marginalised reservoirs of wild hosts and [...] into local livestock, wild food animals and the farm workers or wranglers who tend them. Some diseases such as the Nipah virus [infection], coronavirus [infections] and Ebola spill at these points of disruption. Previous ecologies that marginalised these pathogens to a select few hosts are unplugged and then reconnected in such a way that the pathogens have new exits out through the circuit of production they didn't have before. The pathogens make their way to a regional capital and some to the world.⁸⁶

Other diseases have emerged in megafarms on the outskirts of cities, which supply food to urban centres. Food-borne bacteria or avian influenzas

mingle and become deadlier on the bodies of millions of poultry and livestock animals, before infecting human populations.

Nearly all documented cases of avian influenza transmission to humans (between 1959 and today), occurred in commercial bird farms, warehousing up to hundreds of thousands of birds. These intensive-farming operations, densely packed with birds, are conditions in which influenza thrives, even producing unique strains. Some scientists' theories have stated there is compelling evidence that Covid-19 emerged from a mutation affecting live bats sold at a market in Huanan, China, with the disease transmitting to people working there, before spreading to become a pandemic.⁸⁷

Toxic agrochemicals and the public health emergency in the Global South

Another major danger to human health is the rising use of toxic agrochemicals, or agrottoxins, in agriculture.⁸⁸ According to a recent study, 9 million deaths are linked to environmental pollution annually, with pesticides a major contributing factor.⁸⁹ Pesticides can damage the human reproductive system, and cause birth defects, cancer, and neurotoxicity.

Agrottoxins affect biodiversity, destroying insect and bird populations.⁹⁰ This 'epidemic' of environmental poisoning is the result of rising corporate monopoly control over agricultural production, which has seen identical 'technological packages' used across the Global South. One of the most renowned technological packages is Monsanto's RoundUp Ready, a packed solution of genetically modified seeds (usually soya), associated with the herbicide glyphosate. These seeds are hybrid and cannot be

replicated, and only toxic glyphosate works with this variety of herbicide-resistant seeds. Farmers are then forced to rebuy this package every year, with smaller-scale farmers frequently falling heavily into debt.

Paraquat, a deadly herbicide which is illegal to use in Europe, is currently produced in the UK and exported to many countries in the Global South.⁹¹ Because of weaker

environmental protections, often linked to a legacy of colonial rule, southern Indigenous people and peasants are more vulnerable than those in the Global North to the dangerous effects of toxic pesticide use.

Peasants' health becomes viewed as what the economists would define an 'externality' of the production process, rather than as a human right.

Toxic agrochemicals and the violation of the right to health: the case of the Southern Cone in South America

Ground-zero for this global process has been what Syngenta called “The United Republic of Soybeans” the neocolonial moniker applied to the Southern Cone of South America – a vast subregion that covers southern Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, Paraguay, and Bolivia – in a 2003 advertisement which ran in Argentinian newspapers. The Southern Cone is a stark example of both the commodification of natural resources, with soy and maize growing across large latifundios, or plantation lands, and of how much freedom and access large biotechnology corporations (Monsanto, Syngenta) and commodity traders (Cargills, Dreyfus) have to the corridors of power in Global South countries. Land in this vast region is concentrated in the hands of just a few powerful corporations, plantation owners and national

continued 



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Fumigation plane parked in front of a hangar, Argentina. Many of the pesticides sprayed on crops in this region are applied by planes.

elites, the result of both land dispossession through colonialism and missed opportunities for agrarian reform and land distribution policies. The region has also experienced dramatic extractive practices (mining, fracking, agribusiness) and deforestation, which has led to the expulsion of communities from their lands and mass migration to outer-city slums.

In 1996, the Argentinian government approved the cultivation of the first genetically modified soybean in Latin America, **based on untranslated studies conducted exclusively by the Monsanto corporation**. Across the Southern Cone region, there are now **over 40 million hectares of genetically engineered soy monocultures, which are doused in 600 million litres of the agROTOXIN glyphosate per year, eradicating at least 500,000 hectares of forests per year**. This is happening alongside state violence and the harassment of peasants, including the murders of peasant activists in Brazil, Paraguay and Argentina.⁹²

Crops in the region have been genetically modified to allow for higher and higher doses of agROTOXINS to be applied on weeds and pests, with corollary effects on human health, especially poor and often Indigenous people recruited to work on these megafarms.

However, the health of whole rural communities is often directly affected, as planes are used to spray crops with **pesticides**. Due to this practice, in **May 2019**, children and adolescents had to be hospitalised and farm animals died **across Mato Grosso do Sul** in Brazil. Fumigation by plane leaves pesticide residues in water, causing further damage to human health.

In 2011, in **Canindeyú, a rural region of Paraguay**, a farmer named Rubén Portillo died after suffering the symptoms of severe agrochemical intoxication. Another 22 people from the same community were admitted to hospital with similar symptoms. In 2013, after receiving no response from the national government, communities appealed to the United Nations Human Rights Committee, which ruled against the Paraguayan state in 2019, finding that it was responsible for polluting the community and for clear violations of the right to life.⁹³

In **Argentina**, the use of glyphosate increased by 848% between 1996 to 2016. A study by medical doctors across the four provinces most affected by soy production found almost double the incidence of cancer than across the rest of the country: an increase in neonatal defects and miscarriages, and an increase in allergies, hormonal and neurological disorders. In 2015, the World Health Organisation declared glyphosate a carcinogen.⁹⁴

Part 2: Food sovereignty in action

Peasants and other people working in rural areas have the right to determine their own food and agriculture systems, recognized by many States and regions as the right to food sovereignty. This includes the right to participate in decision-making processes on food and agriculture policy and the right to healthy and adequate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods that respect their cultures.

– Article 15, UNDROP, 2018⁹⁵

Despite the crises and challenges of today's global food system, there is still plenty of room for hope. In 1996, the international movement of La Via Campesina – which represents 200 million peasants, landless workers, Indigenous people, pastoralists, fishers, migrants, farmworkers, small and

medium-size farmers, and rural communities around the world – introduced the concept of food sovereignty at the World Food Summit in Rome. Now, 25 years later, the movement continues to grow and is stronger than ever.



A protest by La Via Campesina members.



Peasant communities around the world are leading this struggle to put power over food production and distribution back in the hands of people. Through food sovereignty, peasants know how to grow food sustainably for their own societies and for the planet.

Food sovereignty enables communities to grow food that is appropriate for their lands and culture and guarantees democratic control over how it is distributed and traded. It is a practical solution that puts power in the hands of people, not corporations.

It is also the only model capable of cooling the planet, which can ensure “a just transition rooted in people’s power, ecological and social wellbeing and solidarity at local, regional and international context.”⁹⁶

Unlike the current agrifood system, food sovereignty provides protections for the world’s most marginalised people and the planet’s biodiversity; and is not based on northern monopolies exporting crises to the Global South. **Peasant agroecology is “the basis of our proposal and vision for the food sovereignty of the peoples of the world.”**⁹⁷

“ We need to fight for genuine, integral and popular agrarian reform, the defence of Indigenous and peasant territories, and the recovery of local food systems... we need to build new relationships between the working people of the countryside and the city. ”

– **La Via Campesina**⁹⁸

Many of the movements and peasants’ organisations building the alternatives for national food sovereignty on the ground have been working for years with War on Want.

Food sovereignty, in practice, can take different forms:

- **Land Rights:** peasant movements organising to demand agrarian reforms and the recognition of alternative forms of ownership, including claiming common and ancestral lands
- **Seed Sovereignty:** challenging the patenting of seeds by corporations, and establishing community seed banks to ensure the rights of peasant communities to use, save and exchange seeds
- **Workers’ Rights:** workers across the world standing together in solidarity. UK workers’ international solidarity actions have helped secure better rights and pay for farmworkers in the Global South working for international supply chains
- **Solidarity Economies:** building alternative value and supply chains by developing localised markets, establishing cooperatives and community credit systems
- **Peasant Agroecology:** challenging the toxic trade and agROTOXIN monopolies and creating a production and agricultural model that respects the planet, its biodiversity and the livelihoods of rural communities, peasants, and Indigenous populations.

International peasant networks and movements are growing, connecting different struggles – workers’ rights, Indigenous peoples and climate justice – organising together in important policy spaces, and winning crucial battles. In 2010, the conclusion of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) talks in Japan called for new financial mechanisms, including a “green development mechanism”, to generate offsets from land areas managed in compliance with the CBD. However, the decision was not adopted: it was blocked by the Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas (ALBA), led by Bolivia. The ALBA expressed its concerns that such market-based

proposals could cause the 'commodification' of nature, harm biodiversity, and violate human rights.⁹⁹ The adoption of the UNDROP in

2018 by the United Nations was also the result of a long struggle by peasant movements and civil society – and a huge win.¹⁰⁰

Who really feeds the world?

A key issue in debates around transformative visions for the world agrifood system is the question of how to ensure there is enough food to feed the world's population. There is an assumption that we need the highly productive farming technology of industrial agriculture, and the Green Revolution technology, to ensure enough production. However, this is not the case: there is plenty of food in the world, around 6,000 calories per person if waste is taken into account, when only 3,000 calories need to be grown and produced to sufficiently feed everyone.¹⁰¹

Since the Green Revolution sixty years ago, highly intensive farming technology has been considered the most effective way to produce enough food: however, the social, economic and environmental impacts of this model have been devastating. It has become increasingly evident that the solution is smallholder, peasant farming. The ETC Group has long estimated that approximately 70% of people globally are fed by or depend upon peasant agriculture, which uses "less (often much less) than 25% of the resources – including land, water, fossil fuels – used to get all of the world's food to the table."¹⁰²

Other recent research has claimed these figures are over-stated, and that just 34% of food is grown on farms smaller than two hectares, on just 12% of arable land globally. However, even if the lower estimate is correct, **smallholder peasant farmers are still using land far more efficiently, and if their methods of farming were applied more widely, across more of the world's arable land, they could grow a larger percentage of the world's food.**¹⁰³

However, it is important to highlight that the ETC group research is also focused on the nutritional contribution of peasant farming (peasant farms produce more food and more nutritious food per hectare than large farms) and how important this chain is for the food consumption of most of the population in the Global South; while other research focuses only on total yield production, without considering if that production is destined for feeding people or fuelling cars.¹⁰⁴

The definition of smallholder farmers also varies from geographical regions. Two hectares is a tiny ceiling for small farms: a small farm in the Tunisian northern cereal belt, for example, is at least 10 hectares. A small farm in the semi-arid central zones is 20-30 hectares.

When we look at major population centres, the significance of small-scale farming is also clear.

In China, home to a fifth of the world's population, small-scale producers grow 80% of the food consumed nationally. In Latin America, 17 million smallholder farms grow 51% of the maize, 77% of the beans, and 61% of the potatoes consumed across the continent. And on the African continent, 80% of food is both consumed and grown by peasant and small-scale farmers.¹⁰⁵ Such farmers generally require little capital investment and most use some type of agroecological techniques.¹⁰⁶

Not only does peasant farming already feed much of the world in the face of the huge monopoly power wielded by corporate agribusiness; under improved conditions, peasant farming could be the best option for feeding the world.

6. The right to land in Sri Lanka: resisting agribusiness land grabs

Peasants and other people living in rural areas have the right to land, individually and/or collectively [...], including the right to have access to, sustainably use and manage land and the water bodies, coastal seas, fisheries, pastures, and forests therein, to achieve an adequate standard of living, to have a place to live in security, peace and dignity and to develop their cultures.

– Article 17, UNDROP, 2018

Land grabbing across Sri Lanka for export-oriented agriculture and large housing development projects has accelerated since the end of the civil war in 2009, reaching epidemic proportions. Villagers have been evicted, as farm and forest lands are marked for tea, rubber, palm oil and banana plantations for export, export processing zones, and the development of tourist infrastructure such as all-inclusive hotels for mass tourism, all of which comes with huge environmental impacts.¹⁰⁷

Land grabbing is not new: indeed, colonialism was one big land grab, and the reaction as part of decolonisation was to place the great majority of land under state control, with access by peasants and larger farmers working through a variety of customary and codified practices. Conflicts and military disputes that arose out of the civil war fuelled land grabbing, as people (and particularly the Tamil minority population) temporarily left their land for safety, making it easier for land to be stolen. As of 2016, farmers and herders had been forced from 36,371 hectares (approximately 140 square

miles) of stolen land and compelled to move into the forests.¹⁰⁸

The Movement for National Land and Agricultural Reform (MONLAR) is pushing back. MONLAR, a long-standing partner of War on Want, encompasses a network of grassroots farmer organisations, and works towards building a people's movement for food sovereignty through capacity building and mobilising small farmers and marginalised communities. It protects natural resources and human rights, and as the representative of La Via Campesina in Sri Lanka, raises the voices of rural communities, persistently campaigning for agricultural and land policies that protect them, while promoting agroecological practices at village level.

One of MONLAR's current campaigns focuses on the protection of nature reserves against expanding tea and palm oil plantations in southwest Sri Lanka, while defending the livelihoods of those living in and around the tropical rainforests.

Another campaign MONLAR has supported is against land confiscation and the blocking of natural water sources in the village of Homadola, next to the Kanneliya Forest Reserve (a lowland tropical rainforest in the south-west of Sri Lanka, protected by national regulations), by the management of the Homadola Estate. In 1912, during British colonial rule, areas of the Kanneliya rainforest were cleared to make way for a lucrative rubber plantation called the Homadola Estate, near the village of Homadola. Today, the Estate includes a palm oil plantation run by the Watawala Plantations corporation.

In 2004, the Kanneliya Forest Reserve was recognised by UNESCO as a Man and

Biosphere (MAB) reserve – an important international recognition for sites promoting reconciling the conservation of biodiversity with its sustainable use. The Kanneliya Forest Reserve is one of the most biodiverse hotspots in South Asia: the forest contains over 300 species of rainforest wet-zone flora, 52% of which are endemic to Sri Lanka.

Despite the international recognition of Kanneliya and many similar protected areas in the country, illegal activities continue within Sri Lanka's protected areas, including mining, poaching, human-induced forest fires, encroachment, monocrop cultivation, and the blocking of streams and rivers, preventing villagers and wildlife from accessing water. In addition, monoculture plantation models have



One of the most important protected areas in Sri Lanka is the Sinharaja rainforest, in the south-west of the country.



widespread negative effects, such as the desiccation of natural water catchments, soil erosion, and chemical fertilisers and pesticides penetrating the aquifers (layers of rock, sand, or earth that contains water or allows water to pass through them).

Villagers in Homadola have the right to obtain water from natural water catchments in the forest-blanketed mountains of the Homadola Estate, regardless of whether land is under state or private ownership. Additional drinking-water projects jointly funded by the village and the Sri Lankan government provide water free of charge.

In April 2021, during the Covid-19 pandemic, the Estate management uprooted rubber trees to replace them with palm oil plantations, an example of how private corporations use moments of crisis to advance their interests. This new project gravely threatened freshwater catchments, sparking a large-scale conflict in the area.

After attempts to gain the attention and support of local government representatives were unsuccessful, villagers began to organise together. Banners highlighting the importance of protecting the environment were drawn and displayed near the Homadola Estate borders and fences, while others established an organisation called *Praana* (life) and contacted the media.

MONLAR contacted *Praana* members after seeing the media reports, and introduced the villagers to lawyers and environmental activists; alongside training the villagers in new methods and practices related to agroforestry and agroecology, to promote the protection of water sources and soil from damaging chemical fertilisers.

Meanwhile, the social and ecological situation deteriorated. Waste disposed from the palm oil-producing factory on the Estate, the Nakiyadeniya Factory, were dumped around the roads leading through Homadola, and chemical pesticides and factory waste now



Aerial view of the palm oil plantation (bottom of the photo) encroaching into Kanneliya rainforest, south-west of Sri Lanka.





 **MONLAR training in agroecology with smallholder tea farmers. Sinharaja rainforest, south-west Sri Lanka.**

flows through the water supply, particularly during the rainy season when heavy rainfall washes the factory waste into freshwater sources. Villagers have reported increases in cancer, the deaths of young people from unknown diseases, and the disappearance of native animals, fish, birds and bees.

“ Due to irresponsible actions of the Estate, now the villagers get polluted water. Who knows what diseases we will get in the future by drinking this water? Most of the villagers don't know what happens to their water sources because they live far away from the Estate. The pipelines laid in the Estate bring water to their households. ”

– A villager from Homadola¹⁰⁹

Villagers met with one of the local authority representatives in mid-October 2021, to put forward their case for the Estate to ensure the protection of the forest areas and water catchments, or to let the villagers protect them. After this meeting, forest destruction has been temporarily stopped, although the future of the forest and water catchments remains uncertain.

As of 2022, the struggle around these issues continues, but villagers now are more hopeful that they can win this campaign with the support of MONLAR, and its network of lawyers, experts and activists.¹¹⁰

7. Resisting toxic pesticides in Kenya: peasant agroecology and seed sovereignty

Peasants and other people working in rural areas have the right not to use or to be exposed to hazardous substances or toxic chemicals, including agrochemicals or agricultural or industrial pollutants.

– Article 14, UNDROP, 2018

Agriculture dominates the Kenyan economy, which employs 70% of the rural population, and accounts for around 33% of its GDP.¹¹¹

Land is an important factor in food production, including the local population's accessibility to it, an important issue in Kenya since 1895, when the country was declared a British protectorate. A series of laws to grab land from the local population were implemented by the British, with freeholds sold and leases granted instead for up to 99 years. Upon decolonisation in 1963, Kenya inherited these same land laws and policies, created to grab large parts of land for the British Crown, with the land grabbed (used for different purposes, from agriculture, to mining to game reserves) transferred to the government of Kenya.

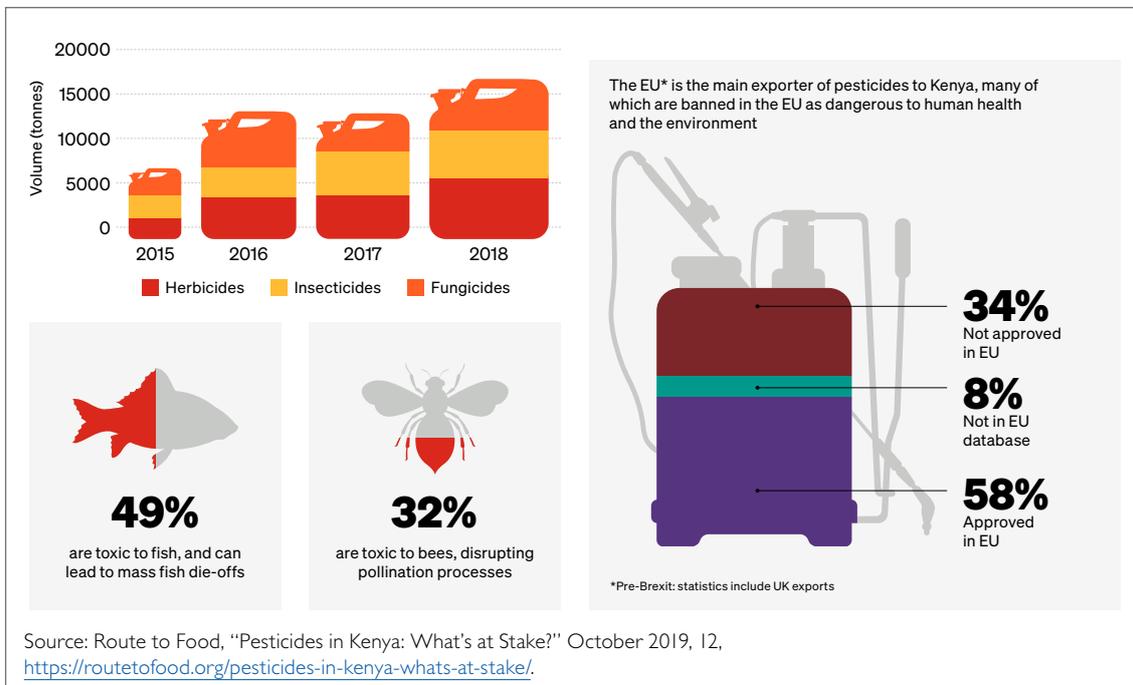
Local populations that used and lived on these lands as pastoralists, peasants, hunters, gatherers, and fisherfolk were effectively displaced and turned into squatters on their own land. These lands were never returned to the original

inhabitants, and instead were sold or leased to corporations and other foreign and national landowners for different development purposes. With the failure of the new post-independence Kenyan government to redress the land issue, local communities had to move to urban areas, mostly populating new informal settlements and increasing food insecurity across the country.

The ownership of land and land distribution for peasants to grow food is now one of the most important challenges for the country. Today, Kenya is highly dependent on export-oriented farming, whilst at the same time relying on imports of other essential crops from abroad.¹¹²

Kenya's **export-oriented agricultural model is wrapped up with the trap of foreign debt:** agricultural exports provide the foreign currency needed to pay down foreign debt. In 2020, the total foreign debt of Kenya rose to around US\$38 billion, up from US\$8.5 billion in 2010.¹¹³

Kenya: agrochemical imports



If a country such as Kenya fails to honour its debt obligations to foreign lenders, it must negotiate for either an extension of the deadline or ask for debt service relief (debt suspension). Free trade agreements are often negotiated at this point, which traditionally covered taxes and tariffs between two countries, but in recent decades have specifically been designed to break down 'non-tariff barriers' to trade: environmental, social, and labour standards. Trade and debt are closely connected,¹¹⁴ as agreements are usually signed in favour of the lending country, and often include clauses permitting imports of products banned in the country of origin, such as agrotoxins, poisonous pesticides and toxic herbicides like paraquat.¹¹⁵ Trade deals favour Global North corporate interests, with devastating consequences for communities in the Global South.

Many of the pesticides sold on the Kenyan market are mutagenic (they

change the DNA of a cell), are endocrine disruptors (interfere with human hormones), are carcinogenic, or have a detrimental effect on the reproductive system.

Oxyflourfen and glufosinate-ammonium are toxic herbicides withdrawn from the European market which are registered as ingredients in 12 different commercial pesticides for sale in Kenya.¹¹⁶

Paraquat is another herbicide banned in the EU and the UK but widely available in Kenya. It is imported by Syngenta Kenya Ltd., a subsidiary of Syngenta, which also owns one of the largest paraquat-manufacturing factories in Europe, based in Huddersfield, England. Workers and farmers who regularly come into contact with paraquat have reported severe health problems, including impaired lung function, skin disorders, and neurodegenerative diseases.¹¹⁷

The recommended dosage and application of paraquat widely varies from how it is actually used in Kenyan agriculture, increasing the risks associated with its use. The pesticide was originally designed for use in megafarms where the application process was done at some distance. This is not the case in small farms of less than two acres (approximately 0.81 hectares), which are widespread in the Kenyan countryside.

Building the alternatives through peasant agroecology and popular education

Peasants and other people working in rural areas have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their own seeds and traditional knowledge.

– Article 19, UNDROP, 2018

War on Want's partner, the Kenyan Peasants League (KPL), is campaigning to stop the import of banned pesticides from the UK and

EU, while advocating for organic pesticides and agroecological training schools.

Throughout 2022, KPL organised smallholder farmers into farming collectives of between 20 and 50 individuals, in the aim of reviving local markets and indigenous seeds, including through the establishment of area-based and household seed banks. Peasant farmers now have the independence and ability to store and reproduce their own seeds every season and use affordable and safe pesticides on their crops.

“ When the soils are healthy, then the human beings and animals will be healthy. The health of the soils is affected by the use of chemical pesticides, herbicides and fertilisers that kill the soil microorganisms, leaving the soil bare and meaning that the farmers have no options but to use them over and over again, putting them into a vicious cycle of dependency. ”

– Dick Olela, KPL member



© Kenyan Peasants League



Members of Kenyan Peasants League, protesting in Nairobi during the COP26 climate summit, Kenya.

Since 2020, in partnership with War on Want KPL has been working on a project to test two organic pesticides, which will then be distributed to KPL members and other farmers as alternative, affordable, and safe solutions to agrottoxins. The first formulation was developed at the University of Graz in Austria, with the second developed by a local farmer and member of the KPL. The first phase of the project, with field tests across the counties of Baringo, Migori, Nairobi and Machakos, produced promising results.¹¹⁸

Dick Olela, National Convener of the KPL, said that both organic formulations were successful in stopping aphids from attacking vegetables:

“We sprayed the leaves of kales infested by aphids, and after one week the aphids were already cleared and the leaves turned green and healthy.”

A second phase of the project is now underway to produce and distribute the active ingredients of the organic pesticide to 30 peasant farmers across both Migori and Baringo counties, while holding farmer education and consultative forums with 200 peasant farmers.

“ They have done a lot of comparison work here, and the plots that have actually been planted using organic manure are performing far much better. And that’s why I am certain that we as KPL are winning... we are on the right track. When we started, we were very few, but you see...the movement has since grown bigger. We have had many clusters, getting formed day after day and the indigenous seeds are in demand from a wider population across Kenya. ”

– Dick Olela, KPL member



Members of Kenyan Peasants League testing the organic pesticide formulas in Migori county, Kenya.

KPL is running a national campaign to ban the import of agrottoxins and expose how highly profitable these imports are for the Kenyan government and Global North corporate exporters. The campaign is also pushing for the legal registration of organic pesticides in Kenya, to clear the path for mass production.

8. Farmers fighting the climate crisis in Bangladesh: local adaptation and mitigation techniques

Peasants and other people working in rural areas have the right to contribute to the design and implementation of national and local climate change adaptation and mitigation policies, including through the use of practices and traditional knowledge.

– Article 18, UNDROP, 2018

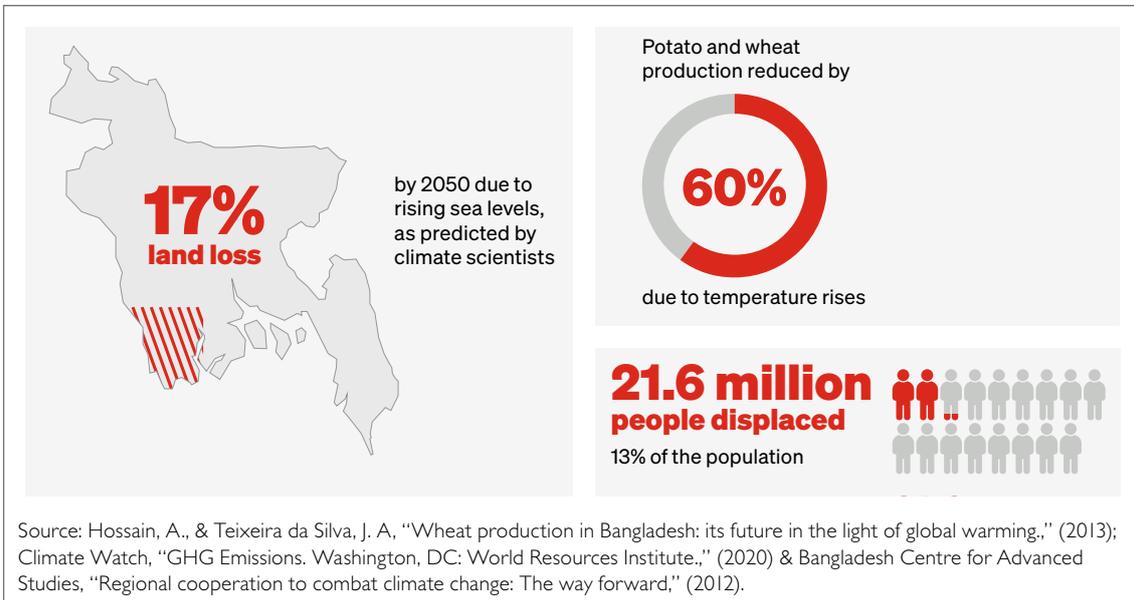
As a geographically low-lying country, Bangladesh is on the frontlines of the climate crisis; yet poverty, underdevelopment, and neocolonial policies are hindering the country's ability to mitigate and adapt to the effects of increasing climate breakdown.

Agriculture is a major sector of Bangladesh's economy, representing 13% of GDP in 2018. It is dominated by smallholders with farms of less than an acre (0,4 hectares), effectively landless peasants. Rice is the main crop grown across the country, concentrated in

Human chain against World Trade Organization (WTO) and free trade agreements. Gazipur, Bangladesh.



Estimated climate crisis impacts on Bangladesh



lowland and coastal areas, with fish the secondary major food export.

Bangladesh's coastal areas are already experiencing increased soil salinity due to climate breakdown-induced rising sea levels. This is made worse by flash flooding which leaves soil waterlogged with sea water, literally salting the earth and making it completely unsuitable for growing crops.¹¹⁹

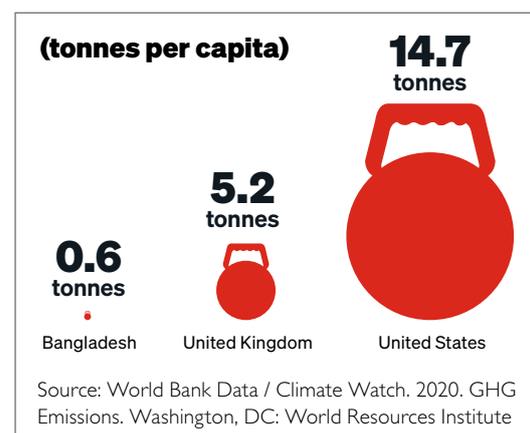
Along the coastal region of Bhola and the fishing port of Cox's Bazar, fisherfolk face frequent cyclonic storms and high waves, causing damage and destruction to fishing vessels and nets, and meaning fishing excursions have to be abandoned.

Cox's Bazar is often beleaguered by flash floods and waterlogging, making aquaculture (fish farming) difficult to impossible. And in Bhola, river erosion is forcing changes to livelihoods and migration to cities. Other areas across Bangladesh face extreme drought. The FAO predicts that Bangladesh's development achievements over the last 30 years are now likely to slowly regress.

“ We had about five and a half hectares of land in one plot. 24 hectares in another plot. Quite a lot, really. All of it disappeared into the river. We had to move our house and now we are forced to do odd jobs. ”

– Mohamed Tota Pramanik, Farmer from Faridpur region, Bangladesh

Carbon dioxide emissions in 2019



Global South countries such as Bangladesh are the least responsible for the climate crisis in terms of contribution to all-time carbon emissions, yet are paying the heaviest price for climate breakdown.

Farmer movements are fighting back by applying local knowledge and climate-adaptive agriculture and mitigation approaches to crop cultivation.

“ We had lots of lands there, our own household, abundance of trees and other wealth. Then in 2003, everything has gone into the river. Nothing is left now. ”

– Rasheda Begum, Farmer from Faridpur Region, Bangladesh¹²⁰

Adaptation and mitigation techniques



Vegetable bags: one technique is to cultivate vegetables in sacks, rather than directly on the soil. This keeps vegetable roots out of the soil. For instance, sweet pumpkin, rice pumpkin, bitter gourd, okra, red spinach and other creeping vegetables can all be grown in vegetable bags, which protect crops from flooding.



Integrated cultivation of fish, fruits and vegetables: in coastal areas, farmers are making use of traditional pond cultivation techniques to grow vegetables alongside farming fish. Pond embankments are elevated so that tidal water cannot enter. Creeping vegetables are grown on the inner banks, outer banks are lined with fruit trees, and various vegetables are planted in the middle.



Bed-Based Vegetable Cultivation: farmers are solving irrigation and flooding issues by planting vegetables in raised beds – which naturally collect and retain fresh water. Raised-bed farming makes it possible to grow crops in the dry season.



Maria Seed Technology Model: Village farmers, mostly women, preserve seeds for the following year's paddy cultivation using a technique called the 'Maria Seed Technology Model'. Farmers slowly mix a kilogram of salt with 4-5 litres of water in a tub, and add an egg, with the mixing process continued until the egg floats. Seeds are then added into the mixture; if they float, they are considered low-quality and are rejected. The seeds which sink to the bottom are selected as ready for preservation.

The **Bangladesh Agriculture Farm Labour Federation (BAFLF)** and **Jatiyo Kisan Shramik Society (JKSS)**, which translates as the National Women Farmers & Workers Association, are working to create an environmentally and socially sustainable, resilient, and egalitarian food system. To this end, both organisations advocate for increased social protections, gender equality, and safe employment, and for the right to food, health, housing, and land. As the national trade union federation for the agricultural sector, BAFLF works to protect and promote the rights and interests of smallholder and marginal farmers and agricultural workers. In 2022, BAFLF has been campaigning for fair wages, employment guarantees, crop subsidies, farmers' rights to land, seeds, and other natural resources; and livelihood assistance for farmers and farm workers affected by the climate crisis.

BAFLF is a strong advocate of food sovereignty, and opposes the corporate globalisation of agriculture, including land grabbing and the introduction of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) into Bangladesh.¹²¹

JKSS works mainly with women farmers and farmworkers to hold workshops, education programmes, trainings and demonstrations. JKSS advocates intensively for the reduction of pesticide use, the problems with GMOs and foreign seeds not adapted to the local context; and for alternatives to the dominant industrial agricultural model, such as the use of local seed varieties. JKSS fights for climate justice, food sovereignty and agroecology to protect the rights and livelihoods of agricultural workers and farmers; through a range of workshops and training sessions to encourage local seed use and preservation, non-pesticide-based farming technologies, and organic poultry and fish farming in coastal areas.

In February 2019, BAFLF, JKSS and allied groups organised a two-month campaign to fight the commercial release of a new, genetically modified form of rice called 'golden rice'.¹²² The Stop the Golden Rice Campaign has been one of the longest-lasting campaigns of BAFLF and JKSS in the country. This campaign was partly organised by BAFLF members who worked at the Bangladesh Rice Research Institute (BRRI), a national research institute funded by international corporations investing in biotechnologies and developing golden rice. BAFLF and JKSS lobbied the Ministry of Agriculture and the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) – urging them to stop the commercial release of golden rice, and organised a national agricultural workers' convention to create mass awareness. **After a series of protests by the movements and popular pressure, the campaign managed to put a temporary halt to the approval of this crop.**

Whilst farmers in Bangladesh are facing colossal destruction to their land because of climate breakdown, countries in the Global North which have contributed the most to the climate crisis are neglecting their obligations to provide sufficient funding and resources – to compensate for the loss and damage caused to countries such as Bangladesh.

It is being left to farmer associations, unions and networks like BAFLF and JKSS to innovate in order to adapt to and mitigate against the onslaught of floods and other extreme weather events, caused largely by the Global North.

9. The power of unions in Morocco: workers organising against exploitation in export-oriented megafarms

Peasants and other people working in rural areas, irrespective of whether they are temporary, seasonal or migrant workers, have the rights to work in safe and healthy working conditions, to participate in the application and review of safety and health measures, to select safety and health representatives and representatives in safety and health committees (...)

– Article 14, UNDROP, 2018

Low-cost fruit and vegetables sold across supermarkets in the Global North have a hidden price: super-low wages for Global South producers.

The policies and behaviours of governments and corporate agribusiness have created and enabled a food system based on the exploitation of cheap labour, including through clamping down on unions and workers organising for better wages and working conditions. Women workers are particularly at risk of labour exploitation. The high level of unpaid work carried out by women, including unpaid household labour, along with below subsistence wages, keeps women workers in poverty.

The vast amount of unpaid work occurring across the Global South means southern workers' wages are effectively subsidised.¹²³ This dynamic extends to the wages of labourers when they enter the geographical north: female Moroccan strawberry pickers

in southern Spain, or the overwhelmingly Chicano workforce in US fruit and vegetable agriculture.

Morocco is essentially a large vegetable garden for the European Union, sending 92% of its vegetable exports across the Mediterranean, with tomatoes totalling 43% of this. **Morocco produces 25% of the tomatoes and 20% of the fruits consumed in the UK.**

Morocco's rural population of 1.5 million peasants and 1 million farmworkers counts for 36% of the total population.¹²⁴ **Land concentration is particularly uneven: just 1% of the rural population farm 15% of the total agricultural area; while 71% farm 24% of the total area, on smallholdings of less than five hectares.**

The legacy of colonialism in Morocco and the growth of capitalism since the 1960s led to the neocolonial *Plan Maroc Vert* (PMV) or

Green Morocco Plan in 2008-18; through which a small minority of local and foreign exporters used public subsidies to expand their landholdings and maximise profits. While smallholder farmers became poorer, losing land and access to resources, multinational corporate monopolies strengthened their grip on the seed, pesticide, and fertiliser trade. The rural minimum wage was just 1,994 Moroccan dirham (US\$203) per month as of 2018. The food security strategy pursued by the Moroccan government has meant that food export revenues cover only 48% of imports.

The corporate megafarms, based in the fertile and agriculturally productive Souss region of Morocco, have 'gained' the most from the PMV, precisely because the model is based on environmentally and socially destructive methods: the rampant overuse and depletion of groundwater, soil destruction through monoculture, and the improper disposal of agricultural wastes.

A significant portion of arable land in the Souss region is cultivated with fruits and vegetable for the export market.

Exploitation is rife across the sector, and not just from the corporate agribusinesses. Small to medium farms hire non-unionised workers to labour in precarious conditions, transporting workers on ramshackle and dangerous lorries; intermediaries make their cut of profits by keeping workers unaware of their rights and paid low wages, while most employers offer nothing in the way of social security, bonuses, or holiday days. The practices of intermediaries have a dramatic impact on reducing workers' rights, weakening unions and their struggles, particularly in the large farms. Many farmworkers live in poor neighbourhoods without the adequate infrastructure to ensure a dignified life, and where the impact of Covid-19 on health and the war in Ukraine have increased the price of food, making life harder.



Moroccan farmworkers picking vegetables.



ATTAC/CADTM Maroc is a popular education movement committed to the Moroccan struggles against globalisation and the dominance of international financial institutions. Its work is grounded in solidarity between peoples and based on social justice, with recent struggles focusing on debt, microcredit, extractivism, workers' rights, trade justice, climate justice and food sovereignty.

ATTAC Maroc is a founding member of the **North African Network for Food Sovereignty**, a unified voice for the struggle of peasants, fisherfolk and agricultural workers in the region that brings together representatives from trade unions, cooperatives, and associations that work across food sovereignty.

One of these member unions is **the Syndicat Démocratique de l'Agriculture (SDA), or the Democratic Union of Agriculture**, which belongs to the Federation of Democratic Unions in Morocco, an important organiser and defender of farmworkers in Chtouka Ait Baha, located in the Souss region.

The SDA's women's committee organised protests to illuminate the suffering of women farm workers across March and April 2022. Alongside lower wages, women workers often spray toxic pesticides without access to appropriate tools, protective uniforms, or spraying schedules. Women are often made to carry very heavy vegetable boxes and work long hours in extremely hot plastic-covered greenhouses. Others feel pressure to hide their pregnancies or their periods for fear of dismissal from work, or even return to work straight after childbirth, a denial of the right to maternity leave. Sexual harassment is often rife in production and packaging units, which overwhelmingly goes unreported and unchallenged.

For women who join unions the situation is often made even worse through retaliatory assault and harassment. As one worker states:

“We live in neighbourhoods deprived of decent living conditions, enduring the hardships of a life of poverty and we bear the responsibility of giving birth and raising children in a patriarchal society that does not recognise our roles without which production and society cannot function. Our situation has further deteriorated with the consequences of the Covid pandemic, the high prices of main consumption materials, transportation, and medicines, with failing public health services and public education. The consequence is that we are trapped in a vicious circle of consumer loans and micro-credits, which drain us at high-interest rates. We are put daily through the mill so as to maximise the profits of the agricultural capitalists who benefit from subsidies and tax incentives. While we live in misery, the employers are constantly expanding their properties and changing their fancy cars.”¹²⁵

In 2022, workers trying to organise against these conditions organised a sit-in protest at the headquarters of Duroc, a company belonging to the large agricultural group Delassus. Duroc employs 3,500 workers all year round and produces 37 tonnes of tomatoes per year to be exported to the EU and the UK markets. Striking workers have been subject to violent assaults by the company's management, followed by a court-ordered quashing of their protests.

In Agadir, the Zniber Group's administration assigned workers a minimum production rate and halved the wages of workers who did not achieve it, while expelling unionists trying to organise against this exploitation. These

repressive acts culminated in a female worker being run over in October 2021, sending her to hospital. Zniber is one of the largest agricultural holdings in the region, which directly employs 7,500 workers. Zniber also exports its products to the EU and the UK through Driscoll's, the largest distributor of berries in the world.

On the farms of the Azura Group, struggles for unionisation have been ongoing since 2007, with the company expelling organisers and affiliated workers, and even sending private security agencies to attack farmworkers protesting in front of the company headquarters in Chtouka Ait Bah.

The challenges of unionising and organising to defend workers' rights and achieve higher wages from profitable produce sent to the EU and the UK have increased in recent years. Employers have used government Covid-19 subsidies to fatten profits, while the effects of the pandemic have weakened the trade union movement, as the ability of workers to meet in person and coordinate resistance strategies has been severely impaired. The Moroccan elections of September 2021 brought to power a far-right government bloc aligned with the national elites: the current Prime Minister, Aziz Akhannouch, was a previous Minister of Agriculture and one of the leading Moroccan



Members of the trade union SDA joining a protest. Souss-Massa region, Morocco.



billionaires (he is the CEO of a leading conglomerate company). Attacks on public sector employment and anti-strike legislation are now increasing.

The experience of Moroccan farmworkers illustrates that fruit and vegetables are not cheap because of supply and demand, so-called ‘natural’ economic processes: they are a desired commodity which is made to be cheap, and that cheapness does not come without a price. It rests on producers lowering their costs through poverty wages, dismantling and repressing workers’ struggles to defend their rights, and subjecting workers to inhumane and dangerous conditions.

Poor or inhumane working conditions maintain a cheap workforce, since protecting workers’ health costs money: money that neither local monopoly capital nor Global North supermarkets selling these products want to include in the price of the produce.

The solution is internationalism, as recently declared by the SDA:

“ One of the main tasks of our union is the contribution to the discussion of the state’s agricultural development model and providing alternatives that serve the interests of the working class of our people. In order to do so, small farmers, fishermen, and workers in the forest sector, the actual producers of our food, are still marginalised by the official agricultural policy that serves the profits of capitalist exporters. The call to develop the demands and aspirations of all workers in the agricultural sector along with real agricultural development needs a high level of structured and flexible organization. It also entails strengthening cooperation with other organisations that are fighting for the same goals at the national, regional, and global levels.”¹²⁶

10. Food and agricultural workers in the UK: organising against exploitation

Peasants and other people working in rural areas have the right to form and join organisations, trade unions, cooperatives or any other organization or association of their own choosing for the protection of their interests, and to bargain collectively. Such organisations shall be independent and voluntary in character, and remain free from all interference, coercion, or repression.

– Article 9, UNDROP

The unjust global food system is sustained by trade agreements negotiated in the interests of Global North countries and multinational corporations; by the role of large profit-driven retailers and supermarkets, and by exploitation of the agrifood workers in their supply chains.

Supermarkets' low prices in Global North countries such as the UK are the result of

low wages paid to food and farmworkers in the Global South. This model of exploitation is replicated in the Global North among marginalised workers who have migrated from poorer countries.

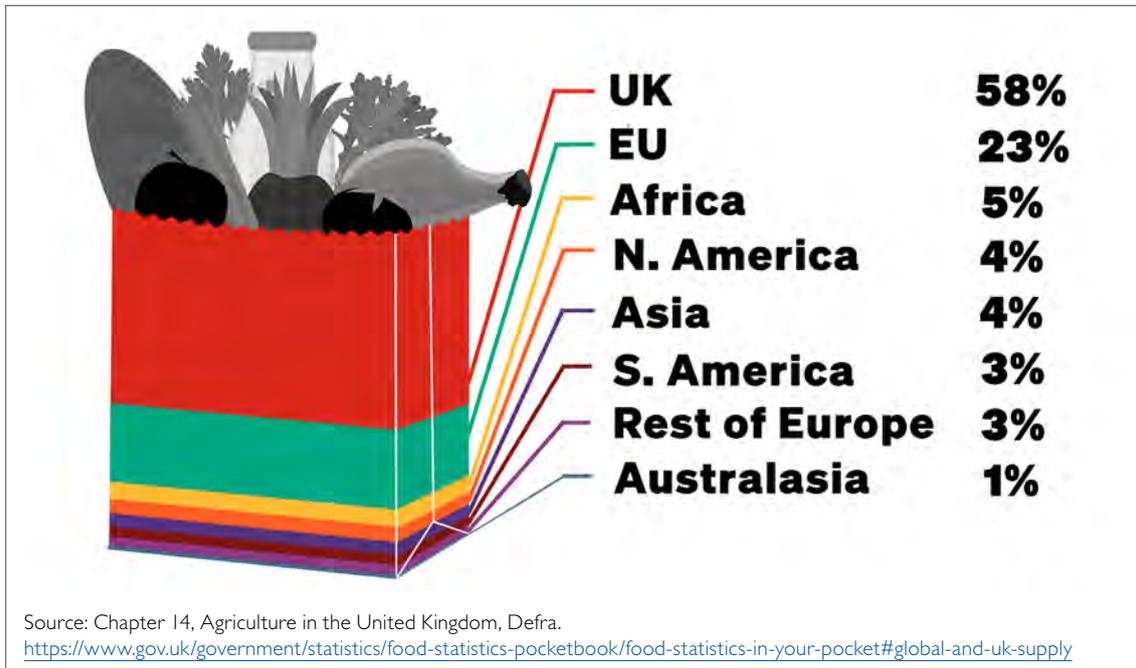
In the EU, more than a third of horticultural crops (cultivation of fruits and vegetables), and almost half of its fruit, comes from labour-intensive farms from Italy and Spain that employ exploited seasonal and foreign



Eastern European farmworkers picking asparagus in the home counties, UK.



Origin of food consumed in UK



workers, usually from the Global South, who are often undocumented, with few legal rights and little protection in the countries they work in.¹²⁷

The UK relies on trade deals to bring in cheap produce as part of its post-Brexit trade strategy, such as the recently signed Morocco deal (2019), while growing only 58% of food consumed in the country.

According to 2021 statistics from the UK Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), the leading foreign suppliers of food consumed in the UK were countries from the EU (23%), Africa (5%), Asia (4%), North America (4%) and South America (4%). At the same time, the agricultural and food processing sectors in the UK employ a workforce composed mostly of foreign workers.

Workers in labour-intensive UK sectors such as horticulture and meat processing face high levels of exploitation and

deregulation, particularly in England.

Since the abolition of the English Agricultural Wages Board in 2013, the exploitation of foreign workers has increased: farmworkers in England do not have statutory protection for their pay and conditions, whereas Scotland and Wales have retained their agricultural wages boards, and foreign workers in these countries still receive statutory protection. Foreign workers in England are therefore left more exposed to “low wages and poor conditions in a system where markets do not value agricultural workers as vital contributors to our food chain.”¹²⁸

In 2021, across the UK 99% of seasonal workers in horticulture came from outside the country,¹²⁹ and 62% of those employed in meat processing were EU nationals.¹³⁰

Foreign workers are the backbone of the UK’s food supply chain, without whom the UK food system would all but collapse, yet they face rampant labour exploitation.¹³¹

Research by the University of Nottingham surveyed nearly 500 Bulgarian and Romanian workers employed across the UK agrifood industry.¹³² It found that foreign workers face abuse, exploitation, and debt; a situation which has grown worse since the Covid-19 pandemic.

Nearly a fifth of those surveyed reported emotional abuse or threats at work, with 11% saying they had not been issued payslips, a work contract, or a P45 form (which includes salary and taxes paid to date once the employment contract is over). One in ten were paid below the minimum wage, while 7% reported not being allowed to take

holiday, not receiving any holiday pay if they did, and having wages withheld. One in ten paid a fee to an individual, agency or employer to secure their job, despite the practice being illegal in the UK and in their home countries. Because of this, researchers believe that such experiences of exploitation are significantly under-reported.

The UK trade union Unite has been organising foreign workers in the British agricultural and food sector for years, an issue that has long been a challenge because of the transient nature of the workforce – but which is seeing positive results.

Organising workers at 2 Sisters Food Group's poultry factory in Sandycroft, Wales

 Workers at a chicken factory.



© Maksymenko Natalia / iStock

The 2 Sisters Food Group's factory in Sandycroft, Wales, is one of the largest poultry processing sites in the UK. Although Unite has had a union recognition agreement with the factory for many years, Unite Regional Officer Brian Troake explained that it has been a long struggle to recruit enough members to have much impact:

“We’ve struggled with the membership because it’s such a transient workforce. People will start work at 8am as a new employee and they’ll quit by 8.30am. The work is

continued 

enormously physically demanding, and the wages and treatment of the workers is so poor. Compounding the problem for union organising in the sector is not just one language barrier, but dozens.”

There are 32 different worker nationalities at the 2 Sisters Sandycroft site, with almost as many different languages spoken.

This is reflected in the University of Nottingham study; **41% of foreign workers surveyed said language was the most significant barrier to flagging problems in the workplace.**

After years of struggling to increase membership, Brian and his union colleagues decided to take a new approach, one that yielded astounding results, with 600 new members recruited in 18 months. They conducted a mapping exercise and went about targeting different communities by identifying leaders in those communities.

Unite’s Site Convenor at 2 Sisters Sandycroft, David Imre, had a crucial role in organising and mobilising workers. Originally from Romania, David moved to the UK in 2016, only joining Unite in 2019. Since then, he has gone from union member to rep to convenor, and has single-handedly recruited hundreds of members. David called his ‘proudest moment’ was **recruiting 89 members in a single day.**

So, what is the secret to his success? **“You need to listen to people,”** David explained. **“And sometimes that may involve listening to them about their personal lives outside of the workplace. That’s how you build trust. People need to know that you really care.”**

The union plays an important role in supporting workers and their families and working to address the issues and needs they raise. At a site where 80% of the workforce are foreign workers, David’s ability to speak five languages is indispensable.

“Especially when people are angry, scared or emotional, it’s hard for them to communicate in a second language,” David noted. **“We need to be able to talk to members in their native language.”**

With numbers comes power – and union members at 2 Sisters Sandycroft began to realise just how much power they could wield when they stuck together.

In 2020, at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, management dug their heels in when the workforce demanded better Covid health and safety measures; but thanks to the increased membership and the insistence of David and his team of reps, management relented.

And in 2021, members secured an unprecedented pay deal, where the lowest paid workers – accounting for 40% of the workforce – saw their pay increase by 6.4% at a time when inflation was only just hovering above 2%. This pay rise took their pay above the UK’s real Living Wage for the first time in the site’s history.

Those working in ‘manual debone’, about a fifth of the workforce, saw their pay skyrocket by more than 10%, while those in the ‘kill and hang’ part of the business saw a pay increase of 7.7%. The deal also secured an additional day’s holiday for everyone.

“Because we are so strong now with hundreds more members, it was not so much of a pay claim last year, it was more of a pay demand,” Brian explained. **“It’s been really empowering and inspiring for people, myself included. It’s not often you go into pay talks with such a strong negotiating position.”** Brian said he is eager to replicate this success at other food processing sites across the UK – and David is hopeful it will happen, as long as migrant workers’ voices are truly heard.

“Finding migrant reps should be at the forefront of our efforts,” he said, adding that migrant reps are also essential because they truly understand the unique migrant worker experience.

“Think about it – you come from a foreign country, you can’t speak the language, you’re often badly treated at work and in the wider community. These people have nowhere to go and no one to turn to. We need to help them.”

Above all, David urged all food and agriculture workers to join a union. **“The more of us that we are, the more power we have to make big changes in our workplaces,”** David said. **“If there’s a problem, we can fix it – but that’s only true if there are enough of us to show we have the power. We’ve proved that it works.”**

Organising foreign workers in UK food industries has become increasingly important since the UK government’s post-Brexit introduction of the seasonal worker visa scheme, which Unite believes renders foreign workers more vulnerable to exploitation. Whereas previously workers from EU countries came to the UK under EU freedom of movement, the UK’s seasonal worker visa scheme is tied to jobs; if a worker loses their job, they lose their right to work in the UK. Consequently, workers are less likely to report abuse or exploitation, for fear of being sacked.

In 2022, a joint investigation by the Guardian and the Bureau of Investigative Journalism (BIJ) exposed how fruit pickers from Nepal on seasonal migrant worker visas were illegally charged thousands of pounds by recruitment agencies to work on UK farms.¹³³ The investigation highlighted how the UK government body tasked with licensing labour providers and protecting

vulnerable and exploited workers, the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority (GLAA), is poorly funded and lacking the resources required to tackle rising exploitation under the new visa scheme.

The Guardian and BIJ noted that **the UK Home Office’s funding for the GLAA was a mere £7 million in 2021, less than the Home Office spent on publications, stationery and printing.**

In 2021, the UK government announced an expansion of the visa scheme as part of its National Food Strategy yet failed to consult Unite, or any other trade union, despite Unite representing over 100,000 workers in the food, drink, and agriculture sector. Unite has expressed grave concerns that without any additional funding for labour rights enforcement or changes to the visa scheme to protect foreign workers, any expansion of the scheme will only further undermine pay and terms and conditions in a sector that is already rife with low wages and exploitation.

The UK government's strategy was based on an initial review carried out across 2020 to 2021 by Leon chain restaurant co-founder Henry Dimbleby, the first of its kind since wartime rationing 75 years ago. What was supposed to be a significant and historic review of the UK's food system fell short after it failed to adequately highlight the contributions or issues faced by the food sector workforce. In the 275-page review, there was barely any mention of jobs, workers or employment.¹³⁴

While the UK government continues to show little interest in the fate of the foreign workers on whose efforts the entire UK food system depends, Unite believes that trade unions and other grassroots organisations must prioritise directly engaging with and empowering foreign workers.

The 2 Sisters in Sandycroft case illustrates that this approach can work, and key to its success was that it was worker-led – with migrant workers themselves organising each other.

Conclusion and recommendations

There are increasingly only two paths forward in a world swept and shattered by climate breakdown, famine, drought, and war, supply chain threats, political, economic, ecological, and social crises.

One is a path for the few: a continuation of Global North monopoly capital and endless corporate profit, facilitated by corporate-friendly national and international policies imposing a one-size-fits-all agricultural system across the planet. It means export-oriented, chemical-intensive agricultural production. It is the path of sending pineapples from Philippines plantations, produced by farm labourers making four dollars a day, to supermarkets in the Global North where a single pineapple sells for four dollars. This means poverty, exploitation, and the poisoning of the countryside across the Global South.

From Moroccan agricultural workers in strawberry farms to Bangladeshi farmers struggling with salt-soaked fields, to Sri Lankans pushing back against monocrop plantations of palm oil replacing sustainable rubber polycrops; **people across the Global South face a world-straddling northern-controlled network of supermarkets and processed foods, looking, smelling, and tasting the same.**

The alternative is a path and a world for the many, the peasant and popular path to development: the struggle for food sovereignty under the banner of networks and movements such as La Via Campesina, along with efforts to regain land

from neocolonial control. It is the struggle for just national distributions of land, and for agrarian reform. It means the fundamental reworking of national agricultural technologies to make them independent, or less dependent, on imported capital-intensive inputs. Food sovereignty and peasant agroecology also cools the heating planet.

Agroecology must be seen not only as a technical solution to the food, farming and climate crises, but a political, social and technical solution; resting on the autonomy and creative ingenuity of peasant smallholders and their capacity to resist monopoly capital and work outside of transnational monopoly supply and value chains.

Price fluctuations are a catastrophe in the Global South, and are very difficult for low-income and poor households in the Global North. Localising farming systems and restructuring social power into the hands of smallholders is key. For example, Zimbabwe, underwent radical anti-racist agrarian reform in the face of Global North sanctions, with agricultural plots redistributed from white settlers and given to black landless rural workers or urban dwellers – resulting in record harvests. Agrarian reforms imply a role for everyone, involving solidarity with peasants and poorer communities in the Global South brave enough to challenge landed power and take over land for their own use, including to feed their families and their people.

Yet, such struggles are just the beginning, and not the end. **Peasant agroecology as the**

basis of just, egalitarian, democratic national farming systems is absolutely central in moving towards food sovereignty.

As peasant agroecology is a key to social and ecological development, it is also a key in tackling the climate crisis. With the food system responsible for almost one third of global emissions, a solution to the climate crisis must be connected to the agricultural and land management sector.

Our current global food system illustrates how closely interconnected the crises of climate, inequality, injustice and poverty are. The model of large scale, destructive agribusiness treats food as a commercial commodity to be traded for profit. It serves the interests of multinational corporations, and not the basic right of everyone to enough nutritious food to sustain a dignified life. A just transformation of the global food system to one based on the model of food sovereignty is crucial to address the root causes of the climate crisis, to ensure equality, and to bring an end to poverty and hunger.

These are the connections between the struggle for nationally based food-sovereign peasant agroecology and a peasant path to development, and a larger project for a Global or People's Green New Deal to address the multiple global crises of inequality, poverty and climate breakdown.

Such a programme requires true internationalism, a movement of movements which acknowledges diversity and the transformations needed towards a shared vision of the future of our food systems.

This includes demands which go beyond 'net zero' to real zero emissions by 2030, with a goal of trying to limit the increase in average

global temperatures to 1.5°C. That means the Global North must reach real zero by 2030, and the Global South by 2050; recognising that the Global South needs to continue to develop its industry and infrastructure. **Solving the climate crisis must not come at the expense of the Global South's right to development, or for states to provide decent lives for their people, and to eliminate poverty.**¹³⁵

It requires:

- Delivering on the promised demands for US\$100 billion in annual, new, and additional **climate finance**, as a floor goal and not as a ceiling; and to commit to new finance goals which reflect the reality that the cost of addressing the climate crisis in the Global South is far in excess of US\$1 trillion annually, roughly equivalent, in fact, to annual US military spending.
- Agreeing on a **global goal for adaptation** that can support countries with their own self-determined plans for adaptation to the changing climate and ensuring that adequate financial and technological support is made available, if it is needed, wanted, and desired – without falling into the old trap of a renewed technological dependency of the Global South on the Global North, using the climate crisis to create new structures of oppression and exploitation.
- **Reparations for climate damages**, additional public finance in compensation to those already suffering the brunt of climate breakdown today.¹³⁶ By climate reparations, we mean that countries must stop doing harm, by rapidly cutting their carbon emissions; repair harm, by providing technology and finance to support people around the world to adapt to the crisis; and compensate for harm that cannot be repaired, via payments to Global South countries for loss and damage.¹³⁷

- **Recognising the existence of climate debt**, part of the broader ecological debt linked to colonialism and capitalism.¹³⁸ And that means recognising that people in states that depend on oil and gas exports, be they Trinidad and Tobago or Venezuela, have their own special needs for a just transition.¹³⁹
- **Investing in real solutions:** this means rejecting carbon off-setting, saying no to carbon markets, and yes to non-market cooperative approaches based on hard and constantly lowering caps on emissions, in order to reach genuine zero.¹⁴⁰
- Furthermore, **it means anti-imperialism: real commitment to the political sovereignty of Global South countries, so that popular struggles for food sovereignty have the space**

to evolve. That means first of all cutting out the Global North policies which trample or seek or recolonise southern states: from the US-Saudi war on Yemen, to Global North sanctions which besiege countries opposing the northern imperialist agenda. Only if states can choose their own policies can they fight for climate debt on the world stage.

We need to be asking if any proposed measures will keep us below 1.5°C, whether they will allow humanity to thrive within planetary boundaries, whether they will undo or transcend historical injustices and power imbalances linked to colonialism and neocolonialism, and whether they will guarantee that everyone has a right to a dignified life.

TAKE ACTION – HOW TO GET INVOLVED

1. Take action with War on Want:

- Share this report with your family, friends and colleagues to expose the corporate capture of our food system and amplify the practical alternatives being built around the world:
- Learn more about the work of War on Want and our partners' efforts to build food sovereignty from the ground up. Read our latest news and resources on these topics and share them to spread the word: waronwant.org/our-work/food
- Take action online. Add your voice to the call to fix our broken food system: www.waronwant.org/FoodSovNOW
- Join War on Want as a member. Be part of a growing movement to challenge the corporate monopoly over our food system and fight for the alternative that puts people and planet over profit: waronwant.org/member

continued



TAKE ACTION – HOW TO GET INVOLVED *continued*

2. Challenge the corporate control of the food supply chain in the UK. Get engaged locally and support an alternative way of producing and distributing food:

- Join and support the UK Right to Food campaign (school meals, living wage and right to food enshrined in law): unitetheunion.org/campaigns/right-to-food-campaign/
- Volunteer at a local community garden: goodtogrowuk.org
- Set up a food cooperative: the UK-based organisation Sustain has an important list of resources on how to set up or join a food co-op in your area: sustainweb.org/foodcoops/
- Join community-supported local agriculture networks, and buy from a local food trader: betterfoodtraders.org/

3. Forge further alliances:

Challenging agrochemical monopolies means solidarity, internationalism, campaigning, and targeting. The support of individuals, popular movements and campaigns in the Global North against harmful agrochemical exports is crucial to challenging governments and corporations. Individuals can take solidarity action with movements in the Global South or support unions struggles by putting pressure on international suppliers. Affiliate your union branch to War on Want: waronwant.org/affiliate or get in touch if you are interested in learning more about how to raise the call for food sovereignty at your union: support@waronwant.org

4. Join anti-war movements:

Such as the Campaign Against the Arms Trade in the UK (<https://caat.org.uk/>). Meaningfully take on the task of preventing the Global North from encroaching on the economic and political sovereignty of Global South countries. **Such internationalist solidarity can enable the growth of food sovereignty movements.**

5. Read more on food sovereignty around the world:

- Globally: La Via Campesina website: viacampesina.org and the International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty (IPC): www.foodsovereignty.org
- In the African Continent: Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa: <https://afsafrika.org>
- In Latin America: Alianza por la Biodiversidad en Latinoamerica (in Spanish): <https://www.biodiversidadla.org/>
- At UN level – the Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples' Mechanism based in Rome, representing civil society, peasant movements and indigenous people at the Committee for Food Security of FAO: <https://www.csm4cfs.org> and <https://www.foodsystems4people.org/> to read more about the movements initiative against the UN Food Systems Summit.

Glossary and acronyms

AGRARIAN REFORM (including LAND REFORM): A set of political, economic, social and legislative measures promoted in order to modify the structure of land ownership and production in a given place. Agrarian reforms seek to solve the concentration of land ownership in a few owners and low agricultural productivity due to the non-use of derived technologies and infrastructures or speculation with land prices that prevents its productive use.

AGRICULTURAL COMMODITY: Staple crops and animals produced or raised on farms or plantations. Most agricultural commodities include cereals, livestock, and dairy and are destined for exports.

AGROECOLOGY and PEASANT AGROECOLOGY: Agroecology is an approach to food production that centres the wellbeing of the population and the preservation of biodiversity. Agroecology can be variously defined as: a set of agricultural practices that aims to mimic natural processes; an approach to food production and economics that puts people and planet over profit; and a political movement that struggles for food sovereignty as a way of transforming food systems. **Peasant agroecology** is an alternative to the model of corporate-led food production that drives peasant farmers out of their lands and keeps farmers in poverty. Peasant agroecology does not only consider the agricultural practices but gives also importance to the struggle for land reforms that put at the centre those who work and preserve the land.

AGROTOXINS/AGROTOXICS: Agrochemicals are generally defined as pesticides, herbicides, fungicides, and insecticides and may also contain hormones or other chemical growth agents. These chemical products are used in agriculture and manufactured with the purpose to kill insects and weeds. In the last decades, movements from the Global South, particularly in Latin America, started defining these agrochemicals “agrotoxics/agrotoxins” (from the Spanish and Portuguese *agrotóxicos*), highlighting their highly toxic and hazardousness and the dangerous impact that these products have had in the last decades on the health of farmers and rural communities exposed to their fumigation. More information and an updated list of these highly hazardous pesticides is published yearly by the international organisation Pesticides Action Network.

FAO: Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations.

FINANCIALISATION: The growing power and influence of global finance, which primarily aims at creating financial profits through the extraction of wealth and the transferring of substantive income flows from the real/productive sectors of the economy to the financial sector.

FINTECH: Fintech describes the application of digital information technologies to finance and management. Fintech may utilise algorithms, blockchains and Big Data to increase its effective management of money or resources.

continued 

GREEN REVOLUTION: A term originally coined in 1968 by the US Agency for International Development (USAID) to describe a strong growth in agricultural production due to investments in research and development on improved varieties of rice and wheat. The breeding of these new varieties required the expanded use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides. While the first experiments were conducted in the US, corporations needed new markets to expand and the Green Revolution was exported to many countries in Asia and Latin America, which experienced increases in yield in the short and medium term but suffered dramatic impacts in the long term on environmental degradation. The Green Revolution had also impacted income inequality, inequitable asset distribution, and worsened absolute poverty. A thorough analysis of the history of the Green Revolution is covered in War on Want's first report.

HUNGER: According to FAO, hunger can be defined as an uncomfortable or painful sensation caused by insufficient energy from diet. Often, the term hunger is measured by the prevalence of undernourishment.

MALNUTRITION: According to FAO, malnutrition can be defined as an abnormal physiological condition caused by inadequate, unbalanced or excessive intake of macronutrients and/or micronutrients. Malnutrition includes undernutrition (child stunting and wasting, and vitamin and mineral deficiencies) as well as overweight and obesity.

MODERATE FOOD INSECURITY: According to FAO, moderate food insecurity can be defined as a level of severity of food insecurity at which people face uncertainties about their ability to obtain food and have been forced to reduce, at times during the year, the quality and/or

quantity of food they consume due to lack of money or other resources. It refers to a lack of consistent access to food, which diminishes dietary quality and disrupts normal eating patterns.

NATURE-BASED SOLUTIONS: the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) at its 2016 World Conservation Congress defined Nature-Based Solutions as "actions to protect, sustainably manage, and restore natural or modified ecosystems, that address societal challenges effectively and adaptively, simultaneously providing human well-being and biodiversity benefits".

PEASANTS: According to the UNDROP, peasants are not only smallholder farmers (with usually less than 5-10 hectares of land, depending on the geographical region), but any person engaged in artisanal or small-scale agriculture, crop planting, livestock raising, pastoralism, fishing, forestry, hunting or gathering, and handicrafts related to agriculture or a related occupation in a rural area. It also applies to dependent family members of peasants. The UNDROP declaration also extends the definition to Indigenous peoples and local communities working on the land, transhumant, nomadic and semi-nomadic communities, and the landless, engaged in the above-mentioned activities; hired workers, including all migrant workers regardless of their migration status, and seasonal workers, on plantations, agricultural farms, forests and farms in aquaculture and in agro-industrial enterprises.

RIGHT TO DEVELOPMENT: An inalienable human right by virtue of which every human person and all peoples are entitled to participate in, contribute to and enjoy economic, social, cultural and political

continued 

development, in which all human rights and fundamental freedoms can be fully realised. This right derives from the UN Declaration on the Right to Development that was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in December 1986.

RIGHT TO FOOD: First declared in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and later in the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the right to food is intended as “the right to have regular, permanent and unrestricted access, either directly or by means of financial purchases, to quantitatively and qualitatively adequate and sufficient food corresponding to the cultural traditions of the people to which the consumer belongs, and which ensures a physical and mental, individual and collective, fulfilling and dignified life free of fear.”¹⁴¹

SEVERE FOOD INSECURITY:

According to FAO, severe food insecurity can be defined as a level of severity of food insecurity at which, at some time during the year, people have run out of food, experienced hunger and at the most extreme, gone without food for a day or more.

UNDROP: United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas.

UNFSS: United Nations Food Systems Summit.

ANNEX

LA VIA CAMPESINA CALL TO ACTION TO STOP THE CURRENT FOOD CRISIS – published June 2022.¹⁴²

In the light of the multiple crises we are currently facing, and the exacerbation of poverty and inequality, War on Want fully supports La Via Campesina's recent call to take immediate actions for a more just agrifood system towards food sovereignty for all and to end the current food crisis, fuelled by speculation and greed.

In the statement below, the full list of demands is published.

“We demand immediate action to:

- **End of speculation on food and the suspension of trading food products on stock markets.** Future contracts on agricultural products should be immediately forbidden. The price of food traded internationally should be linked with the costs of production and follow the principles of fair trade, both for producers and for consumers;
- **End of the WTO's control of food trade and keep agriculture out of free trade agreements.** In particular, WTO's criminal rules that prevent countries from developing public food stockpiling and market and price regulation should be immediately removed, so that countries can develop the necessary public policy to support small-scale food producers in this challenging context;

- Call an emergency meeting of the Committee on Food Security and the creation of **a new international body to conduct transparent negotiations** on commodity agreements between exporting and importing countries so that countries which have become dependent on food imports can have access to food at an accessible price;

- **Forbid the use of agricultural products to produce agrofuel or energy.** Food should be an absolute priority over fuel.

- **Bring a global moratorium on the payment of the public debt by the most vulnerable countries.** In the current context, pressuring some very vulnerable countries to pay the debt is highly irresponsible and leads to socio, economic, and food crises. Put an end to the IMF's pressures to dismantle national public policies and public services. We call for the cancellation of the illegitimate external public debt in developing countries.

We demand radical changes in international, regional and national policies to re-build food sovereignty through:

- **A radical change in international trade order.** The WTO should be

dismantled. A new global framework for trade and agriculture, based on food sovereignty, should open the way for strengthening local and national peasant agriculture, to ensure a stable basis for a relocalised food production, the support for local and national peasant-led markets, as well as to provide a fair international trading system based on cooperation and solidarity rather than competition and speculation;

- **The implementation of popular and integral Agrarian Reform**, to stop the grabbing by Transnational Corporations (TNCs) of water, seeds and land, and ensure small-scale producers fair rights over productive resources. We protest against the privatisation and grabbing of territories and commons by corporate interests under the pretext of nature protection, through carbon markets or other biodiversity off-sets programs, without consideration to the people who are living on these territories and who have been taking care of the commons for generations.
- **A radical shift towards agroecology to produce healthy food in quantity and quality for the whole population.** We must bear in mind that the climate and environmental crisis will be our great challenge in this current context. We must face the challenge of producing enough quality food while reviving biodiversity and drastically reducing GHG emissions.
- **Effective regulation of the market of inputs** (such as credits, fertilizers, pesticides, seeds, fuel) to support peasants' capacity to produce food, but also to ensure a fair and well-planned transition toward more agroecological farming practices.
- **A food governance based on the people, not on TNCs.** At the global, regional, national and local levels, the capture of food governance by TNCs should be stopped, and people's interests should be put at the centre. Small producers should be given a vital role in all bodies dealing with food governance;
- **The transformation of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants into a legally binding instrument** for the defence of rural peoples.
- The development in every country of **public stockpiling capacities.** The strategy of food stockpiling should be held both at the national level but also through the creation and public support to food reserves at the community level with locally produced food coming from agroecological farming practices;
- **A global moratorium on dangerous technologies** that threatens humanity, such as geoengineering, GMOs or cellular meat. The promotion of low-cost techniques that increase peasant autonomy and of peasant's seeds.
- **The development of public policies to ensure new relationships between those who produce food and those who consume,** those who live in rural areas and those who live in urban areas, guaranteeing fair prices defined based on the cost of production, allowing a decent income for all those who produce in the countryside and a fair access to healthy food for the consumers.
- **The promotion of new gender relations** based on equality and respect, both for people living in the countryside and among the urban working class. The violence against women must stop now.

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