

SOWING DEPENDENCIES

**Corporate power, just transitions
and the fight for food sovereignty**

*A roadmap for international solidarity
and movement action*



SOWING DEPENDENCIES: Corporate power, just transitions and the fight for food sovereignty

A roadmap for international solidarity and movement action

October 2026

Report written by Sabrina Espeleta (War on Want), based on research and data analysis conducted by Nick Jacobs.

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The arguments and recommendations presented here draw heavily on the alternatives already being built by movements around the world to challenge the dependencies that shape contemporary food systems.

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Cover image: Mass soybean harvesting at a farm in Mato Grosso, Brazil.
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Acronyms

BAFLF	Bangladesh Agricultural Farm Labour Federation
CBD	Convention on Biological Diversity
CCS	Carbon capture and storage
CFS	Committee on World Food Security
COP	Conference of Parties
DSI	Digital sequence information
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organisation
GBF	Kunming–Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework
GM	Genetically modified
GMO	Genetically modified organism
IFI	International financial institution
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IP	Intellectual property
IPCC	Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
ISDS	Investor-state dispute settlement
JKSS	Jatiyo Kisan Shramik Society
KPL	Kenyan Peasants League
MONLAR	Movement for Land and Agrarian Reform
NDCs	Nationally Determined Contributions
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PPPs	Public-private partnerships
R&D	Research and development
TRIPS	Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights
UNCTAD	UN Trade and Development
UNDROP	UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas
UNFCCC	UN Framework Convention on Climate Change
UPOV	International Union for the Protection of New Varieties of Plants
UPOV91	1991 Act of the International Union for the Protection of New Varieties of Plants
WHO	World Health Organisation
WTO	World Trade Organisation

Preface

In 2026, the UN projects record grain harvests. They will be reaped by machine, loaded on trucks, and will be shipped to the highest bidder. The export revenue will be used to pay interest to foreign creditors, whose demands are driven ever higher by US monetary policy, pushing countries to sacrifice social spending on the altar of interest repayment.

Meantime, local currency depreciation makes whatever food is imported unaffordable. The country's citizens will go hungry. And the irony is that the entire edifice – of land tenure, labour suppression, fertiliser and pesticide use, and debt repayment – has been sold with hunger as the alibi. It is, we're often told, the only way to 'feed the world'. This moral imperative operates not as a reason to get these record harvests to the plates of the hungry, but as a mandate for agribusiness to seize land, pocket public subsidies and consolidate power. **Track the money, and the question is never about who gets to eat: it is about who profits and who gets paid first.**

The War on Want report you are now reading shows how the gears within this machine synchronise. It traces three connected dependencies: the resource extraction powering fertilisers, fossil fuels and mining; corporate control over seeds, software and knowledge; and the structural draining of wealth from the Global South. Informed by the work of frontline partner organisations, the report builds a case for solidarity across movements that capital struggles to keep siloed.

The fuel turning the gears of dependency is debt. Debt hands creditors a claim on future harvests and public budgets, allowing them to dictate domestic policy by proxy. Because both grain imports and debt service must be settled in US dollars while taxes and wages circulate in domestic currencies, any devaluation triggers a double squeeze: external debt payments spike just as imported staples become unaffordable. Servicing that debt cannibalises public provisioning and forces governments to double down on cash crops and mineral extraction to scrape together foreign exchange. **That's why it's possible for export volumes to hit new records at the same time that domestic hunger does too.**

The sheer scale of this extraction is staggering: between 2022 and 2024, low- and middle-income countries paid out US\$741 billion more in debt service than they received in new financing. Decades of anti-debt and anti-structural-adjustment campaigns have made clear what this haemorrhage actually represents: creditors deciding which lives and ecosystems can be treated as expendable, and calculating whose land must be sacrificed to keep whose homes comfortable.

The enclosure of agricultural knowledge has gone digital. Farmers find themselves locked into proprietary subscription packages that strip them of autonomy over how they plant, harvest and manage their land.

Take the extraction trap. A single bag of synthetic fertiliser ties a smallholder buying on credit directly to fossil gas extraction, phosphate stripmining and poisoned watersheds. In Gabès, Tunisia, toxic phosphate processing ruins local fishing and public health to feed industrial farms thousands of miles away. The scramble for hard currency keeps the conveyor belt running.

At the same time, capital has found new ways of wringing money from rural communities: the enclosure of agricultural knowledge has gone digital. Chemical and

seed monopolies have spent recent years locking arms with Big Tech. Once, it used to be simply that one seed and chemical conglomerate would square off against another. Now, there is a new layer of power and finance on top. Microsoft Azure now partners with Bayer, Syngenta and John Deere; Google Cloud with BASF, Bayer and Corteva; and Amazon Web Services with Nutrien, Yara and AGCO. Monopoly power over seeds has merged with monopoly control over satellite data, farm analytics and agronomic algorithms. Farmers find themselves locked into proprietary subscription packages that strip them of autonomy over how they plant, harvest and manage their land.

The investment pathways that make it possible to extract farmers' knowledge from the Global South are also the conduits for material transfers and those conduits have their own functionaries, whose job it is to maintain the appearance of law while facilitating injustice. International trade law hardwires the disadvantage. Even with the WTO's Appellate Body paralysed, its dispute architecture still exerts immense leverage: poorer states cannot afford protracted litigation, while wealthy states ignore unfavourable rulings or weaponise retaliatory tariffs with impunity. Equal-sounding trade rules guarantee wildly unequal outcomes when one party holds all the structural cards.

This is, in other words, a global class conflict. Nearly 1.4 billion people – roughly 40% of the global workforce – work in food systems. More than 400 million of them do not earn a living wage. Cheapened, precarious labour underwrites corporate profits while keeping agricultural workers unable to buy the very food they produce. There is something grotesque about an industry that justifies itself on 'feeding the world', while starving the people who work its fields and processing plants. Labour organising is not an auxiliary issue for food justice; it is the core of it.

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Which is why War on Want points to a real transition, one that rests on unconditional debt cancellation, grant-based financing, climate reparations and targeted public investment to give producers the breathing room to build agroecological alternatives. Land redistribution, living

wages and union power make that space durable.

A full accounting of who owes whom would point to climate reparations, fundamentally flipping the creditors' balance sheet: the question is not what the South owes to global banks, but what wealthy nations owe to the people whose plundered land and labour underwrote their development.

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Food sovereignty provides the political framework here, but like all political terms, it's never fixed.

Invoking national sovereignty means little if we ignore who wields power inside the state. A supermarket executive and an undocumented farmworker do not share interests just because a politician wraps food policy in the national flag. **When the British government reframes food security as 'national security' it lays the rhetorical groundwork for resource hoarding, militarised borders and domestic austerity.**

Genuine food sovereignty cannot be chauvinistic. It must encompass everyone whose labour holds up the food system – regardless of passport – and operate through international solidarity, not national retrenchment.

Sowing Dependencies matters because it refuses simplistic, sector-by-sector fixes. War on Want weaves together anti-imperialist, labour and environmental battles, linking them directly with peasant-led movements. By mapping how extraction, technology and finance enforce the *status quo*, the report shows where coordinated disruption can actually shift power and is a vital addition to the knowledge we need to weave our movements closer together, at a time when national chauvinism is doing its best to push us apart.

Will this transition cost the Global North? For some, the executives and the profiteers from dependency, it certainly will. But for all of us, the beginning of reparative solidarity needn't feel like a privation. It can, when we are buoyed by the movements that working people have always developed to survive crises, not only feel like survival against all odds, but like liberation. And that, surely, is the opposite of dependency.

Raj Patel

Austin, Texas, October 2026

Key messages

This report is both an analysis and a call to action: it documents the web of corporate power and structural dependencies that keep today's corporate industrial food systems locked in place and offers a practical roadmap for the social and labour movements, climate justice organisations and food sovereignty networks working to dismantle them.

Food systems are trapped in a web of dependencies

Our food systems were not designed to feed the world, but to generate profit. Built around fossil fuels, synthetic fertilisers, proprietary seeds, volatile global markets and ever more concentrated corporate power, **they have created a set of interlocking dependencies that make it extraordinarily difficult to change course.** These dependencies are the result of deliberate political and economic choices, made over decades, that have consistently prioritised corporate profits and dividends for the ultra-rich, export-oriented production and financial speculation over food sovereignty, agroecology and democratic control over food systems.

These dependencies are deepening vulnerability in a time of compounding crises

Climate breakdown, biodiversity loss, mounting militarisation and neo-imperial wars, supply chain disruptions and spiralling debt burdens are exposing the fragility of food systems built around external inputs and globalised markets. Each new shock, from the 2008 financial crisis to the COVID-19 pandemic to the 2026 crisis in the Persian Gulf, reveals the same structural weakness: **a system that has consistently prioritised profits and dividends over human rights and planetary boundaries.** The communities bearing the heaviest costs are almost always those least responsible for creating these crises: peasants, food and agricultural workers, Indigenous peoples and rural communities across the Global South, who are being asked to adapt to a system that was never designed to serve them and to enact a transition they never signed up to.

Corporate power sits at the heart of the problem

A small number of corporations now shape what food is grown, how it is produced and traded, and which technologies are promoted as solutions. Their influence extends far beyond markets: into publicly funded research, international governance spaces, trade negotiations and the narratives that define what counts as 'progress' and 'innovation' in food systems. **This concentration of power is not only economic, but deeply political: it determines whose knowledge is valued, whose alternatives are funded, and whose demands are heard.** Understanding how corporate power operates, how it captures governments and where it can be challenged, is a prerequisite for any meaningful transformation.

Food sovereignty offers a pathway for just and equitable transitions

Across the world, social and labour movements, peasant organisations, Indigenous communities and food sovereignty networks are already advancing the alternatives. Agroecological farming systems, community seed banks, territorial markets, solidarity economies and democratic stewardship of the commons are working realities, delivering greater adaptation, stronger livelihoods and healthier ecosystems wherever they receive the political and financial backing they need. **The question is not whether these alternatives work, but whether the structural conditions that keep them marginalised and underfunded can be changed.**

Four interconnected transitions are needed

This report identifies four priority areas for moving from dependency to people's sovereignty. First, **accelerating the transition away from fossil fuel and chemical-intensive agriculture towards agroecological food systems**, starting with Global North countries that bear the greatest historical responsibility for the industrial model. Second, **defending seed sovereignty and agrobiodiversity by challenging corporate control over seeds, genetic resources and agricultural knowledge**, and by ensuring that international frameworks support farmer-managed seed systems rather than criminalising them. Third, reclaiming democratic policy space through **trade systems that support local and regional food economies and workers' rights**, rather than locking countries into export dependency and volatile global markets. Fourth, **confronting financialisation and corporate extraction** through debt cancellation, tax justice and the de-financialisation of food, land and water, treating these as common goods and fundamental human rights rather than assets to be speculated upon.

Transformation requires movements to connect with each other

The solutions already exist, but what is missing is greater coordination between the movements fighting different dimensions of the same struggle. Climate justice, food sovereignty, labour rights, trade justice, debt justice, anti-extractivist and Indigenous

movements are all confronting different expressions of a common system of dependency and corporate power. Too often they do so in isolation – in separate governance spaces, with separate demands and separate coalitions – while the corporations driving the crisis move seamlessly between them and with enormous resources at their disposal. Building stronger alliances across these movements and developing shared demands and coordinated strategies for the governance spaces where food system rules are made is a prerequisite for the transformation this report calls for.

From dependency to people's sovereignty

The interventions in this report are not a wish list of policy reforms to be handed to sympathetic governments but are entry points for collective action: a map of the terrain where power is exercised and where it can be contested. **They take inspiration from the alternatives already being built from the ground by local, national and international coalitions of movements.** Together they outline a pathway from industrial food systems built on fossil fuels and corporate control to agroecological systems rooted in farmer knowledge and ecological resilience; from proprietary seed regimes that criminalise farmer innovation to seed sovereignty anchored in people's rights; from trade dependency and debt traps to democratic policy space and economic justice; and from the financialisation of our common goods to a world in which food, land and water are governed as the rights they are.

Collective mural designed in occasion of the Global Nyéléni Forum in Sri Lanka.



The background image shows a vast field of harvested rice stalks, their golden-brown heads cut and lying on the ground. In the foreground, the soil is parched and cracked into large, irregular polygons, with some sparse green weeds beginning to grow. The overall scene conveys a sense of agricultural hardship and drought.

Part one

The case for transformation: food systems at a crossroads

A system under strain

Something is changing in the way the world thinks about food, and that change is long overdue. For more than 80 years, the industrial food system has shaped how food is produced and distributed around the world: it was designed to generate profit, predominantly for corporations, wealthy elites and Global North countries. Today, the system is showing clear signs of failure: decimating the soils, waterways and biodiversity it depends on, fuelling the climate breakdown that is destroying harvests worldwide, and leaving hundreds of thousands of people hungry or malnourished, despite producing more calories than the world needs.

The costs of this failure are not shared equally. They fall most heavily on ecosystems and on the people who benefit least from the current system: peasant farmers, precarious workers in global supply chains, Indigenous peoples, and rural communities across the Global South. These communities are increasingly expected to cope with a climate crisis they did not create, without the resources and support they were promised.

Across the world, those same farmers, communities and social movements are already building the alternatives, through diversified agroecological food systems rooted in local knowledge and oriented towards genuine food sovereignty. A growing body of scientific and institutional evidence points in the same direction: transformation is not only necessary and urgent, but also possible. The question is no longer whether change is needed, but whether power can be taken from those who are blocking it.

That urgency for change is hard to overstate. **Global food systems are facing multiple and interconnected pressures. Agriculture, fisheries and food supply chains are among the sectors most affected by the climate crisis:** increasingly frequent and intense climate shocks are decimating harvests worldwide,¹ while a food system built on the expectation of stable growing conditions is struggling to adapt.² Recurring *El Niño* and *La Niña* weather patterns, such as those experienced in 2026, are bringing more severe and less predictable impacts, including prolonged droughts in some regions and devastating floods in others, exposing a food system with little capacity to absorb shocks.³ Heatwaves, droughts and floods are already pushing millions of people into food insecurity and driving sharp spikes in food prices.

These events raise two deeply troubling questions: how much is the dominant corporate model of food production contributing to climate breakdown, and how prepared are our societies to cope with its consequences and ensure that everyone has access to adequate and nutritious food? The burden of both the climate crisis and the inadequate response to it falls most heavily on countries in the Global South, where adaptation needs are greatest but financial and institutional resources are often most limited.

Corporate control and its roots

At the same time, today's global food systems are not only industrial – they are also increasingly shaped by the power of a small number of large corporations. A handful of powerful corporations have near-monopoly control over global food production and distribution, from seeds and fertilisers to processing and retail.

This concentration of power is closely linked to the neoliberal economic model that has shaped global economies for more than 50 years.⁴ Its roots, however, go back much further: back to imperialism, when colonial powers built global trading systems to supply wealthy elites in the centre of empires with crops and commodities produced in the Global South. Land, labour and resources were extracted to serve distant markets and generate wealth elsewhere.

That system was never dismantled – it was updated.

Global supply chains and supermarket systems today still rely on cheap food and commodities being sourced from around the world so that people in the Global North can buy products all year round, often without seeing the environmental and social costs behind them. The industrial food system that emerged through the Green Revolution (see Glossary) was promoted as a solution to hunger, but it also deepened dependence on global markets, chemical inputs and corporate control. This rigged food system is responsible for around one third of global greenhouse gas emissions.⁵

Chemical-intensive production based on industrial methods are simultaneously driving ecosystem breakdown, with **land degradation now affecting around 80% of global arable land⁶ and trapping more than 1.3 billion food producers on unproductive land.**⁷ Hunger, which had been in long-term decline, has surged in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and successive economic shocks, threatening to erase decades of progress: it affects some 8.2% of the world's population and as much as 20% of people across the African continent.⁸

Figure 1 Observed impacts of climate change on human systems

Human systems	Water scarcity 	Agriculture / crop production 	Animal and livestock health and productivity 	Fisheries yields and aquaculture production 	
Global	±	–	○	–	Confidence in attribution to climate change  High or very high  Medium  Low  Evidence limited, insufficient Impacts  Increasing adverse impacts  Increasing adverse and positive impacts
Africa	–	–	–	–	
Asia	±	±	–	–	
Australasia	±	–	±	–	
Central and South America	±	–	±	–	
Europe	±	±	–	±	
North America	±	±	–	±	
Small Islands	–	–	–	–	
Arctic	±	±	–	–	
Cities by the sea	○	○	○	–	
Mediterranean region	–	–	–	–	
Mountain regions	±	±	–	○	

The + and – symbols indicate the direction of observed impacts, with – denoting an increasing adverse impact and ± denoting that, within a region or globally, both adverse and positive impacts have been observed (e.g. adverse impacts in one area or food item may occur with positive impacts in another area or food item). Globally, ‘–’ denotes an overall adverse impact. **Source:** IPCC. (2023). *Climate Change 2022 – Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability*

In 2026, a new wave of shocks has threatened to worsen the situation: the crisis in the Persian Gulf has driven up energy and fertiliser prices, raising the prospect of further food price spikes and a renewed surge in hunger over the coming months.⁹ Countries are confronting what international observers are describing as “unprecedented market volatility”: the product of rising geopolitical tensions, faltering international cooperation and mounting trade disruptions. The global markets that governments have long been told would guarantee their ‘food security’ are proving anything but reliable.¹⁰ And as the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food has observed, **industrial food systems are not simply a casualty of rising conflict and authoritarianism: they are entangled with it, producing “as much violence as food”.**¹¹

Faced with these multiple failures and repeated shocks, a growing number of global assessments have reached the same conclusion: industrial food systems are fundamentally broken and unfit for purpose.^{12,13,14}

The IPCC, in its Sixth Assessment Report, called for “fundamental changes to how society functions, including changes to underlying values, worldviews, ideologies, social structures, political and economic systems, and power relationships”.¹⁵

The scale of the crisis is now registering even in the political mainstream of Global North countries that have long treated food policy as a secondary concern: a recent UK government assessment identified food supply vulnerability linked to ecosystem collapse as one of the gravest threats to national security,¹⁶ while a 2024 report by the UK Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) warned that Britain’s food supply is at risk of catastrophic failure by 2030.¹⁷ That a wealthy country like the UK is now reaching for the language of national security and wartime resilience to describe its food situation is itself revealing: it signals that the vulnerabilities this report documents are no longer confined to the Global South, and that the polycrisis we are living through is forcing food back to the top of political agendas across the world.¹⁸

Box 1 Agroecology: the growing consensus on how to transform food systems

Among the various visions of food system transformation currently being discussed, agroecology offers an approach to farming and food systems that relies on ecological processes, local knowledge and biodiversity, rather than dependence on chemical inputs and large-scale monocultures. **At its heart, agroecology is about working with nature instead of trying to control it.** In practice, this includes approaches such as growing a wider range of crops, using legumes to naturally improve soil fertility, integrating trees into farming systems (agroforestry), and combining crop with livestock production. Agroecology also prioritises local and regional markets and shorter supply chains, reducing dependence on volatile global commodity markets.



© War on Want

A JKSS Bangladesh member on her agroecological plot, practising diversified cropping.

A substantial and growing body of evidence documents the environmental, social and economic benefits of agroecological systems: research points to greater resilience to shocks, better access to food at household and regional levels,¹⁹ more secure livelihoods,²⁰ enhanced biodiversity and ecosystem functions, and strong agricultural performance. **A growing number of studies also demonstrate a positive relationship between crop diversity and productivity, challenging the assumption that ecological sustainability must come at the expense of yields.**^{21,22,23} These findings have been recognised by major global institutions including the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO).²⁴

Grassroots and national-level practices have also proved crucial in responding to historical blockades and sanctions imposed by Global North countries: Cuba's agroecological cooperatives and the *Campesino-a-Campesino* movement, for instance, emerged directly out of the conditions created by the illegitimate US embargo and the broader geopolitical isolation.²⁵ Similar dynamics have driven agroecological responses to high input prices and climate stress across parts of North Africa.²⁶

Successful transition initiatives are multiplying at state level too. The most ambitious example is the agroecological transition underway in Andhra Pradesh, India, which demonstrates what becomes possible when these approaches receive serious political and financial backing. The Andhra Pradesh Community-Managed Natural Farming programme (APCNF) is a state-wide transformation of farming practices, involving **6 million farmers, 6 million hectares of land and 50 million consumers: the largest transition to agroecology anywhere in the world.** With nearly 1.8 million farmers already part of the programme, it is demonstrating that it is possible to simultaneously address rural livelihoods, access to nutritious food, biodiversity loss, climate breakdown, water scarcity and pollution – not as competing priorities, but as interconnected challenges with a common solution.²⁷

More importantly, agroecology is not only a technical proposition. By offering farmers and communities a path to reclaim control of their food systems, **it aligns closely with the principles of food sovereignty:** the two are increasingly articulated together in the demands of peasants movements around the world.²⁸ It is important to recognise, however, that **agroecology must remain peasant-led:** with a radical transformation of land ownership and access, and with agrarian reform at the top of the political agenda.

Peasant agroecology and food sovereignty are deeply interconnected demands, and it is in that combination that their transformative potential lies.

Locked in the traps that keep the system in place

Yet knowing what needs to change is not the same as being able to change it. Corporate-based industrial food systems are held in place by decades of economic, political and technological decisions. These create a network of relationships and incentives that make it difficult to change course, and that researchers have come to call ‘dependencies’ or ‘lock-ins’.²⁹ Throughout this report, we use these terms to describe the structures that allow the current food system to reproduce itself over time, despite growing evidence of its environmental and social costs, which movements have long understood and are already fighting.³⁰

The term ‘dependency’ is often used in food policy debates to describe reliance on imported food. In this report, we use the term more broadly – to refer to the structural conditions that keep industrial food systems in place and tie them to wider economic systems shaped by colonial histories, neoliberal policies and unequal global power relations.

These structures of dependency reinforce one another, creating a powerful inertia that keeps the industrial food system in place even as evidence of its environmental and social failures continues to grow.

Most government reform efforts and strategic frameworks fail to address the root causes of the crisis. Rather than challenging the concentration of corporate power, the dominance of financial markets, or the influence of Global North countries over global governance, **they tend to focus on technical fixes, small-scale reforms or individual behaviour change: encouraging consumers to make ‘more sustainable eating choices’, for instance, while leaving the system that produces unsustainable food entirely intact.** This pattern is especially visible in current debates among both governments and climate campaigns about how to transform food systems in response to the climate crisis. Responsibility is consistently displaced onto individuals, while the structural drivers of inequality, environmental degradation and corporate control remain largely untouched.

Meanwhile, the institutions and forums where decisions about food and agriculture are made remain fragmented and highly vulnerable to corporate influence. Those most affected by food system failures, including smallholder farmers, Indigenous peoples, rural communities and social movements, are rarely able to participate on equal terms, if at all (see Box 3).

In these decision-making spaces, powerful corporate and economic interests often shape the agenda and influence which solutions receive political support.

Box 2 Dependencies: a Global South perspective

The concept of dependency has a long intellectual history worth acknowledging. Emerging primarily in Latin America in the mid-20th century, it drew on Raúl Prebisch’s structuralist analysis of unequal exchange between industrialised and commodity-exporting economies, and was further developed by dependency theorists including Fernando Henrique Cardoso, Enzo Faletto and later Samir Amin.³¹ Dependency theory offered a framework for understanding why many countries remained economically marginalised within the global economy, challenging the idea that underdevelopment was simply an earlier stage on a universal path to development. Instead, it argued that **colonial histories and unequal economic and political relations helped reproduce a global division in which many countries in the Global South occupied a subordinate position** (the so-called ‘periphery’), supplying raw materials and cheap labour, while relying on wealthier economies (the ‘core’) for technology, capital and manufactured goods.

These theorists argued that unequal relationships were purposely built into the global economic order. Comparable patterns continue to shape global food systems today: many countries across the Global South depend on imported seeds governed by intellectual property regimes designed in the Global North, on agrochemicals produced by a small number of transnational corporations, and on export-oriented production models tied to distant and volatile markets. **The environmental, economic and social costs fall on peasant farmers and rural workers; the value, control and decision-making power flow elsewhere.** When this report refers to ‘dependencies’, it means precisely these structural arrangements: the ones that sustain these imbalances and make them so difficult to dismantle.

As a result, proposals that rise to the top tend to focus on the above-mentioned tech fixes, such as digital agriculture, gene-edited seeds, so-called 'clean fertilisers', lab-grown meat, carbon offsets and carbon farming.³² These approaches are often presented as modern, innovative and efficient. However, instead of challenging who controls land, seeds, markets, finance and decision-making, they seek to make the existing system work more efficiently to generate more profit for those who control it.

The need to bridge the climate and biodiversity emergencies

In 1992, at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, there was an opportunity to create a single international framework to address climate 'change', biodiversity loss and desertification as interconnected crises. Maurice Strong, the summit's Secretary-General, argued for this approach. Instead, governments established three separate conventions: the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD).

More than 30 years later, the consequences of that fragmentation are painfully visible: the climate and biodiversity crises have deepened dramatically, despite decades of multilateral negotiations and successive rounds of commitments. **The communities and ecosystems on the frontlines of both crises are, in most cases, the same ones. The corporations driving both crises are, in most cases, the same ones too.** And the false solutions being promoted in both governance spaces – carbon markets, biodiversity offsets, gene drives, synthetic biology, so-called climate-smart agriculture – come from the same playbook, developed by the same actors, to protect the same interests.

Yet the movements fighting back have too often found themselves divided by the very institutional architecture that was supposed to solve the problem. Advocates working on climate justice and those working on biodiversity and seed sovereignty have tended to operate in separate spaces, developing separate demands, building separate coalitions

and showing up at separate COPs. Meanwhile, the corporations whose practices are driving both crises move seamlessly between the CBD and the UNFCCC, lobbying with a coherence and strategic patience that fragmented civil society has rarely been able to match. As ETC Group has documented, business lobbying at UN biodiversity talks reached record levels at COP16: the same corporate actors that profit from the dominant food system are simultaneously shaping the negotiations that are supposed to constrain them.³⁹

This separation has profound implications for how movements organise: the governance spaces where food system rules are made – the CBD, the UNFCCC, the WTO, the FAO – are different entry points into the same fight. At the CBD, the struggle over seed sovereignty and the regulation of new biotechnologies like gene editing and gene drives is a fight over who controls the genetic foundations of food systems: the same fight, in a different institutional language, as the struggle against UPOV91 and corporate seed patents.

At the UNFCCC, the push to include fertilisers and industrial food systems in national climate pledges, and to resist the false solutions of carbon farming and offset markets, is inseparable from the struggle for agroecological transition and food sovereignty on the ground.

It is therefore crucial to understand the structural dependencies that lock industrial food systems in place: by identifying and confronting them, we can begin to shift power and unlock change. The dependencies examined in the following chapters cannot be broken by movements working in silos. Breaking the extraction trap in food systems requires pressure at the UNFCCC as much as at the FAO. Defending seed sovereignty requires engagement at the CBD as much as resistance to bilateral trade agreements. And confronting the unjust financial and trade structures that keep countries locked into export dependency requires coordination across debt justice, climate finance and food sovereignty movements that has, until now, been the exception rather than the rule. Part 2 maps these dependencies and the governance spaces where they can be contested; Part 3 sets out what it would look like to contest them together.

Box 3 Mapping global food systems governance: a contested and fragmented landscape

The rules, norms and processes that shape global food systems are not decided in any single place: they are instead spread across **a patchwork of international bodies, trade agreements, environmental conventions and corporate-led initiatives** – often pulling in different directions and rarely giving peasant farmers and other affected communities a meaningful seat at the table.

The FAO, the CFS and the UN system: The UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) was founded in 1945 with a mandate to fight hunger, support smallholder agriculture and foster international cooperation. It hosts the Committee on World Food Security (CFS), reformed in 2009 to include stronger civil society participation mechanisms, which plays an important coordinating role on global food security policies.³³ The International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the World Food Programme (WFP) are less central to policy debates, but have significant on-the-ground influence. The World Health Organisation (WHO) shapes food system governance through its work on public health and nutrition policy.

The World Bank, the IMF and the WTO: The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) were established following the 1947 Bretton Woods conference to stabilise the global financial system and support growth and development. Through the financing they have provided, and the conditions attached to their loans, the Bretton Woods Institutions have played a pivotal role in reshaping food systems across the Global South – particularly through **the Structural Adjustment Programmes of the 1980s and 1990s, which pushed Global South countries to dismantle state support for agriculture and open their markets to foreign competition** (see Part 2, Section 3). For many social movements and civil society organisations across the Global South, these institutions are not neutral development actors: they are neoliberal and neocolonial in their design and operation. The conclusion these movements draw is unambiguous: tinkering at the margins is not enough – what is needed is their dismantlement. The World Trade Organisation (WTO) is no different, and despite facing growing challenges to its authority it continues to oversee international agreements on tariffs, agricultural subsidies and intellectual property rights, making it a critical and deeply contested site of food system governance.³⁴ The WTO's trade regime has played a key role in reshaping agriculture around market priorities. Through rules that promote intellectual property rights over seeds, restrict agricultural protections and limit state intervention in food markets, it has strengthened corporate control over food systems at the expense of farmers' rights and food sovereignty.

The Rio Conventions: Food systems are increasingly shaped by commitments made under the three Rio Conventions: the **UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)**, the **Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)** and the **UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD)**. In addition to reporting on official commitments, a whole range of food system initiatives and debates are now centred around the annual 'climate COP' (the decision-making body of the UNFCCC) and its intermediary meetings, making this a key and highly contested food system governance space. The CBD plays a critical role in assessing the environmental risks of new agricultural technologies, including emerging seed breeding approaches.³⁵

Treaty-based governance: Several international treaties directly shape national food and agriculture policies as well as global food systems. The governance of seeds and genetic resources is divided between two distinct and often conflicting frameworks: the **International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (ITPGRFA)** and the **International Union for the Protection of New Varieties of Plants (UPOV)**. The latter, and particularly its 1991 revision (so-called UPOV91), has been widely criticised by peasant farmers, civil society organisations and movements for prioritising commercial seed breeding and intellectual property rules developed in the Global North (see more below). Against this, the 2018 **UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP)** offers an alternative framework, one that affirms farmers' rights to develop, save and exchange their own seeds.³⁶

'Multistakeholder' governance: Since the 1990s, food system governance has shifted steadily away from state-led multilateral processes towards so-called 'multistakeholder initiatives': corporate-led roundtables, public-private partnerships (PPPs), and forums championed by bodies like the World Economic Forum (WEF). This shift reached its most visible expression in the 2021 UN Food Systems Summit, which was widely criticised for sidelining the CFS and its civil society mechanisms, for privileging corporate-led solutions over human rights frameworks, and for a preparatory process that lacked transparency. While these initiatives claim to represent all stakeholders equally, in practice they tend to be dominated by the interests of large corporations and are increasingly difficult to monitor.^{37,38}

Infographic 1

MAPPING GLOBAL FOOD GOVERNANCE

Power is dispersed across the United Nations (UN), international financial institutions, environmental treaties and corporate forums

THE UN SYSTEM AND SPECIALISED AGENCIES



1. FAO

Food and Agriculture Organisation of the UN. Rome, Italy.

Works to fight hunger, support smallholder agriculture and foster international cooperation.



5. CFS

Committee on World Food Security, reformed in 2009. Rome, Italy.

Key space with participation of civil society organisations: important coordinating role on global food security policies.



2. IFAD

International Fund for Agricultural Development. Rome, Italy.



4. WFP

World Food Programme. Rome, Italy.

Less central to policy debates, but with significant on-the-ground impact.



3. WHO

World Health Organisation. Geneva, Switzerland.

Shapes food system governance through its work on public health and nutrition policy.



1. UNFCCC

UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. Bonn, Germany.



3. CBD

Convention on Biological Diversity. Montreal, Canada.



2. UNCCD

UN Convention to Combat Desertification. Bonn, Germany.

Food systems are increasingly shaped by commitments made under the three Rio Conventions.

4. COP

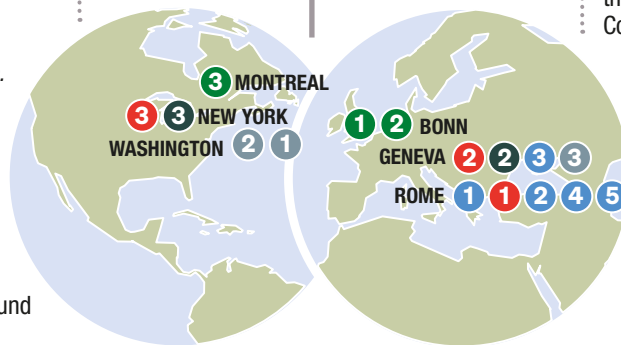
Conference of the Parties of the UNFCCC. Rotating host locations.

The annual 'climate' COPs and their intersessional meetings are becoming a key and highly contested arena for food system governance.

5. CBD COP

Conference of the Parties of the CBD. Rotating host locations.

Plays a critical role in assessing the environmental risks of new agricultural technologies (e.g. seed-breeding technologies).



TREATY-BASED GOVERNANCE



1. ITPGRFA

International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture. Rome, Italy.

VS.

UPOV

2. UPOV

International Convention for the Protection of New Varieties of Plants, particularly UPOV91, revised in 1991. Geneva, Switzerland.

Governance of seeds and genetic resources, widely criticised for prioritising commercial seed breeding and intellectual property rules developed in the Global North.



3. UNDROP

2018 UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas. Adopted at the UN General Assembly. New York, United States.

An alternative framework that affirms farmers' rights to develop, save and exchange their own seeds.

INTERNATIONAL TRADE AND FINANCIAL INSTITUTIONS



1. WORLD BANK

Washington D.C., United States.



2. IMF

International Monetary Fund. Washington D.C., United States



WTO OMC

3. WTO

World Trade Organisation. Geneva, Switzerland.

The IMF and World Bank have played a pivotal role in reshaping food systems across the Global South through loans and Structural Adjustment Programmes.

MANY MOVEMENTS DEMAND THEIR DISMANTLEMENT, NOT JUST REFORMS

"MULTISTAKEHOLDER" GOVERNANCE

1. PPPs

Public-private partnerships.

2. WEF

World Economic Forum. Geneva, Switzerland, and its annual meeting in Davos, Switzerland.

3. UN FOOD SYSTEMS SUMMIT, 2021

New York, United States.

Widely criticised for sidelining the CFS and its civil society mechanisms, for privileging corporate-led solutions, and for lack of transparency.

Since the 1990s, governance has shifted steadily away from state-led multilateral processes towards initiatives led by corporations, which are increasingly difficult to monitor.

Sources: Slater S., Lawrence, M., Wood, B. et al. (2026). How has the global food governance system evolved, and what challenges does it currently pose for food systems transformation? A narrative review and synthesis of the literature. *Globalization and Health*, 22; CADTM. (2025). *Confronting Financial Institutions' Legacies in the Global South*; ETC Group. (2026). *Cross-fertilising advocacy efforts at CBD and UNFCCC for a just transition and systemic transformation*; Fakhri, M. (2022). *Seeds, right to life and farmers' rights. Report of the Special Rapporteur on the right to food*; IPES-Food. (2023). *Who's Tipping the Scales?*; War on Want. (2022). *Profiting from Hunger*.

Part two

Three dependencies, one system of power

Aerial view of the Abu Kraa phosphate mine in Western Sahara.

‘We need to keep feeding a growing population’: the myth that sustains the system

For decades, a single narrative has done more than any subsidy or trade agreement to keep industrial food systems in place: the idea that the world must produce more food through industrial means in order to ‘feed the world’, or people will go hungry. It has proved extraordinarily useful, invoked in moments of crisis to justify more agrochemicals, more monocultures and more corporate consolidation. But the evidence does not support it.

There is no global shortage of food production: the millions of people who go to bed hungry do so not because the world’s farms are failing to produce enough calories, but because poverty, inequality, conflict and the climate and biodiversity crises prevent them from accessing the food that already exists.

Between 1970 and 1990, per capita food production increased by 8% in South America and 9% in South Asia (two of the primary targets of the Green Revolution’s new technologies), yet the number of hungry people rose by 19% and 9% respectively in those same regions over the same period.⁴⁰ **Hunger is not primarily a production problem but a problem of justice:** driven by poverty, inequality and exclusion, conflict and the climate crisis, and a range of other factors that determine whether people can actually get hold of the food that exists. Calls to increase global net calorie production simply ignore that reality.^{41,42,43} Where food production does need to increase, it must do so in ways that improve the livelihoods of farmers and reach the poorest communities directly, rather than feeding commodity chains and export markets.

The second thing these narratives are actively shaping is **the assumption that industrial agriculture and global commodity chains are designed to feed people.** Meanwhile, industrial agriculture is actively undermining the common goods on which all food production depends: land, water and biodiversity.

Growing the same crops year after year across vast areas of land – a practice the sector calls monocropping or monoculture – has become the dominant model for producing commodity crops. This model is destroying biodiversity, agricultural biodiversity (agrobiodiversity – see Box 6) and natural habitats on a massive scale, making food systems ever more vulnerable to climate breakdown⁴⁴ and contributing to the yield plateaus (see Glossary) that are already appearing in key agricultural regions.⁴⁵ Moreover, **a large share of what corporate value chains produce never reaches a hungry mouth:** it is either wasted, diverted into biofuels or industrial livestock feed,⁴⁶ or converted into ingredients for ultra-processed foods (UPFs) with little nutritional value that now dominate supermarket shelves across the world.⁴⁷

The reality on the ground looks quite different from the picture these narratives paint. By some estimates, up to 70% of the world’s people rely on local food systems and what researchers call ‘peasant food webs’ to access their food – not on global commodity chains or the vast retail networks of industrial food distribution. More importantly, in times of food stress, whether from famine, price spikes, social disruption or climate shocks, it is the territorial systems (see Glossary) of peasant food production that keep communities fed and alive: not the global supply chains whose fragility is exposed precisely when people need them most.⁴⁸ How this narrative is constructed and deployed by corporate actors to serve their interests is examined in Part 2, Section 4.

For example, despite the expansion of industrial agriculture in the Southern Cone, smallholder farmers continue to provide the bulk of the foods that feed and nourish people. In Argentina, small farms account for 85–90% of potato, onion and tomato production and around 50% of all horticultural output, while occupying just 18% of the country’s farmland. In Brazil, family farms produce 58% of the country’s milk, 46% of its maize and 35% of its rice, on just 24% of agricultural land. The farms that ‘feed the world’ narratives consistently overlook are, in many places, the ones actually doing it.⁴⁹



A local market in Hikkaduwa, Sri Lanka. Up to 70% of the world's people rely on peasant food webs to access their food.

Three dependencies, one system of power

This section examines three structural dependencies that keep our current food systems locked in place: who controls them, what damage they cause, and the policies, incentives and narratives that make them so hard to break.

- **Structural dependency #1:** The extraction trap – fertilisers, fossil fuels and critical minerals
- **Structural dependency #2:** Owning the harvest – corporate control of seeds, pesticides and digital agriculture
- **Structural dependency #3:** Unequal exchange – neocolonial trade, illegitimate finance and the colonial roots of food dependency

These three areas reflect some of the most important struggles led by War on Want partners across the Global South. Their work ranges from resisting highly hazardous agrottoxics (see Glossary) from Bangladesh to Argentina, to challenging trade agreements that deepen poverty and inequality across North Africa, to advancing agroecological alternatives in Sri Lanka and seed sovereignty initiatives in Kenya. While these dependencies do not capture every problem within the industrial food system, they represent some of its most important fault lines.

The analysis presented in this section draws on research and direct contributions from our partners, as well as discussions held during two regional

convergence meetings organised by War on Want in 2025 through the Global Alliance for Just and Equitable Transitions in Sri Lanka and Brazil. The insights and experiences shared during those meetings helped shape the analysis throughout this report.

We focus on these three dependencies because they are often overlooked in climate policy and negotiation spaces. The links between these dependencies and the wider food system crisis remain poorly understood within many climate movements. Fossil fuel and mineral dependency is often treated as an energy issue rather than a food system issue; dependency on seeds and agricultural technologies is frequently viewed as a biodiversity or intellectual property issue rather than a climate justice issue; and trade and financialisation are often discussed as technical economic concerns rather than as key mechanisms through which corporate power and inequality are reproduced across food systems.

These issues are interconnected dimensions of the same system of corporate power and control. Meaningful transformation requires confronting all three together; cross-movement collaboration and shared strategies are therefore essential.

The concentration of corporate power running through all three dependencies does more than influence them: it helps reproduce and sustain them. **It shapes who sets the agenda, which solutions are considered credible, whose knowledge is valued, and whose interests prevail when policy decisions are made.** These cross-cutting dynamics are explored further in Part 2, Section 4.

1. DEPENDENCY 1: THE EXTRACTION TRAP

Fertilisers, fossil fuels and critical minerals

1.1 What role do they play and at what cost?

Corporate industrial food systems depend heavily on fossil fuels, agrochemicals such as synthetic fertilisers and pesticides, and critical minerals. This dependency is structural: it locks food production into extractive and polluting practices that contribute to climate breakdown, undermine rural communities' access to land and the commons (see Glossary), and leave millions of people vulnerable to supply disruptions and price shocks beyond their control.

The origins of this dependency can be traced back to the period after the Second World War, when chemical companies adapted technologies and chemicals developed for military purposes (including nerve gas) for use in agriculture.^{50,51}

From the 1940s onwards, farmers in Europe and North America were encouraged to increase production through a package of technologies that included hybrid seeds, high-yielding crop varieties, mechanisation, and growing use of synthetic fertilisers and pesticides. These approaches were designed for large-scale monocultures producing commodities such as wheat, maize and soy.

From the 1960s, the same model was promoted across many countries in the Global South through the Green Revolution. The package combined hybrid and high-yielding seed varieties, irrigation systems and synthetic agricultural inputs, and was promoted as a solution to hunger and low agricultural productivity. While it increased yields in some contexts, it also accelerated dependence on external inputs and contributed to the concentration of land, resources and decision-making power in fewer hands. The environmental, social and economic consequences of this transformation continue to shape food systems today.⁵²

The fertiliser treadmill

Synthetic fertilisers have become the backbone of industrial agriculture worldwide. While they have helped increase yields in the short term, they have also locked farmers into production systems that depend on the constant purchase of external inputs. As industrial agriculture has expanded and agribusinesses have pushed into new markets across the Global South, fertiliser use has soared,⁵³ deepening a cycle of soil degradation that makes it increasingly difficult for farmers to reduce their reliance on chemical inputs and step off the fertiliser treadmill.

Where synthetic fertilisers come from – and why that makes us vulnerable

Most crops need three key nutrients to grow: nitrogen (N), phosphorus (P) and potassium (K). Synthetic fertilisers supply these nutrients directly to crops; however, each comes from a different source, and each creates its own set of environmental, economic and geopolitical vulnerabilities.

Nitrogen: a fossil fuel dependency

Nitrogen is essential for plant growth and high yields, yet although it makes up around 78% of the atmosphere, plants cannot absorb it directly from the air. Traditionally, soils were enriched through compost, manure and the cultivation of legumes such as beans, peas, lentils and chickpeas, which naturally fix nitrogen in the soil.

Since the early 20th century, however, the Haber-Bosch process (see Glossary) has been used to convert atmospheric nitrogen into ammonia, the basis of most synthetic nitrogen fertilisers. This process transformed agriculture, but at a cost: it is highly energy-intensive and depends overwhelmingly on fossil gas. Nitrogen fertiliser is therefore not simply an agricultural input; it is also a fossil fuel product.



Big gasholder in chemical plant for the production of nitrogen-based fertilisers.

This connection leaves food systems highly exposed to volatility in energy markets: when gas prices rise, fertiliser prices tend to rise with them, pushing up production costs and increasing pressure on farmers. Today, nitrogen fertilisers account for the largest share of fertiliser use worldwide, **accounting for more than 60% of total fertiliser use in Africa and Asia, and just under 50% in the Americas,**⁵⁴ **while global use of synthetic nitrogen fertilisers has increased by 800% since the 1960s.**⁵⁵ Produced from fossil gas in highly energy-intensive industrial processes, nitrogen fertiliser alone accounts for more than 2% of global greenhouse gas emissions.⁵⁶ Scientists have warned for decades that humanity has already exceeded safe planetary limits for nitrogen use; nevertheless, consumption continues to rise, contributing to biodiversity loss, contaminating water, air and soil, and contributing to a range of serious health impacts.⁵⁷

Phosphorus and potassium: mined dependencies

Phosphorus and potassium play different but equally important roles in agricultural production: phosphorus supports root development and helps crops withstand drought, while potassium contributes to plant health, productivity and resilience.

Unlike nitrogen, however, these nutrients cannot be produced from the atmosphere; they must be extracted from finite mineral deposits through large-scale mining operations. Phosphorus is derived from phosphate rock and potassium from potash ore, both of which require extensive extraction and processing before they can be applied to agricultural land.

This creates a different form of dependency: rather than relying primarily on fossil fuels, **phosphorus and potassium fertilisers rely on critical minerals and extractive industries that consume vast quantities of land, water and energy.** The environmental impacts can be severe – phosphate mining, in particular, has been associated with extensive habitat destruction, pollution and long-term damage to local ecosystems.⁵⁸

Infographic 2

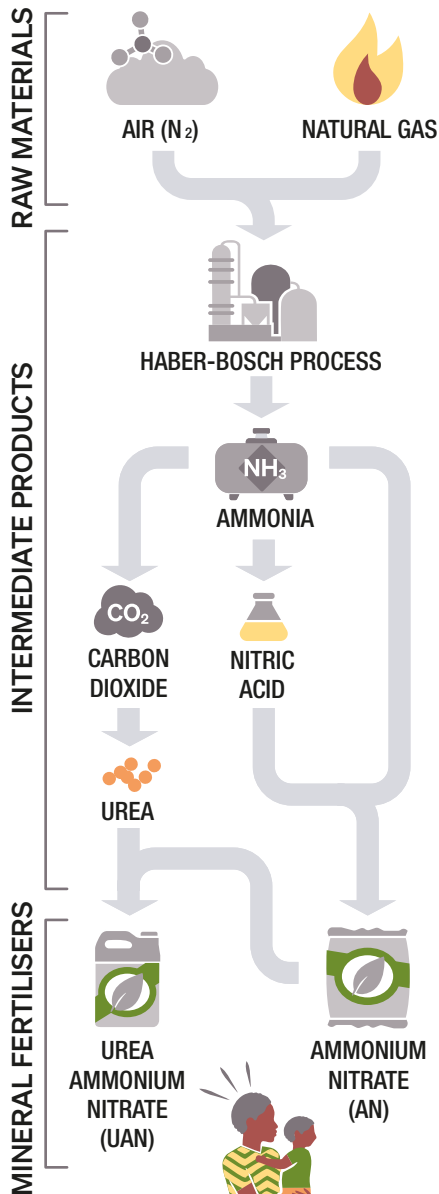
N, P, K: THE THREE LETTERS THE CORPORATE INDUSTRIAL FOOD SYSTEM RUNS ON

From gas fields and mines to your plate: the hidden story of synthetic fertilisers

N NITROGEN-BASED FERTILISERS

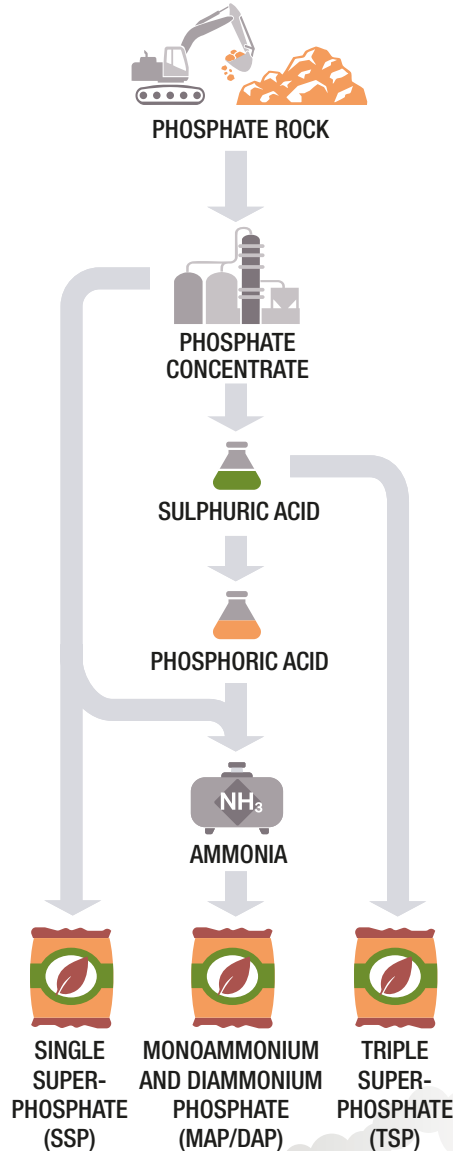
Nitrogen makes up 78% of the air, but plants cannot absorb it directly.

Since the early 20th century, the Haber-Bosch process has enabled its conversion into ammonia using fossil gas, providing the foundation for the world's most widely used fertilisers.



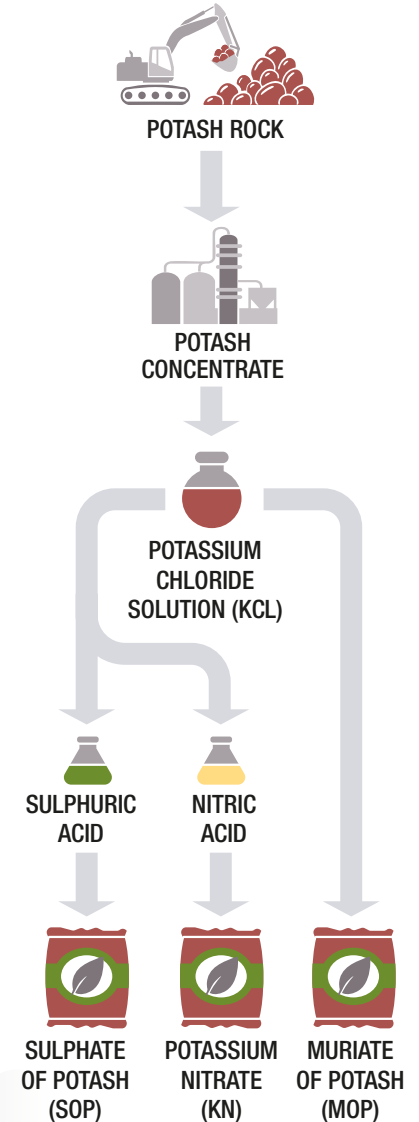
P PHOSPHATE FERTILISERS

Phosphorus cannot be synthesised from the air. It is extracted through the mining of phosphate rock, a finite and non-renewable resource. Global reserves are concentrated in only a handful of countries, making supply vulnerable to disruptions and geopolitical risks.



K POTASH FERTILISERS

Potassium cannot be produced from the air either. It is extracted through the mining of potash deposits, another finite mineral resource with reserves concentrated in only a handful of countries. Its supply depends entirely on natural deposits rather than chemical production processes.



Sources: Fertilizers Europe: <https://www.fertilizerseurope.com>; FAO. (2024). *Inorganic Fertilizers, 2002-2022*; IPCC. (2019). *Climate Change and Land*; Lassaletta, L., Billen, G., Grizzetti, B. et al. (2014). 50-year trends in nitrogen use efficiency of world cropping systems: the relationship between yield and nitrogen input to cropland. *Environmental Research Letters*, 9(10); IPES-Food. (2025). *Fuel to Fork*; Centre for Biological Diversity. (n.d.). *America's frightening phosphate problem*.

Box 4 Sacrifice zones: Gabès, Tunisia and the toxic costs of fertiliser production

In Tunisia, phosphate production shows how export-oriented fertiliser systems can generate severe environmental and health harms for local communities while serving global commodity markets.

For more than 50 years, the southern city of Gabès in Tunisia has been a centre of phosphate processing. Since 1972, the state-owned *Groupe Chimique Tunisien* (GCT) has converted phosphate rock into phosphoric acid and fertiliser products; in the process, local communities have borne the environmental costs of an industry whose benefits flow through national and international supply chains.

War on Want partners and allies in North Africa have long denounced toxic emissions, polluted air and water, damage to farmland and marine ecosystems, and the discharge of phosphogypsum, a waste product from fertiliser production, into the Gulf of Gabès. Campaigners argue that the impacts have affected soil, water, fisheries, public health and local livelihoods for decades. In October 2025, more than 120 people, including children, reportedly received medical treatment or were hospitalised after experiencing respiratory problems and other symptoms that residents linked to pollution from the industrial complex. The incidents triggered renewed protests and demands for the closure of the most polluting facilities.

Despite years of mobilisation, the Tunisian state has continued to prioritise phosphate production and has signalled plans to increase output. This reflects a broader dilemma facing many countries in the Global South: **where economies are heavily dependent on exports and foreign currency earnings, environmental protection and public health concerns are often subordinated to pressure for continued extraction and export growth** (see Part 2, Section 3).

Gabès exposes the sacrifice zones embedded in the industrial production of fertilisers: pollution, health risks and the loss of livelihoods remain concentrated locally, while the economic benefits are captured elsewhere. For the people in Gabès, the struggle is therefore not only about reducing pollution, but about securing environmental justice, public health, democratic accountability and the right to determine their own future, where neither people nor ecosystems are treated as expendable inputs in global supply chains.

Sources:

Al Jazeera (2025, October 14). Dozens hospitalised in Tunisia's Gabès amid environmental crisis: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/10/14/dozens-hospitalised-in-tunisia-gabes-amid-environmental-crisis>

Grun, L. & Vanneste, P. (2025). *P205: The toxic impact of phosphate*: <https://tchak-phosphatecontamination.eu/en>

As with many extractive industries, the benefits are often captured elsewhere, while local communities bear much of the environmental and social cost.

The global food system depends on inputs that come from the ground and from fossil fuels: resources that are extracted, depleted and subject to the geopolitical strategies of the countries and corporations that control them. **That dependency is one of the central vulnerabilities of the industrial food system and one of the strongest arguments for the transition to agroecological alternatives that build fertility through natural processes rather than purchased inputs.**

The energy trap: an entire industrial food system running on fossil fuels

The dependency on fossil fuels extends far beyond fertiliser production. Across the food system, from field to fork, fossil energy powers almost every stage of production: it runs tractors, harvesters and irrigation systems; fuels food processing and transportation; and increasingly supports the vast data infrastructure underpinning digital agriculture.⁵⁹ Industrial food systems are estimated to consume at least 15% of fossil fuels globally.⁶⁰ **The growing dominance of ultra-processed foods has deepened this dependency.** These products require two to ten times more energy to produce than whole foods, reflecting the additional processing, packaging,

storage and transportation built into highly industrialised food chains.⁶¹ Much of this energy use remains invisible to consumers, yet it is embedded in the products that increasingly dominate supermarket shelves around the world.

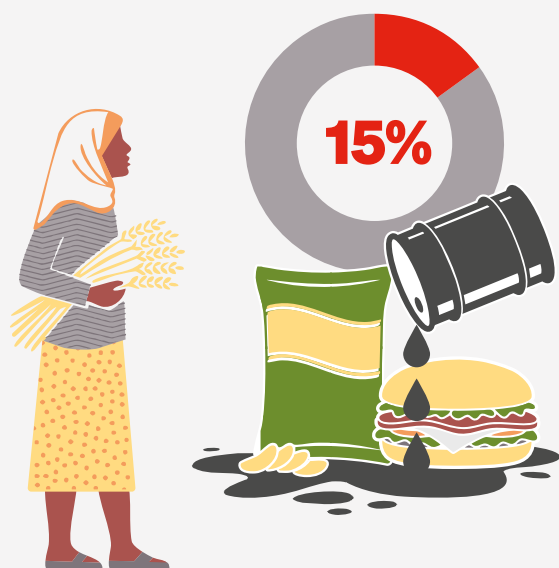
The result is a food system whose resilience depends on volatile energy markets: when fossil fuel prices rise, fertiliser prices rise with them; when fertiliser prices increase, food production costs increase; and when production costs rise, higher food prices quickly follow.

Countries that rely heavily on imported fertilisers are particularly vulnerable to these shocks. Major agricultural producers, including Brazil and India, depend on global fertiliser supply chains, meaning that disruptions in one part of the world can rapidly affect food production and prices elsewhere.⁶²

Infographic 3

INDUSTRIAL FOOD AND ENERGY SYSTEMS

Industrial food systems are estimated to consume at least **15%** of fossil fuels globally.



Ultra-processed foods alone require **two to ten times more energy** to produce than whole foods: a largely invisible cost built into the products that now dominate supermarket shelves across the world.

Sources IPES-Food. (2025). *Fuel to Fork*.

Shocks, disruptions and the limits of a fragile system

Recent crises have exposed the fragility of this model. The war in Ukraine in 2022 disrupted major exports of food, fertiliser and fossil fuels from the Black Sea region, contributing to a 55% increase in fertiliser prices within months.⁶³ In 2026, conflict in the Persian Gulf triggered further disruption: nitrogen fertiliser prices rose by 80% while energy prices increased sharply following threats to shipping routes through the region.⁶⁴

The consequences were felt far beyond the countries directly involved. Across Africa and Asia, many countries remain heavily dependent on fertiliser imports transported through key maritime chokepoints. Sudan sources more than half of its fertiliser imports from Gulf countries, while Sri Lanka, Tanzania and Somalia each depend on the Hormuz corridor for a substantial share of their supply.⁶⁵

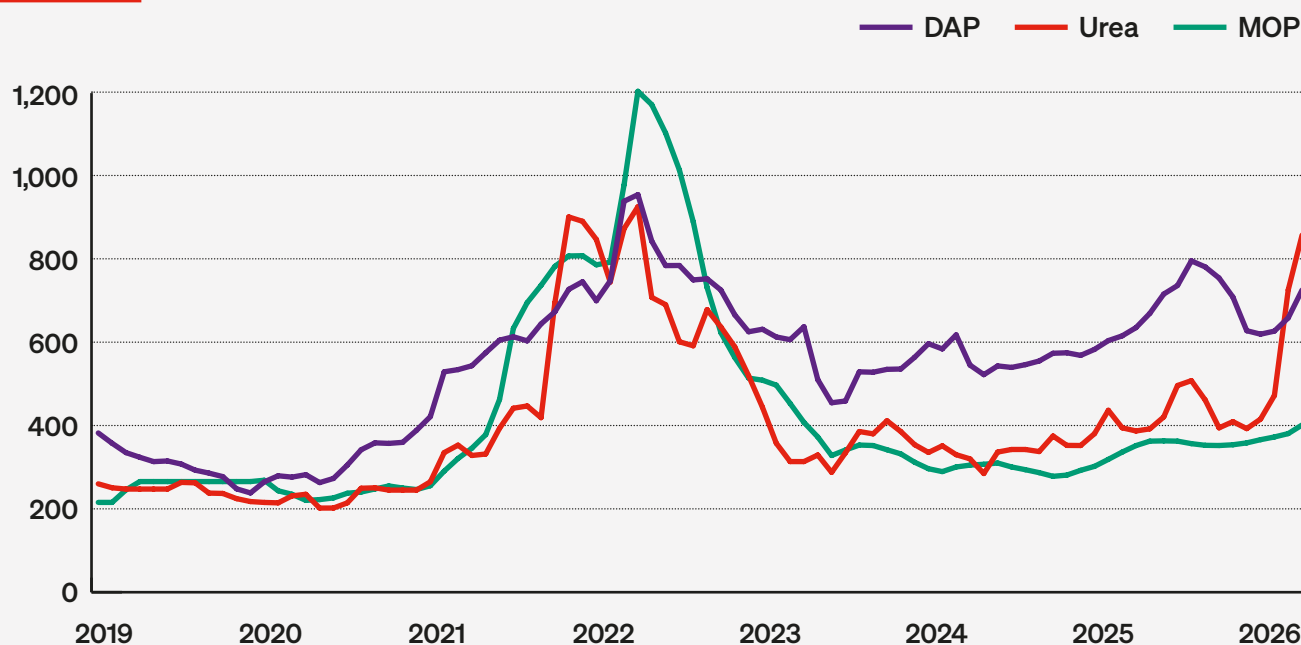
Even farmers who use few or no synthetic inputs are not immune: higher fuel costs increase the price of machinery, transport and distribution, raising production costs throughout the food system and placing additional pressure on rural livelihoods.⁶⁶

These examples highlight a wider problem: fertiliser, fossil fuel and critical mineral dependencies expose farmers and importing countries alike to volatile markets and geopolitical shocks, creating risks that they have little power to control.

Yet, these dependencies are continually reinforced through public policy. **Governments continue to subsidise synthetic fertilisers rather than promote alternatives, despite mounting evidence that intensive fertiliser use contributes to soil degradation and locks farmers into a treadmill of increasingly input-dependent production.** Climate policies, meanwhile, have paid remarkably little attention to the central role that fossil fuels and fertilisers play in shaping contemporary food systems.

At the same time, fertiliser and critical mineral supply chains are becoming increasingly entangled in the geopolitical strategies of powerful states. Rather than reducing vulnerabilities, efforts to secure access to strategic resources often deepen existing inequalities and dependencies, particularly for countries in the Global South that remain dependent on importing energy, fertilisers and agricultural inputs.

Figure 2 Fertiliser prices (US\$ / tonne)



DAP = diammonium phosphate; MOP = muriate of potassium Source: Bloomberg; World Bank

1.2 Hooked by design: the policies, incentives and narratives that lock in the extraction trap

1.2.1 The treadmill: how fertilisers degrade the soils they are meant to feed

Synthetic fertiliser dependency is self-reinforcing and, once established, difficult to escape. Fertilisers can increase yields in the short term by supplying nutrients directly to crops; however, their intensive and repeated use can gradually weaken soil health, disrupting the microorganisms and ecological processes that help maintain fertility over time. As soil health declines, farmers often require increasing quantities of fertiliser simply to maintain existing yields. Over time, this creates a costly cycle of dependency in which declining soil quality generates demand for ever more chemical inputs.^{67,68}

The ecological damage extends well beyond the treated fields. Globally, **only around half of all nitrogen fertiliser applied is actually absorbed by crops; the remainder leaches into the surrounding environment, contaminating water, air and soil.**⁶⁹

Phosphate runoff is among the biggest drivers of water pollution, triggering the algal blooms and aquatic ecosystem collapse known as eutrophication. In the United States alone, the economic damage associated with freshwater eutrophication has been estimated at US\$2.2 billion every year.⁷⁰

The more degraded the soil becomes, the more fertiliser is needed to maintain yields; the more fertiliser is applied, the more dependent the system becomes.

When soils become degraded and productivity falls, farmers may be pushed to bring new land into cultivation, contributing in some contexts to deforestation and habitat destruction.⁷¹ In countries that were early targets of the Green Revolution, these dynamics have become increasingly visible. In the Philippines, decades of intensive fertiliser use have left a well-documented legacy of soil degradation and biodiversity loss.⁷² Similar patterns can be seen in Sri Lanka's tea and rice sectors, where dependence on external inputs has become intertwined with wider agricultural and economic crises (see Box 5).⁷³



A phosphate mine on Nauru island. Phosphate mining for export (especially to Australia) has catastrophically degraded the island's soils, leaving around 70–80% of the land barren and unsuitable for agriculture and forcing the people of the island to rely on imported, often ultraprocessed food, largely from Australia.

1.2.2 Captive markets: how a handful of corporations control what farmers pay

Farmers caught on the fertiliser treadmill are not only dependent on chemical inputs, but also dependent on global markets that are increasingly concentrated in the hands of a small number of countries and corporations.

The concentration is visible across each of the three main fertiliser nutrients. **Nitrogen production is dominated by a handful of gas- and coal-rich economies; phosphorus depends on phosphate rock reserves that are heavily concentrated in Morocco and Western Sahara; and potash production is controlled by a small group of countries, led by Canada, Russia and Belarus.**⁷⁴ As a result, access to the nutrients on which industrial agriculture depends is shaped as much by geopolitics and market power as by agronomy.

This means that the minerals underpinning global food production can only be sourced from a small number of specific locations on earth: they are geographically fixed, finite and increasingly subject to geopolitical competition. Access to these minerals is therefore

inseparable from the political control of the territories where they are found. In some cases, that control is the result of occupation, as in the case of Western Sahara and Morocco, which together account for more than 70% of the world's known phosphate reserves.⁷⁵

This concentration creates the conditions for cartel-like behaviour, and the evidence suggests those conditions are being exploited. During 2022, **leading fertiliser firms raised prices well in excess of their additional production costs, growing their profit margins to 36% even as their sales volumes fell.**⁷⁶

The effects are especially severe in import-dependent countries. Researchers have described fertiliser markets in parts of Africa as 'captive markets': markets where farmers have few alternatives and limited bargaining power, while a small number of suppliers retain substantial control over prices. In countries such as Malawi, fertiliser prices have reached several times the world market rate despite government efforts to subsidise access.⁷⁷ Farmers often find themselves paying more for increasingly essential inputs while a growing share of value is captured elsewhere in the supply chain.⁷⁸

In major agricultural exporting countries like Argentina⁷⁹ and the United States,⁸⁰ rising fertiliser and energy costs have squeezed farmers between expensive inputs on one side and powerful agribusiness buyers on the other. Even when commodity prices rise, producers do not necessarily benefit; much of the additional value is captured elsewhere in the chain.

Faced with these pressures, growing numbers of farmers are seeking to reduce their reliance on synthetic fertilisers and transition towards low input agroecological systems. Yet governments continue to subsidise synthetic fertilisers, while bio-inputs and organic alternatives remain largely unavailable or inaccessible.

In Bangladesh, for example, farmers report having limited access to bio-inputs and continue to perceive agrochemicals as the most convenient and cost-effective option available to them.⁸¹ This pattern reflects the degree to which **dominant food system actors are able to shape the agenda in ways that systematically sideline the alternatives** (see Part 2, Section 4).

Infographic 4

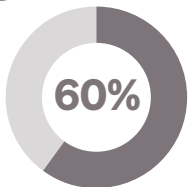
N, P, K: THE THREE LETTERS THE CORPORATE INDUSTRIAL FOOD SYSTEM RUNS ON, IN THE HANDS OF THE FEW

Geopolitical control of fertiliser production, reserves and trade

PRODUCTION AND RESERVES

Production and reserves of key fertilisers are concentrated in a handful of countries.

N NITROGEN

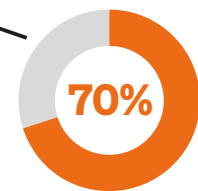


In 2018, China, the United States, India and Russia together accounted for around 60% of global nitrogen fertiliser output.



P PHOSPHATE

In phosphate, between 2010 and 2019, China, Morocco, the United States and Russia accounted for most of the global production of this non-renewable mineral, which is essential for global agriculture, while Morocco and Western Sahara hold more than 70% of known reserves worldwide.



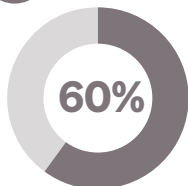
K POTASH

Canada, Russia and Belarus dominate global potash production. Most recoverable reserves are concentrated in Canada and Belarus, followed by Russia and a handful of other countries.

EXPORTS

International fertiliser trade is also concentrated in a small number of countries.

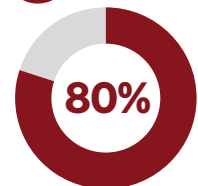
N NITROGEN



In nitrogen fertilisers, the EU-28, Russia, China, Saudi Arabia and Qatar account for around 60% of global trade.



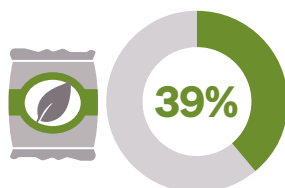
K POTASH



In potash, concentration is especially marked: in 2022, Canada represented 37% of global exports, Russia 23%, and Belarus, Israel and Germany around 7-8% each. Together, these five countries represented nearly 80% of global potash exports.

P PHOSPHATE

In phosphate products, a small group of exporters, notably China, Morocco, Saudi Arabia and the United States, controls nearly four-fifths of global trade.



These flows are controlled by a handful of multinational agribusiness giants. The ten largest firms control 39% of the total global fertiliser market.



In the United States, a single corporation (Mosaic) produces 60% of domestic phosphate fertiliser.

Sources: FAO. (2024). *Inorganic Fertilizers, 2002-2022*; US Geological Survey. (2023). *2019 Mineral Yearbook: Morocco and Western Sahara*; ETC Group & GRAIN. (2025). *Top 10 agribusiness giants: corporate concentration in food & farming in 2025*.



Bags of granular urea fertilisers made of nitrogen, waiting to be loaded for transport in Bangladesh.

1.2.3 Weaponised supply chains: chokepoints, geopolitics and the securitisation of food

Global food and fertiliser supply chains have become increasingly long, complex and concentrated. Vast quantities of food, fertilisers and agricultural inputs now pass through a small number of ports, shipping routes and trade hubs; as a result, disruptions in one location can have far-reaching consequences across the global food system.⁸²

Fertiliser supply chains are particularly vulnerable. Key inputs, including ammonia, nitrogen fertilisers, phosphorus and urea, move through many of the same transport corridors as oil and gas, creating the risk of compound shocks that affect energy, fertiliser and food markets simultaneously.⁸³ This vulnerability was exposed during the disruption of shipping through the Strait of Hormuz in 2026. **Roughly one third of global fertiliser supplies (both nitrogen and mineral-based) transit through the strait,⁸⁴ along with half of global sulphur – a critical input for phosphate fertiliser production.⁸⁵**

The impacts of these disruptions are felt far beyond the immediate region. Countries across Africa and Asia depend heavily on imported food, fertilisers and agricultural inputs that pass through these strategic corridors; when supply chains are interrupted, price increases and shortages can ripple rapidly through food systems already under pressure. The UAE imports large quantities of wheat, tea and rice before re-exporting them to African markets, with some 60% of China–Africa and China–EU trade passing through the country.⁸⁶

At the same time, food, fertilisers and critical minerals are increasingly being treated as strategic assets within wider geopolitical competition. Governments are seeking to secure access to key resources, control supply chains and reduce dependence on rivals; in doing so, they are increasingly framing agricultural inputs in the language of national security rather than food sovereignty or the right to food.

This shift became particularly visible in 2026, when the US government invoked the Defence Production Act to designate phosphorus and glyphosate-based herbicides as “critical inputs essential to military readiness and America’s agricultural strength”. Potash and phosphate were also included on lists of strategic minerals alongside resources such as lithium, uranium and copper.^{87,88}

For countries in the Global South, these developments create new forms of dependency. As War on Want partners in South Asia have highlighted, access to energy, fertilisers and strategic resources is increasingly tied to broader economic and political relationships, including agreements that exchange access to land, resources or infrastructure for energy supplies and investment. Some Gulf states, for example, have gained privileged access to land and resources in Pakistan in exchange for deferred oil and gas payments.⁸⁹

The result is that food systems are becoming increasingly entangled with geopolitical rivalries: supply chains become instruments of power and neocolonial domination. Access to fertilisers, energy and critical minerals can be restricted, leveraged or securitised in ways that deepen existing inequalities and reduce the policy autonomy of Global South countries. The experience of many mineral-rich countries illustrates this contradiction clearly: across the African continent, countries possess significant reserves of phosphates, cobalt, copper and other strategic resources that are increasingly sought after by Global North countries or foreign corporations – yet control over these resources has rarely translated into greater sovereignty or resilience. Instead, many countries remain locked into extractive economies that export raw materials while importing higher-value products, reproducing familiar patterns of dependency and unequal exchange. **Fertiliser and critical minerals are bound together within industrial agriculture strategies that form part of broader processes of militarisation and digitalisation, all oriented towards the same end: to “extract value from African land, labour and knowledge”.⁹⁰**

As the African Centre for Biodiversity argues, “ongoing wars in Ukraine and West Asia, alongside rising tensions among the United States, China, Russia, and their respective allies, have produced a world in which supply chains are routinely weaponised, access to strategic resources is securitised, and economic relations are increasingly subordinated to geopolitical objectives”.⁹¹

1.2.4 Subsidising the crisis: how governments keep industrial agriculture artificially cheap

Rather than helping farmers reduce their reliance on synthetic inputs and transition towards more resilient forms of production, **governments often respond to rising costs and supply disruptions by subsidising the very inputs that create dependency in the first place.**

This pattern has deep roots. Since the Green Revolution, states have played a central role in promoting industrial agriculture through public investment, subsidies, research programmes and extension services. Across regions like the Southern Cone of Latin America, agricultural policy has consistently favoured large-scale, export-oriented production based on mechanisation, agrochemicals and technological packages supplied by agribusiness corporations. While governments have differed in their political orientation, support for monocultures and industrial agriculture has often remained remarkably consistent: this is starkly evident particularly in countries with economies highly dependent on commodities exports (soy, maize, meat) like Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay.⁹²

Today, governments spend an estimated US\$540 billion per year supporting agriculture; around 90% of that support is directed towards forms of production that rely heavily on chemical inputs and large-scale commodity crop systems.⁹³ Input subsidies have become a particularly important policy instrument across the Global South.⁹⁴ By 2010, ten of Africa’s largest economies were allocating between 14% and 26% of their agricultural budgets to fertiliser subsidies alone; rising fertiliser prices have pushed such costs even higher in recent years.⁹⁵

Fossil fuel subsidies compound the problem. **Governments provide over US\$1 trillion per year in subsidies for fossil fuels and fossil-based electricity production,**⁹⁶ skewing incentives across the entire economy and keeping energy-intensive processes like fertiliser production artificially cheap relative to the alternatives.

By contrast, dedicated global funding for agroecology is difficult to quantify and appears to remain extremely

limited. A broader measure helps us see that **small-holders received US\$5.53 billion in climate finance in 2019–20, roughly 1% of the annual agricultural support figure.**⁹⁷ These figures are not directly comparable, but they illustrate the disproportion between the resources supporting dominant agricultural systems and the finance reaching smallholder farmers and agroecological initiatives. Moreover, only 10.6% of the Green Climate Fund’s agricultural funding and 2.7% of EU funds allocated through the FAO, IFAD and WFP were directed towards agroecological projects.⁹⁸

The result is a profound policy contradiction: **governments recognise the environmental, economic and climate risks associated with industrial food systems, yet continue to invest public money in maintaining the very mechanisms that produce those risks.** Rather than supporting farmers to escape the extraction trap, many current policies help keep it firmly in place.

1.2.5 Greenwashing the treadmill: the ‘clean fertiliser’ escape hatch

One reason synthetic fertilisers remain so deeply embedded in food systems is that they sit at the intersection of two powerful industries: agribusiness and fossil fuels.

As global demand for fossil energy plateaus and the energy transition accelerates in other sectors, fossil fuel companies are increasingly looking to food systems as an ‘escape hatch’ and long-term growth market: fertilisers and other petrochemicals are projected to account for 50% of new oil demand by 2050.⁹⁹

These interests are helping to shape the innovation agenda in predictable ways. Rather than investing in food systems that reduce dependence on synthetic inputs altogether, governments and corporations are increasingly promoting technologies designed to make fertilisers appear more sustainable while leaving the wider model intact.

The flagship example is so-called ‘clean fertiliser’. This includes ‘green’ fertilisers produced using hydrogen generated from renewable electricity, as well as ‘blue’ fertilisers that rely on carbon capture and storage (CCS) to reduce emissions from conventional fossil fuel-based ammonia production. These technologies are often presented as climate solutions because they promise to reduce emissions associated with fertiliser manufacturing without requiring major changes to existing agricultural systems.

Infographic 5

FROM EXTRACTION TO AGROECOLOGY: WHERE PUBLIC MONEY SHOULD GO

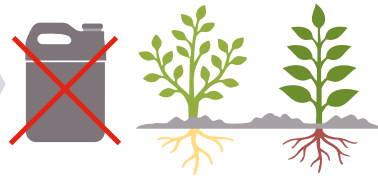
Billions sustain an extractive model, while a just transition still awaits funding

Governments pay approx **\$540 billion** yearly in net support to agricultural producers. **90%** of that support favours large-scale agribusiness.



WHAT THIS MONEY COULD DO INSTEAD

Most of this support does not reach small-scale producers or sustainable practices. Instead, it fuels production systems that rely heavily on chemical inputs and large-scale commodity crops.



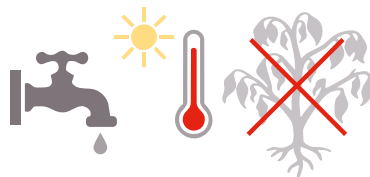
FUND AGROECOLOGICAL TRANSITION

Redirecting subsidies towards agroecology would reduce the use of agrochemicals, restore soils and build more resilient food systems in the face of climate crisis.



SUPPORT PEASANT AGRICULTURE

Family and peasant farming produces a large share of the world's food with much less land and fewer resources. Strengthening it would improve food sovereignty and reduce external dependence.



ADDRESS CLIMATE ADAPTATION

Investing in infrastructure, resilient peasant seeds and local knowledge would help rural communities withstand droughts, floods and other escalating climate impacts.

The largest **1%** of food businesses control more than **70%** of the world's farmland.



THIS INDUSTRY CAUSES TRILLIONS OF DOLLARS IN DAMAGE EVERY YEAR

These costs rarely appear on corporate balance sheets and are ultimately borne by governments and people.



DEGRADED SOILS



POLLUTED RIVER BASINS



DEFORESTATION



EMISSIONS

Sources: FAO, ILC & CIRAD. (2026). *The status of land tenure and governance*; FAO, UNDP & UNEP. (2021). *A multi-billion-dollar opportunity: Repurposing agricultural support to transform food systems*, based on 2013–2018 averages.



Members of France's Confédération Paysanne demonstrate in Paris on 14 October 2025 against the proposed EU–Mercosur trade agreement, which favours agribusinesses and threatens peasants' livelihoods, food sovereignty and agroecological transition efforts in both Europe and Mercosur countries.

In practice, 'clean fertiliser' remains more slogan than reality. As of 2023, around 99% of global hydrogen production remained fossil fuel based,¹⁰⁰ while there are also legitimate concerns that investment in new CCS and clean fertiliser infrastructure will create further fossil fuel use over the longer term.¹⁰¹

Even if emissions from fertiliser production were reduced, the industrial model would remain largely unchanged: large-scale monocultures would continue to depend on external inputs; farmers would remain exposed to concentrated markets and volatile supply chains; and significant greenhouse gas emissions would still be generated when fertilisers are applied to agricultural land. In other words, clean fertilisers seek to make the treadmill look greener, not to help farmers step off it.

There are also concerns about who will bear the costs of this transition. Producing green hydrogen at scale requires large amounts of renewable energy, land and water – common goods that are already under growing pressure. Efforts to secure these resources could drive a new wave of extraction and land acquisition in the Global South, reproducing

familiar patterns of inequality and what many describe as a new form of green colonialism.

Fertilisers have also largely escaped serious scrutiny in climate negotiations. At COP28, governments committed to transition away from fossil fuels but gave only limited attention to food systems, omitting food related emissions from the final Global Stocktake. Where food and agriculture have featured in national climate pledges (NDCs), commitments have generally been weak and have often overlooked the emissions embedded in fertiliser and pesticide use, as well as the subsidies that sustain them.¹⁰² At COP30 in Belém, food and agriculture were elevated on the action agenda and a UK–Brazil 'Belém Declaration on Fertilisers' was launched, yet formal negotiations again produced no substantive outcome on agriculture and the final text omitted industrial food systems and their emissions.¹⁰³ These omissions matter: climate negotiations help shape the rules, finance and policy priorities that affect food systems worldwide, yet the concerns of smallholder farmers and food-producing communities remain marginal in many of these discussions.

Box 5 Sri Lanka: how fertiliser dependency, foreign debt and economic fragility reinforce one another

Sri Lanka's 2022 economic crisis is often presented as a cautionary tale about the risks of 'going organic'. This interpretation is misleading: the crisis was not caused by an agroecological transition, but by the abrupt and poorly planned introduction of a fertiliser ban within an economy already burdened by debt, import dependency and structural vulnerability.

Over several decades, Sri Lanka became increasingly dependent on imported agricultural inputs, including synthetic fertilisers and pesticides, while maintaining an export-oriented agricultural model centred on sectors such as tea production. Agrochemical imports alone were estimated to cost between US\$300 million and US\$400 million annually (approximately £240–£320 million). At the same time, growing external debt and dependence on foreign currency earnings left the country highly exposed to global economic shocks, such as the 2008 financial crisis.



© MONLAR

Paddy farmers were among the most affected by the fertiliser ban.

By 2020, the combined effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, rising food, fuel and fertiliser prices, declining foreign exchange reserves and mounting debt repayments had pushed the economy into a precarious position. **In April 2021, the government responded by imposing an immediate ban on agrochemical imports. Farmers were given little time to prepare, while training, extension services and access to suitable alternatives remained limited.** Agricultural production declined, some farmland was left uncultivated and food imports increased. The ban was reversed later that year. In May 2022, Sri Lanka defaulted on its external debt and subsequently entered an IMF programme, which included the usual conditions: spending cuts, policies to attract private investment and renewed pressure to increase export earnings.

The real lesson is not that agroecological transition is impossible – it is that transitions cannot be imposed overnight. **Successful transitions require public investment, farmers' and workers' participation, technical support and the gradual development of locally available alternatives.**

Events since then have reinforced this argument. The disruption of fertiliser supply chains during the Gulf crisis in 2026 exposed Sri Lanka's continued dependence on imported inputs. Fertiliser imports from Arab countries reportedly fell by around 30–35%, leading to shortages, delays and additional public spending to secure alternative supplies.

For War on Want partner in Sri Lanka, MONLAR (Movement for Land and Agrarian Reform), these recurring crises reveal a deeper structural problem. As Chintaka Rajapakse, the organisation's moderator, has argued, Sri Lanka's modern agricultural sector has become heavily dependent on imported fertilisers, seeds and equipment. This leaves farmers exposed to extreme price volatility. The price of a 50 kg bag of urea, for example, rose from around Rs. 3,000 to Rs. 45,000 during the 2021 crisis and was again fluctuating sharply in 2026.

Seen together, **the crises of 2021, 2022 and 2026 tell a consistent story.** In 2021, the government attempted to reduce import dependency through an abrupt fertiliser ban; in 2022, debt and foreign exchange shortages contributed to a broader economic collapse; and in 2026, geopolitical conflict once again threatened access to essential agricultural inputs. Each crisis revealed the same underlying vulnerability: **an agricultural system dependent on imported inputs transmits external shocks directly into food production, public finances and rural livelihoods.**

The widespread claim that Sri Lanka's crisis was caused by an attempt to transition away from conventional agriculture has been strongly challenged by organisations such as MONLAR, which instead point to decades of debt accumulation, import dependence and structural economic imbalance.

Presenting the crisis as evidence against agroecology not only misrepresents what happened – it also obscures the need for carefully planned, adequately financed and democratically-led transitions.

Nor does economic stabilisation mean that these vulnerabilities have disappeared. Policies centred on privatisation, export expansion and continued dependence on imported inputs risk reproducing many of the same conditions that contributed to the crisis in the first place. Yet alternatives remain alive: surveys suggest that most Sri Lankan farmers continue to support a gradual transition towards more ecologically sustainable agriculture, and many (almost 80%) are already familiar with organic fertilisers and agroecological practices.



Tea production in Sri Lanka through agroecological and agroforestry methods used by farmer members of MONLAR.

Through MONLAR, agroecological pilot farms have been established in villages across the country, using approaches such as super compost, soil regeneration and locally available biological inputs. What has been missing is the enabling political and economic environment: long-term public investment, farmer-led planning, access to appropriate technical support, protection from debt pressures and the policy space to develop local alternatives at scale. Without such changes, Sri Lanka risks returning to the same fertiliser crisis whenever the next external shock arrives.

Sources:

Reuters. (2026, July 3). Sri Lanka urged to stick to reforms as IMF programme nears end: <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/sri-lanka-urged-stick-reforms-imf-programme-nears-end-2026-07-03/>

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2. DEPENDENCY 2: OWNING THE HARVEST

Corporate control of seeds, pesticides and digital agriculture

2.1 What role do they play and at what cost?

Alongside their dependency on fossil fuels and synthetic fertilisers, industrial food systems are increasingly locked into a second set of corporate-controlled technologies and knowledge systems: proprietary seeds, chemical pesticides and digital farming platforms. The spread of these technologies has gone hand in hand with the expansion of monocultures and a dramatic loss of agrobiodiversity. At the same time, they have deepened inequalities across the Global South by eroding local food systems, undermining farmer-managed knowledge, and concentrating power over food production in the hands of a small number of corporations.

The transformation of seed systems

For centuries, farmers have been the architects of their own seed systems: breeding, selecting and exchanging varieties across generations, identifying the crops best suited to local soils, climates and tastes, and saving seed from one harvest to plant the next.

These farmer-managed seed systems remain the foundation of food production and food sovereignty for hundreds of millions of people around the world – and, as the evidence increasingly shows, a critical source of resilience in the face of the mounting climate crisis, providing the diversity and adaptability that industrial agriculture often lacks.

Over the course of the 20th century, however, this foundation was progressively weakened. Seed corporations, working alongside governments, local elites and international development institutions,

promoted hybrid seed varieties through Green Revolution programmes and wider agricultural modernisation efforts.

Hybrid seeds, artificially cross-bred to express specific commercial characteristics, cannot be saved and replanted: farmers must purchase new seed each season, transferring a decision that was once entirely in their own hands into the hands of a corporate supplier. More recently, the commercialisation of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and gene-edited crops (see Glossary) has extended this logic further, embedding systems of intellectual property rooted in patents, which treat plant genetic material as a commodity to be owned and sold.

In addition to the above, rapid technological advances in digital sequencing of plant genetic information – also known as digital sequence information (DSI) (see Glossary) – are now making it **easier still for corporations to appropriate the genetic heritage that farming communities have developed and stewarded over millennia.**

The pesticide trap

The expansion of commercial seed systems has been closely tied to rising pesticide use. Global pesticide consumption has doubled since 1990, with some of the fastest growth occurring in the Global South: **in low-income countries, use has increased by as much as 153% over the past decade alone.**¹⁰⁴

There are many ways to manage pests and diseases, including crop diversification, biocontrol methods and physical barriers. Yet chemical pesticides have become the dominant model, often sold alongside commercial seeds as part of a single ‘technological package’.¹⁰⁵ Farmers are therefore frequently encouraged to adopt bundled systems in which seeds, chemicals, technical advice and credit are closely interconnected.



An exhibition of farmer-managed seeds in Sri Lanka.

Seed dependency and pesticide dependency are two sides of the same process. The widespread adoption of commercial seeds often increases reliance on chemical inputs, while pesticide-intensive production systems reinforce dependence on corporate suppliers. It is difficult to talk about seed sovereignty without also confronting the pesticide trap that accompanies it.

The costs of this trap on people and biodiversity are devastating. More than 385 million unintentional pesticide poisonings occur every year. Chronic exposure has been firmly linked to increased risks of cancer, reproductive disorders and neurological disease. And beyond their direct impacts on human health, pesticides are driving rapid biodiversity loss and undermining the ecosystem functions – from pollination and natural pest control to soil health – on which future food production ultimately depends.^{106,107}

Digital agriculture: a new frontier of corporate control

Digital agriculture represents the newest frontier in the corporate control of food systems. Developed by agribusiness corporations and technology companies, digital platforms collect and analyse vast amounts of information on soils, weather, crop performance and farm management practices. These systems increasingly use artificial intelligence and automated technologies to generate recommendations about planting, irrigation, fertiliser use and pest management.

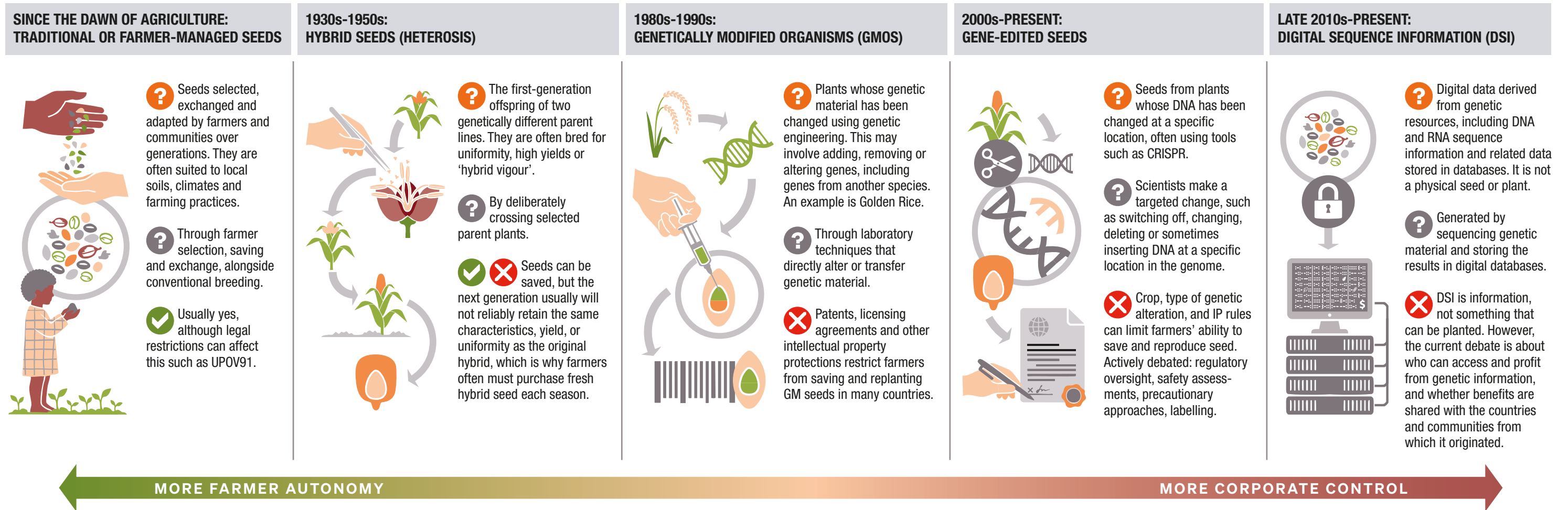
Presented as a tool for empowering farmers, they function in practice as another mechanism for drawing smallholders into dependency on external, corporate-controlled systems: **the data generated by farmers' own land and labour is often collected by platforms that farmers neither own nor control.** Information flows upwards to corporations, where it can be aggregated, analysed by AI systems and monetised, while decision-making increasingly becomes shaped by proprietary algorithms and software systems.¹⁰⁸

Infographic 6

WHOSE SEED IS IT? A STORY OF CONTROL, OWNERSHIP AND POWER OVER WHAT WE GROW, AND AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE AHEAD

From farmer autonomy to corporate ownership: how laws, patents and technology transformed seeds into commodities

? WHAT ARE THEY? **? HOW ARE THEY PRODUCED?** **CAN FARMERS SAVE THE SEED?**  **Yes**  **No**



Sources: FAO. (2025). *Seed systems – Twenty things you need to know*; FAO. (2016). *Seed Security Assessment – A Practitioner's Guide*; Convention on Biological Diversity. (n.d.). *Digital sequence information on genetic resources*; Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST). (2020). *Digital sequence information*; War on Want. (2022). *Profiting from Hunger*.



Pesticide application in a rice field in Bangladesh. By disrupting the ecosystems that naturally regulate pests, intensive agrochemical use can reinforce dependence on chemical inputs while increasing health risks for farmers and agricultural workers.

This trend is being accelerated by growing partnerships between agribusiness giants and major technology firms, including collaborations involving companies such as Microsoft, Google, Amazon and Meta.¹⁰⁹ As a result, corporate control is expanding beyond seeds and chemicals into the increasingly valuable realm of agricultural data and digital infrastructure.

A system designed to perpetuate itself

From Sri Lanka to Kenya to Morocco, farmers and social movements have documented the consequences of these technologies on the ground. As the following sections explore, their adoption is reinforced through a web of subsidies, publicly funded research programmes, trade rules and regulatory frameworks that frequently favour the interests of multinational corporations and Global North countries.

Over time, the unjust distribution of power in global economic systems and food supply chains enables the takeover of these technologies: they do not merely displace alternatives – **they actively erode the production systems, knowledge bases and social networks that alternatives depend on, weakening the very foundations from which resistance to industrial agriculture might grow, and making the dependency harder to break.**

2.2 Captured by design: the policies, incentives and narratives that lock in corporate technology dependency

2.2.1 The pesticide treadmill: how agrochemicals destroy the ecosystems they depend on

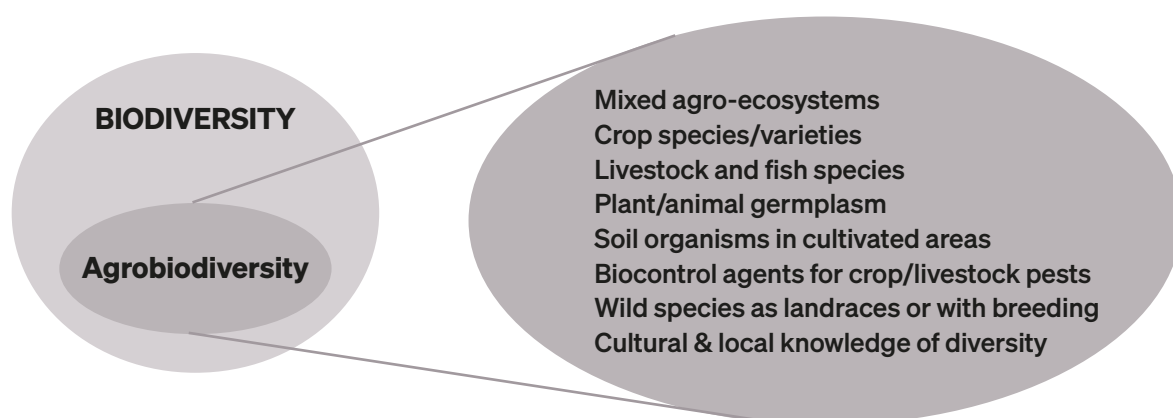
As discussed in the previous section, intensive fertiliser use degrades soils and locks farmers into ever-increasing chemical inputs. Chemical pesticides follow the same ‘treadmill effect’ and produce similarly devastating results. Locally adapted crop varieties and diverse cropping systems are well documented as critical sources of resilience against pest, disease and climate threats. On the other hand, genetically uniform monocultures that have displaced them across large parts of the world are vulnerable to climate risks or pests: a single pest or pathogen can sweep through an entire crop precisely because there is no diversity to interrupt its spread.^{110,111}

Extensive pesticide use critically degrades ecosystems and their self-regulating capacities, making monocultures even more vulnerable to climate shocks. Pesticides are among the primary drivers of the rapid worldwide decline of pollinators¹¹² on which some 35% of globally cultivated crops depend.¹¹³ More fundamentally, **by disrupting the ecosystems that regulate pest populations naturally, pesticides progressively undermine their own effectiveness: pest resistance is rising globally,** with a recent study documenting 16,000 cases of insecticidal resistance affecting more than 600 insect species.¹¹⁴ As resistance builds, farmers are pushed towards higher volumes, stronger chemicals, or both: a 20-year meta-analysis found an overall increase in herbicide application on fields planted with genetically modified herbicide-resistant crops.¹¹⁵ To keep pace with expanding chemical treatments, farmers may also find themselves locked into purchasing seeds with two or more genetic modifications combined into a single variety, engineered for resistance to multiple pests simultaneously. This is what the industry calls ‘stacked traits’.

Box 6 Why agrobiodiversity matters for a just transition

Agrobiodiversity refers to the diversity of plants, animals, microorganisms and ecosystems that contribute to food and agriculture, together with the knowledge and practices used to manage them. Shaped over thousands of years by both natural processes and peasant knowledge, it includes crops, livestock breeds, fish species, pollinators, soil organisms and their wild relatives, as well as the ecological, cultural and social systems that sustain food production. **Agrobiodiversity is not only a biological resource but also a social and political relationship, shaped by access to land, seed systems, local knowledge and farmers' rights.** It is central to the question of who controls food systems, whose knowledge counts, and how the costs and benefits of transition are distributed.

Agrobiodiversity is central to overall biodiversity



It is increasingly clear that an agroecological transition is needed in the face of global biodiversity loss and the pressures created by industrialised agricultural production and food systems. **Such a transition must place crop diversity and farmers' rights at its core.** Diverse, territorial food systems built on smallholder farmers' seed systems offer concrete pathways for this shift, because they strengthen climate adaptation, support local economies and reduce dependence on external inputs. Agrobiodiversity also helps farming systems adapt to drought, pests, floods and shifting growing conditions, while supporting soil health, pollination and nutrition.

This is why agrobiodiversity matters so much for just transition debates. **A just transition cannot be reduced to decarbonising economies – it must also address the social, ecological and political consequences of food and agricultural systems.** That means looking beyond carbon and toward the intersecting crises of climate, biodiversity loss, land concentration, inequality and corporate capture.

The problem is that biodiversity, climate, food and agriculture are still too often treated as separate policy areas, despite their obvious interconnections. A just transition requires these agendas to be aligned rather than siloed, and for policy frameworks at national, regional and international levels to reflect these inextricable links.

For climate negotiations, this matters because the future of food systems is not only a technical issue of emissions reduction. A genuine just transition should support agroecology, farmers' seed systems and the role of peasants, Indigenous peoples and local communities in maintaining and renewing agricultural biodiversity. In this sense, agrobiodiversity is the foundation for more just and equitable futures.

Source: FAO. (2004). *What is Agrobiodiversity?*: <https://www.fao.org/4/y5609e/y5609e01.htm>

Each step of this process deepens the dependencies. The use of agrotoxics and agrotoxics-dependent seeds degrades ecosystems, which then demands more chemicals and more sophisticated seeds: a costly technological treadmill with no natural exit point.^{116,117}

Similar vicious cycles are visible in irrigation. In Morocco, food sovereignty movements report that agricultural modernisation has come at a high environmental cost. Traditional food systems and locally adapted crop varieties have been pushed aside in favour of water-intensive export crops, increasing pressure on scarce water supplies and creating continued demand for irrigation infrastructure. This has locked the country into a cycle of resource depletion, driven more by export markets than by the needs of local communities.¹¹⁸

2.2.2 How rising costs, debt and rural exodus trap farmers into a vicious cycle

Farmers are often stuck in a system where environmental harm and inequality feed into each other. Financial pressures make it difficult to leave this vicious cycle, even when industrial farming is becoming less sustainable and more expensive.

Those costs are real and rising. In the United States, commercial seed prices rose by 100% between 1990 and 2020; genetically modified (GM) seed prices rose by 463% over the same period.¹¹⁹ Dominant firms in seed and pesticide markets have increasingly exploited their market power to push prices higher still, in patterns that closely resemble the price gouging documented in the fertiliser sector (see Section 2.1).¹²⁰ **For many small farmers, this leads to a slow squeeze that ultimately drives them out of farming, allowing larger agribusinesses to expand and absorb their land.** Some 83,000 smallholdings (*chelas*) have disappeared in Argentina over the past 20 years as the country has deepened its commitment to agrochemical-intensive export production and GM crops.¹²¹ In Morocco, mounting production costs and rising debt have driven farm abandonment and a massive outflow of peasant farmers, with an estimated 1.7 million agricultural jobs lost over the same period.¹²²

For those who remain on their land, continuing with industrial farming may seem like the only financially realistic option because of the investments they have already made. Farmers who have expanded their operations and invested in specialised equipment for commodities production, skills and supply chains often face significant costs if they try to change their approach. As a result, the system encourages farmers to stay on the industrial path and makes it difficult to choose alternatives.^{123,124,125}

A plane sprays pesticides over a sunflower field in Argentina.





A plurinational 'Marcha de los Barbijos' in Rosario (Argentina) bringing together communities affected by pesticides exposure, including War on Want partners ACCSA and the Plurinational Network of Pesticide-Affected Peoples. Under the slogan *La salud no se negocia* (health is not negotiable), the march highlights illnesses linked to spraying of agrotoxics and calls for food sovereignty.

These challenges are particularly visible in digital agriculture, where seeds, agricultural inputs and monitoring technologies are often combined into integrated platforms. These systems can require significant upfront investment in equipment, software and specialist knowledge, and often tie farmers to specific ways of producing through contractual agreements.^{126,127} As the African Centre for Biodiversity has observed, digital agriculture is marketed as a tool for reducing reliance on chemicals and mined minerals; in practice, it functions as a 'connective tissue' that normalises and extends their use. **Public subsidies for commodity crops and agrochemical inputs reinforce these incentives, ensuring that the industrial path remains, for most farmers, the path of least resistance.**¹²⁸

2.2.3 Outsourcing toxicity: sacrifice zones and structural violence

The negative impacts of corporate-controlled food production technologies do not fall evenly. **They are systematically concentrated in communities across the Global South, in areas that have come to be described as 'sacrifice zones': places where the costs of industrial agriculture and other forms of extraction (mining, fracking, oil drilling, industrial fisheries) are borne by those least able to resist them and hidden from view to those who benefit.** A system reinforced by structural violence against communities and rights defenders.

The trade in banned, highly hazardous pesticides illustrates the dynamic with particular clarity: **while the most toxic agrochemicals are generally prohibited in wealthy countries, they continue to be manufactured there and exported elsewhere.** According to the European Parliament, some 81,000 tonnes of pesticides containing 41 chemicals banned in EU agriculture were exported by European corporations in 2018 alone.¹²⁹ In Bangladesh, smallholder farmers selling into global value chains operate on extremely thin margins and with very limited autonomy over their production choices, frequently turning to highly hazardous agrochemicals including DDT and paraquat in an attempt to boost yields on marginal land.¹³⁰ The financial burden of purchasing these agrotoxics year after year pushes farmers deeper into debt, and deeper into dependency on the very system squeezing them.

The communities living closest to heavily fumigated industrial agriculture zones bear the worst consequences. These are also sacrifice zones. Across the vast soy monocultures of the Southern Cone, some 600 million litres of glyphosate are applied every year – often through planes and increasingly through drones – contaminating drinking water, devastating local health and eradicating an estimated 500,000 hectares of forest annually.¹³¹ In Argentina, which has the highest per capita pesticide use in the world, a study found that young people in villages where spraying takes place face a cancer risk 2.5 times higher than the national average;¹³² communities exposed to glyphosate have also reported deformations and serious illnesses in newborns.

Box 7 Bangladesh: trapped in the agROTOXICS treadmill

Bangladesh offers a stark illustration of how dependency on agROTOXICS becomes self-reinforcing and how, without meaningful state intervention, the burden of change falls entirely on the farmers and farmworkers least able to bear it.

Rice is at the heart of Bangladesh's food system, people's diets and its pesticide problem. The crop accounts for an estimated 30–40% of total pesticide use in the country, equivalent to roughly 11,000–14,000 tonnes annually. Between 1990 and 2010 the use of pesticides rose by 400%, matching the adoption of high-yielding rice varieties. This shows how the packages of seeds and agrochemicals are always strictly connected and cannot be analysed separately.



Highly hazardous pesticides and herbicides like glyphosate are widely available in local rural shops in Bangladesh.

A field survey conducted by War on Want partners, Jatiyo Kisan Shramik Society (JKSS) and the Bangladesh Agricultural Farm Labour Federation (BAFLF), covering 140 smallholder paddy farmers across Trishal and Sherpur provinces, found that every single respondent used pesticides; 85.7% applied them personally, creating direct and repeated occupational exposure with little or no protective equipment.

Among the pesticides in active use is paraquat: a highly toxic herbicide banned or severely restricted in the European Union, the UK and dozens of other countries because of its acute toxicity and links to Parkinson's disease. However, despite being banned in the EU and the UK, these countries still export it to the Global South. In Bangladesh, it remains legal and available. It is one of a range of what the FAO and WHO classify as Highly Hazardous Pesticides (HHPs): products that present particularly high risks because of acute toxicity, chronic health effects, environmental persistence or severe impacts on non-target organisms. The survey found that only 15.7% of farmers were aware of internationally restricted pesticides, and just 9.6% used label instructions to determine dosage. Most relied instead on advice from pesticide dealers, who function in practice as informal extension services agents, while also having a direct commercial interest in promoting sales.

The health consequences are already visible. **Among surveyed farmers, 38.1% reported acute symptoms after pesticide application, including headaches, dizziness and vomiting; 15% reported severe symptoms. Yet 93.9% of those affected sought no medical treatment,** reflecting both the normalisation of pesticide illness among workers and the absence of accessible health services for rural farmworkers. Long-term exposure to the pesticides in use has been linked in the scientific literature to neurological disorders, endocrine disruption, reproductive health problems and cancer.

The structural logic trapping farmers in this situation is familiar from other contexts documented in this report. Farmers depend on pesticides above all to protect yield and avoid crop loss; fear of losing income, not ignorance, drives most application decisions. Agricultural intensification limited arable land, and the expansion of high-yielding rice varieties have deepened that dependence over decades. **Safer alternatives exist, including biopesticides, integrated pest management and agroecological approaches, and have demonstrated effectiveness in Bangladeshi conditions – but they remain largely unavailable, unaffordable or unknown to most smallholders.** Only 40.1% of surveyed farmers reported using any form of integrated pest management.

Bangladesh has a legal framework on paper: the Pesticides Act 2018 and Pesticide Rules 2019. But enforcement at field level is weak, market surveillance is inadequate, and some pesticides banned under Bangladeshi law remain available through informal channels. The agricultural officers surveyed confirmed that fewer than 25% of farmers in their areas had received any training, and 80% reported that farmers only partially understood pesticide labels.

The lesson that JKSS and BAFLF draw from this evidence is not that farmers should simply stop using pesticides. It is that **a just transition away from agrotoxics dependency requires the state to do what it has so far failed to do: provide training, make safer alternatives genuinely accessible and affordable by subsidising them, hold dealers and importers accountable, and enforce the regulations that already exist.** Abrupt bans without these supports, as Sri Lanka's 2021 experience demonstrated, simply transfer the costs of transition onto the farmers least equipped to absorb them.

Source: JKSS and BAFLF. (2026). *Rapid Study on Highly Hazardous Agrochemicals Use in Bangladesh*. Unpublished.

These impacts fall disproportionately on poor and marginalised populations – including migrant farmworkers – who are less likely to report them, and whose suffering is therefore less likely to reach public attention.¹³³

The violence is not only chemical. As the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food has documented, pesticides are sometimes deployed deliberately to poison land and force peasant and Indigenous communities from their territories.¹³⁴ Across the Southern Cone, **the expansion of GM soy monocultures and glyphosate use has gone hand in hand with the systematic privileging of agribusiness interests, the harassment of smallholder farmers, and the murder of activists and land defenders.**^{135,136} In Gaza, airborne herbicides have been used to destroy crops, while farmland and agricultural infrastructure have been deliberately and systematically targeted since Israel's siege began in October 2023.¹³⁷

The spread of corporate-controlled seed systems is itself a form of violence against communities and their ways of life. As the *Alianza Biodiversidad Latinoamericana* (Biodiversity Alliance) has documented across Latin America, the “indivisible links between peoples and their seeds” are not merely practical but cultural and existential: industrial agriculture spreads by destroying these integrated systems of life, knowledge and identity. **For many communities, resistance to corporate seed systems is therefore not simply an agricultural question – it is a question of survival.**¹³⁸

2.2.4 Knowledge for sale: corporate capture of agricultural research and smallholders' innovation

Large corporations have gained influence over food system technologies not just through private investment, but often with direct support from publicly funded research and development (R&D). Over decades, public agricultural research, education and extension programmes have been progressively reshaped around the priorities of big agriculture and the profit opportunities it generates for agribusiness.

The pattern is well documented: hybrid seeds and agrochemicals opened up vast commercial opportunities, and **the corporations that stood to benefit worked systematically to place these technologies at the heart of publicly funded R&D, steering programmes away from the provision of free public services and towards the development of patentable products that could be sold back to farmers.** The private capture of public research has produced a deeply skewed innovation paradigm: one focused on technological fixes rather than systemic approaches, and oriented towards maintaining reliance on proprietary inputs, such as agrochemicals and genetically engineered seeds, instead of developing the knowledge and ecological foundations that farmers actually need.¹³⁹

The consequences are visible in what gets researched and what gets ignored. Public programmes have narrowed their focus to a small number of tradable commodity crops with markets large enough to deliver returns on investment;^{140,141} programmes are geared towards large-scale farmers who have better access to information, resources and credit and are therefore able to invest in expensive commercial inputs,¹⁴² while minor species, traditional varieties and the needs of smallholder farmers have been systematically neglected.¹⁴³ Research spending on biocontrol and ecological pest management remains low despite consistent evidence that these approaches succeed more frequently and cost less to develop than chemical pesticides.¹⁴⁴

Meanwhile, **government extension services have been progressively privatised and aligned with agribusiness interests, leaving farmers without independent advice and oversight.** Social movements across Africa, including War on Want partner the Kenyan Peasants League (KPL), have observed that government extension officers frequently function, in practice, as the marketing arm of agrochemical companies.¹⁴⁵ In India, cotton farmers were steered aggressively towards expensive hybrid and GM seeds – a process that trapped many in escalating debt spirals, contributing to hundreds of thousands of farmer suicides.¹⁴⁶

The capture of scientific and technical advisory bodies has compounded these dynamics, undermining assessment processes and enabling corporate technologies to be approved with insufficient scrutiny. In some African countries, agribusinesses have been accused of directly drafting seed liberalisation policies;¹⁴⁷ in Argentina, the approval of glyphosate in 1996 was based solely on studies conducted by the Monsanto Corporation, which were submitted to the government in English and not translated into the official national language.¹⁴⁸ **As GM crops and widespread pesticide use have become entrenched, scientific institutions have grown increasingly dependent on agribusiness funding.** Argentina's national biotechnology commission, CONABIA, has conducted its technical work behind closed doors, with a revolving door that brings agribusiness personnel into the heart of public policy.¹⁴⁹ These patterns reflect the broader concentration of power in food systems and the systematic capture of scientific debate and governance by vested interests, dynamics examined in more detail in Part 2, Section 4.

2.2.5 Rules written elsewhere: how Intellectual Property regimes are imposed on the Global South

Peasants' rights to save, exchange and breed their own seeds are recognised under several international frameworks: the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture, the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), and most recently the UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants (UNDROP). These instruments reflect a growing international recognition of the critical role that biodiverse smallholder, peasant and Indigenous food systems play in sustaining both food sovereignty and ecosystems.

In practice, however, a parallel set of rules has been built in separate arenas, away from the UN framework, that systematically favours commercial seed breeders and agribusinesses over peasants and Indigenous people. Designed in alignment with Global North intellectual property (IP) regimes, two instruments in particular have reshaped the legal landscape: the UPOV91 convention on plant variety protection, and the IP rules embedded in trade agreements under the TRIPS provisions (see Glossary). Both are technically voluntary frameworks; in practice, neither has been adopted voluntarily. Together, they have effectively made it illegal across large parts of the world for small-scale farmers and communities to do what farming communities have always done: breed, save and exchange their own seeds.^{150,151,152}

These so-called 'voluntary frameworks' have not been adopted voluntarily. Global North countries have used their economic leverage to coerce Global South governments into accepting intellectual property regimes and opening their seed markets as part of a sustained push to introduce GMOs, gene-edited and genetically modified micro-organisms crops into new markets.¹⁵³

The EU, the UK and the US have made trade agreements conditional on TRIPS compliance, raising what the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food has described as "significant right-to-development concerns".¹⁵⁴ However, sometimes the conditionalities are even stricter.

A clear example is the **Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP)**: on 1 September 2026, the UK secured full access to the trading bloc following ratification by all remaining members. The agreement's intellectual property chapter (Chapter 18, Article 18.7) requires each party to ratify or accede to the 1991 Act of the International Union for the Protection of New Varieties of Plants (UPOV91) if not already a member, **establishing a compulsory minimum standard for plant variety protection that exceeds the baseline set by the WTO's TRIPS Agreement**.¹⁵⁵

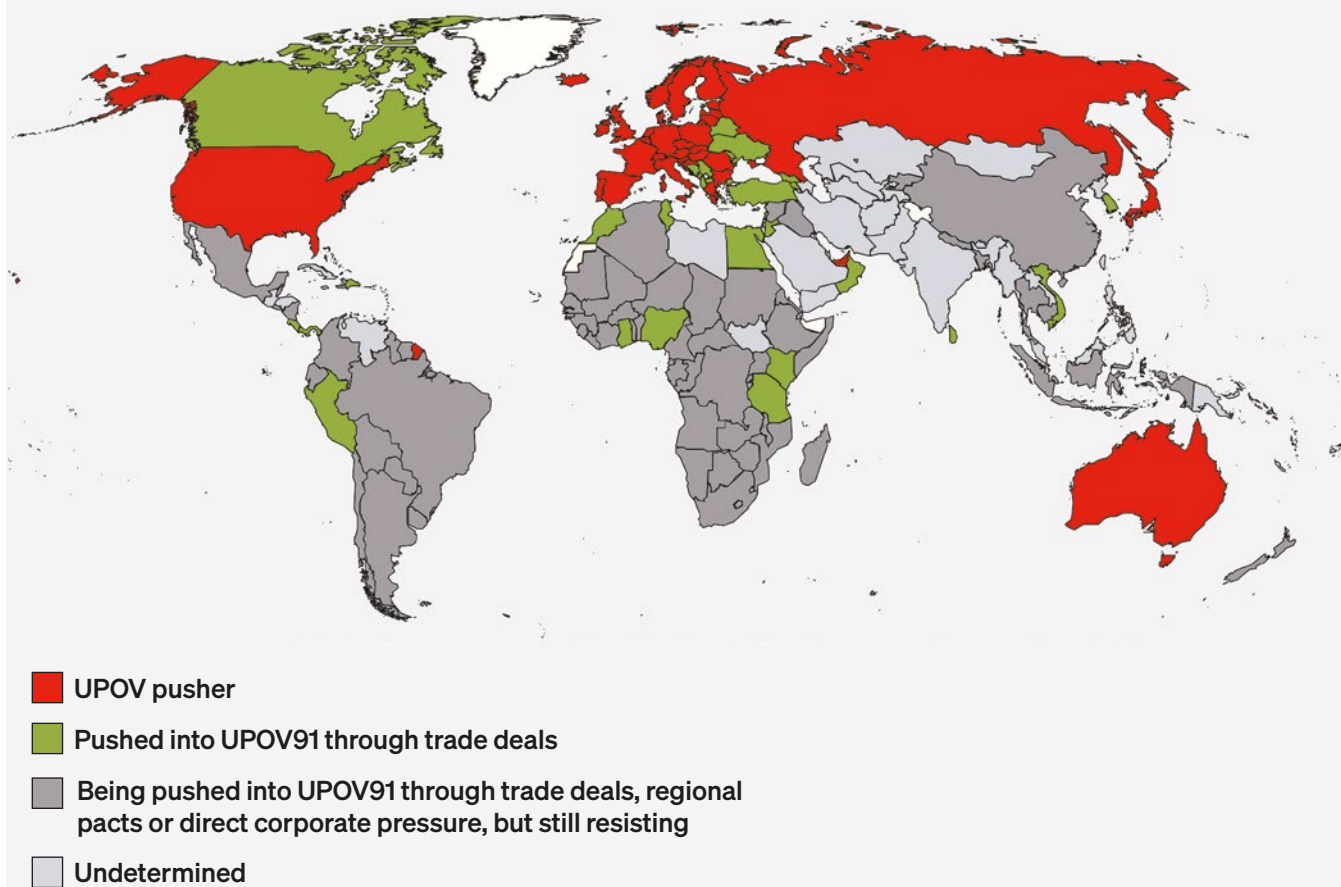
As social movements have testified, governments across Latin America have signed up to UPOV91 under relentless pressure from foreign governments

and multinational corporations.¹⁵⁶ In Morocco, the adoption of UPOV91 has been characterised by local movements as a neocolonial enterprise and a “major break with traditional practices of conservation and exchange”.¹⁵⁷ Kenyan social movements have similarly denounced its imposition and its destructive impacts on local food systems (see Box 8).

When it comes to digital agriculture, the problem is often a lack of regulation: digital technologies and artificial intelligence are being adopted faster than governments and regulators can keep up. As a result, many farmers and communities have limited protection from growing corporate influence over agricultural data, technologies and decision-making systems.¹⁵⁸

Figure 3 Trade deals pushing UPOV91

Joining UPOV91 is rarely voluntary. Global South countries are coerced through free trade agreements and neoliberal reforms that hand the control of seeds to corporations and strip farmers of their rights.



Source: Stop UPOV campaign. Interactive map available at <https://stopupov.org/#mapping-upov>

Box 8 Kenya: the struggle for seed sovereignty and the threat of UPOV91

In Kenya, farmer-managed seed systems are a living, dynamic foundation of diverse and resilient food production. **By fostering agrobiodiversity and enabling crops to adapt to local conditions, these systems play a critical role in sustaining the ecosystem and adapting to a changing climate.** As War on Want partner the Kenyan Peasants League (KPL) put it: “Indigenous and farmer-managed seeds are often more resilient to local climate shocks, pests and diseases than uniform commercial varieties.”

Yet these systems are being progressively marginalised by public policies aligned with the interests of commercial seed breeders.

In 2016, under sustained pressure from multinationals pushing for GMO adoption and seed market liberalisation, the Kenyan government signed up to UPOV91. The government subsequently adopted a Seeds and Plant Varieties Act, requiring all seeds that are sold or shared to be government-certified and to meet criteria of being sufficiently “distinct, uniform and stable” – standards designed around commercial breeding, not smallholders’ innovation.



KPL celebrates a High Court judgment in November 2025 that declared unconstitutional sections of the punitive Seeds and Plant Varieties Act. The law unfairly criminalised smallholder farmers for saving, sharing and exchanging indigenous seeds, imposed harsh penalties, and undermined smallholders’ seed sovereignty while favouring transnational corporations.

The practical consequences have been immediate and serious: peasants’ movements and civil society across Kenya have widely opposed the Act and are campaigning for its repeal, warning that its UPOV91 provisions directly contradict constitutional commitments to protect farmers’ rights. KPL has documented how the effective criminalisation of informal seed systems is already affecting farmers across East Africa: “We have seen cases where farmers who depend on purchased seeds have failed to cultivate their farms due to rising seed prices or have opted to spray their farms to avoid hard labour.” KPL has been clear that **this goes beyond technical regulatory matters to issues of structural power, locking in a broader set of dependencies**: “When technological solutions are introduced without addressing underlying structural issues – such as land access, market inequalities and policy biases – they risk reinforcing existing problems rather than solving them.”

These same biases then ripple through extension and education systems, which tend to overlook or actively undervalue farmer-led innovation, reinforcing a hierarchy of knowledge that marginalises local expertise and accelerates the erosion of the very systems communities depend on.

Kenya adopted a national agroecology strategy in 2023–2024, signalling at least a formal recognition of the value of diverse smallholder systems. However, the seed regime remains unchanged and risks undermining those goals before they take root: although a Kenyan court struck down several parts of the Seeds and Plant Varieties Act and related regulations in November 2025, the government has not yet updated or replaced the wider law. KPL is calling for a change in the Seeds Act and a rejection of one-size-fits-all intellectual property rules, alongside a broader set of policy changes: protection of community seed banks, support for farmer-to-farmer knowledge exchange, promotion of agroecology, and policies that foster collective innovation and genuinely value diverse ways of knowing and producing food.

Sources:

Kenyan Peasants League. (2026). *Seeds of Power: Why Seed Sovereignty Lies at the Heart of a Just Transition in Food Systems*. Briefing paper for War on Want. Unpublished.

Kenyan Peasants League. (2024). *Why Kenya Should Amend Section 3(3)(c) & (i) and Section 10(f) of the Seeds and Plant Varieties Act Cap 326*. Policy Brief: <https://evidence4agroecology.org/cases/22>

Daily Nation. (2025, June 5). Countries asked to withdraw law that criminalises traditional seed savers: <https://nation.africa/kenya/health/countries-asked-to-withdraw-law-that-criminalises-traditional-seed-savers-5069012>

3. DEPENDENCY 3: UNEQUAL EXCHANGE

Neocolonial trade and illegitimate finance: the roots of food dependency

3.1 What role do they play and at what cost?

The third structural dependency binding food systems across the Global South is arguably one of the oldest. For centuries, colonialism and imperialism locked these countries into subordinate positions in expanding global trade networks: exporters of raw materials, importers of manufactured goods, with little say over the terms of either.¹⁵⁹ **Their legacy is still written into current corporate food systems in the form of deep dependencies on commodity exports, staple food imports, and the type of financial arrangements needed to keep this model functioning.**

From the 1980s onwards, these inherited structures were deepened: the Structural Adjustment Programmes imposed by the IMF and World Bank, discussed in Box 3, above, pushed these dynamics further. The results were transformative and largely devastating: the shift towards cash crops and export commodities displaced nutritionally important traditional crops and diverted land and resources away from smallholder farmers. **Countries that had once fed themselves became dependent on global markets for their staple foods.**^{160,161,162}

Across the African continent, food import reliance has tripled over recent decades.¹⁶³ The shift towards cash crops for export has not only reduced the amount of food produced locally per person – it has also eroded the social networks and local exchange systems that communities depend on in times of shortage.¹⁶⁴ Haiti also tells the story starkly: once

self-sufficient in rice, the country had become a net importer by the 1990s, after cheap subsidised rice from global markets was dumped on Haitian markets and local producers were left without support. The consequences were not just economic – they dismantled a food culture and a production system that had fed people for generations.¹⁶⁵

Some countries have ended up doubly exposed, dependent on imports for both their food and the inputs needed to grow it. Morocco is a case in point: the country today depends on imports for nearly 30% of its cereals and vegetable oils, close to 90% of its horticultural seeds, and almost all of its agrochemicals.¹⁶⁶

As the sections below examine in detail, these trade dependencies are actively maintained by agricultural subsidies, trade agreements and a dense web of supporting policies, all underpinned by long-standing narratives about the indispensable role of trade in delivering ‘food security’. **The focus on trade has driven profound shifts in diets and food cultures that have, in turn, amplified demand for staple food imports and reinforced the trade bias still further.** It has been enabled by the economic subordination of the Global South, which forces countries into self-exploitation as low-value commodity producers; and propped up by financial flows that push heavily indebted countries into ever-greater dependence on export earnings, while the growing financialisation and speculation in food systems steadily weakens the control of farmers and communities and entrenches the dominance of export commodity agriculture.¹⁶⁷



Peasant and livestock farmer members of La Vía Campesina protest against EU free trade agreements during an action for the International Day of Peasant Struggles in April 2018, in front of the EU Commission offices in Brussels.

3.2 Rigged by design: the trade rules, subsidies and investment frameworks that lock in unequal exchange

3.2.1 Trade as ‘the route to food security’: a narrative that serves the powerful

The case for unrestricted global ‘free trade’ has been one of the most durable and consequential narratives in ‘feed the world’ debates. It is regularly presented as self-evident: the OECD, for instance, argues that “international trade is essential for food security and nutrition, provides livelihoods to millions, and has an important role in improving the environmental sustainability of the food system.”¹⁶⁸ Multinational agribusinesses have been among its most vocal champions, emphasising their own supposedly indispensable role in moving food between countries, while calling for large increases in global food production to avert hunger crises.¹⁶⁹

These pro-trade ‘feed the world’ narratives dominate policy debates despite the extensive evidence showing that food justice and food sovereignty depend on ensuring reliable access to nourishing food, not on maximising the volume of calories circulating in global markets.

Subsidies, dumping and the rules that keep the system rigged

Based on these dominant assumptions, a wide range of policies has been constructed to promote ‘free trade’ and export agriculture. Following the prescriptions of Structural Adjustment Programmes and subsequently the GATT Agreement on Agriculture, Global South countries slashed import tariffs and opened their markets to large influxes of agrifood imports. Global North countries and trading blocs like the United States and the European Union have continued to subsidise their own large-scale, export-oriented commodity producers in ways that facilitate the dumping of cheap produce in foreign markets – undercutting local farmers and deepening import dependency.^{170,171,172} In Brazil, agricultural commodity exporters are largely exempted from export taxes, providing another form of implicit public subsidy for export-oriented production at the expense of local food systems.

Traditional development cooperation has also been historically geared towards facilitating trade and private business interests, reinforcing neocolonial power relationships between countries.¹⁷³ During the 1980s, a large share of agricultural aid supported the production of export commodities such as rice, wheat, sugar and maize, in line with structural adjustment goals.¹⁷⁴ Today, cuts to development budgets in wealthier countries have narrowed the focus even further. **International cooperation is increasingly centred on trade and market-led solutions.** As the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food has noted, this has **increased dependency relationships in global food systems within and between countries, deepening the very vulnerabilities it claims to address.**¹⁷⁵

Infrastructure, investment and the export bias

In Global South countries, a wide range of policies and incentive structures now explicitly favour export sectors over smallholder farmers and local food systems. **Infrastructure investment (from roads and cold storage to port facilities) is routinely directed towards export supply chains rather than local markets.** Across North Africa, export infrastructures serving European and global buyers have been systematically prioritised over those that might support local food production and distribution. As War on Want partner the Siyada Network observed, the region has bought into “a system of international trade that serves to bolster the interests of the Global North at the expense of local populations in the Global South” (see also Box 10). In West Africa, government commitments to support local farmers and promote agroecology have been repeatedly undermined by a failure to reform trade policies that remain structurally biased towards export interests.^{176,177}

Some governments have gone further still, offering explicit incentives to attract export-oriented investment at almost any social or environmental cost. **Growth corridors and Special Economic Zones (SEZs) are proliferating across Africa, regularly promoted through agricultural development initiatives and public-private partnerships (PPPs).** Typically located close to ports and key trade infrastructure, these zones offer corporations tax breaks, regulatory exemptions, dedicated processing and export facilities and streamlined customs arrangements. Numerous human rights abuses have been documented in their wake, including land seizures from smallholder farmers and widespread environmental degradation.^{178,179}

Insulating corporations from accountability: ISDS and the legal architecture of extraction

International investors are additionally protected by investor-state dispute settlement (ISDS) clauses¹⁸⁰ embedded in bilateral investment treaties. These are opaque legal arrangements that give corporations the right to sue governments for policy decisions that affect their profits, effectively placing extractive investments beyond the reach of democratic accountability. **By 2019, agriculture had entered the top 10 sectors for investment arbitration claims in Africa,** a sign of how deeply these arrangements have taken hold and how much they constrain governments’ ability to act in the public interest.¹⁸¹

The cumulative effect of resource depletion and ecosystem destruction in these export zones is to undermine the very productive capacity that countries depend on, leaving them still more reliant on staple food imports and less able to chart an independent course.



Agricultural worker on an export-oriented farm in Morocco.

© Nadir Bouinouch/Siyada Network

Box 9 The Khemisset ISDS case: what investment treaties mean for global food systems

An ongoing dispute surrounding the proposed Khemisset potash mine in Morocco, near the city of Rabat, illustrates how investment treaties can limit governments' ability to regulate projects linked to fertiliser production, even when there are concerns about environmental impacts and water use.

In 2026, UK-based mining company Emmerson PLC launched an investor-state dispute settlement (ISDS) claim against Morocco after Moroccan authorities did not approve environmental authorisations for the proposed mine. **Emmerson PLC is seeking around US\$1.2 billion in compensation under the Morocco–UK Bilateral Investment Treaty**, arguing that Morocco's actions unfairly harmed its investment. Moroccan authorities reportedly raised concerns about the project's environmental impacts and high water requirements in a country already facing increasing water scarcity.

This case highlights a broader problem with ISDS mechanisms: investment treaties can allow foreign corporations to seek substantial compensation when governments take decisions to protect water, ecosystems, public welfare or other national interests. The dispute also reflects the contradictory pressures facing Morocco: as one of the world's leading phosphate producers, the country is expanding extraction to supply global fertiliser markets, while managing the environmental and social implications that come with it.

The Khemisset ISDS case highlights several of the dependencies explored throughout this report: dependence on externally controlled agricultural inputs, the extraction of minerals and water for global markets, corporate challenges to public interest regulation, and the creation of sacrifice zones. It demonstrates how trade and investment rules can constrain democratic decision-making and make a just transition more difficult to achieve.

Sources:

ISDS Platform. (2026, March 30). Emmerson submits \$1.215bn arbitration claim over Khemisset potash project: <https://isds.bilaterals.org/emmerson-submits-1-215bn>

UNCTAD Investment Policy Hub. (2025). Khemisset v. Morocco (ICSID Case No. ARB/25/22): <https://investmentpolicy.unctad.org/investment-dispute-settlement/cases/1428/khemisset-v-morocco>

A protest in London in 2022 against the Energy Charter Treaty – a treaty from the 1990s that provided ISDS investment protection for energy companies based in 53 countries.



© Andrea Domeniconi



Morocco's greenhouse belt from above (Agadir, Souss-Massa region): thousands of hectares of plastic-covered export farms producing cheap fruit and vegetables destined for supermarkets in the EU and UK. The workers inside earn poverty wages while the land and water beneath is being depleted.

3.2.2 Diet shifts and the neglect of local food systems

The expansion of commodity trade and staple food imports has, in some cases, helped to address acute hunger and broaden access to a wider range of foods. But it has also triggered **profound and largely damaging shifts in diets and food cultures that are rarely acknowledged in mainstream trade debates.**¹⁸²

Across the Global South, cash crops have progressively displaced more diverse, nutritionally important local food production.¹⁸³ Wheat, rice and maize now account for nearly 50% of global calorie intake, a narrowing of the food base that carries significant risks for both nutrition and climate adaptation and mitigation.¹⁸⁴ In Haiti, where people ate locally grown cassava, maize, yam, millet and sorghum just decades ago, diets have been reshaped around bread, pasta and imported chicken.¹⁸⁵

In Sri Lanka, a country that once cultivated some 3,000 rice varieties alongside diverse intercropping of grains, pulses, vegetables and oilseeds, tea monocultures for export have come to dominate the agricultural landscape. In Morocco, export-oriented cash crops like olives, tomatoes, citrus and berries grown for European markets have become the organising logic of the agricultural sector, while domestic food diversity has declined.¹⁸⁶

Trade liberalisation has also accelerated what researchers call **'nutrition transition' in urban areas: the rapid spread of fast-food retail and the expanding availability of processed and ultra-processed foods**

(UPFs).¹⁸⁷ These products – strongly linked to obesity and a wide range of negative health outcomes¹⁸⁸ – are being aggressively marketed across the Global South and already account for around 30% of calorie intake in Brazil, Mexico and Chile.¹⁸⁹ Dependence on imported staple foods compounds the problem, leaving urban consumers exposed to price shocks that affect not just household budgets but dietary quality.¹⁹⁰

Meanwhile, the markets and distribution systems that once sustained local food cultures have been systematically neglected. Local and territorial markets (see Glossary) are critical outlets for diverse smallholder production, moving fresh and nutritious food to low-income populations far more effectively than industrial supply chains.¹⁹¹ Yet governments have consistently prioritised modern retail formats over traditional markets,¹⁹² aligned food safety and quality standards with the requirements of supermarkets and mass retailers, and failed to provide the credit and infrastructure that territorial markets and the local food systems underpinning them actually need.¹⁹³

The result is a self-reinforcing cycle: the trade bias has had profound impacts on diets and local food systems, undermining the capacity of these systems to continue feeding people. As local food systems are weakened, dependence on trade grows; and as dependence on trade grows, the political case for investing in local food systems becomes harder to make.

Infographic 7 WHY DO WE ALL EAT THE SAME THINGS?

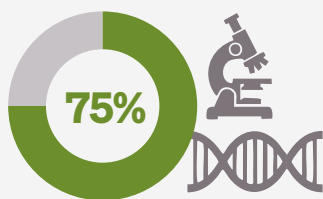
Our diets now rely on just a few dozen crop varieties in supermarkets, with only **three crops** supplying most of the world's calories.

Worldwide, there are between **7,000 and 30,000 species** that are potentially edible

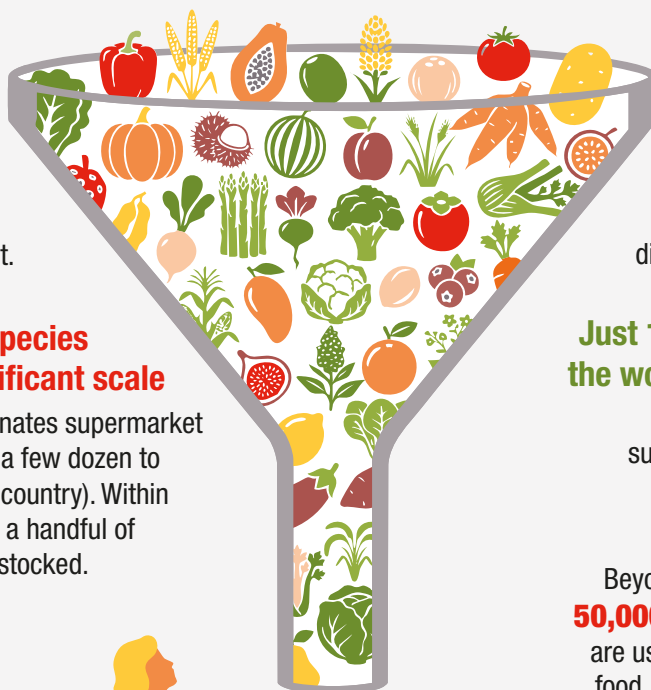
Almost all of them have been part of human diets in the past.

Only around **150–170 species** are cultivated on a significant scale

An even smaller fraction dominates supermarket shelves (a current estimate is a few dozen to 50 species, depending on the country). Within those few dozen species, only a handful of varieties of each are typically stocked.



SINCE 1900 the FAO estimates around 75% of crop genetic diversity has been lost as many traditional, locally adapted crop varieties have been replaced by genetically uniform, high-yielding varieties.



Today, globally, we use only around **3,000–7,000 species**

Most of our food diversity has disappeared from everyday diets.

Just **15 crops** provide **90%** of the world's food energy intake

Rice, wheat and maize alone supply almost 50% of all calories consumed by humanity.

Beyond crops, around **50,000 wild species** are used worldwide for food, energy, medicine and other essential uses.



3 OUT OF 4 CROPS

representing 35% of global food production, depend at least in part on animal pollinators, mainly insects such as bees.



Sources: FAO. (2025). *The Third Report on The State of the World's Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture*; FAO. (2023). *The plants that feed the world*; FAO. (2018). *Once neglected, these traditional crops are our new rising stars*; IPBES. (2016). *The assessment report of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services on pollinators, pollination and food production*.

A problem that does not stop at the Global South

Global North countries are not as insulated from these dynamics as they might appear. While countries across the Global South are forced to adapt their agricultural systems to trade rules they had little say in designing, Global North countries have negotiated arrangements that serve a particular model of food consumption: one built around just-in-time logistics (see Glossary) and year-round availability of out-of-season produce shipped from

distant countries or sourced from nearby production systems that depend on high energy consumption, intensive pesticide use and severe water stress.

The energy-hungry greenhouse horticulture sectors of the Netherlands, and the out-of-season tomatoes and berries produced in Morocco for UK and European markets, are both emblematic of this model: one that externalises its environmental and social costs onto producing countries, while presenting itself to people on the other side of the supply chain as a straightforward convenience.¹⁹⁴

Yet this model carries risks that will not remain confined to the Global South indefinitely.

A food system built on long supply chains and permanent import dependency is one that has severed its connection to the natural rhythms of seasons, territories and weather patterns. In doing so, it has made itself acutely vulnerable to the climate and supply chain shocks that are now becoming the norm rather than the exception.

The apparent economic advantages for importing countries mask a deepening structural fragility in the long term.

3.2.3 Unjust division of labour and value in global supply chains

Trade dependency is not simply a structural vulnerability; it is also a mechanism of exploitation of people and nature. As social movements across South Asia, Latin America and North Africa have consistently argued,^{195,196,197} the industrial food system is kept afloat by the systematic extraction of cheap labour and common goods (e.g. water and

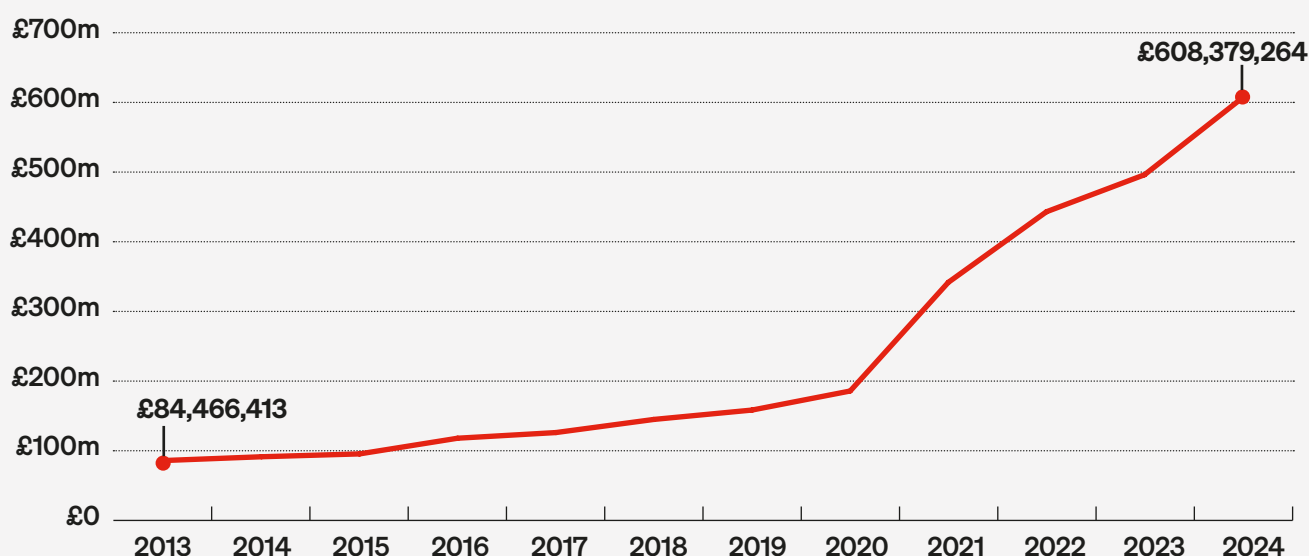
land) from the Global South to serve standards of living and corporations in the Global North, where purchasing power and the profit it generates remain overwhelmingly concentrated.

Within global commodity chains, the rewards flow upward while the risks pile up at the bottom. **Farmers and workers who grow the raw commodities are trapped in a race to the bottom: producing more, for less, in markets where the prices and terms are set by buyers abroad.** In Morocco's berry and tomato export sectors, the competition for a place in global supply chains has effectively become a competition to see who can exploit their workers and nature most cheaply; the winners are the corporate buyers.¹⁹⁸

In Sri Lanka's tea sector, multinational buyers have increasingly withdrawn from primary production altogether, offloading costs and risks onto peasant farmers who must deliver large volumes at low prices simply to stay in the game. The actual money – and value addition – is made elsewhere: in the processing plants, the distribution networks and the retail chains of wealthy countries. As a recent briefing from War on Want and MONLAR on the Sri Lankan tea sector observed, the end market is where the price capture happens – everything before it is someone else's problem to absorb.¹⁹⁹

Figure 4 Value of all UK imports of fruits and vegetables from Morocco

Since Brexit, Morocco has become an increasingly important supplier of out-of-season fruit and vegetables to the UK. In 2023, UK production supplied just 16% of the country's tomatoes and 33% of its raspberries, leaving the UK heavily dependent on imported produce.



Sources: UN Comtrade database; War on Want. (2026). *Bitter Fruits*



Members of a Moroccan farmworkers' union protest in Chtouka-Aït Baha. The union's grassroots local branch, a partner of War on Want, represents workers employed on export-oriented farms where much of the region's fruit and vegetables are grown in greenhouses for export.

This model brings an illusion of sovereignty. However, **integration into global value chains brings with it a complex set of requirements determined in Global North power centres, which farmers and cooperatives have little choice but to accept.** As the Siyada Network has observed of Morocco, “a farmer may negotiate with a ‘Moroccan’ cooperative, yet that cooperative operates within an environment structured by UPOV standards, the requirements of European markets and the demands of agrifood conglomerates. In practice, this reinforces the subordination of farmers to externally driven logics.”²⁰⁰

In Bangladesh, consumer demand for high quality aesthetically perfect crops is what determines production decisions in sectors like rice, curbing the autonomy of farmers. Similarly, in Sri Lanka, although smallholders are still prominent in the tea sector, integration into global value chains has curbed their choice of what to grow and how and trapped them in low-grade production with insufficient capital to upgrade or diversify.²⁰¹

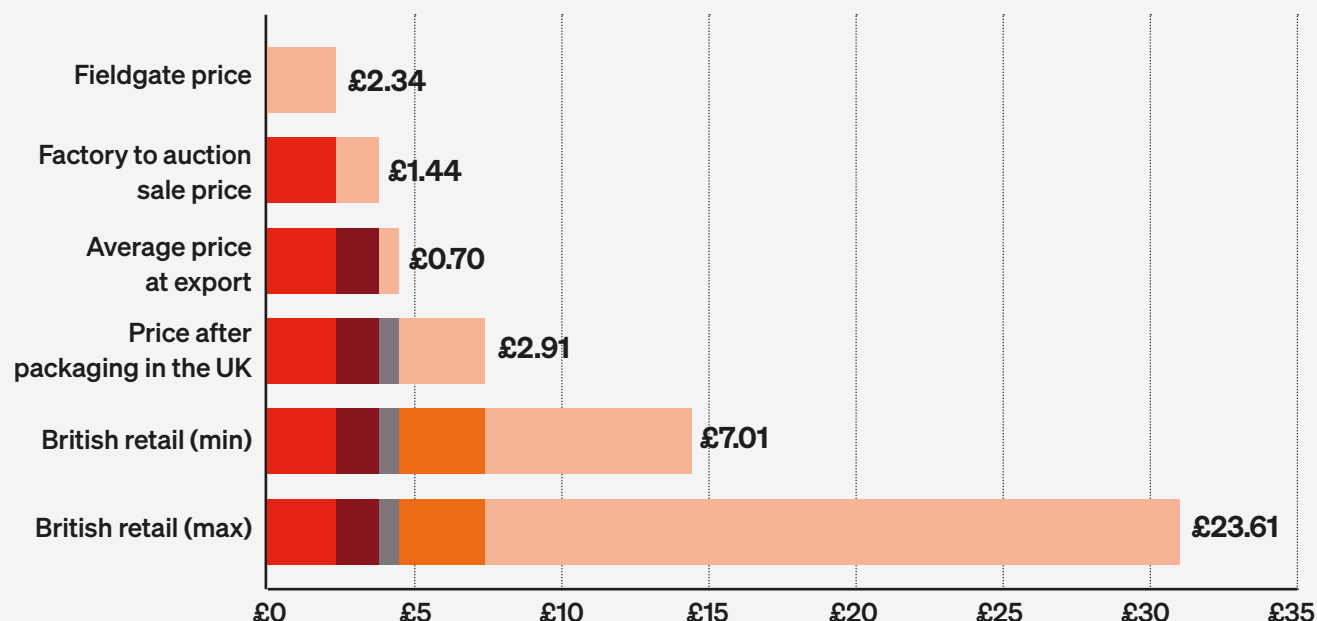
3.2.4 Debt traps: how illegitimate finance locks countries into export dependency

For many countries across the Global South, the promise of export-led agricultural development has not delivered sustained growth or meaningful poverty reduction. **What it has delivered is a chronic need for external financing: to service existing debts, to import staple foods, and to keep economies functioning in the face of volatile commodity markets.** However, access to grant-based and other non-debt-creating forms of finance remains out of reach for most countries – they have instead become reliant on modes of financing that compound rather than resolve their long-term vulnerabilities.²⁰²

Many Global South countries remain dependent on loans from neocolonial institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which tend to come with conditions that shape – and constrain – the countries’ own right to development (see Glossary).²⁰³ Bilateral donors, traditionally a source of grants, have also been steadily shifting towards concessional loans: by 2021–2023, these accounted for 33% of total development aid, up from 28% a decade earlier.²⁰⁴

Figure 5 Added-value of Sri Lanka tea by supply chain segment

The largest share of the final price is captured by retailers in the UK, rather than by producers in Sri Lanka.



Source: War on Want. (2026). *Brewing Inequality*

Traditional development financing is also increasingly channelled through **public-private partnerships (PPPs)**, which have become a prominent vehicle for ‘food security investment’ over the past decade. **These investments are often a risky, opaque²⁰⁵ and high-cost mode of financing,²⁰⁶ and have tended to deepen commodity export dependencies rather than strengthen local food systems.** Corporate philanthropy initiatives like the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) have brought together corporations, states and philanthropic foundations to steer investment towards productivity enhancement, technology adoption and agricultural exports. Recently, War on Want partners in South Asia have raised serious concerns about the Green Pakistan Initiative, a large-scale PPP that claims to be boosting Pakistan’s food sovereignty while, in practice, serving the interests of Gulf investors.²⁰⁷

For financing needs that multilateral and bilateral sources do not meet, developing countries have turned increasingly to private creditors, on terms that have grown steadily more punishing. Developing countries’ debts to private creditors more than doubled between 2013 and 2023, and now account for 60% of their total debt burden.²⁰⁸ **Borrowing costs on international markets are estimated to be two to four times higher for developing countries**

than for the United States, with the gap widening since 2020, particularly for African countries.²⁰⁹

The consequences are now playing out across the Global South in ways that are increasingly difficult to ignore. Debt-to-GDP ratios have been climbing steadily since 2010, as Global South countries have been battered by volatile global markets and the boom-and-bust cycles of the commodities they export: periods of high prices that encourage borrowing and expansion, followed by sharp price collapses that leave debts intact while export revenues evaporate.²¹⁰ In the months that followed the outbreak of war in Ukraine in 2022, debt servicing costs surged by 35% for the world’s poorest countries.²¹¹ Net food-importing countries²¹² and climate-exposed countries²¹³ faced major spikes in borrowing costs in 2022, with some developing countries unable to borrow at all from international markets.²¹⁴

By 2023, African countries were spending 10% of government revenues on debt servicing alone, up from 4.2% in 2010 – dramatically reducing the resources available for their own strategic investments.²¹⁵ In 2026, the Hormuz crisis is projected to trigger another spike in borrowing and debt servicing costs for low-income countries already operating at the limits of their fiscal capacity.²¹⁶

The compounding effect of these pressures is a trap that is genuinely difficult to escape. The need to service sovereign debts forces countries to prioritise export revenues from cash crops and extractive industries to generate the foreign exchange they need. This in turn locks in the intensive export agriculture model, regardless of the damage it does to countries' own food sovereignty, public health and the environment.

In Argentina – historically one of the IMF's largest borrowers – War on Want partners and social movements have long described the country's towering sovereign debt as 'the great discipliner': the mechanism that keeps Argentina bound to its destructive industrial agriculture path regardless of the social and environmental costs. Critics argue that the IMF's lending practices exceeded its own rules and helped deepen the debt trap.²¹⁷

In Sri Lanka, the 2022 debt default has been followed by a new IMF bailout carrying the familiar conditions: attract foreign investment, raise foreign exchange earnings, expand exports. This pattern is less a rescue package than a reset button on the same cycle that caused the crisis in the first place.

Box 10 Morocco: the true cost of export-led agriculture

North African food systems have undergone profound changes over recent decades as governments have pursued aggressive strategies to 'modernise' their agricultural sectors. In Morocco, this process stretches back to the 1970s, when land privatisation began in earnest and investment in research centres was used to spread Green Revolution technologies across the sector. The production and export of commodities including citrus, vines, vegetables and cotton had already been a feature of the colonial economy; from the Structural Adjustment period onwards, the pace accelerated sharply, with land privatisation, the liberalisation of markets for agricultural inputs, and a deepening focus on export cash crops becoming the defining logic of Moroccan – and the wider North African region – agricultural policy.

The centrepiece of this strategy has been the expansion of irrigated agriculture. Irrigated land now accounts for 25% of Morocco's farmland but generates 65% of its agricultural value. Driven by the Green Morocco Plan and the Generation Green strategies, **large-scale greenhouse complexes and dedicated port infrastructures were developed across regions like Souss-Massa, transforming Morocco into the leading supplier of berries and tomatoes to the UK and EU markets.**

What that export success conceals, however, is a model built on the systematic exploitation of workers and the accelerating depletion of water, soil and other common goods. In the greenhouses and packing stations of the berry and tomato sector, **workers face precarious contracts, poverty wages and physically demanding labour with minimal social protection.** A social audit conducted by War on Want partner, the local branch of the CDT Union (*Confédération Démocratique du Travail*), found that workers are transported to work sites on long and hazardous routes, while the growth of the sector has generated few meaningful benefits for surrounding local populations. Water over-extraction and pollution are endemic across the production zones.

The exploitation taking place in the sector is an integral component of a food export model that suppresses labour costs to remain competitive in global markets dominated by large-scale retail. Critically, **social audits carried out locally and required by UK supermarkets have consistently failed to identify the true scope of these abuses,** allowing retailers to continue sourcing from suppliers operating under conditions they have publicly committed to preventing.

This export model has also locked Morocco into a deepening set of structural dependencies. Food import reliance is growing, particularly for cereals, and the country now depends on imports for almost all its agrochemicals and around 90% of the seeds used in its horticultural sector. State subsidies have been captured by foreign investors, while **less than a quarter of the funds distributed under the Green Morocco Plan between 2008 and 2018 reached family and peasant farming, the sector that feeds the majority of Moroccan people.**



Tomatoes from Morocco on sale in Morrisons supermarket.

The Siyada Network has documented how integration into global commodity circuits “shapes technical choices, production models and consumption patterns”, with financial incentives increasingly tied to the adoption of externally determined technologies and standards. The entire chain is directed by more powerful actors operating far beyond Morocco’s borders, as “agriculture becomes a link within a global value chain directed by more powerful actors.” The consequences of continuing this trajectory are severe: across Morocco and North Africa more broadly, **these structural vulnerabilities and dependencies “weaken food sovereignty, while concentrating value and power in the hands of a limited number of actors: agrifood multinationals, agrochemical groups, large cooperatives and modernised private conglomerates.”**

Yet resistance is growing. As social movements shine a light on the realities of Moroccan agricultural export production, they are working to build solidarity across the supply chain – between farmworkers, packhouse employees and consumers in distant markets – on the basis that this chain does not simply connect commodities: it connects people, and the conditions of those people are inseparable.

War on Want partners in North Africa are calling for a fundamental rethinking of the region’s agrifood, environmental and energy policies, centred on building genuine autonomy and dismantling the dependencies that currently define them. That means, in the network’s own words, developing “novel and locally rooted knowledge systems and skills that support ecological and regenerative agriculture”: **a vision of food sovereignty rooted not in abstract principle but in the specific landscapes, communities and knowledge systems that the current model is steadily eroding.**

Sources:

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4. WHO PULLS THE STRINGS?

Corporate power, neoliberalism and the lock-in of industrial food systems

The three dependencies examined in Part 2 – the extraction trap, the corporate capture of seeds and technology, and the unjust trade and illegitimate finance models – all share a common root: **the extraordinary concentration of corporate and financial power in food systems, and the ability of those who benefit from the status quo to shape the rules, capture the governance spaces and control the narratives that keep it in place.** This section examines these cross-cutting dynamics in detail: why, despite the mounting evidence of failure, the neoliberal model of industrial food production remains so difficult to dislodge, and how corporate power and financial speculation work together to entrench it.

4.1 The consolidation of corporate power across the food system

Over the past few decades, ownership and control across the food system have become increasingly concentrated in the hands of a small number of large corporations. Through mergers, acquisitions and greater control over supply chains, these firms have expanded their influence at every stage of the food system, from seeds and farm chemicals to food processing and retail, on a scale that would have been difficult to imagine a generation ago.^{218,219} As a result, a handful of firms now dominate key agricultural markets.

Today, four corporations control 56% of the global agrochemical market (Syngenta alone controls 22%) and 50% of the commercial seed market, with Bayer alone at 20%.²²⁰ By 2019, in the global grain trade, just seven corporations controlled at least half of the market.²²¹

This concentration of economic power translates directly into political power. Corporations with dominant market positions have the resources to shape public policy, influence regulatory processes and promote rules that protect their commercial interests.^{222,223} The result is a food system in which policy debates are often structured around the needs of large agribusinesses rather than those of farmers, workers or consumers.

Corporate lobbying provides some of the clearest examples: Bayer spent more than US\$9 million lobbying the US government in 2019 alone, during a review of glyphosate use.²²⁴ Bayer lobbyists subsequently succeeded in reversing a ban on glyphosate in Thailand²²⁵ and applied sustained pressure on Mexico to prevent it from banning the herbicide.²²⁶ The approval of Monsanto's Roundup Ready technological package and the distribution of Terminator seed technology across the Southern Cone followed a similar pattern: regulatory processes that were, in practice, shaped by the very corporations whose products were under review.

4.2 When food, water and land become assets: financialisation and the erosion of farmers' autonomy

The growing power of corporations and the spread of neoliberal policies have done more than just change how food is produced: they have transformed food, land, water and biodiversity into financial assets that can be bought, sold and traded for profit. This process is also called financialisation (see Glossary). Resources that support life and livelihoods are treated as investment opportunities; the consequences are felt most sharply by peasants and rural communities, who depend on these resources but have the least power to influence the markets that increasingly determine access to them.



The Chicago Board of Trade (CBOT), one of the world's oldest future commodity market exchanges.

This process has deep roots: in the past, many governments across the Global South used tools such as marketing boards and public food reserves to stabilise prices and protect people from sudden swings in food market prices. Many of these safeguards were dismantled under Structural Adjustment Programmes in the 1980s and with the wave of neoliberal policies implemented by both conservative and 'progressive' governments across the world in the 1990s.²²⁷ In their place, **governments were encouraged to remove restrictions on financial flows, establish commodity exchanges and open their economies to global capital. As a result, financial markets gained increasing influence over food systems**, shaping what is produced, how it is traded and who benefits from it.

How food became a gambling chip

One of the most significant changes was the growing role of financial actors in agricultural commodity markets. Commodity futures contracts were originally developed as tools to help farmers and food producers manage risk – such as loss of harvest due to weather – by securing prices before harvest. Over time, however, commodity markets attracted investors whose interest was not food production but financial returns.

As financial regulation was loosened in the early 2000s, banks, hedge funds and other investors expanded their presence in agricultural markets. Today, a significant share of trading is undertaken by actors with no intention of producing, transporting or consuming the commodities being traded. The result is a market in which the price of bread, wheat, coffee or cooking oil can be moved as much by a speculative bet as by anything happening in a field.²²⁸

The consequences became visible during the global food price crisis of 2008 and again during the food and fertiliser shocks of 2022. While the cause of food price increases is never singular, speculation is increasingly amplifying volatility and uncertainty, with the heaviest impacts falling on import-dependent countries in the Global South (where food can account for as much as 45–60% of household expenditure) and low-income households.²²⁹

Land: from common resource to investment portfolio

After the 2008 financial crisis, farmland became an increasingly attractive asset for pension funds, banks and investment firms seeking stable long-term returns. Large-scale acquisitions expanded across Africa, Latin America and other regions, contributing to land grabs, rising land prices and growing concentration of ownership.

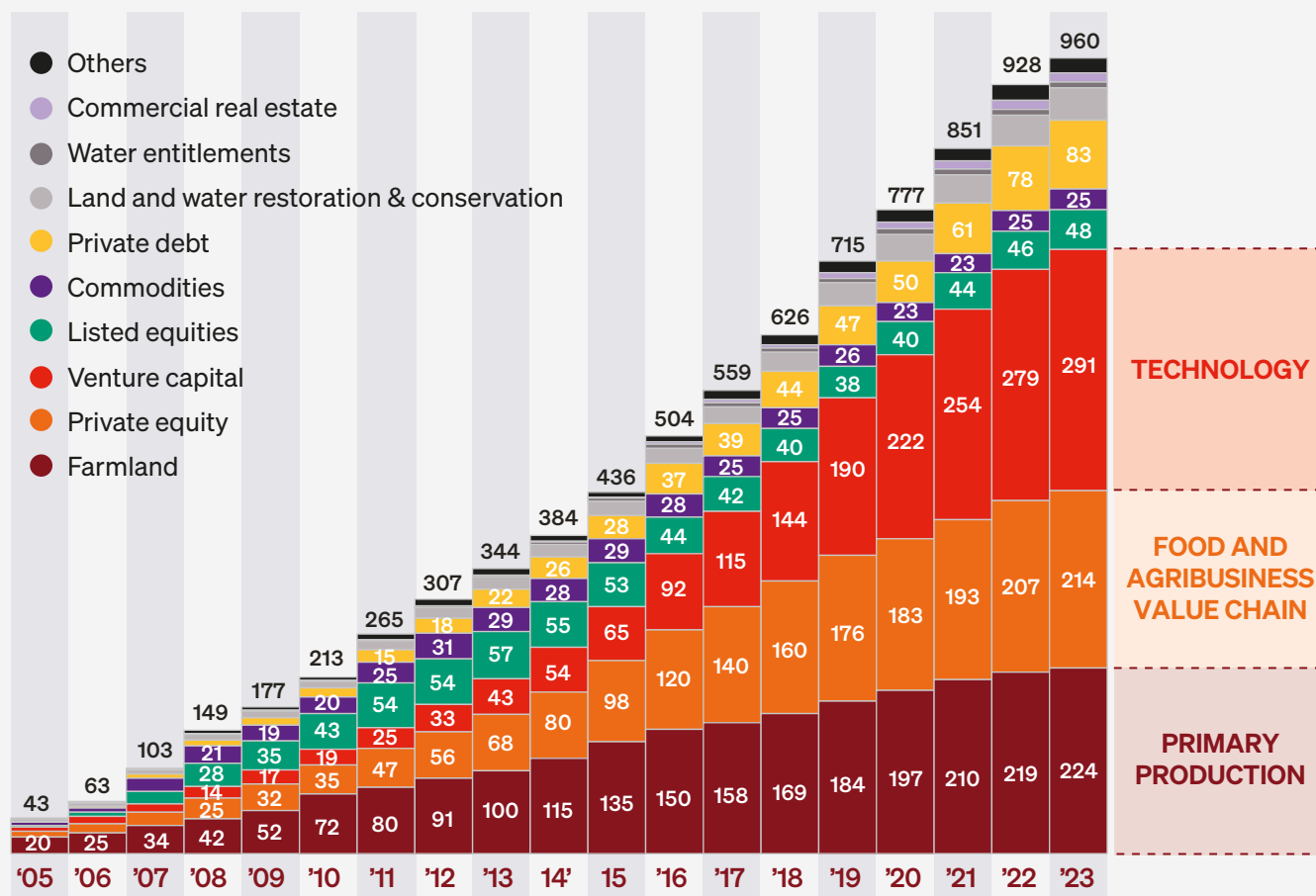
This surge in land acquisition helped drive a wave of land grabs that dispossessed and marginalised farming communities across the Global South.^{230,231,232} Speculative capital inflows have been linked to sharp spikes in land prices in the UK,²³³ Brazil²³⁴ and many other regions, shutting new entrants out of the sector, pushing up costs for those renting

land, and restructuring land systems in ways that systematically disadvantage smallholders and weaken land ownership and/or usage security.

Importantly, this land speculation was not limited to food production. **Many investors targeted land for biofuel crops such as corn for ethanol, directly linking farmland to speculative commodity markets and intensifying competition between food and fuel** in ways that drove prices higher still and displaced small farmers from their land.

The land that peasants and local communities depend on for their food and livelihoods has, in other words, become an asset class: managed for financial returns rather than for the people who farm it.

Figure 6 Number of active funds specialised in food and agricultural assets by main strategy



Source: Valoral Advisors. (2024). *Cultivating value: consolidation trends in the global food and agriculture investment management space*



Extinction Rebellion protesting against Thames Water polluting the River Thames in London, February 2022. Essential water infrastructure and services – privatised in England since 1989 – have increasingly become a vehicle for financial extraction by international asset managers and infrastructure funds.

Water: the next frontier of financialisation

Water has now entered the same world of financial speculation. In 2020, California launched **the world's first water futures market, allowing investors to bet on future water prices** in the same way they trade commodities such as wheat or oil.²³⁵ At the same time, water is increasingly being privatised, with investors and corporations buying water rights and gaining greater control over access to freshwater for farming and urban use.

In the UK, where water and sewerage services in England and Wales were privatised in 1989, international asset managers and infrastructure investors have acquired stakes in essential water companies. Southern Water, for example, is controlled by a consortium led by Australia's Macquarie Asset Management, with Spain's Asterion Industrial Partners also holding a stake. Thames Water was owned by Macquarie between 2006 and 2017 and is now effectively controlled by its lenders amid a financial crisis. Water companies have paid dividends to

investors and high remuneration to senior executives while accumulating debt, polluting rivers and failing to invest sufficiently in ageing infrastructure. During Macquarie's ownership of Thames Water, investors received around £2.7 billion in dividends while the company's debt nearly tripled to almost £11 billion.

These are different expressions of the same process: **water is being shifted from the sphere of public and collective responsibility into financial markets and investment portfolios.** Whether through futures contracts, ownership of utilities, investment in water rights or the acquisition of land with access to fresh water, financial speculators can gain greater influence over a resource on which communities, farmers and ecosystems depend.

As the climate crisis intensifies droughts and water scarcity, these trends create serious concerns. When access to water becomes shaped by financial markets and corporate ownership, the ability of communities and smallholders to secure the water they need can be further weakened.

Nature as an investment opportunity

The same logic is now being extended to biodiversity, forests, ecosystems and carbon cycles: through carbon markets, biodiversity offsets and other 'nature-based solutions', they are being bought, sold and included in global investment portfolios and being turned into assets that can be measured, priced and traded by many of the same financial actors already profiting from food and land markets.

This mounting financialisation reflects the same underlying logic applied to an ever-wider range of our commons: the growing treatment of life's basic needs as opportunities for profit. **The institutions that speculate on grain prices are often the same ones investing in farmland and water rights, allowing them to benefit regardless of how prices change.** The result is a vicious cycle in which the cost of land, water and food rises, making these essentials less affordable and accessible while concentrating control in fewer hands.

Food sovereignty therefore requires more than changes in agricultural production or tighter market regulation. It requires taking food, land and water out of speculative financial markets altogether and recognising them as commons, public goods and fundamental human rights, not assets to be traded for profit.

4.3 'Feed the world': the narrative that keeps corporations centre stage across policy spaces

As Part 2 has shown, hunger is fundamentally a problem of access, inequality, conflict and power rather than a simple shortage of food. Yet, **the 'feed the world' narrative continues to dominate food system debates.**

The persistence of this narrative helps position large agribusiness corporations as indispensable actors, while diverting attention away from the structural causes of hunger and food insecurity. Narratives matter because they help determine whose knowledge is recognised, whose interests are prioritised, and which futures appear possible. Understanding how this narrative gets built, repeated and institutionalised is therefore central to understanding how corporate power operates in food systems.

The power of dominant food system actors extends beyond lobbying and regulatory capture into something more pervasive: the ability to control how food system problems are framed, and therefore which solutions appear legitimate. A set of powerful cross-cutting narratives shapes public and policy debate in ways that consistently reinforce industrial agriculture while delegitimising the alternatives.

By framing the challenge primarily as one of increasing production, corporate actors present their technologies, inputs and supply chains as essential solutions, while alternative approaches such as agroecology, territorial markets and food sovereignty are portrayed as insufficient or unrealistic.

Agribusinesses have been among the most consistent champions of this framing. Bayer has argued that in order to meet the challenge of feeding the world by 2050 "we will need to see at least a 50% increase in food productivity".²³⁶ Cargill has similarly called for a global push to "increase productivity [to] meet tomorrow's food demand".²³⁷

This framing becomes particularly influential during periods of crisis. Food price shocks, geopolitical conflicts and supply chain disruptions are frequently used to justify increased fertiliser use, expanded commodity production and the weakening of environmental regulations. Rather than prompting reflection on the vulnerabilities of industrial food systems, crises are often used to reinforce the very model that contributed to those vulnerabilities in the first place. **The result is a policy environment that continues to favour the business-as-usual solutions from agribusiness: not necessarily because they are the most effective long-term solutions, but because it is the path of least resistance within a system already structured to reward it.**^{238,239,240,241}

Challenging corporate power therefore requires not only changing the policies and institutions but also shifting the narratives and confronting the stories that continue to legitimise dependency and present this corporate food system as inevitable.

Yet the evidence tells a different story. Industrial food chains are not reliably feeding the world: agrochemicals are actively undermining the ecological foundations of food production. Our right to food depends above all on ensuring that people have *reliable* access to nourishing food, not on maximising global output.



Drones have become important tools for generating farm data, highlighting the growing influence of digital technologies and infrastructure in shaping agricultural research, knowledge and decision-making.

4.4 Whose science, whose innovation? Corporate capture of research, science, knowledge and technology

Corporate influence over food systems extends beyond markets, lobbying and supply chains. It also shapes how food system problems are understood, whose knowledge is recognised, and which solutions are considered legitimate.

As discussed in Part 2, Section 2, agribusinesses have funded professional and academic associations, employed allied researchers as ostensibly independent consultants or board members, and run sustained campaigns to discredit scientists whose findings have threatened their commercial interests, including researchers working on the safety of GM crops.^{242,243} The capture of science has in turn paved the way for regulatory processes and safety assessments to be skewed in favour of corporate technologies, reinforcing the dependencies examined in Part 2.

As the weaknesses of industrial food chains have become more obvious, **leading agribusinesses have increasingly shifted their language towards ‘resilience’, while insisting that resilience can only be delivered through technological innovation and efficient global supply chains.**²⁴⁴ The aim is transparent: to reclaim the agenda at precisely the moment when territorial and agroecological systems are demonstrating their genuine resilience advantages and presenting a real solution for climate adaptation and mitigation.

Narratives around modernisation and innovation serve a similar function. Social movements in South Asia²⁴⁵ and Latin America²⁴⁶ have documented how the imperative to ‘modernise’ agriculture is routinely invoked to justify market liberalisation and the adoption of corporate technologies. ‘Innovation’, in this framing, has effectively become synonymous with technologies that generate profit and growth, erasing the innovation embedded in every seed variety that farmers have developed and exchanged over generations.²⁴⁷ As a recent briefing from IPES-Food has observed, **the equation of agricultural innovation with digitalisation and data harvesting has become so entrenched that 70% of the ‘most promising innovations’ reviewed by the FAO in its 2023 stocktake of emerging agrifood innovations were digital-based.**²⁴⁸

Meanwhile, peasant agriculture, organic farming and local food systems are consistently dismissed as backward, unproductive and insufficient to feed the world. Traditional land management systems are regularly characterised as ‘under-utilised’ or ‘idle’, a framing that positions commercialised industrial agriculture as the only valid and efficient use of land.

Smallholders are routinely scapegoated for deforestation and land degradation, deflecting attention from the far more destructive practices of multinational corporations. As War on Want partners in South Asia have put it: “While poor rural populations are blamed for environmental degradation, the true perpetrators remain invisible.”²⁴⁹ **Attempts to move away from agrochemicals and industrial agriculture, meanwhile, have been labelled ‘green extremism’.** In Kenya, powerful corporate actors have succeeded in reducing debates about seeds to narrow technical criteria (yield, export value, market integration), effectively invalidating the knowledge of farmers and social movements and limiting their participation in decisions that directly affect their lives.²⁵⁰

In some cases, corporations have gone further still, appropriating the vocabulary of their critics. Terms like *regenerative agriculture*, *food sovereignty* and *agroecology* have been adopted and emptied of their meaning, creating confusion and making it harder to distinguish genuine alternatives from rebranded versions of the status quo.²⁵¹

4.5 Who gets a seat at the table? Corporate capture of food system governance

Corporate power also manifests in the ability to shape the agenda of food system governance itself, keeping agroecology and food sovereignty off the table while positioning corporate-led solutions as the only realistic path forward. Through public-private partnerships and ‘multi-stakeholder initiatives’, corporations have acquired an inside track to decision-making, framing discussions around ‘technological solutions’, voluntary standard-setting and corporate self-governance.²⁵² **Fundamental questions about rights, inequality and access to food are consistently kept off the agenda, while the alternative paradigms capable of addressing those questions are systematically sidelined.**

Corporate-centric forums like the UN Food Systems Summit have contributed to a highly fragmented governance landscape, while normalising the presence of corporations across spaces that were once the preserve of states and civil society.²⁵³

The cumulative effect of these dynamics has been a profound redefinition of the role of the state in food governance, with consequences that are still unfolding. From the 1980s onwards, powerful institutional and corporate actors have promoted a smaller state whose primary function is to facilitate the private sector rather than to regulate it or provide public services. **The result is a chronic lack of state capacity that cuts across all the dependencies examined in this report.** Disempowered and underfunded states have been unable to regulate the excesses of industrial agriculture and equally unable to invest in the alternative systems of input provision, extension services, infrastructure and marketing that smallholders and agroecological producers need.

The examples are telling. In Bangladesh, the government has adopted comprehensive rules on pesticide registration and usage but lacks the capacity to enforce them or to conduct long-term monitoring of their impacts. It has also failed to invest sufficiently in biocontrol agents (see Glossary), which remain unavailable and unaffordable to most farmers. In Sri Lanka, the 2021 attempted shift away from agrochemicals collapsed because of a chronic lack of state capacity and public finance (a story told in detail in Box 5). Social movements and War on Want partners in South Asia have described this process as **the hollowing out of the state and its essential services: a deliberate ideological project that makes it not only harder to regulate industrial agriculture, but harder even to imagine an alternative.**

Part three

From dependency to people's sovereignty: the changes we need



Members from BAFLF and JKSS Bangladesh mobilising against GM seeds approval.

© BAFLF Bangladesh

The dependencies documented in this report are the result of political and economic choices that have concentrated wealth, control and decision-making in the hands of powerful states, corporations and financial institutions, at the expense of people and ecosystems. **They persist because they are actively maintained through a series of mutually reinforcing mechanisms: corporate concentration, corporate impunity, financialisation, dominant narratives, and the capture of knowledge and governance.**

Around the world, peasants, workers, Indigenous peoples and communities are already building alternatives – but grassroots action alone cannot overcome the treaties, trade rules, financial institutions and governance systems that continue to reproduce dependency. **The task is therefore both to strengthen those alternatives and to challenge the spaces where corporate power is exercised and protected,** and where the resources and parameters for policy change at national and local level are set.

Corporations and powerful states captured these spaces deliberately, systematically and with a level of power that is rarely scrutinised and almost never held to account.

The interventions that follow are about reversing decades of neoliberal restructuring of food systems and rebuilding democratic processes and public capacity. These interventions are informed by two processes and visions.

The first is **War on Want's vision of a Global Green New Deal**, which argues that just, equitable and ecological transitions require far more than technological

change or a focus on carbon emissions.²⁵⁴ They require a radical redistribution of wealth and power, democratic control over the commons, debt and trade justice, food sovereignty, climate justice, and an end to the false solutions that leave systems of extraction, exploitation and corporate power intact.

The second is the **Nyéléni Common Political Action Agenda**, developed through a global process involving peasant movements, Indigenous peoples, workers, fisherfolk, pastoralists, environmental justice organisations, feminist movements and many other social movements.²⁵⁵ Nyéléni offers a movement-led vision of systemic transformation rooted in food sovereignty, the defence of the commons, public services, social protection, democratic control and resistance to financialisation, extractivism and corporate capture. It recognises that these struggles cannot be separated into isolated sectors, campaigns or policy arenas, but must be understood as inter-connected dimensions of a common political project.

These interventions are intended not only as policy proposals, but as tools for movement-building. **Each identifies a different front in the wider fight for food sovereignty and just transitions, highlighting the governance spaces where decisions are made, the movements already organising there, and the opportunities for building stronger alliances across sectors and borders.** Together they aim to outline a pathway from dependency to sovereignty: from industrial food systems to agroecology; from corporate seed systems to seed sovereignty; and from financial extraction and trade dependency to economic justice and the reclamation of the commons.

Box 11 A just and equitable transition in food systems

War on Want's vision for a Global Green New Deal calls for just, equitable and ecological transitions that address the multiple crises of climate breakdown, ecological destruction and inequality. A just transition means not only a rapid and equitable phase-out of fossil fuels, but a fundamental transformation of the economic and political systems that undermine efforts at care and repair – one that allows all beings to thrive within ecological limits. To be genuinely just and equitable, any transition must meet four principles: it must 1) avert climate breakdown while sharing the burden of doing so fairly; 2) secure global equality; 3) support the capacity of all beings to thrive in harmony with the Earth, and to do so within ecological limits; and 4) replace unjust and oppressive systems with fairer and more equitable societies based on care and repair.

Food sovereignty is central to this vision. It places justice at the heart of food system transformation: addressing inequality and poverty, and redressing the historical injustices and systems of exploitation that remain rampant in global food production today.

The roots of just transition thinking lie in collective resistance: against pollution, exploitation and dispossession. As War on Want partner the Kenyan Peasants League (KPL) has consistently argued, just transition in food systems is not a question of shifting practices or substituting one input for another;

it is about “transforming the underlying structures that shape those practices”, redistributing resources and power, and addressing the structural inequalities that define the agrarian system. Just transition must be movement-led, intersectional, anti-racist and anti-colonial, integrating the protection of people and ecosystems into every process of development and transformation.²⁵⁶



War on Want joining the civil society mobilisation in Belém at COP31 (November 2025) pushing for approval of the Belém Action Mechanism (BAM).

These values underpin the vision of just, popular and inclusive transition developed by the Latin American People's Summit.²⁵⁷ They are also reflected in the solutions proposed by an Independent Expert Group of Africans working on just transition. These experts note that “Africans can achieve food sovereignty by shifting away from export-oriented, cash crop, industrial agriculture that has left Africa hungry, towards community-based agroecological systems that provide nutritious food, sustained yields, secure livelihoods, and climate resilience”. Likewise, groups like the Asian Peoples' Movement on Debt and Development (APMDD) have articulated expansive just transition visions for the food system.

The language of just transition, however, is increasingly at risk of being co-opted. The term is regularly limited to questions of energy sources and electrification or narrowed to the question of reemploying workers leaving fossil fuel industries – and even then, often only those in the Global North. Governments and corporations across the world are appropriating the language of just transition as cover for ongoing extractivism and the pursuit of growth at any cost. Green transitions promoted by powerful actors risk producing what social movements have described as a “global system of eco-apartheid”: one in which a green transition for some is secured by putting the exploited and oppressed majority in harm's way.²⁵⁸

It is therefore important to defend a holistic vision of just transition, including within the UNFCCC, where this agenda has been developing over several COP cycles. At COP27 in Egypt, an implementation plan for just transition was agreed; at COP28 in the UAE, this was followed by the establishment of the Just Transition Work Programme (JTWP). The most recent and significant development is the Belém–Antalya Mechanism for Global Just Transitions (BAM), agreed at COP30, which represents the most ambitious multilateral framework yet for coordinating just transition action across sectors and countries. The BAM was developed following sustained efforts by a broad coalition of civil society groups and demands from Global South countries, in the face of resistance from Global North governments seeking to weaken its scope and ambition.

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INTERVENTION 1

Get off the extraction treadmill: accelerating the transition to agroecology

Why this matters

Recurrent supply chain shocks and soaring fertiliser and fuel prices have made one thing clear: the transition away from agrochemicals and fossil fuel dependency is not only ecologically necessary, but economically urgent. And the responsibility for driving it lies above all with Global North countries, whose agricultural corporations and systems have done the most to build and profit from the industrial food model that is now failing us all.

But transition cannot mean abandoning the farmers and workers who currently depend on these systems: they must have access to practical, affordable and locally appropriate alternatives. This requires more than celebrating isolated examples of agroecology: it requires public investment, public subsidies, farmer-led research, access to land and water, fair markets, policies and the financial backing that allow successful local initiatives to expand and take them to scale. Without that, the risk is that the most inspiring examples of transition remain precisely what War on Want partners so often warn against: celebrated anecdotes that light up a report but cannot shift the system.

What we are trying to build

The central demand is a planned, publicly funded transition from industrial agriculture to peasant agroecology. This means:

- Redirecting **public subsidies and agricultural research** funding towards agroecology, farmer-led innovation and ecological farming systems.
- Ensuring farmers have access to **affordable agroecological alternatives**, including bio-inputs, training and extension services, and are supported during a planned transition.²⁵⁹
- Developing **national agroecological transition plans** in partnership with farmers, Indigenous peoples, workers and civil society organisations.
- Prioritising the transition of the **most resource-intensive industrial food systems**, particularly in the Global North, while ensuring grant-based support for adaptation in the Global South.

Where we intervene to shift power

GLOBAL LEVEL: THE RIO CONVENTIONS

Convention on Biological Diversity

The Kunming–Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF), adopted by COP15 of the CBD, is an important but underused tool for advancing agroecological transitions.

Governments should:

- Use the CBD and the GBF as key tools to accelerate the transition to agroecological food systems, recognising that **agriculture, fisheries, aquaculture and forestry** are linked to more than half of the GBF's 23 targets.
- Implement **Target 10** ("Enhance biodiversity and sustainability in agriculture, aquaculture, fisheries, and forestry") by adopting national policies that support peasant-based agroecology, soil restoration and reduced dependence on chemical inputs.
- Accelerate the **implementation of Target 18** ("Reduce harmful incentives by at least US\$500 billion per year, and scale up positive incentives for biodiversity") and redirect public finance towards the scaling up of agroecology and biodiversity-supporting food systems.



A member of JKSS in Bangladesh integrating fish farming in her agroecological plot.

- Mobilise the **finance required under Target 19** (“Mobilise US\$200 billion per year for biodiversity from all sources, including US\$30 billion through international finance”), and ensure this funding is grant based, publicly accountable and directed to peasant organisations, Indigenous peoples and local communities rather than corporate intermediaries.
- Use the **GBF as a framework for transforming food systems**, rather than narrowly as a conservation agenda, and hold governments accountable for translating these commitments into national agricultural, food and financing policies.

UNFCCC AND CLIMATE POLICY

Climate negotiations remain one of the most important, and most underused, spaces for advancing food system transformation.

Governments should:

- Secure clear and measurable commitments on agriculture in **Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs)**, moving beyond vague references to ‘sustainable food systems’ and setting concrete targets for change that embed principles of peasant agroecology and food sovereignty.
- Establish specific commitments to reduce **synthetic fertiliser use and phase out fossil fuel dependency across food systems**, including in the production, transport and processing of food.
- Reject **false climate solutions** that entrench industrial agriculture and corporate control, including poorly defined ‘carbon farming’, corporate ‘regenerative agriculture’ and ‘sustainable intensification’ that maintain dependence on external inputs and obscure the need for structural change.²⁶⁰
- Ensure that the **Belém–Antalya Mechanism for Global Just Transition** explicitly incorporates food sovereignty, agroecology and the reduction of dependency on chemical inputs, building on and strengthening the work already undertaken through the Koronivia Joint Work on Agriculture and the Sharm el-Sheikh Joint Work on agriculture and food security.
- Deliver **grant-based public finance** rather than loans, including funding for adaptation, loss and damage, and climate reparations (see Glossary) for peasant communities across the Global South, with direct access for smallholders and no reliance on multilateral development banks or the private sector.



A protest from civil society against corporate agriculture at COP30 in Belém, November 2025.

GLOBAL LEVEL: FOOD GOVERNANCE

Committee on World Food Security (CFS)

Governments should:

- Use the **CFS and its voluntary guidelines** and policy recommendations as a central space for connecting agroecology with food security, nutrition, social protection and the rights of peasants.
- Implement CFS guidance – especially the **2026 Policy Recommendations on Agroecological and Other Innovative Approaches** – through national policies, budgets, public procurement and extension systems, with direct support for peasant organisations, Indigenous peoples and local communities.
- Resist attempts to reduce agroecology to a technical package that leaves **corporate concentration and unequal access to land, finance and markets untouched**, and instead use CFS processes to advance land and agrarian reform, territorial markets and the progressive realisation of the right to food.



Movements mobilisation at Santa Marta conference, Colombia, February 2026.

The Santa Marta process

The emerging Santa Marta process on transitioning away from fossil fuels provides an important opportunity to connect the global fossil fuel phase-out with the transformation of food systems. While food sovereignty and the need to move away from fossil fuel-dependent industrial agriculture were strongly advanced by social movements and other sectors at the first Santa Marta Conference, they are not yet reflected in the formal pathways and workstreams emerging from the process.

Governments should:

- Ensure that fossil fuel transition roadmaps address **dependency across the whole food system**, including synthetic fertilisers and other fossil-based agricultural inputs, as well as fossil fuels used in food production, processing and transport.
- Use the ongoing Santa Marta process to advance **a fast, fair and differentiated global phase-out of fossil fuels** that avoids creating new forms of extractivism or dependency and ensure that food system transformation becomes an integral part of the emerging international architecture for a just transition.

NATIONAL AND REGIONAL LEVELS

At national and regional levels, governments have some of the most powerful tools to drive agroecological transition. Priority demands include re-purposing agricultural subsidies, reforming public research and using public procurement to support policies based on peasant agroecology and food sovereignty.

Governments should:

- Redirect **public research and development funding** away from chemical-intensive agriculture and towards agroecology, including farmer-led innovation, participatory research, demonstration farms, bio-input development and farmer-to-farmer knowledge sharing.

- Develop **national agroecology transition plans** in partnership with farmers, peasant movements and civil society organisations. An important example is Sri Lanka, where movements are working with the government to develop a National Action Plan for Agroecological Transition – highlighting the growing recognition that meaningful transition requires planning, participation and public support rather than abrupt policy change.²⁶¹
- Enact competition and **antitrust measures** to tackle corporate concentration in agricultural input markets that profit from farmer dependency.²⁶²

Building movement power

- Climate justice movements can use UNFCCC processes to **challenge false climate solutions in agriculture**, demand grant-based finance for agroecological transitions, and ensure that food sovereignty and peasant agroecology are central to just transition frameworks such as the Belém–Antalya Mechanism.
- Peasant organisations and farmer-led networks can use the CBD/GBF and CFS to push for **subsidy reform, public investment in agrobiodiversity and farmer-led research**, and national policies that support territorial markets and land rights.
- Labour, consumer and anti-monopoly campaigns can show how a few big corporations control fertilisers and food systems, pushing up food prices for everyone, and use national and multilateral processes to demand rules that break this power, support shorter, fairer supply chains and respect food and agricultural workers rights.
- Trade justice movements can link fertiliser dependency and import-dependent agricultural **models to unfair trade and investment rules**, using CFS, UNCTAD and regional trade forums to advocate for policy space to protect transitions to agroecology and reduce external input dependence.

INTERVENTION 2

Seeds are not commodities: reclaiming seeds, knowledge and biodiversity for food sovereignty

Why this matters

Seeds are the foundation of our food systems. They carry **generations of peasants' and Indigenous peoples' knowledge and are the result of thousands of years of adaptation to different environments, climates and cultures.** Protecting diverse seed systems is essential for biodiversity, resilient local food production and the ability to adapt to the climate and biodiversity crises.

When farmers and communities lose control over their seeds, the consequences go far beyond the loss of biodiversity. Local food systems become more dependent on commercial inputs and external suppliers, making it easier for industrial models of agriculture to replace diverse, locally-adapted farming systems. As we have seen in the previous sections, farmer-managed seed systems are facing growing pressure from several directions: digital sequence information (DSI) and benefit-sharing debates, new genetic technologies such as GM, synthetic biology and gene editing, and intellectual property rules that restrict farmers' seed practices.

Practices that farming communities and Indigenous peoples have relied on for generations are increasingly being treated as violations of corporate ownership rights. As control over seeds becomes more concentrated, farmers have less power to shape their own food systems while corporations gain greater influence over what is grown, how it is grown and who benefits.

Corporate control over agriculture is exercised through integrated technology packages that combine commercial seeds, agrochemicals, digital technologies and intellectual property protections into a single model of dependency. Defending seed sovereignty therefore means more than protecting seeds. It requires challenging pesticide dependency, corporate technology packages and the intellectual property regimes that sustain them.

The right to seed sovereignty – the right of farmers to save, reproduce and exchange seeds freely – is under growing threat. For decades, peasant movements have recognised seed sovereignty as a cornerstone of food sovereignty. Yet beyond these movements, the issue has too often been treated as a technical or specialist concern, rather than as a central political struggle. That framing must change.

Seed sovereignty is one of the defining struggles of our time: it is central to climate adaptation, the protection of biodiversity and agrobiodiversity, and the resilience of the food systems on which humanity depends. It belongs at the heart of the climate justice agenda, not at its margins.

The adoption of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP), driven in large part by international peasant movements such as La Vía Campesina, has created important opportunities to defend farmer-managed seed systems. UNDROP recognises peasants' right to save, use, exchange and sell their farm saved seed, and requires states to ensure that plant variety protection and other intellectual property laws respect these rights.

Growing scientific recognition of the importance of agrobiodiversity for climate adaptation provides further momentum – around the world, social movements are already building powerful resistance and policy alternatives. Yet many governments are still being pushed to adopt UPOV91 style laws and trade rules that restrict those same rights. What is needed now are national and international frameworks that support farmer seed systems rather than undermine them.

What we are trying to build

The central demand is to break dependence on integrated corporate technology packages and restore peasants' control over seeds,²⁶³ knowledge and production systems. This requires strengthening farmer-managed seed systems, agroecology, biological pest management (instead of agrotoxics) and locally controlled knowledge systems.

This means:

- Rejecting laws and policies that restrict **traditional seed systems or lock farmers into proprietary packages of seeds, pesticides and associated technologies.** Agrobiodiversity must be protected as a shared public good rather than a source of corporate profit. States need to push for international agreements and national laws that support peasant seed systems, Indigenous knowledge and locally-led innovation, in line with UNDROP.

- Preventing further expansion of **corporate control and biopiracy over seeds and genetic resources** through patents, plant variety protection and the growing use of new technologies such as synthetic biology combined with DSI. The biodiversity developed and stewarded by farming communities over generations must not be enclosed through new forms of intellectual property or digital control.

Where we intervene to shift power

GLOBAL LEVEL: THE RIO CONVENTIONS

Convention on Biological Diversity

The CBD is the main international forum governing biodiversity, genetic resources and biosafety. As such, it is a critical arena for defending seed sovereignty and resisting the growing corporate control of life itself.

Governments should:

- Apply the precautionary principle to **emerging biotechnologies**, including through horizon scanning, participatory assessment processes and rights-based risk assessments before new technologies are approved or promoted.²⁶⁴ This means rejecting the rollout of gene editing, synthetic biology, gene drives and genetically modified organisms, and resisting efforts to weaken oversight in the name of corporate ‘innovation’ without proper consultation with peasants and local communities.
- **Oppose the current DSI benefit-sharing mechanism and prevent DSI from becoming a new form of biopiracy.** At the same time, now that the mechanism and the Cali Fund are in place, they should push for rules that protect peasants’ rights, stop companies from taking control of genetic resources through patents, and ensure that benefits reach the communities that have cared for biodiversity over generations. Genetic data linked to crops covered by the Plant Treaty should continue to respect the Treaty’s benefit-sharing rules and should not be used as a loophole to get around them. The current system depends on voluntary payments from corporations, makes it difficult to trace the origin of genetic data, and lacks strong protections for free, prior and informed consent and for the rights recognised in UNDROP. In its current form, it risks becoming a system that enables what food sovereignty movements describe as legalised digital biopiracy.
- Reject **false solutions:** nature-based solutions, biodiversity offsets and other forms of nature commodification that transfer control over ecosystems and genetic resources from communities to corporations and financial actors.
- Defend **biodiversity as a public good** while challenging corporate control of genetic resources, synthetic biology and GMOs across all CBD negotiations and institutions.

UNFCCC and climate policy

Seed sovereignty is fundamental to climate justice. Climate adaptation, particularly in the Global South, depends on access to diverse seeds, farmer-managed knowledge systems and locally adapted food systems.

Governments should:

- Challenge false solutions that deepen dependence on **proprietary technologies and restrictive intellectual property regimes**. Climate policy must not be used to legitimise technological fixes that strengthen corporate control over food systems. Governments should reject approaches that rely on genetically modified crops, gene-editing applications and proprietary ‘technology packages’ that tie farmers to commercial seeds and fossil fuel-based pesticides.
- Secure **climate finance and adaptation funding** for farmer-managed seed systems, including community seed banks, participatory plant breeding initiatives and agroecological innovation.
- Ensure that the **Belém–Antalya Mechanism** explicitly recognises seed sovereignty and agrobiodiversity as essential elements of just transition in food systems and adaptation strategies, rather than limiting just transition discussions to energy and a few employment sectors.
- Strengthen **Technology Needs Assessments** as participatory, country-led processes, designed with peasants, Indigenous peoples, women and local communities, guided by technology justice principles, and aligned with broader goals of food system transformation and climate resilience.



War on Want partners, the Bangladesh Agriculture Farm Labour Federation (BAFLF) and Jatiyo Kisan Shramik Society (JKSS), mobilising against GM seeds and the approval of genetically modified 'Golden Rice'.

GLOBAL LEVEL

The International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture

The International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (the Plant Treaty) is a key international space for defending farmers' rights and the conservation and sustainable use of plant genetic resources. It recognises the contribution of farmers, Indigenous people and local communities, including their traditional knowledge, their right to participate in decision-making, and their right to share in the benefits arising from the use of plant genetic resources.

However, these rights conflict with trade and intellectual property regimes that strengthen commercial breeders' control. UPOV91 treats farmers' reuse of protected seed as an optional and restricted exception, while bilateral and regional trade agreements can pressure countries to adopt these rules. The result is a legal system in which peasants' rights are recognised in principle but weakened in practice.

Governments should:

- Implement the **Plant Treaty** and **UNDROP** in ways that protect farmer-managed seed systems, including by recognising and supporting peasants' right to save, use, exchange and sell farm-saved seed, and by ensuring that national seed laws and policies do not criminalise these practices.

UPOV91

UPOV91 and related plant variety protection regimes are the central legal battleground for seed sovereignty. They restrict farmers' ability to save, exchange and develop seeds, while strengthening corporate control over plant genetic resources.

Governments should:

- Reject UPOV91 and resist its promotion through trade agreements, aid conditionalities and bilateral pressure, in both the Global South and the Global North.

NATIONAL LEVEL: SEED LAWS AND GRASSROOTS INNOVATION

At the national level, movements should push for seed laws that protect farmer-managed seed systems, local exchange networks and agrobiodiversity.

Governments should:

- Protect and support **farmer-managed seed systems**, including community seed banks, participatory plant breeding, grassroots knowledge systems and open source seed initiatives that keep seeds accessible, affordable and adaptable in the hands of farmers.
- Sign, ratify and implement **UNDROP** (where this has not yet been done) as the guiding framework for seed and technology policy, ensuring that trade and IP regimes cannot override peasants' rights to save, use, exchange and develop seeds. Governments that have not endorsed UNDROP, including the UK, should recognise its principles and implement them in national law, so that rights-based approaches govern decisions on technologies (seeds, agrochemicals, digital tools) rather than corporate interests.
- Resist the deregulation of **GMOs, gene editing and new genomic techniques** wherever this would further concentrate corporate control over seeds and food systems.
- Ban the export of **pesticides that are not approved for domestic use**. This would help close the regulatory loopholes that continue to turn many countries in the Global South into dumping grounds for toxic agrochemicals.
- Require corporations and retailers to eliminate **highly hazardous pesticides** from their global supply chains.
- Hold corporations accountable for the **health, environmental and human rights impacts** of pesticides used in the production of imported food.
- Promote a sovereign and decentralised approach to **digitalisation in food systems**. As the Siyada Network has argued, a just digital transition should use digital tools to share local knowledge, strengthen agroecological learning and support cooperation among farmers, rather than increasing dependence on proprietary platforms and corporate-controlled technologies.²⁶⁵

Building movement power

- Peasant, Indigenous and seed movements are using **the Plant Treaty and UNDROP** to defend the rights to save, exchange, develop and steward seeds, and to challenge seed laws that criminalise farmer seed practices, through important international campaigns such as Stop UPOV.²⁶⁶
- Trade justice campaigns are challenging **UPOV91, TRIPS-plus rules and intellectual property provisions** in trade agreements, integrating seed sovereignty demands into broader struggles over trade, investment and corporate power.
- Climate justice organisations can place **seed sovereignty at the centre of climate adaptation demands**, building alliances with campaigns opposing GMO and gene-editing deregulation and with movements defending agrobiodiversity as essential climate infrastructure.
- **Digital rights** movements can work with seed campaigns to challenge corporate control over DSI and genetic resources, and to ensure that benefit-sharing mechanisms do not become new forms of biopiracy.
- Pesticide solidarity movements can build **cross-movement collaborations** (e.g. workers, climate and environmental movements) to pressure Global North governments and powerful actors across global supply chains, including supermarkets, to end the double standards that allow highly hazardous pesticides to be exported abroad while being restricted or banned at home.²⁶⁷

Cross-movement coordination is essential. The struggle for seed sovereignty and against biopiracy is deeply connected to wider struggles over carbon markets, nature commodification and the expansion of corporate control over biodiversity. It is also inseparable from efforts to challenge false solutions in international climate policy.²⁶⁸



Members of the UTT Landworkers Movement distribute free vegetables during a demonstration in Buenos Aires, Argentina in April 2026. These 'verdurazos', held in public squares, are a popular form of protest that highlights the vital role of peasant food webs in feeding communities, while exposing the limited public support they receive compared with corporate food markets.

INTERVENTION 3

A new trade paradigm rooted in food sovereignty

Why this matters

Trade and investment rules shape what countries are able to produce, import, subsidise and regulate. They can either support food sovereignty or lock countries into export-oriented production, import dependence and exposure to volatile global markets. In a world of growing climate disruptions, neo-imperial wars and supply chain shocks, food systems need greater autonomy and democratic control, not deeper dependence on deregulated global markets.

Food sovereignty therefore requires policy space: the ability of governments and communities – not corporate interests – to regulate markets, support domestic and regional food systems, and pursue just transitions pathways that respond to social and ecological needs rather than the demands of international markets.

This struggle extends beyond food alone. Agricultural production depends on fertilisers, energy, transport and other strategic resources, all of which are shaped by trade, investment and extraction regimes. Democratic control over how minerals are extracted, processed and used is essential if countries are to reduce strategic vulnerabilities and protect food systems from the weaponisation of supply chains.²⁶⁹

More broadly, food sovereignty requires the ability to manage economic dependencies, build domestic capacity, and protect people and ecosystems from systems that treat food, land and other 'resources'

primarily as commodities and instruments of geopolitical control.

Trade reform cannot be pursued in isolation: many countries face pressures that push them towards export-led development, even where this undermines food sovereignty. Reclaiming policy space must therefore go hand in hand with tackling debt and financial dependency, issues explored further in Intervention 4. Recent analysis has called for "resilient self reliance" in food systems²⁷⁰ and "equitably transformative resilience",²⁷¹ both of which focus on democratic governance, agroecology and reduced dependence on volatile global markets.²⁷²

What we are trying to build

The central demand is to reclaim the trade policy space needed to build food sovereignty and advance just transition pathways. This means:

- Defending the right of countries to support **domestic and territorial food systems** through public policy, including public procurement, strategic reserves, infrastructure, market regulation and investment in local and regional food economies. These tools are essential for strengthening food sovereignty, ensuring fair incomes for smallholders and living wages for food and agricultural workers, keeping food affordable, and reducing dependence on volatile global supply chains.

- Promoting **regional integration and South-South cooperation** through regional food reserves, seed exchange systems, shared research, public procurement and solidarity-based trade arrangements that strengthen food sovereignty, climate adaptation and territorial food systems, while prioritising the right to food of local populations over export-oriented development.
- Rejecting **‘free trade’ and investment rules** that restrict democratic decision-making, including ISDS mechanisms and agreements that lock countries into export-oriented and import-dependent development models.
- Ensuring that Indigenous peoples, peasants, women, youth and rural communities are recognised as central actors in **shaping trade systems**, rather than being treated as marginal beneficiaries of them.

Where we intervene to shift power

GLOBAL LEVEL

WTO, bilateral trade agreements and investment treaties

These are the central arenas for challenging the current trade model.

Governments should:

- Withdraw from or renegotiate **free trade and investment agreements that reproduce the neoliberal model**, and resist signing new ones that undermine food sovereignty.
- Abolish or exclude **ISDS mechanisms** that allow corporations to challenge public interest regulation, effectively placing corporate profit above democratic accountability.
- Reject **TRIPS-compliant intellectual property rules** imposed through trade agreements and bilateral pressure.
- Challenge the **WTO-led model of agricultural trade** and advance alternative trade frameworks based on food sovereignty, justice, solidarity and reciprocity, protecting the right of countries to decide on their own food production, manage imports and exports, and ensure fair incomes and affordable and nutritious food for all.²⁷³
- Support alternative **regional and South-South trade arrangements** that strengthen food sovereignty, protect policy space and prioritise cooperation over competition.

UN governance: FAO, CFS and human rights forums

These spaces matter because they provide opportunities to place human rights, food sovereignty and public welfare at the centre of trade debates.

Governments should:

- Advance a legally binding international instrument, developed with social movements and allies, that anchors trade in human rights, food sovereignty and state obligations.
- Use the CFS, FAO and UN General Assembly to advance standards that protect smallholders, social protection, public procurement and food sovereignty-oriented trade policy.
- Defend the primacy of people’s rights over corporate trade claims in all relevant UN processes.²⁷⁴

The Rio Conventions

Trade rules influence far more than trade: they also shape biodiversity governance, seed systems, climate finance and technological dependency. Within the CBD, trade rules shape biodiversity, biosafety, benefit sharing and seed sovereignty. Within the UNFCCC, unjust trade regimes reinforce dependence on external inputs and global supply chains while promoting false climate solutions that undermine just transitions and climate justice. They also weaken the principle of Common but Differentiated Responsibilities and Respective Capabilities (CBDR-RC) by shifting environmental and economic burdens onto already subservient exporters.²⁷⁵

At the CBD, governments should:

- Challenge trade measures that undermine seed sovereignty and agrobiodiversity.
- Ensure that DSI governance does not facilitate the **expansion of intellectual property claims** over genetic resources, and that benefit-sharing mechanisms do not legitimise biopiracy.²⁷⁶
- Ensure trade commitments do not obstruct the reform of biodiversity-harming incentives, regulation of harmful agricultural inputs, or public support for agroecology and diversified farming (Targets 7, 10 and 18).

At the UNFCCC, governments should:

- Oppose climate policies that deepen dependence on **global input supply chains**.
- Direct **climate finance** towards territorial markets, rather than corporate-led, technology-heavy ‘solutions’.
- Ensure any new climate-trade forum centres equity, justice and Global South development priorities.
- Reject unilateral measures like the **CBAM (Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism) and deforestation rules** that shift environmental burdens onto developing countries.
- Protect the policy space of the Global South against tariff weaponisation and curbs on industrial policy.

Box 12 Beyond corporate supply chains: how cooperative food webs build territorial markets and solidarity economies

Cooperative food webs offer a practical model for building solidarity economies in agriculture. Rather than relying on long, corporate-controlled supply chains, farmer-led cooperatives can aggregate local produce and supply regional markets at scale, through shared processing, distribution and marketing infrastructure.

Cooperatively owned food hubs, abattoirs, creameries, mills and distribution networks allow farmers to retain more value within their communities, reduce transport costs and minimise waste by matching different products to appropriate local and regional markets. **By pooling resources and sharing infrastructure, cooperatives can help smallholders overcome many of the barriers that favour large agribusinesses.**

This model is being proposed by movements like the Landworkers' Alliance in the UK as a way of linking farmer livelihoods, local food production, public procurement and climate adaptation and mitigation. The model demonstrates how collective ownership and democratic governance can strengthen territorial food systems while reducing dependence on corporate-controlled supply chains.²⁷⁸



Farmers in Sri Lanka selling directly and wholesale through a wider cooperative network supported by MONLAR.

Similar approaches are being advanced elsewhere. In Sri Lanka, War on Want partner MONLAR is supporting cooperative forms of aggregation and marketing as part of a broader agroecological transition. **The goal is not to create niche markets for wealthier urban consumers, but to ensure that healthy, nutritious and agroecologically produced food is accessible to farmers, workers and low-income communities across the country.**

In this sense, cooperative food webs offer more than an alternative marketing structure: they provide an example of how food sovereignty, solidarity economies and democratic control can be built in practice.

NATIONAL LEVEL: POLICY, PROCUREMENT AND PUBLIC REGULATION

At the national level, in addition to challenging the trade agreements and ISDS frameworks mentioned before, the goal is to make trade compatible with public food policy rather than dominant over it. The UK is an example of a country that urgently needs a radical transformation of its food policy, focusing more on diversified agroecological production and support to smallholders, and less on just-in-time supply chains dependent on distant markets.²⁷⁷

Governments should:

- Use **public procurement to create stable markets** for agroecological producers, including through schools, hospitals and other public institutions that can support local food systems and provide fair prices.
- Invest in the infrastructure needed for **territorial markets and solidarity economies**: storage, processing, distribution and direct supply chains that connect diverse smallholder production to local consumers.

Building movement power

- Trade justice campaigns can **challenge trade and investment agreements** that undermine food sovereignty, workers' rights and democratic control over food systems. This includes opposing harmful free trade agreements, ISDS mechanisms and IP provisions in Global North 'free trade' deals that restrict Global South countries' ability to support domestic food production and rural livelihoods.²⁷⁹

At the same time, food sovereignty, peasant and trade justice movements can advance a positive vision of trade based on territorial markets, regional integration, South-South cooperation and solidarity economies. Grounded in the Nyéléni vision, this means promoting a people-centred political economy that links trade to public services, social protection, democratic control over the commons and resistance to corruption and corporate capture of subsidies.²⁸⁰

- Climate justice and anti-extractivist movements can connect **trade dependency to vulnerabilities in fossil fuel, fertiliser and food supply chains**, making the case that climate justice requires democratic control over the commons and reduced dependence on volatile global markets.
- Labour movements and workers' organisations can connect **trade justice to struggles for decent work, living wages and collective bargaining rights across food supply chains**, challenging a model that often pits workers, farmers and communities against one another in the pursuit of lower costs and higher profits.

The struggles outlined in this intervention are deeply interconnected: trade rules shape what countries can produce, how they feed their populations and how they respond to climate, economic and geopolitical shocks. The Nyéléni agenda offers a framework for bringing these issues together, linking trade reform to public services, social protection, ecological transitions and economic democracy. This is a broader vision of systemic transformation rooted in people's rights, international solidarity and democratic control over the commons on which life depends.

The 3rd Nyéléni Global Forum took place in Kandy, Sri Lanka in 2026.



INTERVENTION 4

Debt and tax justice, reclaiming the commons

Why this matters

The Global South is facing a deepening debt crisis that is acting as one of the major barriers to food sovereignty and agroecological transition. Debt repayments divert public resources away from food production, social protection and climate action, while pushing governments towards deregulation and export-oriented development models. At the same time, land, water, seeds and ecosystems are increasingly being treated as financial assets – bought, sold and managed for profit rather than protected as common goods and fundamental rights. Without debt cancellation, tax justice and the de-financialisation of the commons, the conditions for food sovereignty cannot be created and inequality will keep growing.

As the Nyéléni process has also articulated, “financialisation is increasing in all sectors, as financial actors increase their influence over economic policies and corporate decisions, and the financial sector grows faster than those of manufacturing and agriculture. Financial markets generate speculation, price volatility and resource grabbing. Speculative investment inflates the cost of farmland and fishing rights. Housing financialisation displaces the urban poor by transforming housing from a social good into a financial instrument. Carbon markets and offset schemes profit financial actors. Land, biodiversity and genetic resources are treated as speculative assets.”

This intervention therefore connects three demands that are inseparable in practice and have direct impacts on the right to food sovereignty: cancelling the debts that lock countries into dependency; advancing tax justice to redirect resources from North to South; and removing food, land and water from financial markets altogether.

What we are trying to build

Free public resources from debt

Governments should:

- Cancel unsustainable and **illegitimate debts** that tie up Global South countries and link debt cancellation to climate reparations and fiscal space for food sovereignty.
- Create a **fair, permanent and multilateral debt resolution mechanism** that is transparent, democratic and accountable to people's movements rather than creditors.

- Transform and replace existing **international financial institutions** with democratic international institutions: new, more regionalised development banks that provide low or interest-free loans and grants tied to strict social, environmental and human rights conditions; and a radically transformed monetary institution that prioritises currency stability, regulates capital flows and combats speculation, tax havens and tax evasion.²⁸¹

Make corporations pay

Governments should:

- Prevent profit shifting and tax abuse in agricultural and food system supply chains, ensuring that agribusiness and financial actors pay their fair share.

Remove our commons from financial speculation

Governments should:

- Ensure that **trading in agricultural commodities** is linked to the physical goods themselves, not to purely financial contracts that allow investors to profit from price movements without buying or selling the goods.
- Reform **trading systems that enable speculation**. Financial actors (banks, pension funds, asset managers and other investment vehicles) should be strictly regulated, with higher disclosure of their investments, and restructured or closed where they facilitate speculative transactions that destabilise food and agricultural markets worldwide.²⁸²
- Develop a common plan of action around the fight against **water privatisation, commodification** of water and exploitation of ground water by transnational corporations.
- Prevent the commons – including food, land, water, seeds and biodiversity – from being treated and traded as **financial assets** and implement land and agrarian reforms at national level that prioritise smallholders, Indigenous peoples and landless communities.



Members of the UTT (Land Workers Union) protest in Buenos Aires against amendments to the Glacier Law that would advance the privatisation of freshwater under the Milei government. The demonstration in April 2026 reflects growing resistance across Argentina and the Global South to the privatisation of common goods such as land, water and seeds. The board says: “There is no food without water”.

Where we intervene to shift power

GLOBAL LEVEL

UN tax convention

Tax justice is an important part of food sovereignty. Governments need public revenue to invest in the agroecological transition, rural infrastructure, seed systems and climate adaptation. The UN Framework Convention on International Tax Cooperation (UN tax convention) is a proposed international agreement that aims to make global tax rules fairer and give all countries, especially those in the Global South, a stronger voice in how these rules are developed.

Governments should:

- Use the UN tax convention to shift rule-making power away from the OECD and Global North, ensuring that Global South countries can shape international tax rules in ways that protect their right to tax **agribusiness and financial actors speculating on the commons**.
- Embed strong country-by-country reporting and anti-avoidance rules in the convention so that **profit shifting and tax abuse in food system supply chains** become harder to hide and easier to challenge.
- Link **tax justice to food sovereignty and climate finance**, making clear that additional revenue raised through fairer tax rules should fund agroecological transitions, social protection and climate adaptation rather than debt servicing.

UN debt convention and monetary sovereignty

Debt justice and climate justice are inseparable. Many Global South countries are spending more on servicing debts than supporting food systems, climate adaptation or public services. Debt cancellation should therefore be coupled with climate reparations and increased grant-based finance. Key demands include a push for comprehensive debt cancellation for heavily indebted Global South countries, linked to climate reparations and the freeing up of fiscal space for food sovereignty and climate adaptation.²⁸³

Debt cancellation alone, however, is insufficient. Breaking the cycle also requires real monetary sovereignty, untied from US dollar dominance. In times of global crisis, the uneven access to dollars and financial support makes these inequalities stark: some countries can borrow cheaply in their own currencies, while others face soaring costs and capital flight.

Countries around the world have long recognised this problem and are already experimenting with alternatives: regional currency arrangements, local currency financing, alternative payment systems, and new ways to reduce borrowing costs and improve access to finance. Supporting and learning from these bottom-up solutions emerging across the Global South is essential.²⁸⁴ It would allow Global South countries to plan for food sovereignty and simultaneous food system transformation, building resilient, diversified agricultural systems that reduce import dependency and ensure long-term food sovereignty and climate adaptation.

Governments should:

- **Support a UN Framework Convention on Sovereign Debt** that establishes transparent, rules-based processes for debt resolution, including independent debt audits, automatic standstills in crises, and the cancellation of unsustainable, odious and illegitimate debts.
- **Link debt cancellation and restructuring to climate reparations**, ensuring that freed-up fiscal space is used for agroecological transitions, social protection and climate adaptation rather than new rounds of borrowing.
- **Advance monetary sovereignty and reduce dollar dependency** by supporting regional currency arrangements, local currency financing, alternative payment systems and other measures that lower borrowing costs and improve access to finance for food sovereignty.

UN treaty on business and human rights

The proposed UN treaty on business and human rights seeks to establish enforceable international rules for transnational corporations, creating binding obligations for corporations, ensuring that people and communities can obtain justice when corporate activities cause human rights abuses or environmental harm, and placing human rights and environmental protection above commercial interests.

For food systems, these demands would mean that transnational agribusinesses could be held responsible for harms linked to land grabbing, agrotoxics spraying, pollution, labour abuses, seed and input monopolies, forced displacement, water extraction, and abuses occurring through suppliers or contract farming arrangements. A strong treaty would also help communities challenge corporate projects that threaten their land, livelihoods, food sovereignty or right to determine how their territories are used.

Governments should:

- Adopt an ambitious and legally binding **UN treaty on business and human rights** that imposes enforceable obligations on transnational corporations throughout their operations and supply chains, and guarantees access to justice, remedy and reparations for affected communities.
- Ensure that **food systems are explicitly included within the treaty's scope**, so that agribusiness and food corporations can be held accountable for land grabbing, environmental destruction, labour rights violations, corporate concentration in seeds and inputs, forced displacement, water appropriation and adverse health impacts on communities.

The Rio Conventions

Climate and biodiversity finance should be governed as matters of justice rather than investment opportunities for banks and corporations.

Governments should:

- Expand grant-based, non-debt-creating **public finance for adaptation** that explicitly includes seed sovereignty, agroecology and food sovereignty in just transition plans. This financing should be long term rather than short term and project based. As La Vía Campesina recently declared, these must be “unconditional public grants, not loans. These funds must be democratically controlled to drive just and sovereign transitions. This finance is not charity but reparations for the historical, colonial, and ecological debt the Global North owes the South – a climate debt estimated at US\$192 trillion by 2050, equivalent to US\$5 trillion per year”.²⁸⁵
- Reject the **financialisation of climate and biodiversity governance** through offsets, carbon markets and speculative ‘nature-based’ investment schemes, where biodiversity is treated as an asset class to turn into credits and bonds.
- Challenge **public-private partnership models** that channel public funds into private profit while socialising risks.
- Redirect existing **agricultural, climate and biodiversity subsidies** and harmful investments from multilateral development banks and IFIs towards peasant-led agroecological transitions.

NATIONAL AND REGIONAL LEVELS: CONFRONTING FINANCIALISATION IN FINANCIAL CENTRES

The financialisation of food systems must be confronted directly, including in the financial centres of the Global North. The City of London is emblematic: it hosts some of the world's largest commodity markets, where speculation on food prices, farmland and water companies drives up costs and restricts access worldwide. City-based banks including HSBC, Barclays and Standard Chartered have funded multinational agricultural businesses' acquisition of vast areas of farmland both in the UK and globally, while investment and pension funds have fuelled land grabs, particularly across Africa and Latin America.²⁸⁶ The City provides the legal and financial structures through which corporations use legal loopholes and government-backed arrangements to enforce higher land rents, pushing small farmers and Indigenous communities off their land.



Activists from the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST, Landless Rural Workers' Movement) in Brazil mobilise for agrarian reform and the right to land. For decades, the MST has been a leading force in peasant struggles for land, social justice and food sovereignty in Latin America.

Governments should:

- Impose strict position limits and higher disclosure requirements on **commodity trades**, introduce stamp duty-style taxes on such trades, and require regulators such as the UK's Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) to treat food, land and water as 'essential goods' that cannot be treated primarily as financial assets.
- Ban **commodity futures contracts** that allow purely financial speculation on essential goods, and exclude institutional investors from profiting from food, land and water as financial assets.
- Reintroduce **capital controls as legitimate instruments of economic governance** and impose taxes on short-term capital inflows, alongside restrictions on the ownership of farmland and agribusiness for speculative purposes.²⁸⁷

Building movement power

Movements should build stronger alliances between food sovereignty, climate justice, debt justice, tax justice and economic justice movements to challenge the financial and economic systems driving industrialised food systems and restricting the resources available for agroecological transitions.

- Debt justice movements can push for a **UN debt convention, debt cancellation and climate reparations**, connecting debt cancellation explicitly to the fiscal space needed for food sovereignty and agroecological transition.
- Tax justice campaigns can use the UN tax convention process to advance the demand that

resources extracted from Global South food systems are taxed fairly and reinvested in the communities that produced them.

- Economic justice and anti-financialisation campaigns in the Global North, particularly in the UK, can push for the regulation of commodity futures markets, **the exclusion of financial actors from essential common goods, and the accountability of banks and asset managers** for their role in land grabs and food speculation.
- Climate justice movements can connect **climate finance demands** as a priority for just transition in food systems.

The interventions in this report were inspired by the work already being carried out by social movements around the world; they do not seek to replace existing agendas or create new silos. Instead, they ask a simple question: where are the connections between struggles, and how can those connections help us build a more powerful and more coherent political response for just and equitable transitions in food systems?

Throughout this report, we have tried to identify common entry points through which movements can work together, weaving a broader narrative of food system transformation that reaches beyond traditional food sovereignty spaces and connects to struggles for climate justice, economic justice, labour rights and democratic control over the commons.

CONCLUSIONS

Unite the movements: building solidarity across struggles

The dependencies documented in this report are part of a single system of corporate power, sustained by concentrated market and political power, captured governance spaces, and narratives that cast corporations as indispensable and alternatives as unrealistic. Breaking any one of these dependencies therefore means confronting the wider structures that sustain them.

Around the world, peasants, workers, Indigenous peoples and communities are already building alternatives. **Yet grassroots action alone cannot overcome the trade rules, financial institutions, intellectual property regimes and governance structures that continue to reproduce dependency. The work is therefore at two levels: to strengthen alternatives on the ground, while also transforming the places where power is exercised.**

Corporations and powerful states move seamlessly across governance spaces: they influence trade negotiations, research and knowledge, biodiversity governance, climate processes and financial institutions simultaneously – often creating their own forums for influence, with a level of financial power that movements cannot easily match. Movements often encounter these issues through separate campaigns, coalitions and policy arenas.

The systemic analysis and interventions outlined in this report are intended as tools for building those connections and narratives. Each highlights a different front in the wider struggle for food sovereignty and just transitions, identifying the governance spaces where decisions are made, the movements already organising there, and the opportunities for building stronger alliances across sectors and borders.

The Nyéléni vision, developed by more than 500 social movements at the 3rd Global Forum in Kandy in 2025, offers a powerful political framework that brings many of these demands together.²⁸⁸ It connects food sovereignty with struggles for land, water, public services, social protection, democratic control over the commons, and resistance to financialisation and extractivism. At its heart is a simple idea: essential goods should be treated as rights rather than assets, and the people who produce food should have the power to shape the systems on which they depend.

From multilateral spaces to national governments, the struggles described in this report are already under way. The knowledge, alternatives and alliances already exist: the task ahead is not to invent new solutions, but to connect existing struggles, build collective power, and advance a shared vision of food sovereignty and just and equitable transitions for systemic transformation.

Glossary

AGROBIODIVERSITY: “The variety and variability of animals, plants and microorganisms that are used directly or indirectly for food and agriculture, including crops, livestock, forestry and fisheries. It comprises the diversity of genetic resources (varieties, breeds) and species used for food, fodder, fibre, fuel and pharmaceuticals. It also includes the diversity of non-harvested species that support production (soil microorganisms, predators, pollinators), and those in the wider environment that support agro-ecosystems (agricultural, pastoral, forest and aquatic) as well as the diversity of the agro-ecosystems.”²⁸⁹

AGROTOXICS and AGROCHEMICALS:

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 recent decades, movements from the Global South, particularly in Latin America, have started referring to these agrochemicals as ‘agrottoxics’ (from the Spanish and Portuguese *agrotóxicos*), highlighting their high toxicity and dangerous impact on the health of farmers and rural communities exposed to their fumigation. In this report we use both terms depending on the context. More information and an updated list of these highly hazardous pesticides is published yearly by the international organisation Pesticides Action Network (PAN).

BIO-INPUTS: Bio-inputs are products or practices made from living organisms (or materials derived from them) that are used in farming to improve soil health, support plant growth, help plants access nutrients, or manage pests and diseases. They can include biofertilisers, such as compost, manure or microbes that improve nutrient availability, biostimulants, such as seaweed extracts or microbial products that support plant growth and resilience, and biopesticides (also called organic pesticides), which use beneficial organisms or naturally derived substances to control pests and diseases.

BIOCONTROL AGENTS: Living organisms used to control or suppress harmful pests, weeds, plant pathogens or diseases by harnessing natural ecological relationships. They may work through predation, parasitism, infection, competition or other mechanisms. Examples include beneficial insects, nematodes, fungi, bacteria and viruses.

BIOPESTICIDES: Pesticides made from, containing, or derived from biological sources and used to control pests, weeds or diseases. They may contain microorganisms, larger organisms such as beneficial insects or nematodes, or naturally derived substances such as plant extracts, microbial toxins or pheromones.

CLIMATE REPARATIONS: Climate reparations are the repayment of a climate debt owed by the countries, corporations and wealthy elites most responsible for causing and profiting from climate breakdown. They mean stopping further harm, repairing damage and compensating for irreversible loss and damage, while redistributing wealth, resources and power to confront the colonial and extractive inequalities at the roots of the climate crisis.

COMMONS: In Latin American social movement discourse, the concept of *bienes comunes* – the commons or, in some contexts, ‘common goods’ – refers to the natural, social and cultural goods that sustain life, including water, land, seeds and biodiversity. The term challenges the language of ‘natural resources’, which frames nature primarily as an input for economic production and a potential commodity. The commons are understood instead as shared conditions of life, collectively governed through rights, responsibilities and democratic practices. They should not be treated as private assets for accumulation or speculation but protected as shared goods, whose benefits are distributed equitably and over which affected communities have meaningful rights of care and decision-making. In this report, we use ‘the commons’ in this sense and try to avoid where possible ‘natural resources’.

DSI/DIGITAL SEQUENCE INFORMATION: Digitally stored genetic sequence data derived from genetic resources, such as DNA or RNA sequence data, that is increasingly governed under the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the Nagoya Protocol. In CBD negotiations, DSI is treated as a key access and benefit-sharing issue, with parties seeking rules to ensure fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising from its use. Civil society organisations warn that converting seeds and other biological materials into digital genomic data can sever them from their ecological and cultural contexts and facilitate the appropriation of genetic resources.

FINANCIALISATION: The process, which accelerated markedly after financial deregulation and the 2008 crisis, by which financial markets, institutions and profit motives increasingly determine how key sectors (such as food, land and infrastructure) are organised, priced and governed, often prioritising speculative returns over social needs and public control. In practice, this means that financial actors (asset managers, pension funds, private equity) and financial logics reshape core sectors, including strategic public services, as seen in the privatisation of water in the UK and the growing role of foreign financial investors. In food systems, for example, commodity trading has been reorganised so that price formation is increasingly detached from physical supply and demand and driven instead by financial market dynamics and expectations.

GENE-EDITED CROPS: Crops whose DNA has been deliberately changed using gene-editing techniques such as CRISPR technology. In policy terms, they are often debated separately from GMOs because some jurisdictions regulate them differently depending on whether the final plant contains foreign DNA.

GMOs/GENETICALLY MODIFIED ORGANISMS: Organisms whose genetic material has been deliberately altered through genetic engineering, often by introducing genes from a different species usually to introduce traits such as pest resistance, herbicide tolerance or improved productivity. In policy debates, GMOs are regulated through biosafety, food safety and environmental risk frameworks.

GREEN REVOLUTION: A term originally coined in 1968 by the US Agency for International Development (USAID) to describe a dramatic increase 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 combined use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides. While the first experiments were conducted in the US, corporations needed new markets and the Green Revolution was exported to many countries in Asia and Latin America, which experienced yield increases in the short and medium term but suffered severe environmental degradation in the long term. The Green Revolution also worsened income inequality, inequitable asset distribution and absolute poverty. A thorough analysis of the history of the Green Revolution is covered in War on Want's first report on food sovereignty.²⁹⁰

HABER-BOSCH PROCESS: The Haber-Bosch process, developed in the early 20th century, is the chemical foundation of modern nitrogen fertiliser production. It works by combining nitrogen from the air with hydrogen derived from natural gas, using extreme heat and pressure to produce ammonia. That ammonia is then processed further into the nitrogen fertilisers most commonly used in agriculture: ammonium nitrate, urea and UAN solution.

JUST-IN-TIME LOGISTICS: A food supply system built on rapid, tightly coordinated deliveries and minimal storage, designed to reduce costs and waste but often increasing dependence on long supply chains more exposed to external shocks like weather disruptions or wars.

NDCs/NATIONALLY DETERMINED CONTRIBUTIONS: The core climate action plans submitted by countries under the Paris Agreement adopted at COP21 in December 2015, outlining their commitments to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and adapt to climate impacts.

PEASANTS: The UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP) defines peasants broadly: not only as smallholder farmers (typically working less than 5 to 10 hectares of land, depending on the region), but as anyone 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 rural occupation. The definition also extends to dependent family members of peasants; Indigenous peoples and local communities working on the land; transhumant, nomadic and semi-nomadic communities; the landless engaged in the above activities; and hired workers, including migrant workers regardless of their migration status and seasonal workers on plantations, agricultural farms, forests, aquaculture operations and agro-industrial enterprises.

In colloquial British English in particular, the word ‘peasant’ has historically carried dismissive or derogatory connotations, implying backwardness or low social status. In academic, international and food sovereignty contexts, however, it has long been used as a precise and respectful analytical term. The international peasant movement La Vía Campesina has deliberately embraced and reclaimed it, insisting that peasants are the backbone of the world’s food systems. This report uses the term in that spirit, referring broadly to all those who depend on food systems for their livelihoods. When referring specifically to small-scale agricultural producers, we use it interchangeably with ‘smallholders’ and ‘smallholder farmers’.

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

SYNTHETIC BIOLOGY: A set of techniques that combines biology, engineering and computation to design, redesign or build biological parts, organisms or systems. In policy settings, it is often discussed as an emerging technology that raises questions about biosafety, biosecurity, access and benefit sharing, and regulation under the CBD and related protocols.

TERRITORIAL MARKETS: Markets embedded in local, national or regional food systems, where food is produced, processed, sold and consumed within a given territory. The term ‘territorial’ is preferred over ‘local’ because it captures wider food systems, multiple social and ecological functions, and stronger governance and market relationships, while ‘local’ can be vague or used as an unregulated marketing label.

TRIPS PROVISIONS in free trade agreements: Trade agreement rules on intellectual property that either repeat WTO TRIPS obligations or extend them by giving stronger protection to patent and other IP rights.

YIELD PLATEAU: Yield plateaus describe the stagnation of crop productivity in agricultural regions where intensification has reached its ecological limits: the soil, water and biodiversity that underpin food production have been so depleted that adding more inputs no longer improves harvests.

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