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We must resist corporate greenwashing

Agricultural land has become a prized investment for corporations to greenwash their operations — at the risk of exacerbating hunger worldwide

It wasn't that long ago that some people began to hoard food when the pandemic began. Others suddenly found themselves helpless, staring at empty market shelves. More recently, the Covid-19 crisis has shown us how fragile the just-in-time supply chains that dominate our food system are.

The UN Food Systems Summit will take place in New York on 23 September. This could become a prime opportunity for corporations to try to legitimise greenwashing practices as a means of tackling climate change and global hunger – a dangerous trend.

During the last year of the pandemic, one in ten people worldwide suffered from acute hunger, and around 2.4 billion people lived in constant fear that they wouldn't get the right nutrition they needed. Profit must not be put before food security and sovereignty. The massive food price hike and the terrible hunger crisis in 2007/2008 should have been warning enough.

The pursuit of profit has yet to be stopped. But quite the opposite is happening now: agricultural land has become even more prized for potential investment. In early 2021, it was revealed Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates was the largest landowner in the US. In 2016, the global transparency initiative Land Matrix estimated that around 42 million hectares of agricultural land was snapped up by foreign investors.

Greenwashing through agriculture

Agriculture can become even more lucrative for corporations. The idea is that arable land can help reduce carbon emissions and protect against climate change. Farmers can obtain emission credits from a government

or UN agency if they use methods to store carbon, by switching to zero tillage, for example, which avoids over-cultivating the soil, or by planting cover crops. The plants remain unharvested and decompose in the field, which prevents the carbon stored there from being released. But unfortunately, it's not that simple. If the soil is ultimately tilled, the CO2 simply escapes into the atmosphere – just a bit later than it otherwise would have.

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Critics also say that it is extremely difficult to measure the amount of carbon stored in the soil, and it is also highly dependent on location. What's more, this is open to abuse through greenwashing. When farmers sell their emission credits to corporations, these can 'offset' their own emissions without having to actually reduce them. The higher the amount of carbon stored, the more the soil is worth. If these credits are traded on the financial markets, this increases the risk of food prices fluctuating.

Industrial agriculture is responsible for around a third of total global greenhouse gas emissions. However, most of these emissions are not so much from CO_2, but rather methane (CH_4) and nitrous oxide (N_2O). Methane is primarily produced in breeding cattle, growing rice and using chemical fertilisers. More than half of CO_2 output in agriculture comes from activities that take place off the farm – namely deforestation and producing and transporting chemical fertilisers, herbicides and seeds.

The climate benefits of these carbon farming initiatives, as they are called in the European Green Deal, are disputed. The financial added value for small-scale producers, which has been promoted, is also limited. Only those who own thousands of hectares of land could actually make a profit, as a group of environmental activists in the United States recently found.

Private corporation's malign influence

This year's UN Food Systems Summit will also involve corporations, banks, and philanthropic organisations as part of a multi-stakeholder model. At the pre-summit in Rome at the end of July, they were also able to put their ideas on the table for transforming our food systems. The argument: we also need players on board who can fund our 'costly' agricultural and food transition. It's no surprise that soil health is the focus of this 'solutions menu' put together by corporations. But this will

do nothing to slash CO2emissions, nor fundamentally improve global food security.

A recent Oxfam report also warns against this. Carbon farming initiatives could trigger a new surge in demand for arable land, exclusively for carbon capture. This would sideline food production, with serious consequences for global food security. The UN Food Systems Summit, however, threatens to do exactly that by paving the way for these carbon-centric solutions.

Given its multi-stakeholder structure, the summit is not a multi-national meeting where legitimate decisions can be made. It's an event organised by the UN Secretary-General, with the close cooperation of the World Economic Forum. The Committee on World Food Security, the most inclusive UN body, was only included in the summit preparations later on.

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However, the heavy influence of the private sector seems to work. In the follow-up to the summit, multi-stakeholder shaped coalitions of actions that have emerged throughout the summit preparations should continue and advice countries on various summit topics, such as carbon farming. The way these coalitions of actions were put together and their legitimacy have been highly criticised by civil society, which is organised in the UN Committee on World Food Security. In his latest report, the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Michael Fakhri, drew the UN's attention to the enormous dangers posed by the rising power of corporations at the summit.

Radical change is needed

There are a number of meaningful proposals on how to address the current challenges faced in the food and agricultural sector. These include environmental agro-ecological practices that are sustainable, cost-effective and put people first. They have been shown to rejuvenate low-carbon soils while boosting food security at the same time.

Agroforestry increases carbon storage in the soil by planting trees on agricultural land. In addition, it helps small-scale farmers to break free of their firm dependence on chemical means of production. Chemical fertilisers, herbicides, and seeds are usually expensive and have to be

bought again every year, meaning many small-scales farmers then enter into a poverty spiral. Carbon farming will do nothing to help them to get away from these dependencies, because it doesn't give them the autonomy in how they want to farm. Far from it, corporations are exploiting the zero-tillage model to increase their profits by cross-selling products such as chemical fertilisers. Neither the environment nor small-scale farmers benefit from this.

If we are to focus on land-use-based solutions to tackle hunger and climate change, then food security and sovereignty must be paramount in the food chain – for both producers and consumers. At the UN Food System Summit, governments should stand against continuing this multi-stakeholder approach in the UN and support the role of inclusive bodies in the UN such as the UN Committee on World Food Security. Only in this way can the UN be protected from the gradual crumbling of democracy and UN member states retain their responsibilities as duty bearers.

It can't be business as usual anymore – radical solutions are needed. Herbicides must be banned, and the global seed monopoly must be ended. Governments must put a stop to the growing corporate power by introducing binding rules to protect the climate, the environment, and human rights.



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