

## **Sustainable food systems: 2021 may be a turning point for food, ... or it may not.**

### **In 75 years, our perception of the food issue has considerably evolved**

Over the last 75 years, our perception of the food issue has progressively been elaborated and adjusted under the pressure of events.

At the end of World War II, the world had to face an enormous challenge: feed a rapidly growing population in countries devastated and disorganised by the conflict. At that time, the food issue was seen from a production and productivity angle: there was a need to produce, produce at any cost, sufficient food to satisfy a fast-growing demand while contributing to overall economic development. The solution found was a highly productive agricultural model that had the advantage of creating economic opportunities for other sectors, especially the chemical and construction sectors. This model rested on the intensive use of synthetic fertiliser and pesticides manufactured by the chemical industry and of improved seeds (soon-to-be hybrid seeds sold by the seed industry). It also required the building of infrastructure (roads, [irrigation](#) systems, silos, etc.) and the development of [trade](#). The FAO, created in Quebec on 16 October 1945, a few days before the United Nations, was made responsible, at world level, for leading the combat against hunger and for supporting its Member countries.



Photo: Food Action Alliance

It was only during the 1970s that it became clear that the food issue is not just a matter of production and of yield increase through intensification. The Bengal crisis in 1943 analysed by Amartya Sen and those that occurred during the following decades showed that hunger was not barely a problem of production as many people were not able to eat sufficiently in situations where enough food was available, for the simple reason they did not have the means to have access to food [\[read\]](#). This was also the time when there was a development and progressive mobilisation of civil society organisations.

Our understanding of the food issue became even more complex during the 1980s and 1990s with the addition of the stability dimension (to take into account natural and economic shocks) and that of nutritional utilisation. This led to the coining of the [food security](#) concept around which the FAO organised, in Rome, the first World Food Summit, in 1996, in parallel of which a civil society event took place.

However, during this long post-war period, the basic “productivist” model of agriculture was neither adjusted nor challenged.

In the 1990s, following the [Earth Summit](#) held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, and during the first two decades of the 21st century, concerns regarding the environmental, social and economic sustainability, the quality and safety of food and the [climate](#) had a tremendous impact on our way of apprehending the food issue. They led to progressively challenging the “productivist” model.

Within FAO, for example, a series of initiatives emerged around [pest and pesticide management](#), [save and grow](#), [organic agriculture](#), [agroecology](#) and [climate-smart agriculture](#) that explore alternatives to a model based on a frenzied use of energy and inputs produced by the agrochemical sector. This demonstrated that the FAO was not a monolith subject to one-track thinking or to a single worldview and that it was able to listen to what was being said out there and to the people whose concerns with respect to food quality and safety, the environment and climate had drastically increased.

### **Stakeholders threatened by this new vision of the food issue will defend their interests fiercely**

Evidently, this new way of approaching the food issue was not welcomed by the agrochemical and food industries, as well as by a number of large agricultural exporters. Selling fewer chemical inputs, producing higher quality food and facing a consumption increasingly focused on local food represent threats on their activities and profits.

Quite early in the 1970s, the private sector got organised at world level to pull its full weight into the dialogue with public authorities. To ensure greater participation in global processes, it institutionalised high-level exchanges in the framework of the [World Economic Forum](#), known for its annual meetings held in Davos, a famous Swiss resort. In parallel, it also developed its presence within international organisations and their numerous technical committees. With its immense resources, the private sector, supported by new actors strongly connected to the business community, such as the so-called [philanthropic organisations](#) (the largest of which, the Gates Foundation, is structurally linked to [Big Data](#), among others), and various think-tanks and lobbies that it sponsors, is now in a position to have a growing part in processes, to influence them, even to lead them, including in the heart of national authorities, at the United Nations and in its agencies, so as to preserve its place, achievements and profits.





The [Food Systems Summit](#) planned for 2021 is a convincing and concerning illustration of this effort.

The decision by the UN Secretary General to organise this Summit jointly with the [Food Action Alliance](#)<sup>1</sup>, created under the aegis of the World Economic Forum - Davos, is an attempt to change the current balance of power and provide the opportunity to the private sector of taking the lead in the global thinking of the future of world food and agriculture, thus marginalising the FAO, the very intergovernmental organisation who spearheaded all the food summits since the first one in 1996.

It is no surprise to the informed observer to see that the Food Action Alliance groups chemical industries, financial organisations, international and regional organisations and programmes as well as some producer unions, and that it aims at implementing the controversial [New Vision for Agriculture](#) of the World Economic Forum that we have had the opportunity to present here.

From the point of view of Summit governance [[read](#)], we have already drawn the attention of our readers on the nomination as Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for the Summit of the president of the very pro-market and pro-business [Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa \(AGRA\)](#) supported by the Gates and Rockefeller Foundations. This nomination triggered serious criticisms by civil society organisations [[read](#)]. Meanwhile, the

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<sup>1</sup> The Alliance groups industrialists such as [Bayer](#) (Monsanto) and [Royal DSM](#) (chemical), the Confederation of Indian Industry ([CII](#)) - which played a key role in economic policy liberalisation in India (best known members include: Tata Steel, Bajaj Finserv, Mahindra Bank with a strong influence of finance), Rabobank, GROW programs created by the Forum ([Africa](#), [Asia](#), [India](#) and [Latin America](#)), [AGRA](#) (supported among others by the Gates Foundation), the African Development Bank, international and regional organisations or programmes (FAO, IFAD, GEF, IDH, CIAT, IICA et WWF, etc.) and some producer associations (e.g. the Indian Association of agricultural producer - [BKS](#) - and the [World Farmers' Organisation](#)).

role of the Director-General of FAO was reduced to a simple member (among many others) of the Advisory Committee!

The evolution observed in the area of food reminds us of the changes occurred in the field of international development assistance since the beginning of the century [\[read\]](#). In the domain of food, it has been pushed to the extreme, as there was a transition from mainly intergovernmental multilateral processes between the 1950s and 1970s, to processes in which other stakeholders played an increasingly important part, to the extent of now leading them. It is clear that this leadership will have implications on the outcome of the Summit and future orientation of world food and agriculture. One of the main points at stake will be tomorrow's place and weight of Big Data in the food and agriculture sector, i.e. the position and power of the giants that control it. The scenario of digitalisation of agriculture is already in motion in Africa, for example, where the Malabo Montpellier Panel, a group of experts promoting agrochemicals (some part of the 2021 Summit leadership), mechanisation and irrigation on the continent, has become the main apologist of digitalisation [\[read\]](#).

It is critical to note that the arrangement made for the organisation of the Summit also adds to the confusion in world governance of food and agriculture by creating a new forum under the aegis of the United Nations that intends to "Develop principles to guide governments and other stakeholders looking to leverage their food systems to support the [SDGs](#)" (Sustainable Development Goals). This new forum will duplicate at least in part and undermine already existing permanent forums, namely [FAO's Governing Bodies](#) and particularly the [Committee on World Food Security](#) (CSF). The analogy we had drawn between Humanity and a drunken boat, more than 7 years ago, appears to be more relevant than ever! [\[read\]](#)

### **Changes observed at global level are also taking place within international organisations: the case of FAO**

The recent strategic partnership signed between FAO and the group of main pesticide producers in the world, illustrates this point very well.

#### The Strategic Partnership between FAO and CropLife

On 19 October, [FAO](#) and [CropLife](#) signed a strategic partnership aiming at strengthening relations between the two organisations "to deliver sustainable food systems and contribute to the achievement of the United Nations [Sustainable Development Goals](#)". Main cooperation areas pertain to sound pesticide management, management of transboundary plant pests and diseases and data and information sharing [\[read\]](#).

CropLife that groups large agrochemical multinationals such as [Bayer](#) (Monsanto), [Syngenta](#), [BASF](#), [Corteva](#), [FMC](#) and [Sumitomo Chemicals](#), as well as associations operating in the field of biotechnology and crop protection, stressed in a press release that "the future of agriculture depends on new technology and tailor-made innovations that support the digitalisation and advancement of the sector" [\[read\]](#).

For FAO, Director-General Qu Dongyu, elected in June 2019, emphasised the will to intensify partnerships with the private sector "in the adoption of concrete steps towards agri-food systems transformation" and "the potential of digital technologies in this regard". On this last point, in particular, he mentioned FAO's [Hand-in-Hand Initiative](#) that prioritises less favoured countries and seeks to determine opportunities for agricultural development



through change in their food systems by using advanced geospatial modelling and analytics.

One may believe that access to national data generated in the framework of this Initiative may represent one of the main attractions for private companies to cooperate with FAO, in addition to being in a position of influencing the content of programmes and projects launched at country level and creating opportunities to penetrate new markets.



### Critical reactions

Many observers and civil society organisations were stirred to see FAO driven into the arms of the agrochemical industry, some of whose members are currently working on a new definition of sustainable agricultural production [\[read\]](#).

A letter was sent to FAO by academics, scientists, and researchers [\[read\]](#) that expressed concern over this partnership and stressed the contradiction between a close association with agrochemical firms and FAO's declared policy of minimising the harms of chemical pesticide use worldwide and compares the announcement made by FAO to "the World Health Organization announcing a joint venture with Philip Morris to prevent lung cancer"! According to the letter, the agreement "undercuts FAO's exemplary work to date in advancing agroecology".

Similarly, 352 civil society and Indigenous Peoples organisations from 63 countries wrote to FAO to request to reconsider this alliance as pesticides "are responsible for a wide range of devastating health harms to farmers, farmworkers and rural families around the world" and that these chemicals "decimated pollinator populations and are wreaking havoc on biodiversity and fragile ecosystems", listing several pesticides produced by CropLife members and their known effect, such as Syngenta's paraquat, Corteva's chlorpyrifos, Bayer's imidacloprid and néonicotinoïdes, as well as BASF's fipronil [\[read\]](#). FAO's replies can be seen [here](#).

It is worth noting that the Member states of FAO made no objection to this partnership agreement that is part of the wish of the Organisation to intensify its cooperation with the private sector, as reflected in the approval by the FAO Council, on December 4, of a new [Strategy for Private Sector Engagement](#) which has as underlying principle for FAO to work with the private sector “as equal partners”.

Considering what was said on the global context, one may interpret the FAO-CropLife partnership and Strategy for Private Sector Engagement as attempts by FAO to resist its foreseen and already quite perceptible marginalisation.

## Conclusion

The evolution just described makes us believe that 2021 could indeed be a turning point for the future of our food. It also generates two main concerns, despite the presence in statements made by this one and the other of all today’s indispensable “language elements” (inclusion, environment, climate, quality and security, women, etc.):

- The first is that, in the future, solutions recommended in the field of food and agriculture may not be sufficiently inclusive, in particular for small agricultural producers, and that they may contribute to an utter domination of the sector by large private companies. Recent history has shown that “development” actions proposed in the framework of the implementation of the World Economic Forum’s [New Vision for Agriculture](#) have often ensured the promotion of technologies that increased farmer dependency on upstream (agricultural inputs and equipment) and downstream businesses (marketing and processing of agricultural commodities). They have even, sometimes, led to a loss of control by rural communities of the land and natural resources that are the basis of their livelihoods [[read](#)]. It goes without saying that such a situation would bring a surge in rural poverty and hunger.
- The second is that there may be a growing gap between the citizen’s aspirations and the result of the institutions governing our food, which would certainly generate a greater mistrust of the population towards the “system”. Such a situation could, in turn, create tensions that could set the conditions for political shifts, the signs of which could already be observed in recent years (anti-multilateralism, illiberalism, various kinds of extremism including withdrawal into marginal anti-system communities).

One may only wish that the debates that will take place during the 2021 Summit will lead to recommendations that are authentically favourable to the achievement of the United Nations [Sustainable Development Goals](#).

For us, at [hungerexplained.org](http://hungerexplained.org), a reaffirmed commitment by all to the [concept of food security complemented by a fifth dimension, sustainability](#), appears to be a prerequisite to anchor our thinking of the future of food in the experience accumulated over the 75 years that elapsed since the end of World War II.

[Materne Maetz](#)  
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To know more :

- FAO, [FAO and CropLife International strengthen commitment to promote agri-food systems transformation](#), Press release, 2020.
- ETC group, [The Next Agribusiness Takeover: Multilateral Food Agencies](#), 2020.

Websites:

- United Nations, [Food Systems Summit 2021](#).
- [Food Action Alliance](#), World Economic Forum, Davos.

Selection of past articles on [hungerexplained.org](http://hungerexplained.org) related to the topic:

- Opinion: [Green Counter-Revolution in Africa?](#) by Jomo Kwame Sundaram, 2020
- [Food security and sustainability: should we add a sustainability dimension to food security?](#) 2020.
- [Digitalisation of agriculture in Africa is bound to increase exclusion and inequality](#), 2019.
- [Is « Big Data » remodeling our food system?](#) 2018.
- [Privatisation of development assistance: integrating further agriculture into the world market](#), 2018.
- [The World Economic Forum's "New Vision for Agriculture" is moving ahead on the ground...](#) 2017.
- [The European Union investigates on the New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition](#), 2016.
- [1,000 days before the hunger MDG deadline: Humankind on a drunken boat](#), 2013.
- [Seven principles for ending hunger sustainably](#), 2013.