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The grip of private interests on global food governance and its mechanisms

In “The “food and agricultural transition” is ongoing” [[read](#)], we analysed 9 changes occurring in food systems, stressing how most of them lead to a greater concentration of economic power in the hands of private corporations.



Research conducted by the International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems (IPES-Food) examines this evolution by detailing its multiple mechanisms [[read](#)]. It notes that the increased leverage of the private sector in global food governance coincides with the accelerated concentration of power within the private sector itself.

This concentration, as stressed by hungerexplained.org little ago, happened through mergers and acquisitions, asymmetrical contracts, innovations, imposition of norms and through the development of the digital sector, the appropriation of information and financialization [[read](#)]. It translates into greater direct influence of large private corporations in the governance of food systems, as well as by that of the think tanks they fund.

The analysis conducted by IPES-Food discriminates between visible mechanisms and those that are less visible that are used by private interests to increase their grip on global food governance:

- The **visible part** of the iceberg is made of:
 - **multi-stakeholder initiatives** presented as participative and democratic mechanisms in which all food issues stakeholders are invited to participate at national, regional or

global level. At world level, they include initiatives such as the G8 New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition [read], the Scaling up Nutrition (SUN) and the Food System's Summit [read pp. 2-4]. All are strongly dominated by large private corporations, in contradiction with the democratic image a carefully designed communication attempts to give them. They all seek to frame the global debate on food;

- a large number of **public-private partnerships** of which we have already mentioned the pros and cons a few years ago [read] and that can be established at local, national, regional or world level (see, for instance, the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition - GAIN - or the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa - AGRA [read]). They are used to define and direct activities in the area of food and agriculture;
- the **funding of global food governance forums**, including the World Economic Forum (WEF) [read] that played a central role in the Food Systems Summit and in the orientation of the debate around future evolution of the global food system.
- The **less visible part** of the iceberg is made of:
 - **concentration and accumulation of resources** that provide the means for the private sector to exert its influence;
 - **lobbying** [read] and **connectedness** between business leaders and high-level government officials ('revolving doors', that allow professionals from corporations to be recruited by administrations and high-level government officials to end their career in large companies). These mechanisms help orient policies and public investments;
 - **influencing and sponsoring research** [read p. 3 and pp. 5-10] to align science and innovation on private interests;
 - **donations to political parties and leaders** [read] to change their decisions in favour of private interests, in particular regarding trade agreements and investments, but also in the domain of development assistance [read] and public policies.

This situation is not specific to food. Particularly in the case of the development of multi-stakeholder initiatives and of public-private partnerships, this is part of a larger movement whose impact has been felt throughout the economy.

This broader trend was based on the "stakeholder paradigm", stakeholders being all the actors that have interests or worries regarding a particular question. The underlying idea was that the gathering of all these stakeholders (i.e. multipartite initiatives) would allow discussing and agreeing together on discourses, narratives, programmes and policies related to a specific issue. By building a consensus and through the participation of all stakeholders, these multipartite initiatives were supposed to design more effectively solutions to a given problem [read].

It is, however, necessary to recognize that, in these initiatives, some stakeholders are "more equal than others" and they succeed, through their special skills, resources and more or less opaque processes to direct groups towards more business-friendly solutions. When applied at global level, multipartite initiatives actually undermine the multilateral system by replacing it progressively by a great number of mechanisms led by the private sector with the help of certain governments, some international organizations and so-called philanthropists [read].

In the area of food and agriculture, this type of multiplication of mechanisms was observed during the preparation and holding of the Food Systems Summit [read here pp. 4-5 and here p. 4].

A closer analysis of the composition of multipartite groups and of the role various types of participants play in them, it appears that all do not have the same weight. Some (often the most concerned population groups who lack means, capacity and are poorly organized) are frequently just bit-part players or even totally silent during the debate. In meetings, discussions are mostly in the hands of authorities and of those stakeholders with well-articulated spokespersons able to present their point of view effectively. Others predominately sit and listen, compliant.

The consequence, of course, is that the solutions put forward by these groups are generally more in favour of private interests and rely on market mechanisms, alternatives of a different nature being systematically discarded [\[read\]](#). Conclusions reached are usually approved under the pressure of political authorities who promise the earth to the population in terms of employment or public services - e.g. health and education - promises that are, in most cases, not kept.

The IPES-Food report lists a number of initiatives existing in the framework of the UN that aim at regulating corporations. The authors acknowledge, however, that these initiatives are far from being solutions to the problem of the growing influence of private interests in global governance. They are mostly non-binding, made “of ‘recommendations’, ‘expectations’, or ‘guidance’ for ‘responsible business conduct’”. If ever they are binding, their monitoring lacks teeth and only rarely leads to legal action that could put corporations in front of their responsibilities [\[read\]](#). In fact, while corporate communication has evolved to try and improve corporate image particularly in the eyes of clients and the public in general, their actual behaviour has not changed [\[read\]](#).

In its last part, the IPES-Food report makes an attempt at imagining a global food governance in the public interest. For this, it proposes a series of principles (combatting conflicts of interest, updating anti-trust regulation to adapt it to present conditions, stricter control of lobbying, reallocation of public resources to activities of general interest, improved participation modalities, support to actions undertaken by civil society organizations and movements) and, from them, deduces measures.

Evidently, it can be expected that the prospect of implementation of such proposals will create a strong resistance by large corporations that will certainly mobilize all their resources for exploiting current weaknesses of the system and make sure that nothing changes. The main challenge will be to succeed in breaking the alliance between private companies and governments, and bring the latter effectively on the side of the mass of farmers and consumers [\[read\]](#).

Quite a task...

To know more:

- IPES-Food, Who's Tipping the Scales? The growing influence of corporations on the governance of food systems, and how to counter it, International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems, 2023.
- Manahan, M.A. and K. Madhuresh, The Great Takeover: Mapping of Multistakeholderism in Global Governance, People's Working Group on Multistakeholderism, 2021.

Selection of past articles on hungerexplained.org related to the topic:

- The “food and agricultural transition” is ongoing - Nine changes tell us to what kind of world it is leading us, 2023.
- Science, what science ? A problem or part of the solution? When the industry doctors science for profit, 2023.
- Private economic power in food systems and its new forms, 2022.
- Governance: united to decide or divided to be ruled? 2022.
- Responsible businesses or greenwashing? The certification industry in support of multinationals, 2021.
- Bill Gates: philanthropy or business as usual? 2021.
- Sustainable food systems: 2021 may be a turning point for food, ... or it may not, 2020.
- Being a lobbyist : accept to accuse sustainable agriculture in order to help develop profits of firms that fund you, 2019.
- Protecting our health and environment - Is justice to substitute rules and regulations? 2019.
- Privatisation of development assistance: integrating further agriculture into the world market, 2018.