

The Next Agribusiness Takeover: Multilateral Food Agencies



Illustration by Atziri Carranza

In recent years, Big Ag has orchestrated unprecedented takeovers, but three agribusiness plays set for 2020-21, if successful, could amount to a de facto mega-merger with the multilateral food system, binding governments to a corporate agenda that effectively marginalizes civil society and social movements.

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Issue

Between now and late 2021, three separate initiatives could converge and utterly transform the multilateral agricultural system. First, a rumoured “Convention” to be cooked up by the World Food Systems Summit (WFSS) could transform the old public-private partnerships into a new bilateralism between agribusiness and governments. Second, consolidation of the CGIAR (international agricultural research system) will ensure the delivery of so-called Climate-Smart Agriculture and, third, an International Digital Council for Food and Agriculture will entrench Big Data (including digital DNA) as the solution to everything. The Summit provides the framework; CGIAR is the delivery system; and Big Data is the product.

At Stake

Influence over the policies and projects guiding at least four international public sector institutions with a combined annual budget of \$11 billion and 5100 scientific/professional staff with offices or research stations enjoying diplomatic or quasi-diplomatic status throughout the global South.

Actors

The World Economic Forum (WEF) — with its “Strengthening Global Food Systems” project and Food Action Alliance — is taking the lead on behalf of the world’s agri-food and IT giants, working with Big Philanthropy and supported by predictable OECD states.

Fora

Everything leads, unavoidably, to the World Food Systems Summit (WFSS) – likely to be held in New York in September 2021. Off-the-record negotiations in Bellagio and California in the first half of 2020 will be followed by a critical encounter (Berlin, June 5-9) on the UN’s Sustainable Development Goal 2 (SDG2) – the SDG most directly related to food – which could set the table for everything else. Although the WEF and agribusiness wish otherwise, this October’s meeting of the Committee on World Food Security in Rome could be game changing. Finally, toward the end of this year, the potentially pivotal COP of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) in China – followed by the Glasgow Climate Change Convention (COP26, November 9-19) – will add more dimensions to the 2021 Summit. Next year, there will be a series of regional consultations building to a pre-Summit negotiation in Rome just prior to the main event in New York.

Actions

The establishment of the International Digital Council and the restructuring of public agricultural research must not proceed without full debate at the 2021 Summit. Civil society organizations should consider preparing proposals to strengthen genuine multilateralism through the Food Systems Summit and call upon the Summit to act on anti-competition practices within global agribusiness and to develop a participatory process for agricultural technology assessment – especially in relation to the WEF’s nature-based solutions.

System Change – 75 Years of Multilateralism isn’t Enough

At the founding of the UN and FAO 75 years ago, “multilateralism” was a concept describing the inter-governmental arrangements adopted by sovereign states. Beginning in the late 1960s and early ’70s, multilateralism expanded to encompass civil society (labour, other social movements, aid and advocacy NGOs) and, marginally, the private sector.

Over the past quarter-century, multilateralism has been swamped by so-called public-private partnerships that have begun to dominate most global policy negotiations including the implementation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The Food Action Alliance — Davos-bred and WEF-led, along with Rabobank, Bayer/Monsanto, AGRA, IFAD and FAO — is the latest example. In effect, multilateralism is becoming bilateralism — a collaboration between the global public and private sectors — where increasingly acquiescent big civil society organizations, tamed and (therefore) tolerated, provide a veneer of popular participation. While this ‘new bilateralism’ is everywhere, our focus in this Communiqué is where the private sector is most advanced: at the nexus of climate, food, and (proprietary) control over life’s information and processes.

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2019's Three-step:

In the first half of 2019, the focus of governments and CSOs in Rome was on the June election of a new FAO Director-General. The outcome was predictable: China's candidate, Qu Dongyu, former Vice-Minister of Agriculture and Rural Affairs, won the post. More surprising were his immediate and constructive moves to begin restoring the shattered morale of FAO's General and Professional Staff by making tough changes to FAO's Human Resources personnel, doubling maternity leave, restoring previously discarded benefits and vowing to cut abusive contract positions in favour of permanent jobs. Less popular was the new DG's embrace of all things high-tech and his early speeches extolling the virtues of 5G, leading some to quip that he was less FAO's DG than FAO's 5G.

Beyond the Rome-Based Agencies' electoral politics, three other moves remained under the radar until governments and civil society gathered for the annual UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS) in October 2019.

Most important of these was the UN Secretary-General's official announcement that there would be a **World Food Systems Summit** in 2021. Although the Summit's provenance is not entirely clear, most observers believe that the World Economic Forum (WEF) pressed the Summit onto a reluctant UN Secretary-General. As of this writing, the 2021 Summit will be held in New York with a pre-conference in Rome.

Secondly, as the idea for the Systems Summit was being floated in mid-2019, a high-powered group led by the Gates and Syngenta Foundations tabled a plan for **CGIAR 'unification.'** If adopted, the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR — the largest international public sector body of its type intended to service the global South) will quickly become a single corporate entity with stronger-than-ever connections to agribusiness.

Thirdly, agribusiness/WEF enthusiasm for Big Data was transformed into a Germany-led proposal for **The International Digital Council for Food and Agriculture** in January 2019 at the Global Forum on Food and Agriculture, Berlin. At the Forum, entitled "Agriculture Goes Digital – Smart Solutions for Future Farming," 74 agricultural ministers urged FAO to develop a plan for the governance of the Council with the intent of finalizing plans in 2020 or '21. The proposal highlights surveillance and big data storage and exchange but has inescapable consequences for digital sequence information (DSI or digital DNA) and could pre-empt already-contentious access and benefit sharing (ABS) negotiations in the Biodiversity Convention and the FAO Seed Treaty.*

On their own, any one of these three steps – each negotiated off-line with little to no consultation and each so attuned to the agribusiness agenda – would have rung alarm bells for many governments and civil society.

But another development – again in June 2019 – put these food sector shake-ups in a wider context. A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was signed between the World Economic Forum and the Office of the UN Secretary-General on June 13, 2019. It stirred up so much opposition that the highly-encrypted MOU abruptly disappeared from the WEF website and only two photographs of the signing ceremony – without elaboration – can be found on the UN website.¹ This remarkable and explicit union has drawn the attention of an extraordinarily wide coalition of more than 400 civil society organizations and social movements tracking the decline of genuine multilateralism – not just related to food and agriculture but also to corporate accountability, human rights, trade, climate and environment, etc. The 'food' components of the proposed government/business mega-merger are described in this document.

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* Adjacent to these three initiatives, the Dutch are talking about an "International Panel" – modeled after the IPCC – for Food and Agriculture – effectively marginalizing or obliterating the CFS HLPE (High Level Panel on Food Security and Nutrition). Although its sister panels in the UN System have played significant and useful scientific roles, this agribusiness-supported initiative seems intended to promote Climate-Smart Agriculture and the centrality of Big Data. In the end, the rumour may come to nothing – or, it could fit rather snugly into the Davos Food Systems strategy.

1 - UN World Food Systems Summit

Although swaddled in competing creation myths, most parties concur that – whether legitimate or not – the Summit has one identifiable parent – the World Economic Forum’s Food Systems Initiative. The consensus breaks down where some insist that the concept (if not the conception) arose from a UN Inter-Agency meeting earlier in 2019 and those who insist that both the concept and the conception are the Devil spawns of Davos. All agree that the UN Secretary-General at first dissed the idea and only (awkwardly) announced the Summit last October. However, the shepherds and the sherpas had already let loose the joyous news on June 12 at the annual EAT Stockholm conference where its “Inspiration Speaker,” Dr. David Nabarro** (co-recipient of the 2018 World Food Prize), had just hopped off a plane from chairing a session at FAO’s Future of Food Conference to spill the beans that a sea changing World Food Systems Summit (WFSS) was in the works for 2021. An anonymous “concept note” on the Summit, made available June 18, spread the news to the faithful who couldn’t afford to EAT in Stockholm.***

Although the WFSS concept paper calls for “multi-stakeholder” participation, aside from the UN Secretary-General’s office and the Rome-Based Agencies (FAO, IFAD, WFP, collectively known as the RBAs), the only other actor specifically identified is the World Economic Forum. Five categories of stakeholders are identified ranging from policymakers to investors, media, scientists, and cities and communities. There is no reference to civil society; no acknowledgement of indigenous peoples although “producers” are listed among the “investors.” The proposal tags precision agriculture and genetic engineering as important tools for addressing future food security. While it mentions “traditional” systems, it doesn’t mention agroecology. All in all, a decidedly ‘un-UN’ document.

** David Nabarro was Ban Ki-moon’s special representative on food security and nutrition during the food-price crisis of 2008-2009. Back then, Nabarro and Ban Ki-moon were suspected of trying to wrest control of food and agricultural policy from the UN food agencies based in Rome. Fear of this pressured the RBAs to acquiesce to civil society’s call to reform the Committee on World Food Security as preferable to New York domination.

More than a Whiff of WEF

On December 16, Rwanda’s former Minister of Agriculture and Livestock Resources, Agnes Kalibata, was named António Guterres’s Special Envoy to “lead” and “guide” the WFSS process – in cooperation with the RBAs. Since 2014, Kalibata has been (and remains) President of the Gates Foundation’s AGRA (Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa). In 2012, she received the Yara Prize (later renamed the Africa Food Prize). Until 2016, Kalibata’s Vice-President at AGRA was

Sean de Cleene, whom she might also have known when he was Yara’s Vice-President for Global Initiatives, Strategy and Business

Development. Prior to that, de Cleene, now a member of the WEF’s Executive Committee and leading its Food Systems Initiative, collaborated with David Nabarro.

Leading from the RBA side will be an American, retiring FAO Deputy Director-General Daniel Gustafsen, who – rumour has it – will be asked to take on the role by the DG. Three working groups are being established to address Science, Partnerships and (possibly) Systems Architecture including

finance. In the immediate months ahead, invitation-only side-bets are being taken by key actors in Bellagio and California. The Rockefeller Foundation – a founding father of the Green Revolution and CGIAR (and an ally with the Gates Foundation in AGRA) – is reportedly organizing a support fund for Kalibata’s liaison role. In addition, FAO alone estimates that it needs at least US\$5 million to produce the Summit’s background documents, and the total bill for the UN could exceed US\$22 million.

*** The timing is interesting: FAO elected a new Director-General only on June 23 to take office August 1. It is difficult to imagine that FAO’s retiring DG would have committed his successor to a Summit on the eve of an election...or that the heads of IFAD and WFP would have sufficient confidence in such a high-stakes joint venture unless it was pre-cooked by other parties. Would Qu Dongyu, the successful Chinese candidate, propose a Summit without his government offering to host? After their near-death experience at the hands of the UN’s Secretary General during the 2008–09 food-price crisis, would the RBAs risk advancing another Summit – without a venue and with a powerful and largely unknown player (China) in the wings?

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Analysis

The WEF language – i.e., *Systems* in the Summit title – is important. Both WEF and the Gates Foundation regularly invoke “systems change” in their language whether talking about the food value chain or nutrition. But, this Summit can’t discuss changes to the entire food chain without discussing UN normative functions and delivery systems. The structure of the entire multilateral food and agricultural system is on the table. Whether Davos-led or merely heavily influenced, neither the UNGA nor the RBAs can produce a positive Summit genuinely contributing to the SDGs without strong civil society participation and coordination with concerned governments.

Bottom-line

Make no mistake, system change across the multilateral food and agricultural community is necessary and the proposal for the Summit – fully and carefully negotiated – is welcomed. To adopt the WEF/agribusiness proposal would be to force-feed the failed industrial food system on the public sector and the rest of world agriculture.

‘Omission-creep’ from multilateralism to bilateralism has to be exposed and rejected. A coordinated CSO initiative with a coherent strategy can use the CFS processes and the confluence of CGIAR and Big Data initiatives to consolidate and extend CFS-style governance in Rome including UN control over international public sector research and new digital/genomic technologies. It would be comforting to think that a New York-led (General Assembly) WFSS would be mercifully short and superficial if a tad boorish; however, the fact is that any concluding declaration consolidating privileged private sector influence over food and agricultural governance and policies – with political backing and RBA acquiescence – would end in long-term damages. Although there are strong allies in New York (notably, the Women and Youth Groups), overall there is less room for the General Assembly’s Major Groups to manoeuvre in New York than in Rome, and their influence is marginal. A Rome pre-Summit Conference will have to be strong and substantive to avoid bad outcomes from the New York jamboree.

Note on History

Agribusiness linkages to the multilateral system are hardly new, although they are now much stronger. Back in the 1970s, ICD (Industry Council for Development – a trade association) was given offices in FAO and privileged access to drafting and editing FAO manuals and guidelines relevant to the use of fertilizers, agrochemicals and seeds. The ICD was ultimately turfed out of the building when a new Director-General, Edouard Saoma of Lebanon, replaced a former Dutch Agriculture Minister (on leave from Royal Dutch Shell), A.H. Boerma. A few months later, the ICD, slightly modified, materialized in the UNDP in New York.

As yet another Director General, Senegal’s Jacques Diouf, took office in the mid-1990s and revved up for the world’s first Food Summit in 1996, he enthusiastically drafted a letter to the world’s largest agribusinesses inviting the CEO of each enterprise to donate \$1 million to Summit preparations in return for treatment equivalent to a Head of State at the Summit and priority access in designing follow-through to the Summit’s conclusions. It was only when CSOs obtained an advance copy of the letter that the DG withdrew the offer to the companies.

Even then, the Director-General had to dispatch an ADG, Henri Carsalade, to the Biodiversity Convention’s COP in Buenos Aires on the eve of the Summit to negotiate with CSOs incensed that agribusinesses were still being offered the FAO logo in their Summit advertising. This, too, was withdrawn. Agribusiness is, nevertheless, persistent. Early in this century, an agribusiness liaison post suddenly appeared in FAO’s Building B. With uncharacteristic irony, the Secretariat assigned the liaison room 666.

Not that agribusiness needs to have an FAO office to exercise influence. In 2012, ETC Group reported² that FAO was working with its sister agencies in Rome (IFAD and WFP) to produce a common position for the upcoming negotiations on the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Uncomfortable with their product, FAO’s new Deputy Director-General privately consulted her old colleagues in the fertilizer and dairy industries for a second opinion. The weekend before the position paper had to be in New York, she rewrote the text incorporating much of the agribusiness language and then sent it off, after affixing the logos of the three RBAs – without sharing the altered text with the partner agencies. CSOs caught on and the DDG retired shortly thereafter.

2 - CGIAR 'Unification'

For agribusiness, the jewel in the 'triple crown' – largely unnoticed by both governments and civil society – is the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research. Established in 1972 (and about to share its 50th anniversary with the UN Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment!), the CGIAR holds assets that include: an annual budget of roughly \$850 million; approximately 1500 scientists and other professionals; eleven of the world's most important international gene banks that collect, store and exchange much of the South's plant breeding material (773,000 seed accessions and counting); training facilities for South scientists; advanced (comparatively) laboratories; and enormous socio-political influence – particularly among the most marginalized G-77 states.

Since its 25th anniversary (1997), the once-fabled 'Green Revolution' CGIAR has endured an unending and mostly futile review/reform process. A new System Reference Group (SRG) struck in 2018 delivered its recommendations in July 2019 calling for the formal consolidation of the 15 Centers into one. The movement has genuine traction and there is pressure to complete the process quickly. Notably, the SRG is co-chaired by Tony Cavalieri, Senior Program Officer of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and Marco Ferroni, Chair of the CGIAR's System Management Board and recently retired as head of the Syngenta Foundation (a wholly corporate foundation; i.e., according to its bylaws, the Foundation is prohibited from undertaking any activities that could undermine corporate profits). The SRG has 22 members including UK's Elwyn Grainger-Jones, Executive Director of the CGIAR System Organization with previous posts at UK DFID, IFAD and the World Bank. Grainger-Jones – and the UK – are seen as major proponents of the new structure.

Originally, the Green Revolution CG was funded by the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations, which then brought in the World Bank under Robert McNamara; he in turn drew in the bilateral aid agencies of most OECD states. With its star fading in the early '90s, the CG expanded beyond its conventional crop commodities to take on forestry, fish, water and agricultural biodiversity. This did not, by and large, attract new resources.

By 2011, the Gates Foundation (originally a reluctant donor) ranked consistently among the top CG funders and has given more than US\$700 million to the CG's Trust via various formal windows and direct grants to individual Centers. (CGIAR funding, once relatively transparent, has become more opaque with approximately 17-19% of its total funding identified as "other" in itemized published budgets.)

An extraordinary meeting of the 15 Center Chairs was convened at Bioversity International (BI) headquarters outside Rome December 12–13, 2019 to discuss implications and timetable for the "mega-merger" based on an agreement reached at the 9th CGIAR System Council Meeting in China in the first half of November.

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Main elements of the unification proposition:

- One international board responsible for all 15 Centers with each Center having one host-country representative. This sidesteps an immediate legal conundrum that Center headquarter agreements customarily require host-country board membership.
- The management structure of the international entity might be a troika, with one DG responsible for general coordination; another for the mainline commodity breeding Centers; and a third DG for natural resource Centers. Other management options are still on the table, however.
- Irrevocable System-wide decisions are to be in place at least before they can be debated by the Food Systems Summit.
- Dangling before the 15 cash-starved Centers is the SRG proposition that the CG's annual budget (circa \$850 million per annum) will rise beneath the wings of responsible capitalism to around \$2 billion – but only if consolidation is realized. While the SRG put this in writing at the September 23 Climate Action Summit in New York, Bill Gates co-chaired a session on climate and agriculture that announced an additional \$650 million (but not all in one year). Aside from Gates, money was pledged by the World Bank, USAID, Germany, UK, Netherlands, Sweden and Switzerland. This is still far short of the SRG figure, but the unspoken assumption is that Gates, Syngenta and other agribusiness-friendly states and foundations will ante up the windfall if the CG Centers play along.

Options and Co-options ³

Everyone associated with the CGIAR is fed up with the reform/restructuring of the last quarter-century. The System Reference Group was expected to come back with a malaise-shattering proposal. Rumours circulated throughout the first half of 2019, but the 'One Center' ultimatum (described by one Board Chair as a "coercion") wasn't formalized and circulated until July; Centers were only given until October 10 to respond. Communications between the SRG and the Centers have been tense and even bitter.

One communication from the Chair of the merged forest-related Centers has been widely – and positively – circulated throughout the CGIAR describing the ultimatum timeline as "ridiculous." Past and present board and staff members from other Centers have accused the SRG of covertly planning the demise of the natural resource Centers, pointing out that Centers haven't had access to the background studies and rationale that led the SRG to its decisions and that the unification proposition is risky and could fail with irrevocable damage if certain donors (e.g., Gates Foundation?) withdraw after major structural changes are completed. Wrote the CIFOR (Forestry) Board Chair, "There are planning risks, communication risks, staff morale risks, financial risks, reputational risks, project delivery risks..." Some Centers have angrily argued that the SRG has a hidden agenda and that there has been no discussion about the kind of research the CGIAR should pursue in meeting the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. Centers worry that the SRG is interested only in SDG2 ("End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture") and not the full food and agricultural dimensions of the other SDGs. SRG members have been quoted saying that the CGIAR has 100 administrators and five breeders whereas it needs to have 100 breeders and five administrators. (Many CSOs might argue that the administrators are more benign!)

Rumours are also circulating that the members of the proposed new One Center Board should receive honoraria of an outrageous €2000 per day and would be expected to be available half-time. At least one Center noted the trend toward surrendering the SDGs to the private sector. The forestry Center, while claiming to support the principle of unified action, also threw down the gauntlet stating that the new structure... "cannot be at any cost to our viability, cannot be based on coercion, cannot ignore our agenda's priorities and cannot obviate our obligations..."

Some observations:

- Advocates for unification are Gates and Syngenta Foundations, USAID, UK, Canada, Australia and Germany. Germany is thought to be more open to other possibilities. Unification goes hand-in-hand with establishing a new level of partnership between private and public sectors in order to survive changing demographics and the climate crisis.
- For financial and administrative reasons, six Centers are already well advanced in merging but some are alarmed by the new proposal. The voluntary mergers include the two rice centers – IRRI and AfricaRice – and four natural resource Centers, CIFOR – ICRAF (forestry) and Bioversity International (BI) and CIAT.⁴ The natural resource Centers already receive little or no funding from the Gates Foundation (since 2011) and fear they would lose out financially in the new structure.
- Since each of the 15 Centers has its own headquarters agreement and legal personality, neither the Centers nor their host governments can be forced into a unified structure or, if they ultimately acquiesce (experience shows) mergers could take years. Host governments are proprietary and value the research and financial benefits of having an international Center within their borders. A CG "headquarters" move from Montpellier to Rome (resisted by France) is unofficially on hold – although some staff have already moved.
- The administrative troika could also be regional: Africa, Asia, Latin America.
- Many bilateral European funders are unhappy in general and want to take the focus off structure and put it onto substance – i.e., what will this new CGIAR actually do? Switzerland and Scandinavia (less so Norway – perhaps because of Yara's local influential role?) are interested in Agroecology.
- No one appears to be thinking about the status of the 11 CG gene banks that are wrapped up in headquarters agreements, which could mean that any change in legal status could surrender the banks to host governments. Also, no one seems to be taking into consideration the 1994 FAO/CGIAR/World Bank agreement (forced by civil society following acrimonious debates both in FAO and the Biodiversity Convention) that establishes FAO's policy oversight of the gene banks.

Analysis

The System Reference Group's estimation that the CGIAR is wastefully bureaucratic, destructively competitive, and incapable of self-correction is broadly accurate and would be shared by most civil society organizations. However, CSOs are also alarmed that CGIAR Centers have implicitly – sometimes explicitly – accepted the agribusiness narrative in favour of fewer and larger production units employing Climate-Smart – now artfully segueing and expanding into “nature-based solutions” – within an industrial market economy. Agribusiness influence has evolved cautiously over the past quarter-century, but its influence on Center boards and budgets is now substantial. During one review of the System in the late 1990s, Whitney MacMillan, then just retired as Chair of Cargill, commented that he had never heard of CGIAR until he got a call from the President of the World Bank inviting him to join the review team. Today, with a shifting focus toward emerging markets, CG scientists, land, research facilities, and quasi-UN status can reduce agribusiness's overhead and transaction costs and can advance agribusiness policies and priorities. Over the decades, a remarkable number of the global South's senior scientists and administrators have participated in seminars and training programs directed by CGIAR. Even if the CGIAR is waning as a financial and political force in the global South, its scientists and technicians are ‘cheap labour’ and it continues to have useful fields, facilities and influence.

Bottom line

Once again, the call for System Change should be heard – just not the system espoused by agribusiness and philanthro-capitalists. At the time of the food-price crisis, as CSOs pressured the Rome-based agencies to reform the CFS, some CSOs also called for the 15 CG Centers to be subsumed into the logical crop, livestock, fisheries, forestry and trade/statistics divisions of FAO within the revised CFS framework. The logic remains. As a research organization, the CGIAR has been a hammer looking for a nail and has not functioned as part of an overall food and agriculture strategy.

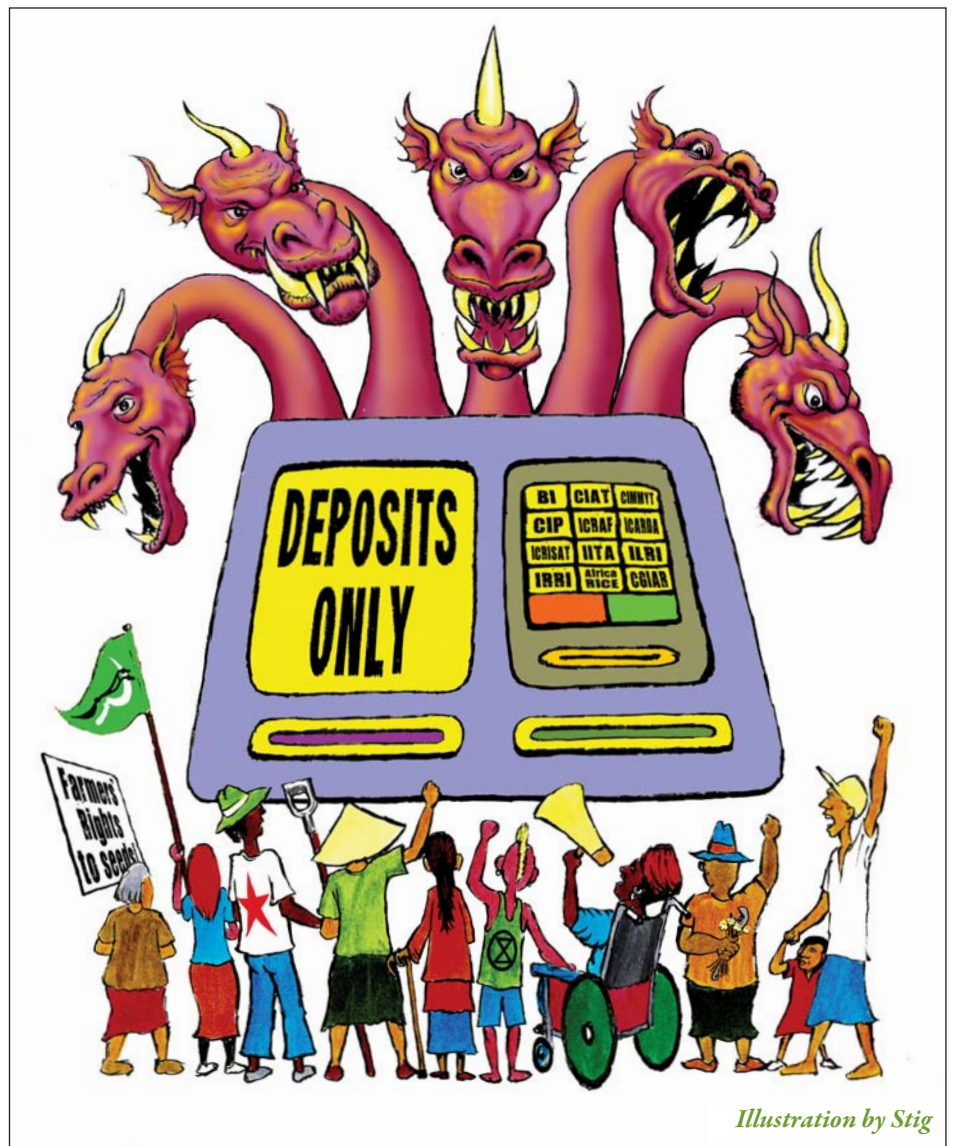


Illustration by Stig

This has been administratively wasteful, programmatically irresponsible and encouraged mission creep handicapping or distorting genuine research needs. Peasant organizations have borne the brunt of the CG's Green Revolution and may well be happy to see the whole system collapse. This, however, is the least likely outcome. If the CGIAR is allowed to devolve into another egregious private-public partnership, resources might well expand and its influence over the South's agriculture could increase. Significantly, a decisive moment for the future shape of the CGIAR is expected at the CG donors and institutions meeting in Berlin immediately following the high-level SDG2 meeting June 5-9 – where Bill Gates is expected to personally weigh in. Nevertheless, the clumsy move to create One Center offers CSOs an excellent opportunity to reopen a debate about the appropriate role of public-sector agricultural science and technologies within the multilateral system – but only if they move quickly.

3 - International Digital Council for Food and Agriculture

In January 2019, 74 Ag Ministers attending the Global Forum for Food and Agriculture (GFFA) called upon FAO to draw up, in consultation with the World Bank, African Development Bank, IFAD, WFP, OECD, WTO, ITU (International Telecommunication Union), OIE (World Organisation for Animal Health) and CTA (Technical Center for Agricultural and Rural Cooperation), a concept note for the establishment of an International Digital Council for Food and Agriculture. The proposal was discussed at FAO in June, and in September FAO sponsored a parallel session at the African Green Revolution Forum to discuss the Council's scope and mission. The organizational work – including a side event during the CFS last October and an online consultation – has been led by FAO's Innovation Team. The CTA, too, has conducted meetings to consider the dimensions of the Council as relevant to data storage, blockchains, satellites and drones. When Berlin hosted the Forum's sequel in January 2020, the 71 ministers present gave FAO the green light to press on.

Fintech

CSOs monitoring the Forum have mixed views on the openness of governments to civil society engagement but they report that, at least in private conversations, governments are drawing a line in the cloud between field production, weather, market and consumption data on one side – and digital DNA on the other. Good luck with that! Big Data comes part and parcel with what industry calls fintech (from *financial technologies*): 1's and 0's know no boundaries.⁵ The collection, storage and exchange of so-called 'conventional' data and digital DNA is not different. Both 'sides' expect to use blockchains to manage transactions and are actively examining the use of cryptocurrencies as payment systems. Arguing that the data technology platform can be compartmentalized is like arguing that the steam engine had no implications for food distribution; that the telegraph had nothing to do with commodity prices; or that (as a former IBM CEO once famously insisted) the world has no need of more than a half-dozen computers. Clearly, IBM didn't (at least originally) see the need for any of these six computers to be on the farm. In 2017, IBM's CEO declared that fully 20% of the world's data was computerized.⁶

At around the same time, IBM announced that farms will yield 20 times more data in 2050 than in 2014.⁷ In 2019, a representative of IBM Food Trust, at a workshop hosted by the ACP Group of States in Brussels, told ETC Group that agricultural data management was well in hand and that the previously horrific energy costs of tracking commodities by blockchain had been solved... although he was at a loss to explain how. A few months later, IBM was embarrassed by news that 9000 suspected cybercrime files in the UK, which had been forwarded to the National Fraud Intelligence Bureau for further investigation, had gone unopened: the algorithms of the receiving computers had found suspicious words and symbols in the evidence. The cybercrime investigator explained the problem: "They...have got a backlog of [cyber]crimes that they have been unable to pass out due to software problems."⁸ IBM was the service provider.

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The issue of Digital Sequence Information (DSI) is critical to negotiations for access and benefit sharing (ABS) within the FAO Seed Treaty since 2013 and almost led to the breakdown of the biennial meeting of the Treaty's governing body in November. Likewise, DSI is central to ABS negotiations around the Nagoya Protocol of the CBD where it has dominated recent meetings of Working Groups leading up to the pivotal CBD COP to be held in China in October 2020 – awkwardly overlapping the dates of the next CFS.

Vast quantities of agricultural production and consumption information are being collected and stored – from fisheries, farms and forests to retail shops and homes – but also terabytes of genomic information are being sucked up, sequenced and stored via several initiatives including the WEF's Earth Bank of Codes, its related Amazon Bank of Codes, the International Barcode of Life, gene bankers "DivSeek," and an unknowable number of private adventurers.

Finskam?

Digital information is never entirely secure – even (or especially?) in the hands of the world's leading IT/social media enterprises. The seriousness of security breaches varies, depending on the sphere of the breach.

The *Financial Times* recently reported on an investigation showing that nearly half of 150 million ad-driven app downloads were fraudulent – the downloads went to fake phones in order to up the numbers and the commission that advertisers pay for each download; even worse, 90% of 200 networks selling ‘app-install ads’ were “knowingly selling fraudulent inventory.”⁹ Hugely successful computer game companies have found themselves conduits for money laundering.¹⁰ Distrust in the current system of storing digital data in the Cloud managed by US tech giants like Google, Amazon and Microsoft has led some policymakers, including Germany’s Angela Merkel, to advocate for “digital sovereignty.”* (Better late than never. At the end of January 2020, Apple was estimated to be worth more than Germany’s 30 largest companies.¹¹) Should the advocates of Food Sovereignty demand sovereignty over their knowledge and data?

As it was for the steam engine, telegraph and computer, the implications of the Big Data platform can be non-obvious. At the beginning of 2020, Esther Dyson, the founding chair of the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), wrote a stunning piece in the *Washington Post* alarmed by a deal that would sell the dot-org domain – the Internet home of more than 10 million CSOs – to a private company called Ethos Capital for \$1 billion.¹² The company has investments in digital advertising, data brokering and other Internet services and Dyson warned that the company would recoup its costs by “for example, selling data on dot-org registrants or perhaps upselling registrants to buy special security services, trademark protection or other versions of their dot-orgs – just as other providers encourage for-profit registrants to buy ‘protection’ for their brands.”¹³ When the Berlin Forum launched its Digital Counsel proposal a year ago, no one would’ve thought such a purchase possible. Today, we can only speculate on the long-term impact on civil society. Not mentioned in the *Washington Post* op-ed is that CSOs’ neighbours in the dot-org are the UN and other institutions in the multilateral system.

I can also see a future where we are far more connected to the Internet. In the morning, a little sensor in your wrist will say, ‘Hey, you’re a bit low on calcium.’ The sensor then asks your fridge, ‘Is there still milk with extra calcium in the fridge?’ The fridge responds, ‘No, I’m going to order it.’ And then a drone will come and deliver within the hour your calcium-rich milk. And this kind of stuff is already starting to happen in a country, for example, like China, which is really moving forward in this way. Europe and the U.S. are still slow to grasp digitalization of food production and food consumption.

– Louise Fresco, former Assistant Director-General of FAO’s Agriculture Department, Scientist and Writer, at UNFCCC COP25, December, 2019

Convantis or Covertis?

In early December 2019, the world’s most powerful agricultural trading corporations – ADM, Bunge, Cargill, COFCO, Louis Dreyfus and Glencore – announced that they were forming a collaboration to be known as “Covantis” that would use digital information – most notably blockchains – to track and trade agricultural commodities. Already, such blockchains are linked from farms and fisheries to retail stores around the world. Cargill’s aquatic sensors in the North Pacific, for example, can be aligned to groundnut production data in West Africa and soybean harvests in Latin America to impact commodity markets in Chicago. Walmart can already track mangoes from a Mexican peasant to a Minneapolis superstore, and at least one British retailer can show pictures of a farm family that grew their veggies. But Walmart’s data managers didn’t seem to know that its store managers in South America and Asia were bribing local officials;¹⁴ and Tesco was clueless that the British farm family was fictitious and the tomatoes were likely picked in Italy under slave-like conditions;¹⁵ the biggest chocolate sellers couldn’t understand why – contrary to their promises – child labour on cocoa farms in Ghana and Ivory Coast had been increasing;¹⁶ Australian regulators were shocked that the heat in the freighter had killed all the sheep;¹⁷ McDonald’s execs were caught off guard by the “great French fry shortage of 2014” and resorted to airlifting fries to Japan.¹⁸ The agribusinesses with the data will determine what information goes in; what comes out; and who finds out. Covantis may well speed up and reduce the transaction costs of international commodity traders but its inputs and outcomes can still be opaque (covertis?) to those of us who grow and eat food.

At issue in the sphere of food and agriculture is control of the genomic data of the world’s flora and fauna as well as consumption and production data related to the industrial food system. The private sector is heavily involved in CGIAR’s digital DNA programs as well as in the Digital Council for Food and Agriculture. This includes IBM Food Trust, Bayer, Pepsi, Unilever, Microsoft, Cargill, Nestlé, Syngenta Group (now merged with China’s largest agrochemical and fertilizer corporations) and BGI (formerly, Beijing Genomics Institute).

* See Guy Chazan, “Angela Merkel urges EU to seize control of data from US tech titans,” *Financial Times*, 12 November 2019. The breach with perhaps the biggest eschatological implications has to be the security hack of the Vatican’s £99 eRosary. Worn as a bracelet, the eRosary activates when the suppliant swipes the sign of the cross to call up prayers, inspirational quotes from St. Augustine, or access a health app that not only counts your steps but keeps you on the straight and narrow; the eRosary can then prescribe exercise (or exorcism?). In the event of a moral crisis, the device can summon a callcenter cleric. Alas, the eRosary was easily hacked and the confidences of the faithful purloined. So much for the all-knowing 1G? Should FAO venture where angels fear to tweet?

Vaulting Aspirations

BGI requires special attention. It has garnered quiet notoriety in agricultural and biodiversity circles for its unorthodox attempts to procure duplicate samples of every accession in the world's most important gene banks – including those of the CGIAR centers. Two initiatives have caused seed curators heartburn: first, a contract between BGI and the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) in the Philippines wherein BGI received 3014 rice accessions for digitization but, according to informed sources, BGI failed to share all of the results, and, contrary to agreements, applied for patents on digital representations of public germplasm. IRRI initially touted the contract with the moneyed parastatal of the Asian superpower – not so much lately. Second, flushed with their mandate over China's huge national gene bank, BGI's leadership flew to Europe to meet with Nordic authorities to push for duplication of the collection of the famous Svalbard Seed Vault. According to those in the room, BGI produced a PowerPoint presentation extolling the technologies and capacities of the Chinese bank and then bluntly asked what it would take to duplicate everything in Svalbard. To the surprise of no one familiar with Svalbard, the response was a decisive, "No way!"

What is BGI – and its sister CNGB?

Founded in 1999 by Jian Wang and Huanming Yang and headquartered in Shenzhen ("China's Silicon Valley"), BGI is a company that holds DNA samples of approximately 40 million people and works in more than 100 countries; it touts collaborations with more than 3000 medical institutions and more than 300 hospitals²⁰ and counts the Gates Foundation among its investors.²¹ In 2010, BGI was said to have more DNA sequencing capacity than all sequencers in the entire United States;²² and in 2013, it held contracts with 17 of the world's top 20 pharmaceutical companies.²³ BGI claims to be able to sequence a full human genome for \$600 – the lowest price (by about \$300) in the industry.²⁴ The company is on a quest to map the DNA of all known plant and animal species on Earth.²⁵

In early 2017, The China National Gene Bank (CNGB), also in Shenzhen and also operated by BGI, held over 500 million genetic sequences of over 8000 species stored in more than 40 databases.²⁶ CNGB has formed strategic collaborations with the FAO, CGIAR, Smithsonian Institution and the Global Genome Biodiversity Network (GGBN). The bank is expected to host around 300,000 species of plants and millions of animals and microbes. CNGB is also said to have some kind of agreement with the Svalbard Global Seed Vault. Probably wishful thinking!

BGI has scandalized more than crop scientists. Together with Shanghai's University Hospital, BGI shared the anonymized data of more than 10,000 Chinese women without government authorization, leading to a wrist-slap and budget cut in public funding. BGI was ordered to destroy the data, but a scientific write-up of the research results were published in *Nature* in 2015, and though BGI claims to have asked the journal to remove the paper from its website, it remains online.¹⁹

Scandal Scramble

The confusion and consternation surrounding the ownership and control of genomic information led to a sloppily-arranged meeting in Bellagio at the end of 2016 and another hurriedly-convened 24-hour gathering at the airport Paris Hilton in late July 2018 where a handful of governments, CG Centers, companies and advisors discussed the corporate capture of gene banks and, quietly, BGI's aggressive tactics. Although most gene bank directors and plant breeders are convinced that maintenance of gene bank accessions is absolutely vital to long-term food security, there is growing suspicion that agribusiness no longer shares this concern and might even see the continuation of living collections as unnecessary competition to their own breeding strategies.

A Tale of Two Coal Mines

The connection between digital DNA and other forms of digital agricultural information cannot be better described than through two coalmines in Svalbard, Norway. One of the coalmines, of course, houses the famous Seed Vault, protected by long-standing international agreements and the Nordic Council, as the backup repository for the world's crop genetic diversity. More than half a million unique peasant-bred plant varieties have found sanctuary in the vault since 2008. The second coalmine – on the same Svalbard mountain – opened its vault to the world's most vital digital information in March 2019. Interestingly, the vault, operated by a private Norwegian company, Piql, transforms data (the infamous 1's and 0's) into analog reels of film extending the viability of the data by several hundred years. Piql is to Big Data what the Seed Vault is to plant breeders. The first governments to make deposits in the Arctic World Archive were Norway, Brazil and Mexico, placing in the mineshaft vital and ancient records including those of indigenous peoples. Svalbard has become a kind of 'one-stop dropbox.' Mexico can store analog information about the agricultural practices of indigenous peoples in the Piql mine and their living samples of maize and beans next door in the same mountain.

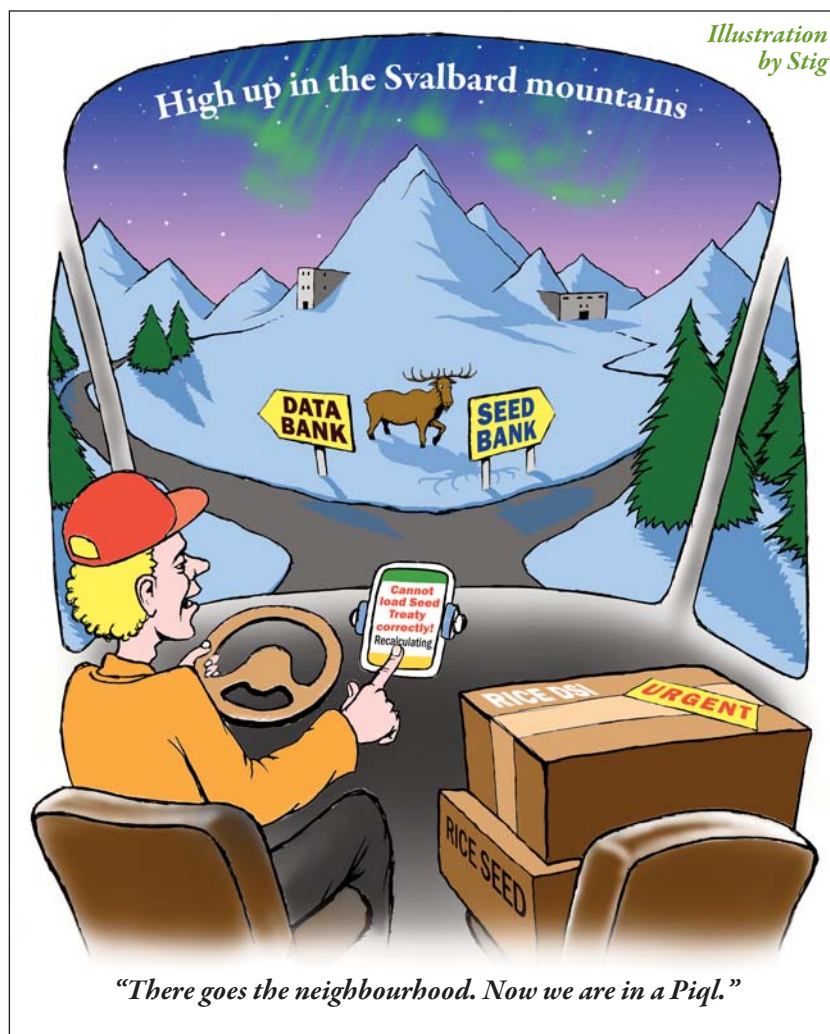
Analysis

Do all roads lead to Berlin these days? Both the SDG2 and Summit strategies will be sorted out in Berlin in June – as will the future of CGIAR. The momentum toward the Digital Council began in Berlin. Still, officials in the German government see their digital proposal as distinct. This is wishful thinking. As noted earlier, the three initiatives are less a strategy than the natural accumulation of interests and momentum arising from the move to a new bilateralism and away from multilateralism. That Germany has sought the input of African states and has sidestepped the urgings of agribusiness to offer the shaping of the Digital Council to FAO is naïve, but also encouraging.

Once posed, however, digital information and digital systems can grow into whatever those who control IT wish to make of it. Digital technologies are at the very core of agribusiness strategies for the decades ahead; getting unfettered access to that information – and control of those systems – via the United Nations in order to “feed the hungry” makes the German proposal completely compatible with the “system changes” of the CG and WFSS. The UN must embark on a consultative process that will allow it to regulate big data everywhere and especially as relevant to food and agriculture and genomics information. It would be deceptive and dangerous to artificially divide the debate between food production and consumption data on one hand and biological data on the other. The two are inevitably connected. Because big data is a multi-sectoral platform that touches upon every part of the global economy and all emerging new technologies, this debate must also look at the need for strengthened national competition laws and, possibly, a UN Treaty on Competition along with a Treaty or Protocol on Technology Assessment.

Blinkered Surveillance

It's worth noting that OECD states' short-sighted pursuit of bilateralism can have consequences. For years now, Europe, North America, and their IT companies have been wrangling over digital surveillance regulations complacently convinced that the standards they set will be adopted by the rest of the world. Meanwhile, back at the UN, the 200-member International Telecommunication Union has been hard at work on the same task since 2016. Over that time, the Chinese government and its IT corporations have submitted literally all of the regulatory proposals on the table – often supported by Russia and Saudi Arabia. With the room to themselves, these countries are likely to get their way and have their regulations adopted by most of the G-77.



The bottom line could either be two competing surveillance regulatory regimes – or, very possibly, the regulatory surrender of Europe and North America to a multilateral system they have ignored. As it is with surveillance technologies so could it be with all forms of big data and treaties on competition policy and technology assessment.

The Governing Body of the FAO Seed Treaty and the COP of the Biodiversity Convention have a record of working collaboratively and the secretariats are in close contact. This work should continue and should contribute to the still wider discussion around multi-sectoral information and the need for technology assessment. In the meantime, the proposal for an International Digital Council for Food and Agriculture should be placed on hold while the issue is also debated in the World Food Systems Summit.

Bottom line

For the third time: we agree that the United Nations should establish regulatory authority over big data – conventional and biological – in support of the processes already underway in the CBD and FAO Seed Treaty. These processes should be able to reach a collective conclusion in time for finalization during the World Food Systems Summit.

Conclusion: When Multilateralism Becomes Bilateralism

Stakeholders vs. Steak-eaters

It has been a standing joke within the CSM (Civil Society Mechanism) in Rome that CFS negotiations pit stakeholders against steak-eaters : civil society vs. agribusiness. FAO's member governments are also stakeholders (or, state-holders?) although the famous revolving door between private and public actors makes it difficult to remember who is which – and who is in whose service – regardless of the colour coding of their name tag.

Individual corporations, trade associations, private-sector consortia and the World Economic Forum are savvy enough to emphasize “meaningful stakeholder engagement...from the beginning” — as the WEF did with its launch of the Food Action Alliance. (Ominously, in the context of the WFSS, engagement between ‘governments, champions and scientists’ is emphasized.) But they see the real connection as betwixt industry and government greased by Big Philanthropy and BINGOs (Big International Non-Governmental Organizations) that may not even know they've drunk the Kool-Aid.

Social movements consistently maintain that they have the real “skin in the game” while corporate lobbyists fear only for their bonuses, and too many diplomats are too invested in their next placements. The concept of stakeholder roundtables is maliciously false and should never be used in UN meetings under the pretense that there is some kind of equality of power around the table.

Each of the three initiatives described in this Communiqué pretend to a commitment to public engagement and each will assure audiences that their early failures to reach out to real stakeholders have been due to time pressure or accident. This is manifestly not true. The critical Food System topic for the 2021 World Summit must be to change the relationship and negotiating powers between stakeholders, state-holders and steak-eaters. What do we want? System Change – not Corporate Capture.

Each of the three initiatives described in this Communiqué pretend to a commitment to public engagement and each will assure audiences that their early failures to reach out to real stakeholders have been due to time pressure or accident. This is manifestly not true.

More Food for Thought: ETC Group reports on governance

ETC Group has engaged with the multilateral food agencies throughout its history. In 2008-2009, ETC published a series of reports related to a restructuring of the Rome-based agencies, which we referred to as a ‘New Roman Forum.’ For historical context and perspective, those reports are useful to revisit:

- In January 2008, ETC Group published a Communiqué entitled “Food’s Failed Estates = Paris’s Hot Cuisine, Food Sovereignty – à la Cartel?”
- In mid-2008, ETC Group remained focused on the food emergency – and ongoing organizational conundrum – after a high-level meeting in Rome. Our report of that meeting and its implications – a ‘translator’ – is entitled “Ciao FAO: Another ‘Failure-as-Usual’ Food Summit.”

- ETC Group offered a draft proposal to reorganize the world’s major food and agriculture institutions in a Communiqué published January 2009, “H(a)LF a Loaf: Finally, in Madrid, a High-Level Forum considers Governance.”
- In January 2012, ETC Group exposed the dangers of philanthro-capitalist / private sector takeovers of institutions charged with protecting public goods, focusing on FAO and CGIAR. See ETC Group Communiqué entitled “The Greed Revolution.”

All of the reports are available at www.etcgroup.org

Endnotes

- 1 The photos can be seen here: <https://www.unmultimedia.org/s/photo/detail/811/0811013.html> and here: <https://www.unmultimedia.org/s/photo/detail/811/0811012.html>.
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- 4 CIFOR and ICRAF effectively merged on 01 January 2019; Bioversity International and CIAT signed an MOU signaling their merger into an Alliance in late 2018; The DGs of AfricaRice and IRRI met in March 2018 and “agreed to enhance joint opportunities and harness the synergies between the two Centers and their partners in support of their shared vision.”
- 5 General definitions of “fintech” can be found online, like this one from Investopedia: the term “financial technology” can apply to any innovation in how people transact business, from the invention of digital money to double-entry bookkeeping. Since the internet revolution and the mobile internet/smartphone revolution, however, financial technology has grown explosively, and fintech, which originally referred to computer technology applied to the back office of banks or trading firms, now describes a broad variety of technological interventions into personal and commercial finance: <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/f/fintech.asp>.
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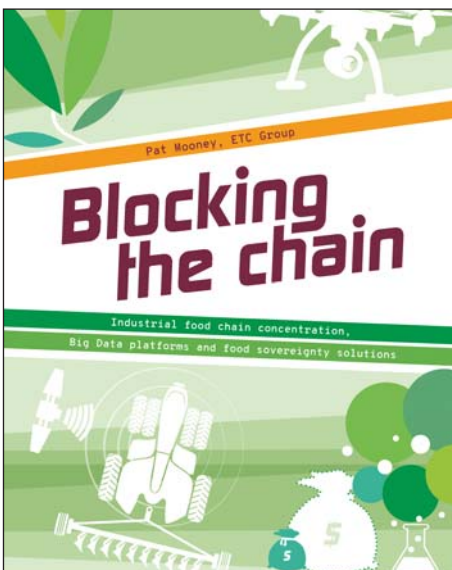
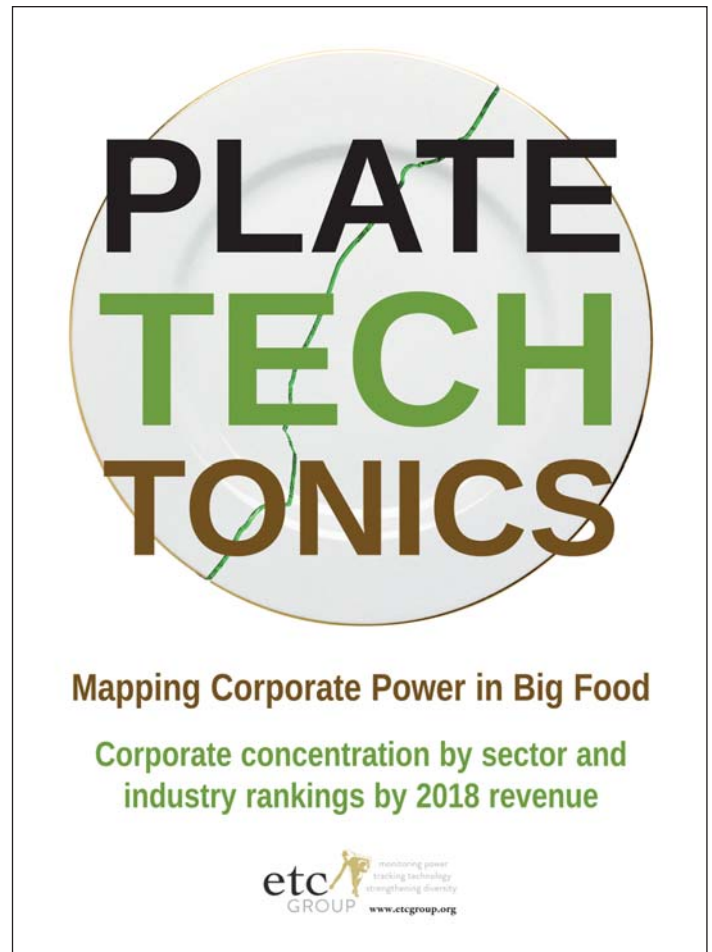
Also from ETC Group:

Plate Tech-Tonics

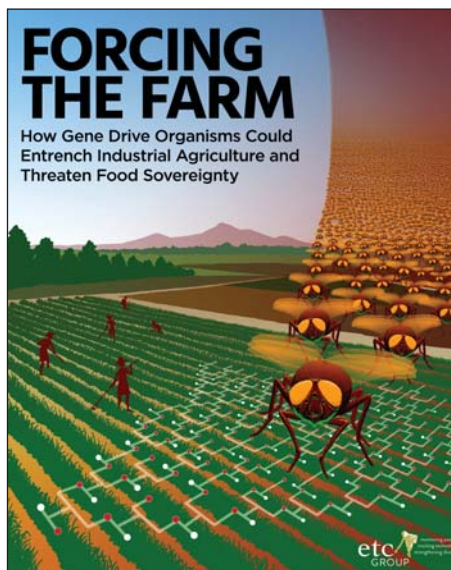
Mapping Corporate Power in Big Food
Corporate concentration by sector and
industry rankings by 2018 revenue

Plate Tech-Tonics refers to an array of technological and financial disruptors that are driving consolidation and corporate power in Big Food. These cross-sector disruptors include expansive Big Data platforms, genome editing (i.e., CRISPR Cas-9), blockchain and the oversize influence of asset management firms. The Plate Tech-tonic disruptions are not specific to a single sector, but rather, are fault lines that can be traced throughout the global agri-food system all the way to our dinner plates.

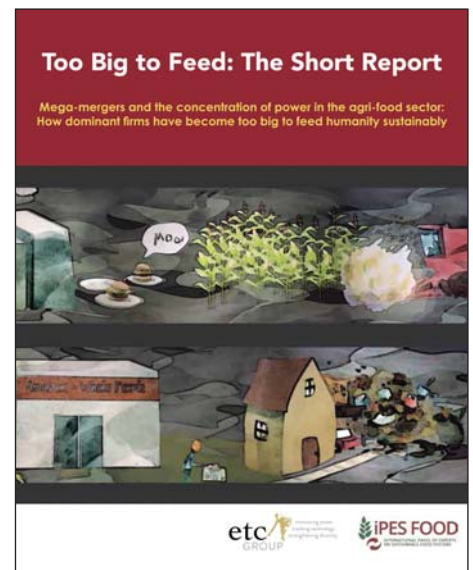
Plate Tech-Tonics is meant to accompany three recent ETC Group publications that provide in-depth analysis of impacts and implications of concentrated corporate power driven by new technologies:



Blocking the Chain: Industrial food chain concentration, Big Data platforms and food sovereignty solutions, October 2018.



Forcing the Farm: How Gene Drive Organisms Could Entrench Industrial Agriculture and Threaten Food Sovereignty, October 2018.



Too Big to Feed: Exploring the impacts of mega-mergers, consolidation, concentration of power in the agri-food sector, published by IPES FOOD in October 2017.

All available from: www.etcgroup.org

The Next Agribusiness Takeover: Multilateral Food Agencies Stakeholders vs. Steak-eaters?

Communiqué #117

February 2020

Over the past quarter-century, multilateralism has been swamped by so-called public-private partnerships that have begun to dominate global policy negotiations including those related to climate and food. In effect, multilateralism has morphed into bilateralism — a collaboration between the global public and private sectors, where increasingly acquiescent big civil society organizations provide a veneer of ‘stakeholder’ participation.

In 2019, agribusiness and agribusiness-friendly foundations launched three initiatives — the World Food Systems Summit process, the move to consolidate and corporatize international agricultural research, and the establishment of a governance framework for food- and agricultural-related digital information — that could profoundly restructure policy and practice in the multilateral system.

ETC Group's report, *The Next Agribusiness Takeover: Multilateral Food Agencies*, examines the three initiatives and their implications and makes the case for civil society organizations to expose and reject the new bilateralism in favor of genuine multilateralism that serves the public good.

About ETC Group

ETC Group works to address the socioeconomic and ecological issues surrounding new technologies that could have an impact on the world's poorest and most vulnerable people. We investigate ecological erosion (including the erosion of cultures and human rights); the development of new technologies (especially agricultural but also other technologies that work with genomics and matter); and we monitor global governance issues including corporate concentration and trade in technologies. We operate at the global political level. We work closely with partner civil society organizations (CSOs) and social movements, especially in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

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