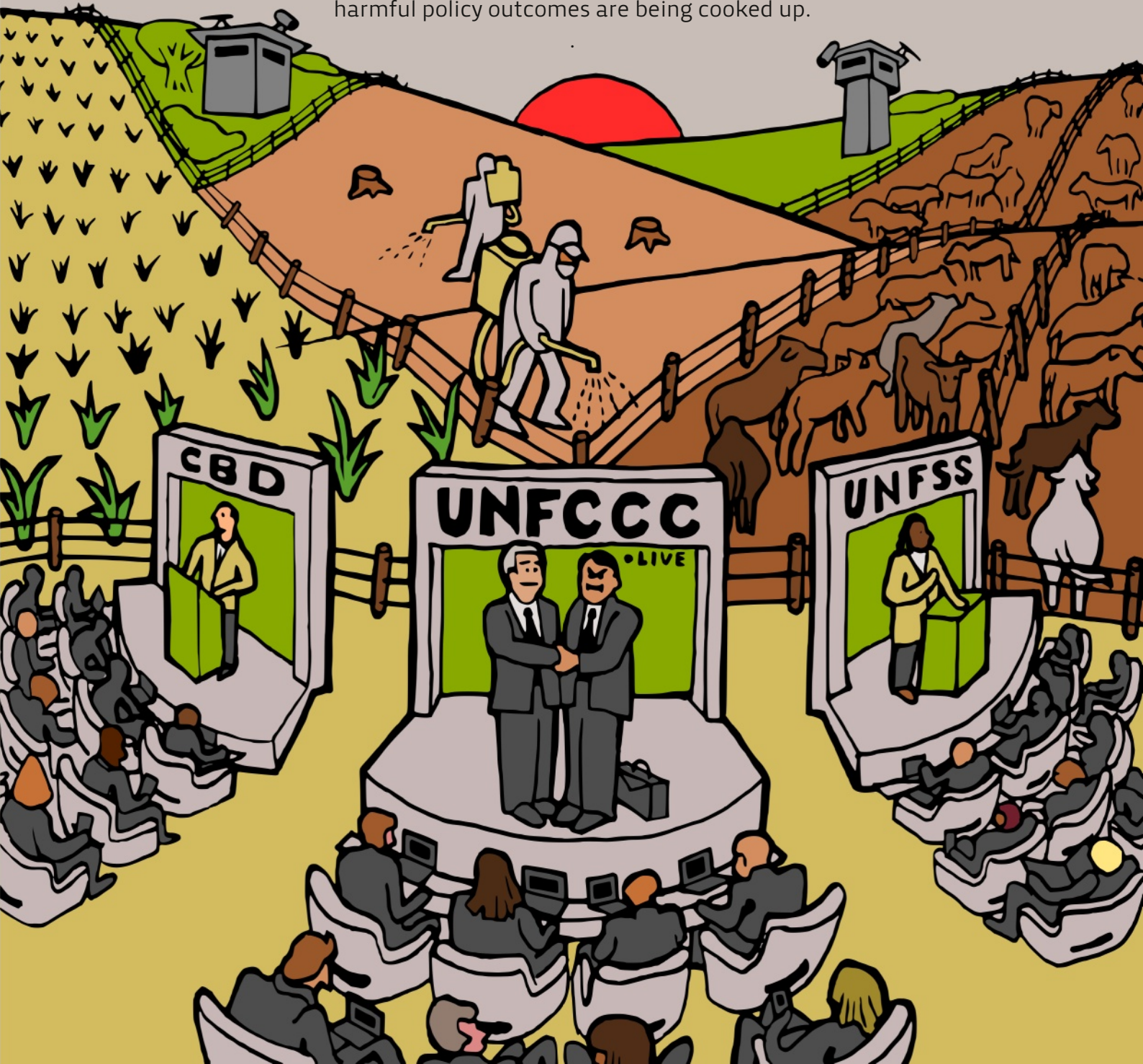




Corporate contagion:

How the private sector is capturing the UN Food, Biodiversity and Climate Summits

With three crucial UN summits set to take place in the next six months, 2021 is shaping up to be a key year in the corporate take-over of biodiversity and climate policy-making. Given that civil society participation will be severely limited for the foreseeable future, a number of extremely harmful policy outcomes are being cooked up.



2021: a key year for the corporate capture of UN processes



Despite the fact that most countries are still suffering from the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, a number of major UN Summits are planned for the final months of 2021.

In September or October, the [Food Systems Summit](#) will take place ahead of the UN General Assembly in New York; in October, a [Conference of the Parties of the Convention on Biodiversity \(CBD COP15\)](#) is scheduled to happen in Kunming, China; and in November, the [UN Framework Convention on Climate Change](#) is planning to hold its 26th Conference of the Parties ([UNFCCC COP26](#)) in Glasgow, Scotland.

While the most equitable approach would be to postpone these events until they can safely be held in person, they will likely take place in a so-called hybrid format where some people including those who have been vaccinated can attend in person while others will be invited to participate virtually. This raises serious equity concerns, given that significant travel restrictions will still be in place and vaccination rates are far higher in the Global North than the Global South. On top of this, the participation of critical civil society voices in hybrid UN meetings that have already taken place has been very limited.

In terms of substance, the Food, Biodiversity and Climate Summits are closely linked. Unsustainable food production systems are the main cause of the destruction of forests and other ecosystems worldwide, and a significant source of greenhouse gas emissions. Industrial livestock and feedstock

production is one of the main culprits: it is the [primary cause of deforestation in South America, which has the highest deforestation rate of any continent](#), and unless the current rise in meat and dairy consumption is halted, livestock farming will be responsible for more than [half of all greenhouse gas emissions by 2050](#).

At the same time, biodiversity loss and climate change are [significant threats to food production](#) and food sovereignty around the world. Agroecological and other more sustainable food systems that many Indigenous Peoples, peasant farmers and women depend on are most at risk, which is compounded by the fact that [the expansion of industrial agriculture often happens at the expense of small-scale and traditional practices](#). A shift towards sustainable food systems and away from industrial agriculture is therefore key to halting climate change and biodiversity loss and sustaining the livelihoods of marginalized groups.

While many heads of state have confirmed the need for strong action to promote sustainable food systems and halt climate change and biodiversity loss, in practice, unsustainable livestock farming and other forms of industrial food production are still heavily incentivized by governments.

Annually, [4 to 6 trillion US dollars](#) is spent on agroindustrial subsidies and other perverse incentives that cause biodiversity loss. Existing multilateral agreements to eliminate, phase out or reform these perverse incentives, such as the CBD's Aichi Target 3, have not been complied with.

As shown by recent [analysis carried out by GFC member groups and allies in nine different countries](#), the main reason these perverse incentives endure is that the very corporations benefiting from them often have a disproportionate influence over national and international policy-making. A growing number of public-private partnerships and initiatives promoting blended finance, like the recently announced [Mobilising Finance for Forests Programme](#), make public institutions even more dependent on corporate funding. As a result, corporations have more influence over the decisions that these institutions make.

It is therefore vital to understand how the capture of UN processes is directly influencing their outcomes, leading to policy decisions that focus on protecting private interests rather than urgent and effective action to defend food sovereignty, protect biodiversity and tackle the climate emergency.

The capture of the Food Systems Summit: corporate philanthropy & technofixes



The 2021 Food Systems Summit (FSS) is a strategic partnership between the UN and the World Economic Forum (WEF), which promotes the interests of the world's largest corporations, and it is proving to be highly controversial.

There are multiple concerns about the influence of transnational corporations, corporate philanthropies and export-oriented countries and their efforts to capture the international food sovereignty narrative. The corporate appropriation of this space for dialogue is happening under the guise of WEF-designed “multistakeholder governance”, with the private sector positioning itself as a key voice in policy discussions that should have direct implications for its business models.

Top of the list of concerns is the appointment of Dr. Agnes Kalibata as UN special envoy to the FSS. Hundreds of CSOs around the world [signed an open letter](#) calling on the UN Secretary-General to revoke the appointment. They assert that: “Led by Dr Kalibata, the Summit will be nothing but a tool for further corporate predation on the people and natural systems.” Kalibata is the president of the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA), which was founded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (still AGRA's main donor) and the Rockefeller Foundation. AGRA has captured scarce public resources for the benefit of corporate interests and sought to open African markets to corporate monopolies. The [agroindustrial food production models it has imposed in Africa](#) focus on controlling commercial

seeds, genetically modified crops, fossil fuel-heavy synthetic fertilizers and polluting pesticides. This has increased impoverishment, directly impacted the human rights of rural populations and caused widespread environmental degradation and contamination.

The clear influence that the Gates Foundation—the world's largest private foundation—has over Kalibata and AGRA has also led numerous organizations to denounce the interference of this kind of “catalytic philanthropy” in the FSS. It [follows the basic principle](#) that “where business and government don't invest, there's space for philanthropy”, seeking to act as a catalyst for increased private sector involvement. The Gates Foundation's approach “[serves to enrich the very same corporations and countries that have been the cause of economic inequalities and environmental degradation](#)” by providing [extensive funding to technological innovation](#), particularly in agriculture, and promoting public incentives for this approach through subsidies and intellectual property rights. This model not only goes against UN and FAO principles, but it also puts food systems at risk on a global level.

As a clear attempt to subvert and undermine multilateral efforts to govern food systems in the public

interest, the FSS is asserting corporate control and a disregard for human rights, biodiversity and the climate. For example, the UN's Special Rapporteur on Right to Food, Michael Fakhri, [expressed frustration](#) with the fact that it took a whole year to get human rights on the agenda of the FSS at all, something he attributes to the dominance of the WEF and Gates Foundation.

The corporate vision being promoted by the Gates Foundation, WEF, AGRA and other key FSS actors argues that technological solutions like genetic modification can reduce operating costs while improving food production, and therefore play an important role in reducing poverty and food insecurity. In reality though, these “solutions” are more often aimed at internationally-traded commodities such as soy that feed livestock and not people. On top of this, this model of industrial food production is [still responsible for widespread deforestation](#), and impacts the lives and rights of huge numbers of rural communities through forced displacement or false promises. Those most affected are often women who depend on small-scale crop production to sustain their families.

The capture of the Biodiversity Summit: perverse incentives & nature-based solutions



CBD COP 15 will negotiate the draft [post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework \(GBF\)](#), which aims to halt and reverse the planet's catastrophic loss in biodiversity. However, the current draft [does not reflect the pathways to transformative change that are required to achieve this](#), and instead will allow the corporations responsible for destroying biodiversity to maintain business as usual.

For the GBF process to be effective, it must address the underlying economic drivers of biodiversity loss—we cannot go on pretending that economic growth can be reconciled with maintaining the ecosystems fundamental to life.

The sections of the draft GBF related to reforming perverse incentives, mobilizing resources for conservation, mainstreaming biodiversity and the role and participation of Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities and women reflect the CBD's refusal to learn lessons from the overall failure to achieve the Aichi Targets. The proposed post-2020 target on eliminating perverse incentives that harm biodiversity and redirecting public subsidies towards biodiversity conservation is actually [weaker than the target that was agreed for 2020](#) (Aichi Target 3). This shows the extent to which the CBD has succumbed to strong corporate lobbies working behind the veil of "stakeholder participation". This multilateral capitulation to corporations is summed up by the fact that earlier this year EU lawmakers agreed to ignore Aichi Target 3 altogether and renew the biggest perverse incentive of all, the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), which will provide [162 billion Euros in income support payments](#) between 2021-2027. Agribusiness associations lobbied hard for this outcome, and it is no surprise that the largest agricultural producers are set to

receive the largest slice of the cake.

The dominance of WEF members, business councils, carbon traders and sustainability consultants in CBD processes and initiatives such as the Informal Advisory Group and Extended Consultative Network on mainstreaming is one way in which the private sector exerts its influence. As a consequence, there is an increasing push for as yet undefined and [potentially harmful nature-based solutions \(NBS\)](#) within the CBD. The World Economic Forum-led Global Future Council on NBS is clear in its aims in this regard, stating that: "[2021] will be a crucial year in mainstreaming nature-based solutions, with several key international meetings...". Market-based mechanisms that include biodiversity offsets are also gaining traction, particularly as a result of

the "no net loss" concept. Also referred to as "net gain" or "nature positive", the concept allows for biodiversity to be harmed in one place so long as it is being conserved in another, a flawed system wide open to fraud and misuse. This approach is strongly promoted by large conservation groups that stand to benefit from carbon and biodiversity offset funds as a source of finance for the protected areas they manage, and these groups collaborate closely with industry, northern governments and key actors in the CBD process. The renewed commitments made to NBS and offsets enshrined in the global ["Leaders' Pledge for Nature"](#) signed ahead of the 2020 Biodiversity Summit signals the extent to which the corporate conservation agenda is now dominating global policy-making on climate change and biodiversity.

The rise of corporate eco-philanthropy

Along with the Gates Foundation's catalytic philanthropy, which is geared mainly towards agriculture (and [geoengineering](#)), eco-philanthropy is also on the rise. This involves powerful business people with vested interests financing a model of fortress-style conservation that requires the strict protection of certain areas, often triggering human rights violations that hit forest communities, women and other underrepresented groups the hardest. Recent examples include Amazon founder and CEO Jeff Bezos's ten-billion-dollar "Earth Fund", with [some of the most conservative conservation organizations on the planet](#) each receiving \$100 million in a first round of payments, and Swiss billionaire businessman Hansjörg Wyss's [donations to the so-called 30by30 scheme](#), which aims for 30% of the planet to be turned into a protected area by 2030.

The capture of the Climate Summit: false solutions & zero ambition



The UNFCCC is closely tied to and influenced by corporations from different sectors whose interests are squarely opposed to solving the climate crisis.

One of the ways that corporations exert influence is through the sponsorship of UNFCCC COPs, which are the main intergovernmental spaces for climate policy-making. [Sponsors of COP21](#), where the Paris Agreement was signed, included BMW, Vattenfall, NewHolland Agriculture and the Indonesia Biofuel Producers Association. This year's COP26 sponsors include [two members of the Drax-led Zero Carbon Humber Partnership](#), SSE and National Grid. The Humber Partnership has applied for millions in public funding to develop a Bioenergy with Carbon Capture and Storage pilot project, a dangerous climate technofix that the UK government is highly supportive of.

The corporate takeover of the UNFCCC has also taken place in the conference halls and at the negotiating tables. For instance, [Shell's CEO boasted about their influence](#) in shaping the highly controversial and still to be agreed Article 6 of the Paris Agreement, which deals with "market-based climate solutions" such as offsetting and emissions trading. Keen to influence negotiations on Article 6 at COP25 in Madrid, the International Emissions Trading Association (IETA) had a [delegation of over 140 people](#) including representatives from Shell and Chevron strolling the conference halls. It also launched its ["Markets for Natural Climate Solutions Initiative"](#) there, a scheme to greenwash and offset the

emissions of major fossil fuel companies. These efforts will culminate in November, where COP26 President Alok Sharma aims at ["resolving long-standing divisions around Paris' markets-governing Article 6 and agreeing a post-2020 rulebook for international emissions trading."](#)

We can therefore expect huge corporate efforts to conclude Article 6 negotiations in Glasgow, which would finally allow for the implementation of large-scale emissions trading and offsetting, a truly disastrous outcome for the climate.

Another ominous statement from the UK's COP presidency is that they want to ["make the net-zero debate societal"](#), and expect many more corporate net-zero announcements during the negotiations. Net-zero, [dubbed "zero ambition" by many CSOs](#), refers to emissions reductions being "net" rather than "absolute", allowing offsetting and other false solutions to mask a lack of action on genuine emissions reductions. Big corporations like [Syngenta](#), [Nestle](#) and [ENI](#) have jumped onto the net-zero bandwagon because it essentially allows them to continue business as usual. The UN is directly encouraging this greenwashing through numerous initiatives that praise institutions as climate leaders for making net-zero pledges. These include two UNFCCC initiatives: the [Race to Zero](#), a global coalition of thousands of city councils, businesses, financial institutions

and universities, and the new [Glasgow Financial Alliance for Net Zero](#); and two industry-led UNEP initiatives: the [Net-Zero banking alliance](#), and the soon-to-be-launched ["Insurers for Net Zero"](#).

Agriculture has also featured increasingly prominently in the climate negotiations in recent years, and discussions have focused on the Koronivia Joint Working Group on Agriculture. Countries with strong interests in the industrial livestock sector have played an important role in these discussions and it is no surprise therefore that agribusinesses such as Yara, the world's largest fertilizer and agrochemical company, are also increasingly prominent in the climate negotiations and other UN events.

One of the ways that a corporate agenda is being pushed in Koronivia and other UN processes is through support for Climate-Smart Agriculture (CSA), [coined by agribusiness](#) as a golden opportunity to use the growing awareness of climate change to disguise their corporate agendas as 'green'. Also championed by the Gates Foundation, CSA is a neo-liberal approach to agricultural development and governance based on ["pricing, market-making, technology and protecting private property rights"](#). Direct UN support for CSA began in 2013 with the formation of the [UN Global Alliance for Climate Smart Agriculture \(GACSA\)](#), which aimed to enable 500 million farmers to

practice CSA by 2030 and which now has over 70 corporate members including Yara, Syngenta and Kellogg's.

The UNFCCC's main funding mechanism, the Green Climate Fund (GCF), is another UN body impacted by the [increasing influence of the private sector](#). As a direct result, the Fund now has an obsession with leveraging private sector investment and

blending public and private finance. It also has a contested Private Sector Facility funding window, where [accredited entities with dubious track records and clear conflicts of interest like HSBC \(Europe's second largest fossil fuel financier\)](#) can apply for finance. Multilateral development banks with strong interests in the industrial livestock and farming sectors such as the European

Investment bank and the Asian Development Bank can partner with GCF to implement projects, develop funding proposals and manage and monitor projects and programs.

Conclusion

Unless the corporate capture of the UN—through public-private partnerships, corporate philanthropism and a multitude of other schemes—is halted and reversed, 2021 will be an especially devastating year for sustainable food systems, biodiversity and the climate.

The UN Food Systems Summit will set the stage by promoting technofixes like genetically modified organisms rather than food sovereignty, agroecology and genuinely sustainable diets. The Biodiversity Summit will then further this agenda by adopting scientifically flawed and ambiguous terminology like “nature-based solutions” that open the door to ecologically destructive policy options serving commercial interests rather than planetary survival. Finally, the icing on the cake, the Climate COP will see a corporate-sponsored dirty deal on Article 6 of the Paris Agreement and the implementation of a fraudulent global carbon offset market that fatally undermines meaningful climate action for the next 30 to 50 years.

Fortunately, social movements and civil society groups are mobilizing against this corporate agenda. The Civil Society Mechanism to the Committee on Food Security has [formally rejected the UN Food Systems Summit](#) as a corporate-dominated show and is planning a series of counter-events to denounce the corporate takeover of UN food policy. The [People's Coalition on Food Sovereignty](#) and other movements are also loudly criticizing the corporate take-over of the UNFSS and food policy in general. The [CBD Alliance](#) is mobilizing to oppose “nature-based solutions” and other corporate bandwagons in the Biodiversity Summit. And a growing group of [NGOs, social movements and academics](#) involved in the Climate Summit

are raising the alarm about the risks of flawed carbon offset markets and so-called “net-zero approaches.”

Increased collaboration between these different movements is vital to resisting the corporate takeover of the UN's food, biodiversity and climate agenda. At the same time, we must shift the focus onto the agroecological food systems, community conservation initiatives and other real solutions that are championed by women, Indigenous Peoples, peasant farmers and civil society all over the world.



This publication has been made possible thanks to financial support from Misereor, Swedish Society for Nature Conservation and a number of other generous donors to GFC's Unsustainable Livestock Campaign. The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect those of our contributors.

MISEREOR
IHR HILFSWERK

 Swedish Society
for Nature Conservation