

# Struggle for the Future of Food<sup>1</sup>

By Jomo Kwame Sundaram<sup>2</sup>

Producers and consumers seem helpless as food all over the world comes under fast growing corporate control. Such changes have also been worsening environmental collapse, social dislocation and the human condition.

## Longer term perspective

The recent joint report – by the International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems (IPES-Food) and the [ETC Action Group on Erosion, Technology and Concentration](#) – is ominous, to say the least.



[A Long Food Movement](#), principally authored by Pat Mooney with a team including IPES-Food Director Nick Jacobs, analyses how food systems are likely to evolve over the next quarter century with technological and other changes.

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<sup>1</sup> First published on Interpress Service, on 10 May 2021 on <http://www.ipsnews.net/2021/05/corrected-version-struggle-future-food/> and on <https://www.ksjomo.org/post/another-false-start-in-africa-sold-with-green-revolution-myths>.

<sup>2</sup> Jomo Kwame Sundaram, a former economics professor, was United Nations Assistant Secretary-General for [Economic Development](#), Assistant Director-General of the [UN Food and Agriculture Organization](#) (FAO) and received the [Wassily Leontief Prize for Advancing the Frontiers of Economic Thought](#) in 2007.

The report notes that 'hi-tech', data processing and asset management corporations have [joined established agribusinesses](#) in reshaping world food supply chains.

If [current trends continue](#), the food system will be increasingly controlled by large transnational corporations (TNCs) at the expense of billions of farmers and consumers.

### **Big Ag weds Big Data**

The Davos World Economic Forum's ([WEF](#)) much touted 'Fourth Industrial Revolution' (IR4.0), promoting digitisation, is transforming food systems, accelerating concentration in corporate hands.

New apps enable better tracking across supply chains, while 'precision farming' now includes using drones to spray pesticides on targeted crops, reducing inputs and, potentially, farming costs. Agriculture is now second only to the military in drone use.

Digital giants are working with other TNCs to extend enabling 'cloud computing' infrastructure. Spreading as quickly as the infrastructure allows, new 'digital ag' technologies have been displacing farm labour.

Meanwhile, food data have become more commercially valuable, e.g. to meet consumer demand, Big Ag profits have also grown by creating 'new needs'. Big data are already being used to manipulate consumer preferences.

With the pandemic, e-retail and food delivery services have grown even faster. Thus, e-commerce platforms have quickly become the world's top retailers.

New 'digital ag' technologies are also undermining diverse, ecologically more appropriate food agriculture in favour of unsustainable monocropping. The threat is great as family farms still feed more than two thirds of the world's population.

### **IR4.0 not benign**

Meanwhile, hi-tech and asset management firms have acquired significant shareholdings in food giants. Powerful conglomerates are integrating different business lines, increasing concentration while invoking competition and 'creative disruption'.

The IPES-ETC study highlights [new threats](#) to farming and food security as IR4.0 proponents exert increasing influence. The report warns that giving Big Ag the 'keys of the food system' worsens food insecurity and other existential threats.

Powerful corporations will increase control of most world food supplies. Big Ag controlled supply chains will also be more vulnerable as great power rivalry and competition continue to displace multilateral cooperation.

### **There is no alternative?**

But the report also presents a more optimistic vision for the next quarter century. In this alternative scenario, collaborative efforts, from the grassroots to the global level, empower social movements and civil society to resist.

New [technologies](#) are part of this vision, from small-scale drones for field monitoring to consumer apps for food safety and nutrient verification. But they would be cooperatively owned, open access and well regulated.

The report includes pragmatic strategies to [cut three quarters of agriculture's greenhouse gas emissions](#) and shift US\$4 trillion from Big Ag to agroecology and food sovereignty. These include “\$720 billion in subsidies” and “\$1.6 trillion in healthcare savings” due to malnutrition.

IPES-ETC also recommends taxing junk food, toxins, carbon emissions and TNC profits. It also urges criminal prosecution of those responsible for famine, malnutrition and environmental degradation.

Food security protocols are needed to supersede trade and intellectual property law, and not only for emergencies. But with food systems under growing stress, Big Ag solutions have proved attractive to worried policymakers who see no other way out.

### **Last chance to change course**

Historically, natural resources were commonly or publicly shared. Water and land have long been sustainably used by farmers, fisherfolk and pastoralists. But market value has grown with ‘property rights’, especially with corporate acquisition.

Touted as the best means to achieve food security, corporate investments in recent decades have instead undermined remaining ‘traditional’ agrarian ecosystems.

Big Ag claims that the food, ecological and climate crises have to be addressed with its superior new technologies harnessing the finance, entrepreneurship and innovation only they can offer.

But in fact, they have failed, instead triggering more problems in their pursuit of profit. As the new food system and corporate trends consolidate, it will become increasingly difficult to change course. Very timely, [A Long Food Movement](#) is an urgent call to action for the long haul.

### **Food systems summit**

According to [Marchmont Communications](#), “writing on behalf of the UN Food Systems Summit secretariat”, the “Summit was [originally announced](#) on 16 October 2019 by UN Secretary-General António Guterres and was conceived following conversations with the joint leadership of the three Rome-based United Nations agencies...at the [High-level Political Forum](#) in July 2019”.

On 12 June 2019, ‘Inspiration Speaker’ David Nabarro announced to the annual EAT Stockholm conference that a World Food Systems Summit (WFSS) would be held in 2021. The following day, a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was signed between the World Economic Forum (WEF) and the Office of the UN Secretary-General.

It stirred up so much controversy that the MOU was later removed from the website of the WEF, hardly reputed for its modesty. [Unsurprisingly](#), many believe that the WEF “pressed the Summit onto a reluctant UN Secretary-General”, and can be traced to its Food Systems Initiative.

Apparently, initial arrangements had bypassed the Rome-based UN food agencies, the [Food and Agriculture Organization](#), the [International Fund for Agricultural Development](#) and the [World Food Programme](#). Their heads were then consulted and brought on board in July 2019.

With so much at stake, representatives of food producers and consumers need to act urgently to prevent governments from allowing a UN sanctioned corporate takeover of global governance of food systems.

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Further readings:

- IPES-Food & ETC Group, [A Long Food Movement: Transforming food systems by 2045](#), 2021.
- GRAIN, [Digital control: how Big Tech moves into food and farming \(and what it means\)](#), 2021.

Selection of articles on [hungerexplained.org](https://hungerexplained.org) related to this topic:

- [Responsible businesses or greenwashing? The certification industry in support of multinationals](#), 2021.
- [The digital revolution in food and agriculture - Exciting promises, mixed results and risky bet](#), 2021.
- Opinions: [Rethinking Food and Agriculture – New Ways Forward](#) a review by Andrew MacMillan, 2021.
- Opinions: [Agribusiness Is the Problem, Not the Solution](#) by Jomo Kwame Sundaram, 2019.
- [The World Economic Forum's "New Vision for Agriculture" is moving ahead on the ground...](#) 2017.