

Chapter 6

Our Relationship with a Failed Food System

The dominant food system claims to feed the world, but instead, it fosters hunger, poverty, and disease. Despite global food surpluses, 9 million die of hunger every year, three billion people cannot afford a healthful diet, and one billion are obese.

The global corporate food system fails over one-third of the world's population. It consigns those with insufficient income and resources to poor quality, non-nutritious, and unethical food choices. The unregulated profit-driven food system has no interest in feeding those who cannot pay its price. Corporations find ways to maximize their profit without regard for fair food distribution, health, or care for the Earth and life.

Multinational corporations control international food trade and the domestic food production of many nations through trade agreements and corruption of governing processes. A few vast corporations control all the steps in the sprawling global corporate food chain, from seeds to point of purchase.

Reducing the multiple dimensions of food to a singular commodity price point defines the global corporate food system failure. Its profit depends upon unfair wage exchange relations favoring corporations against the interest of indigenous people and smaller growers, and on externalizing all health and ecological harms onto life and the Earth. Western governments subsidize and thus cheapen commodities such as corn and soybeans to advantage the corporate food system. Corporations grow food for the point of sale, not for life.

Yet, despite its failure to feed the world, our Western culture cannot imagine having a food system different from the one we have. We fully accept an unregulated food system dominated by distant corporations and governed by market rules that match purchasing power with supply and demand. We view those who grow their own food as backward or as hobbyists and look down on the poor to whom we grudgingly give food through taxes or charity.

Corporate Solution to Food Insecurity

The corporate food system uses the frame of food scarcity and the lack of food availability to explain the persistence of hunger and food insecurity. The corporations and government allies call their hunger solution the Green Revolution 2.0, which Bill Gates and the Rockefeller and Ford foundations currently pilot in Africa, despite the resistance from those they dispossess and exploit. Components of this mission to increase food production include:

- Intensification of corporate-controlled advanced technologies (such as robotic tractors and drone sensing), patented seeds, and more chemicals to increase yield per unit of land.
- Corporate-driven, top-down policies promoted by centralized governments as the one-size-fits-all solution to food insecurity.
- Increased monoculture crop production through greater privatization and concentration of land grabbed from small growers and indigenous people in the Global South.

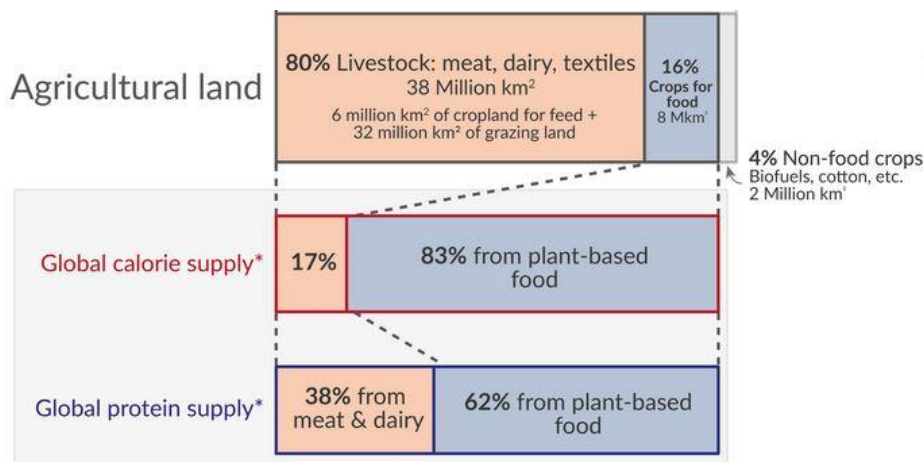
The Green Revolution 2.0 depends upon government and investor financial support and new trade agreements that would diminish domestic control of countries over their own food system and environmental regulations. The corporate food system already operates in this way. Still, the Green Revolution 2.0 would open new frontiers for it to further externalize its production costs and maximize its profits, all justified to feed the hungry. Nevertheless, corporations would continue to sell their privatized food to those who can afford it.

Corrupted Global South nations work with global corporations to enable them to grab land and dismantle customary land rights. Commodity exports have boomed while hunger continues unabated or worsens. Half of those who produce 70% of the world's food go hungry, primarily small growers on marginalized land who depend on local markets in which corporations unfairly compete by dumping their highly subsidized commodities. Dispossessed growers become exploited field workers. This ongoing colonization project subordinates soil, territory, and lives to Western markets.

This narrative has the full support of politicians and the scientific community. A profit-driven global food system has become the only permitted worldview, and all alternative food systems get stamped as utopian, naïve, or socialist and then dismissed.

Food, Not Feed

The global corporate food system has convinced governments and institutions that we must double food production by 2050. This doubled crop production will not feed the hungry but will feed more livestock, based on a projected rise in the demand for meat as the developing world grows prosperous enough buy more meat.



Currently, livestock production uses 75% of all agricultural land to produce feed, primarily corn and soybeans. These crops represent more than a third of global calories and half of global protein. Only a small fraction of this plant protein benefits those who eat meat. The ecological and health impacts of increasing global meat consumption would devastate Earth, life, and human health. In addition,

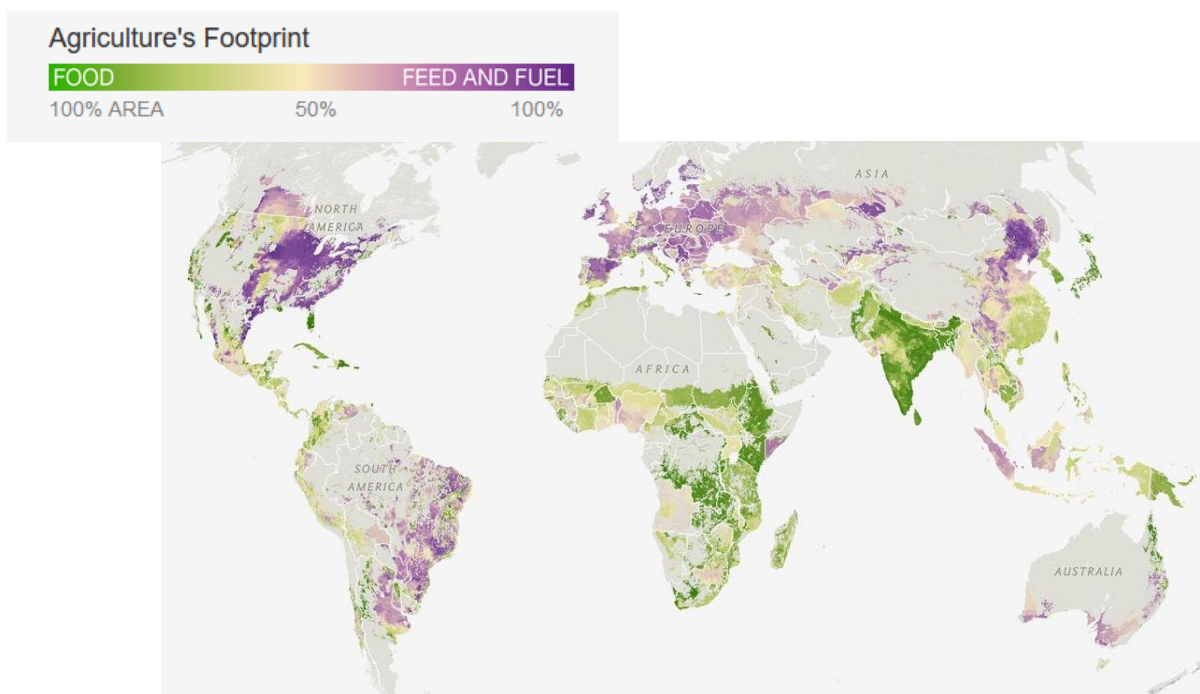
corporations convert cropland from food production to growing feedstock for biofuels, primarily corn and soybeans.

Today, only 55 % of the world's crop calories feed people directly; the rest feed livestock (about 36%) or become feedstock for biofuels and industrial products (roughly 9%). Though many of us consume meat, dairy, and eggs from animals raised on feedlots, only a fraction of the plant-based proteins in livestock feed make their way into the meat and milk we consume. Meat, dairy, and farmed fish provide just 17% of the world's calories and 38% of its protein.

<https://ourworldindata.org/global-land-for-agriculture>

Only half of the world's croplands are used to grow crops that humans consume directly. Over 40% of the land currently involved in overseas agricultural land acquisition will grow crops for biofuel production. Research shows that the UN climate assessment body, the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), greatly overestimates the carbon reduction potential of bioenergy crops for corn ethanol and biodiesel. The latest UN report calls for a global conversion of three times the area of the United States from existing land use to grow bioenergy crops. This goal has the potential of pushing over 300 million into food insecurity, equivalent to the US population.

The map below shows where most crops are grown for animal feed and biofuel feedstock.



www.nationalgeographic.com/foodfeatures/feeding-9-billion/

Our current food system has no intention of feeding the hungry. Instead, it increases crop production to grow feed for livestock for those who can afford meat and feedstock for biofuels to fuel our cars and jets, advancing the false claim that biofuels reduce carbon emissions.

Our Mutual Neediness for Food

Corporations claim that a profit-driven food system maximizes food distribution to the world's people through its price. The market-based food system asserts that those without food have no claim on the food of another as private property rights supersede moral obligations. Further, prices are just because they comply with the universally accepted rule of supply and demand: it is what it is.

Because all living beings need food, we have a common need for food, which makes us mutually needy. Capitalism reframes that reality into defining need as only those who cannot afford food. The corporate food system depends upon us forgetting our mutual neediness.

The market system frees the privileged from any sense of obligation to others. Those who can afford the food price stand apart from the world of neediness. We do not identify with those in need as we

deny our own neediness for food. The wealthy appear self-sufficient and without needs, yet we prove our neediness when we rely upon low-wage workers to provide us with food. The work of wage labor and unequal market relationships make the dependence of the wealthy upon the needy invisible.

The privileged prefer the government to provide food to the needy rather than through our own acts of charity. In this way, we separate ourselves further from solidarity in mutual neediness. Meeting the needs of the hungry transforms into bureaucratic procedures of a welfare state, which require those without food to identify themselves as poor, needy people. Those without food lose their dignity and social independence in exchange for food. Our mutual neediness for food becomes stigmatized. When a government fails to stave off hunger among its people, hungry people depend upon our charity. Thus, within corporate logic, the lack of charity causes hunger, not the lack of justice.

Faced with the extreme challenges of climate change, only two subsequent failed harvests will cause most of the world's population to need food. How will the justice of supply and demand feed us then?

Food as a Human Right

Conflict arises with the profit-driven food system when people claim that they have the right to food based on need, a claim rooted in the customary rights of common access to land for subsistence. Dispossessing people of their common land never extinguished their persistent claim of their right to food.

The UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the UN International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (1966) have framed the right to food as a legitimate right to which citizens can aspire. In this approach, nation-states are responsible for implementing human rights within a legal and nongovernmental advocacy approach. The US and twenty-two other nations have not ratified the Covenant.

The right to food requires the national government to guarantee the availability, accessibility, adequacy, and sustainability of food through legal mechanisms. Accountability for realizing food access rests with national governments, a right interconnected with other rights, from minimum wage to a social protection floor, from access to productive resources for growers to subsidized food for consumers.

Because of our essential and common need for food, many expect the government to manage the social mandate to provide food for all. However, when those who dominate the corporate food system control government policies, the government serves the needs of the corporations rather than the hungry. Corporations restrain the democratic capacity of Western nations. Within the U.S., both political parties depend upon corporations for campaign contributions and, in return, serve corporate interests. As corporate control of government tightens, the government's failure to overcome the inequities of the corporate food system deepens.

Instead, the U.S. government enables and empowers the global corporate food system. We can starkly see the government-corporate nexus through commodity-driven farm subsidies, food safety regulations designed for the largest producers, a swinging door between corporate and government positions of power, the failure of government to protect consumers from harmful agricultural chemicals and food additives, inadequate food security programs, enforcement of unfair trade agreements, corporate-driven research agendas of land grant universities, failure to enforce antitrust legislation, and largely exempting agriculture from environmental regulations.

Beyond national governments, the global corporate food system now has captured control of the policy agenda of the United Nations, where it has come to dominate multi-stakeholder processes, which increasingly exclude those who claim the right to food from the policy tables. International agencies such as the World Bank, the World Trade Organization, and the International Monetary Fund influence the price of food and enforce international food trade agreements. Still, they have no accountability for human rights to food or even to governments.

Most advocates of the current right-to-food approach do not question the commodification of food or its availability based on whether someone can afford it. They do not question food availability in an economic system where growers find it more profitable to grow crops for biofuels and livestock than for people.

We have also learned from the experiences of Russia and China that state control of food production fails catastrophically in feeding people. Centralized policies have not led to food security as state-controlled food systems impose uniform, one-size-fits-all programs and policies throughout the nation, ignoring local variations, adequate local monitoring, and the asymmetry of power between local and special interests.

We cannot look to a government founded on private property and individual rights to promote a rightful food system based on mutual neediness. People may claim they have the right to food based on need, but they do not have a seat at the table to guarantee that right. Neither an unaccountable profit-driven food system nor nation-state bureaucracies can guarantee the right to food.

We need a food system that guarantees the right to healthful food, a food system that cares for the Earth Interbeing and for those who produce the food that we eat. We cannot look toward either the global corporations or national governments for such a food system. To transform the food system requires us to unlearn our conditioned Western beliefs and attitudes. We need to act in the world with the direction of wisdom and experience to bring forth a food system that guarantees food for all.

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