

UN Food Summit Boycotted Over Gates Influence

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Hundreds of farmers and human rights groups are boycotting the 2021 United Nations Food Systems Summit because they believe it favors agribusiness interests, elite foundations and the exploitation of African food systems
- The controversy began when Agnes Kalibata was appointed as the event's head; Kalibata is the president of the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA), an organization funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation
- Gates is promoting an agricultural agenda that supports agrochemicals, patented seeds, fake meat and corporate control
- Planning documents for the Summit also reveal plans for a “radical transformation shift” in Africa, away from traditional farming practices and toward industrial farming – even describing the potential as the “new oil”

Hundreds of farmers and human rights groups are boycotting the 2021 United Nations Food Systems Summit because they believe it favors agribusiness interests, elite foundations and the exploitation of African food systems.¹

The Summit claims it is convening to “launch bold new actions

to transform the way the world produces and consumes food,”² but critics say it is biased toward industrial, corporate farming while leaving out those in regenerative agriculture and the knowledge of indigenous people.³

The controversy began right from the start, when U.N. secretary general António Guterres appointed Agnes Kalibata as the event’s head. Kalibata is the former Rwandan agriculture minister who is now the president of the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA), an organization funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.⁴

AGRA is essentially a Gates Foundation subsidiary, and while some of its projects appear to be beneficial, most of its goals are centered on promoting biotechnology and chemical fertilizers.

Corporate Interests Dominating Food Summit

After Kalibata was appointed special envoy to the 2021 United Nations Food Systems Summit in December 2019, 176 civil society organizations and farmer groups from 83 countries urged Guterres to withdraw the appointment due to Kalibata’s clear conflicts of interest with corporate interests.

A second statement, signed by more than 500 academics and organizations, also opposed Kalibata’s appointment to, and her organization of, the Summit.⁵ AGRA is known to promote the interests of agribusiness, leading civil society organizations to argue that Kalibata’s appointment was a clear conflict of interest.

“This concern over Kalibata’s nomination has been largely borne-out by Kalibata’s top-down approach to organizing the Summit and her exclusion of those most affected by food insecurity and malnutrition in the planning process,” according to an August 2020 report by AGRA Watch.⁶

A dozen individuals representing development banks, academic institutions and the private sector came forward in support of Kalibata, but “11 had past or current connections to the Gates Foundation,” AGRA Watch reported, adding:⁷

“These findings illustrate the influence of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF) on global food and agricultural policy. AGRA Watch has continually documented the role of the BMGF in influencing agricultural development, which has grown immensely in recent years.

That Gates Foundation seeks to exercise influence not only through its funding of projects and shaping of expertise, but also in funding the governance platforms that determine food and agricultural policy. This role of the BMGF in driving policy decisions based on its proprietary and technological model of agricultural development is often overlooked.”

Precision Agriculture, Genetic Engineering Take Center Stage

Concerns that the Summit was dominated by corporate industry heightened when its concept paper included precision agriculture, data collection and [genetic engineering](#) as pillars for addressing food security while leaving out regenerative agriculture.

As reported by The Guardian, Michael Fakhri, the U.N. special rapporteur on the right to food, wrote to Kalibata stating that the Summit was focused on “science and technology, money and markets” while leaving fundamental questions about inequality, accountability and governance unaddressed:⁸

“It [appears] heavily skewed in favor of one type of approach to food systems, namely market-based solutions ... it leaves out experimental/traditional knowledge that has the acute effect of excluding indigenous peoples and their knowledge.

The business sector has been part of the problem of food systems and has not been held accountable.”

The 300 million-member Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples' Mechanism announced plans to boycott the Summit and set up a meeting of their own, while others, including Sofía Monsalve Suárez, head of nutrition rights group Fian International, questioned the Summit's legitimacy:⁹

“We cannot jump on a train that is heading in the wrong direction ... We sent a letter last year to the secretary general about our concerns. It was not answered. We sent another last month, which has also not been answered. The summit appears extremely biased in favor of the same actors who have been responsible for the food crisis.”

Other nutrition experts also expressed the need for the Summit to be more inclusive of initiatives such as agro-ecology and food sovereignty.

Food Group Calls on UN to Sever Ties With WEF

A group of 148 organizations from 28 countries also called on the U.N. to revoke their 2019 strategic partnership formed with the [World Economic Forum](#) (WEF). WEF's involvement with the Summit has been called a form of “corporate hijacking” that would infringe on people's rights to food and food production. According to the People's Coalition on Food Sovereignty:¹⁰

“The WEF will exploit the Summit to streamline neoliberal globalization, which it has espoused for the past 50 years. It is the perfect venue to push for the role of ‘Fourth Industrial Revolution technologies’ to transform food systems, which the WEF has been championing since 2017.

A corporate-led FSS [Food Systems Summit] would be a great

advantage to the political elites and corporate billionaires, enabling them to pose hypocritically as responsible entities that promote healthier diets and climate action.

... The sidelined and marginalized sectors in society – the poor farmers, workers, Indigenous Peoples, herders, pastoralists, fisherfolks, urban poor, women, Dalits, and youth – should replace these corporate moguls in shaping the Summit’s proceedings and reforms.”

Beyond the Summit, WEF’s takeover of the U.N. has been denounced by more than 400 civil society organizations and 40 international networks, which claim it will only accelerate the move toward a privatized, undemocratic global takeover.

Monsalve Suárez stated:¹¹

“Corporations in the global industrial food chain alone destroy 75 billion tons of topsoil annually and are responsible for the annual loss of 7.5 million hectares of forest. This destruction, along with other factors, leaves 3.9 billion underfed or malnourished people. The WEF represents the interests of those who destroy the environment and abuse our human rights. It cannot be considered a strategic partner in solving the world’s crises.”

Africa’s Traditional Food Systems Under Attack

Planning documents for the Summit also reveal plans for a “radical transformation shift” in Africa, away from traditional farming practices and toward industrial farming – even describing the potential as the “new oil.”¹² The African Centre for Biodiversity (ACB), which released the documents, said the plans recycle the “same false solutions ... with the same narrow benefits accruing to a limited number of actors.”¹³

For instance, one section of the documents is titled “the

promise of digital and biotechnologies and the transformation of food systems,” and describes “the significant potential for capturing large economic, social and environmental payoffs from the use of biotechnology products ... In West Africa, for instance, farmers can benefit significantly from the adoption of Bt cotton.”¹⁴

Technology and development take center stage, along with “strengthening the use of big data” for decisions on things like fertilizer use, genetically engineered crops and “accessing markets.” As noted by U.S. Right to Know:¹⁵

“This agenda aligns perfectly with the plans of the agrichemical industry, the Gates Foundation and its main agricultural development program, the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa, which encourages African countries to pass business-friendly policies and scale up markets for patented seeds, fossil-fuel based fertilizers and other industrial inputs they say are necessary to boost food production.”

“The main problem with AGRA,” Global Justice Now explains, “is that it is laying the groundwork for the deeper penetration of African agriculture by agribusiness corporations,” and:

“The BMGF, through AGRA, is one of the world’s largest promoters of chemical fertiliser. Some grants given by the BMGF to AGRA have been specifically intended to ‘help AGRA build the fertiliser supply chain’ in Africa. One of the largest of AGRA’s own grants, worth \$25 million, was to help establish the African Fertiliser Agribusiness Partnership (AFAP) in 2012 whose very goal is to ‘at least double total fertiliser use’ in Africa.”¹⁶

Bill Gates Is the Biggest Owner of US Farmland

The BMGF’s involvement in the Summit is also self-serving, as

Bill Gates [owns more farmland in the U.S.](#) than any other private farmer, having purchased a total of 242,000 acres – much of it considered some of the richest soil in the U.S. – at a frenzied pace over the past few years.¹⁷

Gates, however, isn't interested in regenerative agriculture but instead is furthering an agricultural agenda that supports agrochemicals, patented seeds, [fake meat](#) and corporate control – interests that undermine regenerative, sustainable, small-scale farming. One of the key players in this agenda is the widespread adoption of synthetic meat.

Gates has made it clear that he believes switching to synthetic beef is the solution to reducing methane emissions that come from animals raised on concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs).¹⁸

The strong recommendation to replace beef with fake meat is made in Gates' book "How to Avoid a Climate Disaster: The Solutions We Have and the Breakthroughs We Need," which was released in February 2021.¹⁹ In an interview with MIT Technology Review, he goes so far as to say that people's behaviors should be changed to learn to like fake meat and, if that doesn't work, regulations could do the trick.²⁰

What many aren't aware of, however, is that Gates is either personally invested in, or invested in via Breakthrough Energy Ventures, fake meat companies like [Beyond Meats](#), [Impossible Foods](#), Memphis Meats and other companies he actively promotes.²¹

When asked whether he thinks plant-based and lab-grown meats could "be the full solution to the protein problem globally," he says that, in middle- to above-income countries, yes, and that people can "get used to it."²²

Small Farmers, Regenerative Agriculture Are the Answer

The U.N. Food Summit is poised to bow down to corporate ideology instead of embracing the small farmers and regenerative practices that have true potential to feed the world and heal the planet. If you're new to this discussion, you can find the top [six reasons to support regenerative agriculture here](#). As Timothy Wise, senior adviser at the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, told The Guardian:²³

“A growing number of farmers, scientists and development experts now advocate a shift from high-input chemical-intensive agriculture to low-input ecological farming. They are supported by an array of new research documenting both the risks of continuing to follow our current practices and the potential benefits of a transition to more sustainable farming.”

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