



# The Profession Of Greenwashing by Monsanto

How companies use the language of food security to legitimize making profit

When thinking about food security and climate change, we have to realise that the impacts caused by our food consumption are inconceivable. But now we can breathe again: many people and professionals within the seeds industry have well thought plans and, above all, strategies like sustainable agriculture and green solutions. On consumers side green products and natural ingredients for an ongoing consumption are increasing. Take a look at the picture beneath, promising a solution to feed the world in the light of the rising sun. I am sure, you can guess, who the creator of that fabulous idea is.

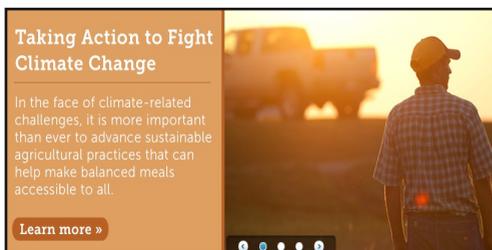
that many small farmers are pending on the big monopoly on the seed market, I would trust in Monsanto being a group of people saving humans and caring for our planet.

Due to different *greenwashing instruments* like model projects, public staged partnerships with environmental organisations and the adoption of a certain language<sup>1</sup>, help companies like Monsanto to build up their image. Underlined by a web design that is kept in earth tones and a plain logo (see in the title) that shows green leaves and natural colours, implementing healthy growth, the language use is obviously planned to constitute an image of a company that is in close touch with nature, a company that is painted in green.

Greenwashing and language contains two strategies. On the one hand, terms or sentences exaggerate facts – or are plain and simple lies. On the other hand, it is possible to use words that go with a certain connotation and do not mean anything or misdirect the reader. The Monsanto website is a goldmine for both.

The maybe most serious and present lie of Monsanto can be seen in this quote:

*The answer you'll hear most often is that agriculture needs to produce more food because the world's population is*



## How Monsanto is creating the picture of an environmental actor

Exploring the internet presence of Monsanto, [www.monsanto.com](http://www.monsanto.com), not having any idea of its media presence and never heard of the discussions about headwords like glyphosate or the fact

growing. *That's certainly true, and Monsanto—along with many other companies, governments and organizations—has been working to develop seeds and other systems that help farmers grow more.*<sup>2</sup>

No, it is not. Looking at the enormous food waste that takes place in many countries, for example 88 million tonnes per year in Europe, about a third of all food produced globally for human consumption is lost or wasted<sup>3</sup>. So, simply producing more – especially the way Monsanto calls for – is not sufficiently to feed the growing population. However, the whole argumentation of Monsanto's actions is built on this pretext to produce – for profit.

More common are words and sentences without any substance at all. Directly lying or changing numbers or facts would be too obvious, but speaking with words of a positive connotation and adapting their meanings to the own goals is not too hard.

*In 2008 Monsanto made a commitment to sustainable agriculture – pledging to produce more, conserve more, and improve farmers' lives by 2030.*<sup>4</sup> But what does it mean to 'improve farmer's lives'? And especially whose farmers lives? Many farmers became dependent of the monopolized market of seeds. Especially small holder farmers suffer from hybrids and patents on seeds<sup>5</sup>. They are not the ones who benefit from scientific solutions and innovations Monsanto and others offer. 'Science for a better life'<sup>6</sup>, the slogan of Bayer – which immediately comes in mind in the view of the recent takeover of Monsanto by the German chemistry company - raises

the same question: which people do really benefit from their better life?



'Act Ethically and Responsibly' is one of Monsanto's principles, but is it ethical to obtain intellectual property rights on seeds for profit? The words of Chairman Hugh Grant are figurative chosen:

*'Sustainability is a journey that presents a constant but welcome challenge: how can we push ourselves to achieve even more? How do we feed a growing planet in a changing climate?'*<sup>7</sup> To use 'sustainability' as a challenge can mean everything and as long as you ask a question, you are not lying.

With 'The Conversation'<sup>8</sup> Monsanto had the awesome idea to get into dialogue with the population. Here a few examples of those statements, full of meanings. Be aware:

**'At Monsanto, we're all about sustainable solutions.'**

Bringing the responsibility to the consumers is one of the specialities of Monsanto...

**'We believe building a balanced plate begins with balanced shopping. That's why having a market full of a variety of fruits, vegetables, grains, dairy and protein is so important.'**

**'Plant breeding – inspired by the past.'**

**'Scientists, including plant breeders, harness nature to help nourish a growing world.'**

Reading all those hope stories one could easily forget about Monsanto's business. It is hushed up by positive language, accentuated by sweet pictures of a better world and tries to fool us...

Another interesting example of greenwashing influencing the language is so called new speak<sup>9</sup>. The development of the term 'pesticides' is a part of that. Looking through the last annual reports of Monsanto, it is outstanding that this word is used more passive and goes always together with 'reducing' or 'safe use'<sup>10</sup>. Otherwise, and definitely more often, they use the term 'crop protection operations', euphemism par excellence – and used in relation with efficiency and to 'provide [...] to minimize more damage'<sup>11</sup>.

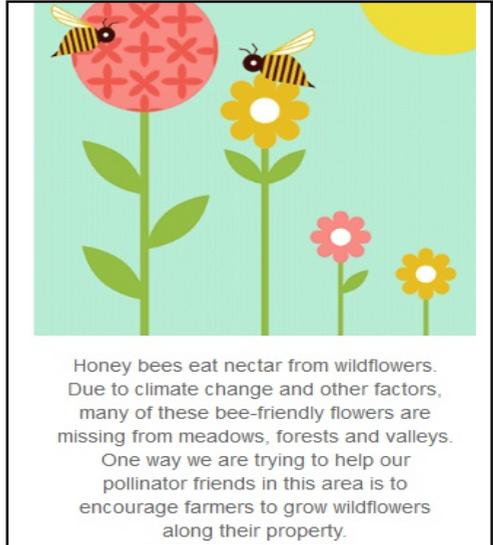
**Feeding the words with a meaning: projects as a greenwashing instrument**

In order to fill such meaningless statements with a little value, Monsanto has its hand in many networks and projects. Monsanto is, for example, member of The Round Table for Responsible Soy (RTRS), which is highly criticized<sup>12</sup>. Multinationals put themselves into a positive light through a membership, actually their influence made the decisions on a sustainable soy production even weaker.

Other examples for strengthening its image by appealing positive projects are WEMA<sup>13</sup> or participating in the 'Fighting Rural Hunger Volunteer Weeks'<sup>14</sup>.

Numerous actions can be found, but let's pick out one and explore how they swing the paintbrush and paint it green: 'honey bee healthy'<sup>15</sup> is skilfully set in

scene – one could consider detracting from the consequences of the own machinations.



'Bees living around production agriculture can lack a diverse diet.' But instead of taking on responsibility, climate change is claimed as the reason.<sup>16</sup> Even recognizing that honey bees are insects and may suffer from pesticides, the so called *Varroa mites* are named as threat #1 to honey bees. Yes, those mites are dangerous for honey bees, but this gets only really critically in combination with monocultures and pesticides<sup>17</sup>. Monsanto's action against this: 'encourag[ing]e farmers to grow wildflowers along their property'<sup>18</sup> and 'develop[ing]technology to protect the honey bee from this nasty parasite'.

Why they are not solving the core of the problem and readmit biodiversity is clear. Otherwise, their products against the *Varroa mites*, could not be sold anymore: efficient 'crop protection operations', responsibly developed by BioDirect-"solutions" by Monsanto<sup>19</sup>.

## **The profession of greenwash: ‘sustainability’ as a main motivation for acting**

But not enough: ‘responsibility’ and ‘sustainability’ are even claimed as main motivations of acting within our food system and are present on the website. Monsanto appoints that hunger and food insecurity is as a problem of availability of food. The increasing world population is to be fed. The brilliant solution: ‘Producing More. Conserving More. Improving Lives.’<sup>20</sup>, by doubling yields of its core crops, ‘Growing better together’ is the slogan of its sustainability strategy in 2015. All this is supported through innovative methods like biotechnology.

Big corporations are using greenwashing since years as a market strategy and to fool consumers. On the example of Monsanto can be seen that the skills of building a waterproof image of a caring corporation have highly increased: through systematically integrating the language of food security.

## **The concept of food security as a breeding ground for greenwashing**

Hunger as an availability problem is precisely, what simplifies the translation of corporation’s pursuit of profit into the language of food security. The principle of food security<sup>21</sup> is a more technical understanding of feeding the world, and means basically securing the availability of food. Following this assumption, it makes sense to believe that more people can be fed through an increased production and more efficient and innovative methods like big corporations and deve-

lopment policies postulate. Therefore, the concept of food security creates the ideal breeding ground for their efforts of increasing food production and, according to Benjamin Shepherd, monopolizing the market.

*‘The underlying implication is that controlling or hoarding of resources must be good; however, control and hoarding by some invariably implies exclusion and deprivation for others. Food-security language has become widely employed as a way of pursuing particular agendas and legitimizing particular actions, especially those of powerful actors, but at the expense of others.’<sup>22</sup>*



Producing more to feed all the humans is always accepted, even, if it is used to maximize their own profit. What began with greenwashing and trying to sell the actions as friendly as possible towards the environment ended up in a structural misuse of terms like sustainability. It is not the case that big companies are negating today’s problems like hunger of millions of people and climate change. Instead, they make use of taking the bull by the horns create the picture of the new hero’s in the food system. They adopt those problems as their mission – supported by the language of food security. ‘Taking action to fight climate change’,

Monsanto's slogan at the picture on the top is one of those examples.

That doesn't mean that greenwashing is not being practised anymore –quite the contrary. Greenwashing instruments, according to the example of Monsanto, accompany and professionalize the perspective of growth as a solution for food security. That makes it possible to twist the words of the critics and is even more dangerous. If you decide not to believe Monsanto, to be against their actions and their motto '*growing better together*'<sup>23</sup>, you seem to be against a better world, against saving humans and honey bee health, against being sustainable.

### **Why is it so important to identify that language use?**

*The commandeering of food-security language helps explain the contradiction that, while it is ostensibly about hunger (achieving sufficient food for 'all people at all times'), food security has instead become a game for powerful actors competing for advantage (profit or scarce resources such as agricultural land) in an increasingly resource-constrained world.*<sup>24</sup>

To see the lie behind the ideology of producing more saves the planet and to understand that resources will end even faster, one only has to think a bit further then until 2030. If we let companies like Monsanto solve the problem of limited resources, the soils will be leached and honey bees may exist as characters in children's books – but not in real. While speaking the language of food security, the consequences of their policy and economic activity are different. Because at

Monsanto, it's not all about sustainable solutions – it's all about profit.

The consequences of that can be seen every day. The agricultural solution that Monsanto postulates won't be able feed a growing population. Monocultures of soy and the massive use of pesticides damage the soils and health of many humans. Patents on seeds restrict small holder farmers in producing food and limit diversity of crops heavily. Destroyed soils and less biodiversity will weaken the ecological system enormously and the production won't be possible on a large scale anymore. Therefore, the validity of Monsanto's offered solutions will only be temporary. Many of the outcomes of Monsanto's actions are examined at the International Monsanto Tribunal in The Hague on the 14th-16th October.



The comparison of the promises that are made in the name of food security and the real outcomes shows the contradictions, as Shepherd states. Learning to identify those lies and set the focus on those who are currently suffering can be one first step in taking action to achieve justice in the food system.

## Understanding mechanisms: Consuming for a better world?

Monsanto's self-representation seems to be abstract and far away. For individuals who aren't touched by those issues in their everyday life, it is hardly possible to question its misused words and then act against them. But what is working on a large scale is being practised on small scales, too.

Each of us is a consumer, every day. Many of us have already heard of gaps in the labelling and do not trust in organic labels, for example, for 100%. Greenwashing methods are meanwhile well known. The milk package shows a happy cow on a colourful flower meadow, but it is obvious, that most of the time the milk comes from some cows hold on a narrow space in huge factory farm, probably even if it is organic milk.

But do we stop buying the milk for this reason? Honestly, no. We soothe conscience through the belief, that a 'natural' or the happy cow on the milk saves the planet. On a consumer's level, the professions of greenwashing, connected to the typical capitalist idea of growth, lend to the argumentation, that consuming 'green' products saves economies and strengthens the system of food security. It is even promised that without a high consumption our economic system will be damaged – and food security would become even more critical.

## Don't let the theft of language happen

That is where *doubt* should be our loyal companion. No green project in a dirty company can be honestly green. And every product that we buy affects something or someone. Consuming has, in every case an impact on humans and environment, whether products come from big companies, or from the organic farm in the next valley. Companies like Monsanto may be able to conceal their misdeeds through greenwashing and a clever marketing strategy. But don't let them take a position as a hero of food security.

But, how is it possible to avoid the on-going misuse of language and the currently functioning legitimations of making profit within the food chain?

*The first thing should be questioning the whole concept of food security* in general. It does not consider dependence and power structures. And it does not consider actions controlled by particular interests, either. Without the assumption that securing availability of food is the only thing that counts, argumentations of Monsanto to simply '*produce more*' will become void. Food sovereignty goes further – and implementing this concept enables to exclude making profit from the food value chain. Therefore, Monsanto could not legitimate its crimes and profit making in the name of food security, anymore.

This also applies on a consumer's level. It is indispensable to question argumentations like a high consumption strengthens the economic system. It is not possible for individuals not to consu-

me at all. But do not consume in the faith of acting for a better world.

*Secondly, be loud against language losing its meanings.*



This seems to be more difficult, as it does not really make sense to stubbornly use ‘sustainability’ in an honest way, but no one actually notices. The Guerrilla against Greenwashing at COP21<sup>25</sup> with ‘as-green-as-stickers’, started 2015 by ASEED can be good way to get people together and make the misused language and greenwashing strategies more obvious.

But it still seems to be a huge challenge to figure out how language theft can be avoided. Any ideas how this can happen are more than welcome, but it is obvious that it has to happen on a larger scale than the individual.

It is clear that in the long term the meaning of *sustainability* has to be saved like some people save ancient seeds to step out of this ongoing system, that is not only created by big companies. But this is another topic.

## Sources and extra information:

1 Cf. Müller, U. (2007): Greenwash in Zeiten des Klimawandels. LobbyControl- Initiative für Transparenz und Demokratie. Köln

2 Monsanto (2016): URL: <http://www.monsanto.com/improvingagriculture/pages/why-does-agriculture-need-to-be-improved.aspx> (10.10.2016).

3 European Commission (2016): Stop food waste. URL: [http://ec.europa.eu/food/safety/food\\_waste/stop/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/food/safety/food_waste/stop/index_en.htm) (27.9.2016).

4Monsanto Company: Our commitment to sustainable agriculture. URL: <http://www.monsanto.com/whoweare/pages/our-commitment-to-sustainable-agriculture.aspx> (24.9.2016).

It is a fact that the monopolizing mechanisms on the seed sector itself violate the independence of farmers all over the world. Through the recent fusion of Bayer and Monsanto the monopoly status is even greater and the small farmer’s rights will suffer more under those one-dimensional market structures.

5 GreenBiz (2015): Small sustainable farmers struggle against Monsanto. URL: <https://www.greenbiz.com/article/small-sustainable-farmers-struggle-against-monsanto-africa> (28.9.2016).

6 Bayer (2016): Logo on <http://www.bayer.com/> (27.9.2016).

7 Those statements are to find on this link: <http://www.monsanto.com/sustainability/pages/default.aspx> (24.9.2016).

8 To find on <http://discover.monsanto.com/conversation/> (27.9.2016).

9 New speak is a term that stems from the world-renowned novel ‘1984’ by George Orwell. It describes a strategy of totalitarian states (or their institutions) to guide language and control people’s thoughts through elimination of particular terms and reinterpretation and creation of euphemisms.

10 Monsanto Company (2001-2015): Annual reports. St. Louis

11 Monsanto Company (2015): Sustainability Report 2015. Growing better together.

12GMWatch a.o. (2011): Certified responsible? Critical assessment of the Round Table of Responsible Soy. URL: [http://gifsoja.nl/Gifsoja/RTRS\\_files/RTRS%20backgroundunder%20v2.pdf](http://gifsoja.nl/Gifsoja/RTRS_files/RTRS%20backgroundunder%20v2.pdf)

13 WEMA is a partnership, founded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Howard G. Buffet Foundation and USAID. Its aim is to reduce hunger in Sub-Saharan Africa through more drought-tolerant maize. Monsanto contributes through ‘technical expertise to develop [...] locally adapted maize

hybrids.'(<http://www.monsanto.com/improving-agriculture/pages/wema.aspx> 28.9.2016).

14 More information on <http://www.monsanto.com/whoware/pages/fighting-rural-hunger-volunteer-weeks.aspx> (24.9.2016).

15 Bee healthy projects are broadly explained on this link: <http://www.monsanto.com/improving-agriculture/pages/honey-bee-health.aspx> (24.9.2016).

Critical voices figured out how big companies producing pesticides try to stretch the causes of bee mortality. Especially the Varroa mites seem to be the perfect scapegoat. It seems that Monsanto shows itself as a honey bee protector to legitimize the production of further pesticides. (More on this link: <http://www.pressherald.com/2014/06/15/bees-big-business/> 28.9.2016).

16 Monsanto (2016): "Entdecke Monsanto" und die Honigbiene: <http://discover.monsanto.com/save-bees> (26.9.2016).

17 An article explains that not only one factor can be the cause of bee mortality, only available in German: Umweltinstitut München: Gründe für das Bienensterben. URL <http://www.umweltinstitut.org/themen/landwirtschaft/bienen/gruende-fuer-das-bienensterben.html> (28.9.2016).

18 As well as in the Netherlands, where farmers implement this strategy because they are not allowed to use chemical fertilizers near the water canals. What sounds like a good step to more biodiversity can also backfire and is criticized, because farmers put pesticides on their fields and the bees, which go to the planted flowery meadows, get easily in touch with the poisons of the pesticides. A buffer zone is supposed to be minimum 10 meters, for example, to protect biodiversity including the bees (more information on, only available in German: [http://www.bund.net/themen\\_und\\_projekte/chemie/pestizide/gefahr\\_fuer\\_die\\_natur/lebensraeume/pestizidebedrohenvieltaufwiesenundweiden/](http://www.bund.net/themen_und_projekte/chemie/pestizide/gefahr_fuer_die_natur/lebensraeume/pestizidebedrohenvieltaufwiesenundweiden/) 3.10.2016).

19 BioDirect™ does research on products to ban the Varroa mites to ensure bee health according to Monsanto, URL: <http://www.monsanto.com/products/pages/biodirect.aspx> (24.9.2016).

20 <http://www.monsanto.com/whoware/pages/our-commitment-to-sustainable-agriculture.aspx> (24.9.2016).

21 In contrary to that – or more as an addition – food sovereignty is a more radical and broader concept and strives for the democratization of the whole food system. "Food security is more of a technical concept, and the right to food a legal one, food sovereignty is essentially a political concept." (Wind-

fuhr and Jonsen (2005): Food Sovereignty: Towards Democracy in Localised Food Systems.). Food sovereignty questions dependence and power structures in the whole food value chain and is in a long term view ... However, building the image of advocating for food security and putting itself in a positive light is hypocritical in the view of consequences that are caused by Monsanto and other companies within the agrarian sector.

22 Shepherd B. (2012): Thinking Critically about Food Security. In: Security Dialogue 43 (3): 195-212.

23 The slogan of Monsanto Sustainability Report 2015.

24 Shepherd B. (2012): Thinking Critically about Food Security. In: Security Dialogue 43 (3): 195-212.

25 More information on these actions: <http://aseed.net/en/guerilla-against-greenwashing-at-cop21/> (4.10.2016).

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