

Wageningen University & Research: Stop the Corporate Agenda



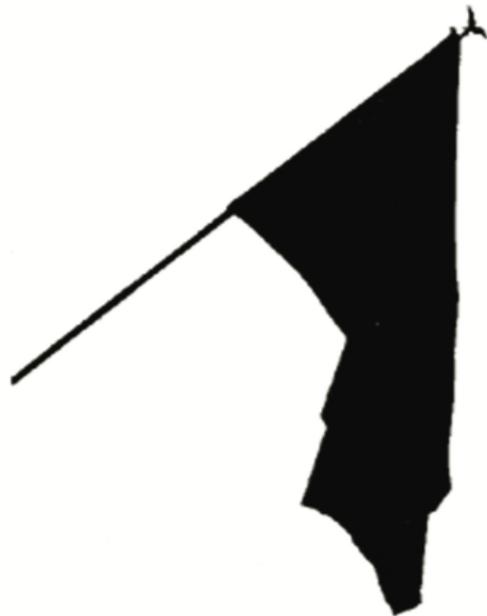
WUR's collaborations with corporations such as Unilever, FrieslandCampina, Syngenta, and Upfield are being placed under increasing scrutiny by activist groups[i], student organisations[ii], professors[iii], external organisations such as Foodwatch[iv] and Follow the Money[v], and the media[vi]. Many of these groups have also highlighted the disconnect between the university's promoted mission of achieving positive social and environmental impacts and the fact that the aforementioned corporations, despite desperately greenwashing their public image, are responsible for upholding socially and environmentally exploitative systems globally. The question arises as to whether university research can support the level of change necessary to achieve social and environmental justice whilst collaborating with companies who have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo.

Undoubtedly influenced by these corporations and their profit margins, WUR insists on trying to solve global challenges within a narrow neoliberal framework. In many of the most influential departments at WUR, transformative change is focussed on developing technological solutions to global problems whilst actively disregarding the need for a radical restructuring of our socio-economic institutions. A recent report found that some researchers at WUR felt working with powerful actors such as large corporations led to the exclusion of more radical methods of creating change and that their research thus "put plasters on the wounds"[vii] rather than addressing issues at their root cause. This is due to the growing understanding and acknowledgment that so-called 'green capitalism', operating in the confines of a flawed system, is never going to support the changes needed to achieve social and environmental justice and has no place in self-proclaimed 'sustainable' research. If WUR truly wants to be part of the solution to global problems, as the university so proudly advertises, they need to restructure their research, projects, and priorities outside of this neoliberal framework. This cannot

be achieved whilst working with profit-driven multinational corporations.

Yet, our university chooses to intensify these collaborations and to promote and actively partake in this neoliberal development. With its expertise on food and sustainability questions, Wageningen University & Research has an influential and powerful voice in many relevant areas. In this role as a frontrunner university and research centre in food and life sciences, it is crucial for us to understand and acknowledge the politics of the industrial food system and the dynamics of research and education.

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FOOD SYSTEMS

Food waste, greenhouse gas emissions, biodiversity loss, workers exploitation, hunger and malnutrition, soil, air and water pollution; the list of issues connected to industrial food production and distribution seems endless. More so, these issues only become accelerated through the rapidly changing climate, to which our food system simultaneously contributes significantly. In order to solve the climate crisis, we must therefore look at our relationship with food. And in order to fix our relationship with food, we must acknowledge and address the problems related to the food system in its entirety.

The climate and ecological crisis

The life cycle assessment of the ecological footprint of our industrial food production system is staggering. From escalating nitrogen values in Dutch soils to the deforestation of the Amazonas - there is little to no actor in the industrial food production sector that cannot be linked to an ecological scandal. Conventional agriculture is known as a culprit for drastically endangering and reducing biodiversity of flora and fauna through the use of pesticides and monocultural practices. Furthermore, agriculture accounts for 24% of greenhouse gas emissions, the majority of which come from industrial agriculture[viii].

The pollution doesn't stop there. Food processing is a resource- and energy intensive process and the likes of Unilever and Nestlé are known to be amongst the biggest plastic polluters in the world. Water, soil, and air pollution and deforestation add to the collateral damage of these food processing companies. Last but not least, the globalised nature of our food system requires the products to travel far and fast, increasing greenhouse gas emissions and food waste.

One might argue that this is the trade-off we have to make in order to end hunger and feed a growing world population, but this does not reflect the truth. Contrary to popular belief, industrial large-scale agriculture and processing is feeding the minority while using most resources. Most of the world's food is produced by small scale (less than 2 hectares of land) farmers and peasants, on a minority of the land. World hunger is thus not the result of a lack of industrial food production.

The social and political crisis

The industrial food system has detached our society from that which provides the basis of our lives. It has removed food production from a central, substantial activity to the outskirts of society, with migrant workers and farmers from the global South harvesting our vegetables and butchering our livestock in places far away from vibrant cities and other dwelling places. This geographical, cognitive and social separation allows us to be detached from the problems that underlie the availability of food for our consumption.

What is often forgotten in environmental and ecological assessments is the role of socio-political conflicts and dynamics. Food concerns everyone on this planet and is at the same time an arena for political and cultural conflicts. Struggles for land, community and nature rights, for food autonomy and food sovereignty and for Indigenous rights shape the way we interact with our environment. Environmental sustainability, in the long run, can only be achieved in a climate of cooperation, solidarity and justice and through the inclusion and participation of everyone.

In our current system, peasant farmers and Indigenous people have been displaced, impoverished, and killed by the global expansion of the industrial food system, resulting in hunger in many regions throughout the world. This industrial food system is controlled by a handful of companies that have the power to decide how and what is produced. These oligarchs of the agricultural and food production sector have been and continue to profit from the exploitation of people and the commodification of nature. They do not have peoples' interests at heart, and as much as they might be willing to adapt in order to stay in their powerful position, we cannot and should not expect genuine sustainable advancements from well-established multinationals.

Unilever, Friesland Campina, Syngenta and Upfield, the most prominent and visible collaborators of WUR, are part of those profiting from this centralised, market-oriented and oppressive system. Their natural interests are fundamentally conflicting with civil values, and their ability to escape accountability has created a landscape of insurmountable differences and gaping power imbalances. Solution

approaches without attempts to level the playing field or without even acknowledging its unevenness are bound to fail. No socially sustainable and equitable system can be built on this foundation. Only in looking at the socio-economic and political dimensions of food production and sustainability can we truly grasp the complexity of the issue and move towards genuinely sustainable solutions.



RESEARCH AND EDUCATION

Studying and working in a research environment so central to the future of our food systems is a privilege, but it also comes with the responsibility to shape and promote a food system that is liveable, equitable and just. It is a responsibility towards virtually every living being. As we are heading increasingly rapidly towards climate and ecological breakdown, there is a growing consensus that solutions to this crisis need to radically diverge from the status quo in order to preserve a liveable planet. The existing responses to social and environmental injustices have been largely inadequate in addressing the root of these issues. This inadequacy includes present academic responses and solutions. Why are universities, these self-appointed centres of change, failing to make a meaningful impact in solving global challenges?

The way we learn about and do research on issues such as food production and the climate and ecological crisis shapes our understanding of the problem and our consequent scope of possible solutions. Solving the food production - climate change conundrum is not about technological innovation alone but needs to take into account the power relations and historic dynamics that are implicit in the current food system and the relation between the global North and South. This starts with critically learning about our own, modern Western standard of living, and the afflicting ramifications it has directly and indirectly on the global South. Despite the international orientation of WUR and especially the collaboration with countries in the global South, the problem of coloniality is hardly ever addressed, not in teaching and also not in research. Without this sensitivity to the context of our research, even well-intended initiatives can easily further entrench colonial and exploitative dynamics.

Recent developments in WUR's collaboration with the private sector unfortunately reflect a determined step further away from this necessary confrontation with the global consequences of our own research and education. Multinational companies taking over more and more space on campus is a blatant representation of the neoliberalisation of both our food systems and our university education system. Those decisions and the way they were executed and communicated further support the current unsustainable and

unfair trajectory of food production. The influence of corporate interests is problematic for research and education at WUR and its role in the envisioning and creation of an equitable and sustainable food system.

The bias and favouritism towards multinational businesses and their business models as well as sharing a learning and working environment with multinational corporations influences the form and focus of education and research at WUR in multiple ways. It creates an atmosphere of privilege and hierarchy concerning WUR-made knowledge. It influences the content of conversations and the narratives discussed on campus and in classes. It compromises the ability to criticise and research the role of the corporate sector in climate change. The exposure to those companies paints a picture of possibilities for our food system that is at best misleading and not representative of the diversity of research and opinions at WUR, and at worst might narrow down the diversity of possibilities perceived by students.

Our university will never be a true leader in sustainability until questions of power and privilege are being addressed properly, both in the education and the research sector. Until more attention is paid to how and what we research and teach and until we create spaces where power imbalances are taken into account and in which we can discuss and reflect critically on ourselves as individuals and as an institution and move beyond a superficial level. We need to start genuine and inclusive conversations on the current role of WUR and the ramifications of these on our education, research, and the global community. We need to make the message we send to the outside world more representative of the different opinions and visions at WUR whilst making our best efforts to educate people in such a way that does not make them culprits in the perpetuation of current injustices but rather critical thinkers and advocates for just and fair, and thus truly sustainable change. This includes reflexivity on one's own position and privilege and understanding of colonial and discriminating dynamics in the food production system and scientific research. The current strategy of intensive private sector collaboration does not reflect such an understanding.

We ask the executive board to acknowledge their bias and to stop promoting a destructive vision of sustainability. We ask them to run this university not as a business, but as the diverse, independent, and critical knowledge production institute that it should be.

We demand them to stop supporting corporate agendas!



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