



THE PROBLEM WITH THE INDUSTRIAL FOOD SYSTEM & HOW TO FIX IT

JULY, 2022

AUTHORS:

Laura Michéle and
Ana María Suárez-Franco

LAYOUT:

Harjyot Khalsa

ILLUSTRATIONS:

[Zago Brothers](#)

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Published by **FIAN International** with kind support from the **Friedrich Ebert Stiftung**. July 2022.



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The industrial food system harms people and the planet and undermines our ability to feed ourselves, our families and our communities in a healthy, sustainable and dignified way.

The UN Special Rapporteurs on the Right to Food, on the Enjoyment of a Safe, Clean, Healthy and Sustainable Environment, and on Toxics have described the main problems with the industrial food system, in particular with respect to environmental destruction and related human rights violations. They have also outlined what governments should do to move towards sustainable, healthy and just agroecological practices supporting the right to food and nutrition and human rights more broadly.

This Q&A summarizes their analysis and recommendations with a view to using them to support the advocacy work of communities seeking the transformation of food systems. You can find the original documents here:

[Report](#) by Michael Fakhri on Food systems (A/76/237, 27 July 2021).

[Report](#) by David R. Boyd on Healthy and sustainable food: reducing the environmental impacts of food systems on human rights (A/76/179, 19 July 2021).

[Report](#) by Marcos Orellana on the Right to science in the context of toxic substances (A/HRC/48/61, 26 July 2021).

WHAT IS THE *PROBLEM* WITH THE INDUSTRIAL FOOD SYSTEM?

“The world has been dominated by corporations in food systems that use wealth to generate more wealth, instead of using life to generate more life.” (Fakhri, p. 9)

There are many problems with the way food is produced, processed, distributed, prepared and consumed in our food systems. These include the destruction of ecosystems, exploitation of workers and unhealthy food and diets.

The industrial food system is dominated by corporations and is a major contributor to the climate emergency, biodiversity loss, soil degradation, water depletion and pollution.

This system relies heavily on chemicals and fossil fuels and displaces and marginalizes peasant communities’ farming practices that were developed over generations and function in harmony with nature. Through a combination of public and private incentives and policies, small-scale food producers are increasingly dependent on commercial seeds, pesticides and fertilizers controlled by powerful companies. These companies can dictate prices and push peasants into a system of “contract farming”, where they lose decision-making power over what and how they produce. The industrial food system

also promotes land and natural resources grabbing, undermining communities’ ability to feed themselves.

Agricultural and food workers, including children, are often exploited and exposed to harmful pesticides.

The industrial food system makes people sick with ultra-processed junk food aggressively promoted through advertising. Unhealthy diets account for ten million deaths annually. Furthermore, the misuse of antibiotics in livestock and aquaculture reduces the effect of these medicines when needed to treat humans.

Each day, the food industry gains more power to shape markets and research, and influence governments and public policies to its advantage. It can do this with the billions it makes from exploiting natural resources and cheap labour.



HOW DOES THE INDUSTRIAL FOOD SYSTEM DAMAGE OUR PLANET?

The industrial food system is a major contributor to climate change, from emissions and the destruction of carbon sinks (e.g., plants that can store carbon so that it does not enter the atmosphere). It accounts for up to 37% of global greenhouse gas emissions that increase the temperature of our planet and lead to catastrophes, such as plagues, floods, and droughts. Much of this happens through deforestation, when agro-industries convert forests into land for agriculture to produce export commodities such as beef, soy and palm oil.

Industrial intensification of agriculture is an “extractive practice” that disturbs the foundations of our ecosystems with lasting impacts for our children and their children. This includes excessive use of freshwater, in particular by the livestock industry, and the pollution of drinking water through pesticides, fertilizers and animal waste. Industrial agriculture is also responsible for air pollution and soil degradation and erosion –threatening the very basis of our food. The industrial food system destroys biological

diversity by promoting monocultures (the growing of a single crop in a field at a time), threatening peasant seed systems, and promoting diets based on a very narrow range of crops. Overexploitation, pollution, and destruction of fishing grounds have resulted in one third of freshwater fish being threatened with extinction. Pesticide use has caused massive loss of insects and the birds who feed on them, bringing the way nature functions out of balance.

The industrial food system, and the pollution, environmental destruction, and deforestation that accompany it, have provided a perfect breeding ground for zoonotic diseases – diseases that pass from animals to humans – such as COVID-19. Poor working conditions and environmental abuses in the food industry have also contributed to their spread.



WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR PEOPLE'S RIGHT TO FOOD AND CONNECTED RIGHTS?

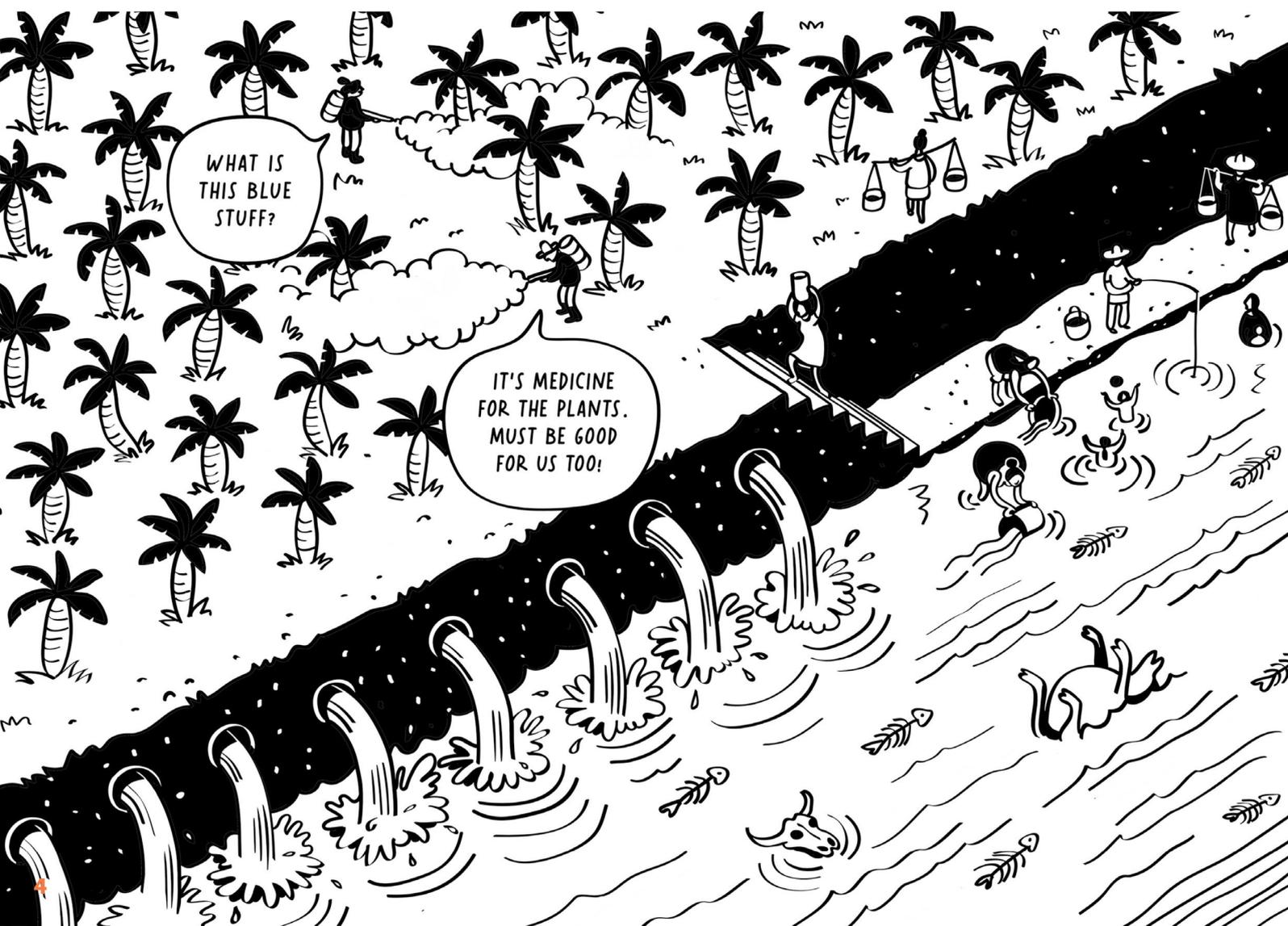
The environmental impacts of the industrial food system deepen existing inequalities and cause multiple human rights violations.

The pollution of water, air, soil and food with toxic chemicals used in industrial agriculture has far reaching effects on the health of peasants, workers, surrounding communities, and consumers, and can cause pre-mature deaths.

Agricultural pesticides regularly poison workers and peasants. Pesticides are responsible for an estimated 200,000 acute poisoning deaths each year. They have been linked to severe illnesses, including cancer, strokes, congenital anomalies, and neurodegenerative disorders such as Parkinson's disease and are particularly harmful for women and children. Children that are exposed to pesticides – for example when working on farms, playing on contaminated soil, or

drinking contaminated water – can experience severe damage to their cognitive and physical development.

Water pollution and excessive water use by industrial agriculture also leads to water shortages for local communities. This has direct impacts on their rights to water and health. It also impacts their right to food and nutrition as it undermines their ability to grow and prepare food, and can lead to water-borne illnesses that affect their nutrition and health. The ability of communities to grow food for themselves and to make a living are also severely undermined by their exposure to changing and severe weather conditions, natural disasters, and the destruction of the environment, including the degradation of soil.



HOW SHOULD FOOD SYSTEMS BE TRANSFORMED TO ENSURE THE RIGHT TO FOOD AND NUTRITION?

“(...) transforming food systems that exploit millions of workers, undermine the health of billions of people and inflict trillions of dollars in environmental damages is morally and legally imperative in order to respect, protect and fulfil human rights.” (Boyd 2021, p. 26)

We can no longer rely on a focus on economic growth to overcome hunger and malnutrition. The right to a healthy environment is protected by law in the vast majority of countries. Healthy and sustainable food systems are a central component of this right, as confirmed by a number of courts and national human rights institutions across regions. Transforming food systems to become healthy, sustainable and just is essential for tackling the global environmental crisis.

Agroecology addresses many weaknesses of the industrial food system. It questions power dynamics (including those between women and men), highlights the importance of people’s access to and control over knowledge and resources and leads to concrete improvements in the RtFN.

This approach imitates ecological processes and biological interactions. It often produces higher yields than industrial agriculture. Since fewer chemicals are used, it causes less harm to the environment. It also corrects damage caused by the industrial food system: it reduces greenhouse gas emissions, recovers the health of the soil, protects biological diversity and decreases the risk of pandemics. Furthermore, it supports the collective construction of knowledge, brings together consumers and producers, ensures decent livelihoods for people working in food systems, and fosters social equity.



WHAT SHOULD GOVERNMENTS DO TO TRANSFORM FOOD SYSTEMS?

“The devastating environmental effects of industrial food systems and associated unhealthy diets on the enjoyment of a wide range of human rights give rise to extensive duties of States to prevent those harms. States should apply a rights-based approach to all food-related laws, regulations, policies and actions, in order to minimize negative impacts on the environment and human rights” (Boyd 2021, p. 17)

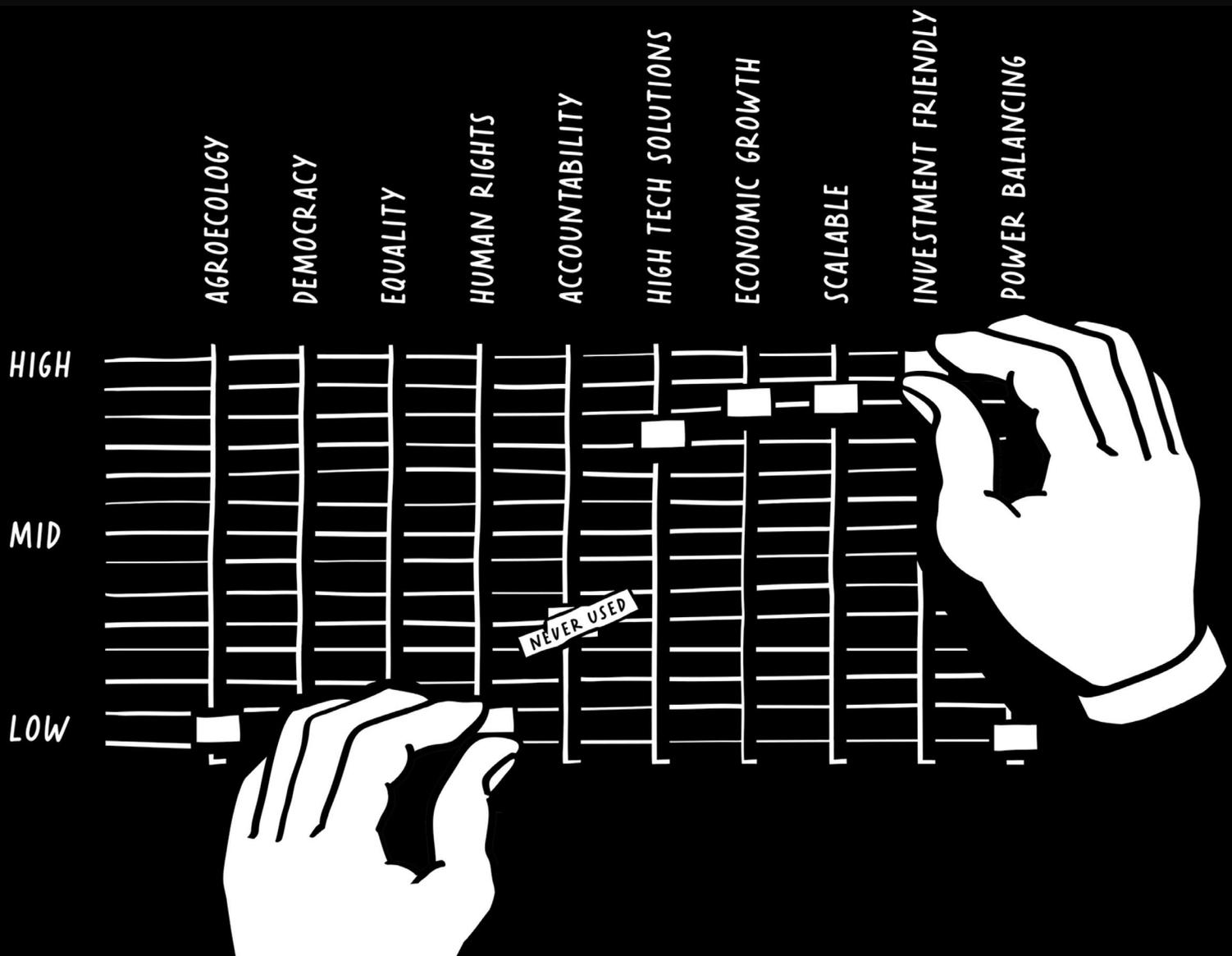
- 1** Governments should reduce the use of agrochemicals and ban the most hazardous. They should stop exporting agrochemicals banned in their own countries. They must introduce stronger regulations and higher taxes on agrochemicals. The money from these taxes should be used to support producers in reducing pesticides and transitioning to agroecology. Countries need to carefully monitor pollution from **agrochemicals** and their impacts on people’s health.
- 2** **Antibiotics** should be allowed only for medical treatment of individual animals. Intensive livestock keeping needs to end. There needs to be stronger regulations for industrial agriculture to prevent the spread of **zoonotic diseases**.
- 3** Governments should provide technical support for agricultural practices that **restore soil health**, including using organic fertilizers, diverse crop rotation, and composting.
- 4** They should adopt and enforce laws to **stop deforestation** and conversion into agricultural land, while making appropriate exemptions for small-scale producers. They should encourage **diversification** of crops and make it obligatory on large monoculture plantations. Food systems should be part of biodiversity strategies.
- 5** Governments should protect **peasant seed systems** (the rights of peasants to save, use, and exchange locally adapted seeds and livestock breeds) and ensure that national and international laws do not harm them. They should revive and support traditional varieties and related ancestral knowledge and practices. Similarly, they should protect and restore the **biodiversity** of the sea.
- 6** **International trade rules** need to be reformed and unjust agricultural agreements ended. New trade rules should be based on human rights law, ensure equitability, and support a transition to sustainable food systems and agroecology.
- 7** Governments should invest in the infrastructure of **territorial markets** at local, national and regional levels. They should also support producers’ and consumers’ cooperatives that facilitate knowledge exchange and adoption of agroecological practices. They should correct any existing bias in policies that privilege supermarkets over informal farmers markets.
- 8** Governments should protect and enhance small-scale food producers’, especially women’s, **right to land and other natural resources** – including through land reform.

- 9 They should develop guidelines on nutrition that integrate health and sustainability concerns and implement free national **school meals** programmes that provide all children with healthy food. The food for these and other public institutions (such as hospitals) should be bought from local producers and prepared in school kitchens.
- 10 Governments should prohibit the promotion of **ultra-processed junk food and beverages** to children and impose taxes and warning labels so that people consume less of them.
- 11 **The governance of food systems** needs to change fundamentally. The rights and livelihoods of the most disadvantaged – including those who lack access to land and healthy and sustainable food, or whose right to a healthy environment is threatened or violated – need to be prioritised. They must be able to participate when governments make new policies on food. Especially women’s participation needs to be strengthened. The transformation of food systems should be based on peoples’ own solutions, rather than imposed from above by “experts”.
- 12 Governments should incorporate the RtFN and the right to a healthy, sustainable environment in national laws with mechanisms to hold authorities and companies accountable.
- 13 The UN Declarations on the Rights of Peasants (UNDROP) and on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) must be applied when governments adopt new laws and policies. Similarly, they should apply the Guidelines on Tenure and on Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries to prevent land, water, and natural resource grabbing. They must also ensure that agricultural and food workers are protected by labour laws.
- 14 **Corporate power** in food systems needs to be reduced including through legislation that reverses excessive concentration. The completion of negotiations on an international agreement to regulate transnational corporations is also key for this.
- 15 Governments must restrict **corporate lobbying** and donations by the food industry and its business associations, and other attempts to influence food systems related policies.

WHAT IS THE *ROLE OF SCIENCE* IN TRANSFORMING FOOD SYSTEMS?

Scientific knowledge plays a crucial role in effective human rights-based food systems policies. This includes measures to protect people from toxic substances arising from industrial agriculture as well as finding ways to reduce and phase them out.

This does not work however when science is misused to support political positions and ideologies that protect powerful business interests profiting from poisonous substances.



WHAT IS THE RIGHT TO SCIENCE?

“The citizen science model of engagement, which ties scientific inquiry to the needs of communities, can contribute to the relevance and impact of the scientific research, ensuring that the benefits of science reach the very people who need their application. [...] This knowledge empowers the communities to exercise agency on their own behalf.” (Orellana 2021, pp. 9-10)

The right to science recognizes and places on an equal footing people’s science – science by and for people – with academic science. People should have a say in the development of science that affects them, including the collection and interpretation of information. The right to science can help in the fight against misleading science and information often used to influence policies and legal processes. It helps ensure that science is based on the needs of people and contributes to policies that benefit them.



WHAT MEASURES DO **GOVERNMENTS** NEED TO TAKE TO REALISE THE **RIGHT TO SCIENCE**?

- 1** Governments should ensure that chemical substances are properly evaluated and scientific information shared before authorizing their sale. They must take into account new research and regularly revise/update measures to protect against toxics.
- 2** When scientific evidence is controversial or unclear and there is a high and/or irreversible risk for human rights then governments should apply the “precautionary principle”. They must not allow the sale and use of an agro-chemical that risks having serious impacts on human health, even when these impacts have not been proven.
- 3** Scientific information on which policies, laws and regulations are based needs to be made public in a format that people can understand.
- 4** Governments must ensure that people, especially affected communities/groups, can meaningfully participate when they design, adopt and implement policies concerning agrochemicals and other toxics.
- 5** They must support research on toxics and waste that is in the interest of the people not corporations and create a safe environment for researchers.
- 6** Governments must create policies on scientific integrity (truthfulness) and put in place measures to reveal and prevent conflicts of interests. For example, research on the health impacts of pesticides should not be financed by companies that make money with these pesticides.

