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From Net Zero to Glyphosate: Agritech's Greenwashed Corporate Power Grab

By Colin Todhunter
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Theme: Biotechnology and GMO

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Today, in the mainstream narrative, there is much talk of a 'food transition'. Big agribusiness and 'philanthropic' foundations position themselves as the saviours of humanity due to their much-promoted plans to 'feed the world' with 'precision' farming', 'data-driven' agriculture and 'sustainable' production.

These are the very institutions responsible for the social, ecological and environmental degradation associated with the current food system. The same bodies responsible for spiralling rates of illness due to the toxic food they produce or promote.

In this narrative, there is no space for any mention of the type of power relations that have shaped the prevailing food system and many of the current problems.

Tony Weis from the University of Western Ontario provides useful insight:

> "World agriculture is marked by extreme imbalances that are among the most durable economic legacies of European imperialism. Many of the world's poorest countries in the tropics are net food importers despite having large shares of their labor force engaged in agriculture and large amounts of their best arable land devoted to agro-export commodities."

He adds that this commodity dependence has deep roots in waves of dispossession, the establishment of plantations and the subjugation of peasantries to increasing competitive pressures at the same time as they were progressively marginalised.

In the 2018 book The Divide: A Brief Guide to Global Inequality and its Solutions, Jason Hickel describes the processes involved in Europe's wealth accumulation over a 150-year period of colonialism that resulted in tens of millions of deaths.

By using other countries' land, Britain effectively doubled the size of arable land in its

control. This made it more practical to then reassign the rural population at home (by stripping people of their productive means) to industrial labour. This too was underpinned by massive violence (burning villages, destroying houses, razing crops).

In more recent times, neoliberalism has further reinforced the power relations that underpin the system, cementing the control of agricultural production by global corporations and facilitated by the policies of the World Trade Organization, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

Corporate food transition

The food transition is couched in the language of climate emergency and sustainability. It envisages a particular future for farming. It is not organic and relatively few farmers have a place in it.

Post-1945, corporate agribusiness, largely backed by the US state, the Rockefeller Foundation and financial institutions, has been promoting and instituting a chemical-dependent system of industrial agriculture. Rural communities, ecological systems, the environment, human health and indigenous systems of food cultivation have been devastated in the process.

Now, the likes of Bayer, Corteva and Syngenta are working with Microsoft, Google and the big-tech giants to facilitate farmerless farms driven by cloud and AI technology. A cartel of data owners and proprietary input suppliers are reinforcing their grip on the global food system while expanding their industrial model of crop cultivation.

One way they are doing this is by driving the 'climate emergency' narrative, a contested commentary that has been carefully promoted (see the work of investigative journalist Cory Morningstar), and net-zero ideology and tying this to carbon offsetting and carbon credits.

Many companies from various sectors are securing large areas of land in the Global South to establish tree plantations and claim carbon credits that they can sell on international carbon markets. In the meantime, by supposedly 'offsetting' their emissions, they can carry on polluting.

In countries where industrial agriculture dominates, 'carbon farming' involves modifying existing practices to claim that carbon is being sequestered in the soil and to then sell carbon credits.

This is explained in a recent presentation by Devlin Kuyek of the non-profit GRAIN who sets out the corporate agenda behind carbon farming.

One of the first major digital agriculture platforms is called Climate FieldView, an app owned by Bayer. It collects data from satellites and sensors in fields and on tractors and then uses algorithms to advise farmers on their farming practices: when and what to plant, how much pesticide to spray, how much fertiliser to apply, etc. FieldView is already being used on farms in the US, Canada, Brazil, Argentina and Europe.

To be part of Bayer's Carbon Program, farmers have to be enrolled in Bayer's FieldView digital agriculture platform. Bayer then uses the FieldView app to instruct farmers on the implementation of just two practices that are said to sequester carbon in the soils: reduced tillage or no-till farming and the planting of cover crops.

Through the app, the company monitors these two practices and estimates the amount of carbon that the participating farmers have sequestered. Farmers are then supposed to be paid according to Bayer's calculations, and Bayer uses that information to claim carbon credits and sell these in carbon markets.

In August 2022, Bayer launched a new programme in the US called ForGround. Upstream companies can use the platform to advertise and offer discounts for tilling equipment, forage seeds and other inputs. But Bayer's big target is the downstream food companies which can use the platform to claim emissions reductions in their supply chains.

Places like India are also laying the groundwork for these types of platforms. In April 2021, the Indian government signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Microsoft, allowing its local partner CropData to leverage a master database of farmers.

Microsoft will 'help' farmers with post-harvest management solutions by building a collaborative platform and capturing agriculture datasets such as crop yields, weather data, market demand and prices. In turn, this would create a farmer interface for 'smart' agriculture, including post-harvest management and distribution.

CropData will be granted access to a government database of 50 million farmers and their land records. As the database is developed, it will include farmers' personal details –

1) Profile of land held – cadastral maps, farm size, land titles, local climatic and geographical conditions.

2) Production details – crops grown, production history, input history, quality of output, machinery in possession.

3) Financial details – input costs, average return, credit history.

The stated aim is to use digital technology to improve financing, inputs, cultivation and supply and distribution.

However, this initiative also involves providing data on land holding deeds with the intention of implementing a land market so that investors can buy up land and amalgamate it – global equity funds regard agricultural land as a valuable asset, and global agritech/agribusiness companies prefer industrial-scale farms for rolling out highly mechanised 'precision' agriculture.

'Data-driven agriculture' mines data to be exploited by the agribusiness/big tech giants who will know more about farmers than farmers know about themselves. The likes of Bayer and Microsoft will gain increasing control over farmers, dictating exactly how they farm and what inputs they use.

And as GRAIN notes, getting more farmers to use reduced tillage or no-till is of huge benefit to Bayer. The kind of reduced tillage or no-till promoted by Bayer requires dousing fields with its RoundUp (toxic glyphosate) herbicide and planting seeds of its genetically engineered (GE) Roundup resistant soybeans or hybrid maize.

Bayer also intends to profit from the promotion of cover crops. It has taken majority ownership of a seed company developing a gene-edited cover crop, called CoverCress.

Seeds of CoverCress will be sold to farmers who are enrolled in ForGround and the crop will be sold as a biofuel.

GE has always been a solution in need of a problem. Along with its associated money-spinning toxic chemicals, it has failed to deliver on its promises (see GMO Myths and Truths, published by Open Earth Source) and has sometimes been disastrous when rolled out, not least for poor farmers in India.

Whereas traditional breeding and on-farm practices have little or no need for GE technologies, under the guise of 'climate emergency', the data and agritech giants are commodifying knowledge and making farmers dependent on their platforms and inputs. The commodification of knowledge and compelling farmers to rely on proprietary inputs overseen by algorithms will define what farming is and how it is to be carried out.

The introduction of technology into the sector can benefit farmers. But understanding who owns the technology and how it is being used is crucial for understanding underlying motivations, power dynamics and the quality of food we end up eating.

Net-zero Ponzi scheme

In its article From land grab to soil grab: the new business of carbon farming, GRAIN says control rather than sequestering carbon is at the heart of the matter. More than half of the soil organic matter in the world's agricultural soils has already been lost. Yet, the main culprits behind this soil catastrophe are now recasting themselves as soil saviours.

Under the guise of Green Revolution practices (application of chemicals, synthetic fertilisers, high water usage, hybrid seeds, intensive mono-cropping, increased mechanisation, etc), what we have seen is an exploitative form of agriculture which has depleted soil of its nutrients. It has also resulted in placing farmers on corporate seed and chemical treadmills.

Similarly, carbon farming draws farmers into the digital platforms that agribusiness corporations and big tech companies are jointly developing to influence farmers on their choice of inputs and farming practices (big tech companies, like Microsoft and IBM, are major buyers of carbon credits). The companies intend to make their digital platforms one-stop shops for carbon credits, seeds, pesticides and fertilisers and agronomic advice, all supplied by the company, which gets the added benefit of control over the data harvested from the participating farms.

Those best placed to benefit from these programmes are the equity funds and the wealthy who have been buying up large farmland areas. Financial managers can now use digital platforms to buy farms in Brazil, sign them up for carbon credits, and run their operations all from their offices on Wall Street.

As for the carbon credit and carbon trading market, this appears to be another profitable Ponzi scheme from which traders will make a financial killing.

Journalist Patrick Greenfield states that research into Verra, the world's leading carbon standard for the rapidly growing $2bn (£1.6bn) voluntary offsets market, has found that more than 90% of their rainforest offset credits – among the most commonly used by companies – are likely to be 'phantom credits' and do not represent genuine carbon reductions.

The analysis raises questions over the credits bought by a number of internationally renowned companies – some of them have labelled their products 'carbon neutral' or have told their consumers they can fly, buy new clothes or eat certain foods without making the 'climate crisis' worse.

Washington-based Verra operates a number of leading environmental standards for climate action and sustainable development, including its verified carbon standard (VCS) that has issued more than a billion carbon credits. It approves three-quarters of all voluntary offsets. Its rainforest protection programme makes up 40% of the credits it approves.

Although Verra disputes the findings, only a handful of Verra's rainforest projects showed evidence of deforestation reductions – 94% of the credits had no benefit to the climate.

The threat to forests had been overstated by about 400% on average for Verra projects, according to analysis of a 2022 University of Cambridge study.

Barbara Haya, the director of the Berkeley Carbon Trading Project, has been researching carbon credits for 20 years, hoping to find a way to make the system function.

She says that companies are using credits to make claims of reducing emissions when most of these credits don't represent emissions reductions at all:

> "Rainforest protection credits are the most common type on the market at the moment. But these problems are not just limited to this credit type. These problems exist with nearly every kind of credit."

Genuine food transition

The 'food transition involves' locking farmers further into an exploitative corporate-controlled agriculture that extracts wealth and serves the market needs of global corporations, carbon trading Ponzi schemes and private equity funds. Farmers will be reduced to corporate labourers or profit-extracting agents who bear all of the risks.

The predatory commercialisation of the countryside is symptomatic of a modern-day colonialist mindset that cynically undermines indigenous farming practices and uses flawed premises and fear mongering to legitimise the roll-out of technologies and chemicals to supposedly deliver us all from climate breakdown and Malthusian catastrophe.

A genuine food transition would involve transitioning away from the reductionist yield-output industrial paradigm to a more integrated low-input systems approach to food and agriculture that prioritises local food security, diverse cropping patterns and nutrition production per acre, water table stability, climate resilience, good soil structure and the ability to cope with evolving pests and disease pressures.

It would involve localised, democratic food systems and a concept of food sovereignty based on self-sufficiency, agroecological principles and regenerative agriculture (there are numerous concrete examples of regenerative agriculture, many of which are described on the website of Food Tank).

This would also involve facilitating the right to culturally appropriate food that is nutritionally dense and free from toxic chemicals and ensuring local (communal) ownership and stewardship of common resources, including land, water, soil and seeds.

This is the basis of genuine food security and genuine environmentalism – based on short-line supply chains that keeps wealth within local communities rather than it being siphoned off by profit-seeking entities half a world away.

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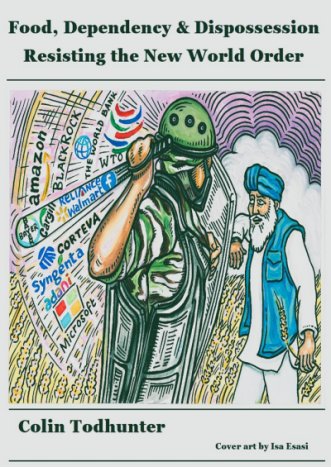

Read Colin Todhunter's e-Book entitled

Food, Dispossession and Dependency. Resisting the New World Order

We are currently seeing an acceleration of the corporate consolidation of the entire global agri-food chain. The high-tech/big data conglomerates, including Amazon, Microsoft, Facebook and Google, have joined traditional agribusiness giants, such as Corteva, Bayer, Cargill and Syngenta, in a quest to impose their model of food and agriculture on the world.

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation is also involved (documented in 'Gates to a Global Empire' by Navdanya International), whether through buying up huge tracts of farmland, promoting a much-heralded (but failed) 'green revolution' for Africa, pushing biosynthetic food and genetic engineering technologies or more generally facilitating the aims of the mega agri-food corporations.

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