



# **A WORLD FOOD FORUM CAPTURED BY CORPORATE INTERESTS?**

Mapping corporate actors behind WFF  
partnerships and narratives

  
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As the world tackles extreme hunger, the climate crisis, and geopolitical dynamics that jeopardize the food security of nations and communities, the question of how we structure our food systems and democratize their governance is critical to ensure that food remains a right for all and not a commodity for the few.

At the global level, we are seeing the emergence of new food policy fora. Besides the United Nations Food Systems Summit (UNFSS), the World Food Forum (WFF) is currently attracting a lot of attention. The motivation behind this research is to address concerns around multistakeholder platforms, such as the WFF, and the principles driving these new forms of governance.

These fora deepen power imbalances between actors and advance corporate-friendly narratives in their founding principles, goals, and actions. There is a notable lack of accountability.<sup>1-4</sup> Multistakeholder platforms and public-private partnerships often establish principles of engagement that repeatedly fail<sup>5</sup> to counterbalance the corporate power of global food and agrochemical giants. As the WFF is emerging as a prominent new nexus in the global food governance space, serving as a forum to advance objectives of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the UNFSS, it is important to investigate its actors, arrangements, actions, and accountability since its launch in 2021.

Furthermore, numerous civil society organizations, policy advocates, and frontline communities have criticized the mandate of the UNFSS and the FAO to work on sustainability due to evidence indicating an alignment with the interests, narratives, and agendas of transnational food and agrochemical corporations and industries.<sup>6-8</sup>

# 1

## THE WORLD FOOD FORUM OF THE FOOD AND AGRICULTURE ORGANIZATION

The WFF was launched as an “independent, youth-led global network of partners”<sup>9</sup> facilitated by the FAO. It aims to “spark a global movement that empowers young people,”<sup>9</sup> aiming to transform the agri-food system and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG).<sup>9</sup> It encompasses a range of online events, networks, and content platforms organized around four topics: a) youth action, b) innovation, c) education, and d) culture. According to its website, the WFF has 40,000 participants worldwide although specific figures for each year’s forum are lacking.<sup>9,10</sup>

The WFF 2023 consists of three major pillars: 1) The Hand-in-Hand Initiative, with its annual Investment Forum, 2) WFF Global Youth Forum, and 3) FAO Science and Innovation Forum.<sup>10</sup> The Global Youth Forum focuses on four core areas of action or tracks: Innovation Lab11, Education<sup>12</sup>, Culture<sup>13</sup>, and Youth Action.<sup>14</sup> The main event of the WFF is an annual Flagship Event, with the first one organized in October 2021, after the UNFSS in September of the same year. The WFF’s annual Flagship Event in 2022 had the theme “Healthy Diets. Healthy Planet.”<sup>15</sup> For the 2023’s annual event the theme is “Agri-food Systems Transformation Accelerates Climate Action.”<sup>9</sup> According to its organizers, participation of at least 80,000 is expected this year. The WFF Flagship Event claims to be the premier global forum “to harness the passion and power of youth to identify solutions and incite positive action for agrifood systems transformation.”<sup>9</sup>

The WFF appears to function as a form of a multistakeholder platform, where a range of actors are involved either as part of a “Global Network” or as “Cooperation Partners.”<sup>16,17</sup>

This mapping is an initial investigation aimed at building a deeper understanding of how the forum engages directly or indirectly with corporate actors or industries – notably from the food, agrochemical, pharmaceutical, and technology sectors – which contribute to fueling the unequal and ecologically destructive global food system we have today.<sup>17-19</sup>

## MAPPING OF PARTICIPANTS AND NARRATIVES OF THE WFF

This is a summary of key findings of our investigation into the corporate relationships of the WFF's Cooperation Partners and their links to the WFF's three pillars and core events.

This analysis aims to support social movements, indigenous peoples, and civil society organizations to further understand the WFF's network and partners, and the potential for competing interests when it comes to agroecology, food sustainability, food sovereignty, and inclusive systems that improve the rights of farmers and frontline communities.

### OBJECTIVES

- To map the corporate relationships of the WFF's "Cooperation Partners"
- To shed light on how corporate actors and industrial sectors —such as food, agrochemicals, pharmaceuticals, and technology—are engaging in the WFF's three pillars.

### METHOD

To understand the relationship between WFF Cooperation Partners with corporate actors or industries, we first searched publicly available websites of the 44 organizations listed on the WFF's website as Cooperation Partners, as of 20 June 2023. (These partners were mainly organizations and not necessarily corporate entities). Secondly, we compiled information on corporate contributors, sponsors, or partners listed on each of the organization's websites (supplementary material, Table 1). We searched for additional information on publicly available documents through internet searches using a combination of keywords, such as "partner," "sponsor," and "funder" and the organizations' name. We included reports, press releases, or any outlet reporting on the organizations' participation in the WFF.

Third, with the information gathered in the previous steps, we assessed the narratives and actions around "sustainable food systems" of each organization found to be backed by corporate actors or industries, and in relation to narratives and actions described by the WFF on the topic. To gather additional insights, we also had several informal conversations with experts who agreed to share their knowledge of the functioning, aims, and actions of the WFF. We have anonymized their personal information as agreed with them.

# 3

## HIGHLIGHTS OF FINDINGS: 'COOPERATION PARTNERS' WITH CORPORATE RELATIONSHIPS



### WORLD FOOD FORUM PARTICIPANTS AND THEIR CORPORATE RELATIONSHIPS

The WFF's website mentions two types of actors involved in the forum: some are part of the forum's Global Network, and others are called Cooperation Partners.<sup>16</sup> The Cambridge Dictionary defines collaboration as "the situation of two or more people working together to create or achieve the same thing."<sup>20</sup> Whereas cooperation is defined as "the act of working together with someone or doing what they ask you."<sup>21</sup> Finally, partnership is defined as "an agreement between organizations, people, etc., to work together."<sup>22</sup> We use these definitions to frame our results and assess the engagement of Cooperation Partners with the WFF.

When we conducted the research, 28 organizations were listed as part of the Global Network, and 44 as Cooperation Partners, and the FAO continued to host the WFF coordination and secretariat. We investigated the relationships to corporate actors only for the Cooperation Partners and only those publicly disclosed during the time we undertook this mapping in June 2023. We did not look at the organizations listed as part of the Global Network, because they appeared to have a less significant role in the forum. They included <sup>12</sup> UN agencies, the OECD, one bank, and nine other international organizations.<sup>16</sup>

*Four types of organizations were listed as Cooperation Partners: Most can be grouped in four key cohorts:*

- a) producers of media content;<sup>23</sup>
- b) platforms for networking<sup>24,25,26</sup> or groups aiming to mobilize people, most of them focused either on food producers<sup>27</sup> or youth;<sup>28,29,30,31,32,33</sup>
- c) training, educational, or support for startups; <sup>34,35, 36, 37,38, 39,40,40,41,42</sup>
- d) charities that run or fund projects related to food, innovation, or technology related to food promotion, food engineering, or food aid programs.<sup>43, 44,45,46, 47,48, 49</sup>

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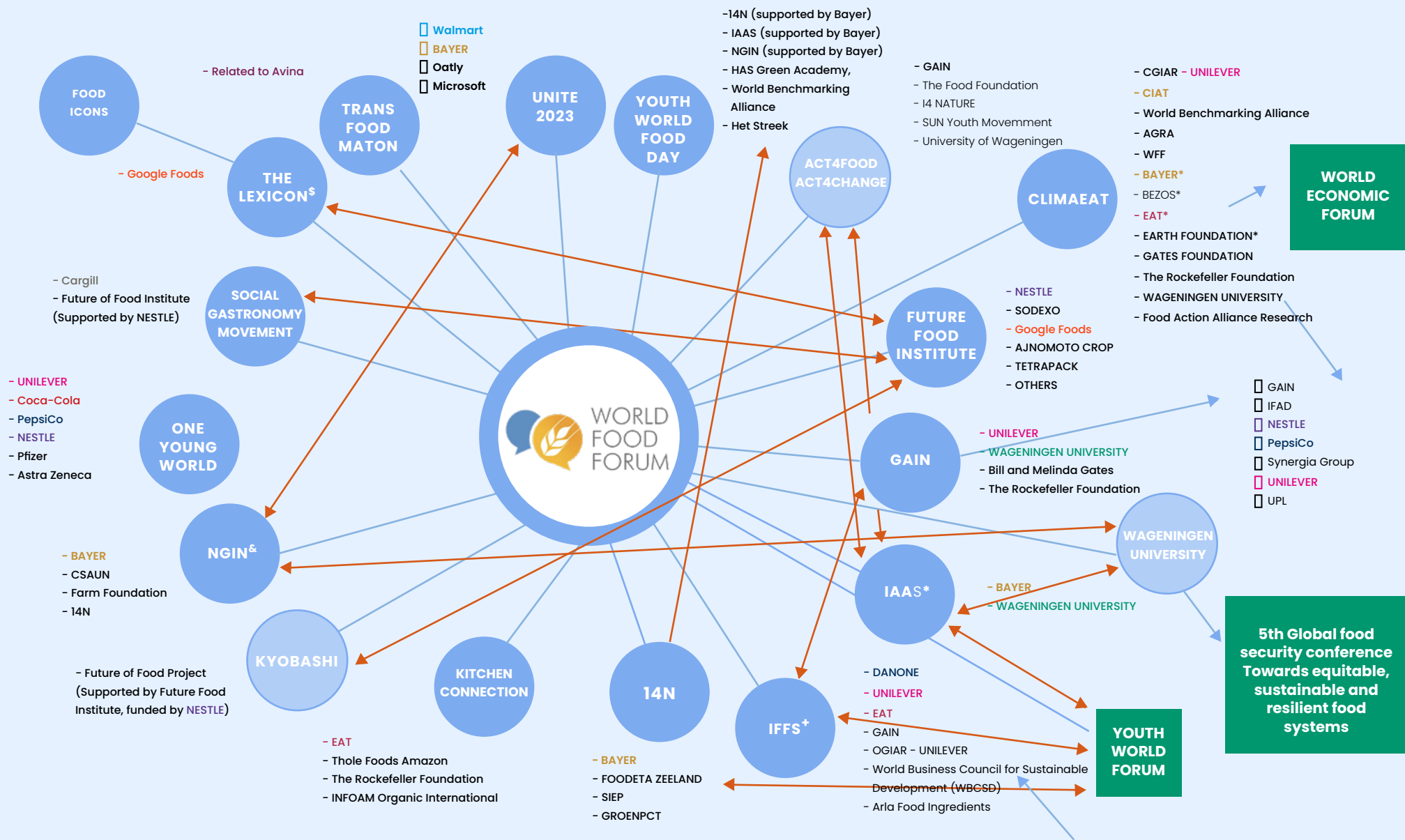
Findings in June 2023:

40% of WFF's Cooperation Partners were found to have some corporate relationships: 18 of the 44 Cooperation Partners had at least one link to food, agrochemical, pharmaceutical, or technology industries (Figure 1). Four had direct links to Bayer, three to Unilever, two to Nestlé, two to Google Foods, and one to Microsoft. Walmart, Bezos Earth Foundation, Coca-Cola, PepsiCo, Hershey's, Sodexo, Whole Foods Market, Pfizer, and AstraZeneca were among other corporations identified in their networks. Those links were mainly identified either as sponsors or supporters.

Some of the well-known organizations listed as Cooperation Partners have themselves close relationships with food corporations: Some examples include CGIAR and Unilever,<sup>50</sup> the Future of Food Institute and Nestlé,<sup>35</sup> GAIN and Unilever,<sup>47</sup> EAT and Nestlé,<sup>51</sup> Google Foods and Google, and links between the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD) and many organizations to corporations like Kellogg's and McDonald's.<sup>52</sup> (See details in Figure 1)

36% (16) Cooperation Partners have multiple and overlapping relationships with corporate-backed organizations (red lines in Figure 1): Some organizations listed are engaged with multiple corporate-backed initiatives; for instance, I4N is not only directly involved in the WFF, but also sponsors the Youth World Food Day<sup>53</sup> and Act4Food<sup>54</sup> campaigns. GAIN is not only in the WFF list, but also sponsors ACT4Food.<sup>54</sup> Innovative Food System Solutions (IFSS)<sup>55</sup> and the Kyobashi Project – a project from the Future of Food Institute –<sup>56</sup> are sponsored by Nestle, Sodexo and Google Food, among others<sup>56,p81</sup> (See Figure 1). This suggests that the organizations with corporate relationships have multiple connections to just a handful of corporate actors, such as Bayer, Unilever, and Nestlé.





**Figure 1.** Mapping of “Cooperation Partners” listed in the WFF that were found to have relationships with corporations. \*IAAS: International Association of Students in Agricultural and Related Sciences, +IFFS: Innovative Food System Solutions &NGIN The NextGen Ag Impact Network. Light blue balloons: funded or related to organization in partnership with food corporations’

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- **Long-term relationship with industry:** Some of the Cooperation Partners have had long-standing relationships with the agri-food industry, such as GAIN and Wageningen University. GAIN is a public-private partnership foundation through which many private sector firms engage locally and globally with the public sector.<sup>57</sup> GAIN has had close financial relationships with Nestlé, and Wageningen University has a close relationship with Bayer (which acquired Monsanto in 2018) and other agri-food businesses.<sup>58,59</sup> Academics at the university have argued for the deregulation of GMOs in the EU.<sup>58</sup>
  - **Pronounced emphasis on narrative building around food systems:** The goals, vision, and objectives of the WFF’s 44 Cooperation Partners varied widely and seemed to have more emphasis on narrative-building than on impacts on the food system. The vast majority of these are youth organizations, startups, networks, or groups aiming to “change the food systems” without identifying clear mechanisms for achieving this change or key outcomes for implemented actions. Other Cooperation Partners include donors who fund youth organizations and programs – such as the Future of Food Institute’s Project Kiobashi – with actors ranging from chefs and artists to urban planners, working to transform the way we eat, but with little detail available on how that would be done. Finally, there are some organizations that apparently provide platforms to disseminate messages or to build capacity on the client’s topic of preference, in this case, food systems or agriculture “transformation,” such as The NextGen Ag Impact Network (NGIN),<sup>29</sup> I4N,<sup>28</sup> or ACT4Food<sup>60</sup>.

**EXAMPLE:** *Act4Food Act4Change*

- Despite having strong messages and actions listed on their public profile, other than pledges signed by followers, it is difficult to track this initiative’s further actions and impacts on global food system.
- The organization aims to promote and disseminate pledges related to four actions urging governments and businesses “to act boldly and promptly.”<sup>61</sup> These four core actions seem to focus on: 1) affordable, healthy, and nutritious food, 2) sustainable farming to regenerate soils and reduce damaging chemicals, 3) healthy and sustainable meals at school, college, or nursery for every child, and 4) education for all about food and its impact on our planet and our health.<sup>61</sup>
- Nevertheless, the initiative is backed by organizations such as EAT and GAIN, which are closely related to Nestlé<sup>51</sup> and Unilever.<sup>47</sup> These corporations have been accused of promoting ultra-processed foods, deepening food inequalities<sup>62</sup> and harming the environment.<sup>60, 63</sup>



## TYPE AND NATURE OF CORPORATE RELATIONSHIP

- **Terms of engagement with corporate actors behind the WFF’s Cooperation Partners remain unclear:** While most of the organizations mapped here have clear vision and mission statements on their websites, it was challenging to find any publicly available statements, policies, or principles on how they engage with their potential or actual funders or corporate sponsors. This is also the case when it comes to safeguards against potential conflict of interests. The FAO and the WFF organizers have told us that there is no corporate money for the flagship event, though some of the participants (namely youth) find sponsors (either a Member State, a university, or an organization) to fund participation related expenses.\* However, WFF partners are free to organize parallel events and discussions when they meet each year in Rome, and some of those are organized by entities that have relationships with agri-food corporations+.
- **Lack of transparency on how WFF Cooperation Partners interact and how impact is evaluated.** It is not clear how multiple events that are labelled as part of the WFF (the WFF’s range of online events, networks, and content platforms) are interconnecting with WFF’s participants. Likewise, it is not clear how Cooperation Partners use or interact with different platforms, partners, pilot programs, and innovation hubs; or, how those claiming to jointly advance “sustainable food systems” as a collective effort following the vision of the FAO’s leadership—“systematic problem solving that can lead to the systematic solutions the world needs now”—are doing so.<sup>15</sup>
- **Promoting corporate messages on outcomes but actions unclear:** The information we gathered unravels a strategic development of vocabulary, in collaboration with corporate actors, to advance narratives in each participant’s network and region rather than focusing on specific and measurable actions. For instance, Foodicons (listed as a WFF’s Cooperation Partner), a project funded by Lexicon, is a new system to identify the sources, processes, and principles followed in value chains of foods that carry icons or symbols designed by Foodicons.<sup>64</sup> Both Food Icon and Lexicon are funded by Google Food, a new food delivery system developed by Google.<sup>43</sup> Another example is the WFF’s 2022 annual report which presents claims around the Forum’s impact (e.g. 70 million meals shared, 20 million kg of food waste saved from landfills, more than 200 events during the flagship event).<sup>15</sup> But it is unclear to readers, how, where, and by whom these outcomes were reached. These results seem to be part of a narrative built around the need to somehow change global food systems.
- **Concepts such as “food sustainability” leveraged across the WFF seem ambiguous:** The type of groups involved are mainly actors that collectively build stories and narratives that target global youth and entrepreneurs with the term “food sustainability.” However, the concept of “food sustainability” or “sustainable food system”

\* Conversation with WFF expert

+ Conversation with WFF expert

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remains ambiguous throughout the WFF documents and website. It might be that it is based on the FAO's official definition, and is therefore not explicitly explained by the WFF<sup>±</sup>. According to the FAO's director general, the WFF aims to find "new possibilities to optimize agri-foods systems, human health and environmental sustainability," and use the forum for "systematic problem solving that can lead to the systematic solutions the world needs now."<sup>15</sup> For instance, some events are aimed at "developing a unifying vision - a manifesto - for a future society through the lens of sustainability within agri-food systems."<sup>15</sup> Yet again, these results seem to be part of a narrative built around the need to somehow change global food systems.



### **PARTNERSHIPS AND NETWORKS AIMING TO IMPROVE SUSTAINABILITY OF FOOD SYSTEMS**

Partnerships that have emerged in the interlinked events of the WFF or with some of its Co-operation Partners also appear to promote narratives about improving food systems. Some examples of these partnerships include:

- **Food Action Alliance (WAA):** The FAA emerged in 2019 as part of the World Economic Forum. It is a public-private partnership aiming to coordinate investments and actions to lead national food systems strategies and flagship initiatives. It has the participation of more than 20 global corporations, such as Cargill, Nestlé, PepsiCo, Rabobank, Syngenta Group and Unilever. <sup>52,65</sup>
- **World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD):** The WBCSD is a global community led by CEOs of over 200 of the world's leading "sustainable" businesses claiming to accelerate the transformations of food system and playing an important role in global value chains.<sup>54</sup> Companies that are part of this group include McDonalds, PepsiCo, Nestlé, and Cargill, among others.<sup>52</sup>

We are yet to see how these partnerships advance food justice, food security, and food-focused equities in the countries where they are operational.

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<sup>±</sup> According to the FAO, a sustainable food system (SFS) is a food system that delivers food security and nutrition for all in such a way that the economic, social, and environmental bases to generate food security and nutrition for future generations are not compromised. This means that: It is profitable throughout (economic sustainability), it has broad-based benefits for society

## 4 HIGHLIGHT OF FINDINGS: CORPORATE RELATIONSHIPS IN THE WORLD FOOD FORUM'S THREE KEY PILLARS

We found several corporate relationships among the WFF's Cooperation Partners, but corporate relationship related to the three key pillars were less discernible. Corporate relationships are more evident for the Hand-in-Hand Initiative and the Science and Innovation Forum.

### PILLAR I: THE HAND-IN-HAND INITIATIVE (HIHI) AND ITS INVESTMENT FORUM

The HIHI focuses on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) related to reducing hunger, poverty, and inequality (SDG1, SDG2, and SDG3).<sup>66</sup> During its meetings, national and local governments, experts, and value chain participants discuss and identify territories or ongoing projects that are suitable for adaptation to the "Hand-in-Hand approach."<sup>67</sup> Moreover, the FAO has developed a "matchmaking" strategy bringing together diverse stakeholders to be involved in partnerships with countries with high levels of poverty and hunger and where national capacities are limited.<sup>68</sup> It is not a coincidence that some of these countries are key in the production of staples (such as rice, wheat, corn, and soy) and have been used by ultra-processed food corporations as longtime suppliers.

- Corporations involved in the HIHI are mainly transnational and based in the Global North. The HIHI is described by the UN as an "evidence-based, country-owned and led initiative"<sup>69</sup> that aims "to accelerate agricultural transformation, with the goal of eradicating poverty, ending hunger and malnutrition, and reducing inequalities."<sup>70</sup> In Bangladesh, Bayer has been a key partner in the nation's agriculture policy and programs. In November 2020, Bayer in partnership with International Finance Cooperation (IFC, a member of the World Bank Group) funded the program, "Better Life Farming" which aimed "to provide holistic and innovative solutions for smallholder farmers in developing economies"<sup>71</sup> by "promoting women agri-entrepreneurs to serve female smallholder farmers."<sup>71</sup> Bayer worked closely with the IFC to ensure "long-term economic viability of the agri-entrepreneurship model" to allegedly promote financial literacy among smallholder farmers.<sup>71</sup> The program claims that it currently has 265 centers and 9 women agri-entrepreneurs operating in Bangladesh, reaching over 50,000 smallholder farmers.<sup>72</sup>

(social sustainability); and, it has a positive or neutral impact on the natural environment (environmental sustainability) (<https://www.fao.org/3/ca2079en/CA2079EN.pdf>)

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Additionally, in 2023 Bangladesh’s government received \$858 million from the USDA and the World Bank (and Bayer through the World Bank) “to enhance climate-resilient agricultural growth, food security, and improve road safety,” through a program called Agricultural and Rural Transformation for Nutrition, Entrepreneurship, and Resilience (PARTNER) which aimed to “transform the agriculture sector by promoting crop diversification, food safety, and climate resilience across agri-food systems.”<sup>73</sup> This seems to be mainly accelerating the production of rice and claiming to be supporting small farmers and sustainable agriculture. Bayer has been criticized for allegedly harmful products.<sup>74</sup> and contributing to environmental pollution.<sup>75</sup>

## PILLAR TWO: THE GLOBAL YOUTH FORUM AND THE YOUTH SCIENCE GROUP

The WFF states on its website that it aligns with the UNFSS, acts as a “major youth platform in global food governance,”<sup>76</sup> and is a global think tank that fosters “youth-led solutions in innovation, science, technology, and education.”<sup>9</sup> As such, one of its core networking events is the Global Youth Forum, which includes scientists, a policy board, and indigenous people. The FAO is represented by the FAO Youth Committee.

- Our informants did not perceive the Global Youth Forum as having a strong presence of multinational corporations. But the forum is perceived as an “opportunity to have a voice”<sup>o</sup> in the space of global food governance, where youth groups representing different countries could learn and experience the UN. It was not until late June 2023 that details of the terms of reference of the WFF and the governance mechanisms were published.

The Global Youth Forum’s participants are highly involved in the majority of the WFF’s annual flagship events and represent the WFF in other events. This included the July 2023 High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) which aimed to share insights and aspirations to transform agri-food systems through youth empowerment.<sup>77</sup> According to some attendees, there is limited integration between the WFF’s GYF, SIF, and HIHI as well as other UNFSS events.<sup>\*\*</sup> But, for some groups, this continues to be an opportunity to network and to find funding for their organizations, despite the WFF falling short of their expectations<sup>++</sup>.

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<sup>o</sup> Conversation with WFF expert  
<sup>\*\*</sup> Conversation with WFF expert  
<sup>++</sup> Conversation with WFF expert

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### PILLAR THREE: SCIENCE AND INNOVATION FORUM

The third pillar of the WFF, the Science and Innovation Forum (SIF) for 2023, claims to “focus on enhancing the accessibility of the most appropriate climate technologies, innovative practices and local knowledge in agri-food systems for climate change adaptation, resilience and mitigation.”<sup>78</sup> The SIF also hosts the WFF Innovation Lab, which consist of several competitions for students and young professionals.

The WFF Innovation Lab is organized by the FAO in partnership with Wageningen University and Research (WUR),<sup>59,79</sup> I4Nature,<sup>80</sup> and the International Association of Students in Agriculture and Related Sciences (IAAS),<sup>81</sup> all of them supported by either food or agrochemical corporations (See Figure 1). The youth interviewed for this research said they believed young participants see the WFF as an important opportunity, and that the risk or the issues associated with partnership with these industries is not perceived as a core problem. It is yet to be seen if or how the corporate relationships influence the agenda of the Innovation Lab in the upcoming events.

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# 5

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

The following key findings from our mapping show evidence of corporate relationships behind several WFF Cooperation Partners.

- At least 18 Cooperation Partners of the WFF have relationships with corporations from food, agrochemical, pharmaceutical, and/or technology industries.
- Partners and sponsors of the WFF, particularly those closely involved in the Hand-in-Hand Initiative (HHI), its Investment Forum, and the Science and Innovation Forum, seem to share common values and a predilection for technological innovation and global value chains. They appear to be more aligned with private investors than social actors focused on eradicating poverty (SDG1), ending hunger and malnutrition (SDG2), and reducing inequalities (SDG10), which are aims prioritized by the HHI.
- The WFF seems to be primarily led by the FAO with the support of young entrepreneurs, startups, and youth groups. Many groups listed as Cooperation Partners have relationships with corporations, raising questions about the real impact of the WFF on improving food systems and its relationship with front-line communities fighting for food justice.



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# 6 IN CONCLUSION

Based on our investigation, the WFF serves as a space to promote multistakeholder arrangements where most of the participants, mainly youth, are exposed to industry-driven narratives. They are offered opportunities for sponsorships, training, and financing, which are often backed by Big Food, Big Agriculture, and Big Technology corporations. The food systems vision of frontline community-led efforts based on agroecology, indigenous rights-based voices, justice and food sovereignty is either wholly missing or only marginally integrated in WFF programming and partnerships.

The WFF's Hand-in-Hand Initiative Investment Forum, the Global Youth Forum, and the Science and Innovation Forum appear to serve as investment and narrative-building platforms for corporate actors. The aim is arguably to advance industrial, extractive, and chemical agriculture which jeopardizes soil quality, access to clean water, and the overall health and well-being of our planetary systems. Corporate actors are strategically investing in shaping industry-friendly narratives and attempting to legitimize narrow fossil fuel dependent and technology-driven solutions to transform food systems.

These efforts appear to circumvent or only peripherally engage with the wealth of wisdom emerging from traditional food systems, agroecological methods of cultivation, and the lived experiences of millions of small farmers, pastoralists, fisherfolks, and those for whom land and food are not commodities for trading, but lifelines for survival.

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