

Food systems and seed sovereignty



BACKGROUND

There is enough food in the world to feed everyone, however 2.4 billion people¹ do not have regular access to food, including many of those who produce it.

We need a new approach to how we manage the global food system that brings the needs of people and planet to the forefront. For too long the way we produce, distribute and consume food has been dominated by a small number of big agribusinesses.²

For generations, small-scale farmers have freely shared a wide variety of seeds to produce a wide range of crops that feed a significant proportion of the world's population. Farmer owned seed systems are vital, not only for producing the food the world needs, but they are also vital for ensuring farmers can adapt in light of climate change.

However, very little finance flows to support these farmer-led seed systems, or other sustainable practices where farmers grow diverse, nutritious food in harmony with the environment. Only 4% of UK aid is spent on agriculture, and only a fraction of that supports small-scale farmers. The majority of public finance goes to subsidise big agribusiness, further consolidating the control they have over food systems.

What's more, over recent decades many countries have introduced laws that limit farmers' choices over which seeds they can access. This has hugely benefited big seed companies as farmers are increasingly forced to buy commercial seeds, rather than use their own.

CAFOD research³ found that the World Bank has been instrumental in pushing these restrictive seed laws that limit farmers' ability to grow, save, share and sell seeds. This has had a particularly negative impact on farmers across Africa.⁴

Part of the World Bank's approach is to subsidise farmers that buy commercial seeds and corresponding chemical fertilisers. This not only destroys the environment, but means that commercial seeds and fertiliser packages end up being unaffordable for many farmers in the longer term.

CASE STUDY

"I cannot afford to purchase seeds for every planting season. With indigenous seeds I am sure I can get the seeds I need, when I need them. Why does the Government want to oppress smallholder farmers by abolishing the use of indigenous seeds? Indigenous seeds represent our culture, our people's way of life, a rich tradition that has been handed down from generation to generation. The Government should amend these punitive seed laws and allow us to freely share and sell indigenous seeds." **Veronica Kiboino, a farmer from Baringo County, Kenya (2022)**

WHAT CAN WE DO?

As a member of the World Bank's Board of Governors, the UK has significant influence over World Bank policies. It is vital that the next government uses this influence to ensure the Bank adopts a more sustainable agricultural strategy, including supporting farmer-managed seed systems.

As part of CAFOD's [Fix the Food system](#) campaign, over 80,000 Catholics have taken part in actions calling for the protection of farmer-owned seed systems. The UK Government and the World Bank have started to listen so this year's general election is an opportunity to continue raising awareness of this injustice.

QUESTIONS FOR YOUR CANDIDATES

1. 2.4 billion people⁵ do not have regular access to food. We urgently need to transform the way we grow, distribute and consume food to ensure everyone has enough to eat, regardless of where in the world they live. If elected, will you work towards transforming the world's food systems so that they serve the needs of all, and are not controlled by a handful of giant corporations?
2. Small-scale farmers are vital to tackling both the hunger and climate crises as they are producing a significant amount of the world's food while protecting biodiversity. Given that we are currently facing both a global hunger crisis and a climate crisis, would you work to ensure that small-scale farmers across the world who are practising sustainable techniques, such as agroecology, receive support from the UK, as well as international organisations such as the World Bank?

MORE INFORMATION

- Small-scale farmers⁶ produce over one third of the world's food on only 12% of agricultural land.
- 30% of the global population – 2.4 billion people – were food insecure in 2022.⁷
- The global food system, which is dominated by industrial-scale production of commodities such as meat, sugar and soy, accounts for up to 30%⁸ of global greenhouse gas emissions and up to 90% of deforestation.
- The push for commercial seeds is having devastating impacts on crop diversity. Over centuries, farmers have cultivated over 6,000 edible plant species. But only nine crops now account for 65% of all crop production.⁹
- In the UK we throw away 9.5 million tonnes of food per year, three quarters of which was fine to eat.¹⁰

1 <https://www.fao.org/3/cc6550en/cc6550en.pdf>

2 https://www.etcgroup.org/sites/www.etcgroup.org/files/files/food-barons-2022-full_sectors-final_16_sept.pdf

3 <https://cafod.org.uk/about-us/policy-and-research/food-systems-and-agriculture/how-the-world-bank-harms-poor-farmers>

4 <https://cafod.org.uk/about-us/policy-and-research/food-systems-and-agriculture/how-the-world-bank-harms-poor-farmers>

5 <https://www.fao.org/3/cc6550en/cc6550en.pdf>

6 <https://www.fao.org/news/story/en/item/1395127/icode/>

7 <https://data.unicef.org/resources/sofi-2023/>

8 <https://www.nature.com/articles/s43016-021-00225-9>

9 <https://www.fao.org/family-farming/detail/en/c/1305838/>

10 <https://wrap.org.uk/sites/default/files/2021-10/food-%20surplus-and-%20waste-in-the-%20uk-key-facts-oct-21.pdf>