Here is why we are boycotting the UN Food Systems Summit

In September this year, the United Nations will host a Global Food Systems Summit in New York. The organisers of this summit are pitching it as a crucial debate of the decade which is to define the future of agriculture. They aim to bring together various stakeholders across sectors who play a role in the global food system.

Yet, the organised peasant and indigenous movements from Asia, Africa, Europe and the Americas that collectively represent most of the world's small-scale food producers have called for a total boycott of this summit. In April this year, scores of scientists, researchers, faculty members, and educators who work in agriculture and food systems, also issued an open call to boycott the event.

To understand why social movements and scientists are staying out of a UN-sponsored summit, it is important to know how the world's food system works today.

A handful of transnational companies dominate the current global food and commodity trade. For instance, just two firms – Dow Dupont and Monsanto-Bayer Crop Science – hold a 53 percent market share in the seed industry. Merely three firms own 70 percent of the global agrochemical industry that manufactures and sells chemicals and pesticides used on crops. This corporate concentration is also evident in the livestock breeding sector, animal pharmaceutical industry, farming machinery, commodity trade and so forth.

Therefore, from the sowing of seeds and growing of crops to the processing, distribution, and consumption of food, transnational agribusinesses control and decide everything. Most of these corporations are now entering into partnerships with Big Tech firms to digitalise the global food system to cement their dominance.

But here is what is striking about these giant corporations. Despite their control over nearly 75 percent of the world's food production-related natural resources, they can barely feed a third of the global population. Furthermore, they are responsible for most of the $400bn worth of food lost annually and for the emission of large amounts of greenhouse gases.

By contrast, we – the small-scale farmers, fisherfolk, farmworkers, peasants, pastoralists and Indigenous people – with barely a quarter of the world's food-production-related natural resources to our name and often neglected in public policies – continue to provide about 70 percent of the world's food. Our web of local small-scale food producers stepped up in every corner of the world when the industrial food supply chain crumbled under the COVID-19 pandemic.

Yet, when it comes to defining the future of our food system, guess who gets invited by the UN to conceive and construct the plan, principles and content of the global summit. It is big agribusinesses!

The UN Food Systems Summit has courted controversy for its exclusivity since it was announced in December 2019.

In March 2020, 550 organisations, comprising some of the world's biggest peasant and indigenous movements, wrote to UN Secretary-General António Guterres to warn him that the summit is not building on the legacy of past world food summits, which were once convened by the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO).

The FAO was given the mandate to organise these events by its member states and it allowed the active participation of civil society through parallel self-organised forums.

However, there was no such mandate given for the organisation of the Food Systems Summit of 2021. The decision to set up the summit was taken by the UN secretary-general in close partnership with the World Economic Forum, which is a private sector organisation representing global corporate interests.

The governance of the summit remains firmly in the hands of "experts" known to be staunch defenders of industrial agriculture, and some states, which host many of these large multinational corporations, are driving the agenda. Through billionaire-run philanthropic foundations and their partners, they have also managed to secure the participation of a small section of the global civil society and advertise that as proof of the summit's inclusive character.

However, some of the largest food producer networks and movements, which include La Via Campesina and the World Forum of Fisher People, among many others, have refused to join the preliminary consultations set up by the organisers and stand firm in their decision to boycott the summit.

There is no denying that the global food system has to undergo a radical change. The COVID-19 pandemic and the logistical bottleneck that several countries faced after its outbreak only accelerated that demand for a systemic overhaul.

Twenty-five years ago, at the 1996 World Food Summit, social movements insisted that food systems built around the idea of food sovereignty offer a pathway to a better, healthier future. Food sovereignty is the right of people to determine their food and agricultural systems. It addresses the people's most urgent and pressing need: to have healthy, nutritious and climatically appropriate food grown in their locality or neighbourhood.

Agroecological and localised peasant production of food respects and co-exists with our natural surroundings and promotes humanist principles of solidarity and collectivism. It keeps away from harmful pesticides and chemical fertilisers and fosters a diversity of nutritious crops, unlike the industry practice of monocropping.

Over the past two decades, social movements have made several advances on this front and convinced the UN and several member states to adopt and implement this idea while drafting public policies. Through efforts spanning over two decades, peasant movements found spaces of representation within the UN, including at the FAO and the UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS).

But these two institutions were initially shunted from the organisation of the summit. The current and the two former Special Rapporteurs on the Right to Food have criticised the current format of the summit for not building on past food summit experiences and pointed out that "the CFS already has the structure that the Summit organizers have been hastily reconstructing".

The summit organisers only invited the CFS chair to join the Summit Advisory Committee in November and asked the FAO's Right to Food office to participate – albeit with a limited mandate – in March.

Despite these last-minute changes, agribusiness apologists still have the power to set the agenda for the summit. This would mean that the event will not only promote corporate interests, but it will also shrink even further the already limited space available for social movements and civil society inside the UN.

This decision by the secretary-general to give such leverage to agribusiness in the summit contradicts Article 10.1 of the UN Declaration on The Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas, which stipulates our right to actively and freely participate in preparing and implementing policies, programmes, and projects that may affect our lives, land and livelihoods.

However, we will not remain silent in the face of this flagrant attempt to decide our lives and livelihoods without our participation. We will boycott the UN Food Systems Summit 2021 and join the people's counter-summit, which will start on July 25. There, we – small-scale food producers and Indigenous people – will reaffirm our solidarity and food sovereignty principles that are rooted in our territories and our way of life.

The Gaza ceasefire is shaky and another war may be coming soon

As soon as the 11-day Israeli war on Gaza ended in May, preparation began in Israel and in the strip for a new confrontation. It was clear from the start that the ceasefire brokered by Egypt was fragile and may not last long. The temporary truce was concluded under pressure from the United States but it did not settle the most triggering issues between the two parties. As a result, conflict between Israel and Hamas could be easily reignited in the near future.

From the Palestinian perspective, the sponsors of the ceasefire have done nothing to stop the Israeli aggression in Jerusalem and Al-Aqsa Mosque, which provoked Palestinian anger and ultimately led to Hamas launching rocket fire on May 10. Forced expulsions and house demolitions of Palestinian homes in occupied Jerusalem have continued, and so have Israeli settler break-ins under Israeli security protection into the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound, where the mosque is located.

Despite international pressure on the Israeli government to stop these raids on Islam's third holiest site, it has continued to enable them. One of the main reasons for that is its own fragility. The new Israeli government is an unstable coalition of disparate political forces which is now subjected to fierce political attacks by former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu after his ouster from power. Facing accusations of being "left-wing", Prime Minister Naftali Bennett is intent on proving his right-wing credentials and would not risk angering the Israeli settler community or the Israeli far right by stopping the raids on Al-Aqsa.

The same is true for the forced expulsions of Palestinians from their homes in occupied Jerusalem. Ethnically cleansing the city of its Palestinian population and making it Jewish-only has been a top priority for the Israeli far right for decades. Bennett likely fears that putting a stop to these crimes would destabilise his coalition. This continuous violence against Palestinians and the violation of Al-Aqsa's sanctity could well trigger another conflict if left unaddressed.

From the Israeli perspective, Hamas emerging as the victorious side from the 11-day war was hard to swallow. Hamas's rockets fired at Israel were welcomed by Palestinians across historic Palestine, not just Gaza, and increased support for the movement.

This caused much frustration within the ranks of the Israeli army and it is likely that its leadership will push for an opportunity to even the score and polish its tarnished image.

Meanwhile, to counter Hamas's growing popularity, Israel has intensified its siege of Gaza, closing crossings to the strip, limiting the entry of aid and the export and import of foodstuffs, and decreasing the supply of electricity.

As a result, the humanitarian situation in Gaza has deteriorated significantly. As Palestinians in the strip face ever-worsening conditions, they are increasingly putting pressure on Hamas to provide for their needs. Hamas, however, does not have an answer to these legitimate humanitarian demands. Finding itself in this difficult position, Hamas might try to export its internal crisis to Israel through another round of hostilities.

One of the important economic issues that Hamas seems unlikely to compromise on is the monthly financial grant which has been provided by Qatar since October 2018, after the movement, and Israel reached an understanding under the sponsorship of Qatar, Egypt, and the United Nations.

As part of this deal, Doha sends $30m per month distributed over many economic sectors in Gaza, including the transfer of $100 at the beginning of each month to tens of thousands of Palestinian families. The cash given to Gaza residents helps to revive the economy of the strip and mitigate the effect of the Israeli siege.

Israel and the US have pushed for an end to the Qatari cash grant and suggested replacing it with purchase vouchers of the same cash value. This proposal was categorically rejected by Hamas, as it realises that many of Gaza's residents survive on these cash handouts and that losing them will likely lead to an explosive situation in the strip.

There also seems to be a deadlock on another issue: the exchange of prisoners. Although for a while there has been talk that such a deal is imminent, there are serious disagreements that have led to the failure of the indirect negotiations. This is another problem that could potentially reignite hostilities between the two sides.

For its part, Hamas has expressed its desire to exploit any military confrontation with Israel to increase the number of Israeli soldiers it has captured to gain more leverage and be able to exchange them for more Palestinian prisoners held by Israel.

While the forces pushing for a new conflict are considerable, there are a few factors that have so far prevented the breakout of another war in Gaza.

First, the same reason that keeps the new Israeli government's hands tied on the raids on Al-Aqsa and the forced expulsions of Palestinian Jerusalemites from their homes – its fragility – also prevents it from launching another assault on Gaza. If it were to do so, one of its coalition partners – the Palestinian Raam Party – would likely withdraw its support. Others might also abandon ship if Hamas's retaliation is successful, especially if it manages to strike the Israeli interior.

For this reason – at least for now – the new government would rather engage in indirect talks with Hamas, raise its negotiating demands, and engage in brinkmanship without necessarily falling into direct confrontation.

Second, Hamas is aware that both its fighters and Gaza civilians might not be able to pull through another Israeli campaign of massive destruction. As soon as it emerged from the last war, its armed wing began restoring its military capabilities, but it was apparent that its fighters needed "a break". Given the difficult humanitarian situation in the strip, its residents are also severely exhausted from warfare.

The awareness of "conflict exhaustion" among Palestinians in Gaza was evident in Hamas's response to the march organised by settlers through occupied Jerusalem after the new Israeli government took power.

Rather than launching a military response to the march as it happened last Ramadan, Hamas contented itself with denouncing it.

Third, the US does not want to see any confrontations in the Palestinian territories. In May, it sent its envoys to the region to pressure all parties into committing to the ceasefire so there are no fresh hostilities while it tries to finalise a nuclear deal with Iran. The US wants calm in the region also because it needs to devote itself to its confrontations with China and Russia.

Although so far these factors are precluding another conflict between Israel and Hamas, the situation is quite unstable and unpredictable. At any point, the calculus of each actor can change and the benefits of another war could be perceived as greater than a commitment to the present ceasefire. A more lasting truce will not be established until the major outstanding issues between Israel and Hamas are resolved.

aljazeera

US general vows to continue airstrikes supporting Afghan...

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"Taliban victory is not inevitable," he said, adding that the US military will continue giving logistical support to the Afghan Air Force even after its foreign forces are expected to leave the country on August 31.

"We will continue to support the Afghan forces even after that August 31 date, it will generally be from over the horizon," McKenzie said.

The US military carried out two strikes against Taliban targets on Thursday in support of Afghan forces in the Kandahar province, multiple defense officials said. Three of the last four strikes by the US targeted captured equipment, one defense official said. This included US equipment transferred to the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces that the Taliban then captured as it advanced throughout the country.

The airstrikes come amid a heightened Taliban push to seize territory and a parallel bid to reignite diplomatic moves for a negotiated end to the war. A Taliban spokesperson on Friday condemned US airstrikes in Kandahar and Helmand provinces as "barbaric attacks" that "will have consequences." The spokesperson said, "The Islamic Emirate condemns these barbaric attacks in the strongest terms."

McKenzie on Sunday vowed to support the Afghan Air Force going forward, and said the US Air Force will also retain the ability to "strike into Afghanistan" against two other groups, ISIS and al Qaeda. McKenzie said it will be clear in the next "days and weeks" if the Afghan government will be able to defend the country from the Taliban.

He added: "I don't think it's going to be an easy path ... [but] I do not accept the narrative that there is going to be a civil war of necessity."

On Sunday, fighting continued on the outskirts of Kandahar. AFP reports McKenzie acknowledged that the US Air Force had carried out airstrikes in the province in recent days. Kandahar, with 650,000 inhabitants, is the second-largest city in Afghanistan after Kabul. **The Kabul Times**

Young Pakistanis' Taliban idealism end with death...

From P1

"It is not possible without the state's support," he said earlier last week.

The Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) is officially banned in the country, but experts say Islamabad's alleged support to the Afghan Taliban is giving impetus to the outfit.

The Kabul Times

Why Afghanistan is another...

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This impact on Western authority is compounded by history. Islam was instrumentalized and weaponized by the U.S. to help to bring down the Soviet Union in Afghanistan in the 1980s.

As in Vietnam, the U.S. negotiated to enable retreat, not victory.

In both Vietnam and Afghanistan, a failure to understand their allies and the enemy and the character of the conflict took Washington down the wrong road. In both, it fundamentally got the politics wrong.

Like South Vietnam, it's now up to Kabul to manage the mess, pain and uncertainty of the Western withdrawal. While there was a Western-centric environment for 20 years, from the pursuit of strategic issues including diplomacy to a tactical approach that involved spreading out Western bases and a dependency on airpower, Kabul is now, quickly, going to have to make another plan.

Here there remains one big, possible difference. Should Kabul now take the fight successfully to the Taliban, which will be necessary for a ceasefire and a negotiated settlement, Afghanistan will be no South Vietnam.

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