

Corporate Monopolies Will Accelerate the Globalisation of Bad Food, Poor Health and Environmental Catastrophe

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Theme: [Biotechnology and GMO](#), [Law and Justice](#)

If the proposed Monsanto-Bayer merger goes through, the new company would control more than 25 per cent of the global supply of commercial seeds and pesticides. Monsanto held a [26%](#) market share of all seeds sold in 2011. Bayer sells [17%](#) of the world's total agrochemicals and also has a seeds sector. If competition authorities pass the deal, the combined company would be the globe's largest seller of both seeds and agrochemicals.

It marks a trend towards consolidation in the industry with [Dow and DuPont](#) having merged and Swiss seed/pesticide giant [Syngenta merging with ChemChina](#). The mergers would mean that three companies would dominate the commercial agricultural seeds and chemicals sector.

In response to the Monsanto-Bayer merger, after it was announced in 2016 the US National Farmers Union President Roger Johnson [issued the following statement](#):

“Consolidation of this magnitude cannot be the standard for agriculture, nor should we allow it to determine the landscape for our future... We will continue to express concern that these megadeals are being made to benefit the corporate boardrooms at the expense of family farmers, ranchers, consumers and rural economies... [there is an] alarming trend of consolidation in agriculture that has led to less competition, stifled innovation, higher prices and job loss in rural America.”

For all the rhetoric that we often hear about ‘the market’ and large corporations offering choice to farmers and consumers, the evidence is [restriction of choice](#) and the squeezing out of competitors. Over the years, for instance, Monsanto has bought up [dozens of competitors](#) to become the largest supplier of genetically engineered seeds with seed prices having [risen dramatically](#).

Consolidation and monopoly in any sector should be of concern to everyone. But the fact that the large agribusiness conglomerates specialize in a globalised, industrial-scale, chemical-intensive model of farming should have us very concerned. Farmers are increasingly reliant on patented corporate seeds, whether non-GM hybrid seeds or GM and the chemical inputs designed to be used with them. Monsanto seed traits are now in [80% of corn and more than 90% of soybeans](#) grown in the US.

By its very nature, the economic model that corporate agriculture is attached to demands expansion, market capture and profit growth. It might bring [certain benefits](#) to those farmers who have remained in agriculture, if not for the 330 farmers in the US who leave

their land every week (according to data from the National Agricultural Statistics Service).

But in the US, 'success' in agriculture has largely depended on over [\\$51 billion](#) of taxpayer handouts over a 10-year period to oil the wheels of a particular system of agriculture designed to maintain corporate agribusiness profit margins. And any 'success' fails to factor in all the external [social, health and environmental costs](#). It is easy to spin failure as success when the parameters are narrowly defined.

Moreover, the exporting of Green Revolution ideology and technology throughout the globe has been a boon to transnational seed and agrochemical manufacturers, which have benefited from undermining a [healthy, sustainable indigenous agriculture](#).

The main players in the global agribusiness sector rank among the Fortune 500 corporations. These companies are high-rollers in a [geo-politicised](#), globalised system of food production whereby huge company profits are linked to the worldwide [eradication of the small farm](#) (the [bedrock](#) of global food production), [bad food, poor health, rigged trade, environmental devastation, mono-cropping and diminished food and diet diversity](#), the [destruction of rural communities, ecocide, degraded soil, water scarcity and drought, destructive and inappropriate](#) models of development and farmers who live a [knife-edge existence](#) and for whom [debt](#) has become a fact of life.

Does the world need it?

Britain is a leader in intensive, corporate-dominated agriculture. But is this the model of agriculture the world should rely on?

Let us turn to campaigner and environmentalist Dr Rosemary Mason to appreciate some of the consequences of this model. She has just written an open letter to Professor Dame Sally Davies, Chief Medical Officer for England and Chief Medical Advisor to the UK government. Although written to Davies, the letter is intended for the four Chief Medical Officers of Health for England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland and Public Health England.

Her letter is essentially a plea to highly placed officials to act.

Mason provides a stark reminder of the impacts of the agrochemical/agribusiness sector, its political power and its effects on health. She draws attention to a [report](#) by the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food, which states unequivocally that the storyline perpetuated by the likes of Bayer's Richard van der Merwe (in [this piece](#)) saying we need pesticides and (often chemical-dependent) GMOs to feed the world is a myth.

The report is severely critical of the global corporations that manufacture pesticides, accusing them of the "systematic denial of harms", "aggressive, unethical marketing tactics" and heavy lobbying of governments which has "obstructed reforms and paralysed global pesticide restrictions".

The authors of the report call for a comprehensive new global treaty to regulate and phase out the use of dangerous pesticides in farming and move towards sustainable agricultural practices. They say:

"excessive use of pesticides is very dangerous to human health, to the environment and it is misleading to claim they are vital to ensuring food

security.”

Mason notes that chronic exposure to pesticides has been linked to cancer, Alzheimer’s and Parkinson’s diseases, hormone disruption, developmental disorders and sterility. Certain pesticides can persist in the environment for decades and pose a threat to the entire ecological system on which food production depends.

One of the report’s authors, the UN expert on Toxics Baskut Tuncak, [wrote in the Guardian](#):

“Our children are growing up exposed to a toxic cocktail of weedkillers, insecticides, and fungicides. It’s on their food and in their water, and it’s even doused over their parks and playgrounds. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the most ratified international human rights treaty in the world (only the US is not a party), makes it clear that states have an explicit obligation to protect children from exposure to toxic chemicals, from contaminated food and polluted water, and to ensure that every child can realise their right to the highest attainable standard of health. These and many other rights of the child are abused by the current pesticide regime. These chemicals are everywhere and they are invisible. The only way to protect citizens, especially those disproportionately at risk from exposure, is for governments to regulate them effectively, in large part by adhering to the highest standards of scientific integrity.”

Mason offers Sally Davies and her colleagues evidence that suggests [rising UK Mortality rates](#) point to a [critical, unprecedented health epidemic](#). Arguing that the heavy use of agrochemicals in the UK is a major contributory factor, she notes Cancer Research UK (CRUK) is protecting the agrochemical industry due to its strategic influence. As a result, the mainstream narrative on cancer [focuses on the role of alcohol](#) (see [this](#) also) and ‘lifestyle choices’ while sidelining the strong evidence that agrochemicals are having.

Rosemary Mason asks Sally Davies if she is aware that the UK Department of Health is working with industry, again citing evidence in support of her claim.

As someone who has written extensively on the adverse impacts of glyphosate, Mason refers Davies to research that [links](#) Monsanto’s glyphosate-based Roundup with liver damage.

If the National Health Service in the UK is experiencing a crisis – as indeed it is – due to rising rates of morbidity (not withstanding the effects of poor funding and creeping privatisation), surely these spiralling rates of diseases must be addressed. And where better to start by shining the light on agrochemicals rather than blaming individuals for lifestyle choices and alcohol consumption?

For instance, a report by ‘Children with Cancer UK’ in 2016 said there were 1,300 more cases per year of cancers in children, particularly in young adults, compared with 1998. While the medical correspondent from [The Telegraph](#) has mentioned pesticides as a possible cause, a spokesperson from CRUK said there is no evidence of environmental factors.

Among the various statistics Mason provides are those indicating that colon cancer had risen by 200%, thyroid cancer has doubled, ovarian cancer is up by 70% and cervical cancer is up by 50% since 1998.

Yes, despite the evidence, the [corporate media in Britain is silent](#) about pesticides, which partly results from the [corporate sponsorship](#) of the UK Science Media Centre; so any science against the corporations can be suppressed by interested parties, including AstraZeneca, Coca Cola, Syngenta, BP and Monsanto.

While Mason produces figures to show the [massive increase](#) in a range of agrochemicals over the years, the Chief Scientist for the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Professor Ian Boyd, points out that once a pesticide is approved there is no follow up. There is also no follow up as to the impacts of not just one chemical but the [cocktail of agrochemicals](#) out there and how they interact when in the human body and within the environment.

And let's not forget that many of these agrochemicals were [fraudulently placed](#) on the commercial market in the first place without proper testing.

Readers can read Mason's letter [in full here](#), where she also discusses a potential UK-US trade deal with the US and the impacts on the lowering of food and environmental standards and subsequent relations with the EU.

The impacts of the Monsanto-Bayer deal and the contents of Rosemary's letter to the Chief Medical officers of the UK are just the tip of an iceberg. There is a lot more that could and has been said on the impact of agribusiness giants on the [globalisation of bad food and poor health](#), [ecological degradation](#), [soil health](#), [ocean dead zones](#) as well as the [chemical contamination](#) of our food by the [handful of food conglomerates](#) that now increasingly dominate the supply chain.

Alternative [approaches](#) and [solutions](#) exist but the political influence and financial clout of transnational corporations means that '[business as usual](#)' prevails.

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