

WN Guest editorial

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The UN system

Commercialising the United Nations

If you hear criticism of the UN system, the report [*Fit for Whose Purpose?*](#), just published by the Global Policy Forum, may help you to understand why. The biggest, richest member governments, while telling the United Nations to achieve more, have been cutting back their core budgetary contributions. While calling for decreased fragmentation, they contribute far more now for earmarked projects, causing further fragmentation and turning the UN System into a contractor for their funds, rather than a set of multilateral agencies furthering human rights.

In whose service?

Multiple multi-stakeholder partnerships have been created, giving equal voice to transnational corporations and giant philanthropies as to national member states. In the health sector, these partnerships lump corporations together with public interest civil society organisations and social movements, as ‘non-state actors’. This ‘ignores the profound differences in their orientation, interests and accountability’.

When such partners are self-nominated, which is typical, there is nothing approaching democratic legitimacy in the process. Conflict of interest issues that undermine confidence in the impartiality of the UN abound. The UN *Global Compact* is described in *Fit for Whose Purpose* as based on principles that are ‘a pale and partial reflection of the body of UN norms, standards and treaty obligations. They essentially risk making voluntary some UN fundamentals’. This process is not by chance. It is part of a ‘neo-liberal’ plan to reduce the UN’s capacity to hinder transnational and other vast corporations in achieving their plans, such as turning the huge lower-income country populations in the global South into consumers of global ‘super-brand’ products that displace local food systems.

Meanwhile, the greatest change that has occurred on the global development landscape is that corporate philanthropy has achieved enormous proportions. The institutions involved expect to be treated as development partners and not donor agencies. Their use of mass media and scientific publishing has caused huge changes

in priorities. Lower-income countries play an increasingly small role, as do any types of organisation that can be properly accountable in setting global development priorities. The UN can no longer play its critical normative part in development, because it has to chase funds and align its priorities with those of the donors.

SUN rise

In the nutrition field, the resulting change can be seen in the living death several years ago of the UN System Standing Committee on Nutrition (SCN). This coincided with the rise of the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) initiative, with its focus on multi-stakeholder partnerships, including with transnational corporations.

This shift is significant. The SCN had first avoided the corporate sector, and then had agreed to work with industry on condition that strict conflict of interest rules were followed that included the acceptance of no money from industries that could benefit from the work of the SCN. By contrast, here is an example from *Fit for Whose Purpose* of how the SUN ‘business network’ operates.

The Laughing Cow [processed] cheese in SUN countries has been fortified in calcium & vitamin D for several years. Throughout that time, Bel has made it available to lower-income families by ensuring the sale of individual portions. Bel is committed to report on the number of people receiving the fortified product each year. With this, Bel says, it will reach 13 million people by the end of 2020.

Thus selling tiny amounts of an ultra-processed food product at high per unit prices to impoverished consumers, which used to be considered exploitative, can now because of SUN, be celebrated as a contribution to international nutrition, because Bel has added nutrients to it – one of which natural cheese already contains. The entire SUN business network then gets credit for reaching 13 million people with a nutrition intervention which is really just business as usual.

Being willing to play ball with Big Food has brought very little corporate money to countries in the global South, but has enriched the SUN secretariat. It has received \$US 20 million over the past six years, 70% from European Union countries, and the rest from Canada and the Gates Foundation. This rate is many times what the SCN secretariat ever received. SUN has 20 professional staff. The SCN had 3-4 at most.

[*Fit for Whose Purpose?*](#) makes a series of recommendations for addressing these issues, with the general purpose of ‘reclaiming the public space by and within the UN System’. Is anybody with real power and influence paying attention?

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Ted Greiner was chair of the UN SCN bilateral constituency from 1990 to 2000, and in 2007 was elected chair of the SCN civil society constituency, now in abeyance.