



Statement

August 15, 2022

Civil society & IPs to FAO: End indefinite agreement, ensure accountability

After a high-level meeting last week, we, representatives of civil society & Indigenous Peoples organizations, urgently call on the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) to end its existing agreement with CropLife International (CLI), to publicly clarify the nature of its ties with the pesticide industry, and to subject these ties to greater transparency and accountability.

On July 25, representatives from PAN, FIAN, IITC and IPEN met with FAO Deputy Director General Beth Bechdol and her colleagues in the Project Support, Partnerships, and Plant Protection divisions. This meeting was held more than a year and a half after we - 11 civil society and Indigenous Peoples organizations - first made a [formal request](#) to sit down with the Director-General upon signing the Letter of Intent (LOI) between FAO and CropLife in October 2020. Our high-level meeting requests [continued](#) through the most recent June FAO [Council meeting](#), amplified by the [massive public opposition](#) from [hundreds](#) of CSO & IP groups representing farmers, agricultural workers, and other communities, academics, scientists and funders from around the world, plus the over 187,300 people from over 107 countries that have [petitioned the FAO](#) to end this alliance with the pesticide industry.

In the dialogue, DDG Bechdol stated that the FAO does not have a formal partnership with CropLife, that the LOI does not have an expiration date, that both parties only agreed to “explore” collaborations, that there is no current discussion on advancing the agreement to a more formal Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), that only one joint public activity has taken place (a webinar) since the signing of the LOI, and that there have been no financial contributions to FAO from CropLife since 2011.

DDG Bechdol also said that for the FAO, CropLife is more of a “prospect” than a “partner.” This is contrary to the [public statement made by CropLife](#). We urge the FAO to correct claims of a “strategic partnership” by the pesticide industry—such claims damage the credibility of the agency, send the wrong signals, and should have been publicly corrected by the FAO.

Further, the supposed informal nature of the engagement with CropLife contrasts with statements made by the FAO in the only joint public activity reported since the LOI was signed: a [webinar on the disposal of obsolete pesticides](#) last 18 November 2021. In the webinar, Director of Resource Mobilization and Private Sector Partnerships Alex Jones, in presenting the new FAO Strategy for Private Sector Engagement, referred to a “partnership” with CropLife, said that he was [meeting with CLI on a monthly basis](#) “to talk about key issues,” and mentioned that [a “workplan” was in place with CropLife](#). In our previous query to the FAO about the existence of such a workplan, we were told that joint workplans only exist for MOUs, and that there is currently no workplan between FAO and CropLife. DDG Bechdol affirmed that informal meetings can take place between FAO and CropLife leaders under the existing agreement. In any case, it is clear that the agreement has given the pesticide industry unprecedented access to FAO decision-makers, with little transparency as to what is being discussed. It has also given CropLife the imprimatur to advertise itself as the agency’s partner, which the FAO has not corrected. Indeed, the topic of Giulia Di Tommaso, CLI’s president and CEO, in the webinar was *“Industry as a partner for driving sustainable development.”*

We recognize and support the FAO’s efforts to increase the pesticide industry’s contribution to cleaning up its own waste. However, such efforts do not require an official LOI with CropLife. As we have elaborated in previous appeals, collaborating with the pesticide industry on broader areas of work such as [defined in the LOI, as well as in the areas of “digitalization” and “agri-food systems transformation,”](#) goes against the agency’s commitment to reduce reliance on pesticides and promote alternatives.

We do not consider that it is appropriate for LOIs or other agreements entered into by FAO to stand indefinitely without periodic review. In our meeting, we sought clarity on the prior due diligence review and risk assessment conducted before signing the agreement with CLI, since it was entered into prior to the FAO’s new due diligence process called [FRAME](#). We were informed that CropLife was reviewed by a partnerships committee under a “due process.” It was also added that the FRAME would apply only to a formal partnership in the form of an MOU, if FAO decided to enter one with CropLife. We believe any collaboration with CropLife not only falls under the [FRAME’s Exclusionary Criteria](#), which prohibits FAO from partnering with companies involved in human rights abuses, but also violates several other criteria and principles outlined in the FRAME. In our meeting, we requested FAO to officially register our objection to considering any agreement or partnership with CLI and offered FAO to submit evidence substantiating our objection. Any move towards a more formal partnership will be met by fierce global opposition from various stakeholders, including possibly Member States. It will also test the integrity of the FAO’s own due diligence process and accountability mechanisms.

We were briefed on FAO’s continued support of their Global Action Plan on Highly Hazardous Pesticides in the meeting. We welcome this effort and look forward to open exchange and progress on this as a sign of FAO’s commitment to reduce reliance on hazardous pesticides and promote safer alternatives, such as agroecology. It is precisely this kind of important work which necessitates that the FAO retains its independence and impartiality. Nonetheless, the agreement with CropLife unfairly elevates the status the agency gives to the pesticide industry above other stakeholders, including representatives of communities directly and adversely affected by its products. With its vast political and economic influence, CropLife has already done so much to interfere in efforts to ban or restrict some of the world’s most toxic

pesticides. In all policy platforms, the balance of power already tilts heavily in their favor, a reality evidenced by the lack of a legally binding mechanism that can effectively stop increasing global pesticides use and its devastating impacts on human and planetary health.

We call on the FAO to rescind its indefinite agreement with CLI and finally end its “intent” to collaborate with the biggest players in the pesticide industry –an industry that is responsible for 385 million pesticide poisonings per year and unprecedented levels of pollution and biodiversity loss. We ask FAO to limit its engagement with the pesticide industry to fulfilling the highest normative standards related to reducing and restricting pesticide use; as well as to increase transparency and accountability in this engagement.

CropLife is no ordinary private sector actor; its primary aim to sell toxic pesticides runs directly counter to FAO’s mandate and the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In our view, it is not the role of publicly funded institutions such as the FAO to facilitate investments from the private sector—most especially the pesticide industry—to Member States. Unfortunately, this seems to be the essence of the FAO’s Hand-In-Hand Initiative and Strategy for Private Sector Engagement.

We thank DDG Bechdol and other officials of the FAO for taking the time to discuss with us and hear our concerns. We expect that while we continue to differ on views on substantive issues, this will not prevent further dialogue towards making FAO a more transparent and accountable organization.

Finally, we would like to thank all organizations and individuals who are supporting this campaign by signing petitions, writing to Member States, and mobilizing to counter the pesticide industry’s influence at all levels. We will continue to remain vigilant, raise our voices vs. corporate capture, and collectively advance our efforts for more just, equitable, healthy and sustainable food systems.

###