

Sustainably Sourced Junk Food? Big Food and the Challenge of Sustainable Diets

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Abstract

Sustainable diets are an increasingly debated policy concept to address many of the environmental, social, and economic issues in the food system. The role of ultraprocessed foods in sustainable diets has received less attention than meat, dairy, and eggs but is deserving of examination given the high environmental impacts and negative health outcomes resulting from consumption of these foods. Big Food companies that make ultraprocessed foods have focused their attention on sustainable sourcing as a significant sustainability strategy. This article argues that sustainable sourcing as a central strategy for Big Food firms has implications for the achievement of sustainable diets. First, sustainable sourcing lends legitimacy to specific discourses of sustainability that align with a growth imperative. Second, it perpetuates weak and fragmented governance, which can enhance the legitimacy of Big Food when participating in coordination efforts. These dynamics of sustainable sourcing are important for consideration given the legitimacy claims of these companies, which situate them as a key part of the solution in working toward food security and sustainability.

Increasing environmental pressures on the food system have made sustainability the focus in a variety of policy venues on the future of food. However, there is much debate on the best way forward, with diverse visions of sustainability that do not always align. Furthermore, exactly how to get to a sustainable food system is debated, with some advocating certifications to ensure compliance by companies and large agricultural operations and others advocating for a complete overhaul to small-scale, locally supported agriculture. "Sustainable diets" have garnered increasing attention in these debates, as the concept offers a more holistic approach that deals with everything from sustainability to workers' rights, land tenure, and food and nutrition security. However, the vague definition that has become the reference point for describing sustainable diets leaves room for interpretation about what foods can be included, how

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their environmental impacts are measured, and in what quantities they can be consumed. Big Food corporations,¹ the largest makers of ultraprocessed foods,² play an important role in defining what sustainability means for their products and, in turn, are influencing the politics of sustainable diets. Companies have pursued sustainable and responsible sourcing as a key part of the food sustainability solution. Through these efforts and the marketing to promote them, consumers are provided with products made “sustainable and ethical” by improvements to their supply chains (Baldwin 2015; MacDonald 2014). However, this approach does little to address the consumption of unhealthy products and, in particular, ultraprocessed foods.

This article argues that Big Food’s pursuit of sustainable sourcing as a key sustainability strategy has implications for sustainable diets as it legitimates certain visions of sustainability while downplaying the role of other interpretations. Simultaneously, it perpetuates weak and fragmented governance in the food system. Sustainable sourcing certainly makes improvements, but it does not critically challenge the primary goals of these corporations, while at the same time lending them legitimacy to pursue risk mitigation and value creation. This legitimacy gives them the ability to shape discourses about the nature of sustainable agriculture and the meaning of sustainability in the context of a growth imperative. It also gives them a coordinating role in governance, allowing them to take advantage of complex, distanced supply chains and fragmented governance (Clapp 2014; Biermann 2009). At the same time that sustainable sourcing lends legitimacy, these companies stake out their own legitimacy claims as leaders and partners in the pursuit of food sustainability and security. The legitimacy of these strategies and these companies is important to examine given that many of the products they sell have been associated with growing rates of noncommunicable disease and make up roughly 60 percent of diets in North America, Australia, and certain parts of Europe, while consumption grows throughout low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) (Monteiro et al. 2013).

This article examines the sustainability efforts of the top ten food and beverage manufacturers globally.³ The analysis is based on content analysis of corporate sustainability reports and policies, corporate websites, corporate

1. Big Food corporations, for the purposes of this article, are the transnational food and beverage manufacturing corporations that control more and more of the production and distribution of ultraprocessed food products globally (Monteiro & Cannon, 2012).
2. Defined as “made from processed substances extracted or refined from whole foods – e.g. oils, hydrogenated oils and fats, flours and starches, variants of sugar, and cheap parts or remnants of animal foods – with little or no whole foods...Most are made, advertised, and sold by large or transnational corporations and are very durable, palatable, and ready to consume...[They] are typically energy dense; have a high glycemic load; are low in dietary fibre, micronutrients, and phytochemicals; and are high in unhealthy types of dietary fat, free sugars, and sodium.” (Monteiro et al. 2013, 22).
3. These are based on *Forbes’* 2016 list of top companies but do not include Kraft-Heinz, as it had no sustainability strategy at the time. The companies are Associated British Foods, Coca-Cola, Danone, General Mills, Kellogg Company, Mars, Mondeléz, Nestlé, PepsiCo, and Unilever.

social media, news media, industry news, nonprofit websites, campaign materials, reports, government filings, and policies. Coding was used to read for the main sustainability activities of the companies, identifying sustainable and responsible sourcing as a significant area of interest. A “political economy of food systems” approach was then used to analyze how sustainability strategies align with sustainable diets discourses (IPES-Food 2017).

The article unfolds in three sections. The first explores debates around sustainable diets and the actors involved, including Big Food firms. The second section shows how these companies are pursuing sustainable sourcing as one of their primary sustainability strategies. The third section outlines the implications of the focus on sustainable sourcing for achieving sustainable diets. In committing to sustainability in this way, Big Food plays a role in shaping ideational debates on the nature of sustainability. Simultaneously, they can exploit complex and distanced food systems while taking advantage of weak and fragmented governance to further increase their legitimacy as part of the solution for sustainability.

Sustainable Diets and Ultraprocessed Foods: A Challenge for Big Food

Some version of the “sustainable diets” debate has been occurring for many years, but the first use of the term is often attributed to Gussow and Clancy (1986), who argued for the inclusion of sustainability considerations in dietary guidelines. More recently, sustainable diets have become the focus of much contemplation by academics, nongovernmental organizations, and some governments, with a recent definition produced by a Food and Agriculture Organization scientific panel as

diets with low environmental impacts which contribute to food and nutrition security and to healthy life for present and future generations. Sustainable diets are protective and respectful of biodiversity and ecosystems, culturally acceptable, accessible, economically fair and affordable; nutritionally adequate, safe and healthy; while optimizing natural and human resources. (Burlingame and Dernini 2012, 2)

This definition leaves room for interpretation, giving rise to a growing body of literature that attempts to operationalize the concept. The appeal of the term *sustainable diets* is in the holistic way it sees sustainability across the food system by focusing attention on consumption (IPES-Food 2017). Consumption becomes a lens to have conversations about what makes a food product sustainable and what mix of foods should be eaten given their differential impacts. Those wishing to define a sustainable diet are forced to recognize the impacts of food choices on all aspects of the food system that come before and after those choices are made.

Much of the emerging literature on sustainable diets has focused on what is included as part of a diet and how it is measured. Many debates have focused

on meat, dairy, and eggs, with their considerable impact on land use, greenhouse gas emissions, water use, toxicity, and more (Weis 2013). However, little agreement exists on just how much of these products could be considered part of a sustainable diet. Some encourage a diet including no animal products whatsoever, and others argue for flexibility with reduced consumption of the worst offenders. Simultaneously, measurement of impacts focuses on various environmental indicators with little consistency across studies (Jones et al. 2016). Increasingly broad questions of social impacts, biodiversity, and soil health have become part of the debate, bringing many aspects of food sustainability under the sustainable diets umbrella (Mason and Lang 2017). Papers exploring the potential for sustainable diets attempt to quantify environmental impact reductions using dietary change models relying on life cycle assessment (LCA) data (Carlsson-Kanyama and González 2009; Eshel and Martin 2006; Tilman and Clark 2014; Tom et al. 2016; Zhu et al. 2006). However, many of these studies continue to leave a variety of questions and trade-offs unanswered.

With many questions still on the table, a variety of actors are participating in debates and further research on sustainable diets. Academics and research organizations have released numerous studies that model and assess needed dietary changes to reduce environmental impacts, while still meeting nutritional needs (Carvalho et al. 2013; Scarborough et al. 2012; Temme et al. 2015). Academics have also studied the acceptability of these diets to the public (Macdiarmid et al. 2011; Vieux et al. 2012) and the reductions in noncommunicable disease that may result (Aston et al. 2012; Springmann et al. 2016). However, few in the academic community have explored the power and politics of the sustainable diets debate.

Simultaneously, NGOs have built on the work of academics, advocating for greater uptake of sustainable diets and pushing for dietary guidelines that adopt sustainability. The work of organizations like the Barilla Center for Food and Nutrition (BCFN) and WWF UK have effectively used the media to reach citizens on this issue (Barilla Center for Food and Nutrition 2015; Macdiarmid et al. 2011). NGOs have also partnered with business and government to enhance the availability of alternative protein sources, with lower environmental impacts and acceptability among consumers (e.g., the World Resources Institute Better Buying Lab, the Carbon Trust “Case for Protein Diversity”; Forum for the Future 2016). The approach of these organizations has largely encouraged slow nudges toward sustainable diets, while some argue that there is a greater role for government intervention to achieve the shift required (Wellesly et al. 2015).

Governments, meanwhile, have been slow to respond to sustainable diets, with only a handful of countries updating their dietary guidelines to include sustainability. Dietary guidelines have been the first line of policy but are still predominantly used in higher-income countries, and political battles have plagued efforts to change them, most notably in the US (Freidberg 2016). A small minority of other governments have discussed economic measures to

encourage sustainable diets. For example, the Danish Ethics Council, a government-appointed body, has recommended taxing beef and an eventual tax on all foods based on carbon intensity (Withnall 2016).

With much discussion of sustainable diets from academics and the NGO community, and little action by governments, businesses have more diverse responses regarding whether they stand to lose or benefit greatly from the adoption of more sustainable diets. Makers of protein alternatives have projected a growth potential of 8.4 percent in the next five years (FAIRR 2016). The alternatives market is rapidly expanding, launching the Plant Based Foods Association in March 2016 as well as a variety of companies working on plant-based meat alternatives, egg replacers, and laboratory meats. Big business is paying attention, with companies like Tyson, Kellogg, and General Mills starting venture capital funds to invest in food start-ups pursuing sustainability. There have also been a number of high-profile acquisitions in the past year, with Nestlé USA acquiring Sweet Earth (Nestlé 2017b) and Danone acquiring WhiteWave (Danone 2017a). Concurrently, the meat industry, which stands to lose, is fighting back, campaigning against reducing meat consumption using a variety of tactics, from highlighting efficiency gains to comparing industrial systems to grass-fed production and maintaining meat's necessity as part of a diet (Capper 2012; Capper and Bauman 2013).

Big Food firms are not yet using the term *sustainable diet* in any corporate sustainability strategy materials. Examining the top ten companies, the term was not used in any of their full corporate social responsibility (CSR) reports, policies, or websites. A few companies have signed on to the FReSH initiative of the World Business Council for Sustainable Development, which is working on sustainable diets but, to date, has released little information (FReSH 2017). Unilever comes closest to acknowledging sustainable diets with its Sustainable Nutrition Manifesto but focuses largely on production issues rather than consumption (Unilever 2017). When companies do discuss changing consumer consumption, it is most often in the context of health and nutrition (Nestlé 2017a).

Big Food companies are important actors shaping the food system, with ultraprocessed foods becoming ubiquitous (Monteiro et al. 2013). These foods are convenient, eaten on the go, hyperpalatable and appealing to consumers, and, most importantly, the most profitable segment of Big Food companies' portfolios because of these foods' low-cost ingredients (Moodie et al. 2013; Moubarac 2017). However, Big Food companies face a number of challenges because of their prominent role in making ultraprocessed foods. First, they face an economic challenge, as sales of these foods in high-income countries have been stagnant or falling, leading to the pursuit of new markets in LMICs (Market-Line 2017; Monteiro et al. 2013).

Second, Big Food firms face a potential legitimacy challenge from sustainable diet debates because ultraprocessed foods are also known to have a higher environmental impact than fresh foods. However, the dearth of studies means a lack of clarity on the precise impacts and areas for improvement in this sector

and on differences across countries and products (Nilsson et al. 2011; Schmidt Rivera et al. 2014). Hadjidakou (2017) has conducted a larger study to explore the environmental impact of ultraprocessed products in Australian diets, finding that one-third of the environmental impacts (CO₂e, land use, water, and energy use) of the average diet come from the consumption of these “discretionary foods.” This study points out the environmental and health benefits that would result from focusing on a reduction in the consumption of discretionary foods, which are often ultraprocessed (Hadjidakou 2017).

An additional aspect to the sustainable diets challenge is the nutrient profiles of these foods. The global spread of noncommunicable disease and poor diet quality are associated with the consumption of ultraprocessed foods (Louzada et al. 2015; Monteiro et al. 2016; Moubarac et al. 2017). These products are experiencing rapid growth in middle-income countries as a result of rising demand for convenience foods and aggressive marketing by firms, placing food and beverage manufacturers among the major players in shaping the global food system (Monteiro et al. 2013). Meanwhile, these foods have been shown to contribute to nutrition transitions to less healthy diets overall (Baker and Friel 2016; Popkin 2014). Reducing consumption of ultraprocessed foods is recommended in many discussions of sustainable diets from academics, civil society, and policy makers. Big Food has used a variety of defensive tactics with respect to health, while remaining relatively quiet on the sustainability issues related to these products (see Scrinis 2016).

Sustainable Sourcing by Big Food

Even if they are quiet on sustainable diets, Big Food companies are moving full steam ahead with other sustainability strategies, such as sustainable and responsible ingredient sourcing. Nowhere has the trend of sustainable sourcing been more prominent than in the food industry (Makower 2017). It is one of the few consistent strategies across companies, with all ten of the top food and beverage manufacturers having sustainable sourcing goals (Table 1). Sustainable sourcing, like sustainable diets, could be characterized as a holistic sustainability strategy that covers everything from land rights to environmental improvements and fair labor practices. Yet it focuses on those aspects of sustainability that occur only upstream and does not consider the impacts of these foods beyond their production.

A range of goals are put forward, based on portfolio and focus. The number and scope have grown over the last ten years from a specialized few ingredients to encompass a large percentage of the ingredients these companies use. However, variation is evident in the sustainability journeys of these companies, with some being much further along in working toward the goal of sustainable sourcing.

Methods for achieving these goals are not the same between any two companies, with all participating in a broad range of initiatives composing their

Table 1**Sustainable Sourcing Goals of the Top Ten Food and Beverage Manufacturers**

<i>Company</i>	<i>Sustainable Sourcing Goals</i>
Associated British Foods	Individual goals for palm oil, sugar, vanilla, spices, Brazil nuts, tea, and rice (ABF 2017).
Coca-Cola	By 2020, sustainably source key agricultural ingredients (The Coca-Cola Company 2016a).
Danone	Individual ingredient targets include lamb, beef, eggs, US direct milk, palm oil, soy, and sugar.
General Mills	Committed to sustainably sourcing 100% of 10 priority ingredients by 2020, representing more than 50% of annual raw material purchases (General Mills 2017, 1).
Kellogg Company	“By 2020, responsibly source our 10 priority ingredients: cocoa, sugar cane, vanilla, palm, corn, wheat, rice, potatoes, beet and fruit” (Kellogg Company 2017a, 10).
Nestlé	“By 2020: For Tier 1 suppliers, cover 80% of the total volume sourced from audited and compliant suppliers. By 2020: For upstream, 80% of the volume of our priority categories to be traceable, 70% to be Responsibly Sourced” (Nestlé 2016a, 83).
Mars	Working to update their strategy, with no defined deadlines at this point: “Our updated sourcing strategy will cover 23 raw materials, covering 60 percent of our sourcing volume” (Mars Inc. 2015).
Mondelēz	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – All cocoa will be sustainably sourced. – 75% of Western European biscuits volume will be made with Harmony wheat by 2015. – Transitioning to cage-free eggs in North America by 2020 and in Europe by 2025. – 100% cage-free eggs in all European chocolate brands, in biscuit products sold in Belgium and the Netherlands, and in Miracle Whip dressing in Europe. – 100% of palm oil will be RSPO by the end of 2015. (Mondelēz 2015)
PepsiCo	“2020 and 2025 GOALS: Through PepsiCo’s Sustainable Farming Initiative (SFI), sustainably source our direct agricultural raw materials by 2020; and sustainably source our nondirect major agricultural raw material ingredients by 2025” (PepsiCo 2017, 1).

Table 1*(Continued)*

<i>Company</i>	<i>Sustainable Sourcing Goals</i>
Unilever	"We are committed to sourcing 100% of our agricultural raw materials sustainably by 2020" (Unilever 2018).

Note. Some goals have been edited for brevity.

strategies. The sourcing focus stems from greater awareness of the impacts of their supply chains, brought out by life cycle assessment (LCA). The Sustainability Consortium, one of the first initiatives to focus on supply chains, identifies hot spots for numerous product categories using LCA. Similarly, the 2017 Carbon Disclosure Project's supply chain report calls the supply chain "the new frontier in environmental responsibility" (Carbon Disclosure Project 2017). Companies like PepsiCo cite pressure from retailers as one of the reasons it pursues sustainable sourcing and requires its suppliers to follow its Code of Conduct (PepsiCo 2016). Additionally, the Behind the Brands (BtB) campaign by Oxfam, started in 2013, worked closely with the firms to discover ways to improve their performance and pushed firms to consider a number of factors in their sustainable sourcing strategies.

Sustainable sourcing is defined in a variety of ways. The companies that are further along, for example, Nestlé and Unilever, have detailed documentation about the ways that they ensure sustainably sourced ingredients. Many companies have been active in creating standards for agriculture through their own agricultural codes of conduct (Unilever 2010) or through the Sustainable Agriculture Initiative platform and AIM-Progress (the European food industry's agriculture and supply chain initiative). Most companies try to maintain some level of flexibility in how they achieve sustainable sourcing, with a variety of programs meeting their standards to be considered sustainably sourced (Nestlé 2016a; Unilever 2010). Palm oil is an exception to this trend, with all companies using the Green Palm sustainable palm oil certification program.

Cocoa provides an interesting example of the different methods of ensuring sustainability, with a variety of initiatives having emerged. Mars, Nestlé, and Mondelēz have been vocal about the need for sustainable cocoa supplies, working extensively on the commodity. The Nestlé Cocoa Plan is a prominent own-brand ingredient sustainability initiative. It uses a combination of fair-trade and UTZ certification, with Nestlé creating goals to provide cocoa plants and training to farmers, in addition to building schools (Nestlé 2016a). Mars calls its cocoa sustainability plan the Sustainable Cocoa Initiative and has invested in cocoa research for plant improvements, while also providing training and plants to farmers. It also works with UTZ, Fairtrade International, and Rainforest Alliance (Mars Inc. 2017). Unilever uses the Rainforest Alliance to certify its cocoa for Ben & Jerry's and Magnum (Unilever 2018). On the other

hand, Mondelez has its own-brand cocoa sustainability program called Cocoa Life, which uses a private global certification body for certification of its supply chain (Mondelez 2017). The diversity of chocolate programs show both the importance of this commodity and the lack of a single agreed-upon standard. The number and scale of supply chain initiatives that have emerged demonstrate the attention that is being put toward corporate supply chains, and as major buyers of ingredients, companies are carriers of strategic knowledge about the nature of their supply chains – the ingredients, the regions, and the suppliers that make up these complex webs.

Implications of Sustainable Sourcing for Sustainable Diets

The use of sustainable sourcing as a major sustainability strategy is not inherently at odds with achieving sustainable diets and indeed might be a major part of achieving them. However, as currently pursued, sustainable sourcing has implications for the realization of sustainable diets. It can serve to lend legitimacy to certain visions of sustainability, and it can perpetuate weak and fragmented governance. Together, these effects may make achieving sustainable diets more challenging in the long run, while Big Food firms are able to claim legitimacy as actors in the food system that are pursuing food sustainability and security. In what follows, I discuss how power and legitimacy interact to provide opportunities for shaping the way sustainability is defined in the context of the supply chain initiatives Big Food companies use. Material power involves market power and personal control of resources (e.g., technological, financial, or natural) (Fuchs et al. 2016). The less visible ideational sources of power come from the use of knowledge, expertise, and legitimacy, which allow actors to shape norms, values, and structures of meaning (Fuchs et al. 2016). Legitimacy is an important element in using power to shape norms. Legitimacy is also complex, being achieved through a variety of mechanisms that can be understood as either input legitimacy (source based or process based) or output legitimacy (outcome based) (Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen and McGee 2013). The following sections explore, first, how sustainability is shaped through the various sustainable sourcing initiatives, and second, how complexity and distance contribute to weak and fragmented governance, which can be advantageous to Big Food firms aiming to show their legitimacy.

Sustainable Sourcing: Defining Sustainability in Supply Chains

Corporations use many means to achieve legitimacy: managing norms, associating with legitimate institutions and standards, anticipating changes in norms, and communicating their practices using various discursive strategies (Dowling and Pfeffer 1975; Joutsenvirta and Vaara 2015; Pollach 2015). These strategies have been extensively used in the global food and agriculture sector, but Big

Food has received less attention (Clapp and Fuchs 2009). Shaping discourse is a critical part of gaining and maintaining legitimacy, and this section outlines some of the ways that Big Food is achieving this.

Global food and beverage manufacturers are increasingly partnering with development organizations and civil society organizations and, at the same time, are tying their work to the Sustainable Development Goals. These ties to civil society and intergovernmental processes can enhance process-based (input) legitimacy for these corporations (Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen and McGee 2013). This type of work shows firms as cooperative with critics and gives them the opportunity to highlight their rankings as proof of the good work they are doing. The top performers on the Oxfam scorecard often emphasized their ranking in the BtB exercise in their CSR reports (Nestlé 2016a; Unilever 2016). Even so-called laggards were able to highlight their improvements at the end of the campaign in 2016. Page 5 of the Kellogg Company's (2016) sustainability milestones report, for example, is used to celebrate its accolades, explicitly linking its work to the BtB campaign and other NGO initiatives. It starts, "Through the execution of our 2020 Global Sustainability Commitments and our science-based emission targets to 2050, we have garnered recognition from partners and stakeholders around the world." Their alignment with these campaigns may enhance their legitimacy, but many questions remain unanswered.

What does it mean for an ingredient to be sustainably and responsibly sourced? Companies, including Unilever, Nestlé, General Mills, and the Kellogg Company, have been applauded for pushing the agenda on sustainable agriculture (Grady 2016). Unilever has been talking about sustainable agriculture for nearly twenty years. Yet, beyond company efforts, sustainable agriculture is still contested and highly context specific (Lang 2010). On the surface, it appears that these companies have managed to secure a variety of mechanisms to assure consumers, governments, and civil society that their ingredients are, or will be, sourced sustainably. However, shaping sustainability from the beginning of a governance process may lend actors legitimacy when they meet those standards. The financial position of Big Food allows them to participate in a wide variety of initiatives, seen in any of their sustainability strategies, and this gives voice to their preferred sustainability narratives. A number of scholarly studies have shown that large certification roundtables and initiatives have provided ample opportunities for Big Food to be part of shaping what sustainability means (Jaffee and Howard 2010; Richardson 2015; Schouten and Glasbergen 2011).

A variety of technical debates exist about the role of genetically modified organisms (GMOs), monoculture production, new technologies, and advanced data collection. These debates unfold in different initiatives, and, as de Wit and Iles (2016, 2) argue, industrial agriculture carries a "'thick legitimacy': authority that cannot unravel easily because it is multi-stranded and broad-based." On the other hand, alternatives like organic agriculture hold only a thin legitimacy that can unravel easily if market demand or policy interventions change (de Wit and

lles 2016). Within the variety of sustainable sourcing forums, the thick legitimacy of industrial agriculture works against alternatives, which must find unique ways to gain legitimacy, at which it only rarely succeeds. For example, discourses from certain actors that did not agree with the use of GMOs or monoculture production as part of a sustainable soy future were excluded in the roundtable process from the outset. Their vision of sustainability was not given legitimacy in the process due to rules set out from the beginning (Schouten et al. 2012). Likewise, the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) originally included conversion of peatland and secondary forests as acceptable in its standard, a contentious position that did not receive consensus among members (Richardson 2015). However, most companies have since abandoned this exception and demand palm oil that is not cultivated on converted land (WWF Palm Oil Scorecard). These debates are important, and through active exclusion of discourses that oppose certain technologies or modes of agriculture, these standards are shaping the accepted meanings of sustainability going forward.

At the same time, many Big Food companies actively fund research to improve farming and deliver crop science innovations. Mars and Nestlé have pursued improved yields and less vulnerable cocoa trees (Mars Inc. 2017; Nestlé 2016b). General Mills works with several agricultural science universities to improve the yields of key crops (General Mills 2017). These efforts will surely deliver improvements to agricultural sustainability, but they simultaneously work to dismiss alternative visions of future food while legitimizing more industrial production. These initiatives also work in tandem with wider industry work, including the Field to Market program, which focuses on continuous improvement rather than absolute reductions or drastic changes (Freidberg 2017). Continuous improvement methods deny visions of alternatives that may take more drastic efforts and play into dominant ideas about growth and human domination of nature.

Sustainable sourcing also firmly embraces continued growth. Most companies list growth as an important factor in pursuing sourcing in the first place, and all of them discuss future business growth goals. For example, The Coca-Cola Company (2016b) states, "As Coca-Cola aims to grow its global juice business significantly by 2020, sustainably sourcing fruit for its juice products becomes increasingly important." Similarly, Kellogg Company representatives presenting at a sustainability conference framed sustainable sourcing strategies as an area for growth, noting that aspirational customers increasingly demand environmentally sound and ethical products (Kellogg Company 2017b). Unilever extols the benefits of its sustainability efforts with its Sustainable Living brands, which grew 30 percent faster than the rest of the business in 2015 and 50 percent faster in 2016, contributing nearly half of total growth for the firm (Baldwin 2016; Unilever 2015). The company's report called *Making Purpose Pay* demonstrates how sustainable living brands are tapping into a desire from consumers to purchase more sustainable products (Unilever 2015). Discourses of growth, combined with continuous improvement over absolute reductions, maintain a

sustainability that is “fundamentally limited” (Dauvergne and Lister 2012). The need for Big Food to grow has led to efforts that are less transformative, enhancing the existing thick legitimacy and dominance of the market and industrial agriculture.

Coordinated Governance in a Complex World: Responses to Distance and Fragmentation

Technical standards, developed from the 1930s onward, provided the means for companies to build complex supply chains over time by ensuring quality and safety conditions while supply chains expanded ever farther (de Wit and Iles 2016). The expanding supply chains revealed weaknesses and risks over time, necessitating development of sustainable sourcing in today’s world. Thus standardization that enabled complexity created the need for responsible sourcing in the first place. As a result, a variety of sustainability governance mechanisms—many market based—such as product certification schemes, have emerged (Auld 2014; Fortin 2013; Hatanaka and Busch 2008). Companies have used sustainable sourcing as a means to manage risks, with vulnerable ingredients sourced globally managed more effectively, with more checks and balances along the way and more actors working to ensure compliance. Kevin O’Donnell of General Mills reiterates this, stating that the driver for sustainable sourcing is “really all about supply chain resiliency, making sure that we can continue to deliver the raw materials that our business depends on to thrive and to grow. It’s also about risk reduction” (Khalamayzer 2017). Similarly, the global sustainability director at Mars, Kevin Rabinovitch, states that decisions are made based on “a combination of how important the raw material is to the business. Certain geographies with higher risks—whether they be social, environmental or political—need to be scrutinized more closely to make sure we are working with the good guys” (Idle 2014).

Sustainable sourcing provides Big Food firms a measure to ensure that they are reducing their risks, working with the “good guys” and able to continue to grow their companies by acquiring the commodities needed to do so. Big Food firms hold a powerful position as buyers, in which they can decide to walk away from underperformers. Rabinovitch states that Mars intends to push the “bad guys” to better their performance: “Business can be a great force for driving positive social change. We need to figure out how we can do more of that” (Idle 2014). Globalized and vulnerable value chains are complex, and in their efforts to bring resilience to their supplies, these companies have positioned themselves as leaders in this field. Immense growth in initiatives has created a fragmented range of certifications and standards with implications for the long-term environmental benefits of these programs. In a fragmented landscape, managing a variety of issues becomes increasingly challenging, as corporate actors may face multiple and conflicting legitimacy and accountability demands leading to “multiple accountabilities disorder” (Koppell 2005). Legitimacy is made

vulnerable by the many questions of accountability—who, to whom, about what, through what process, by what standards, and with what effect (Mashaw 2006)? These questions become particularly challenging with the additional ask of “how to call to account a constellation of regulators” (Black 2008)—many of whom have vested interest in the outcomes of that regulation for their legitimacy.

In this fragmented landscape, vast selection and complexity give companies the ability to choose their focus for ingredients, issue areas, and jurisdictions and to switch between these foci at will. Sustainable sourcing attempts to take on a variety of interconnected but different issue areas, intersecting with diverse regime complexes in the meantime. This added layer of complexity makes for conditions favorable to forum shopping, where companies seek the venues most favorable to their positions (Murphy and Kellow 2013; Raustiala and Victor 2004). Companies have flexibility to control which suppliers are included in the marketplace due to their buying power. Demonstrating this complexity and variation, cocoa has generated a wide variety of sustainability programs. Cocoa is indicative of the fragmentation of some ingredient governance mechanisms, and this fragmentation can lead to weak and poorly enforced governance, which is demonstrated by continued issues with child labor in the commodity chain (Cole 2014). The variety of certifications and labelling schemes in cocoa can also leave consumers confused, having implications for the ability of these labels to make concrete consumption changes a reality (Fischer and Lyon 2014; Grunert et al. 2014).

Apart from confusion over labelling, sustainable sourcing provides a platform for Big Food to sell its sustainability credentials. Nestlé has poured money into advertising its efforts to produce chocolate bars with 100 percent sustainable cocoa. To do this, it has used in-store advertising displays and labeling and has also enlisted YouTube influencer and travel vlogger “Fun for Louis” to promote the Nestlé Cocoa Plan (Nestlé 2016b). Nestlé advertised heavily prior to introducing 100 percent sustainable cocoa in the UK (Ritchie 2014). However, selling sustainable sourcing is made possible by taking advantage of distance in the food system, where citizens are disconnected from the production of what they purchase and unable to verify conditions on the ground (Clapp 2014; Princen 2001). Distance creates a legitimacy challenge for companies to create transparency but can be a benefit if consumers have already decided that the companies are trustworthy.

Increasingly, industry itself is recognizing that fragmentation of governance efforts can be problematic. The Global Social Compliance Programme is an effort of the Consumer Goods Forum to improve on the inefficiencies caused by the “proliferation of codes, audit duplication and divergence of approach” (Consumer Goods Forum 2018). Their work seeks to harmonize existing efforts while highlighting best practices and common approaches and creating equivalence. Specific to the food and beverage manufacturing industry, AIM-Progress has emerged. Working with AIM, the European Brands Association, and the Grocery Manufacturers Association in the United States, AIM-Progress

was developed and is supported by membership of, among others, all top ten food and beverage manufacturers. The main goal of the forum is stated to be to “positively impact people’s lives through our combined leadership of robust responsible sourcing practices throughout our supply chains” (AIM-Progress 2017). It purports to do this by building supply chain capability, assuring compliance, and driving continuous improvement. All of these are admirable goals, but importantly, AIM-Progress has made mutual recognition and collaboration the cornerstones of its approach.

Although AIM does not necessarily advocate for one certification program or way of creating “sustainable and responsible” ingredient supply chains, it allows manufacturers to work together to increase the number of suppliers that will be audited and measured by the same standard across all platforms. To do this, AIM-Progress has adopted the Sedex Members Ethical Trade Audit (SMETA), which is now used by the majority of the Big Food companies to certify particularly those ingredients that are not part of a formalized ingredient scheme (AIM-Progress 2017). By moving to use SMETA across their sourcing strategies, companies are provided flexibility with the ability to switch schemes and move to different suppliers given noncompliance. Sedex has also worked closely with the SAI Platform to further harmonize auditing of agricultural practices (SAI Platform 2016).

Participation in these convergence efforts gives corporate actors a great deal of ideational power and provides opportunities not only to shape the governance of their supply chains but also to control them collectively, giving actors downstream little choice but to comply with their proposed means of auditing. While convergence would appear to be a benefit, it is important that a variety of actors, beyond just the corporations to be governed, be involved in deciding what coordinated efforts should be recognized. The drive for convergence is a way for Big Food to garner support for reducing the negative impacts of fragmentation, while gaining more control of global supply chains to reduce risks to their supplies and reputations. Companies can gain powerful leverage while downstream suppliers and smallholders have a precarious place of uncertainty in the supply chain.

Big Food efforts to participate in ideational debates and governance convergence efforts require continued examination because of their own legitimacy claims. Big Food has actively made legitimacy claims about their role as part of the solution to making nutritious foods available, affordable, and sustainable. For example, Unilever presents itself as a progressive food company, with its CEO, Paul Polman, declaring that he does not care about profits over development outcomes (Walt 2017). Nestlé’s sustainability strategy is about “creating shared value” and “contributing to society while ensuring the long term success of our business” (Nestlé 2016a, 6). Mars has made a commitment to “investing in the future, taking a long-term view and leaving the world in a [better] place for future generations” as part of a billion dollar sustainability initiative launched in 2017 (Mars Inc. 2017). Similarly, Danone launched its “alimentation revolution”

in its 2016 annual report, where it has “chosen ... to focus on initiatives that give us hope. Ideas that show us that feeding 9 billion people in 2050 isn’t an unachievable dream. That it’s possible to make food and beverages that meet not only the nutritional challenges, but the environmental, economic and social ones as well” (Danone 2017b, 10). General Mills, PepsiCo, Mondelez, Kellogg Company, Coca-Cola, and ABF all make similar claims. These assertions clearly position these companies as part of the solution to feeding a growing population, making agriculture and food production better for the environment, making healthier foods, and, most importantly, making a difference. These statements represent legitimacy claims about their social license to operate and their place in the global food system. Coca-Cola even goes so far as to state, “Everywhere we operate, we do so at the pleasure of the communities we serve. That’s why we will always strive to create a positive impact and provide meaningful solutions. We understand that our social license to operate must be earned day-in and day-out” (Coca-Cola Company 2017). Sustainable sourcing is a key component to building legitimacy and social license, where companies can show the work they are doing to improve their supply chains. However, sustainable sourcing leaves out important elements of achieving sustainable diets. Perhaps most importantly, sustainable sourcing does not deal with the health issues of ultraprocessed foods.

Conclusions

Growing interest in sustainable diets as a holistic policy approach both addresses issues in the food system and challenges makers of ultraprocessed foods that contribute to environmental impacts and unhealthy eating. Currently companies are focusing their efforts on sustainable sourcing and sustainable agriculture. They are not, as I have argued in this article, engaging directly with the “diet” aspect of the sustainable diets discourse.

Sustainable sourcing by companies could be seen as a holistic approach, as it takes into consideration many of the same issues that sustainable diets have embraced: equity and labor issues and environmental impacts. However, most problematically, it does not open the door to discussions of consumption and dietary choice and does little to problematize ultraprocessed foods and their increased environmental impact and contribution to unhealthy diets. Instead, it provides an avenue for Big Food to participate in and shape discourses around the meaning of sustainable agriculture and sustainability in the context of growth. A focus on sourcing also creates space for Big Food to coordinate complex and fragmented governance to their advantage by coordinating measurement efforts through SMETA and taking advantage of distance, severing feedback loops and opportunities for transparency.

Big Food’s concentration on sourcing as a means to solve sustainability issues matters because of the legitimacy claims that these companies make while collectively being one of the biggest influences on globally shifting diets. They

are positioning their work as part of efforts to improve food security and sustainability, partnering with organizations in these efforts, and touting these matters as parts of their missions. However, their discursive and coordinating efforts are actually leading to weaker conceptions of sustainability in the food system and to weaker governance. Ultimately, these outcomes are reinforcing conclusions made elsewhere about the nature of private governance in the food system: necessary changes are not being made to create truly sustainable and healthy food systems.

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