

# BIG BRAND ETHICS: BIG FAIL

By Prof. Samantha Thomas  
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**Is it just me or have food choices become ridiculously complicated over the last few years?**

Remember the days when it was just about calorie content? Or sugar and salt? Now there are a bazillion new things that we need to watch out for when ever we put something in our mouths.



Trans fats, pink slime (originally only for animal consumption, but approved for humans in 2001), horse meat camouflaged as Ikea meatballs, shellac in candy (and here you were thinking it was just a product to revolutionise your nails), corn syrup, additives, preservatives, flavour enhancers, E numbers, pesticides... the list goes on and on!

I'm starting to think that my grandfather's 'meat and three veg' approach (with the veggies generally grown in his own garden) was actually pretty sensible.

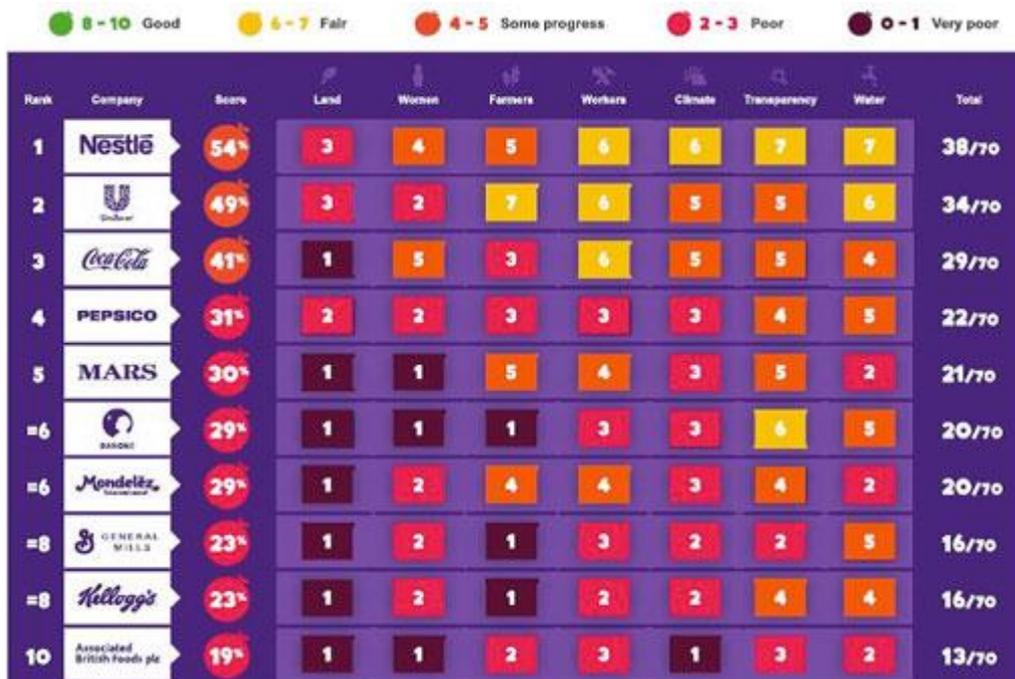
**But there are now a new range of issues to think about. It's not just about what is in your food, but how ethical your food is.**

This week, Oxfam released a report called *Behind the Brands*. The report takes an eye-opening look at what Oxfam calls 'food justice'. They rank the ten biggest food and beverage companies in the world, and how well (or not) they stack up according to their social and environmental policies. In their summary document, Oxfam states:

*"For more than 100 years, the world's most powerful food and beverage companies have relied on cheap land and labor to produce inexpensive products and huge profits. But these profits have often come at the cost of the environment and local communities around the world, and have contributed to a food system in crisis."*

The companies under scrutiny were Associated British Foods (ABF), Coca Cola, Danone, General Mills, Kellogg's, Mars, Mondelez, Nestlé, Pepsico and Unilever. These companies make products that you probably have every week in your grocery shop. Products such as Kit Kat, Cadbury, Doritos, Fanta, Old El Paso, Twinings Tea, Uncle Bens, Evian, and a variety of other snack type foods.

Each of these companies was assessed out of ten in each of seven criteria. Land. Women. Farmers. Workers. Climate. Transparency. Water. Some companies did better than others, but by in large every company could have done a lot better.



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Very few had any policies to address the exploitation of women small-scale farmers or workers (Mars and Danone scored a 1 out of 10 in the Women category). None had adequate policies to protect local communities from land and water grabs associated with their supply change. While most made claims about ‘sustainability’ and ‘social responsibility’, Oxfam found these very difficult to verify. And finally, not one company had made a commitment to ensure that small-scale producers were paid a fair price for their products.

But the key point that really hit home for me was this:

**“In some cases these companies undermine food security and economic opportunity for the poorest people in the world, making hungry people even hungrier.”**

All for us to have the least expensive chocolately snack.

I found the Oxfam report to be a bit of a wake-up call. I logged onto their [interactive map](#) and found myself clicking on products that I buy. The great thing is that we do have choices, and [as Dan Charles from NPR writes](#), these big brands are really sensitive to their consumer image.

**Let’s hope our choices, and shining a spotlight on these ‘bad corporate behaviours’ will lead to some change.**

You can read the full Oxfam report [here](#).