

FIGHT HUNGER & COOL THE CLIMATE WITH AGROECOLOGY



**Friends of
the Earth
International**

Who Benefits? 2018



Small-scale farmer Felicita Aguilar (El Salvador), photo: FoEI.

With our agriculture and food systems under increasing pressure from climate extremes, the amount of hungry people in the world is on the rise again. While there is a clear need to make our food production more climate resilient, we should ignore the false prophets of agribusiness and focus on real solutions like agroecology instead.

The number of chronically hungry people in the world has increased from 804 million in 2016 to nearly 821 million in 2017. According to FAO's latest annual report on the state of food security,¹ climate variability and extreme weather are among the main causes behind this surge; droughts, storms and floods have led to more regional food crises recently, with areas depending on rainfed agriculture hit hardest.

In their search for answers from the agrifood system to the many challenges posed by climate change, governments and international institutions, including the FAO, increasingly refer to 'climate smart agriculture', or CSA. This sounds a lot greener and smarter than it actually is; proponents of CSA deliberately fail to question the problematic nature of industrial food production. Industrial agriculture and food processing are responsible for a large part of human-caused greenhouse gas emissions through deforestation, farming (mostly through the use of chemical fertilizers and heavy machinery), global transport, processing and packaging, freezing and retail, and waste.²

FALSE 'SOLUTIONS'

Loosely defined on purpose, climate smart agriculture allows corporations to greenwash and validate industrial agriculture without having to alter

its model of production and the power structures behind it. While doing so, they co-opt and hijack the language of agroecology, watering it down to a technical toolkit that does not require economic and social change.

Unsurprisingly, the main actors pushing for climate smart agriculture also happen to be the worst social, economic and environmental offenders in industrial agriculture. Agribusiness corporations treat the climate and food crisis as just another business opportunity; the economic system that has gotten us here in the first place is not disputed. As such, climate smart agriculture is the latest addition to a list of false 'solutions' (like carbon markets, genetically modified crops and agrofuels) that fail to deliver and only aggravate the living conditions of the peoples most affected by climate change.

AGROECOLOGY, PEOPLES' SOLUTION

Instead of entrusting corporations with the task to come up with 'solutions' for a climate friendly and resilient agriculture, we'd better focus all our resources and energy on supporting small-scale food producers and scaling up agroecology. Agroecology is a political proposal from social movements, but also a powerful set of traditional farming practices, ecological principles and innovative techniques that provides numerous rich alternatives that have proven themselves capable to deal with the threats presented by climate change, while improving the livelihoods and strengthening the peoples' food sovereignty.



La Via Campesina demonstration, Bilbao, 2017. Photo: Ecuador Etxea.

Agroecological systems have responded better to extreme environmental shocks like floods and hurricanes than 'conventional' farming methods, limiting harvest losses and enabling swift recovery.³ Land plots farmed with agroecological methods (for example: crop rotation and using trees, legumes, stubble, green manure) retain significantly more of their topsoil and suffer much less erosion.

CORPORATE CAPTURE OF THE FOOD SYSTEM

Corporate power is at the core of many problems associated with the industrial agrifood system. Highly capital-intensive as it is, the industrial agrifood system is operating under the wings of the global financial sector. As such, it is primarily geared towards gaining unprecedented market power and profits. Agribusiness corporations, food processors and retailers have merged into just a few big players that dominate entire global value chains. Allowed by a lack of regulation and (weak) voluntary mechanisms, they control how our food is produced, distributed and consumed. The benefits of this highly destructive business model are reaped by corporations and banks, while people and the environment bear the burden of its externalized costs.

Public policies, trade agreements and laws are more and more shaped by the powerful lobby of these corporations. Patent laws, dispute settlement mechanisms, farmers' subsidy schemes like the EU's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP); they all facilitate big corporations at the expense of small-scale food producers. Even international policy dialogue spaces like UN's agricultural organization FAO are not safe from corporate capture; with the help of their home states, big corporations are constantly pushing false 'solutions' like climate smart agriculture at FAO's Committee on World Food Security (CFS).

Biodiversity and agrobiodiversity play an important role in building this resilience. For instance, many small-scale food producers prefer their local, traditional seed varieties over hybrid ones, because they have proven to be more drought resistant as they have been selected year after year to adapt to local conditions.⁴

Agroecology is not only more climate resilient, it can also help to cool the climate. Agroecological production methods are designed to save and recycle resources and nutrients, improve soils, maintain tree and vegetation cover and evade the use of synthetic fertilizers and pesticides. This results in much lower greenhouse gas emissions and soils capable of taking up more carbon than conventionally farmed land.⁵

Other aspects making agroecological systems more climate friendly are their energy efficiency and lower fossil fuels consumption on the farm and – due to their focus on distribution for local markets – off the farm.

STRENGTHENING LIVELIHOODS

Making agriculture more resilient to climate change should also mean more resilient livelihoods for those rural communities that are hit hardest by its effects. Agroecology can do exactly that. Given its diversified production and its focus on territorial instead of global markets, agroecology contributes to (re)localized food systems that – if supported by the right public policies and investments – can reduce poverty, generate decent employment

and empower marginalized groups, especially women and youth.

In many respects, agroecological food producers and territorial markets have already proven to be better equipped in dealing with climate shocks and price spikes than global commodity markets.⁶ The presence of many smallholders leads to more self-sufficiency and wider local availability of (nutritious and culturally adequate) food, while the territorial markets in which they operate are more flexible in reacting to changing circumstances. Altogether, this leads to food systems that are less dependent on imports and therefore less vulnerable to price swings on the international markets.

There is strong evidence that agroecology can dramatically increase yields and household incomes, while reducing risks for food producers – especially in the Global South.⁷ Furthermore, agroecological systems offer more employment than conventional ones, and spread the need for labor more evenly throughout the year.⁸

FOOD SOVEREIGNTY

Considering the fact that the majority of the global hungry and undernourished people live in rural areas vulnerable to the effects of climate change, it is necessary to strengthen their food systems and support their transition towards agroecology, ensuring the availability of locally grown food in times of shortages. Small-scale food producers are already feeding 70-80 percent of



Agroecological family farm in El Salvador, photo: FoEI / Jason Taylor.

the world's population. Unfortunately, more and more communities that rely on these local food systems are losing the capacity to feed themselves because of unfair trade agreements, agribusiness grabbing their lands and lack of public support.

Friends of the Earth International and our allies are calling for a transformation in agriculture and food production based on food sovereignty, agroecology and the relocalization of food systems. To do this we need to take bold and decisive action. Real climate solutions are already

out there in peasant and farmers' fields, but they need to be protected, promoted and enhanced. Instead of backing food corporations and their false 'solutions' to solve hunger and mitigate climate change, our governments must put in place public policies and investments to support agroecological production controlled by small-scale producers. Resources need to be shifted from intensive industrial food production, to scale up agroecology for food sovereignty, and support for peasants and other small-scale food producers.



Peasant rice field, Indonesia. Photo: Martín Drago, FoEI.

Notes:

1. FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO. 2018. The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2018. Building climate resilience for food security and nutrition. Rome, FAO.
2. GRAIN, 2014. Food sovereignty: five steps to cool the planet and feed its people <https://bit.ly/2dknoYt> (checked in October 2018).
3. IPES-Food. 2016. From uniformity to diversity: a paradigm shift from industrial agriculture to diversified agroecological systems. International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food systems, 31.
4. <https://theconversation.com/seeds-under-siege-its-time-to-support-traditional-systems-66415> (Checked in October 2018)
5. IPES-Food. 2016, 34.
6. Sylvia Kay et. al (2016), Connecting Smallholders to Markets, an analytical guide, 34.
7. Olivier De Schutter (2011). Agroecology and the right to food, www.srfood.org/en/report-agroecology-and-the-right-to-food.
8. IPES-Food. 2016, 38.

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