

Viewpoint: Despite its 'social justice pretense' agroecology promotes poverty in developing countries

The world is made up of sunshine and butterflies, roses and rainbows. If we can stop Father Profit from raping Mother Nature, we'll have this world we've dreamt of ... wonderful, toxic-free, full of love, peace, hope and happiness.

This is the dreamer's disease that underpins the agroecology ideology. All we have to do is get rid of the bad, the human, and nature will provide us, in flowing abundance, with all the nourishment and sustenance needed. This reverie is built solely on the belief that nature is unquestionably good and man ... well ... man has done nothing but senselessly destroy nature.

But in its promise of social justice (cloaked as ecological science), agroecology hides a sinister, political weakness that the world hasn't seen since Lysenko.

- Agroecology [claims](#) it is a science; it is not.
- Agroecology [claims](#) it will feed the world; it cannot.
- Agroecology [claims](#) it has the solutions conventional agriculture has failed to achieve; it does not.

What agroecology does have is political activism, funding and an audience wanting to believe its claims: three essential elements to allow zealots imbued with fundamentalist dogma to thrive outside of reason and evidence.

What could possibly go wrong?

What is agroecology?

There are as many definitions of agroecology as activists who claim the title "agroecologist" in their biographies. [Wikipedia](#) describes it as "the study of ecological processes applied to agricultural production systems," which is a bit tautologous. IPES-Food, the self-proclaimed authority on the science of agroecology, [defines](#) it with more lofty terms as:

Agroecology represents an alternative food and farming paradigm, standing in contrast to industrial agriculture. Agroecology is rooted in rebuilding relationships between agriculture and the environment, and between food systems and society. While the practices can be wide-ranging, agroecology is characterized by diversifying farms and farming landscapes, replacing chemical inputs with organic materials and processes, optimizing biodiversity, and stimulating interactions between different species, as part of holistic strategies to build long-term soil fertility, healthy agroecosystems and secure and just livelihoods.

So agroecology is everything that conventional agriculture is not. Simple enough. It puts forward a sort of

“organic plus” approach to farming, concerned with rebuilding a relationship with the environment which conventional agriculture, assumedly, destroyed. This “alternative paradigm” focuses on soil fertility (regenerative farming), diversifying crops and developing biodiverse farms.

But how different is this “paradigm” from what many conventional farmers are presently doing?

Can conventional farmers be agroecologists?

According to the definition from IPES-Food: No!

To be generous, where conventional agriculture would be concerned about yields, agroecology takes a more holistic approach, working within nature to balance yields with the ecological and social consequences of agriculture. But all farmers know very well that to improve yields, they need to protect their soil and conserve water; all farmers recognize their role in delivering safe, nutritious food in an abundant, affordable manner. In other words, all farmers are agroecologists, so the IPES-Food attempt to denormalize hundreds of millions of farmers is both ignorant and malicious. Farmers are constantly looking for better ways to grow and are acutely aware of the fragility and threat from Mother Nature. All farmers work within nature (but some just use better tools to manage the threats).



Indeed, many of the tenets claimed by agroecologists have been used by conventional farmers for decades and in that sense are not remarkable. What agroecologists call regenerative farming is commonly referred to by conventional farmers as “[conservation agriculture](#)” (CA). Some typical CA farming practices claimed as agroecological, but are very clearly conventional, include: well-planned crop rotations; no-till practices; intercropping; cover crops; biodiversity strips and fallowing.

One of the main reasons I have been involved in the fight to keep the herbicide glyphosate on the market for the last five years (against ruthless, well-financed attacks from agroecologists) is that it allows for these

conservation agriculture practices to effectively ensure a more sustainable farming. In some cases conventional farmers are required to apply techniques like cover crops or rotations but it is mostly common sense, leads to better yields and, often, lowers overall costs.

Social justice campaigners calling such conventional practices that develop soil and protect biodiversity “agroecology” while being unaware that farmers have been rotating crops, planting covers, avoiding tillage ... for decades is indicative of a group of activists who have never farmed or even been in contact with farmers. That these urban activists are campaigning to ban crop protection tools like glyphosate that make these “agroecological” practices efficient and viable shows how ridiculous they have become. It is unbelievable that governments and foundations still give these activists any attention at all.

This hypocrisy shouldn't come across as very surprising; it is how zealots operate. My famous sister-in-law, [Rachel](#), who has no children, never hesitates to preach to me on how I should raise my kids. Naturopathic urbanites have unashamedly dictated how our food systems should be managed. But should we be planning agricultural programmes in developing countries based on the advice of social justice warriors with no idea and no concern at all about farming?

Is agroecology merely a social justice concept?

According to an undated campaign [pamphlet](#) from the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), agroecology is unique in that it:

seeks to transform food and agricultural systems, addressing the root causes of problems in an integrated way and providing holistic and long-term solutions. This includes an explicit focus on social and economic dimensions of food systems. Agroecology places a strong focus on the rights of women, youth and indigenous peoples.

So ... according to the UN agricultural arm, agroecology is about social justice (and apparently not at all about farming). But the FAO wants to promote agroecology as a transitional tool in effecting changes in agricultural systems.

To say that agroecology is “transitional”, “transformative” or an “alternative system” is something of a misnomer. Pushing agriculture back to a time prior to the development of crop protection tools and seed breeding technologies is hardly transformative. It is just one more application of the dreamer's disease, rejecting technology and pushing the clock back to simpler days (although they try to package this old wine in new bottles). Agroecologists then claim it is merely a question of proper education (spoken like a true colonizer).

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Will this “transitional” tool improve farming in developing countries or bring us back to older, failed

practices? This question is assessed in an excellent [article](#) by the Ugandan agricultural adviser, Nassib Mugwanya. From his experience, he concludes that agroecology will merely bind African farmers to more struggle and poverty, when what they need is more choice and opportunity for a better life:

Yet the more I have immersed myself in the lives and hardships of smallholder farmers as an outreach officer, the more I have come to conclude that agroecology in Africa, for the rather obvious reason that most African agriculture already follows the path of the farmer, is not the solution. Daisy, the farmers I work with don't have access to synthetic fertilizer or pesticides, they are in monocrop, and they can't afford tractors or irrigation pumps. So the various refinements of agroecology that its proponents suggest offer little to help them dramatically raise their yields, reduce crop losses, much less offer them a life beyond farming if they choose to pursue it.

Mugwanya though is evaluating agroecology according to standards of agricultural performance, concluding it offers nothing more than the status quo: poverty and hardship.

Rather than claiming the present agricultural systems are unjust for the poor, then blocking conventional practices while leaving farmers more vulnerable, shouldn't the system be improved incrementally? How does institutionalizing impoverished farmers reduce the risk of land grabs? Africa in particular desperately needs more than merely more of the same.

What's interesting to observe here is that unlike other anti-agriculture technology campaigns, the trick used by agroecologists in developing countries is not the precautionary principle. They are not playing on the uncertainty of GMOs or the unknown risks of pesticides to effect regulatory bans – that's the playbook for affluent campaigns in the West. These activists are rejecting agricultural technologies on the basis of social justice: *We should be angry that rich, white capitalists are enslaving poor, brown peasants*. Although agroecologists propagate [anecdotal](#) cases and then [juice the numbers](#), conventional farmers do have higher yields, so their argument shifts to trying to show how the rights and freedoms farmers are surrendering to these “neocolonial corporations” are not worth it.

The social costs of agroecology

So while agroecology does not improve conditions and yields, it still works toward providing social justice for peasant smallholders, particularly subsistence farmers in developing countries, right?

Well ... No!

unnamed

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[Poverty](#) is perhaps the greatest social injustice and not providing the means for farmers to improve yields, reduce toil and suffering while advancing their lives economically and financially is hardly something to commend. If you don't allow farmers to access insecticides or seeds resistant to infestations and disease, you are condemning more women to longer hours bent over in the hot sun breaking off leaves. If you deny basic herbicides to smallholders, the backbreaking job of hand-weeding will pass down to their [children](#) (who should be in school).

It is often said that crop protection costs in Uganda are measured in women's day rates. And while anti-GMO activist Vandana Shiva can [chirp](#) about how pleasant it is to hear "the joy" of children's voices working in the gardens, I suppose we just don't share the same concept of social justice ... or progress or development.

By favoring a labor-intensive system of peasant farmers toiling on plots measured by the half-hectare, agroecologists are ignoring the history of economic development: that growth occurs when yields increase enough to liberate labor to other, lucrative non-agricultural endeavors. Agroecology condemns farmers (and their families) to a world tied to the land and their societies tied each year to the luck of the harvest. I suppose I have a different understanding of what a "holistic approach" means.

Many Western crop protection companies are no longer active in certain African countries because the local, corrupt practices go against their internal ethical codes of conduct. This leaves farmers at risk of poorer quality or counterfeit products, opportunistic middlemen and bad agronomic advice. As Mugwanya rightly says, you cannot transform African agriculture without first transforming (modernizing) Africa.

insecticide

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Counterfeit pesticides in Kenya. Credit: Citizen Digital

Agroecologists don't talk much about improving infrastructure (roads, irrigation, markets ...) because that is what colonizers do. Agroecology is a simplistic solution imposed on the poor by wealthy Western activists with ulterior motives. This is the real colonialism, and it will keep Africans poor.

Worse, agroecologists seem to focus on the words *fair* and *just*, implying they would support "fair trade". But quite the opposite is the case. To comply with fair trade certification demands, farmers need a certain critical mass, education and organization. By stressing the ideal of peasant smallholders trying to feed themselves, agroecology is denying farmers the access to better markets, revenue and development.

Agroecology is anything but socially just.

Dancing with the charlatans

Led by ambitious lawyers, environmental campaigners, naturopaths and single issue campaigners, agroecology has become a panacea for any stripe of political activist.

For the environmentalist, agroecology will solve climate change. For the naturopath, it will remove a reliance on chemicals and provide resources for more organic food production. For the social justice warrior, it will help end capitalism, industry and our reliance on economic growth models. For activist lawyers, it provides an alternative model they can use to propagate their potentially lucrative concept of ecocide. For the vegan and animal rights movements, it provides the grounds for a shift away from

“industrial meat”. For the Neo-Malthusians, it provides the best tool for a population degrowth strategy. With all of this wonderful opportunity going around, does it really matter what agroecology actually does to farmers (besides giving them more hardship, uncertainty and poverty)?

Agroecologists claim they will end inequality by getting rid of the rich; end industrial agriculture by eliminating innovative technologies; end globalization and international development by promoting subsistence-farming smallholders. No reasonable person would want any of this (unless they have other interests they want to exploit).

But recently the agroecology community has come into some money from a few wealthy donors; they have allies in the FAO and skittish actors in certain western governments trying to appease this faction of the green lobby. So while they are playing a different game than the precautionistas trying to ban all conventional agriculture, they have found a large number of [friends](#) in the campaign world who would be happy to build on agroecology as the voice of conscience and purpose.

Agroecology has also attracted some of the less credible social justice actors. Take my friend, Vandana Shiva, who defines herself as a “food sovereignty agroecologist”. Shiva’s [Earth University](#) allows Western activist pilgrims to give her (a lot of) money to travel to India to learn about “[agroecology](#)” on her pilot paradise farm. I wish I were making this up, but there she teaches affluent urban devotees the key to biodynamic farming, of being one with the land, filling horns with dung and swishing in the proper mystical direction.



Prominent anti-GMO activist Vandana Shiva

The UN’s [Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights](#) has created a symbolic post (rapporteur) to

speak about the right to food. Since Olivier De Schutter assumed this ceremonial position, the chair has served as a birthright for agroecology activists to launch campaigns under the pretence of UN credibility. At the end of his term, De Schutter set up the International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems (IPES-Food, not to be confused with IPBES) – a sort of rich man’s agroecology talking shop. They have a “high-level panel of experts” and a small [secretariat](#) of white, privileged lobbyists who hold symposiums and publish papers on agroecology and food sovereignty ... but they are not part of the UN (yet).

Is agroecology a science?

No.

Berkeley professor [Miguel Altieri](#) (rumored to have coined the term) sets out the scientific path for agroecology:

In this light, a new technological and development approach is needed to provide for the agricultural needs of present and future generations without depleting our natural resource base. The agroecological approach does just this because it is more sensitive to the complexities of local agriculture, and has a broad performance criteria which includes properties of ecological sustainability, food security, economic viability, resource conservation and social equity, as well as increased production.

[This site](#) is a bit dated and never actually proposes these new technologies (I assume this new, holistic approach takes the scientific methodology). To say agroecology researchers are “more sensitive” to local agriculture denigrates conventional agronomists as just a bunch of white men imposing a colonial oppression on poor people perfectly capable of feeding themselves. As we saw, these social justice actors not only don’t interact with farmers, they also don’t speak to local agronomists. I’m not sure Norman Borlaug felt like a colonial oppressor when he moved to Mexico, but the revisionists are working on “interrogating” that history.

To be a science involves adhering to a scientific method that ceaselessly challenges its theories, concepts and paradigms. Agroecology is based on the unchallenged edict that agriculture must follow natural, non-industrial solutions. That is about as scientific as saying that agriculture is free to use any technology so long as it is written in the Bible.

science v dogma

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I have written about this [elsewhere](#). Science does not care if the solution is natural or synthetic, if it is developed in an industry innovation center in St Louis or by an agronomist on a Kenyan farm, if it is funded by shareholders, smallholders or patent holders. Science is only concerned about whether something works, allows farming to be more sustainable and provides a better life for farmers and consumers. The moment you start adding caveats like “It must only be natural” or “It cannot be tied to corporate funding,” you have abandoned the scientific field and embraced religion.

This is not to say that religion is a bad thing or does not provide some “feel-good” support, but just that people cannot claim their religion (eg, naturopathy) is better than scientific solutions. If it is better, then science, by its very nature, will adopt it among its practices. If it demands blind humility kneeling before an all-powerful Church of Nature, then science will abandon such fundamentalist dogma.

Why must we tolerate this black or white dichotomy on farming? Why must it be only agroecology (with no conventional agricultural tools)? If agroecology could be improved with substances like glyphosate to allow for more complex cover crops and better no-till conservation, then drop the dogma and use the best available tools. If it is all about the organic label, then drop the social justice and sustainability claims – you are only in it for the higher prices you can earn from unnecessarily frightened consumers. Some farmers like “FarmingGeorge” in the UK talk [passionately](#) about agroecology, and while we need such pioneers, he still farms conventionally ([admitting](#) he still uses glyphosate). That should be OK and he should not have to apologize.

Are some credible scientists studying agroecology? Yes and I am often told to be polite to them. Understood, and while there is a [program](#) at the University of Wyoming (which also blends in many conventional farming practices), given the number of activists like Shiva and De Schutter running around

calling themselves agroecology “scientists”, any credible academics should best find another name for their field of study.

Agroecology employs a rather perverse equation where the means justify the ends. Rejecting the conventional means to grow food (in favor of natural-based practices) will produce lower yields, likely famines and imposed shifts in dietary practices. And these horrible ends are accepted to propagate a naturopathic, social justice vision idealized in the affluent, well-fed West.

Can agroecology feed the world?

No. But to be fair, that was never the objective.

The goal of agroecology has never been to feed growing urban populations. At best, its ambition is more modest: to produce enough food to feed the farmer who planted the seeds. Vandana Shiva and her NGO, Navdanya, won the [Midori Prize](#) in 2016 for teaching mostly women to farm agroecologically, listing among her achievements, that 55% were able to grow a surplus. Despite the obvious, almost half failed to be able to feed themselves, it seems irresponsible to encourage a peasant-agrarian mindset in the 21st century when more than half of the world’s population lives in urban environments.

The Green Revolution

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Credit: Dreamstime

Million Belay, the head of the Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa, a pan-African agroecology lobby group, [defines](#) food sovereignty as: “the ability for communities to feed themselves”. This lowering of the bar for farmers (*just grow enough for yourself*) at a time when Africa’s population is rising, urbanising and demanding a higher quality of life is dangerously myopic.

If farmers are not empowered to grow more, better and more reliable crops; if the only goal is individual subsistence; if social justice takes priority over adequate yield; this then is a recipe for famine. Don’t talk about development and agroecology in the same sentence. One bad drought, one locust swarm, one systemic failure and millions will suffer. Agroecology, despite its Western social justice pretence, promotes

vulnerability, poverty and food insecurity.

History repeating itself

Any analysis of agroecology should go into the writings and tragic consequences of the Soviet agronomist, Trofim Lysenko, whose blend of politically-induced research and ruthless ideology led to the death and displacement of millions. Most of his claims were more social (Soviet) justice than scientific, cloaked in ambition and political bias. A later article will compare dogmatic Lysenkoism to some of the claims agroecologists are making today to show how history is (tragically) repeating itself.

For now, two basic points: You cannot force a political ideology against scientific findings for a sustained period – the system will fail. When that failed system concerns food production, people will starve.

One thing is certain: agroecology is closer to Lysenkoism than to science. Governments should concentrate on giving farmers in developing countries better roads, markets and irrigation and stop funding Western agroecologists who only promise these farmers more poverty, suffering and uncertainty.

And with locusts swarming across the Horn of Africa, 2020 agricultural yields in many Western countries declining and the economic collapse following the COVID-19 pandemic, economic vulnerability and food insecurity haven't been this high for decades. Are agroecologists willing to allow famines to protect their social justice dogma? History doesn't bode well here.

Like most ideologies driven by the dreamer's disease, the consequences are usually much worse than their (virtuous) intentions. Agroecology is the solution when peasant farmers have no other means, opportunities or choices. Tragically we do have technologies that can easily be applied to solve problems smallholders face (if only agroecologist lobbyists would get out of the way). Agriculture will get more challenging (more quickly), leading to an increased demand for technological solutions.

I think I was right to not take this social justice dreamer's disease seriously.

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