Numerous headlines lately described a frightening scenario: during a global pandemic, the food security of Sri Lanka was put at risk, apparently by a neo-Lysenko plan to switch the country to organic production.

Sri Lankans watched as “a sharp drop in crop yields and spiraling prices” were making food availability and affordability become a serious crisis. There were many pressures on the country, but reportedly they can thank Vandana Shiva for pushing them off the cliff on food production, apparently.

So my hunch was correct! Vandana Shiva owns this Sri Lankan disaster. See message from a Sri Lankan scientists. Apparently @drvandanashiva has been advising the SL government on how to engineer this ag disaster in their country. Vandana Shiva should be put on “No-Fly” list! pic.twitter.com/tN2uwslOoj

— Channa Prakash (@AgBioWorld) September 4, 2021

But this is not the first time organic has failed. Even before the pandemic, organic production was failing right here at home. “80 percent failure rate dogs county’s $1 million organic farm program” read the headline from a Colorado US paper: in 2016. With full-on developed-world resources, support and assistance at every level, no pandemic, even a grant program couldn’t save organic farming here.

The same fate of those failed farmers has been repeated all across the county under an agricultural program meant to encourage and support organic farming by providing nearly $1 million in capital expenditures, temporary lease rate reductions, organic certification
assistance, weed maintenance and farmer education courses.

Despite those extensive measures, 19 of 24 organic operations have ceased in the past five years, done in by weeds and weather and the sheer amount of work needed to keep a farm going.

Sometimes documentaries or feel-good stories are made about farms that are succeeding. These typically rely on “interns” or Community-Supported ag share workers who are, shall we say, below market rate field staff. While selling niche produce or sausages at very high prices.

It’s Monday and I am going to THREAD about BIGGEST LITTLE FARM, the latest pricy-food-for-rich-people farm held up as an example of how we fix agriculture. Grab your COFFEE. There’s a lot to cover. https://t.co/V60HgFy1Cb

— Tamar Haspel (@TamarHaspel) May 13, 2019

They have a “team” of 60 PEOPLE. You divide, and scratch your head, and then read about INVESTORS and VOLUNTEERS. Then you understand. This DESPITE selling eggs for $15 per dozen, and $21 marmalade.

— Tamar Haspel (@TamarHaspel) May 13, 2019

But maybe we could look to hear from some people who actually have farming experience for some data and some notes. For some data, see this work by Kniss et al, which is in line with other papers showing the same thing:

Similar to previous work, organic crop yields in our analysis were lower than conventional crop yields for most crops. Across all crops and all states, organic yield averaged 67%* of conventional yield. [*edited with corrected number]

This relied on data from USDA production stats, which means these are likely to be well-resourced American farm situations that don’t reflect what might happen elsewhere. So let’s look at what happens elsewhere…..

[Edited to add German data] Data from Germany, where we are definitely comparing crops that would not be GMO, has similar (or worse) outcomes:

Organic farmers in Germany harvested around 48 percent of the harvest of their conventional colleagues on average between 2012 and 2019.
At Grist we heard from a researcher with decades of experience in Africa, including hands-on experience with African farms.

Even this organic advocate thinks African farmers need herbicide http://t.co/WtCeGu75OV pic.twitter.com/HA1PwfhVFS

— grist (@grist) November 29, 2014

Of course, there’s one other possibility: It could be that organic methods just aren’t working for poor farmers.

Don Lotter wrote a fascinating paper about his experiences, and his break from his previous beliefs that organic ag would solve all the problems. Oh, also, see how things went with these volunteers:

There’s a hint of frustration in Lotter’s writing when he touches on the continued emphasis on techniques that don’t work for farmers in Africa, especially when it is justified with pseudoscience. For a while he managed an organic farm in a part of northern Tanzania that attracted lots of foreign volunteers. Corn in the area suffered nitrogen deficiency because farmers refused synthetic fertilizer.

These farmers had been told by foreign volunteers, nearly all of them untrained in agriculture, that fertilizers “poison” the soil — despite the fact that it is very likely that 99% of the calories that these amply-fed volunteers had consumed in their lives were from crops amply fed with synthetic fertilizers, grown in fields that are to this day still highly productive.

Oooh. Get some salve for that burn.

Back to organic yields for a second, though: one thing that was always a question for me was how that USDA data is obtained. The year examined in the paper was 2014. But we also know that a massive fraud was being foisted upon America during this time.

Evidence at Constant’s sentencing showed that, for 2016, his sales equaled approximately 7% of all comparable organic corn grown and 8% of all organic soybeans grown in the United States. Overall, from 2010 to 2017, Constant sold more than 11,500,000 bushels of grain, over 90% of which was falsely marketed as organic. That amount of grain would fill approximately 3,600 rail cars or 14,375 semi-trailers.
It’s not clear to me if the organic claims of this scheme are counted in the USDA numbers. Submitting massive production data that didn’t actually occur could make the numbers even worse. But it’s a fascinating story that you should check out in detail, if you want to know about the extra premium money you spent on organic food going to hookers in Vegas: The Great Organic-Food Fraud.

Damn!!! ?

The Great Organic-Food Fraud https://t.co/Gz3VYDeRPW

— Wandile Sihlobo (@WandileSihlobo) November 9, 2021

I’ve been saving up a number of other cases of organic fraud that make me wonder about the production data. For years, a fertilizer that was marketed as “organic” was not. California schemin’: How a fake organic fertilizer bamboozled farmers and watchdogs alike. How did that affect official yield numbers? Even recently, another case of input fraud went under the radar during the pandemic, but “Weed Slayer” was pitched as an organic herbicide that actually worked! That’s because it contained actual herbicides, it turns out!

It seemed too good to be true, and it appears it may have been — a new organic weed treatment marketed to work nearly as well as synthetic-chemical herbicides not allowed in organic farming.

Many organic-certified farmers from around the country snapped up the co-packaged product called Agro Gold Weed Slayer (WS) and began to apply it to their fields. So did some local organic wine-grape farmers in the Napa Valley, using the product to keep their vineyard weeds at bay.

Again: how does this make the USDA yield data look? And let’s also muse briefly about those detections of glyphosate in organic wines that people blamed on nearby conventional farmers…. 

And y’all know about the huge organic import fraud, right? The labels said ‘organic.’ But these massive imports of corn and soybeans weren’t.

From the field to the supermarket, though, there’s fraud along the whole chain. Once case in the UK, known as the Swaddles Scandal, was remarkable. They just unwrapped and re-packaged food to sell it as “organic”. FOR FIVE YEARS. And nobody knew. Why doesn’t it fail after all this fraud? Hint: $$ profit from the well-fed, and marketing for Big Organic. This is Ronnie Cummins, of Organic Consumer’s Association.

The burning question for us all then becomes how — and how quickly — can we move healthy, organic products from a 4.2% market niche, to the dominant force in American food
and farming?

The first step is to change our labeling laws.

(BTW: Cummins is an anti-vaxxer who wrote a Covid book with Joe Mercola that is 100% crankery and Elizabeth Warren called it out as dangerous nonsense. It’s the same dangerous nonsense he used on GMOs for years. So much pseudoscience in this area, I wonder why that is…)

Recently, some well-fed professors have been trying to press-gang farmers in the developing world to adopt failed organic agroecology methods and discard biotechnology. (They don’t want to talk about the science, because the science isn’t on their side. They also don’t want to talk about the fraud, for obvious reasons.) They do want to blame GMOs, while none of the things they claim are problems are unique to GMOs. You should wonder why they are using GMO as a proxy.

Do they really think that scientists in Cuba should not be permitted to make and use the GMO tilapia and Bt corn that they’ve had for years? Would they really withhold technology from them? That’s a pretty creepy form of neo-colonialism. And if they think they are going to stop capitalism by keeping communists from going to GMO crops, they better try to make their data look a lot better. There are a lot of people to feed in China, and they understand data.

Maybe you didn’t hear from them about the demand for GMO cowpea that reduces the need for pesticides in Nigeria. Or you didn’t hear about saving an important cultural food in Brazil from a virus: GMO bean benefits Brazil’s consumers and smallholder farmers. It doesn’t fit the professorial GMO-bogeyman narrative. You should think about why you didn’t hear about these public projects and important cultural foods from them.

But basically: who gets to decide? A college professor — or some farmers actually farming in Ethiopia? I’d rather trust the Ethiopian farmers to know what they need for their farms, their families, and their communities.

For Dadi Buta and Birtukan it’s very simple: Increasing yields is the way to prosperity — they just want the tools and education that will allow them to produce more food.

I want to hear from Daisy in Buikwe and not Professor in Berkeley:

Smallholder African farmers like Daisy Namusoke need more options, not fewer. When I met Daisy at her farm in the summer of 2018, I asked her whether she preferred a traditional solution similar to her Tithonia–ash concoction or something more modern. She emphatically responded, “I do not mind whether it is a traditional or modern solution, provided it can make me have a big bunch of bananas.”
From “After Agroecology” by Nassib Mugwanya. Nassib goes on and nails the ultimate issue here (emphasis mine):

The ongoing advocacy for an agroecological revolution in Africa is quite vocal on how the model puts farmers at the center of the food system but oddly silent on how it can practically get them out of poverty. It loudly proclaims that agroecology democratizes decision-making but explicitly advocates limiting choices and practices that small farmers might avail themselves of, discouraging synthetic fertilizers and pesticides, mechanization, and biotechnology. It wraps itself in the cloak of anti-colonialism even as the NGOs promoting agroecology are funded primarily by western, developed-world donors.

Agroecological practices can, of course, be useful in some contexts. That’s why African farmers still use them. And if farmers can make low-cost changes to improve their yields that are feasible given available labor, I enthusiastically support them. But they should be thought of as a set of tools, not a pair of handcuffs.

How come the “let them eat kale” professors are the ones trying to restrict the choices? Why aren’t they being honest about how their ideas actually perform in the real world? If your idea of justice is handcuffs — withholding choice and encouraging low yielding ideas on farmers, you might want to get out of the office more. Or at least try to understand Nassib’s knowledge: After Agroecology |Why Traditional Agricultural Practices Can’t Transform African Agriculture.

References:


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A version of this article was originally posted on Mary Mangan’s Blog and is reposted here with permission.