

Climate Change and a New Agricultural System

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This week, the United Nation's [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change \(IPCC\)](#) released a long-awaited [report](#) on land, climate change and agriculture.[1] The report's findings confirm that the agriculture and food systems on which we now depend are no longer viable.

Individual consumer choices in the global north, about what to eat, won't be enough to get rid of a bad system, nor will they be enough to build a just transition to a better one.

While much of the media coverage of the new IPCC report on land and agriculture focus on diet, the report needs to be understood as saying this: we (in protein-rich countries, at the very least), must replace our current large-scale industrialized systems of agriculture and food production with those based on agroecological and regenerative practices. Food security and agricultural resilience, in the face of a changing climate, depends on this.

From IATP's perspective, replacing our current industrialized system requires dismantling the power of large-scale corporate agribusiness to manipulate markets, drive consumer demand, and influence everything from our food safety regulatory system to the rules laid down in international trade agreements.

For agroecological and regenerative systems sector-wide, we must achieve widespread public understanding of the productive, environmental, and economic legitimacy of these systems; invest heavily in them, in the farmers designing them and in the rural communities in which they prosper; and reawaken ourselves to the cultural and societal significance of our agriculture and food systems.

Globally, industrialized agriculture now emits extraordinarily high levels of GHG emissions as a sector. In our 2018 in-depth report, [Emissions Impossible](#), IATP and GRAIN calculated total GHG emissions *by a corporation*, rather than *by country*. This gave us new insights into the astonishing lack of accountability for GHG emissions of the world's largest 35 meat and dairy corporations. Responsible for the design, promotion, perpetuation and performance of large-scale industrialized agricultural systems of meat and dairy production, these corporations must also be accountable for their role in perpetuating, or curbing, climate change, system-wide.

It is imperative not to confuse large-scale industrialized meat and dairy corporations with agroecological and regenerative livestock producers, whose vision and practice is precisely what is needed. Fueling that confusion is the entanglement (at some point in their supply chains), of large, vertically integrated corporations with producers of all kinds and sizes. Vertical integration and corporate concentration in agribusiness is another tough problem to

solve. We can start by enforcing what is left of antitrust laws and stopping more mega-mergers.

It is imperative, too, that we think far beyond single-note dietary changes. For example, consumer campaigns focused on the importance of reduced meat consumption should not rest their case with individual consumer choice, but instead, recognize the role of corporate influence in the system, as well as promoting the importance of livestock to regenerative agricultural systems. A simplistic “no meat” message can too easily and swiftly fall into a populist and misdirected movement harmful to farmers worldwide who are, right now, responsibly building our agroecological and regenerative agricultural systems.

Plant-based diets that continue to rely on agricultural inputs that are themselves high emitters of GHGs (such as fertilizer), pollutants and toxic chemicals are of no use. Nor are plant-based diets dependent on GMOs. Nor are plant-based diets that depend on the continued exploitation of farm labor, farmers forced to sell their commodities for less than the cost of production, and inequity in their ability to purchase and hold farmland. There is the possibility that the choice to eat less meat, (or none at all), could be erroneously seen by those who make it, as an act that naturally leads to agriculture that is good for the land, for farmers, for ecosystems, for consumers. Just not so.

The shift from agrarian societies to industrial, to digital, has come at a high cost when it comes to the general public’s knowledge of agriculture. The value of that loss cannot be over-estimated when it comes to consumer campaigns and the role they can and must play in promoting the system changes we need for a just transition to sustainable agriculture, sector-wide.

The wildly expanding market for organic food tells us that consumers can and do understand the importance of what they eat as individuals, yet it remains unclear how and if this market growth signals a much-needed change in societal values when it comes to the land and the people who farm it. We certainly are not seeing a change in values reflected in the apparent market growth for fake meat, for example. We do not need more unregulated start-up fake meat labs designed to exploit our addiction to fast food. We already know that the societal cost of fast food is much too high a price to pay for private profits gained. What we do need is a consumer u-turn of sorts, away from one-note dietary panaceas, and toward recognizing and insisting on the extraordinary and unimaginably crucial diversity of the ecological and biological systems necessary for the food that sustains life.

Consumers will not understand how agricultural systems work (and what we must do to maintain them), without being taught. Agribusiness will not cede power without the strong insistence of the public and political will. Farmers will not change their practices with no support to do so and little role in defining what a just transition to sustainable and resilient agriculture and food systems should look like.

All of these changes require the responsibility of people committed to our civic role in governance, mindful of the stakes, confident in our role’s legitimacy in a democracy, and tenacious in our determination to get it right.

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Note

1 Officially titled “Climate Change and Land, an IPCC Special Report on Climate Change, Desertification, Land Degradation, Sustainable Land Management, Food Security, and Greenhouse Gas Fluxes in Terrestrial Ecosystems”

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