

Right Kind of Green: Agroecology. The Agri-Food Conglomerates are Failing to Feed the World

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Global Research, October 09, 2019

Theme: [Biotechnology and GMO](#)

The globalised industrial food system that transnational agri-food conglomerates promote is [failing to feed the world](#). It is responsible for some of the planet's [most pressing political, social and environmental crises](#).

Whether it involves the [undermining or destruction](#) of what were once largely self-sufficient agrarian economies in Africa or the devastating impacts of soy cultivation in [Argentina](#), localised, traditional methods of food production have given way to global supply chains dominated by policies which favour agri-food giants, resulting in the destruction of habitat and peasant farmer livelihoods and the imposition of a model of agriculture that [subjugates remaining farmers and regions](#) to the needs and profit margins of these companies.

Many take as given that profit-driven transnational corporations have a legitimate claim to be custodians of natural assets. There is the premise that water, seeds, land, food, soil, forests and agriculture should be handed over to powerful, [corrupt](#) transnational corporations to milk for profit, under [the pretence](#) these entities are somehow serving the needs of humanity.

These natural assets ('the commons') belong to everyone and any stewardship should be carried out in the common interest by local people assisted by public institutions and governments acting on their behalf, not by private transnational corporations driven by self-interest and the maximization of profit by any means possible.

Common ownership and management of these assets embodies the notion of people working together for the public good. However, these resources have been appropriated by national states or private entities. For instance, [Cargill captured](#) the edible oils processing sector in India and in the process put many thousands of village-based workers out of work; [Monsanto conspired](#) to design a system of intellectual property rights that allowed it to patent seeds as if it had manufactured and invented them; and India's indigenous peoples have been [forcibly ejected](#) from their ancient lands due to state collusion with mining companies.

Those who capture essential common resources seek to commodify them – whether trees for timber, land for real estate or agricultural seeds – create artificial scarcity and force everyone else to pay for access. Much of it involves eradicating self-sufficiency.

Traditional systems attacked

Researchers Marika Vicziany and Jagjit Plahe note that for thousands of years Indian farmers have [experimented with](#) different plant and animal specimens acquired through migration, trading networks, gift exchanges or accidental diffusion. They note the vital importance of

traditional knowledge for food security in India and the evolution of such knowledge by learning and doing, trial and error. Farmers possess acute observation, good memory for detail and transmission through teaching and storytelling. The very farmers whose seeds and knowledge have been [appropriated by corporations](#) to be bred for proprietary chemical-dependent hybrids and now to be genetically engineered.

Large corporations with their seeds and synthetic chemical inputs have eradicated traditional systems of seed exchange. They have effectively hijacked seeds, pirated germ plasm that farmers developed over millennia and have 'rented' the seeds back to farmers. Genetic diversity among food crops has been drastically reduced. The eradication of seed diversity went much further than merely prioritising corporate seeds: the Green Revolution [deliberately sidelined traditional seeds](#) kept by farmers that were actually higher yielding and climate appropriate.

Across the world, we have witnessed a change in farming practices towards mechanised industrial-scale chemical-intensive monocropping, often for export or for far away cities rather than local communities, and ultimately the undermining or eradication of self-contained rural economies, traditions and cultures. We now see food surpluses in the West and food deficit areas in the Global South and a globalised geopoliticised system of food and agriculture.

A recent article on the People's Archive of Rural India website highlights how the undermining of local economies continues. In a region of Odisha, farmers are being pushed towards a reliance on (illegal) expensive genetically modified herbicide tolerant cotton seeds and are replacing their traditional food crops.

The authors state that Southern Odisha's strength lay in multiple cropping systems, but commercial cotton monoculture has altered crop diversity, soil structure, household income stability, farmers' independence and, ultimately, food security. Farmers used to sow mixed plots of heirloom seeds, which had been saved from family harvests the previous year and would yield a basket of food crops. Cotton's swift expansion is reshaping the land and people steeped in agroecological knowledge.

The article's authors [Chitragada Choudhury](#) and [Aniket Aga](#) note that cotton occupies roughly 5 per cent of India's gross cropped area but consumes 36 to 50 per cent of the total quantum of agrochemicals applied nationally. They argue that the scenario here is reminiscent of Vidarbha between 1998 and 2002 - initial excitement over the new miracle (and then illegal) Bt cotton seeds and dreams of great profits, followed by the effects of their water-guzzling nature, the huge spike in expenses and debt and various ecological pressures. Vidarbha subsequently ended up as the epicentre of farmer suicides in the country for over a decade.

Choudhury and Aga echo many of the issues raised by Glenn Stone in his paper '[Constructing Facts: Bt Cotton Narratives in India](#)'. Farmers are attracted to GM cotton via glossy marketing and promises of big money and rely on what are regarded as authoritative (but compromised) local figures who steer them towards such seeds. There is little or no environmental learning by practice as has tended to happen in the past when adopting new seeds and cultivation practices. It has given way to 'social learning', a herd mentality and a treadmill of pesticides and debt. What is also worrying is that farmers are also being sold glyphosate to be used with HT cotton; they are unaware of the terrible history and reality of

this 'miracle' herbicide, that it is banned or restricted in certain states in India and that it is currently at the centre of major lawsuits in the US.

All this when large agribusiness concerns wrongly insist that we need their seeds and proprietary chemicals if we are to feed a growing global population. There is no money for them in traditional food cropping systems but there is in undermining food security and food sovereignty by encouraging the use of GM cotton and glyphosate or, more generally, corporate seeds.

In India, Green Revolution technology and ideology has actually helped to [fuel](#) drought and [degrade soils](#) and has contributed towards [illnesses and malnutrition](#). Sold under the guise of 'feeding the world', in India it [merely led to more wheat in the diet](#), while food productivity per capita showed no increase or actually decreased. Nevertheless, there have been [dire consequences](#) for the Indian diet, the environment, farmers, rural communities and public health.

Across the world, the Green Revolution dovetailed with an international system of chemical-dependent, agro-export mono-cropping and big infrastructure projects (dams) linked to loans, sovereign debt repayment and World Bank/IMF directives, the outcomes of which included a displacement of the peasantry, the [consolidation of global agri-food oligopolies](#) and the transformation of many countries into food deficit regions.

Often regarded as Green Revolution 2.0, the 'gene revolution' is integral to the plan to ['modernise' Indian agriculture](#). This means the displacement of peasant farmers, further corporate consolidation and commercialisation based on industrial-scale monocrop farms incorporated into global supply chains dominated by transnational agribusiness and retail giants. If we take occurrences in Odisha as a microcosm, it would also mean the undermining of national food security.

Although traditional agroecological practices have been eradicated or are under threat, there is a global movement advocating a shift towards more organic-based systems of agriculture, which includes providing support to small farms and an agroecology movement that is empowering to people politically, socially and economically.

Agroecology

In his final report to the UN Human Rights Council after a six-year term as Special Rapporteur, in 2014 Olivier De Schutter called for the world's food systems to be radically and democratically redesigned. [His report](#) was based on an extensive review of recent scientific literature. He concluded that by applying [agroecological principles](#) to the design of democratically controlled agricultural systems we can help to put an end to food crises and address climate-change and poverty challenges. De Schutter argued that agroecological approaches could tackle food needs in critical regions and could double food production in 10 years. However, he stated that insufficient backing seriously hinders progress.

And this last point should not be understated. For instance, the success of the Green Revolution is often touted, but how can we really evaluate it? If alternatives had been invested in to the same extent, if similar powerful and influential interests had invested in organic-based models, would we now not be pointing to the runaway successes of organic-based agroecological farming and, importantly, without the massive external costs of a polluted environment, less diverse diets, degraded soils and nutrient deficient food, ill

health and so on?

The corporations which promote chemical-intensive industrial agriculture have embedded themselves deeply within the policy-making machinery on both national and international levels. From the overall bogus narrative that industrial agriculture is necessary to feed the world to providing lavish research grants and the capture of important policy-making institutions, global agri-food conglomerates have secured a perceived thick legitimacy within policy makers' mindsets and mainstream discourse. The integrity of society's institutions have been eroded by corporate money, funding and influence, which is why [agroecology as a credible alternative](#) to corporate agriculture remains on the periphery.

But the erosion of that legitimacy is underway. In addition to De Schutter's 2014 report, the 2009 [IAASTD peer-reviewed report](#), produced by 400 scientists and supported by 60 countries, recommends agroecology to maintain and increase the productivity of global agriculture. Moreover, the recent [UN FAO High Level Panel of Experts concludes that agroecology](#) provides greatly improved food security and nutritional, gender, environmental and yield benefits compared to industrial agriculture.

Writer and academic Eric Holtz-Gimenez argues that agroecology offers [concrete, practical solutions](#) to many of the world's problems that move beyond (but which are linked to) agriculture. In doing so, it challenges - and offers alternatives to - plunder which takes place under a prevailing system of doctrinaire neoliberal economics that in turn drives a [failing model](#) of industrial agriculture.

The scaling up of agroecology can tackle hunger, malnutrition, environmental degradation and climate change. By creating securely paid labour-intensive agricultural work, it can also address the interrelated links between labour offshoring by rich countries and the removal of rural populations elsewhere who end up in sweat shops to carry out the outsourced jobs: the two-pronged process of neoliberal globalisation that [has devastated](#) the economies of the US and UK and which is [displacing existing indigenous food production systems and undermining the rural infrastructure in places like India](#) to produce a reserve army of cheap labour.

The Declaration of the International Forum for Agroecology by Nyeleni in 2015 argued for building grass-root local food systems that create new rural-urban links, based on genuine agroecological food production. It went on to say that agroecology should not become a tool of the industrial food production model but as the essential alternative to that model. The Declaration stated that agroecology is political and requires local producers and communities to challenge and transform structures of power in society, not least by putting the control of seeds, biodiversity, land and territories, waters, knowledge, culture and the commons in the hands of those who feed the world.

It involves prioritising localised rural and urban food economies and small farms and shielding them from the effects of [rigged trade and international markets](#). It would mean that what ends up in our food and how it is grown is determined by the public good and not powerful private interests driven by commercial gain and the compulsion to subjugate farmers, consumers and entire regions.

There are enough examples from across the world that serve as models for transformation, from the [Oakland Institute's](#) research in Africa and the [Women's Collective of Tamil Nadu](#) to the scaling up of agroecological practices [in Ethiopia](#).

Whether in Europe, Africa, India or the US, agroecology can protect and reassert the commons and is a force for grass-root change. This model of agriculture is already providing real solutions for sustainable, productive agriculture that prioritise the needs of farmers, citizens and the environment.

The above article is an updated version of a [previous article](#) by Colin Todhunter.

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