

The Battle against the Global Food Conglomerates: The Seeds of Agroecology and Common Ownership

By [Colin Todhunter](#)

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Theme: [Biotechnology and GMO](#), [Poverty & Social Inequality](#)

The increasingly globalised industrial food system that transnational agribusiness promotes is [not feeding the world](#) and is responsible for some of the planet's [most pressing political, social and environmental crises](#). Localised, traditional methods of food production have given way to globalised supply chains dominated by transnational companies policies and actions which have resulted in the destruction of habitat and livelihoods and the imposition of corporate-controlled, chemical-intensive (monocrop) agriculture that [weds farmers and regions](#) to a wholly exploitative system of neoliberal globalisation.

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](#) or palm oil production [in Indonesia](#), transnational agribusiness and global capitalism cannot be greenwashed.

In their rush to readily promote neoliberal dogma and corporate PR, 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 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.

The Guardian columnist [George Monbiot notes](#) the vast wealth the economic elite has accumulated at our expense through its seizure of the commons. A commons is managed not for the accumulation of capital or profit but for the steady production of prosperity or wellbeing of a particular group, who might live in or beside it or who created and sustain it.

Unlike state spending, according to Monbiot, a commons obliges people to work together, to sustain their resources and decide how the income should be used. It gives community life a clear focus and depends on democracy in its truest form. However, the commons have been attacked by both state power and capitalism for centuries. In effect, resources that no one invented or created, or that a large number of people created together, are stolen by those who see an opportunity for profit.

We need only look at how [Cargill captured](#) the edible oils processing sector in India and in the process put many thousands of village-based workers out of work. Or how [Monsanto conspired](#) to design a system of intellectual property rights that allowed it to patent seeds

as if it had manufactured and invented them. Or how India's indigenous peoples have been [forcibly ejected](#) from their ancient forest lands due to state's collusion with mining companies.

As Monbiot says, the outcome is a rentier economy: those who capture essential resources seek to commodify them – whether trees for timber, land for real estate or agricultural seeds, for example – and force everyone else to pay for access.

While spouting platitudes about 'choice', 'democracy' and 'feeding the world', the corporate agribusiness/agritech industry is [destroying](#) the commons and democracy and displacing existing localised systems of production.

“[Economies are being] opened up through the concurrent displacement of pre-existing productive systems. Small and medium-sized enterprises are pushed into bankruptcy or obliged to produce for a global distributor, state enterprises are privatised or closed down, independent agricultural producers are impoverished” (Michel Chossudovsky in *The Globalization of Poverty*, p16).

As described [here](#), for thousands of years farmers experimented with different plant and animal specimens acquired through migration, trading networks, gift exchanges or accidental diffusion. By learning and doing, trial and error, new knowledge was blended with older, traditional knowledge systems. The farmer possesses acute observation, good memory for detail and transmission through teaching and story-telling. The same farmers whose seeds and knowledge were [stolen by corporations](#) to be bred for proprietary chemical-dependent hybrids, now to be genetically engineered

Large corporations with their proprietary 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, and we have bad food and diets, degraded soils, water pollution and scarcity and spiralling rates of poor health.

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.

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 surplus in the West and food deficit areas in the Global South and a globalised geopoliticised system of food and agriculture.

In India, Green Revolution technology and ideology has merely served to undermine indigenous farming sectors centred on highly productive small farms that catered for the diverse dietary needs and climatic conditions of the country. It has actually [produced and fuelled](#) drought and [degraded soils](#) and has contributed towards [illnesses and malnutrition](#), farmer distress and many other problems.

What really irks the corporate vultures which fuel the current industrial model of agriculture is that critics are offering genuine alternatives. They advocate 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: taking back power

[Much has been written](#) about agroecology, its successes and the challenges it faces (see [this](#), [this](#) and [this](#)). A prominent strand of the agroecological movement regards this model of agriculture as a force for radical change. It offers a political-economical critique of modern agriculture and the vested interests that determine it.

In this respect, Food First Executive Director 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 - the prevailing [moribund doctrinaire economics and outright plunder of a neoliberalism](#) that in turn drives a [failing system](#) of GM/chemical-intensive 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 truly 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.

The more the power structures that shape modern agriculture are understood and the consequent devastating effects are made public, the more urgent the need becomes to establish societies run for the benefit of the mass of the population, and that means a system of food and agriculture that is democratically owned and controlled. This involves prioritising localised rural and urban food economies and small farms (both rural and urban) that should be shielded 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, which are driven by commercial gain and their compulsion to subjugate farmers, consumers and entire regions, while [playing the victim](#) each time campaigners challenge their actions.

There are enough examples from across the world that serve as models for transformation, from farming in [socialist Cuba](#) to grass-root movements centred on [agroecology in Africa](#) and [India](#).

Agroecology must be regarded as a key form of resistance by food producers and both urban and rural communities to an increasingly globalised economic system that puts profit

before the environment. Whether in Europe, Africa, India or the US, agroecology can protect and reassert the commons and is a force for grass-root change that should not be co-opted, diluted or subverted by the cartel of powerful biotech/agribusiness companies. This model of agriculture is already providing [real solutions](#) for sustainable, productive agriculture that prioritise the needs of farmers, consumers and the environment.

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Articles by: [Colin Todhunter](#)

About the author:

Colin Todhunter is an extensively published independent writer and former social policy researcher. Originally from the UK, he has spent many years in India. His website is www.colintodhunter.com
https://twitter.com/colin_todhunter

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