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Agroecological farm in Cuba

Opening a Window for Agroecology at the FAO

by Eric Holt-Giménez

Agroecology—the science of sustainable agriculture—is finding more support within the United Nations. In an effort to bring agroecology into its international programs for food security and nutrition, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) has carried out two public consultations on agroecology, one in Rome in September 2014 and another in Brasilia in June 2015.¹ More consultations in Africa and Asia are planned for October and November of 2015, as

well. The idea is to get a better sense of the best practices, social networks, and public policies that can help “scale up” agroecology.

Agroecology emerged as a science a half-century ago from the careful observations of scientists—ecologists, entomologists, biologists, soil scientists, anthropologists, and others—about traditional agricultural systems. They found these farming practices were highly productive, resilient, and complex, not only technically but also socially and culturally. Farmers managed complex ecosystem functions to produce food, fodder, fiber, and fuel. Scientists realized they were studying a vast, millennial reservoir of knowledge that went beyond empiricism and that travelled “farmer to farmer.” They called this knowledge “agroecology” and began identifying the principles of management that are used to design agroecological farming systems today.

But agroecology also has its detractors—primarily conventional, Green Revolution, and GMO-based industrial agriculture. Why? Primarily because agroecology has found ways to raise yields sustainably without using the commercial chemical products pushed by agro-industry. Agroecology is knowledge-intensive rather than capital-intensive, which is why it is practiced by hundreds of thousands of small farmers around the world. Agribusiness also opposes agroecology because it is a direct challenge to the power of the corporate food regime: it is an essential tool in the global movement for food sovereignty—people’s right to control their own food systems. In other words, agroecology is political as well as practical.

Because of this, the FAO’s agroecological initiative has run up against fierce resistance from Big Ag interests within the FAO, coming primarily from the United States. In order to keep from antagonizing these powerful actors, the pro-agroecology factions in the FAO have tried to keep food sovereignty out of the conversation—to no avail. In Rome, farmers, scientists and representatives from social movements insisted that agroecology was not just a technology but part of a deeper social and political project to transform agriculture. In Brazil, La Vía Campesina and the Latin American Scientific Society for Agroecology (SOCLA) asserted the peasant and indigenous origins of agroecology *and* its scientific rigor. Agroecologists also warned against “climate smart agriculture” and “sustainable intensification” as false solutions that do not address problems of rural poverty and equity, but rather are designed to maintain plantation agriculture.²

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The Institute for Food and Development Policy - known as Food First - is a member-supported, nonprofit "peoples' think tank" and education-for-action center. Our work highlights the root causes and value-based solutions to hunger and poverty around the world, with a commitment to fighting racism and establishing food as a fundamental human right.

In his final remarks to the agroecology symposium in Rome, FAO Director General José Graziano da Silva celebrated the fact that the organization had "opened a window" to agroecology, but insisted that agroecology was just one more technique (along with GMOs) in the fight against hunger. This "we need all solutions" approach, while popular among some in halls of power, ignores the ways that Big Ag destroys the livelihoods of small farmers around the world—the very farmers who practice agroecology!

Despite the political tensions at the agroecology symposia, in both Rome and Brazil, most participants agreed that the "window" opened by the FAO is an important opportunity to identify the public policies needed to develop agroecology on a regional and country basis. Once developed, agroecology policies will depend on the power of social movements to create the political will to get these policies put into practice.

Etxalde: Bridging Theory and Practice for Liberation

by Zoe Brent

"There are no changes without dreams. There is no liberation without liberatory practices. There is no agriculture without seeds. This is how Etxalde sprouted, with dreams, practices, and many seeds to share."

—Malu Egiluz Apoita

Etxalde (sounds like *eh-chal-day*) is Basque for "farm." It is also a newly formed coalition of organizations building food sovereignty in the region. Officially launched in 2011, Etxalde is anchored by ELB, a union representing roughly 800 peasants from the French Basque Country, and long-time Food First partner EHNE-Bizkaia, a 1,000-member strong peasant farmers' union in the Basque province of Biscay. Unlike the union federation that preceded it, Etxalde

puts an alternative sustainable model of food production at the core of its political project, and a vision of food sovereignty as its guiding mission. After four years of strengthening alliances, sharpening political analysis and mobilizing members, this year's launch of the coalition's new publication, also called Etxalde, helps consolidate this new movement and marks a time of important changes taking place among agrarian social movements and farmers' unions in the Basque Country. No longer content with geographic and sectorial alliances alone, what holds this movement together is a commitment to transforming the food system.

Etxalde is focusing on strengthening itself internally: forming politically engaged and active members and developing a strong organizational structure. It is also looking outwards: by providing a social and political space where different groups can collaborate, the hope is that some of the deep seated stigmas against rural peasant livelihoods that are common, especially among urban populations, will unravel.

The organization is working to build the movement for food sovereignty from a broad social base including NGOs, youth organizations, feminist movements, independent farmers organizations and public institutions. At the same time, it aims to link local organizing to international peasant mobilizations. EHNE-Bizkaia was a founding member of La Vía Campesina (LVC), and Etxalde builds on that legacy, as the young organization now puts its political muscle into broadening and deepening its network throughout the Basque Country and globally. Xarles Iturbe of the LVC International Operational Secretariat based in the Basque Country sees this strategic moment as a time of both take-off for Etxalde and grounding of the international movement. La Vía Campesina delegates will converge in the Basque Country in 2017 for



Food First board member Nikki Silvestri (far left) moderates the 40th anniversary panel at Clif Bar Auditorium in Emeryville, California. Photo by Oliver Zahn

LVC's 7th international conference.

As Etxalde engages both locally and internationally, it sows the seeds of transformation. In the words of Malu Egiluz Apoitá, of the executive council of EHNE-Bizkaia:

"Through the network of La Vía Campesina, Etxalde shares its seeds with the peasants of the world and demonstrates that we cannot end hunger, nor stop climate change, nor provide healthy food, nor respect the planet, if we base our food system on industrial agriculture, large-scale fishing, and multinational corporations that undermine sustainable food production. By organizing ourselves differently, Etxalde is the farm where we sow the seeds of the Commons, of solidarity, and of generosity; where [we] value the work of women not just with words, but through daily actions that give real meaning to food sovereignty. As this plant grows, theory and practice meet, crowding out the corporate-dominated food system and making space for food sovereignty."

Meet EHNE-Bizkaia on our Food Sovereignty Tour to the Basque Country led by Zoe Brent, Sept. 25 - Oct. 4, 2015. For details, contact us at foodsovtours@foodfirst.org or call 654-4400, ext. 223.

Walking Together: Reflections on Food First's 40 Years

by Alexandra Toledo

On May 20, 2015, over a hundred people gathered in the San Francisco Bay Area to celebrate Food First's 40th anniversary with a powerhouse panel of past and present Food First staff and board members. Below read some quotes from these food movement leaders' reflections about Food First's leadership on issues of hunger, agriculture, and development over the last four decades.

"The beauty is that we do see real change, change that is necessary for life itself to survive... Thank you Food First for leading with courage, with persistence, and with dignity in this slow but endlessly rewarding work on behalf of life itself."

- Frances Moore Lappé, Food First
co-founder

"The truth is that all exploitation is linked. That's what I learned through the work of Food First.... We are called to stand against exploitation and we stand against the main tool used in oppression, and that is white supremacy. Food First is standing in solidarity with all of those things... and I am very proud to stand in

solidarity with them."

- LaDonna Redmond, former
Food First board member

"That's really the crux of what Food First does... telling the truth about scarcity, telling the truth about who controls the food system, telling the truth about the very idea, the definition of hunger... Fighting against truth decay for 40 years. It's a powerful legacy that we should never underestimate."

- Michael Dorsey, Food First
board member

"Those things which keep us from converging in all of our diversity... the racism in the food system, the classism in the food system, the sexism in the food system—we have to dismantle all these things. But in order to do that, we have to dismantle them within our own movement. Which means we have to be extremely courageous."

- Eric Holt-Giménez, Food First
Executive Director

"To create the movement that we want to create, we have to connect all of these different pieces together... I think if we take a moment, look at these things, and be willing to speak up and challenge each other and certainly challenge the powers that be... we'll see that we are the power."

- Shyaam Shabaka, Food First
board member

"The road we walk together has to lead to the table where you can sit with your family and eat your food knowing that the dinner on your plate is free of all exploitation to humans and to the Mother Earth. That, brother and sisters, is why I'm on the board of Food First because that is the road we are walking together and that is the road we ask you to walk with us."

- Rosalinda Guillén, Food First
board member

Updates
from Food First

SAVE
THE DATE!

Food First 40th
Anniversary Gala
Food Day
Oct. 16, 2015

JOIN US ON ONE OF OUR UPCOMING

FOOD *Sovereignty*
TOURS

CHIAPAS, MEXICO:

Indigenous Food and Water
Sovereignty, Oct. 17 - 27, 2015



BASQUE COUNTRY:

Food Sovereignty, Cooperative Production,
and the Solidarity Economy,
Sept. 25 - Oct. 4, 2015



NEW BOOK!

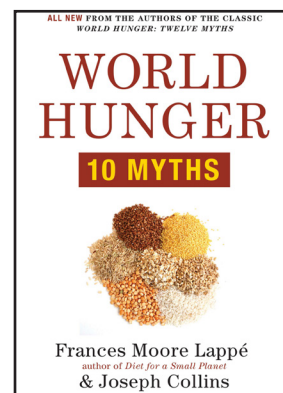
Coming in September 2015 from
Grove Press and Food First Books

World Hunger: 10 Myths

Driven by the question "Why hunger despite an abundance of food?" Food First founders Frances Moore Lappé and Joseph Collins dispel the myths that prevent us from finding solutions to hunger across the globe. *World Hunger: 10*

Myths draws on extensive new research to offer fresh, often startling, insights about tough questions—from climate change and population growth to GMOs, the role of US foreign aid, and more.

Available for pre-order from:
<http://shop.harvard.com/book/9780802123466>



Missed the panel event?

Video recordings of the complete
remarks from the May 20th panel
reflecting on 40 years at Food First
are available online at:
<http://tinyurl.com/40thvideos>

See our photo album from the
event on our Facebook page at:
<http://tinyurl.com/40thphotoalbum>



NOTES

1. International Symposium on Agroecology for Food Security and Nutrition
<http://www.fao.org/about/meetings/afns/en/>
2. Scientists' Support Letter for the International Symposium on Agroecology, 18-19 September, 2014
http://www.iatp.org/files/2014.09.17_AgroecologyFAOLetter.pdf

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