

Agroecology “Lite”: Cooptation and Resistance in the Global North

By Eric Holt-Giménez and Miguel Altieri



The Green Revolution is a one-size-fits-all technological model for global agricultural development that originated in the breadbasket of the United States. Following World War II, the US turned “swords into plowshares” by transforming the vast stocks of wartime nitrate and poisons into fertilizer and pesticides, and by refitting arms factories to make newer, bigger farm machinery. Hybrid seeds were bred to respond to irrigation and chemical inputs. Industrial agriculture boomed.

However, US farmers soon bought all of the new technology they needed. Seeds, agrochemicals and machinery began to pile up in warehouses. The solution to the problem of industrial surplus was to export the uniform model of production to very different and diverse geographical, cultural and social environments in the Global South — later known as the Green Revolution.

The Green Revolution was spread with subsidized credit, international institutions, and government programs to millions of farmers in the Global South. With massive investment, global food production increased dramatically. But because the technology required capital, it concentrated production on large farms and in fewer and fewer hands. Smallholders were driven to the fragile hillsides and into the rain forests. When they were offered cheap credit to buy Green Revolution seeds and chemicals, these inputs quickly destroyed the fertility of their soils and eroded their local genetic diversity. Yields fell, millions of small farmers were economically ruined, and millions of acres of forests and topsoil were lost.

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Food First is a “peoples’ think tank” and education-for-action center. Our work highlights the root causes and solutions to hunger and poverty, with a commitment to fighting racism and establishing food as a fundamental human right.

The Green Revolution proved to be a disastrous mismatch for the Global South. In its aftermath, peasant farmers struggled to stay on the land and restore the ecological integrity of their farming systems. They found a way with agroecology.

Thirty years ago, Latin American agroecologists argued that the starting point for better, pro-poor agricultural development strategies were the systems that traditional farmers had developed over centuries. From the early 1980s on, hundreds of agroecologically-based projects incorporating elements of both traditional knowledge and modern agricultural science have been promoted throughout Latin America and other parts of the developing world. A variety of projects emerged showing that, over time, these agroecologically-managed systems bring benefits to rural communities by enhancing food security with healthy local food, strengthening their resource base (soils, biodiversity, etc.), preserving cultural heritage and the peasant or family farm way of life, and promoting resilience to climate change.

Because they are often developed and shared through extensive *Campesino a Campesino* (farmer-to-farmer) social networks, peasant-based agroecological approaches are an integral part of many agrarian struggles for land and market reforms as well as peasant movements against land grabs and extractive industries. For them, agroecology is not just a scientific or technological project, but a political project of resistance and survival. It is a science, a practice, and a movement.

Agroecology is spreading in the US and Europe. This is good news. But similar to the southward spread of the Green Revolution, the northward spread of agroecology has encountered a mismatch, and it is political.

In Latin America, agroecology is often viewed as an applied science embedded within a social context that challenges capitalist agriculture and is allied with agrarian movements. Deeply engaged with ongoing agrarian debates, Latin American agroecologists typically support both bottom-up agricultural development and peasant resistance against the corporate, industrial agriculture and neoliberal trade policies.

The political dimension of agroecology is problematic in the Global North—particularly in the United States—because challenging the root causes of industrial agriculture’s socio-environmental destruction implies challenging capitalism itself. It requires a radical (i.e. going to the root) critique that transcends the notion that minor adjustments or ‘greening’ the neoliberal economic model will bring about substantive change. It situates agroecology outside mainstream academic, government, and non-governmental programs -- and within the resistance struggles of the social movements fighting for food sovereignty, local autonomy, and community control of land, water, and agrobiodiversity.

But, agroecology in the US and Europe is not anchored in strong agrarian movements. The north-



ern arena of agroecological debate is dominated by an eclectic soup of apolitical narratives (read: avoiding the subject of capitalism), largely promoted by consumers and academics, global institutions, big NGOs, and big philanthropy. This institutional camp uses a variety of terms (sustainable intensification, climate-smart agriculture, diversified farming systems, etc.) to promote a reformist definition of agroecology as a set of additional tools to improve everyone’s toolbox. Big, small, organic, conventional... will all get along better with a little more agroecology.

Agroecology—as a countermovement to the Green Revolution—is at a crossroads, struggling against cooptation, subordination, and revisionist projects that erase its history and strip it of its political meaning. De-politicized agroecology is socially meaningless, divorced from agrarian realities, vulnerable to the corporate food regime and isolated from the growing power of global food

sovereignty movements. *View the full version of this article, including references, at this address: www.bit.ly/agrolite.*

Awarding the Food Sovereignty Prize

As a member of the US Food Sovereignty Alliance (USFSA), Food First was pleased to join our USFSA allies in honoring awardees of the eighth annual Food Sovereignty Prize – the Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa (AFSA) and the Farmworker Association of Florida (FWAF).

The prize was awarded October 15th in Seattle, Washington at the Food Sovereignty Prize awards ceremony.

This year’s honorees were selected for their successes in promoting food sovereignty, agroecology, and social justice to ensure that all people have access to fresh, nutritious food produced in harmony with the planet:

The Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa (AFSA) was founded in 2008 by a group of activist networks and launched in Durban, South Africa. AFSA brings together organizations representing smallholder farmers, pastoralists, hunter/gatherers, indigenous peoples, and more from across Africa.

The Farmworker Association of Florida (FWAF), founded in 1986, has a long-standing mission to build power among farmworker and rural, low-income communities to gain control over the social, political, workplace, economic, health, and environmental justice issues affecting their lives.

A Historic Win for Farmworker Justice

By Ahna Kruzic

The farmworkers at Sakuma Brothers Farms recently voted in a historic secret ballot election to have Familias Unidas por la Justicia represent them in negotiations for a union contract – the vote represents years of organizing and signals a new era for farmworker justice.

Edgar Franks, organizer with Community to Community Development (C2C), the support organization for Familias Unidas por la Justicia (FUJ), emphasized the historic nature of the win – “FUJ represents over 500 Triqui, Mixteco, and Spanish speaking workers at Sakuma Bros. Berry, and is one of the first farmworker unions led by indigenous workers. Despite hardships, workers have shattered stereotypes by organizing across languages and

identity. This is revitalizing the worker movement in Washington state and beyond.”

This win ushers in a new era for farmworker justice internationally as Sakuma Brothers Farms, who supplies to Driscoll’s Berries, is the largest berry distributor in the world. What does the future hold for Driscoll’s suppliers worldwide?

Because FUJ has entered into a new negotiations process with Sakuma Brothers Farms, they have called for an end to their boycott of Driscoll’s and Sakuma products. Meanwhile, work-

ers and consumers around the world have mobilized – including farm workers who supply to Driscoll’s in San Quintín, Mexico. As FUJ doubles down in their union negotiations, C2C and other supporting organizations have stepped up to continue organizing and movement-building in the food system to win justice for farm workers across the food chain.

Food Sovereignty Tour Photo Contest Winners

By Neeka Salmasi

Our first-ever Food Sovereignty Tour Photo Contest

had many stunning entries, including three winners.

Photos were chosen not only on a basis of aesthetic appeal; we were interested in the photographers’ personal reflections and larger human and food histories exhibited. In each photo, we are greeted with unique, place-specific cultural narratives surrounding food production and consumption. Below is one winner, Stephen Wunrow’s *Land Food Democracy*¹. View the rest of the contest winners and photo descriptions at this address: www.bit.ly/foodsovphoto.



Stephen Wunrow’s *Land Food Democracy* 1, South Korea