

ORFC 2020

'Gearing up for agroecology: transforming publicly-funded research and innovation for the public good?'

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I think many of the thousand people present here would agree that agroecology is crucial to addressing biodiversity loss and climate change together in an integrated manner. In fact we need 'agroecological food systems', which involve bringing growers and eaters closer together, instead of separating them through long food chains under the control of corporations. Applying agroecological approaches means feeding and caring for our soils and our biodiversity, diversifying our crops, trying different planting patterns and thus building healthy soils, healthy crops and so healthy people, all the things that all of us present know we need to do.

And yet for the government, agroecology is so unimportant that it forms only 1.5 percent of all its funding. Currently the government is going in completely the opposite direction from agroecology and research is now bought under one organization called UK Research and Innovation (UKRI). Note that word innovation.

UKRI brings together the seven UK research councils, which include arts, humanities and social sciences as well as scientific research, and they're funded to a total of one billion pounds a year or so through the science budget of the government's Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. Innovate UK is part of UKRI and it has economic growth as its key objective. We were talking about that in the systems workshop this morning and agreeing that the fixation on economic growth is actually one of our major problems. UKRI demands that there is matched funding from industry for every project that it funds. You have to be a UK registered business of any size or research and technology organisation to receive funding. And the Treasury wants an enormous seven-fold return on its funding contribution because it wants to make money out of this. And the focus is on technology, of course, looking for simple 'solutions' or technofixes for complex problems.

And also, of course, they want to export all this, particularly perhaps to Africa to help those poor African farmers who of course can't produce enough food and who don't know anything and who need our help so badly! So apparently we're going to help them. We're going to work with the Gates Foundation in order to do that. So this is definitely not about farmer to farmer exchanges of experience and insight. In fact farmer to farmer exchange seems to be one of the things that they are trying to exclude.

Instead they say scientists will invent things in the lab and then help farmers to put them into practice. So there's this constant interruption, this breaking of essential relationships between people, between farmers. But, of course, the corporate relationships are incredibly powerful because BBSRC (Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council) has these corporations involved in its councils,

institutes and clubs: Genus, Dupont, Nestlé, Unilever, Novozymes, SmithKline Beecham, British Sugar, BP, Syngenta, BASF and Bayer/Monsanto. So the corporate influence on research is massive.

UKRI have a project called Transforming the UK Food System for Healthy People and a Healthy Environment. Sounds good, but they go on to say “we're already a global leader in environmental management and earth observation sensors, big data, artificial intelligence and robotics”. By funding research and innovation projects, they say they are building on their strengths. They claim they can transform the precision agriculture sector and meet all the challenges. There are all sorts of warning signs in that description.

They also talk of a data revolution in agriculture which means rolling out 5G broadband everywhere to carry the massive amount of information required for precision farming. They say we'll have to transform food production systems, to improve productivity and sustainability. The investment “will stimulate establishment of novel high value production systems to position UK technologies at the forefront of new industries”. So you can see where they're going.

They're also ignoring basic principles of international law. What about the precautionary principle as enshrined in EU law and the Rio principles? What about the polluter pays principle, also part of the Rio principles? Not to mention Human Rights. These are key aspects if we are to genuinely change what we do and address the climate, biodiversity and agriculture crises. The precautionary principle says we have to pause and think very carefully before we launch so-called solutions to our problems that might bring new, possibly worse problems of their own. We need to be ready to drop such solutions immediately if we foresee such problems. We also need to consider who and what are most responsible for causing those problems in the first place. The polluters have to be made to pay for the negative impacts that they create and that's not the case at the moment.

Finally, I think Article 3 of the Convention on Biological Diversity is really important. 'States should not cause damage to the biodiversity of other states or to regions beyond national jurisdiction.' If we were to follow this article, so much would have to change, for example, importing (often GM) animal feed from regions where forests have been destroyed to make way for intensive agriculture would no longer be acceptable. So it's clear: we have many potential instruments that we could use positively, but the British government's policy is actually ignoring all of those. So that's just a brief summary of what we are up against in the UK.

Thank you.