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

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Despite the rising international profile of agroecology and the acknowledgement that we need radical transformation of food and farming systems, the vast majority of public spending – both domestic and for development assistance abroad – flows towards keeping a system in place, the catastrophic failings of which we are all only too aware of: pollution, degradation, disease, waste and poverty.

Recent intergovernmental reports including from the FAO all highlight the important role agroecology has to play not only as a more sustainable approach to food production, but in addressing and ameliorating if not overcoming multiple crises, from biodiversity collapse through epidemic malnutrition, hunger and ill health to climate chaos.

Still, the resources being made available in support of agroecological transition are minimal. On the most generous interpretation, the UK's Department for International Development has given less than 5% of its agriculture budget to projects supporting agroecology in so called developing countries (Pimbert and Moeller 2018). In Germany the situation is very similar. The country spent less than 8% of its agriculture budget on agroecology abroad (GIZ 2019). Less than 10% of the funding for the CGIAR international agricultural research centres is for agroecology (Nicholls and Altieri 2018). And only 0.6%-1.5% of the US Department of Agriculture's Research Education and Economics budget is spent on agroecological activities (DeLonge 2016).

While some countries, such as for example Switzerland, make a much greater effort to support agroecology – a recent study has found 50% of all agricultural projects funded by the Swiss Development Cooperation to be in support of agroecology – overall, financial resources for agroecology development, research and innovation are dwarfed by the enormity of the support for petrochemical agriculture, agricultural biotech and novel areas like 'smart foods'.

Sad as it is, none of this is particularly surprising. The important question is: what can we do about it? How can we transform the research and development agenda, both domestically and in terms of international aid? What opportunities are there and what skills do we have at our disposal?

For rather obvious reasons of entrenched power, presenting a case for agroecology to the likes of the UK Research and Innovation councils or the Department for International Development is not going to work without significant backing of public opinion.

Which brings me to the one key point I want to make today – and which I believe I already made last year in this very same forum: we need to build a more powerful narrative in support of agroecology than we have so far managed to put together.

A number of colleagues of mine at the Centre for Agroecology Water and Resilience have recently published a study in which they identify six domains that are important in agroecological transformations of food and farming systems.

Based on a wide literature review, they found that the following have been critical enabling conditions for agroecology around the world:

1. Access to land (which is also the focus of the People's Land Policy convened by the Land Justice Network which organised an exciting session earlier today);
2. collaborative knowledge production and collective learning (of which I imagine we will also hear more in the session on Farm Hacks which will take place at 4pm in this very room);
3. diverse systems of exchange, including models such as CSAs and participatory guarantee systems but also just the good old farmers market, and basically the importance of cutting out the middleman;
4. resilient social networks;
5. justice and equality; and
6. the development of alternative discourses

It's this development of alternative discourses that I think is particularly crucial. People's imagination is framed by discourses and narratives – and agroecology, despite its increased prominence in certain policy advising circles, has not yet managed to change the landscape of public opinion. One might well say that it hardly features in public discourse or the mainstream media.

Agroecology has to be made relevant beyond being a nicer way of doing agriculture, and beyond providing niche markets for small scale producers. I see two critical lines of argument which are all too seldomly developed.

1. Agroecology connects soil health to gut health to community health to planetary health. The multiple crises which we find ourselves in and which ravage our worlds can be understood as various manifestations of a deep and manifold health crisis, a crisis of health of many different systems. Agroecology is not just a promising response to these entangled crises, but indeed a rebuilders of these damaged systems. A restorer, a healer.
2. Many of us still live under the sway of the progress myth. Yet, we have evidence of large scale, complex societies which enriched the biodiversity of their immediate surroundings to live in edible abundance. (I am here thinking above all of archaeological studies in the Amazon, but similar historical evidence is increasingly found everywhere in the world). This bears witness to the fact that human civilisations do not have to be ecologically destructive. Connecting these insights with arguments from social movements, and perspectives such as degrowth, Buen Vivir, ecological swaraj could help us envisage and move toward the radical transformation of not just our food systems, but of the whole of our world.

These two lines of narrative require transdisciplinary approaches to be developed. Which leads me to a final comment: While, frustratingly, the funding bodies traditionally funding agricultural research do not favour agroecology, but rather 4th industrial revolution high tech fixes with its robots and recombinant DNA, the Economic and Social Sciences Research Council as well as the Arts and Humanities Research Council may offer routes to the kind of agroecological research that is required to support the building of the counter narratives we so urgently need.

Thank you!