
How can food and farming research deliver for the long-term public good?

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We need research to start delivering public goods again. A few decades ago, the role of public research was fairly clear. It was directed to the interests of farmers and consumers. That's faded away so that most has become more a subsidy to the private sector than a benefit to citizens or producers. There's agreement that research is important but without a blessing from the private sector, the research does not happen in the public sector.

We see that globally in the CGIAR. Their research institutes are increasingly being asked to pay their own way. That means they are taking out Intellectual Property Rights, Patents and Plant Breeders Rights on what had been the public goods in their genebanks and licensing their research to companies. The reason for doing this is not so much to make profits but that they get 'credits', from international donors, for being 'valuable' to the private sector. What had been public goods are being taken away from smallholder producers.

There are many research challenges that could be addressed, from ambient temperature seed storage to improvements in small-scale farm machinery, but these are ignored and young scientists are being pushed in the direction of addressing the needs of the companies.

There is a need to recognise that the only way to get through the next decades with climate change is through a highly decentralised, highly creative approach that links together high-tech, which covers lab research, and wide-tech research being done by grassroots organisations and peasant movements around the world. The two could be complementary if there were mutual respect and good communications and if the barriers to expanding, for example, agroecology, could be removed. Peasants' agroecology could be scaled up if they could stand up. They are not being allowed to stand up because of the intellectual property policies, the kinds of research orientations and the many ways the private sector has all the facetime with politicians while peasants have almost none.