

If Agroecology Is So Great, Why Aren't All Farmers Doing It?

By Eric Holt-Giménez and Ahna Kruzic

After a half century of pioneering work by farmers and scientists, agroecology has finally penetrated mainstream policy circles. This is due to agroecology's widespread success on the ground and the tireless efforts of food activists and policy advocates determined to break corporate agriculture's chokehold on the politics and the purse strings of our food system.

Last month, Friends of the Earth (FoE) published [*Farming for the Future: Organic and Agroecological Solutions to Feed the World*](#) – which was released on the heels of the International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems' (IPES) report, [*From Uniformity to Diversity: A paradigm shift from industrial agriculture to diversified agroecological systems*](#).

The two publications reflect a widespread push by civil society to advance agroecology as a solution to the rural poverty, hunger, erosion, agricultural pollution and greenhouse gas emissions attributed to industrial agriculture.

What we're left wondering is, if agroecology is so great, why aren't more farmers doing it? What's holding agroecology back?

The Friends of the Earth report claims it is in large part the agricultural subsidies, expending “billions of dollars... for the ecologically destructive industrial production of commodity crops,” suggesting that doing away with subsidies would put an end to industrial production and usher in agroecological production.

But farmers don't grow environmentally destructive commodities simply because they receive subsidies. Farmers farm commodities because that is what the capitalist market dictates. They get hooked on subsidies because capitalist agriculture has an innate tendency to overproduce—thus dropping prices. Because they have high fixed and “up front” costs, when commodity prices drop, farmers *increase* their production to make ends meet. This only leads to greater consumption of chemical inputs, larger and larger (and fewer) farms, and of course, more overproduction.

Subsidies don't cause overproduction, they support the incomes of farmers who are caught in a system of capitalist overproduction and low prices.



Agroecological production in the Basque Country. Photo by Leonor Hurado.

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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 agrifood industry thrives on these low prices—especially processors and supermarkets that like to buy on the cheap. Seed, chemical and machinery companies like low prices too, because it drives farmers to produce more, ever buying newer and bigger technologies. The wealth of public subsidies eventually accumulates in these sectors—not with the farmers. Overall, this system keeps prices low for processors, supermarkets, and input companies – which is where money and power disproportionately reside.

But cutting off farm subsidies would be like cutting off SNAP benefits for low-income consumers to spite Walmart—ultimately hurting those struggling in a capitalist system without changing the market rules that keep the industrial agrifoods system in power. The IPES report recognizes that “Industrial agriculture and the ‘industrial food systems’ that have developed around it are locked in place by a series of vicious cycles [that] allows value to accrue to a limited number of actors, reinforcing their economic and political power, and thus their ability to influence the governance of food systems.”

So, when we discuss what’s holding agroecology back, we also need to discuss capitalism and how we can roll back the accumulation of money and power locking in the conventional industrial agricultural system.

We should celebrate the steady appearance of agroecology in policy debates as an important, essential—but insufficient—step in the urgent transformation of our food systems. The question is not just, “how can we scale up agroecology,” or “how can

we use agroecology to change the food system,” but “how can agroecology help us transform capitalism itself?” *You can view the original version of this article at this address: bit.ly/agroecoblog*

Brexit: If You Don’t Set The Menu, You’re On the Menu

By Eric Holt-Giménez

Our poor British comrades, caught between nostalgia and exasperation, democracy and inequity (sound familiar?).

The masses are pissed off. Ever since Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher teamed up to destroy our public sphere, liberals and conservatives on both sides of the Atlantic have doggedly obeyed the neoliberal measures called for by the massive monopolies controlling the world’s “free trade.” This has earned politicians the distrust and disgust of most of the citizenry, pretty much everywhere. Far right parties are on the rise, offering up an intoxicating cocktail of bigotry and nationalism to blunt the hangover from a three decade binge on globalization. The day of the Brexit, [Donald Trump channeled Europe’s far-right discourse:](#)

“People want to take their country back. They want to have independence, in a sense. You see it with Europe, all over Europe. You’re going to have more... many other cases where they want to take their borders back,



they want to take their monetary [sic] back, they want to take a lot of things back. They want to be able to have a country again. So I think you're going to have this happen more and more... I think it's happening in the United States."

What does all this mean for the food insecurity now affecting 1 in 7 people in the US?

Because the root cause of hunger and food insecurity is poverty, it means that the candidate that has the most coherent anti-poverty platform will do the most to end hunger in the richest, most productive country in the world. Of course, neither Trump, Bernie nor Hillary is campaigning on a pro-poverty platform. But how will their policies (or lack of them) affect the poor?

For a Trump presidency, the indicator is Speaker of the House, Paul Ryan. Despite his bluster, it is very unlikely that Donald Trump has the congressional connections or political acumen to do anything structurally original once he's in the White House. Even if Trump actually does convince the Mexican gov-

ernment to pay for a Great Wall, the policy default will be Ryan, whose regressive views on welfare, healthcare and the poor are well known. Hillary has, well, a spotty record on these issues. While she is backing away now, her support for free trade agreements has done little to support local economies. It is unlikely she will advance a pro-poverty agenda if it means compromising her Wall Street connections. Bernie Sanders is clearly pro-poor and anti-rich. However, none of the candidates has specifically addressed the issue of hunger or food.

There is a campaign to address the plight of the US's food insecure called Plate of the Union that petitions the next president to ensure access to healthy foods for all people living in the US. While the petition does not indicate what specific food policies the president should pursue—nor does it indicate which policies are pro-poor—it is an important initiative because it calls for citizens to engage politically in the food system. Why is this important?—Because despite its stridence, the populism of the far right is essentially against politics—thus leav-

ing our society open to even more manipulation by the plutocracy. If we want to end hunger, political engagement is essential. This is true for a Trump presidency (that will greatly increase the power of Speaker of the House Paul Ryan), or a Clinton presidency (that will require enormous pressure to keep her compass firmly on the poor rather than on Wall Street). Because Sanders is basically out of the running, his value is in politicizing the issues—especially poverty and food.

Unless we “set the menu” by engaging politically to change our food system, we will find ourselves on the menu of either the regressive politics of the far right or the neoliberal politics of the established Democratic party. Let Brexit be a warning. *You can view the original version of this article at this address:* bit.ly/FFbrexitblog

Food Sovereignty Tours in Cuba: Good Eats and Agroecology

By Francesco Guerrieri

For Mackenzie Feldman, who studies Society and Environment and Food Systems at UC Berkeley, Food First's [Food Sovereignty Tours](#) to Cuba showed her she is not alone in the fight for food sovereignty.

“It was so refreshing to see so many farmers so into it,” she said.

While industrial agriculture, in the form of large-scale farming and confined animal feeding operations (CAFOs), has flooded the global agriculture markets, Cuba swims against the current.

Feldman and her delegation travelled through the Cuban landscape where, as Feldman said, “organic agriculture has such a long history.” While she enjoyed the pleasantries of Havana and other cities, Feldman’s fondest memories were her visits to small family farms.

“They grew all kinds of vegetables. There were a lot of herbs, a lot of ginger,” she recounted, “basically everything.”

The lush abundance of these small farms is reflected in the statistics on Cuban agriculture. According to Altieri and Toledo, “the Cuban peasantry supported by agroecological strategies exhibits today the highest levels of productivity, sustainability and resiliency in the region.”

And the proof of the pudding is in the eating. Feldman said the best food she had on the Food Sovereignty Tour was the food grown

on the farms. The simple meals consisted of rice, beans and sweet potatoes.

“It tastes so much better,” she said, “It’s so good.”

That taste is a testament to the innovation and perseverance of Cuban farmers. Because these peasants practice agroecological diversification methods on their farms, they produce much more food per hectare than their commercial, industrial agriculture counterparts.

These practices reflect the innovation of Cuban farmers to adapt to changing environments and climates. The perseverance of these Cuban farmers are highlighted by the Food Sovereignty Tours and this made a deep impression on Feldman.

“They’re scientists. They have to do all these experiments to see what works,” she said “They only

have one chance a year to see if it’ll work.”

Their success lies in coupling scientific know-how with the cultural knowledge and traditions of generations of Cuban farmers.

“It totally strengthened my belief that organic agriculture will work,” she said.

Food Sovereignty Tours bring delegates face-to-face with farmers practicing agroecology. It is a special opportunity to learn about the innovations in the agriculture industry from the innovators themselves. It is these same innovations that blaze the trail in the fight for the clean and fair production of food, for food sovereignty.

Food Sovereignty Tours will host another delegation to Cuba on December 27th, 2016 - January 4th, 2017. You can learn more and sign up to join us by visiting <http://bit.ly/FFCuba>.

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