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Photo by Leonor Hurtado

Campesino a Campesino farmer Emeliano Juarez describing how farming sustainably in Tlaxcala has ended hunger by improving the water and soil retention on the fields surrounding their community.

Food Sovereignty and Agroecology: Growing Movements for Constructive Resistance

"I have the audacity to believe that peoples everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality and freedom for their spirits. I believe that what self-centered men have torn down, men other-centered can build up."

— Dr. Martin Luther King

As we witness the global assault on our food systems by corporate profiteers, it is easy to be overwhelmed. But at Food First, we believe Dr. King's bold words still ring as clear today as they did 40 years ago. What "profit-centered" agrifoods corporations are busy tearing down—rural livelihoods, healthy diets, forests, soils, and water sources—"people-centered" movements for Agroecology and food sovereignty are building up.

Even as the giant grain, seed and oil corporations spread chemically-cultivated, GMO-based agrofuels across an area of the earth the size of India, people organized in communities, local organizations, and world-wide movements are resisting the corporate transformation of food and fuel systems that enrich a handful of oligopolies while increasing hunger, depleting resources, and producing, rather than reducing, greenhouse gases.

This resistance is contributing to increasing skepticism about the agrofuels boom. There has been a growing stream of scientific and official reports denouncing the overblown claims and under-reported drawbacks of agrofuels. Recently Nobel Prize-winning climatologist, Paul Crutzen, warned that nitrous oxide emissions from agrofuel production are 300 times more potent than carbon emissions—many times higher than assumed.¹ Cautionary reports from the UN, the FAO, and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) all indicate that industrial agrofuels won't cut greenhouse gasses, and will put rural livelihoods and food systems at risk. Even the International Monetary Fund had to admit that fuel crops pose a threat to food prices and are resulting in inflation that primarily affects the poor.²

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The Institute for Food and Development Policy—known as Food First—is a member-supported, nonprofit “peoples’” think tank and education-for-action center. Our work highlights the root causes and value-based solutions to hunger and poverty around the world, with a commitment to establishing food as a fundamental human right.

Food Sovereignty and Agroecology

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The agrofuels boom has sent food prices skyrocketing around the world, leading Jean Ziegler, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food to call agrofuels “a crime against humanity” and to call for a five-year moratorium on agrofuels development. Quoting from Food First’s “The Biofuel Myths,” Ziegler used the term “agrofuels” in his report, revealing how monopolistic agroindustries impose their financial interests at the expense of the world’s poor and hungry.³

In the U.S., rising food prices, coupled with cutbacks in food services, are depleting emergency food supplies, putting the nation’s 36 million hungry people at even greater risk. Foodlinks America reports that emergency programs, including the Women, Infant and Children Nutrition Program, face shortfalls due to food price inflation. Widespread shortages reported at food banks and food pantries reflect the fact that the agrofuels boom has not only driven food prices up, it has contributed to the disappearance of the country’s grain reserves and the erosion of surplus food stocks. As farm and food activists pointed out in a recent sign-on letter to the Senate Agriculture Committee, “We are one moderate drought or disaster away from... corn prices that would destabilize our entire economy...”⁴

Food First helped draft three important documents calling for a halt to the agrofuels race. The first, a letter to U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, urges the Speaker to oppose the Senate Renewable Fuel Standard (RFS) mandate of 36 billion gallons of biofuel by 2022—a massive five-fold increase over current RFS. This increase will lead to substantial environmental damage and a system of agrofuels production that will not benefit family farmers nor rural communities, will not promote sustainable agriculture and will not mitigate global climate change.⁵ The second document—a background paper for an upcoming national moratorium on agrofuels development—also targets the RFS as the key to the agrofuels boom, and calls for their dismantling. The third document is a background paper for the Rainforest Action Network’s international campaign against tropical deforestation by ADM, Cargill, and Bunge corporations.⁶

Constructive Resistance: Building equitable, agroecological alternatives

Constructive resistance—standing up to injustice and forging sustainable, equitable and democratic solutions—does not just say “no” to corporate colonization of our farms, our food systems, our economy and our diet—it also says “yes” to food sovereignty and the democratization of our food systems.

This resistance actively opens democratic space to advance sustainable agroecological alternatives to the poisonous systems pushed by agroindustry, and supports healthy alternatives to the high sugar, fat, and salt diets of corporate agri-foods. It works for local, people-centered alternatives for the processing, distribution, and retail systems to keep the food dollar in rural and urban communities—not in faraway corporate coffers.

This is the constructive resistance of the National Family Farm Coalition, the Federation of Southern Cooperatives, the Community Food Security Coalition, People’s Grocery, the Vía Campesina, the Campesino a Campesino Movement, the Brazilian Landless Workers Movement, the Cuban Association of Small Farmers, the Karnataka State Farmers Association, the Korean Peasants Association, The Green Belt Movement of Kenya, and thousands of other people’s movements who have decided to “be the change they want to see in the world.”

The Rise of Agroecology

Twenty years ago, visionary ecologists, biologists, anthropologists and farmers teamed up to establish the interdisciplinary science of Agroecology—the science of sustainable agriculture. Agroecology looks to understand and improve the ecological processes at work in the farming system—something traditional farmers have done for centuries—in order to sustainably increase crop yields and ensure an ecologically healthy rural environment. Over the years Food First has worked closely with many of the leaders of Agroecology; path-breakers

including Miguel Altieri, Steve Gliessman, John Vandemeer, Ivette Perfecto—and many men and women around the world who insist on farming sustainably—as they open up this exciting new science (see our publications <http://www.foodfirst.org/publications>). Agroecology has been instrumental in unpacking the corporate hype around genetically modified organisms (GMOs), the Green Revolution, and now, the agrofuels folly. Agroecology has also helped to explain the inherent sustainability of many traditional farming systems, has informed organic agriculture, and has provided important information for the growing farmers' movements for sustainable agriculture, including Campesino a Campesino.

Founding of SOCLA

Agroecology is flourishing in the Global South where peasant communities still produce over half of the food eaten by poor people. In August 2007, Food First participated in the founding meeting of the Latin American Scientific Society for Agroecology (SOCLA) held outside of Medellin, Columbia. Five hundred farmers, researchers and activists met to formulate principles, goals, and objectives, set up committees, and plan activities for its members. The Society will produce a biannual journal, design internet courses in Agroecology, promote regional cooperative research projects, and organize Agroecology trainings and workshops with farmers, professionals and academics. SOCLA will provide academic support to the growing Agroecology movement in Latin America, with plans to form national chapters.⁷

Brazil's Practitioner-Activist-Researcher Alliance

Recently more than 2,000 farmers, technicians, activists, and researchers attended the 5th Annual Congress of the Brazilian Agroecological Association held in Guarapari, Espírito Santo to share experiences, products and methods, and strategize ways to confront Brazil's exploding agroindustrial sector. Food First's keynote address at the conference stressed that in order to develop sustainable agriculture,



Local builders constructing thatch roofs for the Nyéléni Conference Centre in Sélingué, Mali

producers and consumers had to bring about social change—change in the practices, diets, markets, policies and institutions that presently favor agribusiness over sustainability. These changes require the political will of decision makers—and that depends on the social pressure exerted by strong social movements.

The strength of Brazil's social movements for sustainable agriculture resides in the strong relationships between farmers, scientists and militants. In fact, these actors share and incorporate knowledge and practice from each other, resulting in farmer-scientists, militant-researchers, and farmer-militants. The emphasis on Agroecology among the participants at the Congress was accompanied by a strong focus on food sovereignty. Indeed, many felt that one was impossible without the other. While many of us are familiar with the Brazilian Landless Worker's Movement, it is also very hopeful to know that there are many other growing social movements in Brazil stepping up to the challenge of food sovereignty and sustainable agriculture.

Contesting the Green Revolution in Mozambique

The National Farmer's Union of Mozambique (UNAC) recently invited Food First to give a talk on the Gates-Rock-

efeller Foundations' Alliance for a (new) Green Revolution for Africa—AGRA. The Foundation for Community Development of Mozambique (FDC) led by Graça Machel—the present wife of Nelson Mandela and widow of Mozambique's revolutionary hero Samora Machel—organized a public conference on August 17-18, 2007 on "Strategies for Agricultural Development in the Context of the Green Revolution." As might be expected, there was a wide range of positions on the Green Revolution, but very little information about AGRA—the philanthropic flagship for a much larger complex of seed and fertilizer companies, multinational research institutes, and other institutions that have a political and financial stake in re-inventing and extending the Green Revolution. AGRA's purpose is to attract financial and public support to a much larger campaign designed to advance the interests of multinational agribusiness in Africa.⁸

Ismael Ossemane, a farmer and founding member of UNAC, in his moving speech said,

"The new Green Revolution cannot be considered the only solution to solve all the problems in rural development in Mozambique... It is a historic fact that the Green Revolution was implemented and

failed [on] the African continent despite the investment of millions of dollars in the last 20 years (\$220 million/ year). Behind the failure of the Green Revolution in Africa, we recognize an approach that gives little relevance to the way the rural workers have been growing food, managing the ecosystem and distributing the food.

"We are convinced that the use of this same approach in the present time will bring similar consequences. The agronomical research is going slowly from the hands of the state to the private sector, [whose] primary goal is to profit and to obtain the rights to private property. The GMO's are at the core of this research, even though they haven't been able to show any concrete benefits to the rural workers in the world."

*"[We] must... Focus on food for the people; Give the due value to food producers; Establish local food systems; Strengthen local control; Develop local knowledge; Work with nature."*⁹

Our thanks to Diamantino Nhampossa, Director of the Mozambican Farmers Union for hosting and taking us into the countryside to meet with farmers. To read Diamantino's analysis of the challenges of food sovereignty for the African peasantry, visit the Via Campesina website.¹⁰

The Politics of Compassion: Hope, Solidarity, and Action

"A traditional African stool has three legs [that] to me... represent three critical pillars of just and stable societies. The first leg stands for democratic space, where rights are respected... The second represents sustainable and equitable management of resources. The third stands for cultures of peace that are deliberately cultivated within communities and nations. The [seat], represents society... Unless all three legs are in place, supporting the seat, no society can survive."

—Wangari Maathai "Unbowed"

Food First is co-organizing a conference in Mali in that same spirit of democracy, sustainability, equity and peace. African Alternatives to the Green Revolution involves 120 farmers, researchers, and activists from the entire Sub-Saharan region of Africa (November 26-December 2, 2007). Our organizing partners include More and Better, ROPPA, Via Campesina, USC Canada, and IRPAD. Those attending represent farmer and women's organizations, sustainable agriculture groups, nonprofits, research institutes and universities.¹¹

Endnotes

- ¹ www.atmos-chem-phys-discuss.net/7/11191/2007/
- ² <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/weo/2007/02/index.htm#ch1box>
- ³ <http://www.foodfirst.org/node/1716>
- ⁴ http://www.agobservatory.org/issue_farm-bill2007.cfm
- ⁵ http://www.foe.org/biofuel/RFS_Letter_Pelosi%20FINAL%202010oct07.pdf
- ⁶ http://ran.org/what_we_do/rainforest_agribusiness/spotlight/launch/
- ⁷ <http://www.agroeco.org/socla/>
- ⁸ Elenita C. Daño, "Unmasking the New Green Revolution in Africa: Motives, Players and Dynamics," Third World Network, Church Development Service, and African Center for Biosafety. 2007
- ⁹ Read the full presentation at <http://www.foodfirst.org/issues/africanfoodsovereignty>.
- ¹⁰ http://www.viacampesina.org/main_en/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=327&Itemid=1
- ¹¹ <http://www.foodfirst.org/node/1769> for details.

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