

Rome Summit Takes Bold Step Toward Ecological Agriculture



Timothy A. Wise Follow Nov 18 · October 24, 2019 (Originally published by [Common Dreams](#))

Leaders endorse agroecology as one of the cutting-edge innovations we need to help small-scale farmers adapt to climate change.



Farmers association prepares to plant intercropped field, Marracuene, Mozambique. (Photo: Timothy A. Wise)

The Climate Action Summit at the UN last month was widely considered a disappointment, failing to garner the kinds of government actions needed to address the climate crisis. Sadly, the same can be said for actions on agriculture and climate change, despite a [well-publicized commitment](#) of \$790 million to “to enhance resilience of over 300 million small-scale food producers in the face of mounting climate impacts.”

That is not because the investment isn’t needed. It is, desperately. Small-scale farmers in developing countries are already bearing the brunt of climate change yet they have received little of the promised funding to help them adapt to drought, flooding, heat, and other climate changes.

These new initiatives won’t bridge that gap. Just as government actions to date are proving far too weak to address the climate emergency, these agriculture programs support familiar measures that have done little to help small-scale farmers.

Some measures have left them even more vulnerable to climate change.

We need a more decisive shift. Fortunately, government leaders took a major step in that direction in Rome last week at the annual meetings of the UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS). They approved an expert report on agroecology, an innovative and cost-effective way to address rising hunger and malnutrition while helping farmers adapt to climate change. A host of recent UN reports calls for just this sort of change.

“Agroecology is the only solution we have to address the multiple crises we are facing,” said Aisha Ali Aii Shatou of the Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa in testimony to the government representatives at the summit.

When the solutions are part of the problem

The new \$790-million agriculture initiative is driven by recommendations from the Global Commission on Adaptation (CGA), which is co-chaired by Bill Gates, former UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, and World Bank CEO Kristalina Georgieva. Its report, [“Adapt Now: A Global Call for Leadership on Climate Resilience.”](#) has as one of its core initiatives enhancing the resilience of smallholder producers.

Unfortunately, the Commission largely doubles down on the misguided effort to “modernize” agriculture in developing countries by encouraging farmers to adopt precisely the sorts of fossil-fuel-intensive practices that have made agriculture one of the greatest contributors to global greenhouse-gas emissions. As I saw in researching my book, *Eating Tomorrow*, crop diversity and soil fertility often decline as a result.

In its recommendations, the commission includes agroecology only as an afterthought, warning that we need to improve “the evidence-base for the effectiveness of adopting different agroecological approaches” — as if we don’t know enough yet to act.

They clearly hadn’t read the new expert report on [agroecology and other innovations for sustainable food systems](#), released July 3 by the CFS’s High Level Panel of Experts. The expert report, two years in the making, is clear on the urgent need for change. “Food systems are at a crossroads. Profound transformation is needed,” the summary begins. It goes on to present a wide range of evidence that such methods have been shown to simultaneously increase soil fertility, diet diversity, and food security for small-scale farmers.

Agroecology promotes just the kinds of soil-building practices that “agricultural modernization” often undermines. Multiple food crops are grown in the same field. Compost and manure, not fossil-fuel-based fertilizer, are used to fertilize fields. Biological pest control decreases pesticide use. Researchers work with farmers to improve the productivity of their seeds rather than replacing them with commercial varieties farmers need to buy every year and douse with fertilizer to make them grow. As the

expert report documents, soil fertility increases over time, and so do food security and climate resilience.

Agroecology: a proven response to the failing policies of the present

The growing global interest in agroecology comes in response to the widespread failures of input-intensive programs like the Gates-inspired Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA). Fed by heavy doses of government subsidies for commercial seeds and synthetic fertilizers, AGRA has promoted monocultures of a few staple crops, decreased crop and diet diversity, undermined soil fertility, and produced disappointing gains in productivity and farmer incomes. Global Hunger Index scores remained in the “serious” to “alarming” category for 12 of the 13 AGRA countries.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, in its influential report on [“Climate Change and Land,”](#) echoed the urgent need for change and the direction that change should take: “[I]ncreasing the resilience of the food system through agroecology and diversification is an effective way to achieve climate change adaptation....”

Fortunately, in Rome government leaders were forward-looking. Many recognized that business as usual, in the face of climate change, is not an option. They moved beyond the failed policies of the present, endorsing agroecology as the kind of innovation farmers need to adapt to a rapidly changing climate.

As African farmer Aisha Ali Aii Shatou told the summit, “Agroecology allows small-scale producers a dignified life, producing affordable, healthy food in healthy conditions. It eliminates dependence on costly inputs and adopts practices which regenerate seeds and soils while mitigating and adapting to the effects of climate change.”

Next year’s Rome food summit will take up the challenge of translating this visionary report into practical policies.

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