

Global food system lacking in Paris Agreement

GRAIN Collective

The global food system – the processes and infrastructure to feed populations – is one of the main drivers of climate change. Yet the issue is hardly talked about at the climate summits that governments hold every year. Why?

GRAIN supports small farmers and social movements in their struggles for community-controlled and biodiversity-based food systems. See www.grain.org

The food system relies mostly on fossil fuel energy. The chemical fertilizers and pesticides, the mechanization of farms, the pumping up of water for irrigation – all emit huge amounts of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. There is also the deforestation caused by ever-expanding industrial plantations; the soil erosion caused by unsustainable practices; the transport, processing and freezing of food produced in faraway places; and the tremendous waste of energy in the increasingly centralized corporate retail and supermarket systems. Our research calculates that the global food system, which includes agriculture, is responsible for 44–57 per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions.¹

It doesn't need to be this way. A shift over the next 50 years to healthy ecological farming practices focused on returning organic matter to the soil could capture around 24–30 per cent of current global greenhouse gas emissions. It could also create a more productive and sustainable system for providing enough food for a growing population.² Prioritizing local markets and fresh produce would reduce the need for long-distance transport, freezing and processing. Agrarian reforms aimed at supporting small-scale food producers would give back the land to those who produce food rather than those who produce commodities. It would support local initiatives to recuperate indigenous seeds, knowledge and farming systems and global peasant movements that develop new ways of producing food.

In spite of this, the issue is virtually absent from governmental climate negotiations. Government officials seem content to bet on financial carbon markets and other 'solutions' which can make the problem worse. In the official negotiations and seminars at the Paris Summit in December 2015, the most powerful actors

on agriculture were members of the 'Climate Smart Agriculture Alliance'. This alliance was led by the chemical fertilizer industry, which is pushing the agenda in the wrong direction. Meanwhile, in the streets of Paris, social movements and small-scale farmers' organizations rallied with the slogan 'we can feed and cool the planet'.

What can philanthropy do?

First and foremost, we need to further demonstrate the ways in which the current model of food production and consumption wreaks havoc on our climate. This model is closely tied to fossil fuels and promoted by agribusiness, trade agreements and current farm policies. It is a system that is oriented to produce global commodities for profit, not to feed people. Across the world, NGOs and academic organizations are researching and providing evidence on this, and they need philanthropic support.

Second, as grassroots organizations and farmers' movements struggle with the impact of the industrial food system – seeing the destruction of their forests, fighting pollution of their water sources and losing access to their lands – they are in need of technical support. Sometimes, it's a question of helping to ensure access to international networks and the solidarity they offer. Philanthropy can contribute here too by facilitating these networks and connections.

Finally, we need to build momentum towards alternatives that show how a transformative shift towards ecological food systems, local markets and small-scale agriculture would make a massive

contribution both to solving the climate crisis and to feeding the world. In some cases, this means challenging development agencies and philanthropic foundations to support bottom-up approaches that empower local communities and respect indigenous knowledge rather than funding top-down and corporate technology-driven agendas in poor countries.

Here again, people, movements and organizations across the world are active and showing the way. They need and deserve our attention and support. @

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1 www.grain.org/e/4357

2 <http://tinyurl.com/GRAINFCCHS>