Agroecological farming methods being ignored, says UN expert

Ecologist
28th June, 2010

Success of agroecology in Brazil, Cuba and Africa should be replicated in place of current support for intensive farming techniques

Decision-makers are ignoring low-input agroecological farming methods in favour of major investments in industrial farming techniques and pesticides, says the UN's independent advisor on food.

Speaking at a summit on agroecology, UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food Olivier De Schutter said the 'Green Revolution' model of boosting food production with improved seeds, chemical fertilisers and machines was not the only answer.

Agroecological farming is an approach that focuses on a minimal use of external inputs like chemical fertilisers. It involves, among other aspects, controlling pests and disease with natural predators, mixed crop and livestock management and agroforestry (interplanting of trees and crops).

'Scant attention has been paid to agroecological methods that have been shown to improve food production and farmers’ incomes, while at the same time protecting the soil, water, and climate,' said De Schutter.

'Even if it makes the task more complex, we have to find a way of addressing global hunger, climate change, and the depletion of natural resources, all at the same time. Anything short of this would be an exercise in futility,' he added.

Smallholder farmers

A report from MPs earlier this year criticised the Department for International Development (DfID) for favouring support for short-term agricultural programmes and ignoring the needs of smallholder farmers.

It said the UK should pay more attention to the findings of the groundbreaking IAASTD report of 2008 that called for a reversal of international development policies and a move away from chemically intensive farming towards promoting localised agroecological solutions.

The recent UN summit highlighted the ongoing success stories of pro-agroecology policies in Brazil, Cuba and Africa.

One example highlighted was Tanzania, whose western provinces of Shinyanga and Tabora used to be known as the 'Desert of Tanzania'. However, the use of agroforestry techniques and participatory processes allowed some 350,000 hectares of land to be rehabilitated in two decades. Profits per household rose by as much as US$500 a year. Similar techniques are used in Malawi, where some 100,000 smallholders in 2005 benefited to some degree from the use of fertiliser trees.

De Schutter said he would use the UN's food security summit in October to push for more policy measures in favour of agroecology.

'We can scale up these sustainable models of agriculture, and ensure that they work for the benefit of the poorest farmers. What is needed now is political will to move from successful pilot projects to nation-wide policies,' said the UN Special Rapporteur.

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