Agroecological farming 'can double food production in Africa over next 10 years'

Tom Levitt
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Low-input farming projects, not reliant on chemical fertilisers and pesticides, have brought significant increases in food production in Africa, Asia and South America, according to a UN report.

Small-scale farmers can double food production within 10 years in Africa by using ecological methods rather than fertilisers, a new UN report demonstrates.

In a review of agroecological farming projects, which focus on a minimal use of external inputs, like chemical fertilisers, in favour of controlling pests and disease with natural predators, mixed crop and livestock management and agroforestry (interplanting of trees and crops), the report found average increases in crop yield of 80 per cent in 57 less-industrialised countries. In Africa the average increase was 116 per cent.

It urges donors and the private sector, which makes up the vast majority of agricultural investment in African countries, to support a shift towards agroecology to tackle the problems of hunger, climate change and poverty.

'Conventional farming relies on expensive inputs, degrades soils, fuels climate change and is not resilient to climatic shocks. It simply is not the best choice anymore today,' said report author Olivier De Schutter, the UN's special rapporteur on the right to food.

'Even Malawi, a country that launched a massive chemical fertiliser subsidy program a few years ago, is now in agroecology. The government now subsidises farmers to plant nitrogen-fixing trees in their fields to ensure sus in maize production. This programme benefits more than 1.3 million of the poorest people, and yields already rise from 1 t/ha to 2-3 t/ha with such practices,' he said.

The report says Africa is entering a critical phase with a recent surge in interest in agriculture by foreign investors. A World Bank report estimated that in 2009, 45 million hectares of land, an area twice the amount of farmland found in France, had been bought by investors in so-called 'land-grabbing' deals.

Schutter said in the long run agroecological farming would build long-term resilience for countries and make them less reliant on expensive imports based on oil and gas, chemicals and pesticides.

'We won’t solve hunger and stop climate change with industrial farming on large plantations. The solution lies in small-scale farmers’ knowledge and experimentation, and in raising incomes of smallholders so as to contribute development,' he said.

It was time to end the singular view that only industrialisation could improve agricultural production, Schutter said he admitted that it may be difficult to encourage investment into agroecological alternatives from the private sector there are 'no patents on sound agricultural practices' and also because it encourages diversity of plants rather than monocultures. 'It is thus less adapted to the requirements of larger food chains and to the needs of export mar it may be less attractive to investors.'

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