Down with the green revolution, long live agroecology!

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Recent scientific discoveries confirmed that natural and biological farming could double agricultural production and solve the food crisis in Africa.

Discoveries that come after almost 30 years of agricultural policies in favour of a green revolution on the African continent that have resulted in the loss of traditional farming methods and techniques. African farmers want to go back to basics.

“We are opposed to modern agriculture, we support familial and agroecological farming”, says Sissoko, the Director of CNOP (Coordination Nationale des Organisations Paysannes du Mali). Sissoko promotes an "ecological and familial strategy", with traditional farming techniques that would boost yields and exports as well as create more jobs.

An approach that completely differs from the new green revolution, the model advocated by the West since the early 80s with the introduction of structural adjustment programmes by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank. The green revolution proposed an eradication of hunger in the world through a rapid increase of production. However, this model was based on modern and intensive farming methods, with a devastating impact on the environment and biodiversity.

Greater yields
According to a communiqué by United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Belgian national Olivier De Schutter, recent studies showed that, in the long term, biological or agroecological farming would yield 80% more; and that is much more affordable for small farmers. Moreover, the conclusions of the first International Conference on Biological Products Quality (held in Prague, Czech Republic, from 18 to 20 May 2011) state that an agroecological diet reduces the risks of high blood pressure and diabetes and strengthens the immune system.

Now that the world seems to have rediscovered the benefits of natural farming, Sissoko regrets the changes brought about by modern agriculture in Mali in the past few decades: “Family farming here took a hit. The introduction and large scale import of affordable monocultures such as rice has changed our dietary habits and forced local farmers to stop producing traditional varieties of crops. We also noticed that our lands were been purchased by Asians. These developments have impacted on our local production and we have become dependent on food imports”.

Solution to global issues
Therefore, for Malian farmers, the United Nations’ call on countries to turn to agroecology could not have come at a better time. Olivier De Schutter sees agroecology as the solution to food, climate and poverty issues around the world. This type of agriculture offers greater crops diversity and better yields through natural methods that improve food quality and preserve the environment. It is also more labour-intensive, thus creates more jobs. According to Mr De Schutter, agroecology is the solution to food crisis in developing countries.

Chantal Jacovetti, who deals with land issues at the CNOP, agrees with De Schutter: “With the green revolution we’ve destroyed traditional farming skills, turning agriculture into a business venture with the use of chemicals and genetically modified organisms (GMOs). The goal of agroecology is to gather previous farming knowledge into a knowledgebase in order to face emerging food challenges. Agroecology would boost local yields to meet the food needs of the entire population and allow for export in the region.” Jacovetti blames their government officials. “Everything is up to the politicians: it is up to them to support agroecological farming and protect the national market from European dumping”.

Will recent discoveries in agroecology and the call from the United Nations result in a return to traditional farming and in Africa addressing its food crisis? One will probably have to wait for western countries to see the potential benefits of agroecology for their agricultural sector and their health. Jacovetti: “In France for instance, people are now noticing the important loss of traditional farming skills. Fortunately, Africa still has a large number of traditional farmers, so all is not lost”. 

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