Wake Up and Smell the Soil! Groundbreaking UN Report on the Paradigm Shift Needed to Feed the Future

A doorstop of a report arrived in inboxes this morning. Not so subtly called: "Wake up Before It Is Too Late," the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development new report is a rallying cry for action to move toward greater sustainability in food and farming – to ensure food security in a changing climate.

When Monsanto and other chemical companies are pushing hard on the claim that we need their products to feed the world, when The New York Times is publishing multi-page articles on the benefits of genetic engineering, the report comes at a particularly important moment. Its authors include some of the world's leading experts on food, sustainability, and agroecology, including Miguel Altieri, UC Berkeley professor, and Olivier De Schutter, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food.

Three key findings: First, the dominant message most of us hear about hunger reduction continues to be "Grow more food!" There is not nearly enough emphasis, the report argues, on the economic and social context of hunger. "Hunger and malnutrition," the authors write, "are mainly related to lack of purchasing power and/or inability of rural poor to be self-sufficient."

In other words, to address the roots of hunger we must be occupied with how to empower farmers and promote what is known as food sovereignty. As my mother, Frances Moore Lappé, has been saying since her seminal 1977 book, Food First, "hunger is not caused by a scarcity of food, but by a scarcity of democracy."

Secondly, the report calls for nothing less than a "paradigm shift" in growing our food, away from input-intensive, monoculture agriculture, toward what they call "ecological intensification." This means not only rethinking on-farm practices, but also rethinking the farmer herself: seeing farmers as not just producers of agricultural goods, but as stewards of the land, providing us all a valuable service in protecting soil, water, biodiversity, even climate stability.

When I was writing my latest book, Diet for a Hot Planet, this was my biggest a-ha moment: Yes, farmers are at the frontlines of the climate crisis – often the first and hardest hit by climate disasters – but they're also the frontlines of the solutions. They're the ones who are best positioned to protect our ecosystems – including the soil, water, and clean air on which we all depend.

Finally, the authors emphasize the need for systemic change; that's the only way to address the roots of hunger and achieve this needed paradigm shift. Folks, this isn't about "tweaking" here and there; this is a call for a "transformation" at the heart of our food system.

The report includes a trove of data proving the benefits of this paradigm shift, especially as we face an increasingly climate unstable future. In a particularly interesting chapter, Professor Miguel Altieri highlights the growing evidence about the role of sustainable agriculture practices in fostering farm resilience in the face of major climatic events. All the results showed those farmers with greater biodiversity and other agroecological qualities fared significantly better post-natural disasters.

After Hurricane Mitch ravaged Central America, the Campesino o Campesino movement organized farmer research teams to evaluate the impact. They visited 1,804 farms in 360 communities in Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua. What they found was astounding: Those farmers who had adopted sustainable agriculture practices retained greater soil moisture and 20 to 40 percent more topsoil; they also experienced less soil erosion and economic losses.

The report also highlights how agribusiness and chemical corporations have influenced policy setting, regulatory agencies, and research institutions, slowing the spread of more sustainable practices in agriculture. To give just one example, Marcia Ishii-Eiteman from the Pesticide Action Network of North America describes how chemical corporations have influenced national and international chemical policy.

For instance, after Malaysia passed a 2002 ban of the highly toxic chemical herbicide, Paraquat, its manufacturer Syngenta joined the country's palm oil industry to lobby to reverse the ban, which the government did in 2006. Today, Paraquat is still widely used there.

The report also makes it very clear how important it is to act now, because the very resources we depend on for food security are at stake: from a stable climate to abundant topsoil to accessible water. In chapter after chapter, the authors highlight the importance of embracing sustainable agriculture, not only to foster greater on-farm resiliency, but to preserve these vital natural resources.

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