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COMMENTARY FROM THE U.S. AGROECOLOGY SUMMIT 2023

## Agroecology and corporate power in the U.S.

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### Introduction

In reflecting on the U.S. Agroecology Summit 2023, we want to bring a key issue to the fore: corporate power and how agroecology can address it in the food system. Taking on existing power structures was an important theme running through the conference, from confronting legacies of colonization and slavery in the food system to

battling the marginalization of affected communities in agricultural and food sciences. The corporate dominance of agricultural markets and its corresponding influence in the political realm was certainly present throughout our discussions, but here we want to center the role of corporate power in future discussions of agroecology in the U.S.

The Biden-Harris administration has invested significant political capital in framing many of its agricultural and food systems priorities around two themes: addressing corporate concentration in some sectors of the food system, and investing in climate resilience and reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. Building sustainable food systems without a consideration of corporate power fails to acknowledge the realities of our inequitable food and farming systems. However, without a political framing around the principles of farmer-led agroecology, these policy efforts are siloed and fail to effectively counter corporate power in

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addressing the harms of the current system and in building resilient systems for the future. The failure to embed the administration's agricultural economic policy priorities within its agricultural climate agenda is both a depoliticization of these state climate actions and a reflection of mainstream civil society's depoliticized approach to combating the climate crisis in the agricultural sector.

Climate resilience has become increasingly centered in agricultural policy debates, and changes to agricultural practices and inputs advocated for by 'climate-smart,' 'regenerative,' and 'local food' frameworks offer some progress on reducing GHG emissions and strengthening ecological resilience. However, these efforts generally lack socio-political or economic principles. The clear risk of this approach is that climate action in the name of these frameworks may either exacerbate existing (racialized) socio-economic inequities or fail to uplift historically marginalized social groups (Indigenous, frontline, and working poor communities), undermining both the implementation and socio-political legitimacy of these efforts.

In contrast to these depoliticized agricultural-climate approaches, agroecology is a deeply political, social movement-driven, and transformative framework with clear principles linked to social equity, economic justice, and political governance, keenly attuned to the power dynamics in food systems. While less well-known in traditional U.S. agriculture and farming spaces, we argue that agroecology, because of its attention to people power, self-governance, co-creation of knowledge, and engagement with grassroots communities, provides an effective framework for both countering corporate agribusiness power and advancing a climate agenda oriented to social justice in the U.S. agriculture sector.

### Political Underpinnings of Agroecology

Agroecology is commonly framed as a practice (of production), a science (of research and knowledge-sharing), and a social movement (of political action). The 2015 Declaration of Nyéléni of the International Forum for Agroecology unified the movement's voices representing small-scale food producers, including peasants, Indigenous peoples, hunters and gatherers, family farmers, rural work-

ers, herders and pastoralists, and fisherfolk, as well as their communities and consumers, encompassing both rural and urban people. The declaration illuminates the deeply political nature of agroecology, as defined by the global food sovereignty movement:

Agroecology is the answer to how to transform and repair our material reality in a food system and rural world that has been devastated by industrial food production. ... We see agroecology as a key form of resistance to an economic system that puts profit before life. ... The industrial food system is a key driver of the multiple crises of climate, food, environmental, public health and others. ... Agroecology within a food sovereignty framework offers us a collective path forward from these crises. (Declaration of Nyéléni, 2015, "Overcoming," para. 1)

The social movement and civil society representatives who drafted the 2015 Declaration of Nyéléni pointedly identify the social, economic, and ecological impacts of the extractive corporate agribusiness model, and also explicitly denounce efforts to co-opt the concept of agroecology as being anything other than counter-hegemonic:

Popular pressure has caused many multilateral institutions, governments, universities, ... corporations and others, to finally recognize "Agroecology". However, they have tried to redefine it as a narrow set of technologies, to offer some tools that appear to ease the sustainability crisis of industrial food production, while the existing structures of power remain unchallenged. ... We cannot allow Agroecology to be a tool of the industrial food production model: we see it as the essential *alternative* to that model, and as the means of *transforming* how we produce and consume food into something better for humanity and our Mother Earth. (Declaration of Nyéléni, 2015, "Crossroads," para. 1)

Finally, to further underline the political nature of agroecology, under the heading "Our Common Pillars and Principles of Agroecology," the Declaration states that "the autonomy of Agroecology

displaces the control of global markets and generates self-governance by communities,” and “Agroecology is political; it requires us to challenge and transform structures of power in society,” (Declaration of Nyéléni, 2015, “Common Pillar,” para. 1). With this clear political orientation articulated at Nyéléni, La Via Campesina and other social movements and civil-society organizations launched a multiyear advocacy effort at both regional and global levels to center agroecology as a framework recognized and institutionalized within the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the UN Committee on World Food Security (FAO, 2018, 2019; Treacle, 2018; Treacle & Kruzic, 2020).

### **Corporate Power in the Food System: Why it Matters for Agroecology**

In the U.S., decisions about what food will be produced, where, by whom, and how have largely been wrested from the hands of producers and eaters and instead centered in global corporations responsible primarily to their shareholders. A handful of firms dominate meat processing, grain trading, and food processing, selling to a few increasingly powerful retailers (Howard, 2021). The choices of farmers, workers, and eaters in the U.S. are largely shaped by these firms—but not without resistance. Farmer cooperatives, direct marketing, alternative food and farming networks, and efforts to reject high-input and capital-intensive systems (e.g., organic, grass-fed, rGBH free) are just a few examples of attempts to rebuild socio-economic relationships and counter corporate power.

As these efforts flourish and mature, they are often undermined by the political and economic system in which they are embedded—particularly by corporations who see the threat to their power and ability to profit. A common tactic is for the powerful to standardize tools and methods that block efforts by smaller actors and any policy changes that could lead to market reform. For instance, organic certification and labeling were attempts to communicate production practices backed by ecological values to consumers while supporting farmers by providing a premium price and market access. The growth of organic sales threatened the profit potential of mainstream food

companies, and so firms extinguished the threat by buying up organic upstarts, while at the same time using their political power to weaken the organic standards behind the labels.

Similarly, small-scale and family farmers, particularly those linked to livestock production, have faced enormous challenges both in competing economically in a highly consolidated food system and in having their individual voices heard and represented in food governance spaces. Political pressure from well-financed corporations routinely shapes food safety regulations in favor of large-scale businesses; when small-scale producers succeed in producing with scale-appropriate regulations, they are often then economically undercut and acquired by corporate food firms to eliminate the market competition. The ecological and social principles embedded in these smaller-scale entities, when acquired, become subsumed into the bottom line of a global corporation. Thus, in current food system governance, challenges to the status quo are neutralized and stripped of their influence on democratic decision-making, at the expense of farmer livelihoods and diversified rural economies. For example, we see antitrust regulation moving from elected legislatures to adjudication in the non-elected judiciary, farmer-owned cooperatives turning management over to “experts,” and organic and alternative foods becoming labeled and standardized on grocery store shelves. The fact that almost every alternative has met a similar fate—where the power of decision-making moves from democratic processes to boardrooms—means that we *must* be vigilant in foregrounding change in the social and economic relationships surrounding the food system just as the Declaration of Nyéléni lays out. We must understand agroecology as explicitly political and democratic—prioritizing the interests of farmers, workers, ecologies, and Indigenous communities—in order to transform complex systems in the face of corporate power.

### **Mainstream, Depoliticized, Climate- Oriented Frameworks: What is Missing**

Many farmers and growers practicing regenerative agriculture clearly recognize the ecological impacts of agricultural production practices that are failing to protect water quality and quantity, build soil

health, and reduce GHG emissions. They laudably work to find solutions through shifts in production practices, often without market compensation or government support. But for the most part, more mainstream climate-oriented frameworks such as ‘climate-smart’ and regenerative agriculture lack clear political principles. For example, current investments in climate-smart agriculture strip out explicit references to political and ethical issues by incentivizing change in particular practices, but not by changing agenda setting and decision-making nor business and production models. In some cases when farmers or organizations using these frameworks do express political orientations linked to these practices, too often they are through a more libertarian framework, which focuses on the politics of the individual—the choices and opportunities of individual farmers to produce for new markets that only some consumers as individuals can afford to “choose” and products that only certain consumers can afford to buy. In much regenerative agriculture in the U.S., collective action is not readily apparent. The efforts are atomized in dispersed and separate farmers changing their production practices. Products are then supposedly pulled through the supply chain by one individual consumer over here “choosing” to buy that regenerative product off the shelf in one grocery store and another individual consumer over there making their own “choice” somewhere else.

In the same way that the consolidated corporate power is used to lock farmers into high-capital and high-input production systems, it also locks consumers into a consolidated “choice” (which may show up with the illusion of different brands and labels) of what is available on the shelves of their increasingly consolidated grocery stores. It also does not address the aggregate movement for fair wages paid to workers, who as a class could use a higher income to participate in a value chain that affords them quality products, for which farmers are paid a fair price. This avoids the individualistic framing of farmer versus con-

sumer in a zero-sum game. Without recognizing and addressing the power in these relationships (or the fact that the relationships between farmer and processor and grocer and eater have been torn apart or at a minimum fragmented), we can not transform into a system that is resilient, equitable, and healthy for all.

### The Way Forward

Every way of organizing food and agriculture has both ethical and political aspects. Ethics is about understanding and resolving competing interests, claims, or values, while politics is where and how those different interests and claims are contested. Thus, understanding and addressing corporate power is key to advancing agroecology as a science *and* as a practice, and will only be realized through political education, grassroots organizing, and collective action that both strengthens and holds accountable our public institutions and democratic system, which is fundamental to agroecology. As a first step, public investments in climate resilience must be explicitly linked to the antitrust policies necessary to weaken the power of agribusiness in our food system. Explicitly requiring climate-resilient initiatives to do both-and, *both* reduce GHG emissions through production systems change *and* address monopoly and monopsony power, would begin to address the asymmetries of power between corporate agriculture and the farmers and communities that feed their communities through agroecology.

Linking climate resilient policies to the curbing of corporate power is one piece of the transformation that agroecology can offer. Addressing corporate power in the food system requires the agroecological approach that combines science, practice, and movement. It is through agroecology, and its core social movement function, that we can build the political power to enact the fundamental democratic transformation required in the food system.



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