

Nürnberg, Germany 12.– 15.2.2020

BIOFACH2020

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**“Organic delivers!”
...by helping to protect the basis of life**

“Agroecology protects the basis of life and strengthens family farms”

Interview with Marita Wiggerthale, Oxfam

The main theme of the BIOFACH 2020 congress is “Organic delivers!” through the positive influence of ecological farming methods. The fifth interview on this subject, in the BIOFACH series deals with the positive effects of organic methods for protecting the basis of life.

In 2019, the number of people who go hungry rose for the third year in a row. An estimated one out of nine people is starving. A total of around two billion people don't have enough to eat, while over two billion people are overweight. According to Marita Wiggerthale, “There's enough food to go around. Carrying on with ‘business as usual’ is unacceptable.” The long-time Policy Advisor for Food Security and Global Agricultural Trade Issues at Oxfam Germany knows of a sustainable solution for the ongoing problem and never tires of talking about it. She has long been committed to the transformation of food systems through agroecology. The concept represents an alternative model to industrial agriculture and offers many benefits, including more diversity above and below ground, improved soil fertility and greater resilience in times of drought, heavy rains and storms. According to the expert, agroecology protects natural livelihoods, strengthens family farms and promotes a local supply of fresh, healthy and diverse food.

A whole range of studies proves the sustainability of agroecology. A growing number of farmers are joining the movement and changing their farming systems. There is also a steady increase in organic farmers and organically farmed land worldwide. (Agro)ecologically produced foods are more and more readily available.

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Nevertheless, millions of people still have no access to the bare necessities, clean water or healthy food. Moreover: According to the UN, some 200,000 people in developing countries die each year from acute pesticide poisoning.

The noticeable effects of climate change and the adoption of the SDGs have inspired more discussion about agroecology. Because of its many benefits for the environment and food security, the concept has been promoted by several governments as well as the Food and Agriculture Organisation. Have we taken another important step in this direction, Ms Wiggerthale?

Yes, we have. More and more scientists and politicians have come to realize that “business as usual” is not an option. The World Agriculture Report already recognized this in 2009. The message is now being taken seriously. The negative effects of industrial agriculture are obvious. The good news is that agroecology and organic farming provide solutions to many problems, such as the climate crisis, the dramatic loss of biodiversity, progressive soil degradation and the disappearance of small farms, to name just a few. The agroecological approach – and this is its strength – is both firmly based in science and has been practiced on farmland for decades. Although the concept hasn’t yet received much political support, it has gained more and more currency through social movements and farmers’ unions. But there’s also a glimmer of hope in the political realm. For one thing, the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) has launched several initiatives for scaling up agroecology and has also made it clear that agroecology’s holistic approach can help to achieve many of the SDGs (note: the UN Sustainable Development Goals). At the same time, the first report by the Panel of Experts on Agroecology and Other Innovations for Sustainable Food Systems of the UN Committee on World Food Security has appeared. And last but not least, the German Parliament has come out in favour of agroecology.



What are the main criteria of the agroecology concept and what do you consider its greatest benefits?

Agroecology is a holistic approach and not a toolbox. Its basic elements include the fact that agroecology promotes diversity above and below ground, meaning that it very deliberately integrates biodiversity in the system. Among other things, it increases soil fertility and water holding capacity while at the same time regulating pest pressure in a balanced system. But it also preserves the livelihoods of (small) farmers, increases their net income and strengthens their autonomy. This also includes their right to and their control of access to land, seed and water, and reduces their dependence on international corporations.

Ecological and human rights principles like food sovereignty are implemented very differently on the local and regional level. This is where agroecology excels. Farmers can obtain higher prices because local markets promote closer ties between rural and urban areas and between farmers and consumers, while also reducing production costs. This means that net incomes are higher, which in turn has a positive effect on the food security of marginalised farmers, particularly in countries of the Global South.

Another important point is that agroecology is a bottom-up approach and that men and women are treated equally. In particular, on-site actors develop local or regional solutions while building on their own knowledge. In its political dimension, agroecology actively includes civil society actors such as farmers' associations or consumer organisations, who then have an opportunity to influence programmes and relevant policies at an early stage.



The focus is currently on the climate crisis. Governments recognize agroecology as a beneficial concept that can, for example, mitigate the devastating consequences of extreme weather conditions and deliver more stable yields. A long-term study (30 years) by the Rodale Institute in the U.S. revealed that organic and diversified farming systems cope better with the consequences of climate change than does industrial agriculture. Corn yields in drought years were around 31 percent higher.

Are there differences between agroecology and traditional organic farming?

The two approaches have a lot in common, but unlike the traditional organic movement, agroecology does not rely primarily on the certification of products that are then, for example, exported, but on strengthening local and regional food systems according to the aforementioned principles. Although these principles do rely heavily on organic farming, they go much further in their social and political dimensions. It's less about establishing global value chains as is frequently the case in the organic sector, and more about promoting local and regional food security. The goal is to supply people with healthy, fresh food locally, while at the same time ensuring that producers obtain fair prices for their products. The bottom-up approach is key. The farming communities develop their own approaches that work for them and address their concerns and needs. Agroecology is an excellent umbrella for various ecological movements.

Unfortunately, we also frequently hear about negative developments and opposition. What are the forces opposing agroecology and the organic movement?

Seed is an explosive issue. We know that farm production provides 80 percent of the world's seed for growing food. Various studies have shown that small farmers are dependent on exchanging, dealing in and reusing seed. Access to these building blocks of life is severely limited by strict plant variety protection laws, patents and genetic engineering procedures.



These are threats that are directly opposed to agroecology and run counter to its goals. The close ties between the agribusiness lobby and government are one of the opposing forces that is constantly hindering positive developments. So we still have a great deal of work to do.

Are there prime examples of the positive effects of agroecology?

Agroecology was developed by Latin American farmers in the 1970s and is now manifested throughout the world in very different local versions with various focuses. “La Via Campesina” is a global organisation with an emphasis on seed sovereignty. The “System of Rice Intensification” (SRI) has become very widespread in Asia, and the Southeast Asian non-governmental organisation SEARICE promotes the establishment of seed initiatives in the Mekong Delta. Millions of small farmers are applying these agroecological approaches very successfully and are producing huge harvests – an important contribution to reducing world hunger.

What specifically has to happen before agroecology can become even more widespread, in order to protect the future livelihoods of the world’s growing population and fight climate change?

The potential is undoubtedly there. To exploit this potential, we need political and administrative support on every level. Appropriate policy frameworks are essential, from creating local market infrastructure and strengthening farmers’ rights by means of seed laws, to establishing research and consulting structures and developing coherent trade and climate policies. I would like to see Germany and as many other countries as possible making agroecology a central approach for eliminating world hunger and overcoming the consequences of climate change.

This interview was conducted by Karin Heinze, BiO Reporter International

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More information

Agroecology Position Paper 2019

supported by 26 organisations, including IFOAM, BÖLW, Fairtrade

https://www.oxfam.de/system/files/agraroekologie2019_positionspapier.pdf

Agroecology Brochure 2016

Better and different // People develop food systems

https://www.oxfam.de/system/files/agraroekologie_broschuere_a4_web.pdf

Vita

Marita Wiggerthale, born 19 November 1964

1989 - 1991 Voluntary service in Peru, resulting in her decision to engage in development work.

1995 - 2000 Obtained a Masters in Policy, Economics and Pedagogy, which included a semester in France and internships in Aachen, London and Brussels.

2000 - 2002 General Secretary of the International Movement of Catholic Agricultural and Rural Youth (MIJARC) with headquarters in Brussels.

2002 - 2004 Press, public relations and lobbying work in the trade sector for GermanWatch.

Since August 2005 Policy Advisor for Food Security and Global Agricultural Trade Issues at Oxfam German.