

Small scale sustainable farmers are cooling down the earth

Friday, 09 November 2007

Background paper Current global modes of production, consumption and trade have caused massive environmental destruction including global warming that is putting at risk our planet's ecosystems and pushing human communities into disasters. Global warming shows the effects of a development model based on capital concentration, high fossil energy consumption, overproduction, consumerism and trade liberalization. Global warming has been taking place for decades, but most governments have refused to deal with its roots and causes. It has been only recently, once transnational corporations have been able to set up huge money-making schemes, that we hear about possible solutions designed and controlled by big companies, and backed up by governments.

Farmers - men and women - around the world are joining hands with other social movements, organizations, people and communities to ask for and to develop radical social, economic and political transformations to reverse the current trend.

Industrialized countries and the industrialization of agriculture are the biggest sources of global warming gases, but it is farmers and rural communities - and especially small farmers and rural communities in developing countries - that are among the first to suffer from climate change. Changing weather patterns bring unknown pest along with unusual droughts, floods and storms, destroying crops, farmlands, farmstock and farmers houses. Moreover, plants, animal species and marine life are threatened or disappearing at an unprecedented pace due to the combined effects of warming and industrial exploitation. Life at large is endangered by the decreasing availability of fresh water resources.

Destruction caused by global warming goes beyond the physical. Changing, unpredictable weather means that local knowledge, which has been the basis for good agricultural management and adjusting to climate condition, is becoming less relevant, making farmers more vulnerable and dependent on external inputs and techniques.

Farmers have to adjust to these changes by adapting their seeds and usual production systems to an unpredictable situation. Droughts and floods are leading to crop failures, increasing the number of people going hungry in the world. Studies predict a decline in global farm output of 3 to 16% by 2080. In tropical regions, global warming is likely to lead to a serious decline in agriculture (up to 50% in Senegal and 40% in India) and to the acceleration of farmland turning into desert. On the other hand, huge areas in Russia and Canada will turn into crop land for the first time in human history, yet it is still unknown how these regions will be able to grow crops. What is expected is that millions of farmers will be displaced from the land. Such shifting is regarded by industry as a business opportunity through increasing food exports and imports, but it will only increase hunger and dependency around the world.

Corporate food production and consumption are significantly contributing to global warming and to the destruction of rural communities. Intercontinental food transport, intensive monoculture production, land and forest destruction and the use of chemical inputs in agriculture are transforming agriculture into an energy consumer and are contributing to climate change. Under neo-liberal policies imposed by the World Trade Organisation, the regional and bilateral Free Trade Agreements, as well as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, food is produced with oil-based pesticides and fertilizers and transported all around the world for transformation and consumption.

Via Campesina, a movement bringing together millions of small farmers and producers around the world, asserts that it is time to radically change the industrial way to produce, transform, trade and consume food and agricultural products. We believe that sustainable small-scale farming and local food consumption will reverse the actual devastation and support millions of farming families. Agriculture can also contribute to cool down the earth by using farm practices that store CO² and reduce considerably the use of energy on farms.

Industrial agriculture is a major contributor to global warming and climate change

1/ By transporting food all around the world

Fresh and packaged food is unnecessarily travelling around the world, while simultaneously local farmers are denied appropriate access to local and national markets. In Europe and the USA, for example, it is now common to find fruits, vegetables, meat or wine from Africa, South America or Oceania; and we find Asian rice in the Americas or in Africa. Fossil fuel used for food transport is releasing tons of CO₂ into the atmosphere. The Swiss peasants' organisation UNITERRE calculated that one kilo of asparagus imported from Mexico needs 5 liters of oil to travel by plane (11,800km) to Switzerland, while a kilo of asparagus produced in Switzerland only needs 0.3 liters of oil to reach the consumer.

2/ By imposing industrial forms of production (mechanization, intensification, use of agrochemicals, monoculture …) The so called "modernized" agriculture, especially industrial monoculture, is destroying the natural soil processes which lead to the storing of carbon in soil organic matter, and replaces them by chemical processes based on fertilizers and pesticides. Due notably to the use of chemical fertilizers, intensive agriculture and animal production monocultures produce important quantities of nitrous oxide (NO₂), the third most significant greenhouse gas responsible for global warming. In Europe 40% of the energy consumed on the farm is due to the production of nitrogen fertilizers. Moreover, industrial agriculture production consumes much more energy (and releases much more CO₂) to run its giant tractors to harrow and plow the land and to process the food.

3/ By destroying biodiversity and its capacity to capture carbon

Carbon is naturally captured from the air by plants and it is stocked in wood and organic matter in the soils. Some ecosystems such as native forests, peat lands and meadows stock more carbon than others.

This carbon cycle has been part of the climate balance for thousands of years. Corporate agribusiness has now shattered this balance by imposing widespread chemical agriculture (with massive use of oil-based pesticides and fertilizers), by burning forests for monoculture plantations and by destroying peat lands and biodiversity.

4/ By converting land and forests into non-agricultural areas

Forests, pastures and cultivated lands are rapidly converted into industrial agricultural production areas or into shopping malls, industrial complexes, big houses, large infrastructure projects or tourist resorts. This in turn causes massive carbon releases and reduces the capacity of the environment to absorb the carbon released into the atmosphere.

5/ By transforming agriculture from an energy producer into an energy consumer

On the energy level, the first role of plants and agriculture is to transform solar energy into energy in the form of sugars and cellulose that can be directly absorbed in food or transformed by animals into animal products. This is a natural process which brings energy into the food chain. However, the industrialization process of agriculture over the last two centuries has led to an agriculture which consumes energy (fertilizers, use of tractors, oil based agrochemicals...).

The false solutions

Agrofuels (fuels produced from plants, agriculture and forestry) are often presented as one of the solutions to the current energy crisis. Under the Kyoto protocol, 20% of the global energy consumption should come from renewable sources by 2020; this includes agrofuels. However, leaving aside the insanity of producing food to feed cars while so many people are starving, industrial agrofuel production will actually increase global warming instead of reducing it. Agrofuel production will revive colonial plantation systems, bring back slave work and seriously increase the use of agrochemicals, as well as contribute to deforestation and biodiversity destruction. Intensive agrofuel production is not a solution to global warming; neither will it solve the global crisis in the agricultural sector. The impacts will again be felt most seriously in developing countries, as industrialized countries will not be able to cover their agrofuel demand and will need to import huge amounts from the South.

Carbon trading

Under the Kyoto Protocol and other international schemes "carbon trading" is presented as a solution for global warming. It is a privatization of carbon after the privatization of land, air, seeds, water and other resources. It allows governments to allocate permits to big industrial polluters so they can trade "rights to pollute" amongst themselves. Some other programs encourage industrialized countries to finance cheap carbon dumps such as large-scale plantations in the South as a way to avoid reducing their own emissions. This allows companies to make a double profit while claiming falsely that they contribute to carbon sequestration. On the other hand, natural areas in Asia, Africa and Latin America are being treated as mere carbon sinks and privatized through the so called sale of environmental services, thus kicking communities out of their land and reducing their right to access their own forests, fields and rivers.

Genetically modified crops and trees

Genetically modified trees and crops are now being developed for agrofuel production. Genetically modified organisms will not solve any environmental crisis as they themselves pose a risk to the environment as well as to health and safety. Moreover, they increase corporate control over seeds, depriving farmers of their right to grow, develop, select, diversify and exchange their own seeds.

These GM trees and crops are part of the "second generation" of agrofuels based on cellulose while the first generation is based on the different forms of sugar from crops. Even when it doesn't use genetically modified varieties, this "second generation" raises similar concerns.

The true solutions: food sovereignty as the key to provide livelihoods to millions and protect life on earth

Via Campesina believes that solutions to the current crisis have to emerge from organized social actors that are developing modes of production, trade and consumption based on justice, solidarity and healthy communities. No technological fix will solve the current global environmental and social disaster. A set of true solutions should include: Sustainable small-scale farming, which is labor-intensive and requires little energy use, can actually contribute to stop and reverse the effects of climate change:

- by storing more CO² in soil organic matter through sustainable production
- by replacing nitrogen fertilizers by organic agriculture or/and cultivating nitrogen-fixing plants which capture nitrogen directly from the air
- by making possible the decentralized production, collection and use of energy

A true agrarian reform, that strengthens small-scale farming, promotes the production of food as the primary use of land, and regards food as a basic human right that should not be treated as a commodity. Local food production will stop the

unnecessary transportation of food and ensure that what reaches our tables is safe, fresh and nutritious.

Changing consumption and production patterns which promote waste and unnecessary consumption by a minority of humankind, while hundreds of millions still suffer hunger and deprivation. Fair and just distribution of food and necessary goods, as well as reducing unnecessary consumption should be core aspects of new development patterns. Also, industry should not be allowed to impose unnecessary consumption and waste by means of increasing disposable products or by artificially shortening their lives.

Research and implementation of diverse and decentralized energy systems, based upon local resources and technologies that do not harm the environment or take land away from food production.

We urgently demand of local, national and international decision makers:

All around the world, we practice and defend small-scale sustainable family farming and we demand food sovereignty. Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally-appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. It puts the aspirations and needs of those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations. Food sovereignty prioritizes local and national economies and markets, empowers peasant and family farmer-driven agriculture, artisan-style fishing, pastoralist-led grazing, and protects food production, distribution and consumption based on environmental, social and economic sustainability.

Therefore, we demand:

- 1/ The complete dismantling of agribusiness companies: they are stealing the land of small producers, producing junk food and creating environmental disasters.
- 2/ The replacement of industrialized agriculture and animal production by small-scale sustainable agriculture supported by genuine agrarian reform programs.
- 3/ The banning of all forms of genetic use restriction technologies
- 3/ The promotion of sane and sustainable energy policies. That includes consuming less energy and decentralized energy instead of promoting large-scale agrofuel production as is currently the case.
- 4/ The implementation of agricultural and trade policies at local, national and international levels supporting sustainable agriculture and local food consumption. This includes the ban on the kinds of subsidies that lead to the dumping of cheap food on markets.

For the livelihoods of billions of small producers around the world,

For people's health and the planet's survival:

We demand food sovereignty and we are committed to struggle to achieve it collectively.