

Strengthening people's knowledge

Photo: Food Sovereignty Alliance - India

For the past half century agricultural innovation has denied a voice to the many groups who work outside the profession of science – farmers, food providers, women and the urban poor. The value of their expertise gained through practical experience must be recognised in the production and validation of knowledge.

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Padma, who has travelled 300 miles from her village in the Eastern Ghats, joins a group of the Gond indigenous people of central India next to a small government-built reservoir at the edge of their ancestral forest. Her hosts have built a

large structure from materials usually used for weddings. This is to be the venue of interactions between Adivasis (India's indigenous people) small farmers, pastoralists and Dalits. They have come together with those who do not farm, but who are concerned about food sovereignty.

In the past era of scientism, the insights of farmers like Padma were excluded from processes where knowledge was validated and policies were formulated. The 2015 gathering in which she is participating is one of the spaces being claimed by many such communities. Eating, meeting and sleeping in the same makeshift tents, food producers enter into dialogue with others involved in the food system as part of a growing social movement - India's Food Sovereignty Alliance (see also pages 22-25). They share stories and critically reflect with scientists, local government officials and other policy makers.

During the meeting they discuss government poli-

cies relating to seeds, water and land in relation to the threats these may bring to their livelihoods. The event builds on twenty years of knowledge sharing and movement building by a network whose origins are firmly rooted in the teachings of Paulo Freire and the many Indian pioneers of democratic practice and critical thinking in communities. The lack of financial support for such efforts from large NGOs does not hold the movement back. On the contrary, organising accountable structures from the bottom-up, alongside horizontal working practices, strengthens the movement's resilience.

Mainstream agricultural development has been largely based on scientism – a worldview based on imposition of a logic based on nineteenth century physics that ignores or displaces local and indigenous knowledge systems. Policies based on scientism generally promote top-down technologies and development that is indifferent to local priorities or involvement. The imposition of green revolution technology in the global South has often been argued to increase productivity, but it has done little to decrease hunger. It has had dire consequences for the environment, food and nutritional security and the resilience of people like Padma.

Science has an important role to play in agricultural development. However, the marginalisation of local knowledge and priorities, combined with the overwhelming focus of science on improving yield, has pushed agroecosystems and rural livelihoods to breaking point. The Food Sovereignty Alliance is not alone in arguing that research that focuses on technological fixes without addressing the politics of knowledge and the democratic deficit in the governance of food systems and society is incapable of addressing the

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Performing a play as a stimulus for discussions at the Food Sovereignty Summit, Telangana, India, 2015. Photo: Food Sovereignty Alliance - India

world's multi-faceted food crises.

A broad shift to agroecology requires a deepening of democracy that breaks the knowledge monopoly held by professional scientists and powerful institutions, particularly policy-makers. It also requires political and cultural transformation that empowers food producers and citizens in the governance of public agricultural research. It must support the autonomous knowledge production processes carried out by citizens, local communities and social movement organisations such as India's Food Sovereignty Alliance and international platforms such as La Via Campesina.

Networks and collaboration

From this perspective, innovation and development based on agroecology emerges from creative processes of knowledge co-production and mobilisation carried out by diverse collectives of farmers, citizens and scientists. Around the world, these processes are gathering momentum through farmer-to-farmer networks, participatory action research and other equitable collaborations between food providers, researchers and activists.

A series of farmers' juries, initiated by the Deccan Development Society's Prajateerpu in 2001, have successfully challenged the displacement of people by mechanised agriculture in India. During the last two years, both the Food Sovereignty Alliance and older groups, such as the Karnataka Rajya Raitha Sangha (KRRS), have combined an agroecological, evidence-based approach with strong grassroots campaigning. This has undermined the top-down narratives of genetically modified crops, land consolidation and mechanisation being the route to better livelihoods and health. It has allowed traditionally trained scientists to enter into dialogue with these social movements and is opening new opportunities for social movements to influence agricultural development in India.

Agroecology has been rightly called a practice, a

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science and a social movement. Equal attention to each pillar of this knowledge triangle – practical, scientific and political knowledge – is key to unlocking the potential of agroecology. Yet, practical, local knowledge is undervalued by mainstream research and development institutions. Questions about whose knowledge ‘counts’ as being more or less valid, and why this matters, are generally left unasked.

Rejecting scientism

Although some mainstream institutions and scientists are starting to pay attention to agroecology, their narrow framing of agroecology as a science and the intentional ignoring of the deeply political and social nature of agroecology and agroecological knowledge systems is another example of the bias that is inherent in scientism.

For example, participatory technology development (PTD) has traditionally emphasised technical innova-

tions as the solution to sustainable agriculture, obscuring the political, institutional and cultural contexts. Using such a framework means that farmers like Padma are given passive parts in development schemes. Their presence in so-called participatory processes are merely a means of policy makers gaining legitimacy for decisions that they have already made. This democratic deceit allows the structural violence perpetrated by neocolonialist, neoliberal and institutionally racist policies to go unchallenged.

The danger of a narrow understanding of agroecology as scientism was made clear when the FAO organised a technical symposium in Rome on agroecology in September 2014. Encouragingly, this was the first major FAO meeting to focus on agroecology, and has since been followed up with regional level consultations in Asia, South America and Africa. However, at the Rome meeting, scientists dominated the agenda and civil society representatives were only marginally represented. The organisers restricted the meeting to so-called technical discussions, attempting to censor debates about politics. Presenters were discouraged from discussing political topics related to biotechnology, seeds and especially food sovereignty.

This decoupling of the political from the practical and the technical puts agroecology at risk of being co-opted by mainstream institutions. Social movements are rejecting this type of development as false agroecology with its overemphasis on elite scientific knowledge. Formally trained scientists have a role, but equally important are the local knowledge, practice and the experience that citizens (whether producers or co-producers) have gained through their lives on the farm or even at the market, shopping for dinner and cooking.

International Forum for Agroecology, Nyéléni Centre, Mali, 2015. Photo: Colin Anderson



Social movements as sites of knowledge mobilisation

The political dimension of agroecology requires that its practitioners and advocates move beyond conceptions of the co-production of knowledge to take up the mobilisation of existing and newly co-produced knowledge as a part of political struggles to transform the food system.

Social movements are bringing citizens together to articulate the knowledge that forms the foundation of agroecology, enabling collective analysis of the problems that need to be addressed and providing a common platform that can help raise awareness and mobilise people for political change.

One example is the International Forum for Agroecology in Mali in February 2015 organised by the International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty and La Via Campesina. At this forum, food providers from around the world collectively articulated a declaration that had been drawn up through a bottom-up process. The statement defines agroecology from



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Practitioners and advocates must take up the mobilisation of existing and newly co-produced knowledge as a part of political struggles to transform the food system

the perspective of a range of more-or-less democratically organised social movements. This declaration should be a key reference point for all agroecological projects that claim to be politically progressive.

These efforts at participatory democracy are inevitably flawed and we are finding that there is much to learn from other struggles for social justice, such as the US civil rights movement, anti-colonial movements in the global South and the international networks of people living with HIV/AIDS. However, the Mali statement marks another important step towards more democratic processes of co-production and mobilisation of knowledge amongst social movements.

Experiential learning

There is an urgent need for public investment in agroecological research – however it is essential that the governance of public research be democratically controlled in the interests of food providers and the public. The democratisation of agroecology research needs to occur throughout the research and develop-

ment cycle. Non-elites who bring expertise from their life experience, must be part of redesigning scientific and technological research, evaluations of results and impacts of research, the choice of upstream strategic priorities, and the framing of overarching policies.

In the past, narrow concepts of participatory research confined non-researchers to ‘end of the pipe’ technology development (e.g. participatory plant breeding). We now need to move to a more inclusive approach in which previously excluded groups can define the strategic priorities of research and governance regimes before funds are allocated for potentially damaging programmes.

Time for transformation

Rejecting the philosophy and value system of scientism that underpinned the green revolution, Padma and other experts-through-experience around the world seek further opportunities to embrace more participatory modes of knowledge building and mobilisation. The holistic vision and value systems that underpin this knowledge radically depart from mainstream research and innovation systems. We need to build a framework with people coming from diverse worldviews that is capable of transforming the dominant industrial food system. Only then can we shift towards social justice, sustainable livelihoods and environmental democracy.

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