

# ‘Conventional agriculture’ is a loaded term

**Stakeholders groups and scientists increasingly use the term ‘conventional agriculture’, thus lumping together a number of different forms of agriculture. This frame hampers the quest for sustainable agriculture, say agronomists James Sumberg and Ken Giller.**

Imagine reducing a whole range of approaches to agriculture, such as traditional agriculture, small-scale agriculture, mechanized agriculture, intensive agriculture, commercial agriculture and industrial agriculture, to the blanket term ‘conventional agriculture’. It would be disastrous for our capacity to analyse different farming systems. ‘We need these distinctions in order to develop specific strategies for making agriculture more sustainable,’ say Sumberg and Giller in the journal *Global Food Security*. Sumberg is emeritus professor at the University of Sussex and Giller is professor of Plant Production Systems at WUR. Increasingly, however, all current farming systems are lumped together and set

against alternative farming systems such as organic farming, climate-smart or regenerative farming, which *are* precisely differentiated. The implicit message is often that conventional agriculture is not sustainable, bad for the climate and environment, highly mechanized, large-scale and harmful to the rural community. In political debate on the agricultural transition, ‘conventional’ is portrayed as homogenous, conservative, inflexible, old-fashioned, and therefore due for replacement, say the agronomists.

## Image

This image frames ‘conventional’ agriculture as running on fertilizers and pesticides. As a result, we fail to notice other variables such as the availability of resources, climate and political context, suggest the professors. Because



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‘conventional’ farms can be very small or very large, commercial or not, and highly intensive or extensive.

The agricultural sector faces huge challenges, so the quest for sustainable farming systems is ill-served by simplifications that deny the rich diversity of existing farming systems, state Sumberg and Giller. They decline to comment on whether ‘conventional’ or ‘ecological’ farming is a better way to feed the world. They prefer to study how the various systems can contribute to sustainable agriculture. As