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Food Production and Global Environmental Change: Stewardship as a Guiding Principle for Christian Development Organizations

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Abstract: Providing food security has traditionally been an important motive for development cooperation. At the same time, agriculture also has a major impact on the environment, which in turn threatens food production itself. This article argues that the tension between food production and global environmental change is largely caused by a modern dualism that pits man and nature, donor and recipient, and modernity and tradition against each other. It explores whether stewardship can help Christian NGOs find a way forward. Stewardship is closely linked to a Christian view of the relationship between man and earth and the relationship of people to each other. However, it is not uncontroversial. Therefore, a reinterpretation of the concept is needed. Finally, three principles are discussed that derive from a renewed vision of stewardship and can provide strategic direction: working together with nature, empowering local communities and adaptive transformation. Stewardship does not offer ready-made solutions, but that is precisely its strength. It appeals to practical wisdom. Every context is different and requires its own balance of values and interests.

Keywords: food security; climate change; faith-based organizations; stewardship; agriculture; development cooperation

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1. Introduction

After the horrors of World War II, many Western countries considered it their mission to bring peace and prosperity on a global scale. The welfare state was being built up and development cooperation was being invested in. An important element of this policy was the development of agriculture. Hunger had to be driven out of the world. The memories of food shortages were still vivid in people's minds (Koning 2017, pp. 1–3). A growing world population and rising standard of living also meant that food production had to rise dramatically. This led to a radical industrialization of agriculture. In Western countries, surpluses soon arose, which were often dumped on the world market. At the same time, development cooperation focused on increasing the production per hectare. Typical of this approach was the Green Revolution, which gained a foothold in India in particular.

However, industrialization of agriculture, which aims to increase productivity and fight hunger, also has a downside and does not always deliver what is promised. Industrial agriculture is one of the major drivers of global environmental change. Besides that, it makes farmers more dependent on large industrial enterprises and the supply of fuels, fertilizers, pesticides, new technologies and subsidies (Stone 2022, pp. 14–16). At the same time food production is also threatened by environmental destruction itself (Rockström et al. 2017). Extreme heat, drought or rainfall, the disappearance of pollinators, the emergence

of new diseases, rising sea levels and deterioration of soil quality have a major impact on the quality and quantity of food that can be produced (Myers et al. 2017). Due to war and conflict, poor economic conditions and extreme weather conditions, the number of people suffering from extreme forms of food insecurity has been increasing again in recent years (FSIN and Global Network Against Food Crises 2024). A key task for governments and development organizations is to work towards resilient food systems in which enough food of good nutritious value can be produced within biophysical limits (Tendall et al. 2015).

How can development organizations contribute to an agriculture that takes into account social and ecological boundaries and at the same time provides livelihoods for many people? That is not an easy question. Rockström et al. (2017) point towards a sustainable intensification of agriculture. Others point towards regenerative agriculture or organic farming as a way forward. Is there an alternative way to address the tension between food production and global environmental change, to avoid the impasse between the defenders of modern agriculture on the one hand and the defenders of alternative forms of agriculture on the other? In this article, we explore whether the notion of stewardship can provide direction. It is rooted in the Christian tradition and implies a critique of land ownership and the exploitation of nature without ignoring that intervention in nature is needed (Ahiamadu 2010). Therefore, it may be an attractive term for Christian development organizations to rethink the relationship between agriculture and environmental care. Especially since their partners in the South also know and use the term (Justin Thacker 2022, pp. 16–18). In this article, we explore whether the notion of stewardship can help Christian NGOs to strategize on agricultural development. Our primary concern is not to focus on the empirical impact of policy measures, important as that may be, but on the strategic principles behind it.

First, we examine how modern dualism shapes contemporary thinking on agricultural development (Section 2). In our analysis we draw on insights from the work of Bruno Latour and Charles Taylor. Also, the capability approach of Amartya Sen proves to be useful in this regard. Secondly, we critically examine the concept of stewardship and explore how the relationship between people and the land can be rethought from a Christian perspective. The concept of stewardship is not without controversy. The advantage of the concept is that it is widely used, also outside Christian circles, and that it thematizes the relationship between humans and the earth. At the same time, in Western civilization, stewardship is often interpreted in a quite anthropocentric way, arguing that man is lord and master of nature. Some scholars even go so far as to argue that Western Christianity is the cause of the current ecological crisis (White 1967). A critical reinterpretation is therefore needed. We take inspiration from Ernst M. Conradie's idea that a steward is a servant or slave entrusted with the care of a household. This opens opportunities to understand stewardship in a more inclusive way and avoid the biases of modern dualism. Finally, three policy principles are formulated that emerge from this re-evaluation and that may guide Christian NGOs in achieving their mission: working together with nature (Section 4.1), empowerment of local communities (Section 4.2) and adaptive transformation (Section 4.3).

2. Agricultural Development and Modern Dualism

We begin with an analysis of what is usually understood by agricultural development. As we will see, the way in which agricultural development has taken shape in recent decades is the product of a modern worldview, particularly its dualistic nature. We focus successively on the dualism between man and nature (Section 2.1), the dualism between donor and recipient (Section 2.2) and the dualism between modernity and indigenous cultures (Section 2.3). Because modern thinking pits man against nature, ignores the interdependence of people, and pays off rationality against tradition, sustainable agricultural

development is under pressure. It creates fault lines between humans and other creatures, between people and between modern and indigenous cultures.

2.1. Humans Versus Nature

A key driver of agricultural development is productionalism (Thompson 2017, p. 67). Productionalism puts all its cards on increasing food production through science and technology. For those who adhere to this paradigm, higher production is not only a necessary but also a sufficient condition to solve world hunger. A key inspiration is the Industrial Revolution. Just as factories boosted production, the same should happen in agriculture. Through economies of scale, crop improvement, deployment of fertilizers, pesticides and machinery, yields should be improved. However, in opposition to the manufacturing industry, agriculture takes place in an uncontrolled environment. The land is not just a 'resource' that you can use to increase production, it is a living environment with its own dynamics and complexity. Yet, that is not how nature is viewed from a modern perspective. According to Bruno Latour, modern societies pit humans against nature, assigning agency to humans and denying that non-humans also have agency. Nature is approached as mere matter, as just a collection of inanimate things (Latour 2017, pp. 67–68). It functions as a background, a decor for human action, but is not seen as an actor itself (Latour 2018, p. 43). In contrast, Latour himself defends a posthumanist perspective, criticizing the modern dichotomy between man and nature.

Paradigmatic for the productionist worldview is the Green Revolution. Through genetic engineering, crops were developed that had high yields, could withstand extreme conditions and had built-in resistance to certain diseases. Norman Borlaug, Nobel laureate and one of the great architects behind the Green Revolution, saw it as a moral imperative to ensure global food security in this way. Environmentalists who questioned the Green Revolution and the use of biotechnology he called false prophets, an anti-science crowd, an elite holding back progress at the expense of the poor who are starving (Borlaug 2000). Despite its achievements, there remains insufficient attention to the tangible downsides and unintended consequences of the Green Revolution. The Green Revolution in India has been accompanied by the degradation of ecosystems and disruptive social conditions (Shiva 1991). These excesses are not simply accidental but are linked to the pursuit of high-yielding crops with wide adaptation, ignoring specific local situations (Baranski 2022).

That industrial agriculture is one of the major causes of ecological destruction is now widely recognized. However, this does not mean that the productionist paradigm has also disappeared with it. On the contrary. Ecomodernists give productionism a new impulse. They bet on decoupling human well-being and environmental impact (Asafu-Adjaye et al. 2015). Agricultural intensification, they argue, is needed to reduce pressure on landscapes and ecosystems. Through agricultural intensification, you can engage in land sparing, giving back land to nature. Land sharing, as advocated by organic agriculture leads, according to the ecomodernist view, to more pressure on the environment because yields are lower, and more land is therefore needed. They also emphasize that deployment of biotechnology is essential if we as humanity are to meet the Sustainable Development Goals (Purnhagen et al. 2021). According to the ecomodernists, the commitment should be to use as little land as possible. Efforts are made to use resources more efficiently and make room for rewilding (Monbiot 2022, pp. 226–31). Ecomodernists, in other words, want to decouple agriculture and nature, thereby maintaining the modern dichotomy between humans and non-human creatures.

2.2. Donor Versus Recipient

A second way in which the modern worldview permeates agricultural development is thinking in terms of donor and recipient. For Borlaug, the global poor are primarily people who need help. Their traditional ways of doing things and agricultural history are ignored. Technology transfer is what is needed, a transfer of western-based science and technology. Also, utilitarianist Peter Singer puts himself in the position of a donor helping others. In his famous article 'Famine, affluence and morality', he formulates the principle that 'if it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it' (Singer 1972, p. 231). For him, it basically does not matter whether it is to save a child you see falling into a pond, for whom you would immediately jump into the water to save it, or whether it is to save a child far away in Bengal suffering from a famine there. Nor does it matter if you are the only one who can help, or if there are others. In all cases, a life is at stake. Noble as this may sound, poor or food-insecure people are presented here as just passive recipients or victims, without agency.

In his capabilities approach, Amartya Sen is highly critical of this thinking in terms of donor versus recipient. Development starts with free agency, not with increasing wealth, providing food or introducing technology (Sen 2000, pp. 3–4). There is, however, a long tradition of treating the world's poor as passive recipients, ranging from the exercise of brute force and domination to paternalistic notions of a civilizing mission. The rise of modern European civilization was accompanied by mass colonial expansion. Europe imported food from other continents, increased the production of its own agriculture and stimulated colonists to emigrate from Europe to other continents. John Locke (1632–1704), who represents this way of thinking, argued that it was everyone's civic duty to bring land under cultivation and thus contribute to the commonwealth (Thompson 2017, pp. 73–75). Since native people in other parts of the world did not do that themselves, settlers had to. When they worked the land, the land became their property, and they could use it to produce as much food as possible. The situation in which the global poor find themselves cannot be separated from past and present colonial relations. Donor and recipient are not living in a social vacuum. They share a history together.

Whether one advocates for technology transfer or for food aid one approaches hunger or famine as a problem of resource scarcity or of individual needs. In doing so, one ignores not only the agency of the people but also the local social dynamics. Sen shows that in times of famine, there is often still enough food in the region. Whether people have enough food depends on very different factors, such as ownership of resources (labor power, income), resources to produce food (technology, land) and the ability to buy and sell food. If these factors are not taken into account, food aid may even backfire (Sen 2000, pp. 160–88). For example, the increased supply of food may cause prices that subsistence farmers receive for their produce to fall dramatically, or they may be unable to dispose of the food they produce. This can leave them in a very vulnerable position, or even in a situation where they have to abandon their farms, losing a relatively stable source of income. Hunger and food insecurity thus have everything to do with a broader social constellation, the way markets, governments and societies are organized.

2.3. Modernity Versus Indigenous Cultures

A third way in which modern thinking permeates views on food production and global environmental change relates to the underlying idea of development itself. Often, a sharp distinction is made between modern and indigenous societies. Modernity and tradition are thereby contrasted. Charles Taylor (1995) calls this the acultural theory of modernity. The process of modernization is understood as a departure from religion, everyday beliefs

and authority. Through science, a system of absolute knowledge is built. Indigenous knowledge, in contrast, is seen as something of the past, a product of superstition and unsubstantiated assumptions. Against this acultural theory of modernity, Taylor places his own cultural theory. This theory assumes that the development of science, technology and economics in the West can only be understood in relation to its historical setting, or in other words in relation to the influence that Greek, Jewish, Christian and Islamic thought have had. Modern Western culture is a culture alongside other cultures.

According to an acultural theory of culture, development automatically leads to convergence. Eventually, traditional beliefs and allegiances will be abandoned, and modern science and technology will become the guiding principle worldwide. Also, when it comes to global environmental change, humanity is often seen as one. It is about the impact people as a unity have on the earth and how, with the use of science and technology, planetary boundaries can be prevented from being crossed further. However, the idea that there is just one humanity ignores global differences. Various societies are differently positioned. While some groups have long enjoyed the benefits of modern development, others have stepped in later or have yet to reap the benefits of modernization (Chakrabarty 2023). There may be one planet, and therefore one destiny shared by all humans, but there are many worlds, or societies, each with its own history and its own claims to what constitutes climate justice. Differences in wealth and negotiating power easily give rise to international conflicts.

Geopolitical tensions and polarization between groups do not come out of the blue. In Sections 2.1 and 2.2, we already discussed how the process of modernization was accompanied by a disregard for ecological and social dependencies and the construction of a colonial regime centered on maximum production. An obvious response may be to criticize modernity and move away from the concept of development. Modern culture is the cause of all trouble. Therefore, we should look to indigenous cultures that live in better harmony with their environment. This is an approach advocated by, for example, Gilbert Rist (2007). Charles Taylor, from a hermeneutical point of view, chooses a different path. He does not think in terms of oppositions, but in terms of multiple cultures coexisting in relationships of exchange with each other, each developing in its own way in dialogue with other cultures. Western societies can learn a lot from non-Western societies. But the reverse is also true. We may assume that all cultures, including modern Western culture, have valuable sources of wisdom, but also blind spots and elements to be rejected (Taylor 1994, pp. 61–73).

3. Stewardship: A Redefinition

Agricultural development is far from neutral. It is a product of modern western thinking. Global environmental change and food inequality are closely related to a vision of agriculture in which productionalism is central. It is therefore important to look for alternatives beyond modern Western dualism. What does this diagnosis mean for the strategy of Christian NGOs? How should they relate to the tension between food security and environmental care? Is an alternative vision of agricultural development possible, in line with a Christian worldview?

3.1. Stewardship and Colonialism

In this section, we explore what the concept of stewardship might mean in the context of agricultural development. Earlier, we indicated that stewardship can easily be identified with human dominance and a dualism between man and nature. Historically, there is no denying that human domination was often justified by referring to the Bible, in particular the mandate to man from Gen 1:28 to subdue the earth and rule over fish, birds and creeping animals (Harrison 2005). John Locke also explicitly appeals to this text in his

defense of private property and the appropriation of land. Stewardship, it is true, does not coincide with such a way of thinking. The early reformer John Wycliffe, for example, used stewardship as a critical term, in opposition to land ownership by the nobility (Hall 2004, pp. 65–68). However, even though stewardship is often used to criticize or downplay human domination, that does not take away from the fact that the concept presupposes that humans have a special place within the totality of the cosmos. This makes the concept susceptible to anthropocentric interpretations (Palmer 2006).

One may question, however, how decisive the critique of stewardship as being antropocentric is. First, a past use of a concept does not necessarily determine how we interpret such a concept today (Welchman 2012). Consider, for instance, a concept like democracy, which in the past was often given a non-inclusive and elitist interpretation. Women and slaves could not participate fully in the Greek polis, for example. Instead of rejecting the ideal, it has been reinterpreted in many ways over time into what we understand it to mean today. Moreover, it is wiser to adhere to existing moral convictions, and correct them, than to introduce new principles from the outside (Welchman 1999). Second, it cannot be denied that in the Bible humans have been given a special responsibility. From a Christian point of view you cannot ignore this. Humans are mandated to rule, but as creatures among other creatures and not above them (Bauckham 2010). Third, stewardship may fit better with non-Western worldviews, than completely ecocentric approaches. At least in an African context, this is the case (Golo and Yaro 2013; Golo 2020). According to African cosmology, human and non-human beings form a community together, but at the same time they remain morally different. Even if modern dualism is rejected, a distinction between humans and non-humans remains.

3.2. The Idea of a Household

Not infrequently, Christians emphasize the administrative power of humans. Humans are rulers of the earth on behalf of God. The earth may not be their own property, but they stand above other creatures. Ernst M. Conradie opposes this way of thinking and develops a different theological point of view. He refers to the idea of a household. That idea may well serve to develop a more inclusive vision of stewardship. Conradie takes his starting point in the image of the world as a house, an *oikos*. Within that household, humanity has the role of an *oikonomos*, of a guardian of the house (Conradie 2005, pp. 6–9). This guardian is not primarily a ruler, but a servant or slave, entrusted with the care of others (Conradie 2005, pp. 217–19). The image of the steward as a servant is consistent with how the term *oikonomos* is used in the New Testament, including in Luke 12:42–48, 1 Corinthians 4:1–2 and 1 Peter 4:10. It deliberately avoids a theology of domination. Good maintenance of the household and care become central, not domination or self-enrichment (Goudzwaard 1979, pp. 211–12). Moreover, the idea of the world as an *oikos* can also be used to criticize situations of alienation or displacement. Think of refugees or of areas that have become unlivable. These are situations where people are no longer at home in the world (Conradie 2005, p. 8).

Stewardship conceived in terms of guardianship of a household in the way Conradie proposes may serve to avoid the modern dualism between humans and nature, donor and recipient and modernity and indigenous cultures and may provide new orientation. First, the idea of the world as a home presupposes a close connection between humans and the earth. According to Genesis 2:7 man ('adam') and soil ('adamah') are intimately related. Man is formed from dust and returns to dust. The Old Testament assumes a covenant between three parties: God, humanity and the land (Northcott 2014, pp. 208–9). These three belong together and interact with each other. Protecting what is weak and vulnerable is central (Northcott 2014, p. 204). In the covenantal economics of ancient Israel, everything

revolves around households or livelihoods. People receive a piece of land that they may live on and that they may pass on to future generations (Davis 2009). This is an idea we also find in early-modern reformed and puritan concepts of stewardship. John Calvin ([1554] 2009, p. 77), for example, defines stewardship as passing on a field to posterity in good condition. Moreover, viewing the world as a home implies respecting the residence of others. The world is not an empty space to be cultivated for one's own purposes but is already inhabited. This sets limits to expansionism.

Second, seeing the world as a household presupposes cooperation. People are not autonomous individuals but are interdependent beings. This applies not only to families, but also to other types of community. John Calvin speaks of relationships of mutual service in this context (Hardy 1990, pp. 54–63). People have been given different talents and are expected to be of service to each other by sharing them. Johannes Althusius, a Calvinist jurist and political philosopher (1557–1638), argues that people are born 'destitute of all help, naked and defenseless'. They need 'associations' or symbiotic relationships to support each other (Althusius [1614] 1995, p. 17). Such a premise ties in with the image of stewards as servants, and the *oikos* as a common home. It leads to a model in which the focus is not on competition (market), or coercion (state), but on cooperation (society). Such a model can offer an interesting alternative to manage common resources (Ostrom 1990). However, people not only depend on each other's services, they also depend on the services of non-human creatures. After all, without oxygen, photosynthesis, bacterial life, gut flora, etc., no human could live. This invites the expansion of the covenantal community to include non-human beings. By giving non-humans a voice, as Latour (2017, pp. 261–66) suggests, we account for the fact that they are co-inhabitants of the earth. That does not rule out the specific vocation humans have, but rather deepens their stewardship role.

Third, the idea of a household presupposes a specific relationship with the future. Being a good steward means being a good ancestor. This focuses the gaze on the long term (Krznaric 2020). It presupposes a vision of development that does not break with the past, but rather seeks to build on it. To properly pass on an asset or heritage, it must be constantly reaffirmed and renewed. This does not necessarily lead to conservatism or exclude critique. The prophets in the Hebrew Bible constantly called the people back to its original mission and warned that fundamental principles were being violated (Walzer 1993). Fighting domination or exclusion presupposes values like freedom or equality, which themselves already represent a tradition that is passed down from generation to generation (Ricoeur 2016, p. 60). A key feature of stewardship always has been that it starts from the intrinsic value that plants, animals or ecosystems have and that it avoids instrumentalism (Attfield 2006, pp. 193–94). This means that the interests of society, future generations, other species as well as private needs must be properly balanced (Worrell and Appleby 2000). Instead of dominating nature, or just preserving it, the world should be brought to full flourishing (Passmore 1980, pp. 38–40). Such a position could be called 'developmental preservation' (Golo 2020; Wardekker et al. 2009). Improvement, creative adaptation and innovation are needed to correct and enhance current agricultural systems.

4. Strategic Directions

Now that we have explored the historical background of stewardship and how it can be re-interpreted, we return to our original question. Can stewardship help to strive for food security within ecological and social limits and thus support Christian NGOs to find strategic direction? Does it offer a way out to overcome the problems of modern dualism? We discuss three principles: working together with nature (Section 4.1), empowering local communities (Section 4.2) and adaptive transformation (Section 4.3). Using these

three principles, we explore how stewardship thinking can repair the broken relationships between man and nature, donor and recipient and modernity and tradition, respectively.

4.1. Working Together with Nature

We already noted in Section 3.2. that stewardship means that humans and earth belong together. There is an intimate relationship between the two. Without soil life, humans cannot exist and, conversely, it is a human vocation to cultivate the earth and care for it. The idea that man and soil are related aligns closely with what has been called the agrarian vision (Davis 2009). A leading idea behind the agrarian vision is that to achieve a good yield, also in the long term, cooperation between man and nature is indispensable. Stewardship can therefore be seen as a form of prudence (Thompson 2017, pp. 94–98). If farmers take good care of the earth, the earth will also take good care of them. Taking good care of the earth does not go against the self-interest of farmers, but rather serves them. Through knowledge about the soil, water, plants and animals, the fertility of land can be increased. It is important to note, however, that the passages in Genesis 1 and 2, often cited in discussions of stewardship, primarily refer to cultivated land. Stewardship, when consistently applied, also means preservation of wildness, because it sets limits to human expansionism (Thompson 2017, pp. 108–12).

The intimate relationship between humans and the earth points towards a first strategic principle: working together with nature. A stewardship approach therefore has sympathy for alternative forms of agriculture in which connection between man and nature is sought. The strength of organic farming and agroecology is that they make use of ecological mechanisms to increase production (Stone 2022, pp. 209–10). Usually, alternative approaches result in small-scale, labor-intensive forms of agriculture. Some argue that a 'small farm future' is one where most people grow their own food (Smaje 2020, p. 118). However, the question remains: how realistic is such a future, especially in terms of feeding the global population? That said, small-scale agriculture is a daily reality for many farmers in the Global South and can also promote more nature-inclusive practices. Rather than choosing between land sharing or land sparing (see Section 2.1), it may be more effective to adopt a mixed approach. On the one hand, stewardship requires that we do not overexploit land and thus leave room for nature, on the other hand, stewardship cannot do without agricultural practices in which the intimate relation between humans and the earth is further explored. A one-size-fits-all approach does not work, as every situation is different (Giller et al. 2021).

As we have argued, a stewardship perspective focuses on households and relationships within and between households. Therefore, an important aspiration of Christian NGOs should be to strive for sustainable livelihoods, within planetary boundaries. However, there can be no sustainable livelihoods without human intervention. Agriculture is more than just imitating nature. It has its own sense of purpose: the production of sufficient healthy food, in a sustainable way (Denison and McGuire 2015). Depending on the situation, we need to consider what a sustainable future looks like. Sometimes, for farmers this means deliberately choosing one single cash crop. Even if it is not immediately preferable for environmental reasons, there may be situations in which that is the only way forward. Working together with nature means not thwarting natural processes and seeking cooperation with soil life, insects, fungi and other organisms (Smaje 2020, p. 119). It does not exclude scientific knowledge or technology, but rather includes them. Scientific knowledge of soil fertility, precise mapping of soils and new technologies may be useful to better adapt to global environmental change (Monbiot 2022, pp. 226–28). However, a narrow focus on productivity makes systems vulnerable, as there are no alternatives when unexpected situations, like natural disasters, ecological degradation or social instability

occur. One should avoid putting all the eggs in one basket and instead develop multiple options simultaneously (Rifkin 2023, pp. 17–20).

4.2. Empowering Local Communities

Stewardship means not only that humans and earth belong together, but also that people are dependent beings who cannot exist separately from each other. Cooperation as mutual exchange opposes a way of thinking in which groups are each other's competitors or in which people are just victims or passive recipients. Instead of seeking maximization of profit or an equitable distribution of income and goods, we should strive for forms of contributive justice in which all participants, no matter how strong or weak, can have a unique contribution and receive recognition for it (Sandel 2020, pp. 211–13). People derive dignity from contributing to the common good and having the opportunity to serve others. That also implies that Southern leadership is important. Within management and organization studies, a distinction is made between agency theory and stewardship theory (Davis et al. 1997). Agency theory assumes that each actor wants to maximize individual utility. In contrast, stewardship theory puts the responsibility of actors at the center. It assumes that self-interest and public interest are not necessarily in conflict. Most actors are intrinsically motivated to contribute to the common good and derive satisfaction from doing so.

Cooperation and mutual exchange set us on the track of a second strategic direction: empowering local communities. The main focus of Norman Borlaug and of the Green Revolution was food security. By increasing production, hunger and starvation were to be prevented. Food security can, however, be compromised when countries become too dependent on international trade (Thompson 2015, pp. 72–76). Food sovereignty is often presented as an alternative to food security. It aligns better with the idea of cooperation, but, as we will see later, it also raises questions. When it comes to food sovereignty, the empowerment of local farmers is most central. Farmers and local communities should be in charge of their own food systems, according to their own cultural preferences and in line with the knowledge they have, especially of their own local situation (Schanbacher 2010, pp. 53–55). In this way, farmers can earn a living while maintaining their self-determination. They can also derive dignity from providing food for local communities, rather than being subject to the whims of global developments, particularly those that affect world market volatility and, consequently, their position in the value chain.

An advantage of the concept of food sovereignty is that it acknowledges the important role smallholder farmers play in the overall food chain. It is claimed that about 30% of the global food production is provided by smallholders (Ricciardi et al. 2018). Furthermore, smallholders also account for greater crop diversity. This makes them an important partner in the overall food chain, especially in a time of climate change and biodiversity loss. Empowering local communities means first and foremost that partners in the South are treated as responsible agents. But it also means that partners from the North do not run away from their own tasks and responsibilities. The latter would be false modesty. NGOs from the North can play an important role when it comes to funding, facilitating and mediating. Both partners in North and South thus have a responsibility, each from its own position. The starting point is not autonomy or sovereignty, but interdependence. No country or community can exist or produce food on its own (Thompson 2015, p. 73). The main task of development organizations is to connect communities. People are part of a global network of dependencies from which it is difficult to escape, if only because of the impact that one's own actions have on places elsewhere (Latour 2018, pp. 90–99). Stewardship is about recognizing those dependencies.

4.3. Adaptive Transformation

Third, stewardship involves building on what is historically given. It departs from what generations pass on to each other. If you are grateful for what previous generations left behind, you want to be a good ancestor yourself too (Scruton 2013, p. 216). Of course, the reverse is also true: if your ancestors did wrong, you feel an obligation to restore things. This can happen at the interindividual level, but also at the level of societies. Consider, for example, climate finance, where countries that have long benefited from industrialisation support countries in the South in adapting to the most severe effects of climate change. Stewardship does not want to break with the past but wants to improve existing situations and correct what has gone wrong. A strategic direction that fits with this can best be described as 'adaptive transformation'. Adaptive transformation means starting from given situations. You build on traditions that are already there and use what is good and valuable. At the same time, it also requires a critical view. Again and again, transformation is needed, transformation at the level of societal structures, but also at the level of ethos.

The cultural theory of modernity defended by Taylor (Section 2.3.) fits well with adaptive transformation. It values the contribution of different cultures and seeks a respectful dialogue between them. A good starting point for an intercultural dialogue, Taylor argues, is the presumption of equal worth. However, such a presumption does not mean that every expression of a culture is equally worthy, and that critique is not possible (Taylor 1994, pp. 61–73). What a culture has to offer must be tested in dialogue, based on sound arguments. Otherwise, you may not truly take other people and their perspectives seriously. Just as Western cultures have historically adopted elements from other cultures, we now see many products of Western modernity—such as science, technology, and healthcare—being integrated into diverse cultural contexts, reflecting a more interconnected global landscape. Conversely, in a time of climate change and environmental destruction, there is much to learn from indigenous cultures that have a smaller ecological footprint than their Western counterparts and are better adapted to harsh situations. Such an exchange between cultures is not an easy task. Relationships between cultures are often distorted by one-sided power dynamics. At the same time, we are dealing with wicked problems, complex problems for which there are no easy solutions. The adage must be to stay with the trouble and to build bridges across deep divides (Chakrabarty 2023, pp. 102–5).

Adaptive transformation as a strategic direction is best understood in opposition to the modern idea of progress. We borrow the idea of transformation from Jacob Klapwijk (1987). Transformation recognizes that cultures carry good things, but also injustice, oppression and untruth. This can be a helpful corrective in a time of strong polarization, when, for example, the interests of Southern and Northern countries are sharply diverging or left-wing politicians and conservatives blame each other heavily. One accuses the other of not being progressive enough, or of being too colonialist. Listening to each other, building on each other's heritage and valuing each other's traditions are then key principles. Adaptive transformation can encourage Christian NGOs to be peacemakers, to respect various cultural traditions and to build a common future. In such a way, they may strive for right and peaceful relationships between humans and between humans and other creatures, a situation of *shalom* (Wolterstorff 1983, pp. 69–72). From a Christian perspective, stewardship in essence means that God calls people to account. Instead of striving for perfection, Christians should look forward to a new world in which all that is broken will be restored. This should make them humble, but also creates obligations. They cannot shape a new world ex nihilo, but can at least contribute to improving current situations and correcting failures and wrongdoings from the past.

5. Conclusions

Food production and the need to stay within planetary boundaries are often seen as concepts at odds with each other. A major reason for this is the modern dualism that underpins agricultural development. This has led to a one-sided focus on productionism without adequate consideration of the socio-ecological embeddedness of food systems. The concept of stewardship can help Christian development organizations find direction in dealing with the tension between food security and caring for the environment. It emphasizes the potential of smallholder farmers and the well-being of local communities as much as possible. At the same time, it is mindful of the achievements of modern science and technology.

While stewardship does not provide ready-made answers as it acknowledges the fact that each situation is different, this sensitivity to context is the strength of the concept. Each situation requires a balanced accounting of values and interests in the situation at hand, in mutual consultation. Development cooperation is inherently about contextualization, as it involves tailoring approaches, policies, and interventions to specific economic, social, cultural, and political circumstances. However, this does not mean that general strategic guidelines cannot be formulated. Stewardship implies, first of all, doing justice to the relationship between humans and the earth. In agriculture, humans must work together with nature. To create sustainable livelihoods, one cannot do without technology. However, the focus should be on minimizing negative environmental and social impact. Second, stewardship means recognizing that people depend on cooperation and mutual exchange. Empowering local communities fits into such a way of thinking. Christian NGOs should strive for shared forms of responsibility in which each partner, whether from the North or the South, has its own unique contribution. Finally, stewardship leads to a vision of development as adaptive transformation. In a highly polarized world, we have to weigh time and again what promotes peace and what not. One must learn from the good of other cultural traditions, while also addressing and correcting wrongs and injustices.

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