



Tropentag, September 15-17, 2021, hybrid conference

“Towards shifting paradigms in agriculture
for a healthy and sustainable future”

Squaring the Circle: Is Agroforestry Compatible with Modern Capitalism?

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Abstract

The evidence that the inclusion of trees in agricultural production systems brings, on average, more benefits than disadvantages is overwhelming and comes from almost all biomes on our planet. Further, the benefits agroforestry trees provide are likely to increase as the heterogeneity of weather is boosted by worsening climate change conditions. Lastly, many classes of natural catastrophes can be mitigated to some extent by trees: mangroves dampen tsunamis, deep-rooted trees prevent some landslides, hedges and tree alleys reduce waterborne soil erosion, etc. As a dual Belgian and German citizen, I am particularly struck by the July floods that killed over 200 of my countrymen and were worsened by monoculture land use patterns in both forestry and farming.

However, despite this mountain of evidence, agroforestry seems to be honoured far more in speeches than practice. The world seems increasingly set on intensifying petrochemical agricultural production systems. These are of course optimised on an ongoing basis, but nevertheless are unlikely to provide the required adaptation, mitigation, biodiversity, resilience and profitability targets that should be the basis of a holistic assessment of any farming system. This talk will explore whence this paradox arises, review a number of options to increase the adoption rate of agroforestry and other agroecology-based interventions, and discuss with the market based mechanisms alone are likely to bring the agricultural transformation we need.

Keywords: Paradigm shift