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“Exploring opportunities ...
for managing natural resources and a better life for all”

Agroecology and living well: Towards agri-food systems within the ‘doughnut’

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Abstract

Environmental sustainability and social justice are intrinsically linked: SDG1 aims to end poverty, SDG 2 aims to end hunger, recognising that both are only possible while conserving natural resources. However, food insecurity is on the rise again since 2014, and the Human Development Index (composed of life expectancy, education and income) is decreasing since 2019. A key criticism is the persistence of the economic growth paradigm, which still underpins the mainstream idea of progress by perpetuating overconsumption and prioritising luxury tastes over basic needs. Oxford economist Kate Raworth’s ‘doughnut’ framework depicts an economy that respects the planetary boundaries while achieving basic needs coverage for all, meaning that certain sectors grow and expand, while others shrink or change significantly. If human wellbeing is understood in a multidimensional way, encompassing not only a material dimension, but also a cognitive dimension and a relational dimension, then it becomes clear that the quality of ‘development’ is as important as the quantity. This is particularly true for agri-food systems: As we already produce enough food for everyone but are unable to end hunger, the question should not be how much can be produced, but how much is needed (and of what, and where and by whom). Applying post-growth principles to agri-food systems requires a paradigm shift from efficiency to sufficiency, from extraction to regeneration, from accumulation to distribution, from private enclosure to commons, and from control to care. These principles are compatible with agroecological principles as formulated by social movements around the world, and, more recently, also by the FAO and HLPE. For example, agroecology contributes to regeneration by reducing external inputs and increasing agrobiodiversity. By strengthening the autonomy of farmers and their participation in decision-making, agroecology supports distributive justice, land, water, food and seed commons, and care over a technoscientific idea of external control. The plethora of agroecology examples around the world often have in common that they reconnect producers and consumers in more direct relationships by-passing concentrated power in the food system or finding new working models related to sufficiency such as the “half-farmer, half X” lifestyle. For these examples to scale up, out, and deep, a concerted effort is needed at all societal levels beyond a simplistic economic growth paradigm.