

COMMENTARY FROM THE U.S. AGROECOLOGY SUMMIT 2023

## Grassroots agroecology advocates challenge funding objectives focused on U.S. Department of Agriculture

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In the spring of 2023, members of the organizations in La Via Campesina’s North America region who participate in the Seeds, Agroecology, and Biodiversity Collective became aware of plans for a summit on agroecology to take place in Missouri in May 2023. At the time, the Summit website stated that “The primary goal of the meeting is to elevate agroecology in the USDA

National Institute of Food and Agriculture’s (NIFA) portfolio and ultimately increase the quality and quantity of public funding available for agroecology research.” Although this goal was later edited, the U.S. Agroecology Summit 2023 was partially funded by USDA NIFA.

As members of the global peasant movement La Via Campesina, and as supporters, promoters, and practitioners of the principles of agroecology, we recognize the dangers of involving the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) in our growing but fragmented movement, especially through funds allocated by the USDA for research into agroecology.

Here in the United States, it is our responsibility to ourselves and to peasants around the world to insist that any research, promotion, or discussion of agroecology be grounded in food sover-

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eignty, feminism, Indigenous knowledges, and biodiversity, and to defend its fierce demand to end imperialism, capitalism, patriarchy, neoliberal market-based economies, free trade, false climate solutions, and corporate control of globalized food systems and resources.

Millions of people around the world, including farmers, peasants, fishers, workers, and consumers, have identified food sovereignty based on agroecological systems as the only path toward a future that respects their contribution to society, affords them dignified livelihoods, and ensures us all the ability to live in harmony with Mother Nature.

Peasants pursue agroecology on the ground and in their territories as resistance and struggle against the injustices and inequalities of the capitalist system. As such, agroecology inspires practical, action-oriented means of countering these injustices through a social/political component that educates people on the why and how we have the agriculture system we have today and why it must be transformed. In order to make a real difference, we have to establish agroecological systems worldwide that protect biodiversity, traditional seeds, and culturally specific foods while also combatting climate change. Agroecology practices and principles are shared in a horizontal manner, peasant to peasant, rather than top-down, and respect for collective rights, recognition of commons, and advocacy for agrarian reforms. At La Via Campesina's 8th International Conference in Bogota, Colombia, in December 2023, hundreds of peasants and farmers gathered under the theme "Faced with global crises, we build food sovereignty to ensure a future for humanity!"

We know that agroecology must be viewed as a political goal first and foremost. In a letter, we called on the organizers and participants of the Agroecology Summit to recognize that this political aspect must not be erased or ignored, but instead must be the basis of any discussion on agroecology, and that producers and practitioners should be leading the research agenda. We insist that any USDA involvement will be an obstacle to these demands. The exploitative, extractive, and unecological agribusiness model that is supported by policies of the United States government does not allow for coexistence with genuine agroecology and

food sovereignty. The danger of USDA involvement is of co-optation, a watering-down of the principles of agroecology, a corporate-friendly definition of agroecology based only on a few practices and technologies, and a token pittance of funding to appease critics of the U.S.'s dominant yet unsustainable agriculture system.

The USDA and the U.S. government in general—independent of which party has the current majority—have continuously and repeatedly undermined efforts to advance agroecology and food sovereignty at the local, national, and international level and to transform our agriculture system in the radical and revolutionary way that is desperately needed and called for by La Via Campesina and other social movements.

In fact, the global movement for agroecology and food sovereignty is a direct challenge to the policies of the U.S. government and to agribusiness. It is our view that the USDA cannot uplift agroecology in its authentic form given that the political position of agroecology would render the USDA obsolete. Thus, it is not a trustworthy partner in any proposal or funding of initiatives to support agroecology.

Some recent examples of U.S. government positions that exemplify this contradiction include:

- Support of the anti-democratic and corporately controlled process of the United Nations Food System Summit in 2021.
- Support of climate-false solutions, including climate-smart agriculture, carbon markets, CO<sub>2</sub> pipelines, and the all-out advancement of genetically engineered plants and animals. Technologies are touted as solutions to problems that were created by corporate technologies, instead of recognizing that these are social-political-economic problems.
- Opposition to other nations' governments in their efforts to build food sovereignty for their people. These include Mexico's demand to stop GMO corn imports; India's demand to ensure a rice supply management program; Puerto Rico's demand to abolish the Jones Act; and the global demands to end the decades-long Cuban embargo.

- Opposition to the UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP), a United Nations resolution adopted in 2019 with 121 member states in support (“United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants,” 2019).

Furthermore, if the world is to enjoy the benefits of agroecology as the foundation of its agriculture, economic as well as social, cultural, and environmental aspects must be addressed. There must be laws—national and international—ensuring economic justice for farmers and peasants. As long as prices are determined by supply and demand in a global market, this will not be the case. The courageous Indian farmer protesters in 2020–2021, many of whom are LVC members, were fighting for their survival and demanding the return of minimum support prices. Democratic governance must include programs to support the prices of what farmers and peasants produce. Such policies will include actual price supports at parity levels (not government subsidies), public food reserves, supply management, and import controls. Contrary to the public narrative, we cannot rely solely on individual farmers to change their practices or establish sound crop rotations without these protections.

## Reference

United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants. (2019, January 21).

[https://defendingpeasantsrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/A\\_RES\\_73\\_165\\_English.pdf](https://defendingpeasantsrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/A_RES_73_165_English.pdf)

With this economic foundation, further agroecological reforms like land tenure and reparations can be realized. The policies and regulations of the USDA—and the World Trade Organization—that rely on free markets and defend the status quo do not support these reforms.

As we stated in our letter to the Summit organizers, our intent was not to diminish the good intention and dedicated work that many conscientious researchers are doing to advance agroecological processes in the U.S., including many who organized or participated in the conference, and we understand the limitations they face to access public funding for their work. Food sovereignty is not a source of endless capitalistic function. Academics who have embraced agroecology and food sovereignty too often cannot finance their important work. While we deeply criticized this engagement with the USDA, our hope is that this process will generate positive outcomes for our academic partners’ continued efforts and encourage them to partner with grassroots movements. After all, agroecology and food sovereignty advocates around the world embrace scientific research that begins with their needs and that respects and reinforces their struggle against exploitative, extractive industrial agriculture. 