

*IPES-Food report (02.06.2016): From Uniformity to Diversity:
A Paradigm Shift from Industrial Agriculture to Diversified Agroecological Systems*

KEY MESSAGES:

- Today's food and farming systems have succeeded in supplying large volumes of foods to global markets, but are generating negative outcomes on multiple fronts: widespread degradation of land, water and ecosystems; high GHG emissions; biodiversity losses; persistent hunger and micro-nutrient deficiencies alongside the rapid rise of obesity and diet-related diseases; and livelihood stresses for farmers around the world.
- Many of these problems are linked specifically to 'industrial agriculture': the input-intensive crop monocultures and industrial-scale feedlots that now dominate farming landscapes. The uniformity at the heart of these systems, and their reliance on chemical fertilizers, pesticides and preventive use of antibiotics, leads systematically to negative outcomes and vulnerabilities.
- Industrial agriculture and the 'industrial food systems' that have developed around it are locked in place by a series of vicious cycles. For example, the way food systems are currently structured allows value to accrue to a limited number of actors, reinforcing their economic and political power, and thus their ability to influence the governance of food systems.
- Tweaking practices can improve some of the specific outcomes of industrial agriculture, but will not provide long-term solutions to the multiple problems it generates.
- What is required is a fundamentally different model of agriculture based on diversifying farms and farming landscapes, replacing chemical inputs, optimizing biodiversity and stimulating interactions between different species, as part of holistic strategies to build long-term fertility, healthy agro-ecosystems and secure livelihoods, i.e. 'diversified agroecological systems'.
- There is growing evidence that these systems keep carbon in the ground, support biodiversity, rebuild soil fertility and sustain yields over time, providing a basis for secure farm livelihoods.
- Data shows that these systems can compete with industrial agriculture in terms of total outputs, performing particularly strongly under environmental stress, and delivering production increases in the places where additional food is desperately needed. Diversified agroecological systems can also pave the way for diverse diets and improved health.
- Change is already happening. Industrial food systems are being challenged on multiple fronts, from new forms of cooperation and knowledge-creation to the development of new market relationships that bypass conventional retail circuits.
- Political incentives must be shifted in order for these alternatives to emerge beyond the margins. A series of modest steps can collectively shift the centre of gravity in food systems.

WHY IT MATTERS FOR EUROPE:

- Coming during European Green Week and European Sustainable Development Week, the report maps out a viable pathway towards sustainable food and farming systems, whether the starting point is highly-industrialized agriculture in the global North, or subsistence farming in the poorest developing countries.
- A shift towards diversified agroecological farming has huge potential to keep carbon in the ground, turning agriculture from one of the major contributors to climate change to one of the key solutions. It may therefore be the most significant contribution the EU can make to preventing climate change and meeting the Sustainable Development Goals.
- The EU has a heavy footprint regarding the impacts of industrial food production elsewhere in the world. Most developed countries are net importers of animal feed and biomass, adding to environmental pressures and competition for land in developing countries. The EU's 'virtual land area' is estimated at 35 million hectares. Reconnecting livestock production to local feed sources within diversified agricultural landscapes can reduce these impacts.
- Between 2003-2013, one in four farms disappeared in the EU. Diversified agroecological farming offers an exit from the treadmill of industrial agriculture, with its high input costs, declining share of value for farmers, and its degradation of agro-ecosystems.
- The benefits diversified farming brings to society are barely rewarded by current subsidies and support measures under the CAP. This report calls for a wholesale shift in these incentives in order to facilitate a transition in agriculture.
- Across Europe, promising initiatives are springing up in support of alternative food and farming systems, e.g. local food policy councils and direct farmer-consumer marketing. In France, around 250,000 people (1% of the working-age population) now receive weekly boxes of fresh local produce direct from farmers. The report maps out a series of measures to build on these initiatives and help them emerge beyond the margins of food systems.