

A Message for Climate Change Negotiators:

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Small Farmers Key to Combating Climate Change

by Annie ShattuckGo to Original

As world leaders meet in Poznan, Poland this week to work out a foundation for a new international climate change treaty, they would do well to seek the council of some unconventional advisors: peasant farmers. Agricultural policy has been virtually ignored in "official" discussions of climate change. One place it hasn't been ignored is by farmers themselves. In October hundreds of small farmers from all over the world met in Maputo, Mozambique for the fifth international conference of La Via Campesina, a global movement of peasant farmers. A sense of urgency around climate change featured prominently in their final declaration.

It's little wonder. The Via Campesina Declaration casts small farmers in the developing world as both global warming's victims and a potential solution. They are right! While industrial agriculture is one of the world's biggest climate culprits, small-scale farmers actually cool the planet.

Agriculture is responsible for 13.5% of global greenhouse gas emissions - largely from synthetic fertilizers and large animal operations. GHG emissions-soil carbon loss, methane, and nitrous oxide-are largely results of large-scale agricultural operations in which soil carbon is depleted, methane from large animal feedlot operations is released unchecked, and synthetic fertilizers release nitrous oxide-a gas with 300 times the warming power of CO₂.

The agricultural sector, including land use change for agriculture, has been estimated to make up anywhere from 28-33% of global emissions. Combined with the emissions created transporting food in our increasingly globalized food economy where the average bite to eat travels 1200 miles from field to fork, the industrial food system may be the largest single contributor to global warming.

In small-scale organic farming systems however, carbon is actually stored in the soil at a rate of about four tons per hectare. The Rodale Institute estimates that if the U.S. converted to organic agriculture on all its farmland, 25% of U.S. greenhouse gas emissions could be saved.

Small-scale sustainable agriculture is also vastly more resilient to climate change. After Hurricane Mitch devastated much of the Central American countryside, a study of over 1800 conventional and sustainable farms showed that farmers using sustainable practices suffered less "damage" than their conventional neighbors. Diversified plots had 20% to 40% more topsoil, greater soil moisture, less erosion, and experienced fewer economic losses than their conventional farm neighbors. Not only can small-scale sustainable agriculture help cool the planet, it can provide a buffer against the worst effects of global warming.

The small farmers of La Via Campesina know this. They are calling for an international shift towards food sovereignty - the right of all people over the resources to produce and consume abundant, culturally appropriate food. Their vision is one of agroecologically balanced, sustainable, family farms supported by local markets. Not only will this vision confront the injustices of a world food system where one billion people will go hungry this year while another billion are obese-it could help stave off climate disasters.

Any "vision" that may emerge from negotiations in Poznan, Poland this week must include creating a food system that is more resilient, less polluting, and ultimately more just. Peasant farmers, who comprise more than half of all farmers worldwide, have much to offer a warming world. The fact that greenhouse gas emissions from agriculture was on the agenda of farmers themselves before it is talked about on the world policy stage should send a strong message to Poznan: It is time we opened the climate debate to the ills of industrial agriculture, and the home-grown solutions that could save us.

Annie Shattuck writes for Food First/Institute for Food and Development Policy. The purpose of the Institute for Food and Development Policy - Food First - is to eliminate the injustices that cause hunger.

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