

Deepening Democracy for Agroecological Transformations

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Transcript of talk available [here](#) from 1:11:55 to 1:24:53

Alternatively, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pZLRSKMOFPw>

Some governments are calling for a war-like response to the Earth’s accelerating social and environmental crisis. But government decisions to mobilise on a war-like footing to reduce GHG emissions, biodiversity loss, and agricultural pollution will be strongly resisted by powerful actors who currently benefit from petrochemical food and farming. These include agro-chemical and seed corporations, the farm machinery and livestock industry, food processing and distribution giants, as well as banks and other financial institutions.

Indeed, history shows that governments have faced massive economic disruption—and often military coups—when their policies threaten the profits and privileges of corporations and the hyper-rich.

However, governments can decisively counteract the actions of these powerful actors by mobilising to expand democracy and citizen participation in policy-making.

Deepening political democracy can help shield governments from the actions of the agri-food industry. At least three policy choices are crucial in this regard:

1. Ensuring that **global food governance** continues to be based on multilateral decision-making by governments and not replaced by multi-stakeholder governance structures favoured by corporations and financial institutions. The World Economic Forum (WEF) has led recent attempts to reconfigure food system governance during the UN Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) held in 2021. The WEF’s explicit intention was to redesign global governance in ways that entrench the corporate sector through market-oriented forms of governance. Accordingly, the UNFSS adopted a model of multi-stakeholder governance backed by powerful corporate and financial actors that could simultaneously bypass the multilateral spaces where states already come together to take decisions. The corporate dominated multi-stakeholder structure is intentionally designed to undermine the practices of previous UN Food Summits that were organised through multilateral institutions based on the norms of public international law through which the UN generally operates. The development of multi-stakeholder platforms in food systems is being encouraged with an explicit agenda to ‘reset’ governance in the tradition of ‘stakeholder capitalism’ which deepens the concentration of agro-industrial power and sidelines multilateral structures of accountability. However, this unfolding process of corporate capture is not inevitable. It can still be reversed by governments faced with the planetary emergency and the need to act in the public interest.

2. ***Dismantle investment agreements*** that boost unaccountable corporate power. International Investment Agreements (IIAs) such as the Bilateral Investment Treaties (BITs) and investment chapters in the Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) give transnational corporations extraordinary rights without binding obligations.

If public policy is against their interests, corporations can sue sovereign States for millions of dollars before private international tribunals associated with the International Centre for Settlement of Investment Disputes (ICSID) [<https://gtwaction.org/egregious-isds-cases/>].

Freedom to respond to the unfolding planetary emergency requires the creation of alternative international tribunals where governments or citizens can bring corporations to justice when their activities violate social, labour, human and environmental rights, or when they act in breach of public policy [<http://tinyurl.com/AlternateIM> and <http://justinvestment.org/2011/11/call-for-an-alternative-investment-model/>].

3. ***Supporting a more inclusive and participatory democracy***. A growing number of citizens threatened by the social and environmental crisis created by the current agri-food regime seek to overturn the current democratic deficit in policy making and governance.

Decentralised and distributed forms of inclusive governance can indeed complement, - or replace -, models of representative democracy. This is perhaps the **strongest antidote governments and society have** against the power of wealthy elites at this critical moment in history.

Site-specific agroecological solutions to social and environmental crisis will depend on governments financing recurring citizen-centred deliberative and inclusive processes in municipalities, city neighbourhoods, and rural communities.

For example, participatory policy processes and risk assessments based on mini-publics¹ such as citizens' assemblies can create safe spaces for peoples' deliberation, voice and agency. Food governance issues have been deliberated in this way by:

- marginalised farmers in citizens' juries and scenario workshops on food futures in Andhra Pradesh
- citizens' assemblies on genetically modified organisms and agriculture in Mali
- citizens assemblies on the governance and priorities of agricultural research in West Africa

Government policies on public finance for food and farming can also be more effectively tailored to locally specific contexts *through* participatory investment and participatory budgeting done by citizens in city neighbourhoods, municipalities, and villages.

At larger spatial scales, collective action is needed to coordinate local adaptive management and governance across a wide range of agri-food systems and associated landscapes (farmlands, forests, grasslands, peri-urban landscapes, and beyond).

¹ Mini-publics are made up of small numbers of citizens, who may be self-selected or randomly selected from a larger population (Fung, 2003). They include citizens' juries, fora for deliberative polls, consensus conferences, and citizens' assemblies.

So to put people at the centre of agri-food system transformations, it is key to decentralize and redistribute power in polycentric and horizontal webs, both in and between territories.

One option is democratic libertarian municipalism which involves a network of bodies or councils made up of citizens, with members or delegates chosen by sortition (selection as a random sample) or elected from face-to-face democratic assemblies in villages, towns and city neighbourhoods that actively federate to enable cooperation and collective action over large areas and multiple scales.

Valuable insights on democratic practices can also be gained from the Zapatista's federation of autonomous municipalities in Mexico and the democratic confederalism that enables ecological regeneration, women's liberation, and inclusive democracy in Kurdish Rojava.

Bottom-up decision-making, decentralised popular assemblies and more direct, face-to-face democracy are key for navigating the uncharted territory of massive climate change, biodiversity loss, and unprecedented social inequality.

However, tackling these threats on war-like footing implies that **people have time and material security to practice the art of participatory democracy.**

Deepening democracy thus requires expanding economic democracy as well as political democracy.

Economic democracy

Widespread agroecological transformations and re-localising food systems within territories depend on several mutually supportive changes in the economic domain, including:

Box 1. Expanding economic democracy

1. a guaranteed and unconditional minimum income for all men, women and other genders
2. a significant drop in time spent in wage-work and a fairer sharing of jobs and free time between men and women as well as other genders
3. strengthening diverse economies that combine market activities with non-monetary forms of exchange based on barter, reciprocity, gift relations, care and solidarity. Such complementary forms of local economic exchange offer alternatives to markets solely focused on money.
4. building and supporting an economics that holistically integrates productive labour with the labour of reproductive care of women and nature.
5. wealth redistribution measures — closing down tax havens and fiscal paradises, taxing the hyper-rich and corporations as well as financial speculations to free up resources for poorer social groups and regions, and also to fund the regeneration of local ecologies and economies
6. providing finance from public banks, with governments and citizens regaining control over the creation of new money
7. the creation and use of alternative local currencies to retain wealth in re-territorialised economies

8. re-localising and developing agroecologically-based circular economies that combine food and energy production with water and waste management to maintain a good quality of life through controlled processes of de-growth in consumption and production of energy and materials
9. a general and progressive shift to an economics of care, social inclusion, freedom and solidarity — based on the principle of *‘from each according to his/her means, to each according to his/her needs’*
10. economic indicators that reflect and reinforce new definitions of wellbeing such as conviviality, mutual care, frugal abundance, autonomy, and the wellbeing of nature.

Take away message

Deepening political and economic democracy needs to be at the heart of the governance architecture of just and sustainable agri-food systems everywhere.

Enabling more democracy and citizen participation is the best antidote governments have against powerful actors who will inevitably defend their interests and the geopolitics of accumulation through dispossession.

More often than not however, citizens’ right to participate in decision-making will have to be claimed through the agency and actions of people themselves. This human right is seldom granted by the state, the market, and ruling plutocracies.

Agroecological transformations may well have to increasingly rely on people collectively developing self-empowered confederations for inclusive democracy from the bottom up - within and between territories.

Building horizontal alliances for mutual aid and federations between spaces for decentralised self-governance can help regenerate society and a healthier planetary ecology.

Thank you!