

COMMENTARY FROM THE U.S. AGROECOLOGY SUMMIT 2023

Agroecology in the belly of the beast: Reflections and contradictions from the U.S. Agroecology Summit 2023

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Introduction


In February 2023, the Institute for Agroecology (IFA) was formally recognized by the University of Vermont. We are a group of scholars who aim to leverage our privileges and positions within the academy to support farmers, activists, and movements in the struggle for agroecology and food sovereignty. International collaborators have often asked us to consider how we can do more to build


out agroecology in the United States—the so-called “belly of the beast” of industrial agriculture and racialized capitalism (Robinson, 2021)—and how we can act, from the U.S., to support the growth of agroecology in other places.


As a newly formed institute, we are keen to engage with others working to advance agroecology in the U.S. This motivated us to accept an

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Author Note

This commentary is written by members of the Institute for Agroecology following participation in the U.S. Agroecology Summit in Kansas City, Missouri, in May 2023, which is the focus of a special section in this journal.

invitation to join a committee organizing a national convening on agroecology in May 2023. We viewed it as an opportunity to collectively identify research that would support people, communities, organizations, and movements aligning with agroecology in the U.S. The organizing committee named creation of a “roadmap” for agroecological research in the U.S. as the convening’s purpose. The plan was to create a space for listening to the needs of those working on the ground and to identify ways to support their work via research and resources.

While the summit opened space to grapple with tensions and strengthen existing relationships, the meeting did not ultimately produce a roadmap for agroecology research. From our perspective, however, the dynamics that drove the pivot away from the roadmap constitute important outcomes. Our commentary attempts to reflect, identify lessons to take forward into future efforts, and model the kind of reflexivity that we feel is essential for researchers who seek to collaborate with and support social movements in the struggle toward agroecology and food sovereignty. It is important to emphasize that this commentary is written by representatives of the Institute for Agroecology and not the committee that organized the summit, although some members of the IFA team also served as members of the organizing committee. As such, the reflection, analysis, and takeaways presented here are informed by the pillars that the IFA aims to center in our work: equity, transdisciplinarity and participatory action research, and just transitions.

Context Matters

Agroecology’s whole-system approach necessitates a contextualized analysis. Stuart Hall (1980) articulates the importance of carefully considering both the characteristics of the present moment and historical developments that have contributed to current conditions. We attempt to bring this analytical approach to our reflection on the summit.

Practitioner-, community-, and movement-led efforts in the U.S. to advance agroecology are undermined by disabling factors related to our national political economy and the continuing legacies of oppression associated with an agricultural

system built on stolen land with enslaved and exploited labor. Given that the summit was funded by a federal agency that has been complicit in systematically excluding access to resources to underrepresented groups (Orozco et al., 2018), doubts regarding the organizing process and goals of the summit were already high out of the gate (Wills & Tovar, 2023; Wills et al., 2024).

The event brought together roughly 100 people who live and work across the U.S. and Puerto Rico. While the organizing committee aimed to convene a diverse group that represented the breadth of those who engage with agroecology, there was nonetheless an imbalance in the type of knowledge and experience represented in the room. Nearly 70% of attendees were academics or professional researchers. Although many were invited, far fewer people from civil society organizations, social movements, or whose primary job is farming, were in attendance. This imbalance highlights the challenges of convening a diversity of constituencies in these types of events: it is a lot harder for some groups to participate (e.g., farmers) and easier for others (e.g., academics, government employees). While imbalanced participation in the summit reflects both structural challenges and the differing realities of diverse types of work, that it also connects to the politics of knowledge. Below, we reflect on why attending to the politics of knowledge must be central to any effort to advance agroecology. We then propose processes for doing so in future efforts.

The Politics of Knowledge

The politics of knowledge encompass how different types of knowledge are valued and legitimized (Montenegro & Iles, 2016; Pimbert, 2009). In agroecology, centering the politics of knowledge can help deconstruct dominant narratives that frame industrial agriculture as the only way to “feed the world” and Western scientific knowledge as the only valid analytical approach for understanding current reality and proposing viable paths forward. Deconstructing these narratives requires dismantling hierarchies that position some types of knowledge as more legitimate than others; this, in turn, requires that many voices and ways of knowing are valued and have seats at the proverbial table.

As the summit was organized by researchers and emphasized agroecological research rather than multiple agroecological epistemologies and experiences, the event reinforced the academic and Western status quo that separates different types of knowledge, a separation at odds with a political and transformative agroecology. We know that “silos” are part and parcel of knowledge hierarchies: in portraying forms of knowledge as isolated and distinct, it becomes easy to identify some as more important than others. These divisions also obscure the complexity and inherent interconnectedness of all life on earth—there are social, political, and economic factors tangled up with seed selection, on-farm management practices, and distribution chains, for example. Isolating these factors from one another is incompatible with our understanding of agroecology and prevents (eco)systems-level work. Despite the best of intentions, the summit’s narrow focus on a certain type of research missed an opportunity to integrate more diverse perspectives that could have contributed more meaningfully to advancing agroecology and food sovereignty.

When we situate the emphasis on research amidst broader historical contexts, it becomes clear why some attendees voiced concerns that their knowledge and experiences would be extracted to advance the interests and careers of researchers (for a deeper discussion of these concerns, see “A Declaration of Commitments Toward Agroecological Pluralities,” in this issue). While universities have historically marginalized non-Western forms of knowledge, there is simultaneously a long history of researchers appropriating peasant and Indigenous knowledge to their own ends. This dynamic underlies conversations regarding the possible co-optation of agroecology by the academy and other institutions (Giraldo & Rosset, 2018). While this dynamic can be enacted consciously or unconsciously, the impact remains the same: hierarchies of knowledge are inextricably bound up with multiple systems and structures of oppression.

Grappling with the fraught histories and politics of knowledge production and extraction highlights the need to identify alternative approaches to collaborating and organizing gatherings that will

(1) direct resources to the full spectrum of knowledge types, actors, and collective learning processes that will be required for agroecology to gain traction and legitimacy in the U.S.; and (2) enable collaboration, solidarity, and complementarity amongst that full diversity of knowledge, actors, and learning processes. If we are to take the politics of knowledge seriously, it is vital that a diversity of actors, who hold a wide range of identities, experiences, and positionalities, be at the center of processes for identifying collective goals and priorities. While the committee made an effort to *invite* and raise funds to support the *attendance* of farmers, Indigenous People, activists and organizers, it is the agency of these perspectives in the *conceptualization* and *design* of such gatherings that is foundational to an approach that more fully attends to the politics of knowledge. In other words, invitations to attend are not enough; truly just and equitable approaches require that diverse voices and knowledges are involved at every stage of collaborations and convenings, from inception, planning, and attendance through to evaluation and ensuing actions. This, in turn, requires appropriate commitment of resources for supporting the co-leadership of growers and representatives from civil society organizations and social movements in the organization of agroecology-related gatherings.

Advancing agroecology, in the full political meaning of the term (De Molina et al., 2019), requires collective action, which can only materialize out of established, trusting, and equitable relationships. To move toward this end, we conclude our commentary by identifying lessons and commitments that we, as the Institute for Agroecology, can carry forward from the U.S. Agroecology Summit 2023.

What Are We Taking Forward?

Our reflection on the importance of attending to the politics of knowledge is not intended to disparage the effort put into making the summit happen; indeed, the event provided a space to surface tensions, exchange ideas, build new relationships, and deepen old ones. In reflecting on the politics of knowledge, we see the chasm between what is needed and where we are now. We believe that

there *is* a role to be filled by research, but responsibly filling this role requires mechanisms of communication and accountability that attend to the complex reality of working to dismantle existing systems and structures while simultaneously being embedded within them. Any effort to strengthen agroecology must be collaborative at every stage of the process, including the identification of strategies and pathways toward more just and resilient futures. This cannot just be what we *say*—we must figure out how to make it what we *do*.

From our view, conversations about the changes needed within research institutions are critically important for transgressing the boundaries that often lock in static thinking, justify ineffective sectoral approaches, and reproduce systems of oppression. If researchers aim to support agroecology in its most transformative form, it will be vital to cultivate the capacity to engage in these conversations as part of an intentional process of unlearning. This process, in turn, should feed a commitment to collaborative, equitable, and action-oriented research that engages communities, farmers, and social movements as co-researchers with deep place-based knowledge (Montenegro de Wit et al., 2021). All of this constitutes a re-orienting of research from a place of “leadership” to a place of co-creation and accompaniment. Inviting plural perspectives, making space for emergent ideas, and implementing participatory design processes constitute the groundwork for relationship- and trust-building, co-learning, and co-producing knowledge across difference.

Although as an institute we are embedded within the academy, we aspire to engage multiple ways of knowing, recognizing both the practical and political complexity of this approach. Participating in the summit highlighted areas in which we must grow, learn and unlearn to put our aspirations—and our values—into action. Specifically, we identified the need to cultivate practices and processes for: (1) effectively communicating to others within the academy our orientation to the politics of knowledge, (2) attending to the politics of knowledge at every stage of collaborative efforts, and (3) integrating diverse types of knowledge and ways of knowing and convening. Without established norms that speak to these needs, it is

likely that people and institutes located within the academy, regardless of intentions, will reproduce the power dynamics and knowledge hierarchies that we at the IFA aim to deconstruct.

In a similar vein, the summit highlighted deep tensions around what it means to engage with agroecology from within institutions that are often seen as an enemy, not an ally. This is slow work. Relational work. Place-based work. Work that requires moving at the speed of trust. Anathema in spaces that reward speed and glorify the individual, this is collective work—work that requires much more listening than talking, more observing than suggesting. We believe it is possible to hold the contradictions implied by engaging with agroecology from within academic institutions, but we recognize that doing so requires ongoing commitments to reflexivity, humility, and accountability. Our position at the UVM Institute for Agroecology is that scaling agroecology requires transforming the wider political, economic, and cultural domains that undermine the food sovereignty of peoples and communities. This includes how research is often conducted and how research institutions, particularly universities, marginalize the narratives and knowledge of people outside the academy.

Conclusions

We know that there remain pressing needs to study, hone, and implement farming practices that improve soil health and support agrobiodiversity. While these technical and scientific issues are important, they are insufficient for realizing socially just and resilient agri-food systems. As social movements highlight, any effort to advance agroecology needs to foreground food sovereignty, a concept that has been developed and fought for by peasant- and BIPOC-led movements around the world (Nyeleni Movement for Food Sovereignty, 2007). A precondition for agroecology is that people have the right to define and defend their own food and agriculture systems. Among other things, this means sovereign determination of seed systems, foodways, and land, each being a critical component of food sovereignty. That is to say, collective efforts to advance agroecology must center issues of power and agency. We are committed to

approaching our work with humility and care, taking these learnings forward in our efforts to support agroecology in the places and communities where we work.

We conclude by acknowledging that we have focused this commentary on our growth edges—on processes and practices that force us to continually learn and unlearn. As such, there is little reflection here on what went well. This event was organized by people committed to cultivating more hopeful futures and attended by people willing to show up despite misgivings, voice hard truths in generative ways, and participate in meaningful dialogue across difference. The focus of this commentary is not intended to diminish the efforts of the

organizers nor the contributions of attendees. We do not intend to reinforce divisions that reproduce practices of othering. Rather, we aim to honor the difficulty of collaborating. We aim to sit with hurt and repair harm. We firmly contest unjust systems and institutions while aiming to show compassion to the people within them. In short, this piece intends to support future efforts that will build on the important connections and lessons gleaned from the summit. We look forward to continuing to lean into learning and unlearning alongside others who aim to be co-conspirators, advancing agroecology from both outside and within the academy.



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