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# BEYOND ORGANICS

## THIRD WORLD FARMERS TELL US WHY BANNING PESTICIDES IS NOT ENOUGH

BY WAYNE ROBERTS

WHEN I WENT AS A DELEGATE TO THE alternate World Food Summit in Rome last June, I was shocked to meet peasants from Latin America, Africa and Asia who couldn't say the word "organic" without spitting it out in contempt.Most of the world's 850 million hungry people are farmers, and organic or pesticide-laden have the same result for them. Either way, they produce food for a luxury market in the North and don't get to keep much for themselves.

"Agro-ecology" was the word they cheered -- "organic for anti-imperialists," I figured. I spent an hour talking with Miguel Altieri, the fiery Chilean refugee now teaching at Berkeley, California, who led the charge against organics. But he was quizzing me about Vancouver, where he was

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heading to teach, and I never learned that he is the celebrated author of a 1980s text on agro-ecology.

I didn't know much more this past November when I helped negotiate an agreement between the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization and global citizen groups dealing with food and hunger. High on the agenda was the demand that the FAO cooperate with peasant groups to develop a comprehensive approach to agro-ecology. FAO officials quickly agreed, so I never had to defend the term.

It was only last week that I learned what the Next New Thing in sustainable agriculture is all about. All roads led to Guelph, and the organic conference held there last week showcased a range of inspired projects in which Canadian environmental groups are partnering with citizen groups in the South. For a piddling amount of grant money, $1.25 million, or 0.6 per cent of the Canadian International Development Agency budget, these projects are moving mountains -- or more accurately, stabilizing mountains -- thanks to the multiple benefits that are part of the weave of agro-ecology.

"It's no accident that agro-ecology comes out of the South," says Claudia Ho Lem, an effervescent Calgarian descended from Polish, Chinese and Metis stock who's worked on village projects in the Philippines and China for REAP-Canada (Resource Efficient Agricultural Production).

She tells me that Western-style agriculture featuring open fields dominated by one crop is hard

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enough on the soil in temperate climates, where nutrients break down slowly and rainfall is fairly gentle. But in the South, year-round warm weather and torrential storms mean that nutrients break down quickly in the soil, only to be flushed out by hard rainfall. So land-use patterns dictated by colonial plantations and global free trade, designed with food exports in mind, are a recipe for disaster.

That's why environmental stress has such different impacts in the North and South. In the North, the big problems have to do with getting rid of waste and pollution. In the South, environmental problems involve the collapse of production capability: depleted soils that can't grow anything and waterways overtaken with silt that destroys fishing, the source of protein.

In China, where Ho Lem will be returning, erosion, drought and hunger interact in apocalyptic synergy. China has lost 2.66 million hectares of farmland to erosion in the past 50 years. Almost a tenth of what's lost every year ends up in the Yellow River, clogging it with so much silt that the river rises, killing fish as well as adding to the danger of floods.

Ho Lem and REAP-Canada will work with Beijing's International Center for Research to develop agro-ecology villages. They will be relying on sea buckthorn, a thorny bush that's a bit of a miracle plant. Like beans, the bush draws nitrogen from the air, a fertilizer. The roots hold down the soil on hills. The leaves are great feed for livestock. The juiceable berries are rich in vitamin C. The livestock manure can be dug back into the

soil after the methane in it has been used for fuel to heat homes or run stoves.

The three f-words of agro-ecology -- food, fibre and fuel -- mean that productivity comes from having a wide range of plants and animals, which mimics the diversity strategy of nature in the raw. This is in stark contrast to Western traditions that seek efficiency through economies of scale that come from specializing in one crop and one purpose.

In the Philippines, the process means using the "trash" from sugarcane to rebuild the soil instead of burning it in the open air, using the hulls from rice to burn in "turbo stoves" so trees don't have to be cut for fuel and so ash from the rice hull fire can be returned to the soil, growing as many vegetables as possible so farmers aren't dependent on the price of sugar to be able to buy their own food, encouraging trees that will attract birds to eat the mice, raise the water table and provide wood for buildings.

This is the direction organics was heading in the North, says Roger Samson, the visionary responsible for many REAP programs, "but it became a consumer protection movement instead," protecting consumers from the health threats of pesticides. In the South, where desperate social and economic problems are so linked to colonial and global free trade violations of nature's deep-set patterns, agro-ecology is more likely to come out swinging.

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