

RIGHT TO FOOD AND NUTRITION WATCH



Overcoming Ecological
Crises: Reconnecting
Food, Nature
and Human Rights



SUPPLEMENT

THE WORLD TODAY

The rapid spread of coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 in early 2020 is yet another sign that humans are devastating the planet. The COVID-19 pandemic forces us to reassess our relationship with the rest of the living world in a context of multiple, interconnected crises.

Global warming and the dramatic loss of biological diversity are clear manifestations of the ecological crisis that threatens humanity and the planet. Local ecosystems are experiencing unprecedented degradation rates. This situation is linked to a socio-economic crisis marked by increasing inequalities and the concentration of resources in the hands of a powerful few. It is also anchored in the destruction of our social fabrics, leading to migration, wars and famine. Meanwhile, the rise of authoritarianism and political polarization is exacerbating violence against communities and people around the world; and women and non-white-males are particularly affected.

In short, there is a close link between the way societies (mis)treat and exploit *both* humans and nature.

Today's existential threats are rooted in an artificial separation between humans and the rest of nature, as evidenced in the beginning of modernity. This separation underpins modern Western thinking and action – especially since the scientific 'revolution' that took place in Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It manifests most strongly in capitalism and patriarchy, as ways to organize our economies and societies, and to perpetuate inequalities. Indeed, capitalism is built on the premise that it can dominate and exploit nature in order to generate profits. As a consequence, capitalism has radically altered the natural world and continues to destroy ecosystems.

The idea that capitalism may do with nature as it pleases is imposed on the rest of the world through imperialism, (neo)colonialism, and globalization. Today we see new frontiers of exploitation: through the so-called 'green' and 'blue' economies, nature has been redefined as a set of ecosystem services to which monetary value is attributed. Land, water, forests, fisheries and biodiversity are transformed into assets that allow big business and global finance to generate profits.

Additionally, this illusion of separation is seen in the disconnect between international human rights law and environmental law. Founding texts of human rights are largely silent on nature, while environmental law disregards peoples' and communities' rights to protect the environment.

However, recent developments in both human rights and environmental law indicate increased awareness and concern about the complex relationships between human societies and their natural environment. The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP) are important milestones: they reaffirm that people and nature are intricately connected.



TAKE ACTION!

To address the deep crises that humanity faces today, we must overcome the separation between humans and the rest of nature. Nowhere else is our interconnection more evident than in food. Through eating and digestion, nature is transformed into people. Moreover, food production and the availability of nutritious, healthy and culturally adequate food depend on functioning, biodiverse ecosystems, as well as on humans' ability to cooperate with living beings – plants, animals, insects, and microorganisms. Food and its social and spiritual values are also crucial for our communities' social fabric, and thus central to our human nature as social beings. Especially in times of pandemic, nutritious food keeps us healthy and enables us to respond to threats, such as pathogens and illness.

CONNECT THE ISSUES

Global warming, mass extinction and the COVID-19 pandemic clearly show that we need to reorganize our societal relationship to nature. All of these crises are deeply interconnected and therefore we must address them jointly, if we want to overcome them.

Recently, governments increasingly recognize that protecting human dignity is inextricably linked to preserving nature and vice-versa, and that managing land resources sustainably and promoting local knowledge, innovation and practices are crucial to addressing climate change. Likewise, governments are starting to acknowledge that indigenous peoples' and small-scale food producers' agroecological management practices are key contributions to ensuring functioning ecosystems.

These advances are chiefly due to pressure by social movements, indigenous peoples' and civil society organizations. We must take it further! As social movements and social organizations, we must talk about climate change in our land struggles; and about human health when we fight for the protection of ecosystems. As individuals, you can join this global effort and help connect the dots by raising these topics in your community and movements, and also with your family and friends.

MOBILIZE TO PROTECT RURAL PEOPLE'S RIGHTS

A crucial step toward overcoming the human-nature divide is to support the rights of those people and communities who know how to protect ecosystems. These include indigenous peoples and small-scale food producers such as peasants, small-scale fishers, pastoralists and forest dwellers. Let us not forget that women must be at the center of this struggle: in many places, women are subject to structural discrimination and exclusion despite their special connection to seeds, forests, and wild plants.

UNDRIP, UNDROP and other international instruments provide us with an opportunity to re-interpret current instruments of environmental and climate law from a human rights perspective. This is crucial to put center stage the rights of peoples, groups and communities that directly depend on functioning ecosystems. If climate change and the rapid decline of biodiversity are to be tackled, policy makers and other actors need to create the conditions in which rural peoples can play their roles as custodians of biodiversity and stewards of ecosystems. This means that their management and production systems need to be fully recognized and protected, including their tenure and seed systems.

You can mobilize in different ways: from joining street demonstrations to support indigenous peoples' and small-scale food producers' rights, to using UNDROP and UNDRIP as tools to engage local and national policy makers in the struggle. Recent advances in international law and governance spaces – like the UN Committee on World Food Security – also present new openings to bring together human rights and ecological concerns. Movements and organizations – locally and globally – should seize these opportunities to demand policies that ensure the health of ecosystems. The recognition of the human right to a healthy environment could be a promising entry point where nature – or the 'environment' – is not just something functional 'at the service of our survival'.

STAND UP FOR TRANSFORMATION

Capitalism cannot continue doing with nature as it pleases – at least not without provoking profound crises that threaten human survival. There is no other way: we must radically transform our societies.

Our food systems are a perfect entry point. Small-scale food producers' organizations, and indigenous peoples have proposed food sovereignty as a way to fundamentally reshape food systems and power relations. Food sovereignty can generate a broader, deeper societal transformation, especially through localized, circular economies. Against the backdrop of an ecological crisis, agroecology is a critical proposal for transformation. Agroecology is a way of producing food in harmony with nature. This innovative approach builds on the co-evolution of human communities with their natural environment, and is opposed to the domination, exploitation and destruction of nature in the industrial food system.

Agroecology is also much more than that: it challenges existing power structures and proposes ways to overcome the exclusion and exploitation of certain groups of society, in particular women, indigenous peoples, people of color, as well as peasants, pastoralists, small-scale fishers and other rural people.

We must place agroecology at the core of our strategy to transform society.



CONVERGE OUR STRUGGLES

Rural communities are on the frontline of struggles for social justice. Social movements of small-scale food producers, indigenous peoples and grassroots organizations are raising their voices. They practice real solutions, old and new. More recently, new movements have emerged, adding their voices to ongoing struggles, especially for climate justice. Peasants struggling for land and seeds, fisher peoples for their territories, indigenous peoples for self-determination, youth movements to radically reduce greenhouse gas emissions – each struggle is unique, but all of them are interconnected.

This whole host of struggles constitutes the strength of growing movements worldwide. Achieving systemic change depends on our capacity to embrace this diversity, build strong alliances and make people's voices heard in all spaces where decisions are made.



FOOD FOR THOUGHT

- What is your community's relationship with food and nature?
- How does the destruction of nature affect you and your community? How does it affect women in particular?
- What role do capitalism, patriarchy and the dominant industrial food system play in destroying ecosystems?
- How do you think industrial food systems and the ecological and social crises are related?
- Will the COVID-19 pandemic trigger policy change to reconcile food systems, human health and ecosystems?
- How do struggles for food sovereignty and agroecology, and struggles for climate and environmental justice interrelate?
- Which concrete actions should we take to overcome the separation between humans and the rest of nature?
- What are the concrete steps that we can take in our community or organization to trigger transformation?
- How can we build larger and more powerful movements?



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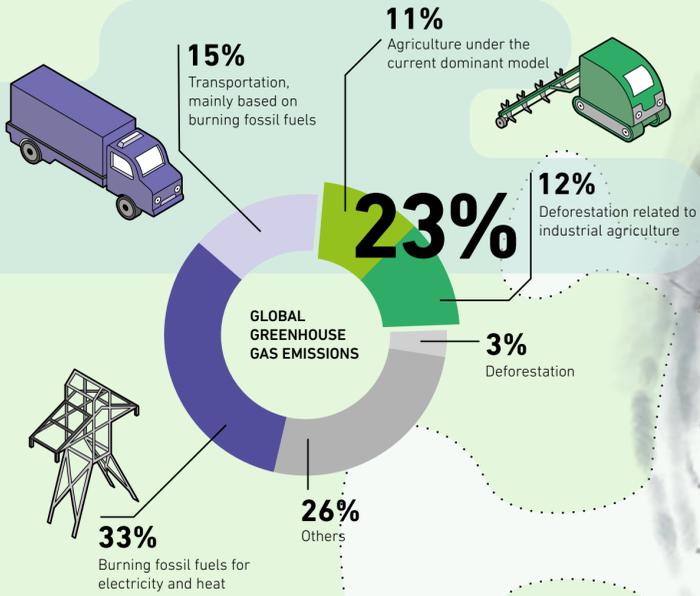
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FACTORS BEHIND THE ECOLOGICAL, FOOD AND HUMAN RIGHTS CRISES

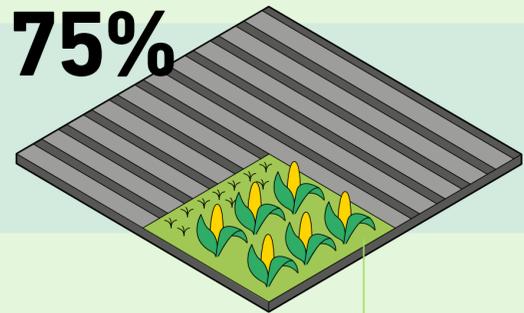
CLIMATE CHANGE

The current dominant agricultural model is behind almost a quarter of global greenhouse emissions.



LOSS OF BIODIVERSITY

The expansion of industrial agriculture is drastically reducing biodiversity.



In the last century, three quarters of plant genetic diversity has been lost, as farmers have been forced to leave their multiple local varieties and landraces for genetically uniform, high-yielding varieties



of the world's food is sourced from only 12 plants and 5 animal species



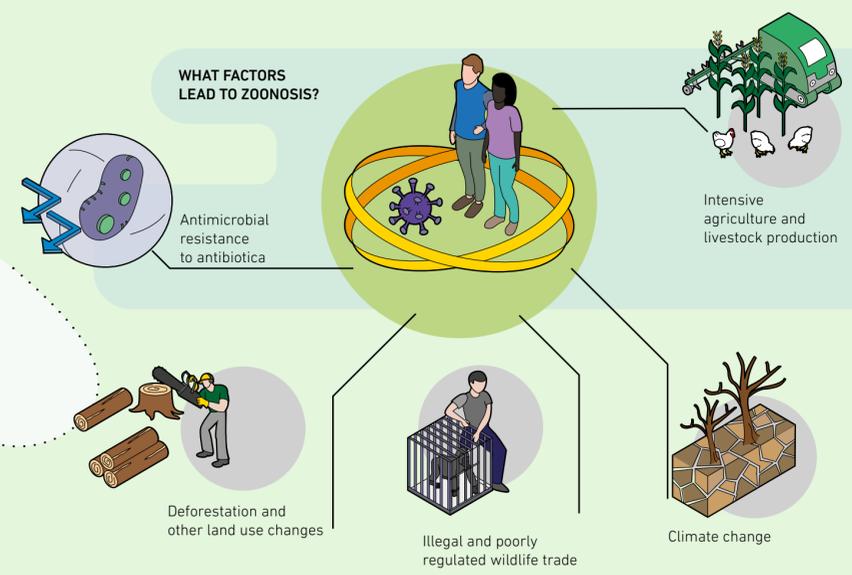
Of the 250,000 to 300,000 known edible plant species, only 150 to 200 species are used by humans



Only three foods – rice, maize and wheat – contribute nearly 60% of the calories and proteins obtained by humans from plants

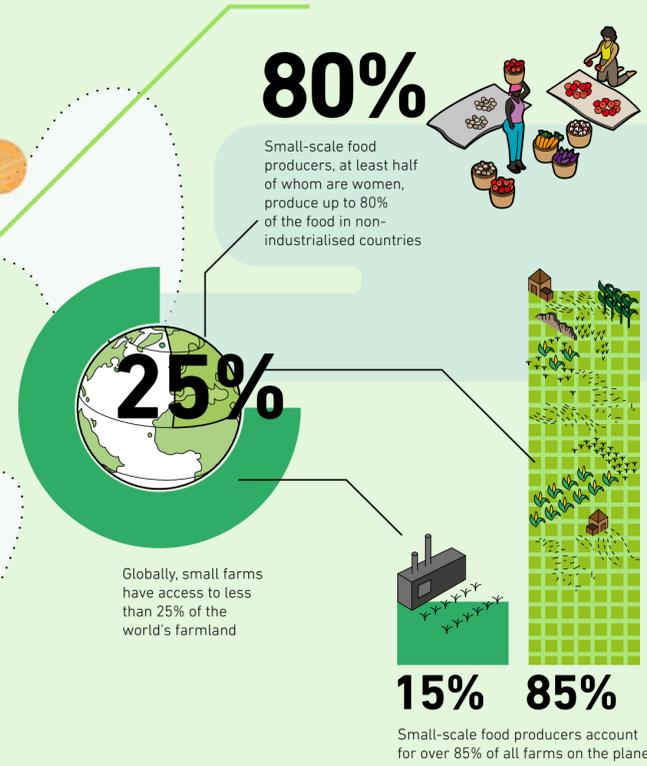
ZOONOSIS & ECOSYSTEM DESTRUCTION

Ecosystem destruction through extractive activities is creating the conditions for the emergence of new diseases. The COVID-19 pandemic is a direct result of it and has laid bare the deep inequalities in our societies, hitting marginalised groups hardest. A further 121 million people could be pushed to starvation this year because of this.



UNDERMINING PEASANT FARMING

Peasants cultivate biodiversity and are stewards of ecosystems.



LAND CONCENTRATION

Around the world, more and more land is falling into the hands of a few powerful actors. In a number of cases, land concentration has been inherited from colonial times. Today, land grabbing and financialization are exacerbating inequalities and driving ecosystem destruction.

AGRICULTURAL LAND IN THE HANDS OF BIG FARMERS/OWNERS



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