

»» The current controversy between the FAO and NGOs regarding 'climate-smart agriculture'

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At first glance, the term 'climate-smart agriculture' seems a bit redundant, as agriculture is a textbook example of an industry that, for millennia, has had to adapt to environmental conditions, which are very much determined by the climate.

In times of ever-quickenning climate change, however, one thing is absolutely certain: farming practices have to adapt to changes and do their part to mitigate the effects. Yet the term as well as the concept of climate-smart agriculture is controversial, and different players define it in different ways.

FAO: smart combination of food security and climate change adaptation

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) coined the term climate-smart agriculture in 2010. In particular, it describes the intelligent combination of food security and climate change adaptation.

Put simply, the approach is based on the following three pillars:

- Securing and boosting agricultural productivity, even under changing climatic conditions
- Strengthening resilience against extreme weather events
- Reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

A great deal of research and development is happening in this area. The FAO's Global Alliance for Climate-Smart Agriculture (GACSA), a knowledge management platform, collects and supports technologies, innovations and 'good practices' from the entire spectrum of agriculture that contribute to this.

NGOs: concept not ecological, socially just or sustainable

A number of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in particular have issued criticism of the FAO concept and the GACSA. They worry that, despite their promising-sounding name, the technologies being promoted are ultimately socially unjust and environmentally harmful, and while they may help to protect the climate in the short term, in the long run they could lead to an ecological, economic and social impasse.

In particular, the critics want to prevent a situation where agriculture that creates dependencies – on resistant high-yield crops, specific fertilisers and pesticides or machines, for example – is propagated under the guise of climate-smart. According to them, not only are these kinds of approaches environmentally harmful; they are also very capital intensive and would displace production by small farmers in the medium to longer term – with commensurate social consequences for the poorest of the poor.

Specific approaches are necessary which suit local conditions

The controversy shows that the goals of climate protection, resource preservation, food security and poverty alleviation are not easy to connect. Globally speaking, agricultural operations have great potential to improve their adaptation strategy and to help mitigate the climate effects. However, this does not guarantee environmental protection or poverty alleviation.

The fact that there are trade-offs in agriculture is nothing new. Climate change adaptation is important, but must not come at the expense of other important dimensions of sustainability

like environmental protection and fairness. Accordingly, it is an issue of both small and large as well as organic and conventional farmers playing their part in terms of sustainable land use.

Not missing out on technological progress

The open criticism that what is referred to as climate-smart agriculture is arbitrary and has to be assessed in light of the extent to which it contributes to the development of location-appropriate, socially just solutions hits on an important point. But some of civil society's complete rejection of the GACSA is a step too far for many experts.

According to them, both climate research and the research and development of the private sector offer technological opportunities that should not be missed. Given its considerable expertise in socio-environmental issues, civil society supporting these climate-smart methods in a constructive and critical way could help improve the quality of the new adaptation and mitigation approaches. ■

Literature

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