

'Nature Based Solutions'

Ransacking agroecology's transformative potential

Since 2020, there has been a growing tendency to present agroecology as compatible with, or as a subset of, 'nature based solutions' (NBS).¹

The 2021 UN Food Systems Summit, for example, considered agroecology as one possible category of 'nature based solutions' in the food and farming sector.

Agribusiness and fossil fuel corporations, corporate platforms such as the World Economic Forum and the finance industry are heavily promoting 'nature based solutions' as the main pathway to sustainability. For them this is a 'win-win-win'.

They are co-opting and undermining agroecology for food sovereignty, which has gained traction with many governments in the last decade.

They tend to focus on the carbon reduction or sequestration potential of agriculture as a main indicator of sustainability and ignore the wider ecological, social, and economic justice elements of agroecology which are key aspects of its transformative potential.

This allows them to promote a certain type of regenerative agriculture, focusing on promoting a few agricultural practices – no-till farming, fertiliser management, cover cropping and the use of corporate digital technologies – **rather than systemic change**. These practices are compatible with maintaining industrial agriculture and corporate control of farming. For example, no-till farming is widely used by the pesticide and biotech industry to promote their products.

Importantly, agribusinesses view 'nature based solutions' as a potential new income stream, which allows them to appear green, as they carry on with the usual destructive farming business models. The finance sector is also keen to grow 'nature based solutions' as a new asset class for financial speculation. The value of voluntary carbon markets quadrupled between 2020 and 2021, driven in part by the acceleration of 'nature based solutions' projects.²

The UN FAO 'Agriculture Nature-Based Solutions' (Ag-NBS) initiative, in partnership with The Nature Conservancy, markets agriculture as a 'nature based solution' to financial investors who are keen on taking control of 'natural capital' and physical assets such as land and forests to shore up their green credentials.³

This conflating of the two approaches sits uncomfortably with the history of 'nature based solutions' as a tool for funding 'protected areas' run by the global conservation industry; a history with significant evidence of displacement and conflict with local communities. This history has been at odds with the call for agrarian reform and land redistribution that are core to many agroecological movements, especially in the global South. The incompatibilities have become even more pronounced as 'nature based solutions' has become a tool to provide carbon credits for fossil fuel corporations, agribusinesses and governments that prefer the distractions of 'net zero' over real zero emissions targets.

The concept of 'nature based solutions' taps into positive ideas of nature as diverse, healthy, versatile and resilient. But a closer look shows that, despite the nice imagery, these so-called solutions will integrate the carbon storage capacity of nature into corporate profit chains, and turn nature and carbon into financial assets.

Agroecology vs 'Nature Based Solutions'

Role of corporations	Opposes the corporate-controlled industrial food and farming system	Operates within and strengthens the corporate-controlled industrial food and farming system
Climate	Cools the planet by taking care of the soil and ecosystems	Heats the planet as it prolongs fossil fuels burning and industrial food production
Inputs	Low input: Drastically reduces fossil fuels, uses no synthetic fertilisers or pesticides	High input: Allows continuation of fossil fuels, synthetic fertilisers and pesticides
Work	Uses agricultural practices that aim to keep people in rural areas and provide decent work	Maintains a precarious labour model and forces farmers into carbon farming contracts
Rights	Puts control of land in the hands of small-scale food producers	Puts control of land in the hands of a few food and I.T. corporations, which cultivate for profit regardless of environmental impact
Vision of nature	Holistic, emancipatory vision of nature as interlinked with culture food systems and livelihoods	Narrow vision of nature as 'capital', providing ecosystem services and an opportunity for revenue

Endnotes

- 1 Friends of the Earth International (2021). Nature based solutions: a wolf in sheep's clothing. <https://www.foei.org/publication/nature-based-solutions-a-wolf-in-sheeps-clothing/>
- 2 Ecosystem Marketplace Insights Team. 2022. "VCM Reaches Towards \$2 Billion in 2021: New Market Analysis Published from Ecosystem Marketplace." Ecosystem Marketplace, August 3, 2022. <https://www.ecosystemmarketplace.com/articles/the-art-of-integrity-state-of-the-voluntary-carbon-markets-q3-2022/>
- 3 Food and Agriculture Organisation, and The Nature Conservancy. 2021. Nature-based solutions in agriculture. Project design for securing investment. Accessed June 2023. <https://www.fao.org/3/cb3144en/CB3144EN.pdf>

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