Unsustainable Farming

Unsustainable farming refers to all the consumption, waste and disposal of water for unsustainable agricultural practices aimed at profit-making, that in the meantime hamper peoples' food sovereignty, agrobiodiversity and peasants farming.

Agriculture accounts for 70% of all the consumption of fresh water in the world. A large amount of this is poisoned by pollution and agrotoxics, while a lot is simply lost and wasted due to inefficiencies and mismanagement. Considering the current consumption and pollution rates, this trend is expected to get worse in the coming years. The industrialization of agriculture and the "green revolution" are especially responsible for this situation. Their technological quick-fix package, spread all over the planet, is presented as the allegedly most efficient food policy and the only way to meet the increasing needs of human consumption. Irresponsible aid agencies stress its value in humanitarian terms, under the pretext of combating hunger, while in the meantime the one-size-fits-all policy is uniformly imposed by free exchange agreements to all small subsistence farmers throughout the planet, to the great advantage of big agri-business corporations. The green revolution approach, however, has multiplied everywhere massive irrigation schemes that don't duly take into account the needs of water reproduction, in as much as they aim to collect water from all available sources, including dams, rivers, springs and wells, and rely on the overwhelming use of agro-toxics to control pests and plant diseases.

The impact on groundwater resources is particularly threatening. Groundwater supplies nearly half of all drinking water in the world. It makes water available during periods of drought or little rainfall, which is crucial for people living in arid or semi-arid regions, including an estimated number of 1.2 to 1.5 billion of rural households in the poorer regions of Africa and Asia. In 2010, the world's aggregated groundwater abstraction was estimated at approximately 1,000 km^3 per year, with 67% used for irrigation, and only 22% for domestic purposes. Artificial canals, irresponsible well schemes, dams, land-grabbing practices and inequitable land regulations contribute to divert an increasing amount of water from local small-scale farming to most profitable export-oriented productions, which often require amounts of water that are unsustainable for local ecosystems. Indeed, the more water one pumps, the lesser one gets: this is the apparently paradoxical consequence of such policies. Irrespective of human rights requirement, the loss of water is rarely compensated. The eviction from water-rich areas are forcibly carried out and grave abuses often take place. Unsustainable over-pumping from groundwater is widespread. It is practiced largely to grow industrial crops (such as sugar cane, flowers, oil palm, etc) for the international market. Notable cases include Mali, Ghana, Ethiopia, Cambodia and Brazil. However, irresponsible water schemes are also implemented by badly informed and badly managed projects of international cooperation that aim to provide small farmers with cash crops (such as vegetables) for local markets. International cooperation projects have been responsible for water depletion and waste of public resources in many cases, including in Niger and in Southern Africa.

The conditions that allow for recharging the groundwater are rarely taken into consideration. In the end, groundwater depletion negatively affects the people who rely on those vital resources, since access to drinkable water is made more and more difficult for the most vulnerable.

This occurred, for instance, in Southern Africa, and in Swaziland in particular, where local water resources are diverted to the advantage of sugar cane production for big corporations suppliers, including Coca-Cola Company. However, due to the extremely higher rates of water consumption involved in this industrial production, as compared to small-scale farming and local crops, the land allocated to local farmers, that feeds the greatest majority of the population, is getting completely dry. As denounced by local civil society organizations, this trend is expected to get worse with the entry into force of the Economic Partnership Agreement within the EU and Swaziland, that will further reinforce the production of sugar and export-oriented agriculture in general.

Unsustainable agriculture must then be regarded as one of the most dangerous forms of water grabbing. While it affects everybody, its effects are more devastating in the regions where water is already scarce, and due to get scarcer in the future because of climate change. This form of water grabbing, however, is especially dangerous because it is more difficult to recognize and fight back. Another agriculture is therefore possible and necessary. Local water committees, responsibly managed by empowered communities, are key to make this happen. Beyond proving capable to meet the needs of local supply, regional networks of local water committees are organizing themselves to resist international policies of water grabbing: this is for instance the case of the Redes and Comunidades de Agua in Central America. Similarly, farmers organizations are increasingly aware that the approach of agro-ecology promotes the respect of natural resources and prevents agriculture to become a driver of water grabbing. Small farmers organizations are increasingly supporting this approach, especially in Latin America and West Africa, and are organizing themselves to fight the industrial and extractivist model in agriculture.