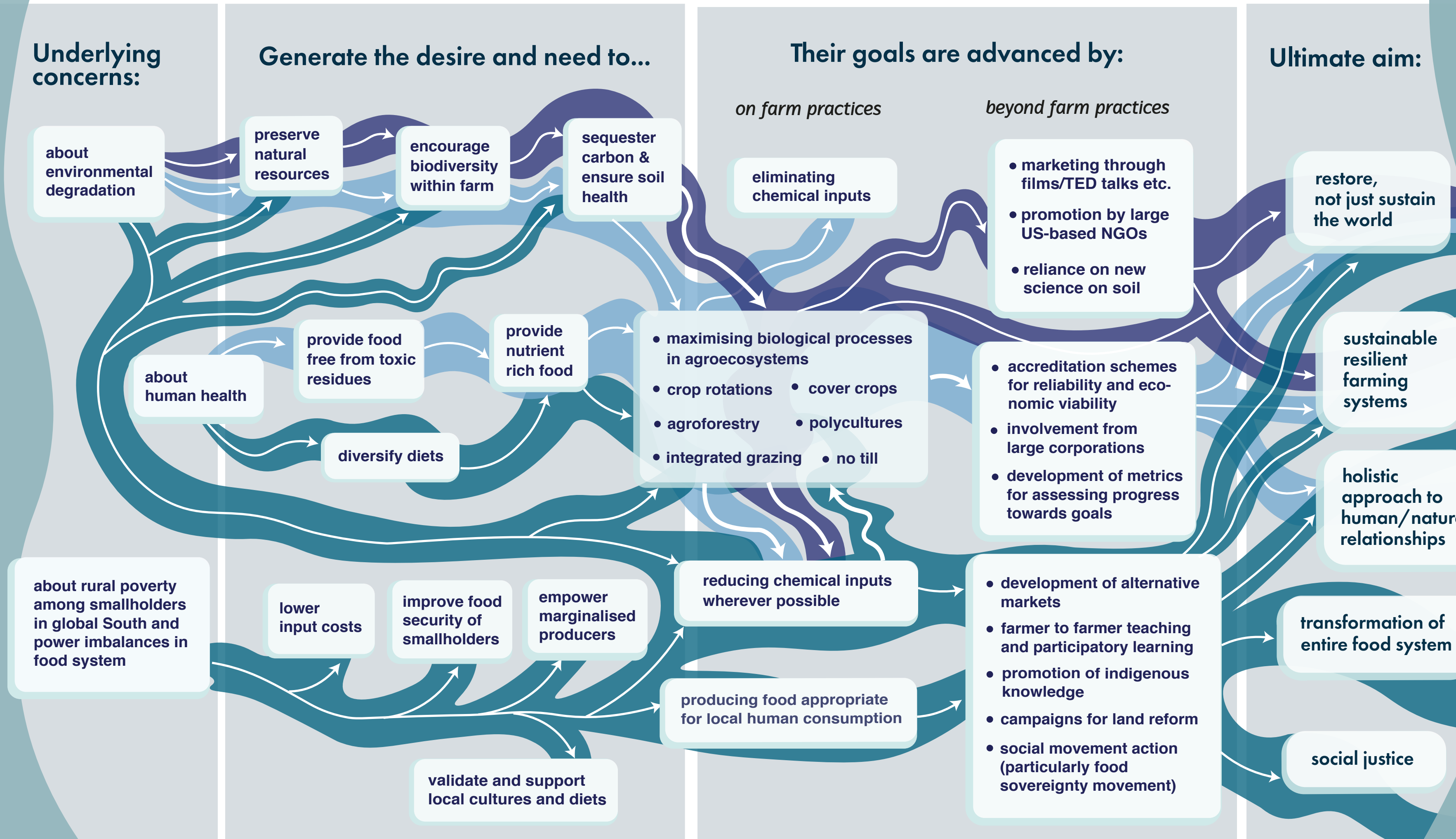




Exploring the ebbs and flows of different agricultural movements

What distinguishes regenerative, organic, and agroecology?

● *Regenerative* ● *Organic* ● *Agroecology*



Join the conversation

The regenerative, organic and agroecology movements share many concerns, and offer seemingly similar solutions. We, at TABLE, therefore began to ask ourselves if they are perhaps repeated attempts to articulate the same things, or whether there are substantive differences.

What does one movement offer, that another doesn't? And what makes one movement more prominent than another in certain geographical, economic or historical contexts? Do they compete for space, or does their co-existence allow them to collaborate and advance their shared goals on a larger scale?

This diagram emerged from such questions and conversations, and represents an initial attempt to understand how agroecology, regenerative agriculture and the organic movement relate to each other.

In producing this diagram we tried to articulate what distinguishes each movement. This, of course, risks making them seem more different or more in conflict than they really are.

Have we made too much of the organic movement's reliance on accreditation schemes? Have we overlooked the justice aspects of the regenerative movement? Have we overemphasised the agroecology movement's concern about rural poverty? Have we underplayed the radical/ reformist dynamics that exist within all three approaches, and the extent to which these overlap across the different movements?

Such problems will be familiar to anyone who has tried to distil complex issues into a simple diagram. We recognise that this work will inevitably involve omissions, simplifications or mis-categorisations. Therefore, we welcome contributions and suggestions from people identifying with these movements and/or working on these topics, as we continue to reflect on these issues.



Key stakeholders

Agroecology has primarily been developed and promoted by small-holder farmers and social movements, alongside agronomists and academics. Increasingly, however, it is gaining the attention of larger development NGOs and intergovernmental bodies, such as the UN FAO. Many agroecologists are very suspicious of more 'mainstream' interest, particularly by commercial actors, and warn against co-optation.

Geographical context

Agroecology has been particularly popular in the global South, especially Latin America, since the 1980s. The term is now increasingly being used in Europe, Asia and Africa, as an umbrella term that encompasses both organic and regenerative systems, and that promotes a holistic food systems perspective.

Scale

Agroecology has generally been adopted by small-holders and 'scaled out' through farmer-to-farmer teaching and support from social movements and NGOs. Agroecologists tend to promote a vision of rural areas populated by a mosaic of small farms, existing within territorial and bioregional food systems that foster more localised food provisioning based on the principles of food sovereignty. Some people contrast agroecology to 'land sparing' approaches, suggesting that the prioritisation of agricultural biodiversity over yield productivity could lead to the conversion of more land for farming. Agroecologists however tend to reject the land sparing /sharing framing, suggesting that it sets up a false dichotomy. They agree that wild land needs protecting, but argue that feeding the world using agroecological methods will not use more land than conventional farming if there are also changes to diets and reductions in food waste.

Farm inputs, monitoring, and assessment

Agroecology is a knowledge intensive approach that depends heavily on human labour, and on observation and understanding of local context. Agroecologists aim to avoid the use of fossil fuel and chemical intensive external inputs, as well as GM and hybrid seeds, due to concerns about environmental impacts, and a desire to reduce farmers' dependence on global corporations. The agroecology movement is sometimes critical of monitoring and assessment processes associated with accreditation schemes, suggesting that they are inaccessible to smallholders and antithetical to agroecology's holistic, context-specific approach and multi-dimensional aims.

Consumption

Agroecology prioritises the production of diverse and nutritious foods suitable for local consumption. If agroecology were to provide food for local populations on a wider scale it would likely necessitate a certain level of dietary change, e.g. a reduction in consumption of meat, sugar and imported and processed foods, and increases in a diverse variety of local and seasonal produce. Concerns about global inequalities mean that agroecologists generally argue for reducing meat intake in historically high-consuming countries, in order to allow for increases in less wealthy regions.

Key stakeholders

Regenerative agriculture (RA) has become particularly popular among farmers, especially livestock farmers, looking to improve their reputation and to dispute claims that their activities are environmentally damaging. The regenerative movement seeks to show that farming can not only be sustainable (i.e. not harmful), but can in fact be a positive force for good, playing a key role in solving climate and environmental crises. Recently, RA has attracted the attention of large food companies looking to manage the environmental impact of their supply chains and to make new consumer-facing claims about the environmental (including carbon) credentials of their produce.

Geographical context

The regenerative movement is most prominent in the global North. Various high-profile farmers, mainly from the US, promote RA through films, books and TED talks. A number of European and Australian practitioners are also developing context-specific practices. Large companies promoting RA have global supply chains, but it remains unclear how their RA initiatives will shape agricultural practices beyond the boardroom.

Scale

Many key figures in the regenerative movement operate relatively large commercial farms in the US; however there is little explicit discussion about the most appropriate scale for the application of regenerative practices. Discussions about the wider knock-on land use impacts of RA are also not particularly prominent within the movement. RA is often associated with a 'land sharing' approach to agriculture and nature conservation. However some people associate certain regenerative practices, particularly ruminant grazing, with 'land sparing' approaches, such as rewilding, which attempt to restore landscapes and ecologies to what they were before humans substantially altered the landscape.

Farm inputs, monitoring and assessment

RA aims to build soil health through practices such as holistic grazing management, the use of cover crops, no-tillage, and the re-integration of livestock and arable systems. In some cases regenerative practices are combined with high-tech or precision technologies to ensure efficient use of fertilisers, herbicides and pesticides; however many within the movement practice organic regenerative farming, and reject the use of chemical inputs entirely. Commercial interest is driving the development of various accreditation schemes. Some of these divide the farming system into discrete parts in order to measure RA's agri-environmental performance, while others critique reductionist metrics and encourage a more holistic or qualitative approach to farm management, incorporating soil health, animal welfare and social fairness.

Consumption

RA is not generally associated with substantive discussions about dietary change although the regenerative movement, along with others promoting ethical carnivorousism, has made efforts to publicise and promote the possibility of sustainable and healthy meat consumption. Many suggest that corporate interest in RA is driven by a desire to ensure that sale of their produce can continue without causing ongoing environmental harm.



Key stakeholders

In many countries, organic certification processes are regulated by state bodies (eg. USDA in the US), and managed by private or non-profit organisations (e.g. Soil Association in the UK). Different stakeholders have different understandings of organic: some use organic as a set of minimum standards that facilitate organic markets, while others promote a broader set of interconnected principles including health, ecology, fairness and care. Many smallholder farmers around the world have long used organic practices, but do not necessarily identify with the organic movement or partake in certification processes.

Geographical context

The organic movement is particularly strong in Europe, Australasia and North America. Organic consumption in these contexts is supported by imports from Latin America and China, where a large proportion of the world's organic agricultural land is found. Traditionally, these regions have primarily produced organic food for export; however domestic demand has grown rapidly in these areas in recent years, particularly in major cities.

Scale

There is no consensus on questions of scale. In many contexts, for example California, organic markets are dominated by a small number of very large-scale organic farms. However, many in the organic movement explicitly highlight the importance of smallholder and family farming. Although organic farms can be large in size and relatively intensive (for example in their use of machinery), organic agriculture is more often associated with land sharing, rather than land sparing approaches to land management. However, as with agroecology, many within the movement reject this dichotomy and promote dietary change and reductions in food waste so that both approaches can coexist.

Farm inputs, monitoring and assessment

As a whole, the organic movement rejects the use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides, although most certification schemes permit some specific chemical inputs. Minimum standards and accreditation schemes were developed in the 1970s to gain trust among consumers, and monitoring and assessment remain an important part of OA. The movement however increasingly acknowledges the need to expand participation options and encourage a broader set of principles and practices.

Consumption

In some cases, the label 'organic' has primarily become a marketing tool, with producers adopting organic practices to access profitable markets. However, many members of the organic movement argue strongly for wider food systems change and predicate the growth of organic agriculture on the consumption of 'less and better meat', increased consumption of a wider range of fruits and vegetables, a reduction in consumption of processed foods, and a shift towards more ethically motivated, socially just food systems.