3G - Agriculture and the climate: problems and real solutions

Theme:	Agroecology
Moderator:	Tjerk Dalhuisen (ASEED)
Speakers:	Danny Wijnhoud (Action Aid), Nina Holland (Corporate Europe Observatory, Wijnand Sukkel (Praktijkonderzoek Plant Omgeving PPO)

Report

Introduction by Tjerk: Agriculture is a big contributor to climate change. It does not have to be; we could cool the planet with sound farming practices. Is 'Climate Smart Agriculture' a real solution or bussiness as usual? Are there other options?

Danny explains the problems with Climate Smart Agriculture. 'Clever name, losing game'. No environmental or social criteria, mainly used by Trans National Corporations. Biotech, Fertilizer and Agrobiz industry use this term to brand their model as 'green'. It diffuses the debate on the real influence of agriculture on the environment. It is mainly rebranding the practices of the green revolution – that depend on fossile fuel and have a very negative impact – as climate smart. So for real solutions like agroecology it would be much better to speak of climate resilient agriculture (or even better: regenerative agriculture TD).

Nina tells us more about the lobby behind Climate Smart Agriculture. Corporations have so far succesfully managed to keep industrial farming out of the UN climate negotiations and agreement. During the COP21 meeting in Paris Monsanto claimed to be carbon neutral by 2021 through 'climate smart agriculture', including RoundupReady GMO crops. At a corporate greenwash event in Paris on 'climate smart agriculture' in Europe, Dutch dairy processor Friesland Campina said they would expand production and offset that by some onsite emission reductions. Another example given was pouring liquid CO2 over grapes that have to be harvested earlier (in August) because of climate change, which affects the taste as it's too hot. The fertilizer industry has a big say in the Global Alliance on Climate Smart Agriculture. But at the same time in Brussels, with help of some MEPs like VVD's Jan Huitema, the fertilizer industry with the big farmers have undermined the air quality directive by making sure NOx and methane (strong greenhouse gas emissions) from agriculture are not covered by the new rules. It is more than obvious they are the last ones to be interested in real climate smart agriculture.

Wijnand presents positive possibilities. Agriculture holds a crucial role in reducing greenhouse gas-emissions and in resilience to climate change. Good agricultural practices can significantly reduce greenhouse gas emissions and at the same time make agriculture less vulnerable to for example weather extremes. Soil is crucial in the climate debate. It is the place where much more carbon dioxide is stored than in the atmosphere. It is a complex subject though, for many factors are involved. And also scale matters, for small steps at a large scale in conventional farming could have much more influence than small projects that go all the way.

Higher soil organic matter creates more resilient soils. He presents examples from test fields in Flevoland where organically grown corn was more resilient and produced higher yields than conventionally grown corn. Much more research could be done on this kind of effects.

As a reaction to the critics on Climate Smart he explains that today is the first time he hears about the negative sides. At Wageningen University it was considered as a neutral term for practices that could reduce greenhouse gas emissions (confirmed by various students). People in the workshop agree that good practices should not be confused with business as usual.

Those attending the workshop agree there is a huge potential to make agriculture much more resilient and even regenerative, especially in organic and agroecological practices with low inputs and especially soil care. Opinions and ideas differ on the possibilities to increase soil organic matter in a relatively rapid way. Much more research could and should be done in this direction. To combat climate change strong efforts should be made to increase soil organic matter.

Outcomes

1. Avoid the term 'Climate Smart Agriculture'. It is used mainly by industry to greenwash business as usual.
2. Good agricultural practices and especially soil care can significantly reduce greenhouse gas emissions and maybe even turn agriculture into a carbon sink instead of polluter. Increasing soil organic matter should be a focus in policy. Organic agriculture appears to have a positive impact on soil life and crops are much more climate resilient.
3. Much more research is needed on this topic and available (public) funding should be allocated to research on agroecological solutions to climate change.

More information

- Website Regeneration International, http://regenerationinternational.org/
- Factsheet 'Healthy soils can cool the planet', http://2igmzc48tf4q88z3o24qjfl8.wpengine.netdna-cdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/March9_Factsheet_EN.pdf
- Report 'Regenerative Organic Agriculture and Climate Change – A Down to Earth Solution to Global Warming', http://rodaleinstitute.org/assets/RegenOrgAgricultureAndClimateChange_20140418.pdf
- Report 'Food & climate: connecting the dots choosing the way forward', http://www.centerforfoodsafety.org/files/foodclimate_51242.pdf
- Report 'How multinationals use climate change to impose an industrial agricultural model', http://multinationales.org/How-multinationals-use-climate-change-to-impose-an-industrial-agricultural
- Report 'Solutions COP21: Climate Smart Agriculture, boosting the technofix', http://corporateeurope.org/climate-and-energy/2015/12/solutions-cop21-climate-smart-agriculture-boosting-technofix
- Article, 'Wereldvoedseldag: Groeiende beweging wil échte veranderingen in landbouw en voedselsysteem', http://www.viceversaonline.nl/2014/10/wereldvoedseldag-groeiende-beweging-wil-echte-veranderingen-in-landbouw-en-voedselsysteem/