



**Briefing Note** September 2023

# A JUST TRANSITION TO AGROECOLOGY



**FIAN**  
INTERNATIONAL



## INTRODUCTION

The multiple crises currently affecting humanity and our planet have clearly demonstrated that we cannot continue businesses as usual. We urgently need a just transition towards fair, healthy, and sustainable economic systems if we are to ensure the survival and life in dignity of present and future generations as well as their intrinsic relationship with nature.

The United Nations (UN) Human Rights System—an authoritative framework—has the mandate and competence to define standards and guidance on how states, individually and jointly, can advance towards the needed transition, including the transformation of food systems. Different UN human rights bodies recognize that urgent action is required to overcome the multidimensional crises we face, to which agro-industrial food systems have substantially contributed. **This briefing assesses a just transition from the right to food and nutrition perspective and argues that only a systemic, multisectoral and human rights-based transition can guarantee a safe, sustainable, and just future.** It shows how to address the current food crisis, the rising socio-economic inequalities, and the Triple Planetary Crisis: climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution. While several UN human rights institutions have recalled the urgency of transforming food systems, we argue that **the crucial role that agroecology plays in such a transition has not yet been properly recognized, and is not reflected in existing regulatory frameworks.** Building on arguments of UN experts and on concrete experiences from diverse communities across different regions, in this briefing **we identify specific legal and policy measures** that governments can adopt and implement at all levels of governance to facilitate a just transition to agroecology. Based on the principles of intra- and intergenerational justice, these measures are in line with states' human rights obligations and environmental commitments. Above all, they are for the benefit of the planet and its people.



## 1. ELEMENTS OF A HUMAN RIGHTS-BASED JUST TRANSITION

A just transition that addresses the inequalities, violence, dispossession, and destruction of ecosystems that the current system generates must be based on international human rights standards and frameworks<sup>1</sup>. **It needs to be directed to promoting, protecting, and fulfilling the human rights of all, in particular the realization of the right to adequate food and nutrition. It pays special attention to marginalized groups who face multiple, intersecting forms of discrimination and exclusion.** The rights of women, Indigenous Peoples, workers, peasants, fishers, pastoralists, and other small-scale food producers and communities provide the parameters for a truly equitable, just, and sustainable transformation of food systems. While the starting point is states' obligations vis-à-vis human rights and the environment, a just transition is meant to focus on the well-being and care of human beings and of nature. Furthermore, it should recognize and build on the policy guidance<sup>2</sup> that is endorsed by the Committee on World Food Security (CFS), which is the foremost inclusive intergovernmental forum dedicated to food security issues. **Human rights are indivisible and interdependent.** A sectorial approach that merely focuses on an energetic transition by, for instance, promoting the use of renewable energies without considering the impacts of the expansion of these technologies on, among others, the right to food, the right to land, the right to water, the rights of peasants and Indigenous Peoples, the right to a healthy, clean, and sustainable environment<sup>3</sup>, the right to health, the right to work, and cultural rights, undermines the principle of indivisibility and interdependence of human rights. Moreover, this approach does not address existing power imbalances and discrimination. **A just transition must be based on a systemic and multisectoral approach** that addresses socio-economic inequalities, including gender inequalities, in order to transform processes of marginalization and exploitation that have always benefitted the same groups.



**In a just transition, the meaningful and effective participation of the most affected and frontline people and communities is essential.** The collective voices of small-scale food producers, peasants, fishers, pastoralists, Indigenous Peoples, workers, forest people, urban communities, and women have

<sup>1</sup> International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions, UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP), UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) etc.

<sup>2</sup> CFS (2021). *Agroecology and other innovative approaches*.

<sup>3</sup> For more information see: Orellana, M. (2023). *The toxic impacts of some proposed climate change solutions*. A/HRC/54/25.

articulated a vision for the transformation of food systems that respects, protects, and fulfils everyone's human rights. This vision offers an intersectional perspective. Their aspirations are firmly rooted in the fundamental right to adequate food and nutrition, as enshrined in decisive human rights documents, including the UN Declarations on the Rights of Peasants and other rural workers (UNDROP), as well as the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).

The concept of '**Just Transition**' first emerged in the United States of America in the 1970s, in the context of negotiations between unions, community members and environmental organizations over the closure of a nuclear power plant. Since then, the concept has gained popularity as a framework to articulate workers' demands in relation to environmental conflicts. It unites different forms of resistance against political and economic models that have destroyed the planet, concentrated wealth and exploited workers around the world, and the impacts of which have fallen disproportionately on marginalized communities<sup>4</sup>. More recently, the concept has been adopted by some UN agencies, such as the International Labour Organization (ILO)<sup>5</sup>, and it is also mentioned in the preamble of the Paris Agreement<sup>6</sup>.

Although the just transition debate originated in the energy and extractive sectors, the concept has served as a rallying point for labor movements and other social and environmental justice movements and their alliances, including in the context of food and nutrition. The result has been a more comprehensive and deeper vision of a just transition, which views environmental degradation as one of several manifestations of a wider crisis. As such, this concept is diametrically opposed to the narrow view behind 'net zero emissions', which fails to consider broader environmental, social and economic issues, as well as human rights. In the context of food and nutrition, the term 'just transition' has the potential to give content and direction to the ubiquitous calls for food system transformation, which have been taken up by corporations and other actors promoting so-called "solutions" to the current interconnected crises. Their proposals, however, fail to address the root causes of climate change, the destruction of ecosystems and biodiversity, and rising inequalities<sup>7</sup>. A just transition places justice, human rights and the agency of people and communities center stage.

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4 Transnational Institute (2020). *Just Transition: How environmental justice organisations and trade unions are coming together for social and environmental transformation*.

5 International Labour Organization (2015). *Guidelines for a just transition towards environmentally sustainable economies and societies for all*.

6 UNFCCC (2015). *Paris Agreement to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change*.

7 FIAN International (2023). *Food Systems Transformation: In Which Direction?*



## 2. WHAT IS THE PROBLEM WITH INDUSTRIAL FOOD SYSTEMS?

There are multiple problems with the way food is produced, processed, distributed, prepared, consumed and disposed of in industrial food systems<sup>8</sup>. Some of the most problematic features and impacts are:

- **Power imbalances and inequalities**

As stated by diverse UN Special Rapporteurs<sup>9</sup> and other experts<sup>10</sup>, industrial food systems contribute to human rights violations. They are based on discrimination, unequal trade relations and labor exploitation. Peasants and other people working in rural areas are the most important food producers in the world—they provide between 75% and 80% of the global food<sup>11</sup>—yet they are amongst the most affected by poverty, hunger, and malnutrition. These figures clearly show that the denial of the right to adequate food and nutrition is NOT a result of a lack of available and accessible food in the world, but rather of the injustice and power imbalances that are deeply entrenched in the economic system. Inequitable production and distribution systems prevent those in need to access food.

- **Climate crisis, biodiversity loss and pollution**

Dominant food systems are based on intensive industrial agriculture and export-oriented food production. They are major drivers of climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution, and overall environmental

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<sup>8</sup> FIAN (2022). *The Problem with the Industrial Food System & How to Fix It*.

<sup>9</sup> Boyd, D. (2021). *Human rights obligations relating to the enjoyment of a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment*. A/76/179. de Schutter, O. (2010). *Agroecology and the Right to Food*. A/HRC/16. Elver, H. (2015). *Right to Food*. A/70/287. Elver, H. (2017). A/HRC/34/48. Fakhri, M. (2021). *Food systems and human rights*. A/76/237.

<sup>10</sup> Including IPES Food: International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems.

<sup>11</sup> FAO (2014). *The state of Food and Agriculture*.

degradation<sup>12</sup>. Currently, approximately one third of global greenhouse gas emissions come from industrial food systems<sup>13</sup>. Chemical pesticides and synthetic and mined fertilizers play a significant, yet under-recognized, role in exacerbating climate change, ecosystem degradation, and environmental pollution<sup>14</sup>. They are derived from fossil fuels or unsustainable mining, and their production is highly energy-intensive. Additionally, the usage of chemical pesticides leads to high greenhouse gas emissions, and they equally have negative impacts on human health, soils, ecosystems, and biodiversity. The industrial food system promotes the prevalence of large monocultures, which have negative impacts on agricultural biodiversity, diminish the resilience of food systems, and pose a threat to the right to adequate food and nutrition. Despite the fact that over 6000 plant species are grown for food, a mere three crops (rice, wheat, and maize) contribute to 60% of the total human calorie consumption<sup>15</sup>.

#### • Serious health impacts caused by the use of agrochemicals

The use of pesticides and chemical fertilizers in intensive industrial agriculture has serious negative impacts on the health and wellbeing of people, in particular peasants and other small-scale food producers, Indigenous Peoples, and rural and urban communities. Long-term exposure to pesticides can particularly lead to chronic diseases such as cancer, birth defects or other reproductive harm, and abnormalities in the neurological, developmental, and immune systems. An estimated 44% of all peasants and agricultural workers (amounting to 385 million people) are poisoned by pesticides annually, and about 10000 people die from acute poisoning every year<sup>16</sup>.

*The amount of pesticides needed to protect crops depends on the robustness of the farming system. If crops are cultivated in unsuitable locations, they tend to be more susceptible to pests and diseases. Over the past decades, diversity in farming systems has been greatly reduced in terms of crops and varieties grown in natural habitats. The result is a loss of ecosystem services like natural pest control through predators and a loss of soil fertility<sup>17</sup>.*

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<sup>12</sup> Boyd, D. (2021). Human rights obligations relating to the enjoyment of a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment. A76/179, p.4.

<sup>13</sup> Fakhri, M. (2021). Food systems and human rights. A/76/237, p.5.

For more information on direct and indirect emissions please see Elver, H. (2015) A/70/287, p.11. Crop and livestock farming are responsible for approximately 15% of global emissions. The production of fertilizers, herbicides, and pesticides, along with energy usage for activities such as tillage, irrigation, fertilization, harvesting, and transportation, accounts for 60% of the overall emissions generated by the global food system. Furthermore, the expansion of agricultural areas and alterations in land use contribute an extra 15-17% of emissions.

<sup>14</sup> Ciel (2022). Fossils, Fertilizers, and False Solutions.

<sup>15</sup> Boyd, D. (2021). Human rights obligations relating to the enjoyment of a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment. A76/179, p.8.

<sup>16</sup> Boedeker, W., Watts, M., Clausing, P. et al. (2020). The global distribution of acute unintentional pesticide poisoning: estimations based on a systematic review. BMC Public Health.

<sup>17</sup> Elver, H. (2017). A/HRC/34/48, p.20.



### 3. THE CASE FOR TRANSFORMING INDUSTRIAL FOOD SYSTEMS TO AGROECOLOGY

The urgency of transforming industrial food systems is now widely recognized, including by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), and the CFS. Agroecology plays an essential role both in the food system transformation and in a just transition<sup>18</sup>. As early as 2010, following an extensive review of scientific literature, the then Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food reached the conclusion that agroecology plays a significant role in mitigating climate change. **Agroecology, a form of agriculture and food production, stands out for its low carbon emissions, conservation of ecosystems, and positive impact on the livelihoods of peasants and other small-scale food producers, while increasing their agency.** By avoiding emissions associated with the fossil-fuel intensive production and application of synthetic fertilizers and pesticides, agroecology delinks food production from the reliance of fossil fuels, and as such is a pathway to a sustainable future<sup>19</sup>.

Since then, various Special Rapporteurs on the Right to Food have reported on the **proven successes and benefits of agroecology**<sup>20</sup>. They have **emphasized the potential of agroecology as a way to significantly reduce the extensive use of pesticides**<sup>21</sup>, and described it as the best approach to efficiently and effectively use natural resources to fulfil the right to food. Agroecology has been widely endorsed by scientists, civil society organizations and organizations of Indigenous Peoples, peasants, and other smallholder food producers<sup>22</sup>. Recent research analyzing long-term evidence suggests that **minimizing or completely eliminating the use of chemical fertilizers on farms can lead to reduced greenhouse gas emissions and decreased toxic pollution**<sup>23</sup>.



Additionally, by building on and stimulating natural processes, agroecology enhances farm productivity and improves resilience to the effects of climate change and other factors. By reducing reliance on chemical fertilizers, global agriculture becomes less vulnerable to international economic shocks<sup>24</sup>. Four

<sup>18</sup> IPCC. (2022). *Summary for Policymakers*. In: Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability. Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. FAO. (2018). *The 10 elements of agroecology*. High-Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition of the Committee on World Food Security. (2019). *Agroecological and other innovative approaches*.

<sup>19</sup> de Schutter, O. (2010). *Agroecology and the Right to Food*. A/HRC/16/49, p.13.

<sup>20</sup> Elver, H. (2015). A/70/287.

<sup>21</sup> Elver, H. (2017). A/HRC/34/48, p.19.

<sup>22</sup> Fakhri, M. (2021). *Food systems and human rights*. A/76/237, p.14-15.

<sup>23</sup> Fakhri, M. (2022). *Conflict and the right to food*. A/HRC/52/40, p.6.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, p.6.

agrochemical companies currently control 60% of the global commercial seed market and 75% of the global pesticides market<sup>25</sup>. **Diverse and localized food systems that are based on agroecology are more resilient** as they do not depend on expensive inputs provided by agrochemical companies, which is particularly beneficial for those food producers who do not have the money to buy expensive inputs. Rather than relying on external inputs, agroecology enhances biological processes in soils to improve productivity and plant health. Shorter supply chains and territorial markets increase food sovereignty, while the co-evolution of human communities with their natural environment ensures a diversity of seeds and breeds that have adapted to local conditions.

**Agroecology**<sup>26</sup> is rooted in the traditional knowledge, innovations, and practices of Indigenous Peoples, peasants and other small-scale food producers, and combines these with scientific evidence. By fostering the agency of food producers, agroecology addresses power imbalances and social inequalities. This distinguishes agroecology from other approaches that are being promoted to transform food systems, as these tend to reproduce or even exacerbate some of the main problems of industrial seed systems. Biological and digital technologies, for instance, are highly energy and resource intensive and carry serious risks, while many of their promised benefits still need to be proven<sup>27</sup>. Furthermore, these technologies are dominated by a small number of corporate actors who hold exclusive proprietary rights over products and infrastructure. This entails serious risks of exacerbating dependency and marginalization of small-scale food producers, thus entrenching discrimination and inequalities. Agroecology is not against science and innovation; through collective processes it puts those who produce and consume food at the center of decision-making on the kind of technologies that are the most appropriate in any given context.

A just transition enables sustainable and fair food production, leads to more just working conditions, and transforms consumption patterns. It includes dietary shifts towards more healthy, sustainable and less resource intense consumption. Enacting such a transition reduces food waste, preserves food diversity, and avoids homogenization, which ultimately impoverishes small food producers, leads to a decrease in the variety of diets, and damages the planet. Sustainability refers not only to the environmental dimension, but also to cultural adequacy, equity, and livelihood enhancement. Because it builds on local, indigenous, and peasant knowledge and traditional practices, public policies and legal frameworks that are consistent with an agroecological approach will support the production of healthy food, thereby contributing to human well-being, the regeneration of ecosystems, and the preservation of biodiversity.

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<sup>25</sup> International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems (2017). *Too big to feed: exploring the impacts of mega-mergers, consolidation and concentration of power in the agri-food sector*.

<sup>26</sup> For more information see: FIAN (2021). *Agroecology in UNDROP*.

<sup>27</sup> One example are so-called „new genomic techniques“ (NGT), which are promoted by seed corporations and some researchers as providing a solution to the problems of the current food systems, but which are only marginally used (only one soy and one canola variety are marketed in the USA), and which entail serious risks of unintended and uncontrolled effects. See, for instance, Testbiotech (2023). *„Gene Scissors“ cause chaotic disturbance in plant genome*.





## 4. LEGAL AND POLICY MEASURES TO ADVANCE A JUST TRANSITION TO AGROECOLOGY

Based on the analysis of experiences of transition in various regions, FIAN has identified a series of regulatory and public policy elements that states should adopt to advance agroecology<sup>28</sup>. The challenges at hand require comprehensive action that responds to local contexts and needs, and is based on participatory and inclusive processes. To this end, the following steps can be taken initially:

### Support and promote transition processes

- Develop and adopt binding transition plans and allocate financial resources to the necessary budget items, which include, among others, gender-sensitive support mechanisms for rural populations and Indigenous Peoples, in line with UNDRIP, UNDROP, CEDAW and ILO conventions.
- Recognize Indigenous Peoples, peasants, small-scale fishers, pastoralists, and other rural peoples' knowledge, practices, and innovations, and rigorously implement their right to effective, meaningful and informed participation to define thematic priorities, policy options and implementation approaches.
- Transform agricultural subsidy systems and extension services to provide appropriate support to small-scale food producers through processes that enable the effective participation

<sup>28</sup> FIAN (2021). *Transitioning towards pesticide-free food systems: Peoples's struggles and imagination*.  
FIAN (2021). *Key elements in regulatory frameworks to ban highly hazardous pesticides, phase out other pesticides, and facilitate a transition to agroecology*.

of peasants and other small-scale food producers.

- Ensure access to essential services, incentives, and adequate support for agroecological food producers (such as crop insurance, credit, and cash transactions), and put in place safeguards against indebtedness.

### **Phase-out agrottoxics and ensure liability**

- Ban pesticides or active ingredients. A truly comprehensive ban covers manufacturing, usage, distribution, and commercialization of pesticides, starting with highly hazardous pesticides, then continuing with prohibited pesticides in the regulating countries, and lastly reducing other pesticides that also harm the environment or affect food adequacy and safety.
- Create agroecological zones that are free of agrottoxics (including pesticides, chemical fertilizers, GMOs) at national and sub-national levels.
- Establish clear liability regulations for damages caused by agrottoxics, including pesticides. In the case of highly hazardous pesticides, the most effective measure is to impose strict liability regimes. Furthermore, in the case of damages caused by pesticides, the burden of proof lies with the production and distribution companies and not with the affected individuals and communities. Enforcement of all regulations shall be guaranteed.

### **Ensure access to markets and knowledge**

- Support territorial markets at local, national, and regional levels and ensure access of agroecological producers to markets with fair prices that reflect living wages.
- Promote and prioritize the consumption of peasants' agroecological products, for example, through government procurement contracts for school meal programs.
- Support social solidarity economies, including rural peoples' cooperatives.
- Promote rural universities and other spaces to build capacity and exchange experiences to co-create knowledge on agroecological practices.
- Reorient public agricultural research and training to incorporate agroecology into national and academic research programs, and support inclusive and participatory agricultural research in which small-scale food producers are involved on a par with researchers.
- Ensure the protection of peasants' and Indigenous Peoples' traditional knowledge, innovations and practices, particularly in the context of intellectual property policies. This includes prohibiting patents and all other forms of intellectual property rights (IPR) on genetic sequencing (both physical and digital) to avoid biopiracy.

### **Reverse discriminatory structural policies and prevent undue interference**

- Take measures to prevent undue interference by corporations and related actors (such as philanthropic foundations and corporate-linked research institutions, among others) in the transition process, and ensure the accountability of companies that fail to comply with established regulations or interfere with the implementation of transition plans.
- Reverse discriminatory structural policies against agroecology, including budgetary benefits, trade advantages, tariff barriers, and investment protection measures.

- End harmful agricultural subsidies that benefit large agri-business.
- Stop the public funding of partial research that is unduly disqualifying agroecology and justifying the use of agrotoxics, and ensure the establishment of adequate policies to prevent conflict of interest.

### **Implement the rights of peasants, rural communities, Indigenous Peoples, and small-scale food producers**

- Ensure small-scale food producers' access to and control over land and other natural resources so that they are able to practice agroecology. This may include the implementation of redistributive agrarian reform policies.
- Ensure the respect, protection and fulfilment of peasants' and Indigenous Peoples' rights to save, use, exchange, and sell their seeds, including by legally recognizing their distinct seed management systems and safeguarding their right to decide on the crops, species, and varieties that they wish to grow.

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