

Interview

An Interview with Agroecologist Jairo Restrepo

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INTRODUCTION

“My dream is to construct a being, an ideal state of a being, so that I shall not be the ideal being of the State.”

Jairo Restrepo is a passionate educator and activist in the field of sustainable agriculture and food sovereignty. He campaigns for a return of self-determination, knowledge and autonomy for the farmer in the face of powerful agribusiness. He has been a consultant on sustainable agriculture for many years, working with the UN, Unesco, the FAO and the International Labour Organisation, among others. Originally from Columbia, Restrepo is a strong advocate for agroecology and regenerative farming. He is unique in that he not only argues passionately for the rights of farmers, but he also teaches an array of practical technologies and preparations to increase soil fertility and transform cropping. He offers tools and inspiration for farmers, smallholders and activists.

An agronomist with a rebellious character, he has a passionate belief in people power and their local rural culture and food sovereignty. He works to disseminate the indigenous knowledge and experience he has gathered from over 20 years work across all continents.

In this interview he speaks of organic farming, but he is mistrustful of certified organic farming in the context of South America. He aligns his thinking as more reflective of regenerative agriculture which takes a wider holistic approach to organic principles that includes the local environment and its communities.

Tell us about your background and how you came to work in organic agriculture?

worked at the Federal University of Rio Grande de Sul in Brazil for many years. I was researching how to eradicate the smell of rotten eggs from a phosphoric poison called Malatol used in corn and wheat storage. However, in 1979 I happened to hear a talk given by a professor working in the poison residues lab of the Ministry of Agriculture. His name was Sebastián Pinheiro and in 45 minutes he was able to describe how agricultural poisons were used not only in the environment, but also how the industry was born out of the second world war, and that it was now bribing the entire structure of the Brazilian military dictatorship that was then in place. This was a

turning point for me. I became very self critical and aligned myself with Pinheiro. Working with him, I trained in chemical residue analysis, and then I started speaking out to defend and protect life. My mission now is to defend life. This is my purpose, my instinct, but also to protect the conditions that encourage perpetual and healthy life.

What impact did your work have in South America?

It is hard to quantify it – many things in Latin America happened due to the crisis or terror and rising social tension. So there is resistance and re-existence. When I speak of re-existence I speak of people who have always found a way

without industrial agriculture. Some farmers have access to industrial technology, others have not. But the changes are huge. 75% of farmers in Latin America are now using organic fertilizer in one way or another and they produce 67% of food across the continent, mostly in the small farmer sector.

When we started promoting the proposal of organic agriculture in Cuba, in 10 years we were linked with 87,500 promoters of organic agriculture. From 1997 up to 2007 where a 10 year programme was concluded and assessment in Havana was performed, we recognised that this movement grew due to the interest of many farmers, so we did have a huge impact. I participated in forming the founding of the movement in Cuba and made several consecutive volunteer trips from place to place throughout the country. One of my trips lasted 78 days, and we were in contact with 3,000 Cuban technicians – this practically became policy.

Ideas are shared through farmer-to-farmer learning. But organic agriculture is not a small farmer unit, it is not even a political proposal; it is broader than that. Organic agriculture goes from being an instrument of technological transformation to an instrument for transforming society.

Society does not have to be detached from technology. Technology is an expression of society and this is what we want. We don't want to change technology; we want to transform society, thereby changing the technological proposal. Today the opposite occurs, the dominant type of technology proposes a society subjugated to industry, and we want the opposite – and here I use one sentence quite a lot – “my dream is to construct a being, an ideal state of a being, so that I shall not be the ideal being of the State”. I want to fight for this ideal state of being so that I won't be the ideal of the State; that is not to be slavish.

Industrial agriculture is no longer able to respond to the crisis of societal change. On the contrary it is causing the crisis, because agriculture and the food system wants to enslave society, concentrating economic revenues. This hungry proposal of accumulating capital by all means causes a crisis, and farmers see that this is not a technological issue but an economic crisis that in turn is a political crisis. Capital is its own gravedigger in this respect.

What are the obstacles facing organic agriculture?

In South America there are three obstacles. The first is the State. It has little societal commitment and no desire to change. Industry is where the power lies, and politicians are temporary. In Latin America industry is power and politicians are temporarily there as its representatives.

The second obstacle is the monolithic approach of universities. The term ‘university’ is derived from ‘universities’, the universal set of knowledge possible to dream up, construct and propose a thesis. Today universities don't propose theses, they propose ‘research’ but already know the results. This is adjusted research. Industry does not need universities for knowledge, as they conduct more research themselves, what they need is legitimacy. People have an idea that university is “free, public and serves the people”. That's a lie, the university doesn't represent the citizenry, more so, if universities were to close farmers wouldn't even notice, the social impact of universities is negligible as compared to farmers. People think that universities are prestigious; this is still the image that is maintained, like a veil. The truth is that the university is a brothel, where knowledge and technology are prostituted.

The third obstacle is rural outreach, the system for disseminating information to farmers. It has been created on a lie. It assumes farmers as a technological consumer unit rather than as a cultural entity. The agricultural supply industry can sell products through operatives that need very little training – you don't need to be an agronomist, to be a mugger you don't need to go to college.

Organic agriculture is about rural communication, where discussion and dialogue is held, where the farmer is recognised as having something to give, as they know the territory. The farmer provides the context and the background, and then others coming in can see the potential or possibilities. This is the basis for developing organic agriculture where both parties can grow together.

Can you tell me about the impact of your work on climate change?

It's very simple. The more we can build life in the soil, the less carbon will be in the atmosphere. So for example, the herbicide industry should pay for

carbon emissions, not only for killing life but also in the embodied oil within the product itself. Fungicides greatly modify the climate, why? Because they are selective and modify the food networks connecting microbiology and decomposition. When decomposition of organic matter is paralysed and modified this releases more carbon. On the other hand the proposal of

You have worked for the United Nations. They have proclaimed this year *the International Year of the Soils*. What do you think of this?

They have a year for everything. Saying it's organic agriculture is to increase soil life and to trap carbon within productive systems.

the *International Year of the Soil* is like saying it's International Life Year! Every single day humanity is related to soil. Our stomach does not exist without being tied to the soil – without soil there is no life, so why have one year that is for soil? It's madness.