

# Beyond Productivity: Reimagining Futures of Agriculture and Bioeconomy

Online-Workshop | 08.10.2021 | 10am-3pm (CEST/UTC+2)  
Registration via email at [batata@posteo.de](mailto:batata@posteo.de)



## Organizers

The workshop is organized by Eugen Pissarskoi, Kerstin Schopp (all International Center for Ethics in the Sciences and Humanities, University of Tübingen), Stefan Ouma and Leiyo Singo (all Chair of Economic Geography, University of Bayreuth). It is part of the research project “BATATA - Whose Bioeconomy? Tracing Visions of Socio-ecological Transformation and their Ethical Deliberation in Tanzania. Bioeconomy as societal change, Module 2(2)”, funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research.

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## Synopsis

Biomass seems to become the bottleneck resource on the way to Sustainable Development. Global injustices – manifested in a pertaining undernourishment – plus the expected population growth in the 21<sup>st</sup> century provide a reason for increasing the use of biomass for food. Intergenerational injustices – manifested in the transgression of critical environmental systems such as Planetary Boundaries – provide a reason for protecting arable lands from agricultural uses, but they also offer a reason for additional production of biomass for substitution of fossil resources.

### Productivity Paradigm

A broad majority of policy strategies addressing these challenges stick to what might be called a ‘Productivity Paradigm’: increasing productivity is considered to be necessary to alleviate the rising biomass demand and the resulting competition on land use (c.f. Garnett et al. 2013: 33). Increase in (agricultural) productivity means that the same amount of output is produced by less (land/ labour/ energy) input and results from technological progress (for a recent review c.f. Meyfroidt et al. 2018).

In the Global South, the Productivity Paradigm dominates the material and discursive space in the field of agricultural development. Productivity rise in agriculture is taken to be a necessary means for reducing rural poverty by scholars from the Global North (de Janvry und Sadoulet 2012, Dercon and Gollin 2014, Collier und Dercon 2014, DeBoe 2020) as well as the Global South (e.g. Maghimbi et al. 2011, Tadele 2017). Even those positions which take environmental limits seriously remain within this paradigm by aiming at a “Sustainable Intensification” (e.g., Garnett et al. 2013, McDonagh 2015, Mdee et al. 2018).

In the Global North, biomass availability is a crucial topic within Bioeconomy policies which have been adopted by nearly 20 states in the last ten years (IACGB 2020). They aim at transforming current “fossil economies” to economies which use biomass instead of fossil resources. They, too, stick to the Productivity Paradigm, imagining productivity increase in agriculture as a necessary means for a successful realization of a bioeconomy (Alff und Spies 2020).

### Beyond Productivity: Approaches

Despite its pretended self-evidence and discursive dominance, the idea that productivity increase is the key for the future of agriculture has been challenged – albeit often implicitly – by parts of the civil society and academia both in the Global South and the Global North:

- Agricultural conceptions discussed under the moniker “agro-ecology” in the Global North (Plumecocq et al. 2018, González de Molina et al. 2020) and the Global South (Martinez-Torres & Rosset 2014, Mdee et al. 2018) envision a labour-intensive agriculture which does not aim at permanent growth in labour or land productivity.
- The ways of life and of agricultural production aspired by peasants and pastoralists in all parts of the world – the “peasant condition” (van der Ploeg 2008) – contradict the goal of productivity increase (van der Ploeg 2008, Scoones 2020).
- Visions of economies with lower resources throughput advanced by Degrowth advocates mostly from the Global North imply, according to these advocates, that



economies will generate a lower aggregated product, and therefore have a lower productivity (e.g., Gomiero 2018, Kallis et al. 2018).

- Visions of agricultural economies which are more independent of competitive market relationships and are thus shielded from the pressure to raise productivity have been in turn a long-standing focus of debates in Critical Agrarian Studies (Gerber 2020) and debates on African Futures (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2014) taking place in the Global South.

### **Resulting Dialectic**

In sum, there are visions of agriculture and bioeconomy both from the Global North and the Global South which implicitly question a main pillar of the politically dominant positions on Sustainable Development: productivity increase. However, the fact that these alternative visions of agriculture imply reduction in productivity growth is often considered as an objection, even as a *reductio ad absurdum*, against these visions: if neither the labour productivity nor the land productivity increases, it just seems to be inconceivable how the biomass bottleneck could be relieved (c.f. Woodhouse 2010, Bernstein 2014, Meyfroidt et al. 2019). Even critical scholars warn that opposition to productivity growth or technological progress might support an austerity thinking preventing emancipatory processes from the “current, high-energy and labor-scarce world” (Robbins 2020: 5)

### **Workshop Goals**

With this workshop, we aim to impugn this dialectic by reflecting the normative presuppositions of the Productivity Paradigm and discussing how visions of agriculture without productivity growth could capture both discursive and material space:

1. Does the Productivity Paradigm presuppose wrong goals? – Alternative agricultural visions might imply less productivity in land- or labour use, but higher productivity in other criteria such as e.g., ecological values or perhaps even in well-being of morally considerable beings. Which kind of productivity should count?
2. Should the Productivity Paradigm be constrained to certain economies? – For instance, the German Advisory Council on Global Change suggests in its recent report (WBGU 2020) that industrial countries require an ecological transformation of their agricultural systems which would lead to a less productive agriculture. To the contrary, countries with prevailing subsistence agriculture need an increase in productivity of their agriculture (WBGU 2020: 152). Does the Productivity Paradigm hold true only for some economies?
3. Is the Productive Paradigm a result of a colonial ideology (for a historical review of this notion, c.f. Haynes 2020) and should be decolonized?



## Structure of the Workshop – Preliminary Concept

10.00-10.30	Introduction (30')
10.30-12.00	<p>First Phase: Presentation of Visions (90')</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Two consecutive rounds: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Each round with four simultaneous discussion rooms (10-12 participants pro room).</li> <li>○ In each room invited speakers present (different) visions of agriculture and/or bioeconomy</li> <li>○ Guiding questions for small-group discussions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ What does make these visions implying reduced productivity attractive? And for which stakeholder groups (farmer, consumer etc.)?</li> <li>▪ Which lessons can be drawn from indigenous (autonomous) communities that live with less resource throughput?</li> <li>▪ Does there exist a sustainable agricultural vision shared by politically sub-dominant groups both in the Global North and the Global South which opposes the productivity paradigm?</li> </ul> </li> </ul> </li> <li>• Plenary round</li> </ul>
12.00-13.00	Break (60')
13.00-14.30	<p>Second Phase: Reflection of Visions (90')</p> <p>General Structure:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Plenary presentations</li> <li>• Discussion Phase: small-group discussions in breakout rooms <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Guiding Questions for breakout rooms: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ How reasonable are objections to productivity-independent visions both from the mainstream discourses as well as from critical political economy?</li> <li>▪ How do decolonized visions of an agriculture and bioeconomy independent of productivity growth look like?</li> <li>▪ How could decolonized visions capture both discursive and material space?</li> </ul> </li> </ul> </li> <li>• Plenary Phase: collection of main agreements/disagreements from the small-group discussions</li> </ul>

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