

Beyond Productivity: Reimagining Futures of Agriculture and Bioeconomy

Workshop Report*
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Introduction

Transformation of the fossil economies to a Bioeconomy – an economy whose raw materials come mainly from renewable sources – as envisioned in the early industrialized societies of the Global North will make biomass the bottleneck resource of the 21st century. Visions of Bioeconomy and Agriculture which dominate the material and discursive space both in the Global South and the Global North share the belief that the best means to alleviate the resulting challenges consists in a further increasing agricultural productivity.

But what are the visions of agriculture of those who are not in a position of political or economic power both in the Global North and the Global South? Does there exist a shared vision among them? Which role does productivity play in such a vision? What would make an agriculture without productivity growth attractive to small producers? Do indigenous communities and the Degrowth movement have an own conception of productivity or an own attitude to it? How could decolonized conceptions of productivity capture more space in public debates and policy circles? – These questions foregrounded the reflections and conversations of the workshop aptly named: “Beyond Productivity: Reimagining Futures of Agriculture and Bioeconomy”.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the workshop was held as a digital event on October 8th, 2021. By virtue of being virtual the workshop drew about 40 scholars, agricultural practitioners and policy activists from different countries including Germany, Ghana, France, Tanzania, and the USA. We deliberately wanted to span boundaries and gather diversely positioned scholars and activists, many of whom would normally not share the same discursive space. This diversity, we believe, has influenced the contributions and deliberations during the workshop. Of course, the theme of the workshop itself - the role of productivity for a sustainable agriculture - constitutes a puzzle. There are contradictory attitudes towards it, even within more critical academic circles, as well as among grassroots movements representing peasant farmers and livestock keepers.

From a theoretical point of view, it seems to be obvious that agricultural productivity must rise. Rising productivity of agricultural lands implies that more biomass can be produced on the same area. Since arable lands are scarce worldwide and since additional biomass helps to fight undernourishment, capture CO₂-emissions, and substitute fossil resources, higher land productivity seems to be the clue. Rising productivity of agricultural labour implies that farmers and pastoralists produce more with the same labour input. That means, in turn, that they can raise their incomes which is necessary particularly, but not only, for small producers in Sub-Saharan Africa to survive.

However, there are practices of agricultural activities which provide evidence for the contrary claim: there is no need that the agricultural productivity rises, and it might even turn out that it shrinks in a truly sustainable agricultural system. These practices are pioneered both in the Global North and the Global South outside of the academic and political mainstream, often by small producers. Agroecology – a practice supported by the worldwide network of peasants La Via Campesina – provides a prominent example for that. The way of living with animals and farming of Maasai pastoralists might serve as a further example for an agricultural engagement which does not strive for a continuous rise in productivity. Finally, the Degrowth movement from the Global North envisions economic organizations of societies without an urgency to grow.

In the following, we summarize the main points of the discussions about this “productivity puzzle”. The report keeps records of the claims, ideas, and thoughts exchanged at this meeting without that we, the authors, necessarily agree with all of them.



Part 1: Visions of Agriculture and the Role of Productivity

The first round aimed at bringing together visions of agricultural practices from different parts of the world, which do not strive for further increase in land or labour productivity. The discussions took part in four parallel breakout rooms with two speakers in each. Following presentation by speakers, participants in respective breakout rooms discussed the differences and similarities of the presented visions of sustainable agriculture.

Henryk Alff and **Michael Spies** (Eberswalde University for Applied Sciences) introduced a systemic approach to agriculture. According to it, agriculture should be conceived as a complex system consisting of interrelations between ecological and social, culturally embedded, systems. Its main goal is improvement of human well-being. Specific institutions for agricultural systems should be developed in broad participatory processes in which participants develop a shared conception of human well-being and which interconnections between social and ecological agricultural systems best suit it. The role of productivity depends on the specification of these main values.

In another presentation, **Theodora Pius** and **Lina Andrew** ([Mtandao wa Vikundi vya Wakulima Wadogo Tanzania](#) (MVIWATA), member of La Via Campesina) introduced MVIWATA's vision of agroecological agriculture. According to it, agriculture empowers and entitles peasants to strive for their livelihoods, their well-being and its just distribution. The goal of productivity is pushed by the government and investors. Rising productivity has not that much benefited farmers so far. Rather, it has made them work for markets and for the profits of others and not for their own well-being. Additionally, productivity rise leads to monoculture deteriorating ecological conditions. The agroecological approach pursued by MVIWATA opposes that and puts the working people at the center. However, it is powerless when it comes to policymaking because politicians generally side with corporate agendas. Maasai pastoralists can serve as an example for people who keep agricultural/ animal keeping practices which remain independent of the productivity rise.

In his presentation *(Re)productivity: Pastoral Economies of Provisioning*, **Leiyo Singo** (University of Bayreuth) highlighted that pastoralists' economies are embedded in non-market cultural practices and identity. The primary objective of the pastoral economy is satisfaction of family needs and not exchange or profit maximization. Pastoralists are reliant on family labour (labour intensive) and respect various balances in the human-non-human ecosystems. Care, love, solidarity, identity, and communal living are placed higher above the logics of maximization and competition. However, pastoralists in Tanzania are increasingly threatened by the state and capital interests that are driven by market values and logics. In that regard land which is the base for their livelihood, identity and survival is appropriated for market purposes.

Christina Mfanga (Tanzania Socialist Forum) underlined that the problem of Tanzanian agriculture lies in the distribution of the means of production, not in a lack of productivity. Access to land and the fair compensation of farmers' labour are the main issues. Over past years, there have been many land disputes in the country, mainly due to so-called "investors", and land has been grabbed from smallholders. If left with their own pieces of land and with a fair compensation of their fruits of labour, farmers would have enough to feed themselves and the communities around. She advocated for connecting the assumed "productivity problem" to how the economic system works. With the financialization of life, farmers increasingly have to pay for things, but producer prices have not risen. Hunger does not come from lack of production, rather from its distribution. The need for productivity growth is largely promoted by agribusiness multinationals such as seed



companies and aligned political interests. Productivity growth is an elite discourse serving these interests. “Productivity” is an ideological issue, “Food sovereignty” can be an alternative ideology. A different agriculture is possible, but it is a question of how the population is becoming convinced that the alternative has something to offer. Who is able to decide over their own future? Who decides about agrarian land politics?

[Gaël Plumecocq](#) (French National Institute for Agriculture, Food, and Environment Toulouse) offered a differentiation of agricultural systems developed in participatory workshops with French farmers along two dimensions: one dimension represents the degree to which agriculture is embedded into international markets (ranging from “globalized food system” to “locally embedded”). The second dimension represents the degree to which an agricultural system uses exogenous inputs (ranging from “extensive use of exogenous inputs” to “relying on ecosystem services”). The resulting graph reveals a [broad variety of visions of agricultural systems](#) endorsed by French farmers (see the diagram below). It became strikingly clear that one cannot just tell one story about agriculture or even sustainable agriculture. Like the voices from Tanzania, Plumecocq warned about an increasing appropriation of the base, which is land and seeds and breeds, by corporate interests, as well as a disappearing of local knowledge in France and other parts of Europe.

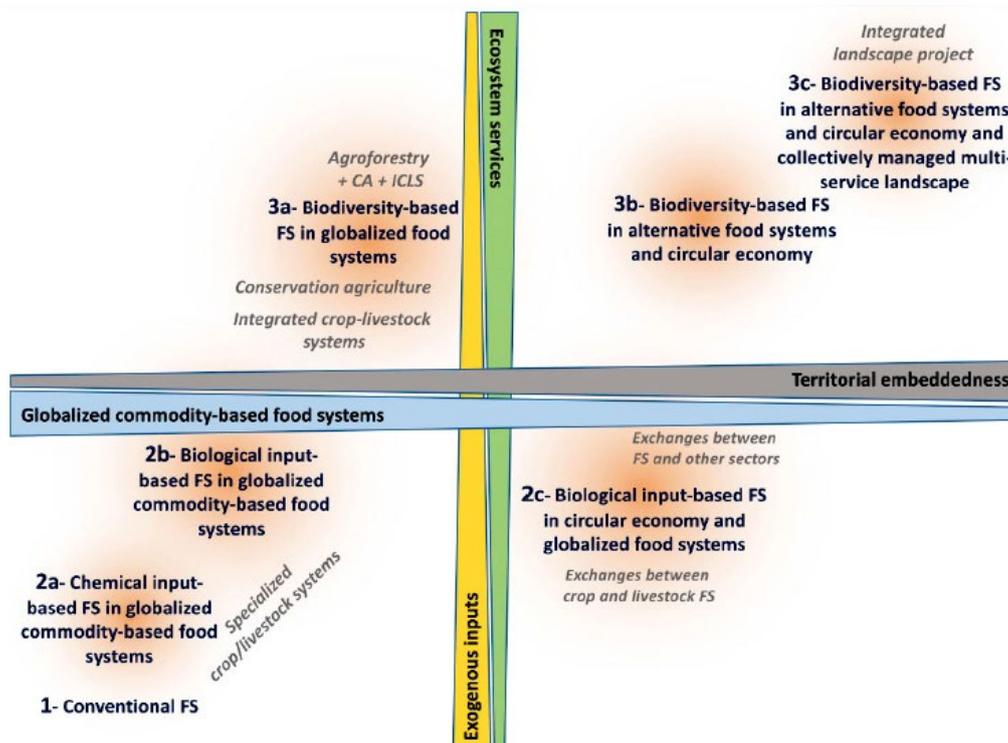


Figure 1: Visions of agricultural systems, Source: [Plumecocq et al. 2018](#), Figure 2

Presenting AbL’s vision of agriculture, [Paula Gioia](#) ([Arbeitsgemeinschaft bäuerliche Landwirtschaft](#) (AbL), Germany, member of [La Via Campesina](#)) pointed out that they promote organic agriculture in small farms. Their central concern is the social question of agriculture and that opposition to policies that advantage industrial agriculture. She emphasized that the goal of productivity rise is imposed, and the aim of agroecology is to reclaim the reality that existed [in Europe] before this imposition. Thus, it is about reclaiming the past. Paula added that agroecology is not just the alternative but the only way forward. However, all approaches must be contextualized in a local setting (no one-size-fits-all).



In a similar line of thinking, [Richard Mbunda](#) (University of Dar es Salaam) posited that the productivity discussion is ideologically loaded since it focuses on agro-chemistry, technical know-how, and capital. It deals with an industrial agriculture which focuses on markets and sidelines smallholder producers. “There is a need to bring additional ideological issues to this discussion” he said pointing out issues of food sovereignty, sustainability, right to food, and the autonomy of smallholder producers.

Corroborating to Gioia’s call to reclaim the past of agriculture and Mbunda’s take on the role of ideology in the productivity equation, [Divya Sharma](#) (University of Sussex) brought in the double character of India’s Green Revolution. After the Green Revolution, the region of Punjab has become highly productive particularly in the wheat and rice production. However, environmental and health problems have affected the local population consequently. As a response to this, a regional agricultural movement [Kheti Virasat Mission](#) has emerged which unifies affected people across all classes and strives for agro-ecology. Elderly farmers who remember traditional agricultural methods play an important role since they have conserved the knowledge.

Discussions in the Breakout-Rooms: An Upshot

It is important to consider whether and how productivity fits into people’s livelihoods and is related to them. Productivity can improve their livelihoods, but currently it is strongly influenced by capitalist imperatives and contributes to class differentiation and uneven capital accumulation in countries such as Tanzania. This notion of productivity has been imported to Africa in the 1970th and it does not work in interest of the most of their peasants. However, the idea of productivist agriculture has become deeply entrenched in the mentality of the farmers meanwhile and is experienced in economic realities: a growing number of needs cannot be satisfied without cash.

Most participants agreed that mainstream notions of productivity need to be reconsidered by taking additional values, for instance, sufficiency and the well-being of the future generations, into account. Therefore, changing the timeframe could help to produce more and better food in the long run. Given that we already have reached a planetary state of climate breakdown, visions that do not envision productivity rise are deemed more realistic compared to what is formulated within the conventional productivity paradigm. Agro-ecology is an option to increase productivity in quality, not quantity. Qualitative productivity improvement rests on incorporating a wide range of social and ecological values and not merely economic ones. Additionally, legal, and political frameworks that are formulated in a deliberate, collective manner could help to develop a commonly shared vision of a future agriculture and the role of productivity in it. As an important sidenote to the framework presented by Plumecocq, it should be emphasized these different visions of agriculture need to be better scrutinized for the underlying social relations of production, input-provisioning and marketing, which also includes ownership questions.

Other participants mentioned that the discourse on low productivity is used to continue alienation of farmers from their lands across Tanzania. It is used to help “modern seeds” penetrate rural areas. While it is true that many youths increasingly find it difficult to access land and consider agriculture as not paying off, it is more appropriate to argue that agriculture actually has been *made* to be not rewarding. Among other, the role of brokers at the interface between farmers and markets should be critically scrutinized.



Another key question is that of political power. How can the political representation of other visions of agriculture become effective? Focusing on the case of Tanzania, Christina Mfanga argued that “so called experts who come from the government come to the people with notions that this is the kind of modern agriculture that is needed, and these are the people who say that the peasants are not aware of anything...”. An exception was the of previous regime under late-President J.P. Magufuli. Despite some of well-known shortcomings, Magufuli shared some visions with small-scale farmers, e.g., banning GMO. Magufuli also took away land from investors that had been obtained under questionable circumstances. The current regime, however, supports investors. “For the government, investors are business partners, but for the majority these are enemies, not development partners.” Struggles are continuing. Forging a larger social movement from these struggles is the challenge that lies ahead. How to speak with one voice?

The session ended with a paradox. While we can raise several critical points about the thrust for productivity, it can be patronizing to say that small-scale farmers don’t want productivity. If asked, many farmers would probably agree that anything reducing their workload is good. At the same time, this does not mean to go down the corporate road to productivity. Another question that emerged was: “Who are the people”?. How do we account for social differentiation, and potentially differentiated interests, among the peasantry and livestock keepers?

Part 2: Towards Decolonization of Productivity?

The second (afternoon) round of the workshop focused on the question what it would mean to decolonize productivity. Introducing participants to the session, [Stefan Ouma](#) (University of Bayreuth) raised the linkage between productivity and coloniality, emphasizing that notions of productivity cannot be understood without considering the colonial experience. Colonial administrators already cultivated modernizationist discourses on raising productivity among ‘backward’ African producers, a rhetoric that still shines through the contemporary productivity gospel. Endorsement of economic properties such as efficiency, labour productivity, and the coupling of property and improvement have European origins but buttressed colonial expansion and orders. “Already in the first session, several workshop participants have pointed out that the established values of today’s market-based agriculture were imported to Africa rather recently” he reiterated. Moreover, often peasants tend to play down themselves or their own technology and knowledge, as have been stressed in the preceding debates.

Two keynote addresses were presented by [Julien-François Gerber](#) (Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands) and [Emmanuel Sulle](#) (University of the Western Cape, South Africa).

In his presentation titled *Towards Decolonization of Productivity?* **Julien-François Gerber** provided a Degrowth/Post-Growth perspective on the guiding question for the second part of the workshop. According to him, the Degrowth/Post-Growth movement – he used both names synonymously – aims at an economy which establishes the right balance between a plurality of often competing values. Applied to agricultural systems, one finds diverse trade-offs peasants must face such as utility-drudgery, production-ecology; autonomy-dependence; innovation-conservatism among others. This diversity of values is much richer and more complex than just the goal of increasing the productivity of agricultural systems.



Additionally, Gerber stressed that the ideas of the Post-Growth movement do not originate from the Global North but are deeply rooted in writings of thinkers from the Global South. Taking South Asia as an example, visions of an economy as they are propagated by the Degrowth movement today can be found in the works of Gandhi, J.C. Kumarappa, Stella Bloch and Ananda Coomaraswamy, Tagore, Radhakamal Mukerjee, or Vandana Shiva, as Gerber elaborated.

Whose productivity is being promoted in agricultural policies? asked **Emmanuel Sulle** and added that imposed productivity does not understand the local context: it ignores diversity by imposing monoculture which carries economic and ecological consequences. That is why projects like the New Alliance for Food Security and Southern Agricultural Growth Corridor of Tanzania (SAGCOT) [failed](#) (was abandoned or died a natural death). He cited the Kilombero valley where there has been overproduction of canes since the companies cannot buy all the produce (and the communities cannot consume it). Farmers (in outgrowers arrangement) are forced by circumstances to forgo their necessities to produce for capital. Farming is a way of life and therefore other values beyond quantity do matter. He particularly mentioned quality of the food produced, (seed) sovereignty, and taste as preferences that matters to peasants.

Agricultural sector in Africa is captured by global agribusinesses. Hence, small-scale producers have limited agency in determining the agricultural futures they want. Thus, the need for liberating African agriculture arises. As such Sulle titled his presentation *From decolonising productivity to liberating African agriculture* to emphasize the social question of production. Contrasting the mainstream narrative, Sulle emphasised that peasants and their traditional farming systems are productive and resilient. The only important question is whose productivity is being considered when assessing the productivity of agriculture.

In her commentary on the two talks, [Wendy Wilson-Fall](#) (Lafayette College, Easton, USA) raised further points to be kept in mind when discussing possibilities of decolonization of the notion of productivity. She cautioned the audience about simplifying calls for or against productivity by raising the following questions:

- What are the dreams, motivations, and desires of farmers? How do we find out what the rural population [wants]? We need a better understanding of peasant's values.
- Does Africa have a responsibility to feed Europe? The role of African agriculture in the world needs to be scrutinized. It seems Africa has already done quite a bit for the world, so why should she feed it, as some productivity prophets have been calling for?
- What are national consumer patterns as they relate to production? To what extent can African societies sustain themselves in terms of national consumption?
- How can people remain in rural areas? Can we create more attractive rural areas? We have to look 'beyond productivity' for that.

She concluded her interrogation by reiterating that the optimization push needs to be resisted. We cannot avoid critically reflecting also on notions such as “modernization”, “poverty” when talking about decolonization of productivity. Wilson-Fall stressed that the country needs the farmers, not the other way round.



Discussions in the Breakout-Rooms:

Following the plenary presentations, participants were divided in three groups to focus on one of the following questions:

- What would make an agricultural system without productivity growth attractive to smallholder farmers and pastoralists?
- Do indigenous communities (in Sub-Sahara Africa/Global South) and the Degrowth movement from the Global North have an own conception of productivity or an own attitude to it? How does it look like?
- How could decolonized conceptions of productivity capture more space in public debates and policy circles?

What would make an agriculture without productivity growth attractive to smallholder producers?

This question raised follow-up questions such as whose productivity is promoted in agricultural policies. Following Gerber and Sulle, it is more productive to focus on the plural of productivities than on one or no productivity. This plurality should integrate social and environmental forms of productivity, such as the freedom for smallholder farmers to decide which crops they cultivate when and which crop quality they want to achieve, which is an important issue for smallholder farmers.

There are rural communities around the world who decided not to get into the “mainstream agricultural model” or to move out of it. In most cases, such a transition requires high levels of resources and a strong political and social will since the transition period is usually characterized by drops of incomes. Hence, the question of moving out of the dominant system of productivity is related to people’s livelihoods.

In the existing economic system, public subsidies support the mainstream productivity paradigm forcing peasants to become more and more productive. Therefore, they leave agriculture if they are not able to meet the desired outcomes for themselves, the nation, and the markets. Farmers focus more and more on cash and therefore often pragmatically follow the market and do cash-crop shift. Sometimes, these shifts lead to a less labour-intensive production. Since political-economic rules and constellations make an agriculture without productivity unattractive, micro-level questions like “How to make a beyond-productivity-agriculture attractive to the youth?” are less relevant. The *macro-level* is most important since the larger economic framing of agriculture makes the agro-industrial-technical productivity (in the narrow sense) a central issue.

For this reason, a paradigm shift is needed, and it is important to decommodify agriculture. This decommodification will have implications on the decolonization of agriculture since money is a central issue of both.

Do indigenous communities and the Degrowth movement have an own conception of productivity or an own attitude to it? How does it look like?

In his plenary presentation, Julien-François Gerber has pointed out that the Degrowth movement stresses a plurality of values among which an agricultural system must balance: well-being, meaningful work, resilience to shocks, land and labour productivity among others. Land/labour productivity (and the resulting monetary income) constitute only a part of the valuable properties of agricultural systems.



This picture of a plurality of values which need to be adequately balanced within an agricultural system with the resulting plurality of productivities in a balanced proportion seems to fit well to the ways of life of farmers and pastoralist practiced by indigenous communities in Sub-Sahara Africa and in Latin America. They are balancing the productivity of ecosystems and non-human animals with the productivity of social bonds/relationships in a different manner than these values are balanced in the established agricultural practices of the Global North.

For instance, the Maasai take their cattle not mainly as a means to income. Particularly, they do not count their animals but give them names and have a close attachment to them, recognizing and respecting their moods. Industrial livestock farming would not allow to keep these bonds, these close attitudes to the animals – the balance between the value of respecting the animals and earning income for own livelihood would be destroyed. Similar examples can be found in indigenous communities in Latin America. Indigenous farmers search for a right coexistence with animals and plants, taking them more morally weighty than the farmers in the Global North do it. A remarkable difference lies in the fact that while the Degrowth vision is largely aspirational, the pastoralist economies of provisioning are existing reality.

Thus, one recognizes the ideas from the Degrowth movement in some existing practices in the Global South. There, people struggle to keep these practices whereas the Degrowth movement struggles to introduce them in the Global North. However, the political mainstream and the governments do not understand the requirement of balancing neither in the Global South nor in the Global North. The Degrowth movement remains a rather small, politically marginalized movement there.

How could decolonized conceptions of productivity capture more space in public debates and policy circles?

Taking the case of Tanzania, a largely agrarian society, discussants acknowledged that the country politics are dominated by urban elites. Therefore, without a broader movement taking on the existing ruling class, nothing will change. Those working with the grassroots movements pointed out that the “people are there, but the funding is the issue”. Christina Mfanga came across a lot of struggles among farmers which are extra-organizational and less visible. Most of the movements she mentioned here are not donor dependent. The latter is often a setback for radical struggles.

Researchers need to get more to the grassroots to learn about the real struggles of the common people. Richard Mbunda emphasized the need for research that is strongly grounded in decolonial conceptions of agriculture. Data is helping the proponents of hegemonic discourse to speak, so alternatives need data, too. We need to have a larger discussion about decolonizing productivity and associated research. We should turn Global North-South axis upside down, “we” in the Global North can learn a lot from the Global South in terms of human-environment relations.

Conclusion

The debates at the workshop have demonstrated that there are similar objections raised against the dominant visions of agricultural futures¹ and bioeconomy by scholars and activists from different parts of the world. The dominant visions both in the Global North and the Global South endorse the goal of productivity growth. In light of the mainstream

¹ see [here](#) and [here](#)



economic theories, the socio-economic institutions as established in the early industrialized societies of the Global North, and their values (which have been exported to other parts of the world, too), productivity growth seems to be a necessary condition for a flourishing life. However, as the workshop debates have fortified, there are grassroots movements in the Global North – which are small and politically unrepresented – who object the pursuit of further increase in land or labour productivity and search for socio-economic institutions which enable a flourishing life not relying on growth of economic aggregates. And there are communities in the Global South – often politically marginalized and currently in terminal crisis such as Maasai in Tanzania– which have preserved and still realize ways of life in which growth of productivity does not play a significant role.

As such, there is a ground for a fruitful exchange and mutual learning between the scholars studying these marginalized communities and grassroots movements, policy activists striving for recognition of their values and the members of the communities and movements from the Global North and the Global South themselves, an exchange which would avoid the temptation to romanticize these communities and movements, but which would also recognize the drawbacks of their norms and values. Andrew Coulson² commented to us in a reply to the first draft of the workshop report that the workshop's debates could have fared better in this regard for the crisis of the present-day pastoralism did not receive enough space at the workshop.

However, as some participants have pointed out, these topics are not new and have been intensively discussed in different parts of the world, although without a mutually equal exchange. Still, substantial real-world changes remain missing and perhaps it would be worthwhile to address the means of politicization more directly.

We intend to continue this dialog within the research project BATATA: www.batata-bioeconomy.de

² Andrew Coulson and colleagues have addressed the question of productivity in their resourceful textbook on [Agriculture in East Africa](#).