

Statement from Karen Mapusua, President of IFOAM - Organics International in response to the statement below made by Matthias Berninger, head of public affairs and sustainability at Bayer.

*“Some NGOs want to introduce agroecology for Africa across the board. This is an ideologically driven demand, the result of which you can see in Sri Lanka. The high priests of agroecology from the NGO Ifoam have achieved a blanket ban on pesticides and fertilizers there. The consequence was that within a year, first agriculture, then the economy, and finally the government collapsed.”*

It is unfortunate to see a widely peddled myth that has been dispelled many times rear its ugly head again. Fact is the ban on chemical inputs was not in place long enough to have had any major impact on food security and such comments dismiss the real problems farmers the world over face.

According to Thilak Kariyawasam of the Lanka Organic Agriculture Movement (LOAM), member of IFOAM – Organics International, the country has been experiencing a food crisis fueled by a financial crisis and dependence on importing food and chemical inputs that have become more and more expensive.

It is simply not true that IFOAM - Organics International achieved a widespread ban of pesticides and fertilizers. Firstly, we did not advocate for this and secondly this step did not lead to the collapse of agriculture, the economy and the government. Upon hearing about this decision, we advised that such transformative change cannot happen overnight. It requires long-term planning to train farmers to produce and use organic fertilizers, make other necessary organic inputs available, possibly subsidized, and set up proper extension services to advise farmers on agroecological practices etc. We are more than happy to support our members working with Sri Lankan policy-makers and local stakeholders in transforming their food and farming systems

With regard to the comments on agroecology, the basis for the promotion of this system is far beyond ideology. According to FAO, agroecology has been studied as a scientific discipline since the 1930's and there is a strong evidence base for its role in food security. Furthermore, there is no need for anyone to introduce agroecology across Africa, agroecological approaches have been practiced there for centuries.

Fortunate Nyakanda from Zimbabwe, World Board Member of IFOAM - Organics International says “It is not the first time that a European-based power comments on what Africa needs, and, for sure, it will not be the last time. It is also a shame that some people are busy focusing on increasing European influence in Africa when Africa is, through agroecology and organic farming, busy building sustainable food systems and attaining food and nutritional security that has been eroded due to the use of chemical inputs.

I am happy, though, that the toxicity of crop protection products has been acknowledged and that many farmers in Africa are women. However, the answers to mitigating toxicity do not work for farmers for the following reasons;

- i. There is not always a high literacy rate among women farmers in Africa and most of the application instructions as well as required protective gear are not understood, let alone the fact that training does not reach farmers in most parts.
- ii. Protective gear is beyond the reach of many farmers both men and women
- iii. The full protective gear is too uncomfortable (especially in the heat of Africa) for farmers to wear leading them to spray toxic inputs unprotected.
- iv. Some elements of the protective gear are not culturally appropriate in most African communities.

I have experienced first-hand how organic and agroecological farming has improved health and lifted families out of debt cycles incurred from the purchase of synthetic inputs and fertilizers. In addition to the financial burden of using such substances, we must consider the damage it is doing to our soils and biodiversity. Of course, it can be a long and draining process to wean the land off harmful inputs that have been used for years but results using innovative organic practices show it is worth it. Farming families have more disposable income, soils and biodiversity recover leading to long-term, stable yields grown in harmony with nature.”

In closing it is important to note that organic agriculture and agroecology are an important pathway to addressing the deeply intertwined global crises of climate change, food and nutrition security, health, loss of biodiversity, soil degradation and poverty in farming communities.