From a good idea to false promises

The small organic farmer, the chemical giant Syngenta and the food multinational Nestlé: they all champion "regenerative agriculture". **Andrea Beste** explains where the term comes from, who uses it for what purposes, and how misguided approaches **can be avoided**

Conceptual descriptions of "sustainable agriculture" have increased significantly in recent years. Agroecology, regenerative agriculture, hybrid agriculture – who can keep track of them all? "Regenerative agriculture" in particular has been receiving increasing attention in the press and in research funding for a few years now. What is this term all about?

If one looks for the roots of the term "regenerative agriculture", one finds the following passage in Dahlberg (1993): "Regenerative agriculture was formulated in 1983 by Robert Rodale, founder of the Rodale Institute, an ecological research institute. He publicly advocated for it and later founded a 'regeneration project' that encouraged farmers and communities to pursue regenerative approaches."[1] There is also a definition by Christen et al. from 2010: "Regenerative agriculture is an approach to farming that rejects pesticides and artificial fertilisers and aims to improve the regeneration of topsoil, biodiversity and the water cycle." This is almost identical to the IFOAM principles of organic farming.[2] Australian soil ecologist Christine Jones went even further. In 2003, she defined it as follows: "Agriculture is regenerative when soils, water cycles, vegetation and productivity continuously improve rather than just remaining the same. This also increases the diversity, quality, vitality and health of soils, plants, animals and People together." Her approach is often referred to in Germany as "regenerative agriculture".[3]

The term took a major step forward in 2015 when it became associated with the fight against climate change. In Costa Rica in June 2015, around 60 people from 21 nations, many of them from the organic farming scene, founded the international grassroots movement Regeneration International.[4] It aims to reverse global warming and end world hunger by promoting the global transition to regenerative agriculture. In parallel, the French government launched the Four Per Mille Initiative in the run-up to the 2015 Paris Climate Summit with the Climate-smart Agriculture conference. Its starting point: an additional four per mille of organic matter in all soils worldwide each year could allegedly largely offset anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions. Multinational corporations were quick to jump on this initiative with the idea of generating additional revenue with carbon farming certificates. This dichotomy between a grassroots movement largely rooted in organic farming and an instrumentalisation of the term driven by the agricultural and food industry has become increasingly pronounced in recent years.

Big Food hijacks an idea

At the climate summit in New York in September 2019, 19 global corporations founded a coalition for "alternative farming practices" and named it "One Planet Business for Biodiversity (OP2B)". Members include Danone, The Kellogg Company, L'Oreal, Mars, Nestlé, Unilever and the fertiliser company Yara. The term "organic farming" is not mentioned by OP2B.

1 For more information on the Rodale Institute, see Regenerative organic agriculture and climate change. A down-to-earth solution to global warming, available at t1p.de/rondale

2 See t1p.de/ifoam-principles

3 See aufbauende-landwirtschaft.de

4 See regenerationinternational.org

Can this be sustainable? When industrial-oriented global food giants advertise using the term "regenerative agriculture", it is a case of greenwashing.

Not once. Instead, "regenerative agriculture" is introduced as a basic concept. This term is now appearing in more and more corporate promises. PepsiCo, for example, has committed to introducing regenerative practices on seven million hectares (PepsiCo, 2021), while Cargill wants to implement this on ten million hectares by 2030 (AFN, 2020). Nestlé promises to invest 1.2 billion Swiss francs by 2025 "to boost regenerative agriculture along our supply chain".[5] And Erik Fyrwald, CEO of Syngenta, one of the world's largest manufacturers of pesticides, said that "the truly sustainable future of agriculture – I call it regenerative agriculture – is now taking shape" (CNBC, 2021; translated by the author). Unsurprisingly, there is no mention of organic farming in this statement, as promoting farming methods that do not use synthetic pesticides is contrary to the core business of this company.

From the perspective of multinational corporations, regenerative agriculture has a major advantage. The term is not yet protected, nor is there a clear international or national definition. Many proponents of the regenerative approach see this as an advantage. They argue that this could encourage conventional farms to operate more sustainably. However, this overlooks two things: firstly, it has been scientifically proven that the use of synthetic chemical fertilisers and pesticides damages the soil life that we are trying to build up. Secondly, this lack of precision in the definition invites economically or politically motivated greenwashing.

Regenerative versus organic?

In Germany, there is often a perception that the three terms organic farming, agroecology and regenerative agriculture are competing with each other to be the best method. But while the word "ecological" is used in Europe and
"organic" is protected worldwide, the terms
"Agroecological" or "regenerative" are not. At European and global level, it can be observed that not only corporations but also decision-makers repeatedly resort to terms such as "regenerative" or "agroecological" when they want to avoid verifiable changes to the system and thus the explicit mention of organic farming, even though the latter clearly has scientifically proven advantages (Sanders and Kuhnert, 2023; Hülsbergen et al., 2023). This concept of "new framing" poses a great danger to the honest and effective transformation of agriculture towards greater sustainability. Most corporations understand regenerative agriculture to mean only conservative tillage with the use of pesticides and mineral fertilisers, garnished with catch crops and flower strips. The danger of greenwashing is made clear by a study conducted by the investor network FAIRR in autumn 2023. According to the study, 50 of the 79 large agri-food companies surveyed emphasised that regenerative agriculture was a solution to climate change and species extinction. However, two-thirds of these 50 corporations had not specified any quantifiable targets, and only four companies each mentioned results-oriented targets or specific amounts they intended to invest (FAIRR, 2023).

Companies are now also realising that they need to take more concrete action. In September 2023, the Sustainable Agriculture Initiative Platform (SAI), which is supported by large agri-food corporations, presented a "global framework for regenerative agriculture" (SAI, 2023). This framework lists practices and indicators that will be used to measure regenerative farms. Pesticide and nutrient management are mentioned, but there is no requirement to reduce these inputs. The paper does not mention genetically modified plants at all. The requirements for recognition as a "regenerative farm" are vaguely worded and unambitious. External certification is mentioned but not required.

However, it already exists: Control Union, a certifier also active in organic farming, offers certification to agricultural businesses and their customers through regenagri. [6] This is based on numerous regenerative measures, including pesticide and mineral fertiliser reduction, which are incorporated into an assessment framework that is not publicly available, however.

5 See nestle.de/responsibility/thinking-ahead-about-sustainability
6 See regenagri.org
7 See t1p.de/controlunion

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According to the company's website, more than 250,000 farms covering a total of one million hectares of land have been certified to date. The focus is on cotton from India and Turkey, as well as coffee and soy from Brazil. The buyers of the products can also be certified. They can use the "regenagri regenerative certified trust mark for PR and public statements," writes Control Union.[7] This means that products from certified regenerative agriculture (using pesticides, mineral fertilisers and genetic engineering) will compete with organic products in the future – and confuse consumers.

On the other hand, it is of course to be welcomed that more and more conventional farms are looking into management methods that can contribute to soil improvement and are coming together under a "label" to try them out and exchange experiences. As long as this does not simply result in ideological plough abandonment, which continues to be achieved at the expense of high glyphosate use in conventional farms, it would be a very welcome development (for the effects on the soil, see article by Neumann, p. 24 f.).

There is a lack of funding and research

What is also clear is that there is still considerable scope for the development and dissemination of agroecological and regenerative techniques such as permaculture and agroforestry within organic farming. It might be beneficial to express such additional commitment with a label that uses organic as its basis. In the USA, the Regenerative Organic Alliance was created for this idea, with

Among the few hundred Regenerative Organic Certified farms worldwide, only three are located in the EU (see article by Brinkley, p. 34f.). However, certification alone will not suffice, as Volkert Engelsman, CEO of organic wholesaler Eosta, stated at the founding of the Business Alliance for Regenerative Agriculture (BARA), which he co-initiated: "We have talked a lot about people and the planet, but we still only pay farmers per kilo. Until that changes, we will not make any progress." (Eosta, 2022) But it is not only payment that is lacking; research is also lagging behind: In Germany (and Europe), only two percent of agricultural research funding has so far been allocated to research fields related to organic farming. (Agrarpresseportal, 2022) This stands in stark contrast to the eco-action plans at European and national level and the potential for progress that has been internationally documented for years, and has clear political reasons. If the EU Commission wants to achieve its goal of "25 per cent organic farming in Europe by 2030", then 25 per cent of research funding must also be directed towards this goal. The same applies to the goal of "30 per cent organic farming in Germany": it requires investing 30 per cent of funds in organic research. □

▷ List of references: **oekologie-landbau.de/materialien**

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