

**Agroecology for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**  
**Healthy Sustainable Food as a Human Right (29/01/2019)**

*By Pregs Govender*

Thank you to the organisers, the delegates and the many organisations and movements working to ensure that the world moves from industrial agriculture to poison-free agroecology. Thank you to the farmers, activists, scientists, researchers, policy-makers, writers, educators and artists inside and outside this room.

Thank you to the mainly women subsistence and small scale farmers in places like Phillipi and across our province, continent and world, whose work feeds those who, in a world of racism, poverty and inequality, would otherwise die of hunger; to the women farmers who save and share seed, to the local communities in places like Xholobeni who face assassination for their stand against global mining companies and the traditional leaders and government officials who collude with them; to the organisations building solidarity for food sovereignty - thank you.

The human right to healthy sustainable food cannot be seen in isolation from all other rights. It is integrally connected to all human rights including land, water, clean air, health, education, access to information and participation in all the decisions about our lives. Human rights are indivisible and interdependent.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights asserts that 'Everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights set forth in the declaration, can be fully realized.' Yet we know that climate change, poverty, inequality, religious and economic fundamentalisms, militarization and its continuum of violence from bedrooms to borders, are worsening. Human rights are closely linked to the political question of power. Who has power and who has used that power to create and maintain a social and international order that has resulted in the degradation of human beings and the earth that is our home?

At the heart of the African concept Ubuntu, 'I am because we are', is the day-to-day work of survival done by women. This work is largely invisible, unvalued and devalued. It is not counted in the gross domestic product of our countries. The GDP measures profits benefiting a handful of individuals. It measures war, death and destruction. It does not measure the hard work of creating and maintaining life that costs women time, health and often their lives. Most men and the state take little or no responsibility for the work of social reproduction that is too often relegated to women.

Africa is the birthplace of humanity – here the mother of all of humanity conceived, nourished and birthed the first human being. A continent of abundant beauty and wealth Africa was brutally colonized, her land divided between European colonisers, her mineral wealth exploited and knowledge stolen and patented, her reverence for the earth, her water, air, moon, stars and sun discarded by a white male god with blond hair and blue eyes that reigns in some heaven above. Africa's people have been enslaved and taken across the world to create wealth for Europe and America; they have been forced to produce cash mono-crops, (from sugar to cocoa), while leaders who stood up for Africa and her people were raped and killed.

How will this change, who will change it and how will society be radically transformed to realize a world built on the inherent dignity of each of us, and respect for the earth that sustains all life? SA's Constitution is clear – dignity is inherent to each of us. It is the first founding value and a substantive right. It is our birthright.

A scientific, evidence based approach has to be taken – we cannot do what we have always done and expect the results to be different. The evidence is clear. The global capitalist order that focuses on the survival of the fittest has failed to realize human rights. Widespread hunger and deepening climate change must focus our minds on how to connect what each of us does individually and collectively to change this.

The world produces a surplus of food in ways that contributes to climate change, obesity, hunger and diseases such as cancer. These are not just individual problems that can be fixed simply with lifestyle choices. It is helpful if you do not smoke, drink, take drugs, exercise and eat healthily. Yet we have little or no power over those who cause the worst pollution of the earth, her water and air. Food, that should nourish and sustain us poisons our bodies. From Monsanto and its carcinogenic products to the US that dumped its chicken in SA using trade agreements as stick and carrot we need to interrogate the laws, policies, international frameworks, treaties and institutions such as the World Trade Organisation, that reduce human rights to commodities to be speculated on and bought and sold to the highest bidder.

It is time to use our collective wisdom and power to change this. We, who want a world that values all our children and that enables each child to reach their full potential, are the overwhelming majority. I would like to end with a poem from Love and Courage, A Story of Insubordination:

*'we live and speak  
no longer conscious  
of our wholeness  
our connectedness*

*we have begun to believe  
we are fragments  
our stories  
disconnected  
from each other's*

*we no longer hear our own voices  
we no longer see our own faces...'*

Human rights cannot be fragmented – we are whole human beings living for a short time on this precious earth. We will hear our own voices. We will see our own faces. We can connect all our stories.

Pregs Govender served as MP ('94-'08) and Human Rights Commissioner ('09-'15). An author, Pregs incites love, courage and insubordination through writing and education.