

## **Response to the Agroecology APPG on Nature Based Solutions payments for Agroecology**

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The Landworkers' Alliance (LWA) is a UK wide union of agroecological farmers, foresters and other land-based workers. Our mission is to improve the livelihoods of our members and create a better food and land-use system for everyone. We work for a future where producers can work with dignity to earn a decent living and everyone can access local, healthy and affordable food, fuel and fibre - a food and land-use system based on agroecology and food sovereignty that furthers social and environmental justice. Established less than 10 years ago, we now have over 1,500 members spread across the UK. LWA is a member of La Via Campesina (LVC) which is a worldwide movement of peasant farmers, landworkers, indigenous people, and pastoralists based in over 82 different countries. LVC brings together members to campaign on climate justice for agroecology, and part of that campaign informs this response.

### **Summary:**

NBS is a vague and contested term used by a range of different actors in different contexts. As a term it has grown in popularity over the last decade, partly because it is as “simple to construct and logical for non-specialist understanding” (Cohen-Shacham, 2019, p21). However, nature itself and our relationship with nature has never been simple to construct. NBS has been criticised as instrumentalising ‘nature’ and treating it mechanistically. Creating a ‘simple’ construct can mask many complex relationships and often hide power struggles. We should be wary of simplified terms and simplifying nature, and work to make complex relationships clearer, and embrace complexity. Calling Agroecology an NBS is problematic and may compromise some of the core principles of Agroecology.

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**SHELL:** NBS = are projects which protect, transform **or** restore land. In this way, nature absorbs more CO2 emissions from the atmosphere. These projects can lead to the marketing, trading and sale of carbon credits.

**DASGUPTA REVIEW:** NBS = Actions to protect, sustainably manage **and** restore natural or modified ecosystems while simultaneously providing benefits for human well-being and biodiversity

**FRIENDS OF THE EARTH INTERNATIONAL:** NBS are being used to serve the political and economic agendas to commodify and financialise carbon and the carbon drawdown potential within natural ecosystems

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## **Engagement and Consent**

It is welcome to see that the NBS definition provided by the APPG Agroecology group includes the importance of full engagement and consent of local communities. However, it's not clear what this means in practice, and whether this is actually happening with current NBS schemes. In particular, when thinking about local community impacts - who seeks consent and who carries out this engagement? What counts as meaningful engagement? In many communities, and sometimes especially remote rural communities, engagement and consent can be very sensitive processes which may cause conflict and exacerbate existing relations of power, calling for a role for third party organisations to support the process of engagement. What happens if the community does not consent, and given the moral imperative of climate change, is it even likely that a community will not give consent, even if it might compromise other social, economic or human rights? This definition also alludes to the often top-down nature of NBS projects - where project leaders seek engagement and consent with those impacted, rather than being driven by grassroots communities. This is not consistent with agroecological principles.

## **NBS and Land Sparing**

Several criticisms of NBS see NBS as supporting the land sparing agenda rather than the land sharing agenda. Historically, NBS projects have removed areas of land from agriculture into forestry monocrops as a necessary trade off for a greater good. The underlying logic is that it is possible to sustainably intensify agriculture using GMOs, chemical fertilisers and feeds, vertical growing etc to increase production levels. The logic of sustainable intensification does not work with the current economic system for agricultural produce - farmers are incentivised to intensify their production on less land, but maintain the same area of land in order to increase profits in a system where monetary profit is the key guiding principle and farmers battle daily with low incomes and debt. This has perverse impacts on ecosystem health, and resilience in our food systems. A key question here is whether the inclusion of Agroecology as an NBS could potentially shift this logic so that trade-offs are better understood and NBS takes a more land sharing approach?

## **NBS and payments systems**

In the definitions above we can see how for some actors, NBS is tied to carbon markets. Firstly, it is vitally important to make sure that NBS are not conflated with carbon markets, as the two are very different things. Who pays for NBS, what mechanisms are used for payment, and how prices are established are important debates to be had, and these should be held publicly as the implications of payment systems can have wide societal impact. We have already seen how subsidy systems can drive wealth accumulation through CAP, and there is evidence to show that payments for carbon sequestration are tending to benefit larger landowners. There is a need for much more subtle and careful understanding of the impact of financialising natural assets such as soil or biodiversity, and what impact this has on other inherent values that our natural assets have. This is important to consider as

one of the key motivations for this enquiry seems to have been motivated by how agroecology should receive payment for the public goods that it is delivering.

### **NBS and offsetting**

Linked to the carbon markets question is also whether or not NBS can be used as offsetting systems. NBS projects are proposed as a way of sequestering carbon while also achieving other natural and social benefits. Carbon sequestration is used then for polluters to offset their emissions. Offsetting is problematic in several different ways, and has been widely criticised as not being effective in leading to actual reductions in carbon emissions. Instead offsets allow polluters to carry on business as usual while seemingly sequestering carbon elsewhere. This masks huge complexities about the time lag in sequestration projects, the complexities of how carbon (and other greenhouse gasses) interact in our atmosphere and soils, the socio-economic impacts related to inflation in land values etc. etc. LWA would not support Agroecology being included into an NBS payment system that is driven by offsets as this is a completely inadequate system for addressing the need for actual and immediate emissions reductions.

## Agroecology principles & NBS principles compared

| <u>Agroecology</u>  | <u>NBS</u>   | <b>Key comparisons</b>   |
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| Diversity (mixed grazing, intercropping diverse range of cereals etc)   | Maintain biological and cultural diversity and the ability of ecosystems to evolve                                   | Whereas Agroecology would seek to actively enhance diversity through human-nature interactions, NBS principles only seek to maintain diversity   |
| Resilience (biological complexity and diversified practices, reducing dependence on external inputs)  |  |  |
| Build synergies (eg hedgerows for soil erosion and feed for animals)  | Embrace nature conservation norms -(eg protecting an area to conserve a specific species)                            | NBS can come from Land Sparing perspectives which can compromise land rights   |
| Co-creation and Sharing of Knowledge (context specific knowledge, producer knowledge and participatory processes)   | Determined by site specific natural and cultural contexts including 'traditional knowledge'                          | Convergence, though with potential for NBS to be lead by top-down consultation processes.<br>As well as 'traditional' knowledge, other social and cultural factors are important inherent factors in agroecological systems. |
| Culture and Food Traditions (increasing production is not the solution to diet related health problems - cultural practices and food traditions are important part of the solution) |  |  |
| Efficiency (using less external resources by creating synergies with system components)   | Can be implemented alone or in an integrated manner with technological or engineering solutions                      | Some divergence in relation to synergies being central to agroecology. Clarity needed on what technological or engineering solutions would be acceptable for inclusion in NBS, and implications for resource use and rights. |
| Recycling (closing nutrient cycles eg by integrating animals with crop systems)   |  |  |
| Human and Social Values (protecting and improving rural livelihoods, equity, justice, and social well-being through bottom-up   | Produce societal benefits in a fair and equitable way in a manner that promotes transparency and broad participation | NBS examples are framed around compensation from lost access rather than recognition and protection of rights. While   |

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| grassroots approaches and solidarity economies)                            | Recognises and addresses trade-offs between production of immediate economic benefits and future options - ie not simplifying ecosystems for immediate impact | recognising trade offs, does not clearly explain the values or principles that might be used in weighing trade offs.   |
| Responsible Governance (transparent, accountable and inclusive mechanisms) | NBS are an integral part of overall policy design to enable large scale interventions   | Where Agroecology holds specific principles of governance, NBS principles sees inclusion of NBS in policy and governance mechanisms as an enabler of NBS, which could lead to clientelism and at worst corruption of governance systems. |
|  | Applied at a landscape scale - such as large forests or watersheds  | Scale is not specified in agroecological principles. Presumably for agroecological approaches, scale would be determined by grassroots groups and the scale of ecological systems involved   |

Agroecology then does not neatly fit under the banner of NBS. There are elements that are quite different: scale, advocates (land spares v landsharers), bottom-up and top-down approaches, understandings of human nature relationships and the role of governance. But, in certain framings it is possible to understand agroecology as an NBS, as agroecology is intrinsically working with nature to develop solutions. The important point is that NBS is contested and there needs to be much closer attention to its definition, practices and impacts. It's important to question whether agroecological farmers receiving payments on NBS schemes (as the assumed *only* option for payments for Agroecology) are joining ineffective offsetting schemes. Or whether agroecological farmers are then required to put a financial price on their soil that exacerbates land speculation at the expense of broader objectives relating to new entrant land access and longer-term agroecological transitions. Perhaps framing NBS to more closely align with the principles of agroecology, and create more rigorous governance systems for NBS which follow these principles, the funding would be better aligned to actually achieve the aims and objectives of agroecology.

To turn the question on its head, if current spending priorities were focused on Agroecology, would you consider NBS to be within the framework of agroecology in order to allow more capital to flow into NBS? Is the question driving this enquiry even the right one? Instead of trying to shoehorn agroecology into a potentially problematic scheme, this APPG should be seizing this moment of greater recognition of Agroecology by the UK Government and designing equitable and sustainable finance mechanisms specifically for Agroecology, while effectively scrutinising schemes that contradict the principles and delivery of agroecology.

#### **Recommendation:**

We recommend that agroecology is supported in its own right as a key way of addressing the combined climate and biodiversity crisis. We have serious concerns around some of the claims to NBS, which can be conflated with carbon offsetting and marketisation. Much clearer definitions of NBS, and formulation of effective regulation of these approaches must be developed in order to ensure that they don't have adverse socio-economic consequences both in the UK and globally, which could exacerbate the crises we face.