

Agricultural chemistry cannot arm sub-Saharan Africa against famine, says FiBL Director Beate Huber. Earlier, Bayer lobbyist Matthias Berninger made this claim in an interview with Table.Media. The organic NGO Ifoam and the Research Institute of Organic Agriculture disagree.

**From**  
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Agricultural engineer Beate Huber doubts that agrochemicals can arm sub-Saharan Africa against famine. She is director at the Research Institute of Organic Agriculture (FiBL) in Switzerland and heads the international cooperation department. "Trying to close the productivity gap in Africa solely by importing sophisticated agrochemicals is neither realistic nor goal-oriented," Huber says. Earlier, however, Bayer lobbyist Matthias Berninger had called for just that in an interview with Table.Media. Berninger's thesis is that this would enable Africa to strengthen its own production and help the continent to become independent of food imports.

The use of pesticides and fertilizers only leads to new dependencies in Africa, warns FiBL Director Huber. She refers to the "fatal" consequences of the Ukraine war. These have shown how quickly import dependencies, for example through rising world market prices and interrupted supply chains for agricultural raw materials, can lead to famine on the African continent.

### **Agroecology includes use of local resources**

More than 80 percent of food in sub-Saharan Africa is produced by smallholder farmers, according to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). "Small farmers often don't have access to crop protection products produced abroad," Huber says. Or correspondingly available goods are too expensive, he adds. Huber therefore advocates an agroecological approach that builds on locally available resources.

"We know from our comparative research in the tropics that organic farming can achieve the same yields as conventional farming," Huber says. With much more positive effects on the environment, especially biodiversity and soil fertility.

### **African does not want to be patronized by Europeans.**

Berninger is also facing opposition from the organic NGO Ifoam. Its president, Karen Mapusua, rejects the idea that promoting agroecology is merely an ideological approach. There is a solid evidence base for the role of this scientific discipline in food security, Mapusua refers to the FAO, which has been scientifically studying the system for decades.

Criticism is also coming from Zimbabwe: "This is not the first time that a European has spoken out about what Africa needs, and it certainly won't be the last," says Ifoam board member Fortunate Nyakanda. What Nyakanda finds deplorable is that it is obviously only about strengthening European influence in Africa. Africa has long been busy building sustainable food systems based on agro-ecological standards.

Small farmers save on input costs

In addition to import dependencies and negative impacts on the environment, the toxicity of pesticides also poses health risks for parts of the African population. Many farmers in Africa are women, among whom few can read and write, Nyakanda reports. Advice on the safe use of toxic products is therefore neither understood nor implemented. Training on the necessary protective equipment is rare, the equipment is usually unaffordable and impractical for extreme heat, so agricultural chemicals are sprayed without protective clothing. Further complicating matters, some elements of protective equipment are considered culturally inappropriate in most African communities. In addition to the health benefits of organic farming, it also benefits many farm families financially by eliminating the cost of chemical inputs.

Ifoam President Mapusua and FiBL Director Huber deny further statements by Berninger. The latter had accused the NGO Ifoam of being responsible for the food crisis in Sri Lanka. "It is unfortunate that this narrative, which has already been refuted many times, is now coming up again," says Mapusua.

### **Conversion to organic farming takes time.**

Moreover, "it is simply not true that we have been advocating for a ban on the import of pesticides and fertilizers," Mapusua says. The Indian Ocean island nation's government had banned chemical fertilizers and pesticides in April 2021. Almost overnight, the country fatally wanted to switch to organic agriculture. Ifoam, which works in Sri-Lanka and elsewhere, had pointed out after the decision to ban imports of chemical inputs became known that such a shift toward agro-ecological farming could not happen overnight. This was also quickly recognized by the Sri Lankan government, which had decided out of a financial emergency to cut expenses. The ban was lifted at the end of November 2021. However, the disastrous consequences of the economic crisis can no longer be undone. According to the FAO, millions of people in Sri Lanka still suffer from hunger.

The FiBL director is backing her. The fact that Berninger, despite knowing better, cites Sri Lanka as an example of the alleged failure of organic agriculture raises "considerable doubts about the sincerity of his arguments," says Huber. For years, Sri Lanka spent a large part of its agricultural budget on importing fertilizers and pesticides. This was supplemented by financial subsidies for farmers. Lacking the ability to pay in the midst of the economic crisis in 2021, the government stopped these imports, she says. This misguided agricultural and economic policy is still having an impact today.