**“Sustainable intensification” is unsustainable**

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Technicians and farmers discussing the results of sustainable intensification on a rice farm in Nepal.

In a [new](http://ideas4sustainability.wordpress.com/2014/06/18/new-paper-putting-back-meaning-into-sustainable-intensification/) [paper](https://ideas4sustainability.files.wordpress.com/2014/06/2014_loos_sust_intensification.pdf) led by [collaborators](http://wp.me/1B7cl) at Leuphana University Lueneburg (Germany) and just released in print in the scientific journal [*Frontiers in Ecology & the Environment*](http://www.esajournals.org/doi/abs/10.1890/130157), my colleagues and I question one of the buzzwords in international conversations about hunger and conserving the environment: sustainable intensification (SI). Explained briefly, sustainable intensification seeks to produce the most food, on the least land, with the lowest environmental impact.

SI has been the subject of a recent European Union report, [proposals](http://ag4impact.org/publications/montpellier-panel-report2013/) by [prominent scholars](http://www.amazon.com/Sustainable-Intensification-Productivity-International-Sustainability/dp/1849713324), and is a major [theme area](http://www.fao.org/agriculture/crops/thematic-sitemap/theme/spi/en/) of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. SI is often seen by some experts as “key” to agriculture’s future, [particularly in Africa](http://africa-rising.net/), and has been the subject of a number of high-profile publications in some of the world’s [top](http://www.sciencemag.org/content/341/6141/33.short) [scientific](http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v478/n7369/full/nature10452.html) [journals](http://www.pnas.org/content/early/2011/11/16/1116437108.full.pdf+html). It is, in short, an idea on the rise.

Despite the term’s popularity among national and international aid organizations and top thinkers, it is getting more attention than it warrants, at least in its current form. Given how readily powerful groups are taking to it, there’s a serious danger that it will drain both funds and attention from the larger and altogether different reforms necessary to fight hunger and food insecurity today, and in the future.

My colleagues and I question, however: Is it a *good* idea, or a sufficient one, for the problems at hand? Our piece addresses two basic arguments:

1. A focus on agricultural intensification is, by definition, a focus on production. Yet production is not even the most important factor in reducing hunger, much less the *only* one. So the phrase “sustainable intensification” cannot be viewed as a proper goal in itself, or continue to be treated as the most prominent “tool” in our efforts to sustainably nourish the planet. This point may be an object of some confusion, given that SI is so often mentioned in the context of growing population, food demand, and persistent current hunger. However, documents promoting SI rarely explain how it will directly fight hunger, rather than resting on the tempting-but-incorrect notion that making more food, in and of itself, will do the most to fight hunger. [We plainly know](http://www.iatp.org/blog/201309/science-means-having-to-say-%E2%80%9Ci%E2%80%99m-sorry%E2%80%9D) that [this is not the case](http://www.sciencemag.org/content/327/5967/825/F1.large.jpg). It will take [much broader social action](http://www.srfood.org/images/stories/pdf/officialreports/20140310_finalreport_en.pdf) and [multi-factor approaches](http://rstb.royalsocietypublishing.org/content/369/1639/20120288.full) to achieve sustainability and fight hunger, because neither one is [simply related](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/conl.12084/full) to how much food we can produce per acre.
2. Extensive research in the areas of both nutrition and sustainability affirms our point that “[w]ithout specific regard for equitable distribution and individual empowerment (**distributive** and **procedural justice**)” increasing productivity cannot claim to be “sustainable”—sustainability requires addressing inter- and intra-generational justice (i.e., justice for today’s generations, and considerations for future ones) and simply “producing more with less” can actually lead people to *consume* more, swamping out benefits from efficiency and causing a net *increase* in unsustainable consumption.

In other words, if our **goal** is dignified and rightful access to culturally appropriate, healthy food for everyone at all times (food security) while being environmentally sustainable, we should not confuse this with undue emphasis on “sustainable intensification.”

In light of persistent misconceptions around sustainability and food production, some relevant basic facts we reference in our piece:

* Simply [producing more food](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0016718501000069) does not necessarily [feed more people](http://www.jstor.org/stable/1153672). Consider the fact that [30 to 40](http://www.npr.org/blogs/thesalt/2014/02/27/283071610/u-s-lets-141-trillion-calories-of-food-go-to-waste-each-year) percent of food is wasted; that many of the world’s farmers lack reliable access to education, infrastructure, credit or fair markets; the fact that intensification [often goes hand in hand](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/0305750X9400116G) with squeezing out the small farmers and landless rural laborers most likely to be suffering from hunger. In this light, simply producing more cannot be thought of as sustainable without looking at how that food is distributed, who it is distributed to, and who gets to make those decisions—the [food sovereignty](http://usfoodsovereigntyalliance.org/what-is-food-sovereignty/) movement argues that it [cannot simply be left](http://f1000research.com/articles/2-235/v1) to concentrated and corporate-dominated “free markets.”
* In some places where “maximum yields” are not obtained for all products, almost any intensification would likely disrupt local ecosystems with no clear benefits for food security—which depends on political and economic power, [not just yields](http://ideas4sustainability.wordpress.com/2014/07/11/why-not-to-analyse-food-and-biodiversity-in-the-same-way-as-carbon/), in a world with enough food for everyone already.
* [Vast amounts of land and energy](http://iopscience.iop.org/1748-9326/8/3/034015/pdf/1748-9326_8_3_034015.pdf) are poured into [feed for animals](http://www.siwi.org/documents/Resources/Policy_Briefs/PB_From_Filed_to_Fork_2008.pdf) and biofuels—with the benefits going overwhelming towards large companies, not the hungry, and by and large not struggling farmers (despite the [potential](http://www.iatp.org/files/258_2_100001.pdf) for biofuels to have done so).
* The “distribution gap” is several times larger than the “nutrition gap”—that is, in many countries, [it would take 2-4X as much food](http://www.ers.usda.gov/media/849266/gfa23.pdf) to address hunger if we *don’t* address unequal distribution as it would take to address hunger and provide nutrition if it were evenly distributed.
* Producing “more food on less land” *in no way* guarantees that less land will be used for agriculture, and in some cases increases the amount of land used because as yields go up, the potential profits entice more people to enter the market and farm more land.

With upcoming meetings this fall like the FAO [International Symposium on Agroecology](http://www.fao.org/agriculture/crops/thematic-sitemap/theme/spi/international-symposium/en/) and the [Committee on World Food Security](http://www.fao.org/cfs/cfs-home/cfs41/en/), and the nascent Global Alliance on (so-called) [Climate Smart Agriculture](http://www.fao.org/climate-smart-agriculture/en/), it is imperative that these issues be understood, and that addressing these complex problems not be simply swapped out for the far less effective idea of producing more food using less land and fewer resources.

It is true growing more food in a more sustainable manner is something that will need to be done in some places, and at some times. But whenever it’s talked about in the context of hunger, food security or feeding the future, it must come after discussion, participation and planning specifically *with* those who face hunger and food insecurity, be they small farmers, landless workers or urban residents. Ignoring the issues of procedural justice (who gets to make the decisions and how) and distributive justice (how and who has access to the food produced) is ignoring both the [established science](http://rstb.royalsocietypublishing.org/content/369/1639/20120288.full) and the need for democratic justice that will truly bring us into a food secure and food sovereign future. Organizations and scholars embracing SI need to [rethink its usefulness](http://foodgovernance.com/2014/07/17/debating-sustainable-intensification/), and its potential to distract us from [evidence-based and effective](http://www.srfood.org/images/stories/pdf/otherdocuments/20130724_genderfoodsec_en.pdf) approaches based in [human dignity](http://www.srfood.org/images/stories/pdf/officialreports/20140310_finalreport_en.pdf) and [food sovereignty](http://agroecopeople.files.wordpress.com/2014/06/chappell-author-vers-in-herring-2013-oxford-university-press-handbook.pdf).

- See more at: <http://www.iatp.org/blog/201409/%E2%80%9Csustainable-intensification%E2%80%9D-is-unsustainable#sthash.9SuLCJKn.dpuf>