Uncovering "regenerative" agribusiness: Deafal and over 100 entities launch a campaign to defend Regenerative Agriculture.

In recent years, major companies in the agribusiness sector have initiated programs for the development of regenerative agriculture. In 2021, Danone claimed to have launched regenerative agriculture projects with 50,000 farms, while Nestlé announced in 2022 that it would invest 1.2 billion Swiss francs (CHF 1.2 billion) to support its producers in transitioning to regenerative agriculture. Additionally, PepsiCo, McCain, Cargill, and Walmart have all embarked on ambitious "regenerative" plans.

The fact that large agribusiness companies, one of the systems responsible for global soil fertility loss and biodiversity erosion, are now discussing regenerative agriculture has strangely not garnered much public interest. However, something in recent weeks has brought attention to an issue that has been underestimated until now.

Regenerative agriculture at risk of greenwashing: the opposing views of Bayer and Deafal

Around mid-2023, Bayer Crop Science, the agricultural division of the German pharmaceutical and chemical company Bayer AG, gained attention for its public statements, setting the goal to "become a global reference for the application of regenerative agriculture" on 161 million hectares. In October 2023, Bayer published its regenerative agriculture program, adopting - without mentioning it - the "Principles and Values Charter of Organic and Regenerative Agriculture" developed by Deafal in 2018 after years of spreading and implementing regenerative and agroecological practices, collaborating with over 4,500 farmers and 200 agricultural companies.

Among the tools Bayer declares it will adopt are the use of new fungicides and herbicides, artificial intelligence, the adoption of modified seeds, and biotechnologies. Glyphosate is also included among the tools that Bayer considers essential for the transition to regenerative agriculture.

The charter developed by Deafal in 2018 - which clearly expresses the association's mission to "Regenerate Soils to Regenerate Societies" - is based on four principles:

- **Regenerating Soil** Implement practices that enhance soil fertility, quantifiable through increased organic carbon, greater provision and availability of mineral elements, and increased microbiological diversity. In hilly and mountainous terrain, choose systems and techniques that limit soil erosion. Adopt scientific, innovative, and experimental practices that leverage local specificities and cultures, drawing inspiration from traditional local practices.
- **Regenerating Ecosystems and Biodiversity** Operate by reducing environmental contamination from synthetic chemicals, utilizing local agricultural waste through the self-production of technical means, reevaluating local genetic resources, and efficiently managing water and agro-silvopastoral resources. Ensure that plants receive cultural care and treatments that promote their long-term health and constant physiological balance.
- **Regenerating Relationships among Living Beings** Act in the care and respect of the dignity of individuals and animals. Promote work and exchange relationships based on the protection of rights and transparency.
- **Regenerating Knowledge** Promote knowledge as a collective asset in continuous transformation and evolution, to be acquired and transmitted in a dimension of openness and interaction with others.

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4. https://terraevita.edagricole.it/difesa-sostenibile/agricoltura-rienergativa-bayer-punta-ad-una-transizione-globale/?fbclid=IwAR23aj3AJ2K8ob_XPYVh3-34pgiFGIjw-2aVmd53XhN-7KeZEDWCDznK
In addition to strictly agronomic aspects, including practices such as composting, the production of stimulants and biostimulants in a circular economy perspective, cover cropping, minimal soil tillage, and intercropping, Organic and Regenerative Agriculture encourages farmers to create networks in the territory and new participatory and collaborative relationships among actors in the agri-food chain.

Deafal's journey in recent years, starting well before 2018, has led to significant examples such as the publication of the book "Organic and Regenerative Agriculture. Beyond organic: ideas, tools, and practices for quality agriculture", published by Terra Nuova, and the establishment, in May 2023, of the National Association of Producers for Organic and Regenerative Agriculture, an organization that brings together agricultural companies adopting regenerative farming and breeding techniques.

Regenerative agriculture and economic interests of agribusiness: two incompatible worlds.

Unlike organic agriculture, regulated in Europe since the early 1990s, there is currently no universally accepted definition of regenerative agriculture: this creates a space of ambiguity that can allow certain actors, such as multinational corporations, to appropriate the term for greenwashing operations.7

However, a recent study8 attempted to clarify the numerous definitions of regenerative agriculture by analyzing websites, documents, and scientific studies: among the most frequently mentioned goals are "the reduction or elimination of synthetic inputs and the maximization of on-farm inputs", the non-use of "agrochemicals and synthetic fertilizers," and "increased biodiversity."

None of the works collected in the review mentions the use of new molecules for agrochemicals or the application of new genetic techniques, as reported in Bayer's documents.9 It appears clear that Bayer, like many other companies, seeks to position itself among farmers and consumers to strengthen its presence in the global market, confirming dependence and exploitation logics (of soils, agricultural companies) through a "regenerative" narrative.

Italian authors Barberi and Antichi, in a recent work10, report how through organic and regenerative agriculture, it is "possible to achieve adequate and stable production by minimizing the use of external inputs and preserving environmental resources." This demonstrates that the more complex and diversified agricultural systems are, the more resilient they are and the less dependent they are on external technical means (agrochemicals, herbicides, synthetic fertilizers, ...).11: It is evident that no multinational agricultural products and services company finds this path of "liberation" of farmers economically appealing.

Another focus of regenerative agriculture is soil health, a biodiversity treasure that hosts two-thirds of known living species. A recent review of 148 publications concluded that "agrochemicals pose serious risks to soil and human health" and that "agrochemicals cause an imbalance in soil fertility, directly affecting crop yields." Faced with this data, how can one of the largest companies in the marketing of agrochemicals, including the world's most used herbicide, present itself as a leader in promoting regenerative agriculture, which aims to eliminate their use?

We conclude by emphasizing again the political and social centrality of regenerative processes. As also reiterated by Antichi and Barberi, regenerative agriculture "explicitly emphasizes the creation of a network of relationships among producers, citizens, and other local actors, in a context of short or very short supply chain, absent in the definition of conservative agriculture."
These networks of producers, local supply chains, and interacting and cooperating communities are obviously absent in Bayer’s documents: the last two points of Deafal’s Principles and Values Charter, related to the regeneration of knowledge and communities, remain without a specific mention.

The association between “Bayer” and “regenerative agriculture” seems to us to generate a true oxymoron, that is, according to Treccani, the union of “two words or expressions that are irreconcilable in meaning as they properly indicate an antithesis or contrariety.” The adoption of a regenerative approach to agriculture cannot, in fact, ignore criticism and the abandonment of the entire agribusiness system, with its extractive and predatory production, distribution, and consumption logics.

The #DefendRegenerative campaign: Deafal and over 100 entities together to promote true regenerative agriculture.

To stop these greenwashing attempts and prevent the improper use of the term “Regenerative Agriculture” by Bayer and agribusiness, while simultaneously activating a dialogue involving farmers, workers, associations, and communities, Deafal has launched the #DefendRegenerative campaign: in the first days, the initiative has already garnered over 100 endorsements from agricultural companies and entities committed to building a new food system and hundreds of citizens.

Agricultural companies, citizens, entities, associations, and businesses can endorse the #DefendRegenerative campaign with the aim of protecting Regenerative Agriculture from distortions and the agribusiness’s appropriation. In the coming months, we will work together with participating entities to bring Regenerative Agriculture to the forefront of public opinion and institutional agendas and strengthen a working network to define and promote this approach.

Do not leave Regenerative Agriculture in the hands of a few multinational corporations that have destroyed the planet with soil, air, and water pollution. Join our campaign: it’s yours too!

✅ I ENDORSE AS AN ASSOCIATION

✅ I ENDORSE AS A FARM

✅ I ENDORSE AS A CITIZEN

👉 Share this campaign on social media with the hashtag #DefendRegenerative
Italian organizations

International organizations

Farms
Other farms & organizations

Citizens
We thank the over 250 citizens who have chosen to support the campaign up to now.