

Regenerative Agriculture: A Shared Ambition For The Future Of Farming?

Executive Summary

Regenerative agriculture (RA) has captured the attention of major food and farming companies – a term that encompasses various sustainable farming practices, some as ancient as agriculture itself. This study offers lessons from a supply chain perspective, exploring its adoption and efforts to propel it into the mainstream.

The first section showcases the diverse ways in which RA is perceived and its relevance in the broader sustainability landscape. The second section focuses on scaling-up: how can companies create an environment where it is desirable for farmers to invest time and money in regenerative farming. Responding to the ambitious goals cited for a RA future, the final section highlights often-overlooked themes, including social justice and equity, crop diversity, agroforestry, nutrition, and debates over landuse and livestock.

Five Insights on the Movement:

1. Collaborative efforts setting ambitious, shared goals for RA are valuable – as goals help to drive our behaviours and culture.
2. RA holds potential to inspire profound, collective action, bolstering farm and supply chain resilience while aiding carbon drawdown and nature recovery. Substantial investments and a systems approach are required to avoid it becoming a lukewarm movement, progressing too slowly to effectively respond to climate risk.
3. Not all embrace RA; scepticism and concerns exist across different camps, making it an unsuitable framing for some farmers.
4. Companies championing RA are at varying stages of their journey, exhibiting disparate levels of ambition, resulting in a somewhat fragmented landscape.
5. Narrow perspectives of RA, focused only on a few practices, risk undermining more expansive regenerative ambitions, envisioned by many organisations and people.

Eight Lessons For Companies Working to Scale-Up RA:

1. While pilot projects are valuable, emphasis should shift to mainstreaming RA through new business and financing models.
2. Programmes must prioritise the needs of farmers, involve co-creation and engage with the nuances of change and risk – especially as initial costs can be high, with delayed returns.
3. Farmer support requires a triad of technical assistance, cultural acceptability, and financial incentives to de-risk practice changes.
4. On-farm interactions between farmers and buyers are valuable to build trust and understanding; intermediaries can help facilitate this for large companies.
5. Effective measurement is delicate and complex, with limited uniformity across companies, despite efforts to align approaches. Certification programmes also exist and can be valuable for fostering trust.
6. Many carbon offset schemes have integrity risks and a limited view of RA; they should not be relied upon to scale-up RA practices.
7. Consumers should be engaged, but expecting buying habits to drive a RA revolution is complacent; value chains should share any additional costs.
8. Collaboration is necessary across the supply chain and between competitors. A plethora of mainly NGO-led collaborations exist and navigating these is critical.

In summary, the RA movement has huge potential as a transformative force in agriculture. While many are actively pursuing its ambitious goals, the journey is deeply complex and should not be underestimated. It demands unlikely collaborations, new responsibilities, innovative business models and open mindsets.