

## Critical Perspectives on the Global Food System

Summer 2023  
E39

Sören Köpke (SK) and Fekadu Beyene (FB)

**Study Programmes:** Ökologische Agrarwissenschaften (M.Sc.),  
Sustainable International Agriculture (SIA)

**Time:** Wednesdays, 8:15 - 12:15, starting April 12, 2023

**Room:** H21 (in presence), Steinstr. 19

**Information and resources** will be provided via **the Moodle page** of the course!  
Please check regularly.

**Tutor:** Timeo Schneider

There is no session on the **7<sup>th</sup> of June** (Kompaktwoche). On **June 28<sup>th</sup>**, there will be a day-excursion.

**Website:** <http://www.uni-kassel.de/go/iapug>

### Introduction

Why is world hunger such a persistent feature, while at the same time, obesity presents a serious health risk? What is the global food system, and in how far is it rooted in history? Which are the problems family farmers around the world are facing? How do rural people fight for their rights to water and land? What is the impact of climate change on food security, especially with regards to vulnerable populations? How can food production become more sustainable, and what are the barriers to sustainable development? Is there really a stark contrast between biodiversity and agriculture? And what is the role of power and politics in explaining challenges in the global food system? – These are some of the questions we will deal with in this course.

The course introduces critical theoretical approaches under the large umbrella term of political ecology, and brings together complementary and diverse perspectives discussing social, ecological, economic and geographic factors that impact agri-food systems. Food systems are spaces of contestation between different perspectives, legacies and interests; agri-environmental issues are complex and deeply political matters; and equity and sustainability are at the core of analysis. Examples covered include (but are not exclusive to) land grabbing, conservation policy, world nutrition, agrarian extractivism, climate policy, the Green Revolution, and the political economy of water for food.

## Content

The course consists of three elements: it introduces a range of critical approaches (food regime theory, more-than-human geographies, critical agrarian studies, world-ecology) with special emphasis on the intellectual origins, theoretical perspectives, and concerns of political ecology. Second, the module introduces case studies on key environmental issues in development in each session, exploring contemporary debates on agricultural topics and focusing on how central actors perceive of nature and how they strive to shape environment-society relations.

In concluding, the module considers different empirical and theoretical approaches towards transition of the global food system, including initiatives that aim at creating a fairer and ecologically sustainable global food system.

## Objectives

By the end of the course, students should have an overview of critical theories explaining power relations, conflicts and social-ecological interactions in the global food system. They should be able to assess merits and gaps of these theories, and to apply them to contemporary problem situations. In particular, they should be familiar with analytical concepts for understanding interconnected issues in development, environment, political economy and conservation with regards to agri-food systems. The course aims at presenting the complexity of these issues, and to allow students to identify and criticize apolitical ecologies and convenient yet faulty narratives. Finally, the students will familiarize themselves with central themes and key cases from the Global South related to food systems and the environment.

## Methods and approach

The course provides a mixture of teaching and learning methods including lectures and guest lectures, classroom debates, group work, literature discussions, poster sessions, student-led seminars, essays and case-study analysis. A day-excursion is planned for the 28<sup>th</sup> of June.

## Literature

Basic literature and advanced texts will be provided through Moodle. For student presentations and student-led seminars, introductory literature will be provided upon request, yet students are expected to look for additional relevant sources independently.

## Examination

Prerequisite for the acquisition of the module credits is the active and regular participation in the entire course and reading of the texts in Moodle before each session. In addition, the course consists of 2 course assignments (50% each):

- a. **Student-led seminars:** Students need to hold an interactive group lecture on one of the topics below, including a discussion on the topic (or of their choice, after clarification with the lecturer), of altogether 45 minutes. The grade for the presentation accounts for 50% of the final grade of the module. Criteria are set within the course.
- b. **Essay:** Each student will write an argumentative essay of four pages (max 2000

words) which discusses a particular question or a particular case study in the light of central hypotheses, questions and/or concepts of political ecology. The grade for the paper is 50% of the final grade of the module. Criteria for evaluation are set within the course. Please clarify details with [soeren.koepke@agrار.uni-kassel.de](mailto:soeren.koepke@agrار.uni-kassel.de) prior to writing it.

### **Topics for student seminars**

\*Topics could include, but are not confined to, the following:

- Food sovereignty vs. food security
- A corporate food regime? Contours of the current global food system
- Gender and feminist political ecology
- Debt in the Global South and its connection to food security
- Cash crops (cotton, tobacco, coffee & cacao) and subsistence agriculture
- Indigenous food practices in the Global North, i.e. the Arctic regions (Sami, Inuit)
- Pastoralism between marginalization and resilience
- Political economy of small-holder contract farming
- REDD+ and other offsetting schemes and their relation to land and forest rights
- Digitalization and the food system
- Trade and food security: MERCOSUR, CETA, etc.

### **Contact and speaking hours**

Dr. Sören Köpke, Postdoctoral researcher and lecturer,  
Section of International Agricultural Policy and Environmental Governance  
Steinstraße 19  
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[soeren.koepke@agrار.uni-kassel.de](mailto:soeren.koepke@agrار.uni-kassel.de)

Speaking hours each Wednesday, 3-5 PM, after appointments are made by eMail. During term break, speaking hours will be announced.

Speaking hours and contact details for Prof. Fekadu Beyene will be announced at beginning of the term.

## Course Outline

Please note: Depending on developments in the course, some of topics might be adjusted. Please check Moodle for updates the week prior to the next seminar, or get back to us should you plan to prepare well in advance.

1. **Course introduction** – April 12, 2023 (SK)
  - What is the global food system? What is political ecology?
2. **World hunger** – April 26, 2023 (SK)
  - Where Malthus erred
  - Hunger and conflict | Food as a weapon
  - Food aid and its critiques
3. **Colonial roots of the current global food system** – April 19, 2023 (SK)
  - Colonial trade and agriculture
  - From slavery to indentured labour
  - A short history of tea
4. **Sustainable agricultural development and the environment** – May 3, 2023 (FB)
  - Ecological agriculture/eco-farming
  - The social and ecological systems (with specific application to agriculture)
  - Agriculture, trade and environmental justice (large scale agri. investment in developing countries)
  - Green revolution in Africa (AGRA progress and prospect) and beyond
5. **Agrarian questions old and new** – May 10, 2023 (SK)
  - Agrarian Marxism & Peasant studies
  - Landgrabs
  - Green grabbing (Conservation and control)
6. **Environmental conflict and environmental justice** – May 17, 2023 (SK)
  - Origins and development of the environmental justice debate
  - Water wars? Climate wars? A critique of the environmental conflict discourse
  - Marginalization
7. **Property rights and social capital in natural resource (land, water and agrobiodiversity) management** – May 24, 2023 (FB)
  - Property rights regimes
  - Property rights to natural resource management (NRM)
  - Drivers of property rights change (efficiency and equity)
  - Social capital in coordination of NRM
  - Policies for agrobiodiversity management and ecosystem services

- Case studies and reflections
8. **More-than-human geographies and the commodity turn** – May 31, 2023 (SK)
- Actor-Network Theory
  - More-than human geographies
  - Food regime theory (Guest lecture: Dr. Louis Thiemann)
  - Commodity frontiers
  - Word-ecology
9. **Climate resilience and policy** – June 14, 2023 (FB)
- Climate Smart Agriculture
  - Adaptation and adaptive capacity development
  - Mechanism for enhancing climate resilience
  - Climate change models (DICE model) and policy options
  - Case studies and reflections
10. **Agro-ecology as a transformative force** – June 21, 2023 (SK)
- Knowledge and power in agrarian transformation
  - Guest lecture: “Biocultural Heritage and local knowledge“, Javier Becerril
  - Guest lecture: Judith Bopp, Vechta Institute of Sustainability Transformation in Rural Areas (VISTRA), University of Vechta
11. **Day excursion: The role of seeds in the global food system** – June 28, 2023 (SK)  
Topic and date may be subject to change
12. **Challenges to agricultural development in developing countries** – July 5, 2023 (FB)
- Technical (technological progress, human capital, infrastructure)
  - Political (governance, violent conflicts, fragile states, colonial influence)
  - Institutional and market development (contracts, transactions, information asymmetry)
  - Environmental impact assessment of agricultural production (land resource degradation, water scarcity)
  - Case studies and reflections
13. **Wrap-up and student-led seminar sessions** – July 12, 2023 (SK &FB)