

WHAT REGENERATIVE AGRICULTURE CAN LEARN FROM THE ORGANIC MOVEMENT

Regenerative agriculture (RA) has gained attention as a new approach to farming that aims to go beyond sustainability. Despite the growing interest, there is no widely accepted definition for RA and that increases the risk for co-optation, hampers promotion and public action, and undermines incentivizing programs for adoption. For RA to realize its promise, it will need to merge with the corporate industrial agrifood system, and it can draw on lessons from the Organic Agriculture (OA) movement to do so.

With OA, the corporate system has easily integrated the foundational pillar of growing food without chemicals but abandoned pillars including alternative food distribution and a focus on whole foods and unprocessed ingredients. The lessons from OA suggest that the RA interpretations most easily integrated with the corporate industrial system will likely shape the future of RA, giving it a chance to influence agricultural change.

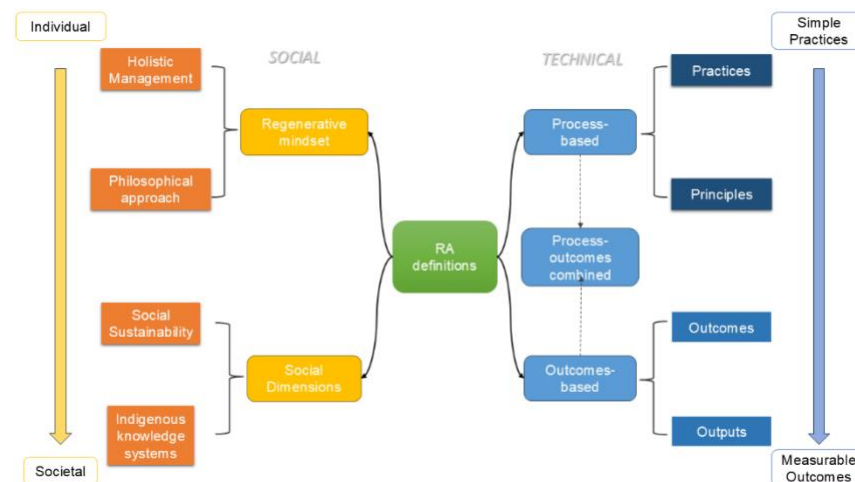
Based on the literature, four approaches to defining RA have been identified in two categories; technical and social, as seen in Figure 1. The technical category includes process-based and outcome-based definitions, while the social category includes philosophical and social dimensions. The approaches are not mutually exclusive and exhibit gradients that range from simple practices to measurable outcomes and from individual to societal levels.

There are notable parallels between RA in Canada and the United States today and the organic sector in the U.S. in the 1970s and 1980s. Both movements faced challenges in defining their principles, as OA lacked a settled definition until the Organic Foods Production Act in 1990. Today, the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements faces pressure to incorporate technologies like genetic modification to increase sustainability.

While mainstream organic certification focuses on growing food without certain chemicals, this is far from the movement's original goals. Regardless, OA offers benefits like reduced synthetic inputs, reduced water pollution, increased biodiversity, and increased profitability. However, its profitability relies on wealthy consumers in developed countries, driving production in poorer countries.

RA faces similar challenges with process-based definitions being vulnerable to co-optation. These definitions allow producers to implement practices without fundamentally changing their approach, making it easy to integrate with industrial capitalism. Large multinational companies have developed incentive programs for RA, focusing on carbon offsets without addressing social concerns like power relations and inequality.

Figure 1: Social and Technical Definitions of Regenerative Agriculture



Outcome-based approaches for RA focus on measurable results rather than practices. They have potential to be transformative, but success depends on the details of indicators and thresholds for factors such as soil health, biodiversity, and soil water holding capacity. Third-party regenerative certification, such as the Regenerative Organic Certification or Ecological Outcome Verification, also have a crucial role to play in the approach.

Social and philosophical-based definitions of RA are also potentially transformative, challenging the Western conceptualization of humanity's relationship with nature. These approaches emphasize reciprocity and a holistic view of the environment, drawing on Indigenous and philosophical perspectives. However, these definitions are challenging to merge with mainstream industrial capitalism.

RA has gained significant attention and growth in the last decade, reflecting society's realization of the planet's precarious state. It offers hope for tackling environmental crises and fostering harmony with nature. However, its ability to solve problems on a large scale depends on its integration with capitalism which could mean compromising its principles, as seen with OA. RA may either be stripped of its transformational qualities or transform society's relationship with nature, depending on whether it holds to its principles or makes compromises to remain relevant.