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Regenerative Agriculture: Reviving the Earth for the Future Sustainability

*Firoj Aktar¹ and Md Shahajahan²

¹Department of Agricultural extension, Palli Siksha Bhavana (Institute of Agriculture), Visva-Bharati, 732135, India

²Department of Soil Science & Agril. Chemistry, Uttar Banga Krishi Viswavidyalaya, Pundibari, Cooch Behar, West Bengal-736165, India

*Corresponding Author's email: aktararg786@gmail.com

This article presents regenerative agriculture as a transformational strategy for addressing the urgent need for resilient, sustainable agricultural practices. It emphasises the negative effects of conventional agriculture and the significance of pursuing alternative techniques to achieving food security and environmental sustainability. The fundamental concepts of regenerative agriculture are thoroughly explained, including soil health, biodiversity protection, water management, and carbon sequestration. The article also discusses the benefits of regenerative agriculture, which include increased soil fertility, biodiversity conservation, water conservation, climate resilience, and economic viability. It concludes by emphasising the necessity of broad regenerative methods in ensuring a sustainable future for agriculture and the world.

Keywords: Regenerative, Conventional, Biodiversity, Sustainable, Climate resilience

Introduction

In recent years, around the world has seen increasing realisation of the critical need to shift to more sustainable and regenerative farming techniques. Conventional agricultural systems, which include heavy chemical inputs, large-scale monocultures, and widespread land clearing, have greatly contributed to environmental degradation, soil erosion, biodiversity loss, and climate change. As the world's population grows and natural resources become scarcer, it's crucial to find solutions that address both food security and environmental sustainability. Although the term 'regenerative agriculture' has been in use since the 1980s, interest and usage have increased significantly in the last decade (Giller et al., 2021), and as a result, this spectrum of understandings reflects, in part, the diversity of actors interested in, participating in regenerative agriculture. Regenerative agriculture has evolved as a transformational and comprehensive agricultural method that aims to not only sustain a healthy food production but also on restoring soil, protecting nature, and improving the health of our planet through the use of organic amendments, minimum soil disturbance and crop rotations (Rhodes, 2017). The approach recognises that agriculture can be play significant role in mitigating climate change, sustaining biodiversity, enhancing ecosystems, and promoting community well-being. Regenerative agriculture offers a workable and comprehensive answer to many of the problems facing modern agriculture by focusing on soil health, protecting biodiversity, managing water effectively, and carbon sequestration in the soil.

Practices of Regenerative agriculture

Almost everyone who uses the word "regenerative" will do some combination of the following:

Minimising soil disturbance

Regenerative agriculture improves soil health by reducing mechanical disturbance, unlike conventional farming which relies on deep ploughing and heavy machinery. Farmers adopt minimum tillage or no-till methods to protect soil structure and reduce erosion (Al-Kaisi & Lal, 2020). These practices can improve water drainage and support soil organisms (Mondal & Chakraborty, 2022). Reduced disturbance may increase soil organic carbon, though the relationship between tillage and carbon storage is debated (Luo et al., 2010). Studies also show that organic inputs are key for carbon gains, while reduced tillage may sometimes increase weeds or nitrous oxide emissions (Mary et al., 2020).

Maintaining soil cover

Regenerative agriculture emphasizes keeping soil covered with cover crops and plant residues throughout the year to restore soil ecosystems. In pasture systems, farmers avoid overgrazing so plants can regrow properly (Teague & Kreuter, 2020). Many practitioners use Mob grazing methods which lead to high stocking densities, causing livestock to trample some forage biomass, which creates a decomposing 'thatch' layer of plant residues on the soil surface that protects soil and supports microbial activity (Wagner et al., 2023). These practices may increase soil carbon and improve soil conditions, though results depend on environmental factors.

Promoting crop diversification

Regenerative agriculture promotes shifting from simplified monoculture systems to diversified cropping systems with more crops in rotations and mixed cover crops. Crop diversification helps improve pest control and soil fertility naturally, reducing the need for chemical inputs (Prescott et al., 2021). This approach contrasts with intensive agriculture, which relies heavily on synthetic fertilizers and pesticides. Legume crops contribute to soil nitrogen, lowering dependence on costly synthetic fertilizers (Cusworth et al., 2021). Additional practices like fertiliser use to boost early growth, agroforestry, hedgerows, and pollinator habitats also support biodiversity and soil health (Levin, 2022).

Incorporation of crop rotation and cover cropping

Planting cover crops during fallow periods or between cash crops helps to protect the soil from erosion, enhances organic matter content, and adds nitrogen through biological fixation. Alteration of crops across seasons disrupts pest and disease cycles, improves nutrient uptake efficiency, and reduces soil-borne pathogens. This practice also diversifies farm income streams (Shubha et al., 2021).

Agroforestry

Agroforestry is a land-use system that integrates agriculture and forestry to maximize food production and support the diverse needs of rural communities. It creates a symbiotic relationship among crops, trees, and livestock, where trees help conserve soil moisture, improve soil fertility, and protect crops from strong winds and harsh climatic conditions. The inclusion of trees and woody perennials enhances biodiversity, provides shade, improves microclimate, contributes to carbon sequestration and improves microclimate and soil health. Agroforestry practices such as planting trees, shrubs, palms, or bamboo alongside crops help reduce erosion and mimic natural ecosystems, thereby promoting sustainable land management.

Integration of animals and cropping systems

Livestock can be integrated into arable farming through grazing on temporary grass leys and by including forage and cover crops in crop rotations. Such practices can increase soil carbon stocks and slightly improve soil organic matter when livestock graze these systems (Teague & Kreuter, 2020). However, adding extra livestock may increase greenhouse gas emissions from ruminant digestion, potentially outweighing soil carbon sequestration benefits. When livestock numbers and land use are carefully managed, integrated crop–livestock systems may provide environmental advantages compared to conventional segregated farming (Jordon et al., 2022; Breewood & Garnett, 2020). Nevertheless, the role of livestock in

sustainable food systems remains debated due to the significant climate impact of meat and dairy production (Breewood & Garnett, 2023; Cusworth et al., 2022; Dutkiewicz, 2021).

Organic farming

Organic farming practices avoid using hazardous agrochemical inputs (pesticides, fungicides, herbicides, and fertilisers). Instead, they are built on increasing biological density while also maintaining and replenishing soil productivity. Organic farming is distinguished by the restriction of synthetic inputs and the implementation of health-improving agronomic methods.

Principles of Regenerative Agriculture

Regenerative agriculture is based on a set of basic principles that guide its operations toward sustainable and holistic land management.

1. **Soil Health:** Regenerative agriculture focuses on restoring soil health, which is crucial for plant growth, nutrient cycling, water filtering, and carbon storage. Intensive farming has led to soil degradation, but regenerative practices such as cover cropping, crop rotation, reduced tillage, and organic amendments can rejuvenate soil fertility and biological activity. Healthy soils promote sustainable crop production, enhance water retention, reduce nutrient runoff, and support vibrant ecosystems (Hungate *et al.*, 2017).
2. **Biodiversity Conservation:** Biodiversity conservation is vital in regenerative agriculture, contrasting with traditional practices that often harm biodiversity for maximum production. Regenerative agriculture emphasizes the importance of biodiversity, aiming to create habitats that support diverse plant and animal species. Techniques such as agroforestry, livestock integration, and habitat corridors enhance ecological balance, promote natural pest management, and aid pollinators. Maintaining biodiversity bolsters agricultural ecosystem resilience and enhances the health of surrounding landscapes (Wickramasinghe *et al.*, 2004).
3. **Water management:** Water management is critical in regenerative agriculture, particularly due to rising water shortages and climate change. Traditional farming often leads to excessive irrigation, aquifer depletion, and water contamination. In contrast, regenerative agriculture focuses on water conservation and quality enhancement through techniques such as contour ploughing, water collection, drip irrigation, and cover crops, which reduce runoff and maintain soil moisture (De Vries *et al.*, 2020). Water-saving methods can help regenerative farmers reduce drought risks, protect water resources, and contribute to the overall sustainability of agricultural systems (Mukherjee *et al.*, 2016).
4. **Carbon sequestration:** Carbon sequestration significantly enhances soil health and reduces greenhouse gas emissions while preserving biodiversity. Effective practices include reduced or no-tillage methods that maintain soil organic matter and tree-based farming for restoring carbon-depleted soils. Regenerative agriculture plays a crucial role in climate change mitigation by storing carbon in soils and vegetation, addressing the substantial greenhouse gas emissions from agriculture, deforestation, and industry. Key strategies such as agroforestry, rotational grazing, cover cropping, and biochar application not only increase carbon storage but also bolster farming resilience against climate-related challenges, including extreme weather and temperature variations (Vicente-Vicente *et al.*, 2016).

Benefits of Regenerative Agriculture

Regenerative agriculture has numerous advantages beyond soil health and climate resilience.

- ✓ **Enhanced Soil Fertility Status:** Regenerative approaches increase soil structure, nutrient availability, and water-holding capacity by rebuilding organic matter and microbial activity. This results in increased crop production while minimising synthetic fertiliser usage (Shubha *et al.*, 2017).
- ✓ **Biodiversity Conservation:** Regenerative agriculture promotes varied ecosystems by providing habitat for pollinators, beneficial insects, and wildlife. This supports natural pest management, decreases pesticide use, and increases ecological resilience.

- ✓ **Water Conservation:** Implementing regenerative techniques helps to preserve water resources by minimising runoff, increasing infiltration rates, and lessening drought effects. Healthy soils can better retain moisture, allowing crops to thrive during dry spells.
- ✓ **Climate resilience:** Regenerative agriculture is an effective technique for mitigating climate change. Carbon sequestration in soils and vegetation serves to balance greenhouse gas emissions, reducing the impact of climate change and increasing soil resilience to extreme weather events (Mukherjee et al., 2016).
- ✓ **Economic Viability:** Regenerative agriculture has the potential to be an economically viable solution in the long term, notwithstanding the initial transition expenses. Farmers' profitability can be improved via lower input needs, less reliance on outside inputs, and the possibility of higher yields.

Challenges of Regenerative Agriculture

Regenerative agriculture has the potential to restore soil health, enhance biodiversity, and combat climate change, yet its widespread adoption is hindered by various challenges.

- ❖ High initial transition costs deter farmers from adopting regenerative agriculture, as they must invest in new practices and training. Temporary declines in crop yields during the transition can negatively impact farmers' income.
- ❖ Lack of knowledge and technical support hampers effective implementation of regenerative practices like crop rotation, cover cropping, agroforestry, and rotational grazing. Many farmers may not have sufficient access to training, extension services, or research-based guidance needed to implement these techniques effectively.
- ❖ Agricultural policies and subsidies often favour conventional farming. Additionally, farmers practicing regenerative agriculture may struggle to receive premium prices or financial incentives for their environmentally beneficial practices.
- ❖ Uncertainty in measuring benefits, such as carbon sequestration and soil health, Reliable monitoring systems are still developing, making it difficult to quantify the environmental outcomes of regenerative farming practices.
- ❖ Finally, variations in climate and regional conditions affect the success of regenerative techniques, requiring adaptive strategies.

Conclusion

Regenerative agriculture is a significant pathway to a more sustainable and resilient food system. This transformational strategy tackles environmental concerns by prioritising soil health, biodiversity protection, water management, and carbon sequestration while improving food security and social well-being. However, scaling up regenerative agriculture needs a collaborative effort from farmers, policymakers, academics, and stakeholders along the agricultural value chain. By adopting regenerative techniques and cultivating a supporting ecology, we can prepare the world for a sustainable future in which agriculture coexists peacefully with the health of our planet and its people.

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