

More Growth Than Good

A Closer Look at Syngenta's "Good Growth Plan"



She can feed a hungry planet.
We're going to help her do it.

the good growth plan

One planet.
Six commitments.

Find out more

Executive Summary

On 19 September 2013, Syngenta presented **The Good Growth Plan**, its six-point plan for responsible growth. The plan's objectives, to be implemented by 2020, are: to promote resource efficiency, to regenerate ecosystems, and to strengthen rural communities.

This report analyzes Syngenta's Good Growth Plan with regard to its formulated objectives, the chosen indicators, and the envisaged steps towards implementation. The central question is: To what degree does the Syngenta agrochemical company fulfill its corporate responsibility with this plan?

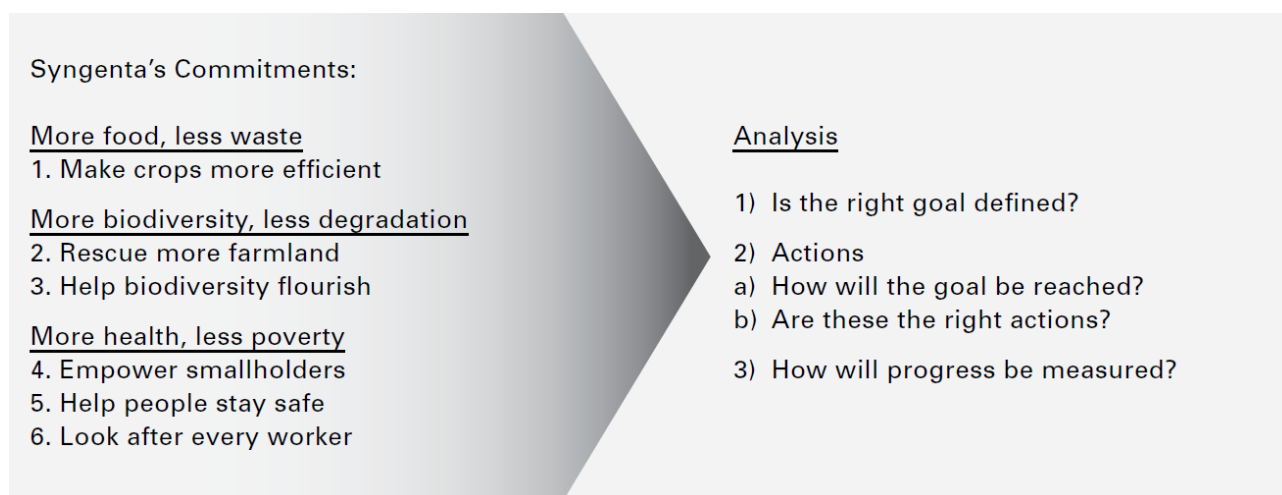


Illustration: Syngenta's Commitments / DB Analysis

Compared with other instruments used to assess the sustainability of agricultural systems (such as those of the FAO or BASF), Syngenta's rating system appears to be overly restrictive and simple. It gives the impression that a systematic selection process was used to choose the goals and indicators. One apparently wants to be assessed only in areas where goals can be reached without bringing current business practices into question. Thus, for example, Syngenta does not examine if, by the achievement of its self-chosen goals, other recognized indicators for sustainable agriculture will be negatively influenced. Accordingly, any achievement of Syngenta's goals would give no insight into whether the corporation had made a contribution to sustainable development or not.

The World Agriculture Report (IAASTD) of 2008, with its message "Business as Usual is Not an Option," marked the start of a global rethinking. The political and scientific consensus, that a paradigm shift in agriculture is needed in order to produce enough food in the future for a rising global population, is growing steadily. This view is however nowhere to be found in Syngenta's sustainability plan.

Goal 1: "Make crops more efficient by increasing the average productivity of the world's major crops by 20 percent without using more land, water or inputs."

Syngenta wants to raise productivity, and in its Good Growth Plan literature it mentions a necessary "huge increase in production" in order to feed the global population. The focus on constantly raising production ("more with less") via expansion of a somewhat less polluting industrial agriculture is the wrong approach. Worldwide, we already produce enough food to feed 12 to 14 billion people. The problem is much more that the crops produced are, on the one hand, not distributed according to need, and on the other hand, not exclusively and efficiently utilized as food (but rather as biofuel and livestock feed). However in 2013, 40% of Syngenta's revenue came from pesticides and seed for corn and soybean cultivation that primarily serve livestock feed and biofuel production.

The goal should not only be to use less water, but also to ensure that the water is not contaminated by pesticides. But water quality is not important to Syngenta, although here the firm would have more opportunities to make a difference, as well as greater responsibility. Moreover, The Good Growth Plan does not

make clear how many reference farms there are, what exactly is being measured, and over what period of time. It is also important to distinguish between a short-term increase in efficiency, and a long-term and sustainable solution.

Goal 2: “Rescue more farmland by improving the fertility of 10 million hectares of farmland on the brink of degradation.”

The need to stop soil degradation is acknowledged internationally. However Syngenta’s stated objective remains unclear. By how much should fertility be increased? Syngenta considers plowing for weed control to be one of the main causes of the loss of farmland. But according to the FAO, there are a multitude of other causes of soil loss in agriculture. Syngenta also gives no details about which methods it will promote to reduce plowing. Solutions that Syngenta has pushed in the past – such as the use of non-selective herbicides like Paraquat – result in other negative effects.

Goal 3: “Help biodiversity flourish by enhancing biodiversity on 5 million hectares of farmland.”

Here too the objective is vague. By how much should the biodiversity of crops and agricultural areas be increased?

For Syngenta, the fostering of bee populations through field margins plays a central role in the preservation of animal diversity. However it is extremely questionable how much sense it makes to set up field margins for pollinators in habitats where highly toxic insecticides are used.

Possible negative effects of Syngenta’s corporate policy on biodiversity are systematically ignored in The Good Growth Plan. Regarding pesticides, patents on plants, and the promotion of monocultures, it is obvious that these issues have negative consequences that cannot be offset by the planting of flowering meadows.

Goal 4: “Empower smallholders by reaching 20 million smallholders and enabling them to increase productivity by 50 percent.”

Conclusion

The newest CSR concept from the Basel-based agrochemical corporation will not produce sustainable business practices that are “good” for humans and the environment, even if all of the plan’s objectives are met. This is primarily because the inadequate goals and actions simply ignore human rights due diligence. In addition, fundamental questions about the company’s product line and corporate policy are systematically disregarded.

Imprint

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This goal also focuses on increasing productivity. However higher productivity by itself cannot be equated with less hunger and poverty. The critical factor is whether the producer can earn a living wage. This human rights key indicator is ignored by Syngenta. This applies to other economic factors as well, such as the stability of crop yields, or – particularly interesting in the case of Syngenta – the dependence on individual input suppliers. Potentially higher yields, which due to the higher production costs also lead to greater debts, can lead farmers into a vicious cycle of debt.

Goal 5: “Help people stay safe by training 20 million farm workers on labor safety, especially in developing countries.”

This goal would affect only a fraction of the people who regularly use those Syngenta products that are highly toxic. In addition, training is not enough to prevent the risks of dealing with pesticides. According to the FAO, training is the last of three measures to reduce risk. The first measure is to avoid pesticides when possible. The second measure calls for less hazardous pesticides to be used. With the company’s reductionist view of worker safety, and the sales of highly hazardous pesticides in countries where safe handling cannot be assured, Syngenta is still willing to accept the poisoning of countless farm workers.

Goal 6: “Look after every worker by striving for fair labor conditions throughout our entire supply chain network.”

This noble goal is even more vaguely formulated, and therefore not measurable. “Striving for” fair labor conditions describes a process and not a concrete goal. In addition, the program is limited to India, Eastern Europe and Latin America. Does Syngenta have no suppliers in Asia (other than India) or Africa to be monitored?