

TheRegenerationRebellion

[00:00:00] **Philippe Birker:** I'm Philipp. I'm a co-founder of Climate Farmers. Uh, grew up in Germany, now living here in central Portugal, and I'm stewarding seven and a half hectares of land here myself. And this is kind of when I fell in love with, with regen ag back in 2017, and then fell in love with farmers, and basically what Climate Farmers is doing is it's a support community for farmers, um, that wanna transition towards regenerative agriculture or doing regenerative agri-agriculture.

And by now we- we've become a bit of a learning ecosystem and also a bit of a, yeah, representative of farmers towards all kind of other stakeholders in the agrifood system. The current agrifood system that we are, that we're existing in is completely failing us. Like, um, it's, it's failing our farmers who are on average in their late 50s, and who mostly have children who don't wanna take over their farm 'cause they see their parents being stressed and overworked with, uh, not enough money at the end of the year on their bank account to make [00:01:00] ends meet.

Um, it's failing our planet. I think most people know, who are your listeners, that agriculture is the biggest driver of climate change with 24% of all greenhouse gas emissions, biggest driver of biodiversity loss, and it's also failing our own health. 'Cause let's face it, the way how we are currently growing our food is not only making the planet sick, it's also making us sick.

And, um, it's, it's always, uh, weird because it's almost too good to be true, but regenerative agriculture tackles all of these things, and it basically tackles it in very simple words by working with nature instead of working against it. So you basically look at the, the context of a farm, you look at the current landscape of a farm, and you kind of see what would naturally be growing here, how would it be growing in a natural context, and how can I replicate that and basically support nature in what it does best, and that just tends to be regeneration of soil and biodiversity, and through that, also production of very delicious and nutritious food.[00:02:00]

I mean, if we're looking at the barriers to this, in the end it, it's very simple. It's, it, it's capitalism, and it's a few companies making a lot of money from the current system, and I would call out here the agrochemical industry, which is very similar for me to the tobacco industry or the oil and gas industry.

They basically very successfully and geniusly, um, evil genius, but still geniusly, created a system where farmers are exclusively being paid for yield at all costs, and then they're selling them products which basically destroy our planet, but they are giving them a lot of yield in short, um, in... with a short horizon, let's say.

And, um, that means that farmers are now stuck in that system, so they're buying a lot of external inputs in order to maximize the yield. They get subsidies also based on that, and, um, with that they have been farming for the last 30 years, 40 years, but have been seeing the fields being more and more depleted, [00:03:00] so they have to put more and more input, and we're basically at the closing end of that downward spiral.

But as with all other areas of life as well, where the ones who are currently in power and the ones who are currently benefiting, um, the agrochemical industry is very much resisting. They're trying to hijack the term, and they're trying to do whatever they can to influence policy, education, and also farmers directly in preventing them from shifting.

So we see farmers driving the change, and we see the rest of the system actually actively being against them changing in that direction. So just to put things in perspective, in 2017, I had a very hard time finding any farmers that would be doing regenerative agriculture. With a lot of research, um, I found 60 farmers back then.

Um, back then we had 10.5 million farmers in the European Union. By now, we have only 9 million farmers left, so 10% of... more than 10% of all farmers have basically closed their farms within the last 10 years. Um, but we estimate [00:04:00] that there's currently between 100,000 and 200,000 farmers somewhere on the region paths, um, across Europe.

And in terms of organizations, when we started there was Soil Heroes out there, and that was pretty much it. And now I think there's more than 100 startups and organizations somewhere in the region space, and the whole field in itself has completely exploded. So the, the consumer awareness has been rising, the interest of farmers have been rising, the interest of policy.

Also corporate actors have definitely been pushing it and integrating it into the agenda. So there seems to be a, a lot of momentum going in the right direction. One of the biggest bottlenecks that we still see is education, which is, uh, still very much lacking behind, and that's one of the areas that we're also tackling.

I grew up in a farming context, and then, um, I spent my 20s in Amsterdam and Berlin building up a few different impact startups. Also ran a techno club in Amsterdam for three years and, uh, really enjoyed [00:05:00] big city life. But towards the end of my 20s, um, I kind of also had enough of it, and I was craving for more nature around me.

And then I found out that in Portugal, um, they passed a law that you can rebuild broken down houses and ruins in certain areas without any planning permission, and that was very tempting as a German, where you needed permission to raise your fence. Um, and so together with a few friends, we bought an abandoned village, and with that village came seven hectares of land.

With that came my interest in how to steward that land, and then I first looked into permaculture. Then I found Richard Perkins, one of the leading region farmers back then. Then I found region ag, and then I found papers from Wageningen University from the '80s and '90s already talking about biodiversity increase and soil carbon sequestration and all the benefits and holistic grazing.

All of this is not new, right? It's mostly indigenous farming practices. These papers were from the '80s and '90s, but it has just not been-- The time wasn't there yet for it, let's say. And this is what sparked my curiosity. And then, um, I was at an-- I was part [00:06:00] of Ashoka Changemaker Exchange, which is the youth network of social entrepreneurs.

And through that, I met my co-founder, Ivo Degen, who also grew up in a farming context, who also was just diving into region ag. And we spoke in Berlin on the hottest day ever measured, um, back then, it was thirty-nine point four degrees. And we both were like, "If we don't work on climate change, then what are we doing with our times?"

This was the height of Greta Thunberg and everything, and we were both were like, "Region ag seems to be the one thing that makes sense." And then I, I did that farmer tour, and after that I was deeply in love with the regenerative farmers that, that I met and their estate and that I spoke and worked with, and I was like, "These people are, are the real heroes of our times."

But most of them felt very lonely. Um, they all didn't know each other. They all were the only ones in the area. Some of them were literally getting bullied by other conventional farmers around them for doing crazy stuff like moving their cows on a daily basis and having many different fe- plants on their field at the same time, and all being super messy.

And so [00:07:00] the very first thing that we did is we connected them in a WhatsApp group Very simple and, and very powerful. And there was deep sharing going on, and, um, people were really connecting and really being happy that they found a community. The pandemic was also going on at that time, so we did a lot of stuff online.

Then we really had the craving of the farmers to meet in person, so we organized, during the pandemic still, the first conference for regenerative farmers in the world's only farmer's castle in southern Germany. We wrote a manifesto there, um, from the farmers to define what regenerative agriculture is.

Um, and then it also became clear that there was a hype coming around it. We need to protect it, um, against greenwashing, so we developed an MRV, um, for regenerative agriculture together with our farmer community and with Wageningen and other university partners, where we basically say, "Hey, these are the indicators for regenerative agriculture."

Um, this is one of the outcomes also of a big EU project that we were in with, uh, soil health benchmarks. And, um, we [00:08:00] also started d- dabbling into the carbon, uh, market, something that I wouldn't recommend for anyone to do. It's a whole mess out there, but it is a tool that we can use to pay farmers in the transition.

And then we started understanding more and more that there's a whole complexity going on with many different actors that are involved, and so we, we tried to, to, to grapple with that complexity by creating what we call a systems map. So we interviewed more than 100 different stakeholders, um, ranging from insurances, over banks, to policy, to farmers, um, supermarkets, and consumers to really understand what are these blockers.

And an outcome of that systems map was that actually education is, uh, one of the biggest issues. There's some grassroots education going on. There was our community of practice going on, but there are also 60,000 students every year being educated in 512 agriculture degrees, of which none of them are in regenerative agriculture.

And so for the last, uh, one and a half years, we [00:09:00] first, um, developed, uh, an own, uh, training program, and we're now developing the first master program in regenerative agriculture in collaboration with different European universities to finally en- empower young people to actually learn and study regenerative agriculture in order to then afterwards have also successful careers in that area.

So the, the reason why we focus on farmers is because farmers are the backbone of our agri-food system, right? And unfortunately, they are the ones which have been mostly exploited in, in the current system. So they are... They are doing the work on the ground. They are the ones who most of the time have seven-day workweeks, who are completely dedicating their entire lives to this.

But if you're looking at the margin that they are getting in the end, it's a joke. So a good example is always milk because it's one of those where I find ridiculous. So most farmers in Europe right now are getting between 30 and 40 cents for a liter of milk. And now if you go to the supermarket, [00:10:00] most of the time you'll be paying between one and two euros anywhere in Europe.

And now if you look about it after the milk leaves the farm, the only thing they do is they put it in a package and then they put it in the supermarket. That's it. And for that they take 60 to 80% of the profit margin. That makes no sense at all. And unfortunately, that's the reality for most produce. And at the same time, for example, we have an amazing farmer in southern Portugal that does holistic grazing with his cows, and he...

the cows are having an amazing, uh, effect on the ecosystem. He's building biodiversity. He's storing carbon. He's doing everything right, but he's producing 5,000 liters of milk a day. And so the only one that's able to buy that milk from him on a daily basis, and it needs to leave the farm every day, is the largest Portuguese supermarket, Pingo Doce, and they pay him a dumping price which he normally gets for...

which a feedlot would be getting the same price for that milk. And this [00:11:00] just amplifies and exemplifies the issue that we're having, and that's why we say that all that we are doing is around building a regenerative food system which focuses on farmers again being at the center of that food system, and to empowering farmers because they are the ones doing the amazing work.

They are the ones which we need every day, three times a day. They are the ones which we need for the future, and they're, they're also the ones which are dying out. We don't have a shortage of people wanting to work in management or coaching or consultant positions, but we definitely have a shortage of people wanting to work in farming because farmers have been so exploited, and also because farmers have not received the respect in society that they should receive.

So one of our slogans is, "We need to make farming sexy again." We help farmers to kind of, uh, regain control of their, of their, of their supply chains and of their finances. So, um, we usually create, when we start working with farmers, something that we call the holistic context. So we, we analyze the farm, and we really see what is the current cash flows, what is [00:12:00] working ecologically, economically, socially, which direction do you wanna go into, and then we, we help the farmers to understand what are experiments that they could be running and what are things they could be doing in their context.

This can sometimes mean, for example, stacking of businesses. Very often I would recommend... The- one of the very nice side benefits of regen farms is, is that they're very beautiful, and I think we actually need to have more people go to farms, so often we help them, for example, also setting up, um, tourism business, and to stack the different revenue streams that they're having.

It can also mean that we are trying to match them with corporate partners that pay them for the ecosystem services which they're achieving. Here, unfortunately, carbon still being the, the main one that partners are willing to pay for, which I hate. I would love to pay farmers for biodiversity and soil water storage capacity increase, but I don't think we're there yet.

Um, and then we're also trying to create profiles for farmers on our website and to increase their visibility so that they can also look, depending on what they're growing, in [00:13:00] more direct training. And then we're also connecting farmers where we can with potential fa- partners that they could help with, or with banks that could give them better loans if they're transitioning.

So, um, basically anyone that is willing to be with us on this journey of supporting farmers is a welcome ally for us. Yeah, the, the Research and Innovation Labs is a part of the company that, that's run by, uh, Fabio and Alex, and what we're doing here is we're, we're bringing farmer perspectives and farmer needs into the, the research projects which are running in Europe.

So there is, uh, EU Horizon grants, which are very large scale, usually two-digit million research grants. Um, they're mostly given out to, to academic institutions, um, which are very often doing amazing work, but they're often very detached from farmer realities on the ground. And so what we normally do is we bring in our farmer community and our network, and we develop, uh, basically applications for these funds together with the universities to kind of see [00:14:00] how can there really be a synergy between the needs of farmers and what would be relevant for them, and the needs that researchers has, and also that the EU is interested in.

And then, um, we have right now four different projects running around this, doing anything from ecosystem service measurement to looking into training of farmers, to looking into socioeconomic factors of farmers. Um, and the benefit of that is also that we're collecting a lot of data with which we can then show and prove that regenerative agriculture is actually working in practice, because even though I don't love to focus on data, I can definitely understand it.

Um, and the more of that we have, the more we can also then use it again for advocacy, for example, on a policy level, um, if we can show that regen ag leads to outcomes which benefit the whole of society. If we're looking at the policy side, then, um, we- we have a, we have a very tragic deadlock, I would say.

So we have the Common Agricultural Policy, which is giving out more than 400 billion euros over seven years, and, um- Again, I [00:15:00] mentioned already, but Bayer is the organization that has most lobbyists in Brussels of any organization in the world, and so they heavily influenced the last cap in the direction that it rewards yield and size of farms, um, so that farms essentially, um, buy agrochemical inputs, and that then again fuels the industry.

Um, so we're trying to change that, and what we, what we did here is we also said there's only so much that we can do, and this is really something that the farmers should be best doing themselves. So we enabled, uh, EARA to come to life, which is the European Alliance for Regenerative Agriculture, which is a farmer-led organization which is now doing direct policy work in Brussels for regenerative farmers, and we are very much supporting them as much as we can in the amazing work that they're doing, and they are also publishing reports and, uh, really doing in-depth analysis, um, lastly, for example, of different MRV systems which are existing in Europe.

Yeah, I mean, we're, we're, we're following such an holistic approach because even though in business school they taught me to, [00:16:00] to focus on one thing only when you, when you run a business, and to be narrow, um, narrowly focused, in reality, this is not gonna solve any of the complex issues of our times, you know?

I, I do believe that we reached a point in our civilization where anything but systemic change is gonna be a drop of water on a hot stone. And so we need to change this big-picture perspective, and unfortunately, most of our society is about shying away from complexity. And so we really want to say we, we embrace that complexity, we acknowledge it, we honor it, and that's also why

we say we try to be a bit of a catalyzer and to be an organization that brings different people together to the table that normally don't talk with each other.

This can be conventional and regenerative farmers. This can also be, for example, the nature conservation movement and the rewilding movement and the farmers, because they actually have a lot of things which they share, but they very often are working against each other. Um, same thing with, for example, the organic movement and [00:17:00] the regen movement.

I think the ideology is very similar, and we need to be working together, and then this also means, of course, bringing in the different other stakeholders such as banks, insurance, et cetera. So we see ourselves very much as, as bridge builders here and as instigators, and then very often that also means that, that we make a connection, we host a gathering, and then we step away again.

And, um, one of the things that I always like the most is when I hear afterwards about things that happened and that I wasn't even aware of because they happened without our influence, um, because there's a lot of work to be done, and, um, yeah, these... this, these works need to be happening parallel, and I think that's also the beauty of the, of the regen system as it is right now, that there's so many things happening that, um, things are moving collectively forward very nicely.

So in terms of where we are at now and where we're moving to is that we, we, we have grown to, to 35 people within the, the organization, which also had led to, [00:18:00] um, a lot of overwhelming of me and my co-founder, let's say. Um, because if you wanna-- especially if you wanna org- run an organization regeneratively and invite everybody to bring their full selves to work, then that also means a lot of complexity and a lot of responsibility.

We have been paying more than €200,000 in salaries a month, and often with that also, um, nourishing families. And so over the last year, we went through a process of, um, splitting up into several smaller organization, and we're now focusing a lot more on building this ecosystem of value-aligned actors, which each have certain areas which they specialize on, and which each work on the same mission, but as independent organizations.

And so we started Terra Madre, for example, which is focusing on the carbon credit work of Climate Farmers. We started Resource, which is, uh, now run by my co-founder Ivo, which is really focusing on this gathering of different, uh, actors from across the agri-food system on farms in person to kind of find these [00:19:00] commonalities of, uh, collaboration.

And, um, we have Eyara of course, and then we also as Climate Farmers now really focus on the education aspect, which is also something that I personally really care about. And so apart from the, the basically the community events and the grassroots training and our regional agronomy program that we're running and the research and development labs, one of the biggest things that we're doing right now is the development of this master program.

I am very grateful that we have partners like the Tata Motors Sustainability Foundation, which fund this philanthropically, so that we have the, the capacity that we can say to universities, "If you're open and willing to, to be at the forefront of agricultural education, you can adopt the master that we are developing and the courses, and we can provide you with access to them for free."

Because many universities, um, basically have a lot of budget cuts right now and don't have the possibility to develop this new material. But we need to start rethinking how we're training the next generation of farmers, because if we continue training them in the old mindset, then they will [00:20:00] also continue to destroy the planet with the way how they're farming.

I think anyone in Europe is doing steps towards the future for all of us every day. That starts with where you buy your food, right? If you buy your food in the supermarket and if you buy feedlot meat, then that is a system that you're supporting, and the planet and your own body are paying for that, right?

And if you're working in a food corporate and you know that that corporate is exploiting the farmers that it's working with or is supporting a conventional agricultural system, then I don't know how you're gonna be looking into the eyes of your children in the future. But wherever you are, and I... We work with a lot of people in what other people would call evil corporations, but they are doing amazing work, and I always call them my white knights because they are trying to push the agenda within their organization forward.

And everybody can do that. Everybody can talk to colleagues over the lunch break, or if you're having online calls in Zoom meetings, everybody can bring in the topic about regen ag. Everybody can [00:21:00] keep on poking, uh, other organization and keep on inspiring other people to move in that direction. And in the end, change will happen from people, and a small dedicated group of people that is collaborating together has been changing things in the right direction many times in the past.

And I know that a capitalist system will always go towards maximization of capital, but, uh, it is within all of our hands to change that. Just be conscious about the food that you're eating and try to buy it as closely and as directly from a farmer as you can. Like, this is one thing that everybody can do.

It also doesn't have to be more expensive. Like, I get all my vegetables and all my meat, um, that I'm eating directly from our farmers. I call myself farm-tarian. And in the end, I, I don't pay more than people that pay money in the supermarket, but the money that I spend ends up in farmers, which are doing amazing work, in the pockets of them and not in the pockets of the supermarket owners.

And that is a decision that all of us are taking every day, and that is in the end just coming down to, to effort that you wanna put in. And if you really can't find any regenerative [00:22:00] farmers in the area, you can always take a web- uh, look on our websites on the map, or you can drop me a line on LinkedIn, and I'm happy to do my best to point you in the right direction.