



PAFO-COLEAD INNOVATIONS SERIES: Innovations and successes of African farmer-led businesses and SMEs

SESSION N°20

Successful agroecological practices by farmers and SMEs in Africa

Wednesday 4 September 2024 - 12:00-14:00 UTC

Online ([Zoom](#))

English-French-Portuguese interpretation available

1. Context

Agroecology is a dynamic concept that has gained prominence in scientific, agricultural, and political discourse in recent years. It is increasingly promoted as a means to transform food systems by applying ecological principles to agriculture, ensuring the regenerative use of natural resources and ecosystem services, and addressing the need for socially equitable food systems. These systems allow people to exercise choice over what they eat and how and where it is produced.

Agroecology encompasses a science, a set of practices, and a social movement. Over recent decades, it has evolved from focusing on fields and farms to encompassing entire agricultural and food systems. It now represents a transdisciplinary field that includes all the ecological, sociocultural, technological, economic, and political dimensions of food systems, from production to consumption.¹ It emphasizes sustainable farming methods that enhance biodiversity, improve soil health, and reduce dependency on synthetic inputs.

Agroecological farming systems value diversification, mixed cultivation, intercropping, cultivar mixtures, habitat management techniques for crop-associated biodiversity, biological pest control, improvement of soil structure and health, biological nitrogen fixation, and the recycling of nutrients, energy, and waste.

The food system transformation through agroecology follows a transition pathway which focuses on: (i) the complementary use of all available nutrient sources, with a focus on achieving optimal efficiency from applied nutrients; organic and inorganic, with the goal of restoring soil nutrient

¹ HLPE. 2019. [Agroecological and other innovative approaches for sustainable agriculture and food systems that enhance food security and nutrition](#). A report by the High-Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition of the Committee on World Food Security, Rome.



balance; (ii) the redesign of farming systems to increase system diversity, improve soil and animal health, enhance diversification and recycling, reduce inputs, and increase synergies on farms and across landscapes; (iii) the close relationship between people who grow the food and the people who eat; and (iv) building a new global food system that is not only sustainable but also helps restore and protect Earth's life-support systems. This food system is based on participation, localness, fairness and justice.²

Farmers use a very wide range of practices at field, herd and farm level that are aligned with agroecology principles:³

- **Intercropping and crop rotation:** enhancing soil fertility and reducing pest infestations. By growing multiple crops together or in succession, they can improve nutrient cycling and soil structure.
- **Agroforestry:** integrating trees into agricultural landscapes provide shade, improve soil moisture retention, and offer additional sources of income through fruit and timber production.
- **Organic farming:** avoiding synthetic fertilisers and pesticides. This practice not only ensures healthier produce but also protects the environment from chemical pollution.
- **Conservation agriculture:** using techniques such as minimal tillage, cover cropping, and mulching are being widely adopted. These practices help in maintaining soil structure, reducing erosion, and conserving water.
- **Integrated Pest Management (IPM):** combining biological, cultural, and mechanical methods to control pests. Farmers use natural predators, crop rotation, and resistant crop varieties to manage pest populations sustainably.

2. Policies supporting agroecological transitions

As the global community grapples with climate change, biodiversity loss, and food insecurity, agroecology offers a sustainable alternative that is increasingly recognised and supported by policymakers, scientists, and social movements.

Facilitating an agroecological transition requires the strong involvement of policy- and decision-makers at local, regional, national, and supra-national levels, as well as farmer organisations, supply chain actors, and the agro-industry.⁴

International commitments such as the 2021 United Nations (UN) Food Systems Summit, the 2022 UN Conference of the Parties of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) (CoP 27), and the 2022 UN Conference of the Parties to the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) (CoP 15) recognise agroecology as a key approach to transitioning towards more productive, sustainable, and inclusive food systems. The agroecological transition pathway is informed by the consolidated set of thirteen key agroecological principles, closely related to the ten elements of agroecology as defined by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).⁵ The political traction of agroecology is evident in the increasing number of policies and initiatives that support its principles. The FAO has been actively promoting agroecology as a key strategy for achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The European Union's Common Agricultural Policy increasingly incorporates agroecological principles to promote sustainable farming practices. The Farm to Fork Strategy, at the heart of the European Green Deal, aims to make food systems fair, healthy, and environmentally friendly. This strategy focuses on international cooperation in food research and innovation, particularly in

² Stephen R. Gliessman. *Agroecology. The Ecology of Sustainable Food Systems*. 2nd Edition. 2006. CRC Press.

³ Viability Project Team. 2023. [Agroecological practices are widely used by African farmers](#). Working Paper 2. Bogor, Indonesia and Nairobi, Kenya: CIFOR-ICRAF: The Transformative Partnership Platform on Agroecology.

⁴ IPES-Food (2018) [Breaking away from industrial food and farming systems: 7 case studies of agroecological transition](#).

⁵ FAO. 2018. [The 10 elements of agroecology guiding the transition to sustainable food and agricultural systems](#).

Wezel, A., Herren, B.G., Kerr, R.B. et al. [Agroecological principles and elements and their implications for transitioning to sustainable food systems. A review](#). *Agron. Sustain. Dev.* 40, 40 (2020).

climate change adaptation and mitigation, agroecology, sustainable landscape management, land governance, biodiversity conservation, inclusive and fair value chains, nutrition and healthy diets, and the prevention and response to food crises, especially in fragile contexts. The European Commission has produced a technical note on the role of agroecology in transitioning towards sustainable food systems in third countries.⁶

Several countries have incorporated agroecological principles into their national agricultural policies, recognising the need for a transition towards more sustainable food systems.⁷

In recent years, policies specifically designed to support agroecology have emerged in countries such as Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, France, India, and Nicaragua. Agroecology has gained significant traction in Africa, where agriculture is a primary livelihood for millions. Agroecological practices offer a promising pathway to food security, environmental sustainability, and economic resilience.⁸ The ECOWAS Agroecology Transition Support Program, developed by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), promotes a shift away from Green Revolution practices towards agroecology, including subsidising biofertilisers and other natural inputs. Some African countries, such as Kenya, Uganda, Zambia, Togo, Ethiopia, and Senegal, have developed or are developing agroecological policies to guide their food system transformation.

Identifying gaps in existing food systems policy and regulatory frameworks and addressing misalignments with the transition to agroecology is crucial for transformation. Key gaps to address include mainstreaming agroecology and other innovative sustainable practices into existing national and county policies and strategies, securing funding for agroecological initiatives and innovations, sustaining research and development, and ensuring policy coherence to enable their adoption at scale and in a transformational way.⁹

3. Challenges and benefits for the private sector in adopting agroecological practices

The benefits of adopting agroecological practices are widely recognised by entrepreneurs. However, the hidden social and environmental costs of unsustainable farming often remain invisible in market prices, resulting in weak incentives to transition to more sustainable production and consumption practices.

Agroecology plays a crucial role in supporting environmental sustainability and biodiversity conservation by encouraging diverse cropping systems and natural pest control methods. These practices lead to healthier ecosystems and more resilient agricultural landscapes. Soil health benefits from practices such as crop rotation, cover cropping, and organic fertilisation, which improve soil fertility, reduce the need for chemical inputs, and enhance long-term productivity. Over time, agroecological practices can reduce costs associated with synthetic fertilisers, pesticides, and water usage, leading to significant savings for businesses. The diversification of crops and income sources also provides a buffer against market and climate shocks.

There is a growing consumer demand for sustainably produced food, driven by social and ethical considerations. Smallholders and entrepreneurs can tap into niche markets and premium pricing for organic and eco-friendly products, thereby promoting local economies. Agroecology also

⁶ The DeSIRA initiative (more than 270 million euros mobilised over the period 2018-2020) aims to develop this type of research (<https://europa.eu/capacity4dev/desira>).

⁷ FAO. González de Molina, M., Roberto Caporal, F. [Agroecology and politics: how to achieve sustainability? On the necessity of an agroecological policy](#). 2013.

⁸ AFSA's study report reviews international and regional policies affecting agroecology and food sovereignty in Africa. The report identifies existing bottlenecks and policy gaps inhibiting the advancement of agroecology and recommends strategies to advance community voices on the transition to agroecology in Africa. AFSA. (2017). [A Study of Policies, Frameworks And Mechanisms Related To Agroecology And Sustainable Food Systems In Africa](#). Kampala, Uganda.

⁹ Sinclair F, Wezel A, Mbow C, Chomba C, Robiglio V, Harrison R (2019). [The contribution of agroecological approaches to realizing climate-resilient agriculture](#). Background Paper. Global Commission on Adaptation, Rotterdam.

promotes community involvement and knowledge sharing, empowering farmers, especially women, by providing sustainable livelihood options and improving food security.

However, despite the numerous benefits, the adoption of agroecological practices faces several challenges which need to be addressed:

- Farmers and entrepreneurs need extensive training to adopt new agroecological methods. This involves not only understanding the practices but also the science behind them.
- Effective policies are crucial. Governments can support agroecology by providing subsidies for organic inputs, investing in research, and facilitating market access.
- Ensuring fair market access for farmers and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) is essential. This includes establishing new supply chains and market networks, which can be complex and costly.
- Transitioning to agroecological practices often requires significant upfront investment in new technologies, training, and infrastructure. This can be a major barrier for SMEs and smallholders with limited financial resources.
- Enhancing linkages with Research and Development (R&D) is vital. Businesses often struggle to invest in R&D without immediate financial returns, making it challenging to innovate and improve practices.

Addressing these challenges requires a coordinated effort from governments, businesses, and the agricultural community.

4. Way forward

Scaling agroecology in Africa requires a multifaceted approach that includes policy support, education, community involvement, market development, and research. By leveraging these strategies and building on successful initiatives, Africa can transition to more sustainable and resilient agricultural systems.

Key actions include creating stronger markets for agroecologically grown foods, developing social solidarity economies, advocating for agroecological procurement by institutions, raising public awareness, and establishing inclusive governance mechanisms that support an agroecological transition. Strengthening linkages between producers, consumers, and other food system actors is essential, as is ensuring consumers understand how and by whom their food is produced.

The circular economy aims to minimise waste by designing products and systems that facilitate the reduction, reuse, and recycling of materials. This approach reduces environmental pollution, lowers greenhouse gas emissions, and promotes a more sustainable and resilient economy. Additionally, the circular economy presents economic opportunities for entrepreneurs.

While adopting agroecological practices poses challenges for the private sector, the potential benefits are substantial. By investing in sustainable practices, businesses can contribute to environmental conservation, economic resilience, and social well-being. Overcoming initial barriers requires supportive policies, access to knowledge and training, and a commitment to long-term sustainability. As global demand for sustainable food systems grows, agroecology offers a viable and beneficial path forward for the private sector.

Key points for discussion:

- What are the key innovations that farmers and entrepreneurs develop and adopt that contribute to agroecological transitions?
- What type of investments are needed to support entrepreneurs to transition to more sustainable and agroecological practices?
- What incentives can be provided to SMEs and smallholders to embrace agroecology?

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Agenda

12:00-12:10 Introduction: *Dr. Babafemi Oyewole, CEO, PAFO*

Moderator: *Isolina Boto, Head of Networks and Alliances, COLEAD*

12:10-13:00 Panel: **successful agroecological practices by farmers and SMEs**

- *Nancy Mugimba, National Coordinator, ESAFF Uganda*
- *Sophie Sedgho, Founder and President, La Saisonnière, Burkina Faso*
- *Rosinah Mbenya, Country Coordinator, PELUM, Kenya*

13:00-13:20 Discussants

- *Ousseini Ouedraogo, Executive Secretary, ROPPA, West Africa*
- *Noël N'Guessan, Co-Founder, LONO, Côte d'Ivoire*

13:20-13:50 Debate

13:50-14:00 Key takeaways and conclusion

- *Jeremy Knops, Délégué Général, COLEAD*



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