



Photo: Scott Fitzmorris

How to amplify agroecology

“Agroecology is a process. You cannot expect a process to be perfect immediately. But once you make a step, you are moving.” With these words, Ugandan farmer Jowelia Mukiibi captured both the essence of the agroecological transition and the attention of her audience: 70 people representing 30 organisations doing groundbreaking work on agroecology around the world.

Janneke Bruil and Jessica Milgroom

In May 2016, the [AgroEcology Fund \(AEF\)](#) and the [Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa \(AFSA\)](#) brought grassroots *organisers*, advocates and donors together in a Learning Exchange to share experiences and ideas about how to amplify agroecology. The AgroEcology Fund is a consortium of progressive foundations that are committed to supporting agroecological solutions

across the globe. The exchange in Uganda was initiated to deepen understanding of current and future efforts to amplifying agroecology, and to learn how the AEF could better support this work.

Through creative small group activities such as poster making and theatre exercises, field visits, public events and various other dynamic learning methodologies, a rich, collective pool of knowledge

was built about strategies to amplify agroecology. We share here some of the most compelling insights from the four day meeting.

How to amplify agroecology

Throughout the various sessions of the Learning Exchange, lessons were shared on successful strategies for the amplification of agroecology. We talked about when, how and why these strategies had been successful, or not, and how they might be improved.

Strengthen farmers' organisations Strengthening farmers' organisations is fundamental in amplifying agroecology, because together farmers' organisations can create a grassroots movement that is capable of influencing mindsets and policy. Moreover, organised farmers help to build evidence that supports agroecology as a modern way of farming in the face of climate change and the current industrial food system's glaring injustices. Insights about how best to strengthen farmers' organisations point first of all to farmer-to-farmer learning, as that allows farmers to confidently build knowledge from experience, and to develop a sense of ownership and leadership over their organisations. Strong and genuine farmers' federations can give networked farmers organisations a space to express themselves and advocate for their own rights.

Put women at the forefront Women are an important source of agroecological knowledge. Valuing and promoting this knowledge must, therefore, be a central element of any amplification strategy. Putting women at the forefront can be done, for example, by ensuring that they play leadership roles in farmers' organisations, involving them in campaigns and supporting their own struggles, enabling them to learn from other farmers and providing them with opportunities for technical, political and economic education. **The Korean**

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Women Peasant Association (KWPA) shared how some of their members significantly built their skills and self-confidence after an exchange visit with women farmers in Thailand. Their experience also demonstrates that agroecology can help to overcome sexual discrimination, especially when practical training is combined with political training.

Create direct relations with consumers Urban citizens are one of the central agents of change in the agroecological transition. **The Agroecological Collective of Ecuador** shared some of their very successful campaigns to use 'taste' and other sensorial experiences to motivate consumers to be a part of the transition. This group organised a nation-wide campaign to promote 'community baskets' that bring healthy, agroecologically produced foods to low income urban families. The families involved now spend up to 80 % less on their food than before the introduction of the baskets, while the farmers get up to 40 % more income for their produce. Connecting farmers and consumers enables farmers to sell a diversity of products directly to consumers, and to receive vital feedback on the quality of their products. **Navdanya** in India also actively connects what they call 'producers and co-producers'. They work with

What is amplification of agroecology?

Amplification of agroecological experiences is "the main challenge today", in the words of former UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Olivier De Schutter, because of its many contributions to addressing challenges such as hunger, poverty, loss of biodiversity and climate change. The participants in the Learning Exchange see amplification of agroecology as the transformation of food systems, rather than just the spreading of a set of food production techniques. Importantly, it promotes alternative forms of economic exchange

and places agrobiodiversity, the struggle for land, control over seed and local farming and marketing knowledge (especially that of women) at the centre of this change processes. Amplification of agroecology was seen as a long-term process that is led by social movements, but encompasses all actors in the food system, including consumers. As agroecology is understood as an ongoing process of transition, there is no pre-determined end goal in its amplification, save for the broad objective of transforming food systems around the world.



Outside spaces were optimally used. Photo: ILEIA

women farmers to identify, grow and process traditional varieties of beans, and sell this food in ‘food circles’ they form with consumers, thereby circumventing traders. Participants expressed that such connections are particularly effective when they are embedded in local culture, organised as a joint initiative with shared values between consumers and producers, and accompanied by awareness-raising efforts.

Strengthen agroecology schools Agroecology schools around the world are an effective way to engage people, especially youth, in agroecology. Agroecology schools rely greatly on the principle of peer-to-peer learning among farmers – valuing local knowledge – and often also include two-way learning processes between policy makers and farmer groups. They provide a forum in which people who hold important local knowledge about farming can share their experiences. In a self-organised session, the **Peasant Workers Association of Nicaragua (ATC)**, the **Zimbabwe Smallholder Organic Farmer Forum (ZIMSOFF)** and other participants in the Learning Exchange shared lessons from their own schools, such as the **Shashe Agroecology School** in Zimbabwe. They stated that the schools must be autonomous from government and universities, and function best when organised and run by a farmers’ organisation. In addition, it is crucial to have good facilitators that understand how to support a social movement and incorporate feedback from students. Many successful schools started at the regional or national level, after which they were replicated at the local level by trained farmers.

Share knowledge Sharing knowledge about agroecology from farmer to farmer is an important way to spread practices. This is especially effective when knowledge sharing is based on local, ancestral wisdom, respects the values, principles and culture of the farming communities and responds to concrete needs. Many participants agreed that, following the

adage of ‘seeing is believing’, knowledge sharing is best done through showcasing and adapting living examples as opposed to relying on theoretical assumptions. The Mexican organization **DESMI** (Spanish acronym for the Socio-Economic Development for Indigenous Mexicans) promotes the traditional milpa intercropping system of maize, pumpkin and beans, the establishment of fruit tree nurseries, and mushroom production. A key strategy for all this work is exchange visits between farmers, through which they demonstrate how to apply indigenous knowledge and foster increased appreciation of local food.

Support work on the ground and document it

Supporting farming communities on the ground to diagnose and prioritise their problems; identify, test and adapt agroecological principles and to engage in vigorous farmer-to-farmer and village-to-village learning networks has proven to be effective. This process fosters the emergence and spread of localised examples that demonstrate the power and success of agroecology. **Groundswell International** supports locally rooted farmer-to-farmer innovation in agroecology. From their work in West Africa they realised that in order to achieve wide, systemic change, it is critical to document and disseminate successful practical experiences, learn from this work, and find ways to leverage the lessons. Others agreed that documentation and dissemination of successful agroecological alternatives provides evidence that agroecology works, generates insights for policy change and strengthens the agroecology movement.

Advocate For long-lasting change, it is necessary to insert agroecology into policy frameworks as part of a bottom-up process. Engaging in dialogue with local and national government authorities about how to support agroecology as a tool to fight hunger, poverty and environmental degradation can be very effective, as well as educating people about existing laws (both

Every day started with a *mistica*. Photo: ILEIA





Learning from farmers during a field visit. Photo: ILEIA

To achieve systemic change, it is critical to document experiences and leverage the lessons.

favourable and unfavourable to amplification of agroecology) and ways to demand that the government protect their rights. Effective advocacy can help to generate public support for agroecology. Policy advocacy for agroecology generally works well when it is embedded in broad collaborations among farmers, researchers, and civil society organisations, and specifically includes women and indigenous peoples. Advocacy must also be based on the documentation of successful agroecological practices and supported by rigorous research. [La Vía Campesina](#) emphasised the need to support farmers to advocate for their rights, rather than simply representing them. They enhance farmers' capacity to advocate by facilitating their active participation in meetings (national and international) and policy dialogues, supported by training beforehand.

Communicate and reach out Communication and outreach is fundamental for amplifying agroecology, as it is necessary to make the case that agroecology is the agricultural system of the future. From experience, campaigners have found that humor and cultural references can be effective tools in communication. Helpful is presenting solid data and research to debunk claims made by agribusiness and to raise awareness about agroecology as an alternative to industrial agriculture. "We have to drag Dracula into the sunlight, but after we have done that, we need to give solutions. Agroecology shows how it can be done differently," said Anuradha Mittal of the [Oakland Institute](#), referring to lessons learnt in the 'Our World, Our Business' campaign. This campaign aims to expose and end the World Bank's Doing Business ranking, which rewards countries that have weak labour or environmental standards but provide easy access for corporate land grabs. Various participants emphasised that it is important that the content of any communication tool on agroecology is created in partnership with food producers. Social media, multimedia, documentary films and curriculum development were mentioned as strong outreach tools. For example, [Coventry University's Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience \(CAWR\)](#) has found that participatory video, in particular, is a powerful medium for mobilisation and advocacy.



People forged new relations at the Agroecology Learning Exchange. Photo: ILEIA

Resist and transform Many campaigns are based on resisting the industrial agriculture model, corporate power over productive resources, and policies that marginalise small farmers. While this is necessary to stop developments that limit agroecology, it is crucial to also promote positive, evidence-based alternatives. This is what agroecology has to offer: living, inspiring examples that envision a new agricultural system through education, science, culture and policy. As industrial agriculture undermines peasant family farming rather than supports it, many participants agreed that there can be no co-existence between industrial agriculture and agroecology. CAWR worked with a variety of actors to develop research and communication materials for the agroecological movement. They learnt from this experience the importance of having a strong network of partners committed to promoting a transformative type of agroecology, as opposed to one that conforms to the status quo.

Create a new narrative Framing and messaging emerged as central elements in amplifying agroecology because agroecology is based on a completely different set of values about food, nature and people than the industrial system. A special session was therefore dedicated to the question of building a new narrative around agroecology. This narrative should not be defensive but rather present its underlying positive principles and values. The

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conclusions from this session were that the new narrative must be based on the notion that agroecology is a viable vocation, rather than that farming and agroecology reflect the failure of rural actors to advance. Agroecology can bring employment, income and well-being; in fact family farmers are already feeding the world, and they must be supported to work with agroecology. The narrative should also approach agroecology as a knowledge system in its own right. There should not be competition between knowledge generated through science carried out at universities and knowledge generated and kept by farmers because these two types of knowledge are compatible and complementary. Finally, agroecology must be presented as a continuous process of transition, as an inclusive and participatory dialogue between people, and with Mother Earth.



Every group made a poster depicting their work on agroecology. Photo: ILEIA

Develop effective ways to work together

Participants of the Learning Exchange shared many lessons drawn from work on agroecology that was undertaken within coalitions. For example, the Agroecological Collective, which encompasses over 20 organisations in Ecuador, was faced with the complexity of working with so many different actors. It was tempting to reduce the structure to a hierarchical model. Instead, the organisations decided to maintain a horizontal collaboration by minimising institutional interests, logos and egos. Various participants stated that for agroecological amplification, a variety of actors have to be on board, as a variety of people and organisations can bring different experiences and knowledge of agroecology to the table. This can be achieved by working in inclusive, but loosely established coalitions. In such coalitions, it is necessary to clarify the role of each partner, to develop a set of core principles to help different partners work well together, and to create tools for problem solving. These were some of the important insights for **GRAIN, ETC Group** and La Vía Campesina as they worked together to protect farmer seed systems and fight new laws that would endanger farmer seed systems. AFSA, being an Africa-wide alliance of diverse organisations, similarly developed a set of core principles to provide the common ground for the work together. Different participants pointed at the need to avoid economic dependence between the partners in a coalition. Finally, it was suggested that upholding accountability to those impacted by the work is a fundamental necessity.

Fund flexibly To achieve the amplification of agroecology, funding diverse organisations is essential. As agroecology is embedded in very different and complex contexts, participants emphasised the need for flexibility on the side of both grantees and donors to allow for adaptation of plans and strategies. They stated that funding schemes should include long-term core funding that is directed to reaching the grassroots.

With regards to results, donors should not overly focus on quantitative outcomes, but rather on qualitative changes achieved through flexible, trust-based relationship with grantees. Ideally, funding for agroecology is based on shared values between donors and grantees, is regenerative, supports social transformation and policy shifts, and happens at a landscape or bioregional level.

Looking forward

The lessons shared here are not an exhaustive synthesis of insights shared over the course of four days. Moreover, they are drawn from years, and sometimes even decades, of experience. They are lessons learnt, not only through successes, but often through painful failures. Having a space to share these lessons made this, in the words of one participant, “a landmark meeting.” More sharing and documentation is surely needed to understand better the respective contributions of practice, science and movement in amplifying agroecology, and to articulate theories of change. However, the dynamics of sharing and exchange, the personal connections and the sense of a global community that were forged at the Agroecology Learning Exchange will undoubtedly contribute to an agroecological transition for a long time to come.

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Much sharing between participants took place with humour. Photo: Rucha Chitnis

