

Can a farmer make a living with agroecology? This is often one of the first questions asked. Indeed, a misplaced assumption exists that agroecology is incapable of generating decent incomes. But there are solid reasons why agroecology is a model that can generate incomes that are comparable to, if not superior to, those obtained from conventional agriculture. An invisible force behind this economic potential, are women.

While production per person may be lower in agroecology, the economic value added per unit of end product is higher. Four central characteristics underpin this advantage. Interestingly, the role and the work of women in shaping and driving these characteristics is key, although often invisible and unaccounted for.

First, agroecology is built upon internal human resources such as labour and knowledge, meaning fewer costs have to be incurred for expensive external inputs such as chemical fertilizer, pesticides or heavy machinery. Women's labour as well as their knowledge of specific crops, animal care and processing techniques are crucial and are often accessible either on-farm or through cooperation. Consequently, the net income per unit of product, and per person, is higher in agroecology.

Secondly, agroecology is founded upon diversity. Biodiversity is central to agroecological productivity, 'by nature' diversifying yields and in turn risks and markets - an important buffer in times of (potentially climate-induced) crop failure or price volatility. Women often hold specific knowledge on seeds, breeds and biodiversity, and are the central innovators in pursuing alternative marketing channels and activities. The diversity inherent in agroecology invites the use of this specific knowledge through observation and interpretation of differences, learning, and experimentation.

Third, and related, resources are used much more efficiently in agroecology, further decreasing costs. Through farm redesign, a territorial ecosystems approach and continuously improving farming practices, resource use is optimised. Women are often the first to experiment with these techniques. And finally, agroecology thrives when new alliances are built: amongst producers themselves and between producers and consumers. This is often the central domain of women, who create and maintain off-farm relations, for example through engaging in new activities and markets.

It goes without saying that women are not in service of these characteristics, but rather that these characteristics are an expression of the way women move in and around the farm and the way they relate to each other and to others.

There is enormous potential to further strengthen the economies of agroecological farms in Europe. A new economic lens which values multifunctionality and recognises the central role played by women, is key in visualising this potential.

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The economic potential of agroecology in Europe