

# FARMING MATTERS

Formerly known as LEISA Magazine



## Agroecology and feminism

Transforming our  
economy and  
society



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Essential reading on feminism, agroecology and new economics

# Agroecology and feminist economics: New values for new times

As humans, we are facing the most decisive crises in our planetary experience. Contrary to what is sometimes argued, these crises have not arisen from the COVID-19 pandemic, but are rooted in the progressive exhaustion of natural resources and rising inequalities in an unsustainable global economic system. It is time to learn from other ways of doing things, other cosmovisions and other values.

By Janneke Bruil, François Delvaux, Assane Diouf, Rose Hogan, Jessica Milgroom, Paulo Petersen, Bruno Prado and Suzy Serneels

**T**he contemporary crises we now face stem from the overexploitation of nature for the benefit of individual profit. Industrial food is an important component of this model. The fallout of this is all too familiar: soil deterioration, biodiversity loss, deforestation, indigenous and other peoples' rights violations, precarious rural livelihoods, unsafe working conditions, climate change, the double-edged sword of obesity and malnutrition and strong concentration of power.

The capitalist, patriarchal and colonialist system has divided the world into those who have and those who have not, those whose voices are heard and those who are silenced. As a result, women, indigenous as well as black and brown people (among others) have been pushed aside for centuries. The COVID-19 outbreak amplifies, deepens and uncovers these pre-existing tragedies, inequalities and injustices.

In many places, new ways of being in the world are being developed. It is high time that we listen to (and learn from) other ways of doing things, other cosmovisions, other ways of organising society, other values - precisely those that have been silenced. The world needs new values and new leadership in these shifting

times. This is a crucial moment; the decisions we make now could lead us down a path of destruction, but could equally send us on a path towards regeneration.

This issue of Farming Matters brings to the forefront how perspectives such as intersectional feminism and indigenous cosmologies coupled with agroecology have been transforming our economy and society. These insights offer pertinent lessons for the pursuit of deeper, much needed transformation.

## Agroecology: a new social and natural contract

To respond adequately to the perfect storm of crises (climate, biodiversity, hunger, health pandemic, economic), a new 'social contract' is needed based on values of justice, equity and solidarity combined with a new 'natural contract' between the human community and the other beings of our planet. At CIDSE, the Agri-Cultures Network and Cultivate! we share a common understanding of agroecology as a systemic, and integrated approach which - at food systems level - is the expression of this new contract. What becomes clear is that agroecology is a holistic approach which needs to be embraced as such, rather than reduced to a set of practices. For this reason, CIDSE's Principles of Agro-



Farmer Ngurani Simon from Katakwi, Uganda and his son working in the citrus gardens during school holidays.  
Photo: PELUM Uganda

ecology emphasise the socio-cultural, ecological, economic and political dimensions of agroecology, similar to FAO's 10 elements of agroecology.

Global recognition that agroecological approaches have great potential to meet the multiple criteria for a sustainable food and nutritional system is expressed in the groundbreaking 2019 HLPE report on *Agroecological and other innovative approaches to food and nutrition security*. Today, awoken by the pandemic's exposure of the fragility of mainstream food and farming systems, agroecology is being viewed and appreciated afresh by governments and other food and agriculture actors as a model for resilience.

By promoting the reconnection of agriculture with the ecological dynamics of local ecosystems and the shortening of physical and social distances between food production and consumption, agroecological experiences point to the importance of constructing 'food territories' based on ecologically regenerative, socially equitable, politically autonomous and democratic economies. Instead of economic productivism focused on capital accumulation, the economy of agroecology is anchored in practices of social solidarity and care for the living ecosystem. This includes practices guided

**Feminist agroecology places 'life', relationships, care and balance at the center of the food system.**

towards social and ecological reproduction, which have always been, and still are, widespread in humanity but have been delegitimised, made invisible and even persecuted by political institutions. Rebuilding just and democratic governance of agrifood systems rooted in economies of care is what agroecology movements have been practicing and advocating for decades.

### **Why feminism in agroecology?**

Agroecology, food sovereignty, solidarity economy and feminism are concepts and movements aligned in their desire to work towards building other ways of being in the world and reformulate power relations. Feminism questions systemic structures of power that dictate social relations. The movements that promote agroecology and food sovereignty question structures of power that control the production, distribution and commercialisation of food. They arose in response to the environmental and social injustices that have resulted from patriarchal capitalism. However, the troubles run deeper: the very success of that model is dependent on the industrialisation of the food system (by which the control of food is out of the hands of the people) and, to varying degrees, on the subordination of women.

Women smallholders in many countries produce the majority of the food but few own the land they cultivate. Many don't have access to public services and lack basic rights. Removal of forests, wetlands and wild ecosystems for annual cropping removes habitats from which women source foods, medicines, energy and untapped biodiversity for future opportunities. Women have very little voice in decision making, while their traditional knowledge and society's respect for it is rapidly being lost. For centuries, women have been relegated to hard labour in the fields, food preparation in



the kitchens, childrearing and housework, as well as sexual duties. Especially in rural areas, they have been largely excluded from political spaces, education, voting and even from freely socialising and making decisions about their own bodies.

In modern society, what is considered 'productive' is seen to be that which earns money and contributes to economic growth. However, for this productivity to be possible, there is necessary 'reproductive' work that sustains it, including cooking, cleaning, washing clothes, purchasing or growing food, caretaking, emotional support, and the work of nurturing community and social networks. This, for the most part, is the work of women and it has remained invisible and undervalued despite increased gender equality in the world.

That said, feminism is much more than gender equality. A feminist perspective on agroecology means not only creating spaces for women to at least obtain the same conditions and rights as men, but also revaluing the reproductive work that women do and recognise it as a fundamental part of not only the economy, but of the wellbeing of the family and community in everyday life. A feminist perspective on agroecology also entails men taking on more responsibility for reproductive work. Feminist agroecology places values of 'life', relationships, trust, care and balance at the center of the food system. For this reason, beyond recognising the fact that women hold knowledge and know-how that is fundamental for agroecology, many proponents of the agroecology and food sovereignty movements have embraced feminism as an inalienable element of the struggle for a fair and sustainable global food system.

## This issue of Farming Matters

In the present issue of Farming Matters, these messages are brought home through the lived experiences of men and women around the world. Struggling against the invisibility of cooperative economic practices and practices of care towards others and towards the living ecosystem is a central challenge for the construction of agroecology. Building networks and movements emerges as the crucial node of change. In Bolivia (p. 28), peasant women have played a key role in bringing back indigenous potato varieties, which shows how women's innovative capacities can be bolstered when they come together. Similarly, in the case of India (p. 14) women established networks to devise novel economic practices, ways to secure land, agroecological techniques and women-led cooperatives. Revealing the often invisible work of peasant women is an important step, as argued by Van der Ploeg and Bruil (p. 17), which demonstrates how women's knowledge and skills are crucial in making agroecology economically viable across Europe.

The key lesson from decades of agroecology work in the Sahel (p. 48) is that it is possible to strengthen

women's economic and political position through agroecology, but only when it is accompanied by enhanced nutrition, improved local governance and inclusion of marginalised members of the community.

Indeed, in order to avoid reproducing unwanted patterns of exclusion and injustice, more intentional work on network building is necessary, based on solidarity and alliances with people from different backgrounds, reflect authors from the UK's Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience (p. 43). In the words of Rachel Bezner Kerr (p. 31), in order to achieve a feminist agroecology, "we must place considerations of social justice at the centre."

But how does one go about it? Importantly, as experiences presented in this magazine show, a reflection by farmers on their everyday realities and conditions can serve as a catalyst in addressing the inequalities generated by patriarchy and industrial agriculture. There is a great deal of disparity when it comes to social inclusion. In Uganda (p. 40) a special visioning methodology that combines gender issues and agroecology has been used to raise awareness of, and change, the (unequal) division of tasks between men and women. In an interview, Leonida Odonga (p. 32) explains how a critical reflection on the impact of agro-chemicals has spurred women to develop alternatives such as composting, natural pest repellents and bio-fertilizers. As the Movement of Peasant Women in Brazil demonstrates (p. 44), the realisations from such reflections can form a basis to bring women together into movements that are capable of changing government policies.

However, involvement with politics can be a risky endeavour. Experiences with scaling agroecology (p. 18) make clear how this process is vulnerable to co-optation and can exclude the women who were the original protagonists of agroecology initiatives. The story of the Southern African Rural Women's Assem-

**Feminist agroecology also entails men taking on more responsibility for caretaking of the children and purchasing food.** Photo: Janneke Bruil





**Agroecology, food sovereignty, solidarity economy and feminism are aligned movements that work towards building other ways of being in the world.** Photo: CENDA, Bolivia

bly (p. 21) suggests that the risk of co-optation can be greatly reduced when movements organise not around agroecology as a practice, but around more fundamental demands, including those for women's leadership, horizontal ways of collaborating and for perspectives that emphasise care rather than profit or control.

The centrality of care in a feminist agroecology is highlighted in different articles. Food initiatives in Ecuador (p. 10) show that change not only emerges by making production more agroecological, but also by cultivating affinity between people and their food, especially in times of COVID-19. Academics in Mexico (p. 24) make a similar case for the scientific world, arguing that agroecological knowledge should not only focus on abstract theory, but also on embodied experiences and caring relationships between researchers, peasants and Indigenous peoples.

As explained by authors from the agroecology network REDSAG in Guatemala (p. 36) and from the Native American Food Sovereignty Alliance (p. 39), such sophisticated ethics that highlight care for nature and others are often embedded in Indigenous cosmovisions. These worldviews form an entry point to inspire the construction of a feminist agroecology and to revalue the work done by peasant and Indigenous women in the present.

## Making the shift

The articles featured in this Farming Matters issue show us 'glimpses' of how agroecology, as a new social and natural contract based on justice, equity, solidarity and harmony with nature, is unfolding through concrete experiences in different parts of the world. This contract needs to be embraced to provide adequate responses to the structural crisis of a society heading for collapse. In that sense, the pandemic is showing us the value and importance of resilient and diverse food and farming

systems based on feminist ethics of care and solidarity.

Around the world, people who produce their own food or are part of local food networks are much less vulnerable than those solely dependent on (global) markets and value chains. People are (re)discovering the pleasure of home cooked food, valuing fresh, healthy products from local producers over supermarket food. Farmers organisations have quickly established direct delivery systems. New rural-urban relationships are being forged to avoid urban hunger and save small businesses. However, governments often fail to support these initiatives based on grassroots organisation. Moreover, there is a risk that the pandemic may be used to entrench globalised food even further.

Therefore, despite people's creativity in face of COVID-19, piecemeal adjustments that continue to rely on the political and economic status quo are inadequate. Economies cannot continue to be organised as if people are cheap sources of labour and ecosystems are an inexhaustible provider of resources and an endless waste sink. We have to work towards transformed economies and societies, which are organically integrated into the ecological dynamics of the planet.

To support and accompany agroecology, the values underlying the practices, policy and research in food and agriculture need to change. This requires a fundamental paradigm shift. The pandemic can therefore be seen as a test: is the current generation of humans able (and ready) to make that shift?

The authors form the editorial team of this special issue of Farming Matters. **For the AgriCultures Network:** Paulo Petersen and Bruno Prado (AS-PTA, Brazil) and Assane Diouf (IED Afrique, Senegal). **For CIDSE:** François Delvaux (CIDSE), Rose Hogan (Trocaire) and Suzy Serneels (Broederlijk Delen). **For Cultivate!:** Janneke Bruil and Jessica Milgroom. Contact: delvaux@cidse.org





Photo: Silvio Moriconi

# The path to feminist agroecology

Agroecology, food sovereignty and feminism are concepts that provide a new and critical perspective on food and farming. They can help us to understand the world and push us into action. But what exactly do they mean? And what can we do? Below, we present three critical proposals.

By Marta Soler Montiel, Marta Rivera-Ferre and Irene García Rocas

## AGROECOLOGY AND FEMINISM > PERSPECTIVES

**F**ood sovereignty, agroecology and feminism are often associated with complex political struggles. Some of these form part of our daily lives, and some take place farther away. These three concepts represent a variety of political proposals, especially when they are taken up together. All too often they collide with the cruel realities that we encounter on a day-to-day basis. In other words: even though we may aspire to living in a world based on food sovereignty built through a feminist agroecology, we live surrounded by industrialised agriculture and globalised food in a capitalist and patriarchal world. These are the contradictions we live with.

### How feminist is food sovereignty?

The term 'food sovereignty' was born from peasant movement La Vía Campesina as an alternative concept to agri-food globalisation. It is formulated as the right of peoples to decide upon and control their food autonomously through peasant agroecology. Agroecology, on the other hand, is an alternative to the green revolution that recovers and builds upon traditional knowledge, manages biodiversity with wisdom and art, and integrates social and ecological aspects into food production. In addition, agroecology is for and by peasants: the knowledge and know-how of those who grow, raise and produce food creates autonomy for farmers.

Social justice, both for those who produce food and for those who consume it, has always been at the heart of food sovereignty. We might think, therefore, that gender equality is also implicitly present, and that food sovereignty and, by extension, peasant agroecology are feminist. However, the women of La Vía Campesina needed to create their own assembly within the organisation to fight for their participation and to ensure that feminism was taken up as everyone's issue. Since patriarchy permeates our world and guides our way of life, we run the risk of building a patriarchal food sovereignty and agroecology.

Advocates of agroecology tend to idealise family farming, the culture of rural and indigenous communities and culinary knowledge, without questioning the deeply unequal gender relations that are hiding in families, farms, communities and kitchens.

Women, in most cases, are invisible or considered as a 'help' and not as active protagonists of the agroecological transition. When peasant women do gain prominence in agroecology, production or marketing, they often receive praise. But what about the work overload they suffer in order to achieve what they do? Have they managed to negotiate the distribution of household chores so as not to collapse trying to participate in public and economic life? Indeed: sometimes we fall into the trap of wanting to make the work of women visible and end up glorifying traditional feminine responsibilities without claiming fair retribution and distribution of labour.

## The roots of feminist agroecology

Although women's struggles for resistance and autonomy are timeless, the political formulation of feminism as such has Western roots. The impulse of liberalism and capitalism in the French Revolution, at the end of the 17th century, drove the development of individual and collective rights in a new market-based society, and in the context of private property. Political power was made 'democratic' with the establishment of the right to vote and parliamentary representation, but these new rights were reserved only for men. It was at this time that the gender conflict was made explicit, and the patriarchy that conceives of women as inferior was revealed.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the voices of African-American women gained strength and many denounced the dominant discourse on feminism, which had been constructed exclusively from the experiences of middle class, Western white women. These voices were followed by racialised, indigenous and peasant women from all over the

world who suffered from colonial domination. From their experiences and visions of the world, they generated their own emancipatory feminist political analysis and proposals.

What we now call 'intersectionality' began to be visible, which is nothing more than the crossing of the axes of domination: class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, age and gender. Also, women from different parts of the planet began to construct so-called eco-feminism, denouncing the anthropocentric bias of dominant feminism that does not question the appropriation and destruction of nature. Recently, proponents of the so-called feminist economy of rupture have begun to formulate proposals to build a non-capitalist economy oriented around the 'ethics of care' that places life in the center.

To us, the ecofeminism that allies with postcolonial feminism and the feminist economy of rupture is the kind of feminism that feeds agroecology.



**A life worth living** Ensuring and demonstrating the economic viability of agroecology must be made a top priority. Today it is very difficult to live in the countryside, with rural livelihoods characterised by prevalent job insecurity, lack of decent wages, low benefits, minimal labour rights and heavy workloads. Women are disproportionately burdened by these issues. In addition to being active in agroecological initiatives, they often have other paid work, and engage in care taking. It is therefore important to establish realistic agroecological projects that provide for decent remuneration and dignified lives.

We are all contaminated by machismo and we all reproduce violence, power relations, and gender roles. Do you know how to handle conflicts and emotions in agroecological projects? Indeed, patriarchal relations are present in both the rural and the urban world, including within agroecological initiatives. Realising and acting upon this implies making it a priority to constantly rethink how to deal with these relationships and the violence embedded within them.

Questions that must be central for anyone building a feminist agroecology are: 1) how to build viable agroecological initiatives that collectivise care work and 2) how to obtain both a decent income for the peasantry and affordable prices for low income consumers.

**What to do** We cannot resist throwing out some ideas about what to do, although we are aware that both diagnoses *and* proposals for action and change must be collectively constructed from the ground up.

• **Value all work** We think that a first step is to recognise, explain and face the fact that the jobs and roles that women have traditionally performed, both in the countryside and in kitchens, homes, families, communities and in the territories are seen to have less value than the roles that men play. Socially valuing the work of women must also involve an equal distribution of the work they do, making care-giving a collective responsibility of the whole society, and not exclusively of women. This proposal implies, therefore, a democratisation of care work.

• **Question power relations** A second essential step is to question power relations within the family and break the idealisation of the 'peasant family', in order to confront and change patriarchal relations.

A feminist agroecological transition must go hand in hand with changes in relationships and roles between men and women in their homes, building new forms of coexistence. This, together with the equal distribution of care work, would allow women to occupy some of the spaces that are currently taken up by men.



**We cannot assume that agroecology is already feminist in itself.** Photo: ENDA Pronat

• **Address the lack of time through networks**

A third step is to strengthen and develop social networks and collaborations with individuals and groups, both in farming and in caring for children or other people. This will help to address the lack of time that results from the 'productivist rhythms' of rural communities. Carrying out joint planning, collaborating and engaging in collective work can facilitate care-giving and participation in community life. This can take various forms: cooking, organising a diet adapted to each season, being in a consumer group or campaigning to incorporate organic food in school canteens. This can save time to, for example, conserve seeds, cultivate the garden, take care of animals or process food, without having to increase working hours.

These ideas are based on the thinking behind eco-feminism and decolonial feminism, which place *food* at the center of our society. In this approach, peasant work as well as domestic work are considered essential for life, thus displacing the current centrality of the market. For us, it makes total sense to pursue this radically democratic proposal. We believe it is the most promising road to the feminist agroecology and repeasantisation that we need for the food sovereignty of all people.

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*This is a shortened translation of an article originally published in Spanish in the Food Sovereignty, Biodiversity and Cultures Magazine, on 05/29/2019.*



Photo: Marcelo Aizaga

# The Emergent Kitchen: 'food for life' in Ecuador in the face of COVID-19



The contradictions between the highly rational, commodified, competitive 'masculinity' of industrial food and the feminist preoccupation with life have become increasingly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic in Ecuador. Meanwhile, a growing number of families are finding inspiration in the 'Emergent Kitchen' programme, created by a collection of social movements that utilises the kitchen as a space of encounter and re-constitution of the possibility of 'food for life'.

By Eliana Estrella, Marcelo Aizaga and Stephen Sherwood



Over time, we and others involved in the lively social movements in Ecuador have come to understand food not just as a bundle of nutrients or a commodity, but as a necessary and important space for creating and maintaining relations. In other words, food generates *affect*. Following 75 years of deepening industrialisation in food and its well documented harmful consequences, we and our partners in the lively *Colectivo Agroecológico*, a network of actors involved in healthy, sustainable, socially equitable farming and eating (what we call 'food for life'), seek a radical feminisation of food. What does that mean?

**The feminisation of food** As the feminist-biologist scholar Donna Haraway explains, history shows the danger of conforming to reductionist identity politics (i.e., reducing the world of human experience to power struggles over sex, race or social class), which underlies much of the discourse of feminism without appreciating the importance of difference, as defined by one's preferences, creativity and flair. For example, fellow agroecology activists commonly characterise problems with modernisation in food as the product of a distant 'system', and part of a historical battle between a marginalised campesino class and elite urban-based consumers. This depiction holds some truth, but its detachment can create a sense of frustration and hopelessness in the quest for solutions.

Inspired by Haraway, we find that more immediate, concrete change can come from where we have greater access and influence: within the home, neighbourhood and community. We continually ask those eager for change to start with a reflection over their own activity as one who eats, and hence is involved in the constitution and structuring of the present state of things – for good or for bad.

According to Haraway, a call from 'us' on behalf of a certain identity may end up deepening the same divisive, violent history that activists aspire to end. Instead, Haraway summons more unifying, inter-subjective activity: *affinity*, understood as the state of one's relationships with other people as well as between people and the environment, in this case, the degree of socio-biological well-being generated in and through one's agri-food practice. It's not that identity politics is wrong, she explains, it's that in perpetuating a division between us and them, people of difference can come to neglect their commonality and interdependence with others. In other words: by drawing lines around groups of people, we lose access to potential allies and their experience, insights and resources.

Grassroots food movements in Ecuador, of which we are a part, have long embraced the affinity of food. In the context of COVID-19, we have encountered new conflict with the food industry and its state and corporate allies, but also in our own families, neighbourhoods and communities. We summarise a few elements of the food controversy arising from the pandemic in Ecuador. We then introduce 'The Emergent Kitchen' – a response from thousands of families from different walks of life, but sharing a common interest in healthier, more socially equitable and sustainable ways of living and being in and through food.

**The official response to COVID-19** With the recognition of the arrival of the coronavirus and above all, the outbreak of an epidemic in Guayaquil, Ecuador entered a regime of movement restriction and personal protection measures, including: social distancing, mandatory use of masks, and an unprecedented imposed quarantine. From 13th March, people were only permitted to circulate in public once a week for food or medical attention. A 14:00h - 05:00h curfew was imposed on weekdays, and all day on the weekend.

## AGROECOLOGY AND FEMINISM > FOOD FOR LIFE

These measures did not take into account the importance of family-level food, health care, and immune system strengthening, which health experts define as central to disease resistance. The National Emergency Operations Committee initially limited food provision to private companies. Even though they provide almost 70% of Ecuador's fresh food, family farmers lacked the required documents to sell their products in public. Despite the risk of contagion in closed spaces, the government forced the closure of traditional outdoor markets as well as all agroecological markets and fairs.

The existing capacity of families and neighbourhoods to provide for their own nutrition, food and bodies was overlooked. Instead, policies continually emphasised 'safe', highly processed supermarket foodstuffs, despite growing concern over an even worse pandemic tied to industrial food: overweight/obesity and its association with the lethality of COVID-19. In summary, the state's public response to the lockdown-induced food crisis was: trust us, and let us provide what you need.

Faced with a government that neglected direct producer-consumer relations, families and neighbourhoods needed to find their own solutions. But this turned out not to be easy. We share two examples of the challenges of gaining access to fresh, healthy food, even in the rural areas outside of the city, through the stories of Erlinda and Paul.

### Peri-urban vulnerability: Erlinda and Paul

While people may expect food dependency in the city, we were surprised to learn that it had become an issue in surrounding villages. Erlinda has her farm near Quito, Ecuador's capital. Although she lives in a community surrounded by countryside, nowadays most of her neighbours have left the hoe and machete behind to work in the flower export industry, construction, as a housemaid, or in clothing maquilas.

Erlinda explains that this situation has created great dependency among her neighbours: "What I like most about my farm is the diversity of Andean roots, vegetables, tubers and grains that I grow as well as my seed bank. When we were forced to undergo quarantine, the neighbours who were not involved in planting began to panic and come [to me] for food..."

Meanwhile, Paul is an elderly Frenchman with over thirty years in the Andes. Preferring the fresh air of the *campo*, he chose to live in a peri-urban community of the *Kitukara* – an indigenous group. Being over 55 years of age, the government's policy did not permit him to leave home. At first, he did not worry.

Nevertheless, after the first week, Paul quickly realised that the local store shelves no longer had fresh food. "There were no vegetables, no fruit, no eggs. There were only noodles, cans and junk food. At that moment, I realised that despite living in an indigenous

community, people no longer produced anything [of food]. We were just as vulnerable as the people [in the city]."

In both of these cases, neighbours had chosen rural residence but earned their living in the city. People had stopped cultivating potatoes and maize, raising guinea pigs and chickens, and growing and cooking with their own herbs and vegetables. In the process, such communities lost touch with their seeds, animals, and customs. They had their life in the *campo* in every way, except physically. In terms of food security, they had become dependent on the market and the whims of others. Given the burgeoning food crisis, something was needed to help people begin to re-construct their food sovereignty.

### The Emergent Kitchen: waking up 'the people who eat'

"We are once again in an age where the search for fresh food has become our primary concern." -- Chef Esteban Tapia, during a session of The Emergent Kitchen

In response to food challenges facing urban and rural dwellers, the Agroecology Colectivo (*Colectivo*) and the Ecuadorian Movement for Social and Economic Solidarity (MESSE), joined forces to solve problems with production, distribution and procurement. In particular, they made use of a series of well-established communication platforms developed over the last ten years through their joint campaign for 'response-able' consumption: *QueRicoEs!*.

The Colectivo and MESSE consider the production and exchange of food as fundamental to the identity, health, environment and social well-being of people. Through 'eating well' in every way, we argue,



Social distancing at the Carcelen market in the North of Quito. Photo: Diana Cabascango



## The objective of feminist food is to nurture the synergies found among us.

food growers and eaters can collectively care for health, culture and the environment; they can advance their food sovereignty. As such, the goal of QueRicoEs! is not just ethical responsible food practice, but also establishing the relationships and socio-biological feedback necessary for food that is responsible: that continually negotiates practice and context for health, sustainability and social equity.

In the context of COVID-19, this led to a series of effective civil society responses, including practical hygiene protocols, information on accessing personal protective equipment and remote diagnostic services, and laboratories offering tests. Partners in the different food movements shared seeds, irrigation equipment and vehicles that were permitted to circulate on certain days. They set up communication channels for families in search of specific ways to access and prepare fresh, healthy food. Free internet-based consultations were organised on urban gardening, nutrition for disease resistance and healthy cooking, fermentation and food storage.

As part of these efforts, we began to experiment with a series of live public debates on radio and social media, giving birth to the Emergent Kitchen. The weekly programme consists of open-ended conversations among people who are looking for good, healthy food, such as farmers, housewives, professional cooks, and store owners. As an illustration, we'd like to share a conversation that took place between Michelle O. Fried, a nutritionist and author of popular cookbooks, and Ibeth, a housewife from Quito:

Ibeth: *"Hello, good afternoon. Could you tell me the name of this thing?"*

Showing an image, Ibeth explained that she was baffled by a mysterious, Sputnik-looking object that was sitting on her kitchen counter.

Michelle: *"Good to try something new and delicious. It is kohlrabi. It is a compact, almost leafless cabbage. Although its small upper leaves are also very rich. Where did you get it?"*

Ibeth: *"I ordered an organic basket and this product came to me. But, I don't know how to prepare it."*

Michelle: *"An unusual way to prepare it, but one that I love, is to grate the raw tube and add vinaigrette with a little toasted sesame oil ..."*

During the programme, people share their experience with dishes made from other unusual, under-utilised, tasty vegetables, including watercress, achocha, chayote, arugula and white carrot. Michelle explains that such little-known, highly nutritious products from the Andes as well as other parts of the world have increasingly been displaced by processed food-stuffs, which in turn undermines the health of families and cultures. In Michelle's words, a response starts in the kitchen, as *"The kitchen is where the family is cared for and protected from illness."*

Despite the worries and urgencies that came with the pandemic and the confinement of quarantine, participants in the Emergent Kitchen programme came to realise that this is a time for overcoming fears by exposing one's palate to new flavours and tastes and by utilising the food experience as a means of taking charge of their situation.

**The affinity of food for life** As one member of the public put it during The Emergent Kitchen, *"Our aim after the pandemic is not to return to normal!"* We seek more.

Consistent with Andean cosmovision, radical feminism understands affinity and affect holistically, contributing to the well-being of all people, regardless of gender, race or income. Applied to agriculture and food, this perspective seeks to address the socio-biological relations enabled through human-human and human-environmental interactions.

Andean cosmology and feminism are both founded on the idea that one's reality is built on endless collective histories - with the soil, water, plants, the sun and the sky, with taste and flavour. Consequently, the objective of feminist food is not to make individual differences disappear - between the sexes, urban and rural or among races - but rather to nurture and embrace the synergies found among us all, in this case as enabled by means of the relational practice of *food for life*.

With the arrival of COVID-19, we find great tragedy and sadness in the illness and deaths in our families and neighbourhoods, but we also find the possibility of a more *feminist* meal, constituted through affection and care for our co-existence. In providing a platform for people to share an affinity for healthy, sustainable, and culturally and socially empowering cooking and eating, the Emergent Kitchen contributes to the embodiment of a practice that nurtures life in and through food, in all of its wonderful expressions, differences and integration.

Eliana Estrella, Marcelo Aizaga and Stephen Sherwood are active in the QueRicoEs! Campaign of MESSE and the Agroecology Collective in Ecuador. In addition to finding information at [www.quericoes.org](http://www.quericoes.org), you can listen to a programme of the Emergent Kitchen or *Cocina Emergente* (in Spanish) on Facebook. Contact: [ssherwood@ekorural.org](mailto:ssherwood@ekorural.org)

# The power of women's networks for agroecology in India

A photo story by Soumya Sankar Bose and Amrita Gupta

**C**ommercial, industrialised agriculture has made women farmers invisible in much of the Global South. India is no exception. This is changing with India's Zero Budget Natural Farming practices (now more often referred to as Community Managed Natural Farming), which are being used by nearly a million smallholder farmers. Women, with little access to credit, land, or commercial seeds, have turned out to be its strongest advocates.

Through their community networks and self-help groups, they have scaled agroecology from village to village; improving not only household nutrition, incomes, and soil health, but also their own agency and dignity. Within their practices, feminist logic takes precedence over traditional market dynamics. However, the approach has also created political tensions and controversies. This photo story presents highlights of this experience.

**1** "We knew we needed a space to save our native varieties of seeds and transmit the traditional knowledge of farming which is agroecological, which does not harm nature," says Chukki Nanjundaswamy, coordinator of Amrita Bhoomi near Bangalore, Karnataka; a peasant agroecology training center established to prove that an alternative farming model can exist. As a member of La Via Campesina, the center offers training based on the farmer-to-farmer approach, centering agroecology, peasant rights, food sovereignty and social justice.







**2** Nisarga Nisargaka Savayava Krushikara Sangha is a self-sufficient cooperative group in Honnur, Karnataka. All members practice natural farming together, keeping social and caste discrimination aside. While Zero Budget Natural Farming is successfully being scaled, its popularity also brings political challenges and controversies. Central to ZBNF practices is the use of cow manure and urine to enhance soil microbial activity. A major challenge, however, is that Hindu extremist nationalist parties, who consider the cow to be sacred and advocate for bans on cattle slaughter, are attempting to politicise these practices. Such a stance is extremely problematic as it threatens to criminalise Muslim and other minority populations in India that rely on cattle for their livelihoods and food security. Some critics have argued that these controversies result in communities that are not currently part of ZBNF farming networks being excluded. Another concern stems from confusion about the programme's stance on genetically modified seeds. The Andhra Pradesh government shuns the use of GM and hybrid seeds in this approach, while other groups have approved their use. Thus, despite the scale it has achieved, there is still doubt about whether ZBNF practices will be successful in systems that have become heavily dependent on industrial inputs and technologies, such as the Bt cotton belt of India.



**3** In much of the world, women like Bayamma Reddy have long been the guardians of indigenous seeds; through agroecology, their wealth of knowledge and role on the farm has regained value.

When Bayamma's sons left for higher education, she began to practice natural farming on the plot of land near her house, using the knowledge and skills that had been passed down to her across generations. She is from Balakabari Palli, Andhra Pradesh, which lies in one of the most drought-prone districts in the country. In these regions, commercial crops that require irrigation and other expensive inputs have proven to be untenable. To ensure a diverse food basket and mitigate the risk of crop failure, she and her husband follow the traditional practice of *navdanya* (sowing a combination of nine cereals and millets) before the onset of the monsoons.

**4** Kavita Kuruganti is the founder of ASHA, the Alliance for Sustainable and Holistic Agriculture. She is also associated with MAKAAM, a nationwide forum of more than 120 individuals and women farmers' collectives, civil society organisations, researchers and activists, drawn from 24 Indian states, which works to secure due recognition and rights of women farmers in India. In a recent interview, Kavita explained how women were traditionally engaged in labour-intensive farm work like transplanting, weeding, and harvesting. However, as she explains: "As agriculture gets oriented towards markets, with an increasing reliance on herbicides and machines, men take over the decision-making." Practicing agroecology allows women to reclaim their decision-making rights.







**5** In Andhra Pradesh, women’s self-help groups have been instrumental in spreading the principles of agroecological farming from village to village – without this grassroots women farmers’ movement, it would have been impossible to scale these practices up and out to the nearly 600,000 farmers reached today, or to reach the targetted 6 million farmers by the end of the decade. Most of the programme’s staff and trainers are women farmers.

**6** There are many landless women farmers in Anantapur (Andhra Pradesh) – some are widows of farmers who have committed suicide (an ongoing tragedy in India), others were rescued from trafficking. Nearly all are victims of caste discrimination. A group of them has come together to collectively lease land that was previously lying fallow. The women share their skills, knowledge, and labour amongst themselves, growing pesticide-free food for their families. They sell the surplus at their farm stores, and also deliver vegetables to customers’ homes by bicycle – micro-enterprises that they are eager to see grow. The women in the collective have devised a rota system for farm work that allows them to manage both production and care work at home. Here, feminist logic takes precedence over traditional market dynamics. The women pay each other partial wages during the agricultural season, ensuring pre-harvest cash flow to cover household needs. Beyond improved finances, agroecology also pays dividends in the form food sovereignty, self-reliance, and dignity.



**7** Sujatha and her husband Jagadish have been practicing natural farming for nearly ten years on their 4-acre farm in Gotteghally, Karnataka. The transition from chemical farming was challenging, says Sujatha, but as they learned about the health hazards associated with chemical pesticides and fertilisers, their resolve strengthened. Now, their farm is being cultivated according to the five-layer model of natural farming: an ecosystem that is more forest than field. “There are maybe more than 200 varieties growing on my plot,” says Jagadish. The couple grow bananas, coconuts, guavas, jackfruit, sweet potatoes, pulses and lemons, while also experimenting with coffee on the sloped areas of their farm. Chickens and goats are free-range. Taller trees – silver oak and moringa – form a natural fence, and when these trees shed their leaves, this serves as a mulch, building humus in the soil.

The photos on these pages are made by **Soumya Sankar Bose**. **Amrita Gupta** wrote the text and works with the Agroecology Fund.  
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This photo story is based on field visits and workshops during a week-long learning exchange in February 2020 in Southern India, where nearly a hundred agroecology practitioners, advocates, researchers and policymakers from more than 30 countries convened.



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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This column builds on '*The economic potential of agroecology. Empirical evidence from Europe*', published in the *Journal of Rural Studies* (2019).

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# The economic potential of agroecology in Europe

# Can feminist agroecology be scaled up and out?

Women and feminist perspectives are fundamental to agroecology and food sovereignty. But what happens when agroecology is being scaled up and out? This article describes two agroecology experiences, in Spain and Colombia, in which both women and feminist approaches got left behind. How can we achieve scaling of agroecology that questions patriarchal, structural inequalities and is truly inclusive of a feminist perspective?

By Isabel Álvarez Vispo and Paola Romero-Niño

In recent years, agroecology as a science, practice and movement is increasingly considered an essential tool for achieving food sovereignty. The development of innovative practices, the systematisation of experiences, and strengthened local, national and international social movements are showing that agroecology has the potential to nourish the world in a just and sustainable way.

As a result, debates have deepened on how this should be done, with the scaling of agroecology featuring prominently. Horizontal scaling (scaling out) refers to the increased aggregation and spread of agroecological projects. Vertical scaling (scaling up) is understood as the development of institutional policies and measures to support agroecology, for example through education, research, and markets, amongst others, as well as the involvement of different actors beyond producers.

The Basque Country has pioneered and inspired the movements for agroecology in Spain. Little by little agroecology is successfully scaling out, involving more and more consumer and producer groups, a successful community-supported agriculture system (CSA), and the incorporation of diverse groups of people, including youth and, at the start, women. In Colombia, women's organisations have been promoting agroecology as a tool for peace and a model of rural development that has gradually scaled up, from community production to the adoption of national policies. These two experiences represent a scaling of agroecology, but in both cases women and the feminist perspective were left behind in the process.

**Horizontal scaling: The Nekasarea network in Basque Country** Starting in 2007, the EHNE Bizkaia farmers union began to work on a territorial strategy for food sovereignty that included both training and awareness-raising on the different dimensions of agroecology and network development. This resulted in a system of community supported agriculture consisting of different producer and consumer groups, which was named *Nekasarea*. Producers joined the network after receiving training courses in organic horticulture, which over time turned into longer and more comprehensive courses in agroecology. By 2010 there were already 15 producer and consumer groups



operating within the network, more than half led by female producers.

Although neither the courses nor the strategy for revitalisation of the territory developed by EHNE Bizkaia had an explicit gender or feminist focus, it was a pleasant surprise for them to find out that at the beginning of this process more than 50% of the participants were women, reaching up to 80% in some courses. At least quantitatively, it really seemed that the agroecological scaling process was proving to be transformative. But the success of the network attracted new people, mainly men, some of whom had

## When agroecology became the household's primary economic activity, women 'ceded' decision making to men.

found themselves unemployed because of a crisis in the Basque metal industry.

The good news was that more people were seeking to develop agroecological projects. The network scaled out quickly in a short time. In 2016, there were some 200 producers involved in the network and Nekasarea even won the prestigious Milan Pact Award. Since then, the organisation of the network has shifted towards the development of more autonomous groups. The not so good news was that both in the training courses and in Nekasarea's own participatory spaces, the presence of women fell significantly: in some cases from 80% to 20%. This masculinisation of the network was owed partly to the influx of new male participants, but also reflected the fact that when the agroecological enterprise became the household's primary economic activity, the women who had previously led it, 'ceded' the decision making to their partners. Reverting to patriarchal logic within the family and within society, women were pushed out and also voluntarily stepped down when the economic benefits of their activities became clear. This trend continued in the following years, and in 2016 only a quarter of the then 60 consumer producer groups were visibly led by women. To this day, participation is still largely male and there is hardly mention of a feminist approach.

These developments have shown how agroecological spaces, originally primarily dominated by women,



An agroecology gathering of farmers in La Playa, Santander, Colombia. Photo: FIAN Colombia

were taken over by men when they scaled out significantly. This case points to the need for women to organise amongst themselves to be able to make their needs and demands visible, not only in Bizkaia but throughout the whole of the Basque Country. Reflecting on this point, the Etxaldeko Emakumeak movement arose, an open group of women committed to Food Sovereignty. They define themselves as agroecofeminists and their *raison d'être* is to spread Food Sovereignty into feminist movements, and feminism into food sovereignty movements.

## Vertical scaling: Agroecology in Colombia's Peace Agreement

For decades in Colombia, women, mainly peasant, indigenous and Afro women, have developed communal agroecological processes to produce food for home consumption, to care for their environment and to build peace. They see agroecology as a tool for peace building because as a social movement it helps strengthen rural organisations and improve peasants' living conditions. This is especially the case when they leave the ranks of war and join civil society. Agroecology can also create favourable social, economic and environmental conditions in the communities for the creation of local sustainable food networks.

As the fruit of their hard work, rural organisations also managed to put agroecology on the country's

# Advancing agroecology requires raising awareness about the inequalities that arise in scaling processes.

political agenda. Women played an important role in positioning agroecology as a tool for peace, and it was finally incorporated into the Peace Agreement between the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia - People's Army (FARC EP), at the end of 2016. They made this happen through local and national level advocacy strategies, expressing the need to nurture local communities and organisations.

At the community level, women producer organisations actively participated in the coordination spaces for local development processes to promote agroecology as a tool for peace. They developed agroecology training in rural schools, built national alliances and platforms for rural women that included agroecology and made public statements. At the national level, women engaged in monitoring and follow-up work on the peace agreement, as well as political lobbying in which women's platforms and networks pushed for legislation that promotes agroecology.

Despite this work and the continued insistence by women's groups, agroecology has today become relatively peripheral in the practical implementation of the Peace Agreement. The government promotes laws contrary to the spirit of the Agreement, in which agriculture is focused on increasing production and promoting industrial agriculture, even to the extent that monocultures are encouraged. Likewise, at the

local level, women's participation and proposals are often misused and misunderstood to promote productive projects that encourage the use of technological packages and production for the exclusive export of 'exotic' foods. For this reason, despite the strategic role of women in scaling up agroecology, their proposals for agroecology to be used as a tool for peace and community building are not reflected in the implementation of the Agreement.

**Nothing built on inequality will bring justice** Although agroecology is being successfully scaled out and up in different contexts, it is happening without taking into account the part of the 'iceberg' of the food system that is underwater. The visible tip of this iceberg shows the production and profit, yet the elements that sustain this productivity, such as the work of women, remain invisible.

In both the Basque Country and Colombia we see how not taking an explicit feminist approach can make advances appear successful even though they leave women behind. This is especially ironic since they were the ones who advocated for agroecology in the first place. In the case of vertical scaling up in Colombia, occupying spaces of political advocacy implies a very high cost for women (in terms of time and security). Although small achievements were made, their needs and perspectives were not given priority in practice by the state, meaning they again became invisible. In the case of Nekasarea in Spain, we see that in the scaling out of agroecological alternatives not dependent on the state, women were excluded from protagonism and decision-making as soon as the projects became economically successful and fitted the capitalist patriarchal model.

Advancing agroecological transitions requires raising awareness about the inequalities that arise in scaling processes, and questioning the institutional and organisational models (including in the family) that, as we have seen, continue to reproduce patriarchal systems. Failure to take these aspects into account leads to processes in which women gradually disappear.

No institution, organisation or network built on inequality is going to build just realities. For this reason, we believe that the incorporation of a feminist perspective in the process of scaling up and out is key for any meaningful change. We need to build new paradigms for agroecology in which women are visible and feminism is a priority.

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### A field visit of the Nekasarea network.

Photo: Isabel Álvarez Vispo







Photo: Rural Women's Assembly

# The rise of rural women's movements in Southern Africa

Rural African women are invisible and often marginalised in formal leadership structures. By organising themselves in social movements, women in Southern Africa have amplified their voices to challenge agri-business and patriarchal oppression while advancing agroecology and building new leadership for a feminist agroecology.

By Mercia Andrews

In Africa, rural women have to struggle against corporate agribusiness and extractive industries which seek to control their land, seeds and other resources. At the same time they are also faced with different forms of patriarchal oppression and exploitation at home, in the community, in the workplace and even within social movements. While women initiatives have successfully targeted some of these issues at the local level, extending their struggle to district, national and international levels remains difficult. The Rural Women's Assembly was established to take on this challenge. Let's take a closer look at their two main struggles.

**Challenging agri-business and extractive industries** Global investors and transnational corporations are engaging in large-scale land acquisitions in Africa for food production, biofuels, mining and land speculation. At the same time the Alliance for the Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA), the New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition in Africa and proponents of Climate Smart Agriculture are promoting a 'New Green Revolution'. This vision encourages the collaboration of governments with agri-business like Monsanto, Syngenta and other major producers and traders of GMOs. Women's demands for support for agroecology are completely ignored in favour of the seeds, pesticides and other inputs developed by Monsanto and other biochemical TNCs. The impact of this corporate-led agribusiness push is particularly severe for rural women, who complain of an increase in sexual harassment and party-political coercion by government

officials of the departments of agriculture acting on behalf of these new elites.

The Rural Women's Assembly (see box), whose members mainly use agroecological farming practices, has joined hands with other peasant and small-scale farmers in Southern Africa to contest agribusiness and the lack of support for peasant agriculture from their governments. We confront our governments' extractivist agendas and the manner in which they are allowing corporate capture of our seeds, land, forests and oceans by big capital such as agri-business and biofuel interests.

We also defy seed laws and undermine the power of TNCs when we congregate across borders to share traditional and indigenous seeds and publicly destroy GMO seeds. As guardians of traditional and indigenous seeds, rural women continue to have seed banks and share and trade their own seeds. We also resist the intrusion of the fast food market, by reviving local food systems and local food production.

Crucially, we demand usufruct rights to the land in order to produce food for the family/community, thus making it politically challenging for agri-industry and mining companies to appropriate communal land.

### The struggle against patriarchy

Despite the important role of rural women in agriculture and household food security, our experience shows that traditional authorities continue to reproduce patriarchal structures. This has a major impact on women's decision-making abilities in terms of farming practices, markets and access to finance in the home, community, the church, learning institutions, the political arena, and the economy.

An example is found in the Limpopo province of South Africa where men claim that the BaPedi culture dictates that women are not supposed to lead. This is evident from the commonly used proverb "*Tsa etwa key a tshadi pele di wela leopeng*", meaning "if a leader is a woman, disaster is bound to happen". Women leadership is obstructed by traditional authorities in rural communities who expect women to be silent, hidden and respectful. These oppressive norms and cultures must be challenged. Women should be placed at the forefront to denounce poor leadership and corruption at village and ward level.

This is what we are working towards. For example, in Zimbabwe we organise to defend women who are pushed off their land when their husbands die. Esnati, from the Rural Women's Assembly in Zimbabwe, explains: "When my husband died, my in-laws evicted me from the land I worked alongside him. I was sent back to my parents with nothing, where I started to cultivate their land. For years, my work fed us and I could sell to the market. The day my parents died, my brother and the local head-man came to evict me. I was devastated and angry. I went to the local RWA group. Fifty women ac-

## The Rural Women's Assembly

The Rural Women's Assembly emerged in 2009 out of the World Social Forum's People Dialogue which sought to create opportunities for activists to learn from the struggles that defend territories and the commons.

Afterwards, the Rural Women's Assembly organised itself across Southern Africa, establishing autonomous, country level platforms, electing their own leadership structures and developing their own guidelines and principles for the movements. Currently the RWA exists in nine countries: South Africa, Mozambique, Swaziland, Lesotho, Malawi, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Namibia, Mauritius and we have just started in Angola.



panied me back to the homestead and together we insisted that I will stay on the land and in the house. We occupied the land daily for over 20 days fighting off the local men.” Finally, Esnati was allowed to stay on the land, paving the way for other women in her situation.

**Amplifying the organising capacities of women** A critical challenge is that women are not valued as leaders. This is why we are creating powerful local associations, farmers’ groups, saving clubs, health committees and church-based women’s organisations led by rural women. The existence of these local formations show that rural women have the skills, ability, experience and knowledge required to lead.

This is very important because women are often made invisible in wider movements despite having played key roles in them, for example the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa, the Green Belt Movement in Kenya that mobilised thousands of women against logging, and the Niger Delta Women’s Movement resistance against oil drilling. There are hundreds of other important women-led initiatives across Africa: Women have challenged slavery, colonialism, apartheid and fought in the wars of liberation. Therefore it is essential to probe the unexplored areas of African women’s leadership, their protests, activism and campaigns so that their voices and leadership can be heard and amplified more completely.

We have various strategies to strengthen the leadership of women. At a regional level in Southern Africa, we regularly organise a feminist school, leadership sessions and a young women social media training camp where ideas of feminism, feminist leadership and power relations are strengthened and developed. Examples of popular resistance and grassroots women’s activism are integrated into these trainings. At the national level in various countries, we challenge the dominant male-centred, hierarchical, directive-oriented, centralised organisations and decision making, including within farmer movements. For example, in 2018, the RWA challenged the elections of the Namibian Small-Scale Farmers Union with its predominantly male leadership. This successfully led to women being elected into the union’s leadership structures.

**Towards feminist leadership in African agriculture** In the past years, we have learned a lot. Important questions for us are: how can we create different, non-hierarchical organisational forms and ways of leading? Leadership for what? To change what? For us, leadership is a means and not an end in itself. It has to be rooted in the values of the movement and an understanding of the change that we have to make in the lives of women. This implies deconstructing the concept of leadership, especially



We must make sure that women and their practices are no longer made invisible, ignored or erased from memory. Photo: AFSA

feminist leadership. Experiments are needed with collective leadership, flat structures and greater autonomy at the village and country level, to “create the road as we walk it”. Within the RWA, we are already building a praxis of action-reflection, of combining strategies and being open to learning. We aim to create spaces that are open and safe for women. Popular education, reading together and story-telling are used as part of our movement building strategies.

We have learned that to build women movements we have to recognise that in the past and present, and across our lands and our communities, strong women’s collective mobilisations already exist. In order to strengthen agroecology, rather than focusing on the scaling of a particular farming practice, we must make the voices of women our point of departure, engage in their struggles and foster their mobilisation on the basis of horizontality. This involves promoting feminist leadership and making sure that women and their practices are no longer made invisible, ignored or erased from memory. By doing so we can activate the full force of women to challenge agri-business, dismantle patriarchal structures and advance a feminist agroecology.

**Mercia Andrews** is a feminist activist based in South Africa, and is the regional coordinator of the Rural Women’s Assembly. This article builds on ‘A case study of the Southern African Rural Women’s Assembly: We can break the bend’, published in *Agenda* (2019). Contact: [mercia@tcoe.org.za](mailto:mercia@tcoe.org.za)

# Care ethics in agroecology research: practices from southern Mexico

In Chiapas, Mexico, scholars and students are seeking to 'territorialise' the university using indigenous and feminist principles of care. The university has become not only a place that generates cognitive knowledge but also a place that nourishes experience and meaningful connection. This experience shows how a feminist ethics of care can guide the formation of new, agroecological ways of organising.

By Diana Lilia Trevilla Espinal  
and Ivett Peña Azcona

**F**irst of all we would like to situate and name ourselves: we are women with Afro-descendant and Indigenous roots. We speak from Chiapas and Oaxaca, where we are weaving experiences and dialogues with women from different places and generations, particularly peasants, Indigenous, Black and migrant people. We participate in networks such as the Alliance of Women in Agroecology (AMA-AWA) and the Network of Creators, Researchers and Social Activists. The first is a collective where over 50 female students, researchers, members of social organisations, feminists and agroecologists from Latin America and the Caribbean, the United States and Europe, come together. The second is made up of young women from Mexico.

From our perspective, which is shared by the great Indigenous and peasant movements in the Global South, food sovereignty starts with the defense of the territory and of those who inhabit it: people, fauna, flora and the commons, which includes seeds, water and forests. We also share the perspective of women in Latin America, who emphasise the importance of making territories free from violence against their bodies and of building communities without discrimination, exclusion, dispossession and impoverishment. As women from these territories, we continue to nurture these perspectives.

## **Feeling-thinking with the territory**

Currently, rural areas are disputed territories due to the competing interests of agri-industry, which considers people, land, and food as commodities with which to generate short-term



surpluses and profits. Large companies and international organisations are pressuring for reforms that promote the use of technological packages offered by agroindustry. They also pressure governments to implement large, extractive projects. Women and feminists from Latin America are engaged in struggles against megaprojects and industrial agriculture to defend peasant agriculture and preserve the commons. Their practices and analyses inspire us to contribute to what we consider four fundamental aspects of a feminist understanding of food sovereignty:

1. Food sovereignty as situated in territory-body-earth: This means that we are bodies rooted in territories. Therefore, what happens in our bodies affects the territories and vice versa.
2. Feeling as a constituent of knowledge building: This implies valuing the affects, emotions and human relationships with nature that are present in all the processes that shape territory-body-earth.
3. The recognition that indigenous, peasant, coloured and Afro-descendant women contribute to the theory, politics, economy and defense of the territory.
4. The acknowledgement that care work, which involves the affective, psychic, relational and physical work needed for life, is indispensable in creating the conditions for agroecology and food sovereignty.

From this perspective, we share an experience in Chiapas on how we are territorialising food sovereignty through feminist practices.

**An ethics of care and the academy** We noted that an ethics of care lies at the heart of feminist food sovereignty practices. A feminist ethics of care recognises that we are not productive beings, we are beings who reproduce life, therefore, we need and can give care. This must be done in reciprocity, which in turn requires conditions that allow care to be a common, collective practice that is distributed fairly among all gender/sexual identities and generations. Care work refers to all the work that is done to preserve and regenerate life, not only concerning children, family or community members but also animals, plants and territory. Care work is often unpaid and done by women, who frequently have to combine it with paid jobs. An ethics of care can help change this.

We should not forget that what today is called agroecology is based on the millenia-old knowledge of indigenous peoples and peasants. While research has been important in generating insights on agroecology, the academy often continues to be a predominantly masculine and colonial domain focused on the production of abstract knowledge rather than fostering

## Academia is predominantly masculine and colonial and not focused on relations of care.

relations of care. In the South of Mexico, people are taking an alternative approach. The Aula-Huerto or classroom-garden is a space of experience and interaction, located in the research center of *El Colegio de la Frontera Sur (Ecosur)*, in San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico. Founded in 2008, it is part of a wider pedagogical initiative that seeks to scale agroecology by strengthening communities around health, conservation and food through the exchange of knowledge and experiences.

**The Aula-Huerto** The Aula-Huerto consists of three spaces. There is a classroom-kitchen-laboratory called “*El frijolón*” where people in the scholar’s community can share healthy, locally produced food. It also has a greenhouse, where seeds are dried and

Workshop on health and nutrition at the Aula Huerto. Photo: Ivett Peña Azcona



## AGROECOLOGY AND FEMINISM > ETHICS OF CARE

germinating plants are nourished, an area where plant residues are composted and a 'semilloteca' where seeds are stored for later exchange. Finally, Aula-Huerto has a large garden that runs across the university where more than 36 different species of vegetables, aromatic plants, flowers and 'milpa' (beans, squash, chile, quelites and corn) are cultivated in beds and vertical gardens.

The Aula-Huerto has the potential to build on an ethics of care. It developed through an organic process of self-organisation and collective management, mainly done on a voluntary basis by a group of researchers, as well as technical staff, administrators and students. The participation and leadership of women, who make up 80% of the people involved, is key. Group members perform managerial and administrative tasks but also engage in care work, which includes watering plants, making compost, sowing, harvesting and safeguarding seeds.

There is still no internal or external policy that supports the initiative, except that it has now been incorporated into the institutional environmental plan. In practice, the strategy to sustain it is based on networks and collective action; for example, the Aula-Huerto has alliances with other groups such as the Chiapaneca Network of Educational Gardens, the Mexican Network of Educational Gardens and the International Network of Educational Gardens.

Next to caring for nature, the Aula-Huerto is also a place where food, seeds and knowledge are exchanged between people from inside and outside the academic community, serving to blur the boundaries between the two worlds. Every Friday the garden turns into an agroecological market, where local producers come to

sell their products and engage in conversations with university researchers, students and staff. This creates direct relationships with consumers. Indigenous seed varieties are presented and exchanged. In the Aula-Huerto, peasant groups, primary and secondary schools, universities and social organisations and movements, come together to share agroecological experiences. Visitors come from within the country, as well as other countries such as Cuba, Brazil, Chile, Puerto Rico, Colombia, Venezuela, India and the United States.

The value of the Aula-Huerto is increasingly recognised by formal education institutes outside the research center. Various diploma courses on educational gardening for primary and secondary school teachers were hosted in the Aula-Huerto, as well as over 26 agroecology workshops and various conferences, such as the First Mexican Congress of Agroecology in 2019. In this way, practices are disseminated, experiences are shared and other agroecological processes are strengthened. Collectively, we are building the Aula-Huerto on a feminist ethics of care, based on the ideas of ploughing the path, sharing the harvest, thanking mother earth and sustainability.

**Ploughing the path** At the heart of these efforts lies a collective process that brings together different knowledge and generations. Strengthening the social fabric of our community and promoting collective ownership and responsibility are as important as the results of particular activities. The starting point is that in order to learn about agroecology, feeling and thinking together with others is central. This implies a challenge to recreate and to *territorial-*

**Cooking workshop, mandala garden and agroecological debate at the Aula-Huerto.**

Photos: Ivett Peña Azcona





ise agroecology beyond academic spaces, aiming for an agroecology that is not only shaped by research, but also by communities, by creating space for all within and outside academia to come together.

**Sharing the harvest** This is something we have learned from indigenous peoples. For them, *sharing the harvest* is a communal, ethical principle. In the Aula-Huerto this takes shape in the distribution of the work and time put into the care of its spaces. Everyone's involvement is encouraged, so the responsibility and work do not fall exclusively on women. Through this principle, gender relations and roles are transcended. The harvest is also shared through the involvement of local communities in different activities, which includes the literal distribution of the seeds, vegetables, and medicinal plants harvested. A concrete example is how during the current COVID-19 crisis, the Aula-Huerto group is collaborating with organised civil society to deliver medicinal plants and seeds in agroecological food baskets to vulnerable families.

**Thanking Mother Earth** Traditional ceremonies to thank Mother Earth come from indigenous and peasant peoples around Latin America and the Caribbean. In the seminars, workshops, encounters and meetings in the Aula-Huerto, this principle is taken forward in different ways, for example, through opening *mística* ceremonies; by expressing the appreciation for the work of those who collaborate; or by sharing food among the participants.

Thanking Mother Earth means valuing agroecology - not only as a productive practice, but also in terms of nourishing co-existence, recreation, art, relaxation and enjoyment, solidarity and community. Other examples of how these values are incorporated in the Aula-Huerto practices include yoga in the garden, painting, drawing and photography workshops and playing games, for example to learn about pest and pollinator management. We also organise talks about health and nourishment, events where people cook, and workshops on how to process garden produce into ointments, essential oils, tinctures, preserved foods and ferments.

**Sustainability, justice and dignity** Agroecology as an alternative to the agro-industrial system, and a tool for food sovereignty, also means addressing socio-environmental conflicts. This implies challenging daily practices in which land, common goods and people are exploited for profit. A feminist ethics of care is an important strategy to guide the formation of new, agroecological ways of organising based on principles of sustainability, justice, dignity and collectivity.

## We must value agroecology as food production, co-existence, recreation, art, solidarity and community.

In the Aula-Huerto we promote critical thinking, as well as the politicisation of these issues in the closest everyday relationships. We talk about the importance of both recognising the role of women in agroecology and promoting actions that ensure that their opinions and proposals are heard. This involves reflecting on whether women receive fair wages and whether care work in families is fairly distributed. There are still challenges ahead of us. One is creating protocols in the committee and research center to advance an institutional culture without violence and based on ethical principles of care.

Changing the wider institutional environment remains a big challenge, for us in Aula-Huerto but also for the broader agroecology movement. Within households, organisations, academia and social movements, we need to work towards not only an equitable and non-binary redistribution of the tasks, but also address more fundamental issues to break patriarchal forms of oppression. This requires the full participation, commitment and involvement of all genders and sexual identities. It also requires bottom-up public policies, regulatory changes, budget allocation to sustain local initiatives and other actions that seek to overcome inequalities and that promote a sustainable life.

Through our experience with the Aula-Huerto ECOSUR, we are convinced that to scale agroecology we must build on a feminist ethics of care. This goal will not be possible if we do not re-examine the unequal relationships that continue to exist inside and outside our communities, and without valuing the importance of care work in the broadest sense. This includes caring for people, relationships, food systems, the community and the territories.

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# Highland agriculture in the hands of women

Women in the Andean highlands of Cocapata, Bolivia, play a leading role in re-establishing peasant ways of farming, while building innovative connections with urban people. In doing so, they are creating agricultural systems that not only nourish the community and its natural resources but that also support vulnerable populations in the city and secure access to safe and healthy food during the current pandemic.

By Lidia Paz Hidalgo





**R**ural communities in Bolivia are threatened by the introduction of chemical fertilizers, certified seeds, monocropping and climate change, which are leading to the degradation of their natural resources. To reverse this trend, communities in the municipality of Cocapata engage in the struggle for food sovereignty. They have embraced agroecology as a means of reaffirming their peasant way of life as well as actively resisting the capitalist system, which seeks to trap small-scale producers in vicious cycles of dependency whilst channeling profits to multinational corporations.

Peasant families in these communities once managed a high diversity of native potatoes, which have now disappeared because consumer markets favour one particular type. This trend has been facilitated and reinforced by the government which, since the 1980s, has imposed laws and regulations that require seeds to be certified and penalise the sale of unregistered, indigenous seeds.

**Recovering potato diversity** The potato is commonly reproduced through its tuber (although the tuber is often mistakenly referred to as ‘potato seed’), which produces identical plants and thereby does not contribute to biodiversity. However, potatoes can also be produced by using the seeds from the small fruits that appear after the plant’s blooming period. Plants raised from seeds give rise to tubers that are genetically diverse. In this way, plant traits from long-lost varieties can be recovered. From 2017 to 2019, the Centre for Communication and Andean Development (CENDA) and communities in Cocapata engaged in a process of experimentation to recover these varieties in order to foster biodiversity and develop strains with enhanced climate change resistance. This was not easy. In the beginning the potatoes were very small, but through trial and error they were able to obtain potatoes large enough for consumption.

It is not only size that matters in potato cultivation. Now, with a base of over 100 different varieties, they can select and cross varieties in accordance with their own needs and values such as taste, health and resistance against diseases and frost. It also means that they can produce and save their own seeds for production, removing the need to buy tubers and in turn giving them greater autonomy. As put by one of the peasants: “We had gone into loss when buying certified tubers, we have even become indebted to the companies that sell them. That is why now I am producing mak’unku seed myself. With that we are moving forwards”.

**In the hands of women** Peasant women in Cocapata play a leading role in scaling up

and out the practice of breeding and managing diverse potato varieties, both within and outside the region. A major instrument through which they do so are potato fairs, where the women display and exchange over 160 varieties. While the exchange of seeds is an ancient practice in Bolivia, it has become less common over the years. Due to economic globalisation, local markets have become a site for the purchase and sale of commodities.

Through the seed fairs, practices of exchange based on solidarity are re-valourised. Here peasants and other community members become exposed to and exchange potato varieties with diverse colours, tastes, textures and medicinal qualities. Peasants that hold the most exchanges and those that have the largest diversity of potatoes receive prizes. Many are won by women.

Despite successes in breeding diverse potato varieties and spreading them through fairs, some challenges remain. One major challenge lies in the nature of demand from commercial markets. Most potatoes are sold to regional markets in the nearby city of Quillacollo or through intermediaries who reach the communities via trucks. In these markets there is a strong preference for the waycha variety. The potatoes have to be of a certain size and end up in the cities where they are mostly processed into fast food. This narrow demand for one variety hinders communities from engaging in more diverse cultivation, which in turn exposes them to the inherent risks associated with cultivating only one variety: vulnerability to changes in climate, diseases, pests and shocks in market prices.

**The adversities of markets and the pandemic** Aside from potato selection, women also play a leading role experimenting with new vegetables. Many women have concerns over the vegetables available in the market, which are produced by large farms in the valley using a lot of pesticides, and are expensive in some periods of the year. By producing vegetables that are less common in the region, women have been able to reduce their dependence on the market and can nourish their families with fresh, healthy and diverse foods. By using parts of the farm with different altitudes and microclimates, as well as establishing small greenhouses, they are able to cultivate a diverse range of varieties with different requirements in terms of water, soil, temperature and shade.

The varieties women experimented with include lettuce, carrot, onion, cabbage, radish, parsley, celery, chard, beet, turnip, broad bean and peas. They learned how to grow these ‘new’ crops by exchanging their experiences with other women in the community, but also internationally. Victoria Quispe, one of the peasant leaders in the community, brought knowl-

## AGROECOLOGY AND FEMINISM > RECIPROCITY

edge home from a visit to Guatemala: “Before I didn’t even know how to produce my own vegetables. I’ve learned from my travels. It didn’t work the first time because I sowed too early. Now it works and I don’t need to buy from the supermarket in Quillacollo”. Women also experiment with agroecological practices, such as soil improvement through the use of sheep, lama and alpaca manure, and pest and disease management using plant extracts, ash, minerals and insect traps.

The vegetable gardens do not only play a role in nourishing peasants in their day to day life, they are also crucial in times of crisis. During the current COVID 19 pandemic, transportation between cities and the countryside has become severely restricted. Now that families have their own produce, they don’t need to travel to stores in the city. In addition, during the pandemic many families that had migrated to the cities temporarily moved back to the countryside, where they knew they would have access to food produced by the community. The pandemic also motivated many families that did not previously have a garden to establish one.

**Reciprocity between countryside and city** While potatoes and vegetables are important to nourish rural households and communities, they also play a role in securing food for vulnerable populations in the city. Over the past decades many people from rural communities migrated to cities, seeking improved employment, education and livelihood opportunities for themselves and their children.

Once in the cities, rural people and especially women, find themselves in a vulnerable position. They have few people to fall back on, occupy risky jobs and face food insecurity. Most migrant families settle on the outskirts of middle-sized cities such as Vinto and Quillacollo and make a living as informal vendors of sodas, vegetables or ice cream. Some continue to maintain a garden in their rural home communities. Santiago Bautista is one of them: “I’m happy to produce my own cabbages, carrots, and onions to share with my family. I’m happy to have my own little greenhouse.” Besides vegetables, potatoes also go to the cities to be processed into chuñita or tunta, a method traditionally used by the Quechua and Aymara to dehydrate the potatoes so that they can be kept for years.

The countryside also supports vulnerable people in the city through a network of reciprocal relations. Many women who cultivate vegetables in the countryside share their produce with their extended family in the cities. Families who live in the countryside but do not grow vegetables obtain them from other community members as a gift, through exchange with other

products, or by buying them for very low prices and then passing them on to relatives in the city.

### Restoring ancestral knowledge

With the establishment of more diverse ways of farming, communities in Cocapata also came to revalue ancestral knowledge and management practices. Until about 5 or 10 years ago, peasants managed their fields using a strict rotation cycle. After one or two cycles of potato cultivation, the land was left to rest for a period of 10 to 15 years. However, due to pressure to fulfill market demand, farmers no longer abide by these principles. Potatoes are now cultivated for up to 3 consecutive years. This has created problems with disease, which remain dormant in the soil for many years. More intense potato cultivation is also depleting soil fertility and leading producers to use chemical fertilizers that further degrade and contaminate the soil.

## Farmers in the countryside support vulnerable people in the city.

To reduce the pressure on the land, farmers are introducing varieties or species that are better adapted to the current climate. These are intercropped, planted in different periods of the season or cultivated at different altitudes. Legumes such as tarwi, which fix nutrients in the soil, are also incorporated in the rotation cycles. These new practices are supported by ancestral knowledge. By observing certain indicators, such as the flowering of cactus, the howling of foxes, the coloration of particular algae, the patterning of clouds and the humidity under stones, climatic predictions are made to decide the timing and location of specific crop plantings. Farmers constantly observe and adapt these indicators in response to the impacts of climate change. Thus, by recovering ancestral knowledge and combining it with new agroecological practices, rural communities are able to deal with the challenges of globalisation and climate change, while nourishing themselves and urban populations.

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It is a common experience for me to get a particular question when I link gender equity and feminism with agroecology. Whether it is from reviewers during scientific peer review, or in policy circles, I am often asked, ‘what does this have to do with agroecology?’ The answer, in my view, is *everything* – without addressing gender and other social inequities, and developing new forms of organization that address injustice, agroecology is simply an environmentally-friendly way of farming.

In the United Nations High Level Panel of Experts report which I co-authored last year on agroecology and other innovations to address food security and nutrition, we highlighted how attention to power dynamics is one of the fundamental ways to differentiate agroecology from other sustainable agriculture approaches. This is not just about gender inequity, but the many and often layered social inequities inherent in the food system. The term intersectionality, coined by feminist scholar Crenshaw, refers to the overlapping and interactive ways that race, sexuality, class, gender, and other categories of difference act as multiple sources of power and forms of oppression at individual, social and institutional levels.

The framework of agroecology goes beyond a set of practices and approaches to ensuring ecological benefits from agriculture, to one that is trying to build a just, fair food system. Agroecology is not just about growing food, it is also about addressing power. While terms such as *transformative agroecology* draw attention to political and economic factors which shape the food system, there is still limited attention given to power dynamics within households and communities which use agroecological approaches. If agroecology is leading to increased workloads for women at the expense of their health and well-being, or is failing to think about farmworkers and their families, then it is not addressing social justice.

A *feminist agroecology* is thus one which looks at how to integrate attention to inequities into agroecological approaches, and strives to place considerations of social justice at the centre of efforts to shift values and processes. What are the implications of specific practices for people’s time, work and leisure? How are decisions and tasks shared regarding what to plant, how to manage the farm, how to care for members of the family and what to do with the harvest? Are the benefits from agroecological production shared within and between families and communities? Are people being exploited?

In our work in Malawi, in collaboration with a farmer-led non-profit, Soils, Food and Healthy Communities (SFHC), we have examined how agroecology can work to repair social rifts that are created in the current broken food system, including gender dynamics. Such efforts are neither without struggle nor straightforward, but they can provide real, meaningful change as farming families use agroecological methods to not only repair the soil, but also to repair and address the inequities embedded in families and communities.

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# Towards a feminist reparative agroecology



# "Agroecology in Africa has a female face"

Photo: Ben Chandler

A community educator and food justice activist, Leonida Odongo has an impressive knowledge of the reality of farmers in Africa. In this interview she talks about the impact of Covid-19 on women in Africa and the importance of *tafakari*; reflection with farmers on their own experiences. "It is becoming clear that the future is agroecological".

By Leonardo van den Berg and Janneke Bruil



**How has Covid-19 affected women in Africa?** Covid-19 regulations in Kenya required farmers to have a permit to transport food from one county to another. This was especially the case at the onset of the pandemic in Kenya in March 2020, but many farmers (particularly women) could not afford these. Other markets were closed to contain the pandemic. This was problematic because open air markets are key sources of livelihoods for women. There was also a lot of brutality meted on traders to enforce these measures, for example through the use of teargas to scatter the traders. Due to the financial stress and because people have to stay at home, there are also more conflicts within households, which has contributed to a spike in gender-based, domestic violence in particular.

Market restrictions also led to increases in food prices for consumers. Other regulations restricted people's movements between counties; As a result, families, especially those in informal settlements, had great difficulties in getting food. Some informal settlements were completely locked down. While the government announced that food would be provided to these settlements, local administrators controlled this food and only distributed it to people that supported them. This led to rallies and demonstrations, for example in Eastleigh, where people chanted: "You can't lock us up and not give us food", when the government enforced a lockdown restricting movement in and out of the area due to rising cases of Covid 19.

In addition, many companies in the capital city and towns shut down. Employees did not get their salaries due to closures and could not send remittances to rural areas – a crucial source of income for many rural families. This meant that farmers that depend on remittances were not able to till their land on time.

This situation was compounded by a locust infestation during the period of the pandemic. The government's main counter measure was aero-spraying, which we know has negative effects in terms of climate change and toxicity. Farmers have not received support to mitigate the impacts of both the pandemic and the locust infestation.

### **What is the biggest systemic challenge for African farmers?**

Agribusiness companies have discovered that food is a billion dollar enterprise and are increasingly entering the African countryside. In even the most remote rural communities in Kenya, you will now find agribusiness shops that sell chemical fertilizers, pesticides and chemically produced seeds.

Agribusiness companies try to convince farmers to use chemical pesticides, claiming it makes the work easier and makes them have higher yields. However, what they don't say is that pesticides destroy biodiver-

sity, make the soil toxic and kill earthworms, butterflies, bees and other organisms. Research in Kenya has found alarming levels of pesticides in fresh foods, which are partly responsible for increases in cancer and other diseases due to the carcinogenic components they contain.

Many of the pesticides available in Kenya have been abolished by law in other countries. Unfortunately, weak legislative systems in Africa are leading to the continent becoming a dumping ground for what is no longer useful in other parts of the world.

**How do you address the promotion of pesticides?** We use *Tafakari*, a Swahili word meaning 'reflection'. When working with farmers, you cannot demonise how they produce and what they are using without presenting alternatives. So we hold community sessions where farmers are able to reflect and share their experiences. Farmers often tell me that 10 or 20 years ago they grew food without using any chemicals. Now they do: prior to seeding, when crops are growing and even during harvest. Often they say that while these chemicals increased production initially, yields are now declining.

This is an entry point for us to discuss various issues. For instance, soil fertility. We ask farmers to bring a



## **PROFILE**

**Leonida Odongo** is an activist and educator working on agroecology, feminism, human rights and social justice, based in Kenya. Next to engaging in technical, legal and political education with rural communities and grassroots organisations, she also plays an active role in the Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa (AFSA), the World March of Women Kenya and Africa and the Civil Society Mechanism of the Committee on World Food Security. Leonida currently coordinates the activities of Haki Nawiri Afrika, an initiative advancing social justice among university students, smallholder farmers and communities negatively impacted by climate change. Email: [leonida.odongo@gmail.com](mailto:leonida.odongo@gmail.com)

## INTERVIEW > LEONIDA ODONGO

glass of soil from their farm and to observe how many leaves, earthworms and other organisms they can spot. If there are no leaves, it means there are no microorganisms. If there are no earthworms, it means that chemicals have killed them. With no leaves and organisms it also means that there is no humus in the soil. Then we reflect with farmers on the importance of microorganisms and humus and their roles in soil fertility.

### ‘Art can be a powerful starting point to reflect on change.’

We also use theatre to spark reflection. For example, farmers take the role of bees, farmers, butterflies or chemical companies and each actor shares how pesticides impact them. At the end a judge, who is Mother Earth, makes a verdict. In this way learning is made as easy as possible. After every session we converge with the audience to share their experiences and we discuss their challenges.

In some of our reflections with farmers we invite an artist or a musician to express culture and its relation to the way food is currently produced. Musicians can play a song about traditional life in Africa and relate this to what is happening now. For example, right now there is a lot of individualism. It used to be unheard of to buy seeds from a shop, because you could always get them from your neighbours. Art can be a powerful starting point to reflect on change.

**What is the secret to the success of this approach?** Farmers want to see tangible change. The beauty is that we co-create knowledge informed by the farmers’ own reflections and experiences. What we enjoy very much is transgenerational knowledge sharing, for instance when elderly farmers talk about the different herbs that can be used to make organic fertilisers and when young people participate in these sessions to learn from elderly farmers.

We also ask local, innovative farmers to come to talk about how they produce. When crops are failing, farmers approach them to ask: “how come your crops are not dying like mine?”. These exchanges between farmers really help to re-emphasise that indigenous, agroecological forms of production really work. We also organise practical training on making compost, bio-fertilisers or natural pest repellents, for example from the leaves and bark of the Neem tree. We don’t put too much emphasis on writing and instead focus on listening and practical exchange.

### What is the role of women and feminism in these initiatives?

Agroecology has a female face. The majority of people who till the land and save seeds are women, who have relationships and knowledge that are important for agroecology. Sadly, when you go to an African household you will find that men control the land, cattle and coffee or tea plantations. These are deemed to be ‘male’ crops, whereas women control crops that do not earn cash for the household but are mainly for subsistence. Ironically, it is the women who harvest the tea and coffee and take it to the millers for processing, but when the cash gets paid, it is the males who control this money. In some cases, when farmers are paid bonuses or when prices of commodities in the

“There is a need for networks that are advancing rural women’s leadership.” Photo: AFSA







“The majority of people who till the land are women. But who controls the resources?” Photo: AFSA

market go up, men tend to leave home, go to the nearest town and spend all the money. That is why it is important to start a dialogue about food production and who controls the resources.

The community dialogues enable women to have safe spaces where their voices can be heard and their concerns listened to. These platforms also provide opportunities for women to recognise their importance as women, not only in terms of reproduction but also in terms of production. They enable women to get access to opportunities to interact and speak about issues such as domestic violence, reproduction, health and education or discuss other issues affecting their children.

Patriarchy is very much entrenched in African culture and it takes time for it to change. In communities we have discussions around gender roles about food production and the overall work on the farm and in the household. We ask: Why is this happening? What is the economic contribution of each person in the household? Why do we need to change? In these platforms we get women to speak directly to men on why patriarchy hurts food production. This self-analysis is the beginning of changing gender roles. We are seeing that the men we have worked with are changing in terms of how they interact with women. But a lot still needs to be done, not only in Kenya but across Africa.

**With all that is going on, what gives you most hope for the future?** What gives me hope is that it is becoming clear that the future is agroecological. The emergence of many problems including new pathogens such as Covid-19 are related to the destruction of ecosystems. This makes a strong case for agroecology.

Another hopeful development is that more spaces are being created for women to participate in decision making and that women have great skill in organising. In order to change people’s mentality more structurally, there is a need for stronger women’s networks that are advancing rural women’s leadership. And we see these are growing. Through dialogues we have been able to create a network of over 300 women in Eastern Kenya that work on issues of agroecology. The ‘We are the solution’ campaign, led by women in West Africa, is another example of a strong women-led network that promotes female voices in policy processes for family farming. And in Southern Africa, there is a Rural Women’s Assembly (see page 21).

We find that women connect with each other faster

**‘Organised women are bold, resilient and transformative.’**

than men; they tend to share easier. They have more spaces for interaction, not only while farming but also in the market and other places. Of course, the interaction with men is also important. You can’t solve patriarchy-related problems if you don’t include men. But when women come together, they learn from each other and grow together. We know that organised women are bold, resilient and transformative.

# Agroecology nourishes the spirit of life in Maya cosmology

According to the worldview of the Maya indigenous people in Guatemala, as humans we are a part of the natural cycles of life. Colonisation and industrial agriculture broke this harmony through capitalist agrarian policies, land dispossession, violence against women and war. Today, women are working with agroecology in their communities to recover traditional values and rebuild connections with land and food.

By Juana Patricia Sanic, Manuela Elizabeth Telón, David Humberto Paredes and Felix Atonio Archila

**F**rom the perspective of the Maya indigenous people, who make up the majority of the population of Guatemala, agroecology is a system of life: a system that protects different varieties of seeds and diverse agricultural practices where all the vital elements of nature converge and synchronise harmoniously. Grandfather Wind, Grandmother Water, Grandfather Fire, Grandmother Moon,

Grandfather Sun, Mother Earth and Father Heaven comprise the family that gives life to our planet Earth. The synchronisation of these elements with people enables a form of agriculture in which everyone is connected. One element cannot live without the other; each fulfills many functions that are sustained by other elements. This way, mother nature generates products that nourish not only living bodies but also the spirit of life.

Women have always played an important role in agriculture and in protecting this delicate harmony with nature. In a traditional Maya story of how agriculture was domesticated (see page 38), women were the first to plant and harvest their own food.

## The rise of modern agriculture

Until the 1940s, cocoa beans were used as a form of money in Guatemala. They were regarded as highly valuable, and they were also offered to the gods for their exquisite flavour and other properties. Likewise, *trueque* (barter) practices were very common. Families exchanged their harvested agricultural products, for example trading corn for herbs or beans for eggs.

However, over the last century, everything changed. Sadly, with the imposition of the current economic model in the 1940s, agriculture was brought within the market system and its role within society became commercialised. Food, once produced for healthy meals, is now produced for trade and profit. From the 1950s and 1960s onwards, agro-industrial companies emerged. They considered themselves owners of the country, invading and seizing land from indigenous and peasant communities to practice large-scale agriculture.

Starting in 1960, Guatemala suffered 36 years of civil war, centered around the fight for the control of politics, economic power and land tenure. Many peasant and indigenous communities were tortured and massacred and their houses and villages were burnt down. The government, the army and the security forces applied the





Our identity is our history and our history is our identity. Photo: REDSAG

‘Scorched Earth’ policy, which consisted of violently removing rural crops, houses and people. Indigenous peoples’ and peasants’ property documents were erased to pave the way for land appropriation.

**The exploitation of peasant and indigenous women** During over three decades of war, thousands of women died after being raped by soldiers and tortured in many ways. Their breasts were cut off so that they could not breastfeed their children and babies were extracted from their wombs. Peasant and indigenous women were considered the enemy, as they represented a connection with life and with the land through their knowledge, practice and ability to create and nurture new life; new peasants who might rebel against those in power.

Indigenous and peasant families were left without land and without the conditions necessary to lead a decent life. They had to look for landowners willing to provide accommodation in exchange for farm labour, providing landowners with the attractive prospect of free labour.

Essentially, peasant and indigenous communities were pushed into slavery in order to survive. Again, women suffered most. Landowners preyed on their vulnerable situation to force women to have sexual relations with their bosses. Refusing meant families risked being evicted, stripped of their homes, or having more

or heavier work imposed upon them. Landowners did not see women as human beings, but rather as sexual objects.

While these extremes are behind us, violence against rural women has not disappeared. Human rights, especially those of peasant and indigenous women, are often violated by elite groups and large corporations in Guatemala. Municipal, departmental and national governments bow to their demands, since they are the ones who finance their political campaigns, helping to maintain a system of exploitation, submission and inequality.

**More equity through agroecology** In the period our Maya grandmothers and grandfathers tell us about, agriculture was a cultural practice in which women, men, the young, the old and children could participate without discrimination. One of the most important goals of REDSAG, the National Network for the Defense of Food Sovereignty in Guatemala, is to revive this practice and defend the rights of women in food sovereignty. Breaking with the racist and patriarchal system underpinning our society is a great challenge. However, we are making an effort to do so by restoring the balance between women, men, fauna, flora and the elements from the perspective of the Maya worldview that our identity is our history and our history is our identity.

## AGROECOLOGY AND FEMINISM > COSMOVISION

Years of living in patriarchy and civil war have deepened inequalities. However, agroecology is rooted in the belief that everyone can sow, work the land, harvest and cook agroecological products from their own plots. We believe that by enabling this, we are working towards a more equitable distribution of the heavy domestic workload. Sometimes women in the communities participate in meetings, while men take care of the family. There are men who have learned to cook and take on this work more often at home than before. These are important changes. Little by little we are raising the necessary awareness to transform the realities of women. REDSAG raises awareness through training in schools, churches, with the media and through political advocacy. It is an arduous but necessary task; we are working towards national adoption of public policies that protect women's rights.

At REDSAG we are also training women as agrofeminists whose focus is to preserve and promote healthy, cultural, traditional and ancestral knowledge, and to raise our voices together in defense and protection of our natural assets. We are establishing creole and native

seed banks in all the country's territories. We aim to build capacity in the domain of agroecology and community economy for both men and women, propelling men to give women the space that they deserve, and that they continue to fight for.

From the Maya worldview there is an understanding that men and women possess the same rights. They are complementary; the equilibrium of a harmonious life system that is in balance with all the life systems that surround us. Only by reviving and protecting the ancestral knowledge and practice of our grandmothers and grandfathers will we be able to respect everything that surrounds us and connect to our own traditional ways of interacting with the 'spiritual knowledge' of the planet.

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## How agriculture was domesticated - an ancient Maya story

Maya grandparents recount that when the Mayans were nomads, the men were responsible for searching for food for the family in the mountainous jungles. In turn, the women were responsible for child care and food preparation.

There was a time when women longed to find a way for their husbands to not always have to go out hunting, but they could not think of anything that could keep them at home. Being nomads, they settled in places where they saw the opportunity to stock up on food and water. In one of these stops, during the rainy season, the men did not go hunting for a long time.

As usual, the women always had a place near home to throw away kitchen leftovers, like a compost pile. In that place they also dumped animal waste, such as manure. The manure contained seeds of different varieties, but the women, accustomed to the hunter-gatherer lifestyle, paid no attention to them.

Then, at one point one woman realised that with the recent rains, various seeds thrown into the compost pile had begun to germinate. Noticing the seedlings, she decided to transplant them one by one in the patio around her house, curious to know what they would develop into. Every day she approached the seedlings and spoke to them with

affection. She gave them constant attention, had a lot of love for them and watched them grow.

As the days passed, the seeds grew into many different kinds of plants because the woman had thrown a great diversity of seeds in the compost. Some seeds were vegetables, others were fruit, others were precious timber varieties that were found in the mountains. This is how the woman discovered that all plants in the mountains grow from seeds, in some cases even very tiny seeds. She told her husband to look for seeds to sow close to home, showing him what she had discovered. The man, shocked at what was happening with the growth of the seedlings, happily told his wife that her idea was great. From that moment on he would spend his time searching for seeds and helping his wife plant the seeds nearby the house.

The woman also told her husband that instead of hunting animals, it would be better if he could look for baby animals to raise at home. That way, they could have various foods close to home without the need to go hunting. He did this and also began to look for a diverse array of seeds, including medicinal plants, trees and fruit and vegetable varieties. This is the Maya story of how agriculture was domesticated through women.



Traditional Indigenous economies in North America have always been rooted in deeply encoded cultural understanding of reciprocity, stewardship, relationships, and the innate abundance of living ecological systems. Cultivating and harvesting food was done with the belief that humans are part of the living system and that they must take care of the earth and it would take care of them. Our precious seeds were often cared for by women, who cultivated the earth with loving care as they sang and prayed on behalf of future generations. Our ancestors had vibrant regional and intertribal trade networks to exchange seed, food, crafts and other necessities, that were also sites of social and cultural sharing.

Indigenous peoples in the Americas domesticated some of the most valuable crops to the world, including corn, beans, squash, potatoes, tomatoes, and chocolate. Indigenous food systems also included fish, game and highly nutritious wild harvested foods. Unfortunately, US government assimilation programmes replaced traditional foods and diets with commodity foods such as wheat, sugar and processed fats. As food is central to Indigenous cultures, many communities also lost the knowledge and skills for growing and preparing these foods, as well as the ceremonies and prayers that accompanied each season. Today, the combined impacts of colonisation and commodity foods have devastated the health and culture of Native communities.

The shift from the relational worldview that informs Indigenous economies, to an extractive, capitalist worldview that regards everything—land, water, plants, animals—as a commodity to be exploited for profit has been devastating. The modern, industrial food system is embedded in economic logic based on short-term gains without regard for long-term consequences or relationships. This has led to the mistreatment of our ancestral seeds, which corporations feel they can genetically alter and control, at the expense of nutritional value, seed sovereignty and resilience.

We believe that Indigenous cultural restoration is inextricably linked to the revitalisation of our traditional seeds and food systems. Cultivating ancestral foods helps Indigenous peoples heal from historical trauma, remember who we are, and to honor our reciprocal agreements to care for our Mother Earth. At NAFSA, through our Indigenous Seedkeepers Network we organise seed exchanges, workshops and matriation of indigenous heirloom seeds from institutions back to their home communities. NAFSA's Culinary Program pairs Native chefs-in-training with more experienced Native chefs.

Reclaiming traditional foodways reinforces community initiatives such as language immersion, revitalisation of cultural rites of passage, and other deeply spiritual, culture-based initiatives. By growing, cooking and sharing our ancestral foods, we are literally re-indigenising our bodies from the inside out.

*The Native American Food Sovereignty Alliance (NAFSA) in the US is a national network of indigenous leaders dedicated to restoring food systems that support tribal self-determination, community wellness, and rebuilding relationships with the land, water, plants and animals.*

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# Reclaiming our Indigenous food economies

# Growing equity through agroecology in Uganda

A novel approach to addressing inequality in Uganda through agroecology is generating exciting outcomes. By using culturally appropriate reflection tools, rural women and men are strengthening their agroecological practices while challenging socio-cultural norms. In the context of climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic, they are collectively taking major steps towards ensuring equitable and resilient food systems.

By Joshua Aijuka, Robert Guloba, Denis Okello and Mary Baganizi

Abuko Harriet and her husband Edielu Daniel from Otuboi sub-county, Uganda display their family Vision Road Journey for three years. Photo: PELUM Uganda





**S**ince 2018, the Acholi and Teso communities in Northern and Eastern Uganda have been strengthening their agroecological practices to restore and rejuvenate their cultivation and use of traditional and wild foods. Using relatively simple tools from the Gender Action Learning Systems (GALS) approach, they analysed underlying challenges. Together they generated practical actions for addressing these, such as value addition, resource mapping, on-farm domestication of wild foods, establishment of community seed banks and organizing indigenous seed and food fairs. These actions were laid down in community action plans; and a key part of this process was addressing the inequality that existed within households.

### Women in agriculture in Uganda

Traditionally, women in Northern Uganda are engaged in various agricultural activities, from production to processing, transportation and selling. Male migration to cities has further increased the agricultural workload on women and girls, who are also responsible for feeding the household and providing other unpaid care work.

Compared to men, the majority of women farmers lack access to knowledge and appropriate tools. In the past five years, the government has undertaken some efforts to promote animal traction and farm mechanisation, but has done little to address cultural barriers that impede women's ownership of such productive resources. Women's decision-making power on agricultural management is limited; About 65 percent of female farmers lack control over proceeds from their farming activities, often leading to domestic violence.

The COVID-19 crisis has further increased the burden on rural women to produce food, with family members returning to rural areas to seek refuge during the pandemic. Access to vital agricultural resources such as seeds, knowledge and markets has been severely hampered during the lockdown.. Traditional seed saving practices are also affected, as many families are resorting to eating their seed stocks. Increasing financial stress and the fact that men are spending more time in the household than usual has also contributed to increasing levels of domestic violence.

### Championing a change of perspective

Since 2018, about 3000 households in the Teso and Acholi subregions of Northern and Eastern Uganda have been utilising GALS as part of their wider agroecological approach. This region is known for its savannah grasslands and long dry seasons, making agroecological practices and management systems particularly relevant. Farmers in these regions generally have lower levels of education, fewer assets, and more limited access to services and infrastructure

than in the Central region. In times of shock, such as prolonged drought, heavy rainfall, pest outbreaks (such as the recent locust invasion in the region) or the current COVID 19 pandemic, many families resort to negative coping strategies: selling productive assets such as land and livestock.

Through use of GALS, farmers started to reflect on roles and responsibilities within their household related to access and ownership of resources, while simultaneously building technical skills on agroecological practices. This process was initiated by Trócaire and PELUM Uganda, in collaboration with local partners: SOCA-DIDO in Katakwi district, TEDDO in Kalaki district, ARLPI in Omoro district and SARDNET in Lamwo district. A small number of participating villages were already experimenting with agroecological practices at a small scale, but all were new to the GALS methodology.

A peer-to-peer learning structure is at the core of the approach. So-called 'champions' learned how to use the GALS tools and then trained others in their community. Male champions were explicitly selected to be change agents for their fellow male counterparts. This part of the process required quite some patience. Only a few men could be identified that relate to their wives in ways that support equal decision making and that were willing to gradually reach out to and transform the perspective of their peers.

While community members deepened their knowledge and practices of agroecology (notably on composting, farm planning and design, diversification, agroforestry, water harvesting, soil fertility, livestock integration, community seed banking and integrated pest management), they started to integrate GALS tools in the process. This enabled them to strengthen agroecology without creating an additional labour burden for the women, and ensuring that men, women and children enjoy the returns from farming.

For example, through the Vision Road Journey, various families presented a vision of producing and selling more vegetables during the dry season. They identified irrigation, compost making and solar drying as the appropriate agroecological practices required to help move towards this vision. Other families used the Challenge Action Tree to identify deforestation as the root cause of problematic drought in their context, and to pinpoint agroforestry as an appropriate solution.

Most families identified climate change, most tangible in the form of prolonged droughts and heavy rainfalls, as their biggest obstacle. Seeking solutions, communities developed hazard maps, desired (vision) maps of their communities and action plans consisting of appropriate agroecological solutions. In Kalaki district for example, they started to plant trees, restore wetlands and open cattle walkways. GALS tools helped these families to develop a new balance in sharing the responsibility for this work between men and women.

### Transforming roles within the family

This experience has motivated men and women farmers to embrace agroecology in pursuit of the realisation of their respective visions. The strengthening of agroecological practices has led to higher yields and diversity, which has improved household nutrition. There are also indications of increased resilience, for example the fact that fewer families are selling productive assets in times of shock or stress.

We are now witnessing more equitable relations within families. In many families, both farming and household activities are carried out by all members of the family. Defying pre-existing cultural norms, women now also own livestock, such as goats and sheep. This has led to more equitable family economics: men are taking part in household chores and farm work, and decision making is shared, which was not the case before. Various men have started to take up domestic tasks such as cooking, fetching water and bathing children, among others. They have generally become more responsive to and supportive of their

wives' needs. All this has helped to reduce the workload for women.

There is more recognition of the way women select seeds: not just for yield and marketing potential, but also for qualities of taste and household food security. In addition, the GALS methodology has helped women select seeds that are tolerant to climate change. Both men and women are now seeking a diversity of quality seeds to meet their needs.

That is not to say that this was easy to achieve. A major difficulty with GALS is the slow process of changing people's attitudes and behaviours. Furthermore, we discovered that it is generally easier for women to embrace the methodology than it is for men.

**Factors of success** Reflecting on our experience, we can identify various factors of success. First of all, we have found that the GALS methodology helps families to participate in agroecology with an end goal in mind: their vision.

Another reason for the effectiveness of the GALS tools is that it is people-led. The methodology empowers people to analyse their situation and generate their own solutions from their own perspective. This makes it fundamentally different from more top-down approaches. Similarly, the spread of these tools by existing community peer learning structures and resource persons (for example the GALS 'champions') enhances ownership and continuity.

Another crucial factor in the success of this experience is that GALS is culturally appropriate. It is not confrontational, nor does it make external judgements about cultural practices. Moreover, it is based on relatively simple drawings that do not require any level of literacy. This has helped people to build confidence to express themselves. While many initially didn't believe that 'a few simple diagrams and pictures' could possibly bring about transformation, trust in the methodology grew and more people have taken up leadership roles.

One key lesson that is emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic is the vulnerability of the current food system and the need for a socially just, localised and more resilient one. Integration of GALS and agroecology provides a ray of hope for a bottom up, inclusive and people-led transformation to holistically and systematically address the deeply rooted challenges that reinforce poverty, vulnerability and inequality in many communities around the world, especially sub-Saharan Africa. Scaling agroecology with the integration of GALS will strengthen our recovery from COVID-19 as well as our resilience in the times of uncertainty that may lie ahead.

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## Tools for reflection

Gender Action Learning systems (GALS) consist of simple tools and diagrams through which communities can analyse the gender and broader socio-economic issues affecting their livelihoods, and then generate their own solutions.

Within the various GALS tools, we found that the **Vision Road Journey (VRJ)** has been the most successful. With the help of this tool, men and women can envision a better future and discover ways of achieving this. The tool appeals to illiterate and semi-literate people because it uses diagrams and pictures. Men and women are guided to think about their past lives, their current situation and where they want to be after a defined period of time. They then design a pathway to change and identify possible risks and opportunities.

Another popular tool was the **Gender Balance Tree (GBT)**, used to clarify roles of men, women and children within a household: who does what, who decides what, who spends most and on what, and who benefits most from the household income. The tool also brings out the inequalities in ownership of resources and decision making. It has helped men and women to identify existing inequalities and take deliberate actions to address them, take joint decisions and to stop spending on things that do not benefit the household.

Other GALS tools include the multi-lane highway, the challenge action tree, the empowerment map and the gender justice diamond.



The COVID-19 virus has jarred many people out of the illusion that globalised, corporate food is safe and secure. Yet, many people don't know what to do about it. Some have taken up backyard gardening and 'buying local', practices that are important for local food sovereignty. However, across Europe and North America, many of these responses remain couched within a market-based neoliberal paradigm. We desperately need to focus our action on breaking up corporate power in food systems and supporting long-term systemic changes.

Local food initiatives are crucial for building more just and sustainable food systems. They support locally-based economies and governance, they bring consumers in contact with producers and with their natural environment, build community, teach people about where their food comes from, circumvent agroindustrial food production and avoid supermarket monopolies. Home gardening can also provide healthy affordable food, opportunities to learn and to connect people with nature and food. However, local food initiatives and gardening would go much further in driving social change if they also confront structural inequalities and social exclusion.

First, individual gardening initiatives would have more impact if they were coupled with collective efforts to secure access to land, organise workshops or construct novel systems of local exchange, for example for those who don't have time to garden or money to purchase healthy local produce.

Second, while strong local communities are important for developing territorial food systems, this turn inwards to one's own community risks fostering exclusion and division. There is a need for intentional work in network building, solidarity and allyship with people from other communities or with different backgrounds.

Third, local food initiatives can often be depoliticised, focusing exclusively on the technical aspects of local food systems. Yet, citizens can simultaneously mobilise to influence the governance of food systems by working with (local) governments, confronting structural inequity in food initiatives (e.g. anti-racism), or engaging in contentious politics to confront policies and practices that lock in corporate food systems.

Fourth, these localised initiatives in the global north often fail to confront the ongoing colonial relationship between corporations, 'eaters', elite groups and governments in the global north with food producers and communities in the global south. The only way to topple this model is through broad-based collective learning and transnational action that reveals and deconstructs the ongoing colonial relationships at play in food systems.

Working against the grain, social movements are amplifying the political dimensions of local food initiatives. They are advancing economic models based on feminist and degrowth economics that move far beyond the profit-motive of capitalist economic logic. We need to continue to shift our efforts from individual to collective, exclusive to inclusive, and technical to political to break up corporate power and other intersecting oppressions.

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# Pivoting from local food to just food systems

# Harvesting the liberation of peasant women in Brazil

In Brazil, society is governed by patriarchal, racist and capitalist social relations that subordinate women, especially rural women, and deem them inferior. The situation is more pronounced for Black women, who must also struggle against the enduring legacy of slavery and the racial inequalities that are still embedded in society today. By coming together to reflect on their realities and engage in collective action, Black women in Brazil are challenging the systems that exploit them while actively constructing agroecological alternatives. The struggle for economic autonomy and supportive public policies is an example of what peasant women from the Movimento de Mulheres Camponesas (MMC - Movement of Peasant Women) in the state of Bahia, Brazil have coined *Popular Peasant Feminism*.

**Fighting for women's rights** Bahia is the largest state in the north-eastern part of Brazil. It is predominantly Black and home to diverse cultures. It also has a long history of struggle against racism and for liberation and the peasantry, as it hosts the largest number of smallholdings in Brazil.

However, until 1988, peasant women were discriminated against and excluded, both socially and politically. The state did not recognise them as rural workers, meaning they possessed no formal labour rights. As a consequence, women were not allowed to join rural workers unions, denying them a platform through which to articulate their demands.

To change these conditions, peasant women have engaged in a long struggle in pursuit of their rights. In 1982, women from across the state started to come

By organising in a movement for 'popular peasant feminism', women in Bahia, Brazil, have strengthened farming practices that enhance their economic autonomy and successfully pushed for policies that recognise and support their work. This experience demonstrates how women can shape organisational and political processes and be the protagonists of solutions to their common challenges.

By Cleidineide Pereira de Jesus,  
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Seibert and Michela Calaça



together to reflect on their conditions and their daily reality. They also began to formulate proposals to improve their situation, and strengthened their agroecological farming practices as a pathway to greater autonomy and independence. Little by little they aligned in a national level movement. In 2004, together with movements from 16 other Brazilian states, they founded the national Movement of Peasant Women (MMC), which is currently present in 30 municipalities in Bahia.

To this day, the MMC has fought for the recognition of peasant women as rural workers, as well as their right to social security services. This led to changes in the federal constitution in 1988 where these rights were granted (although various rights are at risk of being dismantled again today). While this was a major win, the battle was not over. For example, the Programa Nacional de Fortalecimento da Agricultura Familiar (PRONAF - National Policy to Strengthen Family Farming) adopted in 1995, which amongst other things provides credit to family farmers, did not have a section focused on women.

Since 2007, the MMC has been running a national campaign on healthy food production that is part of their project to promote agroecological and feminist peasant farming. The experiences of peasant women,

and the challenges they present to agribusiness and to patriarchy, formed the starting point. The initiative denounces the negative effects of agribusiness on the environment and proposes the construction of food sovereignty as an alternative means to nourish the country. A cornerstone of the campaign is that women's work in producing food must be valorised and that women should be recognised as citizens with rights and as protagonists in the construction of agroecology.

**The re-discovery of the home garden** As part of this national campaign, in Bahia women engage in various exchanges and training/formation programmes on agroecology, feminism and public policies centred around peasant agriculture. This process of knowledge exchange enables women to adopt and adapt appropriate agroecological practices. At the same time, by reflecting on and analysing their day-to-day realities, the injustices caused by patriarchy, capitalism and racism come to the fore.

For example, from their reflections and actions, peasant women realised that a significant part of their production came from the home garden. While home gardens have a historical significance in securing food

Harvesting beetroot at Fazenda Cigano, Riacho de Santana - Bahia, Brazil. Photo: Henrique Sousa Silva



## AGROECOLOGY AND FEMINISM > PEASANT FEMINISM

for peasant families, society did not value them because they fall under the domain of women. But through their conversations and their collective work, women realised that their gardens are not only places where they can produce healthy foods, but also where they can maintain and spread cultural and ancestral knowledge and practices.

Besides hosting a large diversity of vegetables, an orchard, medicinal plants, small animals and flowers, the home garden is a place where people engage in conversation and where children play. As such, the home gardens formed the starting point for women to organise themselves politically (understanding how to change their reality), productively (agroecology) and economically (by creating markets), to enhance their position, income and autonomy.

### Strengthening peasant women's systems of production

This built on work that had been ongoing since 1982. While peasant women in Bahia were well organised politically, they also needed to generate their own income and enhance their economic autonomy. In response 25 groups that together encompass over 800 peasant women joined forces to strengthen their production systems and markets. Together women began to improve their agroecological practices and commercialise their own produce.

An important agroecological practice was the use of water cisterns. North Eastern Brazil is very dry and the cisterns, distributed from 2003 onwards through the One Million Rural Cisterns Program (PIMC), allow peasants to harvest rainwater during the rainy season. The availability of water turned out to be a key turning point for agroecology, facilitating peasant livelihoods and allowing them to increase the agroecological pro-

**Making raw sugar from cane juice in Comunidade Santaninha, Riacho de Santana - Bahia, Brazil.**

Photo: Déborah Murielle S. Santos



duction of healthy foods. The introduction of the cisterns had a particularly profound impact for women, given that they are typically the ones responsible for fetching water for their homes and gardens.

This brought diverse benefits, women saw their economic position improve and their families and communities gained access to healthy foods. Prior to selling the food they produce, the women evaluate whether it is better used to nourish their own families. At the home garden they produce a diversity of products, including pumpkin, sugarcane, various bean types, tomatoes, lettuce, cumin, carrots, sweet potatoes, okra, onions, water melon, mango, guava, banana and beetroot. The

**Strong peasant organisations are needed that can fight against set-backs and re-conquer public policies.**

women also cultivate an immense variety of medicinal plants and animal feed, including sorghum, grass and forage palm. Prioritising food to feed the family has helped bring healthier diets to the communities.

With the 2007 campaign, the women groups started to professionalise. In some municipalities, processing was moved from home kitchens to professional structures and equipment was bought that enabled them to produce at larger scales. As a result the groups increasingly sold not just fresh crops but also sweets, cakes, cookies, flowers and dishes that are typical of the Brazilian semi-arid region.

Importantly, by organising production and distribution in a more solidary manner, the women were able to access the new institutional markets that were created by the government's National School Feeding Programme (PNAE) and the Food Acquisition Programme (PAA). They started to sell to schools, hospitals and other public institutions in the region. This supported peasant women in making their own decisions and in becoming aware of what they produce and who they produce for. It was a pleasure for them to know their food was nourishing children in the city.

The process of training/formation and organisation in the movement and the development of skills in production and commercialisation increased women's confidence in generating income from their own gardens. In this way, the peasant women have constructed a feminist



agroecological praxis that seeks dialogue between different forms of knowledge and transforms reality, starting from a reflection on concrete experiences.

### **Impact: diversity, autonomy and freedom from violence**

The experiences generated by the organisational processes of peasant women and the appreciation of women's work, were key in enhancing the autonomy of peasant women. This is demonstrated by an increase in crop diversity in the gardens. It is through the amplification of women groups that women were able to produce more in terms of quantity and diversity. Building on the productive capacity of the home garden also contributed to enhancing food sovereignty, starting within their own homes and expanding to popular restaurants, schools and other public places.

These developments have also served to reformulate household relationships: women have come to be more valued and respected by their own partners, children and by themselves. For many women it was the first time that they were making their own money and felt able to decide how to spend it. With greater incomes, women were able to improve their conditions as domestic workers at home. For example, purchasing appliances such as a washing machine afforded them more free time. Many also returned to school to finish their studies, with some acquiring positions and status at universities. These shifts have allowed peasant women to confront or distance themselves from instances of domestic violence, and work towards bringing an end to violence within the family.

By politically organising themselves in the Movement of Peasant Women, the women groups shifted from being isolated experiences to being connected at community, municipal, state and national levels. As such, women became agents of change that motivate (and are motivated by) other women in different parts of the country.

To peasant women the home gardens are "small" experiences that become large and exemplary when united with others for the construction of food sovereignty and the transformation of entire production systems.

**Lessons learnt** This experience shows that public policies, such as those that support the establishment of institutional markets, are important for peasant women to construct food sovereignty, reverse hunger and enhance their financial autonomy. By engaging in organisational and political processes, women became the protagonists of solutions to their common problems, and helped to develop policies that recognise the work of women and enhance their autonomy.

However, the experience also shows that public policies and programmes are vulnerable to political

change. Since 2016, public policies in Brazil, particularly those that support the poorest, are being dismantled. This reflects the conjunction of crises (economic, environmental, political and social) that led to Jair Bolsonaro's election. An administration led by neo-fascists and extreme neo-liberals.

## **By reflecting on day-to-day realities, the injustices caused by patriarchy, capitalism and racism come to the fore.**

This year, starting with the COVID-19 pandemic, various peoples' organisations from the countryside, forest, and waters drafted a Law designed to strengthen the production and distribution of healthy food to fight against the return of hunger aggravated by the pandemic. The Assis de Carvalho Law (Law No14.048) was approved by the Chamber of Deputies and the Federal Senate with a large majority. But president Bolsonaro rejected this law, vetoing practically any proposal that fights hunger.

This points at the importance of having strong peasant organisations with a political agenda, that can fight against set-backs and re-conquer public policies that serve to improve life in the countryside and in the city when they are under threat.

In summary, this experience highlights agroecology not only as a technique or way of producing food, but also as a form of political engagement. An agroecology without feminism, anti-racism and an organised peasantry risks co-optation and being undermined by the very powers that agroecology seeks to challenge. The greatest lesson we learn from the women of the MMC is that without the political organisation of peasant women, agroecology is not possible.

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# Women organising agroecology for resilience in the Sahel

The COVID-19 situation has exacerbated the existing crises in the Sahel. Just before the pandemic broke out, an innovative approach to strengthen people's resilience through agroecology was starting to bear fruit in Burkina Faso, Ghana, Mali and Senegal. At the centre of this are women, who have pioneered agroecological farming practices with a strong focus on better nutrition and decision making. New economic relations and power balances are emerging between men and women, providing a basis for long-lasting resilience.

By Tsuamba Bourgou and Peter Gubbels





Photo: ANSD

**B**urkina Faso and other countries in the Sahel are currently facing a multitude of crises. Over 12 million small scale farmers and their families in the dryland areas of the region are *chronically* vulnerable to food and nutrition insecurity. This is the result of the degradation of fragile ecosystems, population growth, and a low capacity to adapt to climate shocks, such as major droughts. To survive, an ever-increasing percentage of families are taking desperate measures. They sell their harvest to pay back loans, eat their seed stocks, borrow money from loan sharks, cut down on the number of daily meals or sell their physical assets. This makes them even more vulnerable.

On top of that, millions of people have had to flee their homes on the run from extreme violence from jihadists and other armed groups. They are living in terrible circumstances, often without a roof over their heads, and facing a shortage of water, food and medical care. The COVID-19 pandemic is making this crisis worse, particularly for women. After terrorist attacks, many rural services such as schools, hospitals and police stations were shut down, services sorely needed during the pandemic. Forced market closures and restrictions on gatherings have also hit rural communities hard.

In the regions where we work, these restrictions hampered income-generation activities for women, such as selling garden produce and artisanal products, or undertaking petty commerce. It also affected the ability of women's groups to carry out collective activi-

ties such as market gardening in the dry season (February to May), conduct their groups' savings and credit sessions, and participate in trainings and knowledge building activities.

**Agroecology as a response** Before COVID-19, an increasing number of women in the Sahel had already started to experiment with agroecological practices, including soil and water conservation, agroforestry, intercropping with legumes, use of short cycle local seeds, and dry season vegetable production. They were attracted by these practices because they recognised their potential to increase soil fertility, productivity, sustainability of the natural resource base, nutrition, resilience, income and autonomy.

In Burkina Faso, women in over 80 communities in Eastern Region, near Fada N'Gourma, started to use these practices with the support of a local NGO called 'Association Nourrir sans Détruire' (ANSD) and Groundswell West Africa. They bolstered their knowledge on agroecological practices that served their needs, such as protecting tree shrubs and dry season gardening, as this gave them healthy food all year round.

As explained by Mrs Bilana OUOBA, Kokouogou village, between 60 and 70 years old, this implied overcoming some cultural obstacles:

*"There has always been the attitude in our traditional way of farming, that you have to be crazy to let the trees smother the crops in the field. So I used to cut down all the trees and shrubs and even sweep away every twig and set fire to all this in my field. When we heard about a farming strategy to let the trees grow [Farmer Managed Natural Regeneration], this caused a lot of controversy in our community. But I started to do some tests and protected small trees that were growing in my field. I also improved the soil. I now harvest pods from the *philiostigma* trees from my field. It has become a major source of income and healthy food for me. Today, this is a common practice for women in the village."*

The women also engaged in credit and savings groups. This not only allowed them to gain access to vitally needed credit, but also bolstered their leadership, solidarity, and self-confidence. Moreover, the women negotiated with village leaders and the rural municipality to secure access to land and water for dry season gardening. Village leaders also agreed to support women in the poorest households in accessing seeds, through a popular system of credit based on cooperative grain storage (locally referred to as *warrantage*) and revolving loans to obtain poultry, goats or sheep. One of the many things we can learn from these women is that improving livelihoods requires not just technical knowledge and access to productive resources, but

## AGROECOLOGY AND FEMINISM > RESILIENCE

also strengthened organisational and leadership capacities.

This became very clear from the case of the Lanpugini Women's Group from the village of Bassieri, Burkina Faso, which consists of 44 members of whom only two are literate. The group's main activity is market gardening, but since 2011 they have also been running their own savings and credit scheme, with a special solidarity facility for women in emergency situations. The Lanpugini's Women's Group meets once a week. During these meetings, the women have an opportunity to hear news from each other, discuss their concerns (including on farming) and share other ideas about how to improve their living conditions.

It has now become common for women in this area to come together in a group and to obtain and control funds for farming and animal-raising. After some time, these women started to discuss gender relations with men. Building their own collective group has strengthened the women's leadership and organisational capacities. It has also enabled them to have a stronger voice in decision making - both within their family and in the village and to improve their livelihoods.

### New roles and responsibilities

These experiences are significant, because in the Sahel, men and women have increasingly come to realise that women's participation in the transition to agroecology is essential for a resilient, sustainable and productive solution for improved livelihoods. However, measures to foster women's engagement in agroecology can easily lead to further increasing their already heavy workloads. The domestic work, agricultural work *and* childcare that they have to take on are

It has become common for men to help their wives in the watering of crops. Photo: ANSD



often referred to as women's triple work burden. Even within initiatives to promote agroecology in the Sahel, rural women often remain economically marginalised and vulnerable – sometimes with an increased workload. Agroecology is often celebrated for its strong emphasis on human and social values, such as dignity, equity, inclusion and justice. Yet there is still much for practitioners of agroecology to learn about how to foster more equitable (economic) relations within families and within communities. This experience provides useful insight on how to do this.

**Changing governance** For several years now, we have accompanied communities in Burkina Faso, Ghana, Mali and Senegal in their efforts to combine agroecology with equity. While teaching each other the most relevant agroecological practices,

## The pathway to equity

In our experience, the pathway towards building more equitable (economic) relations between men and women through agroecology is based on the following set of main principles:

- **Engagement of women farmers as trainers of other farmers.** This fosters the development of women leaders who serve as role models in their communities. Women prove that they are as capable as, and sometimes better than, men in ensuring the transmission of knowledge to others. These women leaders gain respect, develop a stronger voice in decisions, and are listened to and consulted with more both within their households and their wider communities.
- **A combination of strategies can strengthen women's ability to make an income with agroecology.** Women's struggles for land, market gardening and their credit & savings activities enable them to make a substantial financial and material contribution to household expenses, as well as improving food security and nutrition. This in turn changes (economic) relations within their households: Women report that they are consulted more often by their husbands in family decision making, including farming.
- **Women must be involved in planning and decision making on agroecology.** Women's involvement in decision making, at both family and village level, helps to improve their mobility and creates and reinforces the new norm that women can and do participate in meetings, both within and outside their villages.





Women's credit groups bolster leadership, solidarity, and self-confidence. Photo: Agrecol Afrique

communities have reformed governance at the community and municipality levels, strengthening the position of women in the process, including those from the most vulnerable families.

At the community level, representative Village Development Committees that include women leaders have been established. These committees lead the planning, implementation and oversight of the promotion of agroecology in the community. At the rural municipality level, or 'Commune', the mayor and elected Councilors, having seen the benefits of agroecology through field visits and discussions with villagers, agreed to include the promotion of agroecology in their Communal Development Plans and budgets. These plans now include specific activities to strengthen the position of women.

These developments are already bearing fruit. For example, it has become common for men to help or replace their wives in the planting of beds and the watering of crops if required, for example in instances of illness or pregnancy. Another indicator is that in many villages, men have contributed their own resources to the fencing of market gardening sites that are reserved for women. While in large compounds of many family members, grandmothers often take care of the children when women are out of the house to farm or sell, in smaller compounds it can now be seen more often that men are taking on these care duties. Finally, in some cases, male elders and traditional village authorities have agreed to provide secure land access to women groups for market gardening or collective farming. These are major socio-cultural changes for rural families in the Sahel.

**Lessons from our experience in the Sahel** We have seen that it is essential that women are able, in a culturally sensitive way, to

directly address gender relations and the division of resources and responsibilities within the family. As they gain in self-confidence, organisation, solidarity, leadership and economic means through their women's groups and agroecological activities, it is important that they do not become overburdened, or that childcare is compromised. Changes in the division of roles and tasks are necessary and possible, as we have seen.

Within the social and cultural context of the Sahel, the short term benefits of agroecology to addressing women's specific needs can eventually bring about wider change. Improvements in income, food and nutrition security, self-confidence, organisational capacities and economic wellbeing lay the foundations to instigate shifts in gender relations, women's status and decision-making roles within families and communities. It is important to recognise that this takes time. The process can be accelerated through the support of civil society organisations, for example with facilitation of dialogues and through local capacity building. We do realise that as outside agents we can play a facilitation role, but in the end the women themselves must negotiate these things within their families and communities.

It is our strong conviction that these insights illuminate the most promising pathway to a real and equitable renegotiation of roles and responsibilities between men and women in the context of agroecology in the Sahel.

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Around the world, women and men are working together to build more solidary and caring economic relations around food, based on feminist principles.

# El Salvador

## Urban agriculture for survival

**A**s people in El Salvador struggle to survive, many vulnerable people have turned to cheap, highly processed and industrially produced foods, which has in turn increased the incidence of chronic illnesses such as diabetes, allergies and hypertension. The COVID 19 pandemic is amplifying this situation, particularly for people that lack formal employment and live on a day-to-day basis. However, at the same time, women are increasingly engaging in urban agriculture as a strategy to obtain healthy and chemical-free food and to survive the pandemic. While the practice is not new, it now finds greater relevance than before, and is emerging in backyards, neighbourhoods and schools.

Many initiatives are being led by not just women but also other vulnerable groups such as youth, the elderly, and people with a disability. Equipped with a horizontal or vertical space, seeds and their own labour, they are taking charge of a creative process of learning and experimentation. They do so by creating a green environment, producing healthy foods, using water conscientiously and, most importantly, nourishing solidarity and teamwork. The Urban Agriculture movement also negotiates with authorities to free parks and rooftops for food production and to create spaces where produce can be sold.

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# Nicaragua

## 'Building agroecology networks'

**"A**ll living beings, women, men, society and nature, are interconnected. Therefore we must move away from the patriarchal culture of domination and control of women's bodies and of nature, and move towards new relations that care and protect life and that are characterised by recognition, appreciation and mutual respect." The creation of this feminist vision marked the beginning of the work done by local organisations, communities and farmers in the municipalities of Belen, Mateare and Villa El Carmen in Nicaragua. From 2014 onwards they embarked on a process to identify problems in the community and realise their dreams. They established a network of agroecological promoters, in which men and women work together to develop agroecological practices. Community ecological brigades carry out reforestation, community clean ups and awareness raising activities on the importance of environmental care. They have also established seed banks to preserve

native seeds and guarantee their availability to local producers, as well as setting up platforms to discuss the various roles of men and women. These activities, along with other initiatives, have helped to facilitate the establishment of agricultural practices that contribute to the improvement of soils and the wider environment, the recognition of women's experiences and knowledge in relation to land and nature, and the restoration of natural forests. It also led to the more active participation of men in household work and of women in community and productive activities.

**For more info and videos visit [canteranicaragua.org](http://canteranicaragua.org) or contact Anabel Torres ([anabeltorres27@gmail.com](mailto:anabeltorres27@gmail.com)).**



Photo from Pantera repository



# Zimbabwe

## Indigenous seeds fa(i)ring well

In the south of Zimbabwe women have become leaders in organising seed and food fairs and spreading knowledge related to indigenous, climate-resilient seeds. Mid-season dry spells and prolonged droughts make food insecurity an ever-growing challenge in Zimbabwe. To address this, since 2017 women farmers have begun to manage indigenous and traditional seed varieties that have the capacity to withstand and recover from extreme weather events such as droughts. These include small grain varieties such as rapoko, sorghum, and millet, as well as legumes and tubers. The women have also started to organise seed fairs: a collective system of conservation, sharing and renewal of traditional seed varieties which constitutes the cultural identity of communities. Traditional seed varieties are brought by women farmers to a seed fair. Farmers who have lost the associated knowledge or do not know the variety can then learn from them about the processes of production, selection, storage and cooking of the crop. Through the sharing and exchange of seeds, different households end up obtaining a diverse range of varieties by the end of the fair. These varieties and



Photo by Phumla Maduma

their diversity, in combination with agroecological water and soil management practices, have proven their worth having withstood Cyclone Idai-induced floods and El Niño induced drought in 2019. These successes also contribute to the recognition of the role of women, who now occupy positions of influence in various farmers' committees.

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# Eastern Europe and Central Asia

## Building agroecology networks with peasant women

In Eastern European and Central Asia, peasant organisations are strengthening agroecology and peasant seed systems through cross-regional exchanges, with an emphasis on supporting the leadership of peasant women. Eco Ruralis (Romania), Elkana (Georgia), ADI (Kyrgyzstan), Zher Ana Astana (Kazakhstan), Zan va Zamin (Tajikistan) and Grandina Moldovei (Republic of Moldova) have come together to share their diverse experiences and expertise in agroecological trainings, movement building and advocacy. In collaboration with the European Coordination of La Via Campesina (ECVC), FAO REU and Cultivate!, these organisations are brought together to learn from and inspire one another. They thereby strengthen peasant agroecology and seed diversity networks in the Eastern European and Central Asia region by linking organisations working on those issues to existing networks, encouraging networking between initiatives and facilitating horizontal peasant-to-peasant learning processes with a special focus on the inclusion of

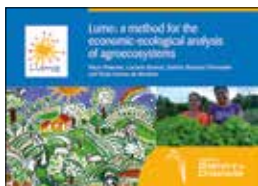
women. From this collaboration a strong, resilient and structured network is emerging in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, which is capable of advocating in national, regional and international policy making arenas for food systems based on agroecology and local seeds.

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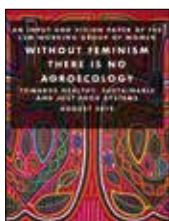
## RESOURCES



### **Lume: Tools for the economic-ecological analysis of agroecosystems**

**Paulo Petersen, L. Silveira, G.B. Fernandes and S.G. Almeida, 2020. Coventry University**

Only a few tools are available to study the economic basis of agroecosystems. This publication introduces the Lume method developed by AS-PTA in Brazil, which gives visibility to the economic, ecological and political relations that lie at the heart of agroecological farming. The participatory method particularly emphasises the work done by women, which is often hidden or disfigured by conventional economic theory. It has proven to be an invaluable resource to formulate technical advice to local farmers' organisations and academic research projects. The method has also been applied to the design, monitoring and evaluation of public policies for rural and agricultural development.



### **Without feminism there is no agroecology: Towards healthy sustainable and just food systems**

**Teresa Maisano (ed.), 2019. Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples' Mechanism for relations with the UN Committee on World Food Security (CSM)**

"From a feminist perspective, agroecology is and must be a political proposal that recognizes and promotes the historical and social practices of women, from the domestication of agriculture and the production of healthy food to the eradication of hunger, food insecurity and malnutrition." This is one of the starting points of this 2019 statement from the CSM Women Working Group. The group counts 190 participating organisations, bringing together fisher folks, peasants, pastoralists, indigenous peoples, consumers, agricultural workers, activists and landless women from all across the world. The publication highlights the importance of taking a feminist approach to the promotion of agroecology and the realisation of the human right to adequate food and nutrition. It argues that patriarchal, feudal and capitalist relations of power, along with the current sexual division of labour and 'gender blind' agricultural policies, are among the root causes of gender inequalities, discrimination and marginalisation of women, especially in the rural areas. It emphasises the potential of agroecology to challenge these power dynamics and realise women's rights in the agricultural sector, to enrich feminist perspectives, and further strengthen political will to reframe gender roles and responsibilities.



### **Film: Gather**

**Sanjay Rawal (director), 2020. First Nations Development Institute, 74 minutes.**

In traditional times forests, plains, deserts, the sea or village gardens were important places for Indigenous North American communities to source their food. Modern developments have taken these food sources away or barred Indigenous peoples from them. However, Indigenous peoples continue to return to their places of origin, including their food. Gather is an intimate portrait of the growing movement amongst Native Americans to reclaim their spiritual, political and cultural identities through food sovereignty, while battling the trauma of centuries of genocide. The film follows Nephi Craig, a chef from the White Mountain Apache Nation (Arizona), opening an indigenous café as a nutritional recovery clinic; Elsie Dubray, a young scientist from the Cheyenne River Sioux Nation (South Dakota), conducting landmark studies on bison; and the Ancestral Guard, a group of environmental activists from the Yurok Nation (Northern California), trying to save the Klamath river. Gather aims to further build international awareness, understanding, and appreciation of women in the Native American food movement, which will ultimately bolster support for an improved policy environment for long-term sustainability.





## Right to food and nutrition watch: Women's Power in Food Struggles

Alejandra Morena (ed.), 2019. Brot fur die Welt & FIAN International

In today's context of rising hunger and ecological collapse, women and all those who seek to reimagine food, environment and economies, face ever-increasing attacks. This edition of the Right to Food and Nutrition Watch addresses key issues of power, and exposes the structural violence that degrades both women and the environment. This edition is the result of a collective reflection process driven by women around the world. It highlights the power of individual and collective women's resistance to lead the way towards better social and ecological relations. The five articles reflect an array of women's struggles, activism and analysis with regard to the right to food and nutrition. Together they delve into the right-wing political climate in which activism takes place, how patriarchy and the neo-liberal food system negatively impacts both women's autonomy and nature, and the growth of the struggles being waged for a just food system. These insights show how both women and nature are exploited, 'othered', and made invisible, while also demonstrating new ways of being with each other and nature.



## Nourishing Life: Territories of life & food sovereignty

Michel Pimbert and Grazia Borrini-Feyerabend, 2019. Coventry University and CENESTA.

This Policy Brief focuses on the contributions that the territories governed, managed and conserved by custodian indigenous peoples and local communities make to the food sovereignty of the peoples and communities themselves. Drawing from eight inspiring cases, it shows how community custodians are well organised, knowledgeable, self-aware, and possess a strong sense of identity and pride. They hold the capacity to develop 'localised' and culture-rich food systems that sustain the health of both their custodian communities and territories. To add visibility, strength and recognition to these "territories of life" the document argues for more participatory knowledge sharing processes and discusses specific options to advance cooperation. It offers recommendations for civil society organisations and networks, and for legislators, policymakers and government officials willing to halt the drivers of planetary disaster and enhance the positive forces that foster more just and sustainable food systems, better conserved biological and cultural diversity, and more empowered and healthier communities.

## COLOPHON

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**WE MUST VALUE  
AGROECOLOGY AS  
FOOD PRODUCTION,  
CO-EXISTENCE,  
RECREATION, ART,  
SOLIDARITY AND  
COMMUNITY.**

Diana Lilia Trevilla Espinal and Ivett Peña Azcona, page 24

**African women  
have challenged  
slavery, colonialism,  
apartheid and fought  
for liberation - these  
are unexplored areas  
of African women's  
leadership.**

Mercia Andrews, page 21

**WE CANNOT ASSUME THAT FOOD  
SOVEREIGNTY AND AGROECOLOGY ARE  
ALREADY FEMINIST IN AND OF THEMSELVES.**

Marta Soler Montiel, Marta Rivera-Ferre and Irene García Rocés, page 7

**Local food initiatives  
would go much further  
in driving social change  
if they also confront  
structural inequalities  
and social exclusion.**

Colin Anderson, Jessica Milgroom and Michel Pimbert, page 43

**IT IS BECOMING  
CLEAR THAT  
THE FUTURE IS  
AGROECOLOGICAL.**

Leonida Odongo, page 32



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