

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

The 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

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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 cosmologies. 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?

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