

How to amplify agroecology

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

Janneke Bruil and Jessica Milgroom

From 10-13 May 2016, the AgroEcology Fund (AEF) and the Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa (AFSA) brought grassroots organisers, advocates and donors together in a Learning Exchange to share experiences and ideas about how to amplify agroecology. The AEF is a consortium of progressive foundations that are committed to supporting agroecological solutions across the globe. The exchange in Uganda aimed to facilitate learning among participants about amplifying agroecology through sharing ideas and experiences, and for the AEF to learn how they could better support this work. Through various dynamic sessions, a rich, collective pool of knowledge was built about strategies to amplify agroecology. As facilitators of the meeting, we share here some of the most compelling insights.

Strengthen farmers' organisations Strengthening farmers' organisations is fundamental in amplifying agroecology because, together, farmers can create a grassroots movement capable of influencing mindsets and policy. Strong and genuine farmers' federations can give networked farmers a space to express themselves and advocate for their own rights. Insights about how best to strengthen

farmers' organisations point to farmer-to-farmer learning, as that allows farmers to confidently build knowledge from experience.

Put women at the forefront

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

Every morning the meeting was opened with a *mística*, a ceremony that connected participants with each other and the deeper purpose of the work.

Photo: ILEIA





Small group sessions facilitated dynamic discussions and in depth sharing of ideas and experiences.

Photo: Scott Fitzmorris

(KWPA) built on their skills and self-confidence after an exchange visit with women farmers in Thailand that combined practical and political training.

Create direct relations with consumers Urban citizens are one of the central agents of change in the agroecological transition. Connecting farmers and consumers enables farmers to sell diverse products directly, and to receive vital feedback on their products. The Agroecological Collective of Ecuador organised a nationwide campaign to promote ‘community baskets’ that bring healthy, agroecologically produced foods to low income urban families. Such connections are particularly effective when they are embedded in local culture, organised as a joint initiative with shared values between consumers and producers, and accompanied by awareness raising efforts.

Strengthen agroecology schools Agroecology schools around the world are an effective way to engage people in agroecology. They rely on the principle of peer-to-peer learning among farmers and often also include two-way learning processes between policy makers and farmer groups. The Peasant Workers Association of Nicaragua (ATC), the Zimbabwe Smallholder Organic Farmer Forum (ZIMSOFF) and others shared lessons from their own schools. They concluded that the schools must be autonomous

from government and universities, and function best when run by a farmers’ organisation. Many successful schools started at the regional or national level, after which they were replicated at the local level by trained farmers.

Share knowledge Sharing knowledge about agroecology from farmer to farmer is an important way to spread practices. This is especially effective when knowledge sharing is based on local, ancestral wisdom, respects the values, principles and culture of the farming communities and responds to concrete needs. Many participants agreed that knowledge sharing is best done through living examples as opposed to relying on theoretical assumptions.

Support work on the ground and document it Supporting farming communities on the ground can help them to diagnose and prioritise their problems; identify and test agroecological principles and to engage in learning networks. This fosters the emergence and spread of localised examples. In order to achieve wide, systemic change, it is critical to document and disseminate successful practical experiences, learn from this work, and find ways to leverage the lessons. Documentation and dissemination provides evidence that agroecology works, generates insights for policy change and strengthens the agroecology movement.

Advocate For long-lasting change, it is necessary to insert agroecology into policy as part of a bottom-up process. Engaging in dialogue with local and national government authorities about how to support agroecology as a tool to fight hunger, poverty and environmental degradation can be very effective, as well as educating people about existing laws and ways to protect their rights. Policy advocacy for agroecology generally works well when it is embedded in broad collaborations among farmers, researchers, and civil society organisations. La Vía Campesina emphasised the need to support farmers to advocate

What is amplification of agroecology?

The notion of ‘amplification’ of agroecology was the central theme of the Learning Exchange in Uganda. This was chosen as opposed to ‘scaling up’, with its connotation of linear, pre-planned replication, which is contrary to the way agroecology best develops. For the participants it was seen as the transformation of food systems, rather than just the spreading of a set of

techniques. Importantly, it places agrobiodiversity, the struggle for land, control over seed and local knowledge at the centre of this change processes. Amplification of agroecology was seen as a long-term, ongoing transition process that is led by social movements, but encompasses all actors in the food system, including consumers.



A field trip to visit local farmers generated discussion and reflection within the group about the crucial role that knowledge plays in agroecology.

Photo: Scott Fitzmorris

for their rights, and to facilitate their active participation in policy dialogues.

Communicate and reach out

Communication and outreach is fundamental for amplifying agroecology, as it is necessary to make the case that agroecology is the food system of the future. Campaigners have found that humor and cultural references can be effective tools in communication. Solid data and research to debunk claims made by agribusiness is helpful to raise awareness about agroecology. Social media, multimedia, documentary films and curriculum development were mentioned as strong outreach tools.

Resist and transform Many campaigns are based on resisting the industrial agriculture model, corporate power over productive resources, and policies that marginalise small farmers. Agroecology offers living, inspiring *alternatives* that envision a new agricultural system through the transformation of education, science, culture and policy. As industrial agriculture undermines peasant family farming rather than supporting it, many participants agreed that industrial agriculture and agroecology cannot co-exist. It is therefore crucial to promote a transformative type of agroecology.

Create a new narrative Framing and messaging emerged as central elements in amplifying agroecology because agroecology is based on a completely different set of values about food, nature and people than the industrial system. A special session was dedicated to building a new narrative around agroecology. The conclusions were that it must be based on the notion that agroecology is a viable vocation, rather than a sign of backwardness. The narrative should make clear that agroecology can bring employment, income and well-being, approach agroecology as a knowledge system in its own right and present it as a continuous process of transition.

Develop effective ways to work together

Various participants stated that to amplify agroecology, a variety of actors have to be on board, who can bring different experiences and knowledge to the table. This can be achieved by working in inclusive coalitions. In such coalitions, it is necessary to clarify the role of each partner, to develop a set of core principles to help partners work well together, and to create tools for problem solving. These were some of the important insights for GRAIN, ETC Group and La Vía Campesina as they worked together to protect farmer seed systems. Different participants pointed at the need to avoid economic dependence between partners in a coalition.

Fund flexibly To achieve the amplification of agroecology, funding diverse organisations is essential. As agroecology is embedded in very different contexts, participants emphasised the need for flexibility of both grantees and donors to allow for adaptation of plans and strategies. Funding schemes should include long-term core funding that aims to reach the grassroots. Donors should not overly focus on quantitative outcomes, but rather on qualitative changes achieved through flexible, trust-based relationship with grantees. Ideally, funding for agroecology is based on shared values between donors and grantees, is regenerative and happens at a landscape or bioregional level.

The insights shared here are drawn from years, and sometimes even decades, of experience. Having a space to share these lessons with each other as well as with donors made this, in the words of one participant, “a landmark meeting.” More exchange and documentation is surely needed to understand better the respective contributions of practice, science and movement in amplifying agroecology. However, the collective insights and the dynamics of sharing that were forged at the Agroecology Learning Exchange will undoubtedly contribute to the agroecological transition for a long time to come.

Janneke Bruil (j.bruil@ileia.org) and Jessica Milgroom (j.milgroom@ileia.org) work with ILEIA, the Centre for Learning on Sustainable Agriculture. They designed and facilitated the Agroecology Learning Exchange in Uganda, May 2016. An extended version of this article is available at www.farmingmatters.org

The learning, connections and inspiration that transpired during the Exchange will have a long-lasting impact on the agroecological transition. Photo: ILEIA

