

FAO's regional meetings on agroecology: a reflection

In 2015, a series of unique meetings on agroecology were organised on three continents. Hundreds of civil society representatives, academics and policy makers attended. What have the meetings achieved so far and what next?

Janneke Bruil and Diana Quiroz

"Agroecology (...) is an approach that will help to address the challenge of ending hunger and malnutrition in all its forms" said José Graziano da Silva in 2014. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), which he leads, had just organised the International Symposium on Agroecology for Food Security and Nutrition. Indeed, agroecology is gaining momentum for its potential to increase food and nutrition security, address climate change, enhance biodiversity and build food sovereignty. The FAO decided to continue discussing agroecology via regional meetings in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, and Latin America and the Caribbean throughout 2015. This article reflects on the outcomes around four key themes of these discussions.

Agroecology as a path towards food and nutrition security

Agroecology can be a key strategy to improve food and nutrition security, argued Roberto Ugas (National Agrarian University La Molina, Peru) at the regional meeting for Latin America and the Caribbean: "Andean farmers who keep at least 70 % of their productive area under agroecological management have better food availability, access, use and stability." In all meetings, the need to enable biodiverse, agroecological farming was voiced. One fundamental step is securing producers' access (especially women, youth, family farmers, and indigenous peoples) to land, water, and seeds. A lack of knowledge and awareness about the contribution of agroecology to diverse diets was highlighted as a major barrier. To tackle this, participants suggested integrating agroecology into education for youth and adults, as well as

farmer field schools and other farmer-to-farmer methodologies, with special attention for traditional knowledge. It was made clear that a holistic, transdisciplinary approach based on new relationships between farmers, academia and other knowledge holders will be crucial. In all regions, producers presented agroecology as a way of life and a path towards food sovereignty for rural *and* urban citizens. In this respect, participants emphasised the importance of recognising the right of peoples, communities, and countries to define their own agricultural, labour, fishing, and food and land policies.

Agroecology and natural resources in a changing climate

Various agroecological practices promote carbon storage through increasing organic matter in the soils, and reintroducing trees to the landscape. The great climate adaptation potential of traditional management practices with local varieties of traditional food crops, and particularly drought resistant species, was also emphasised. Therefore, it was stated that more resources need to be devoted to research on the link between agroecology and climate change, an on farmers' selection of varieties and species. Massa Koné (CMAT, Malian Convergence against Land Grabbing) said: "agroecology is the only answer to climate change and farmers hold answers that must be valued." Indeed, agroecology not only helps to cool the planet and to adapt to the impact of climate change, participants emphasised, but also brings social benefits, expressed in stronger social security networks that are essential to resilience. In keeping with their Nyéléni Declaration on Agroecology (2015), civil society representatives rejected attempts to reduce the concept of agroecology to a set of technologies

designed to alleviate the harmful impacts of industrial agriculture.

Learning processes in agroecology There was general consensus that farmers and other food producers should be at the forefront of knowledge co-creation in agroecology. Farmer-led, bottom-up, local innovation systems and practices are especially important. As a result, the way knowledge is built and shared needs to be fundamentally different from conventional technology transfer. In the words of Clara Nicholls (SOCLA, Latin American Scientific Society for Agroecology): “Agroecology is not only a scientific approach, it is a way of life that values science, but is also aware that knowledge comes from the ancient traditions of people.” In all regions, participants discussed how to strengthen and increase the recognition of peasant and indigenous knowledge, farmer-led research and farmer-to-farmer learning. Participants reflected on the role of scientists in interactions with farmers, and discussed how to transform these into processes that are truly driven by farmers.

Public policies to promote agroecology Discussions in all regional meetings made it clear that fundamental change in policy is needed for agroecology to reach its full potential. The cross-sectoral nature of effective policies was highlighted, as agroecology not only touches on production and consumption, but also on issues such as health, education, and the environment. The first policy priority in agroecology would be to put control of seeds, biodiversity, land and territories, waters and knowledge in the hands of producers. Without access to these resources the

transition to agroecology is impossible. The role of new markets for agroecological products was considered a pertinent issue. Sophia Ogutu (farmer from Kenya) emphasised: “The focus of policies needs to be on crops that are consumed locally, and on giving farmers, especially women, control over their natural resources.” Experience has shown that the most effective policies have a local character and promote the further development of proven successes such as community seed banks, farmer field schools, agroecology schools, demonstration farms and farmer-to-farmer exchanges. Therefore calls were made to collect and better disseminate data from existing experiences with agroecology to enable evidence-based decision making. Throughout all seminars, civil society recommended that policies on agroecology must be developed within a food sovereignty framework. Finally, the importance of participatory policy development processes was highlighted, that respect the needs of both farmers and governments.

Reflection In many ways, the regional meetings boosted the official recognition of agroecology as a relevant and time tested approach, and strong recommendations were made in all regions (see box). While this is welcome progress, the meetings could have addressed the inherent contradictions between agroecology and the current neoliberal approach to modernising agriculture in a more systematic way. More specifically, they could have explored how to achieve a shift away from a productivist mindset, with its focus on aggregate supply and increases in yields, towards a more multi-functional agricultural model that pursues improved nutrition, resilience, food sovereignty and the sustainable use of resources.

Several important issues were not on the table during the meetings. For example, how to overcome the strong influence of agribusinesses on policy making processes. In the future, this issue should be dealt with in more detail and with more time. It is also notable that confusion exists around FAO’s support for agroecology on the one hand and their engagement with the Global Alliance for Climate Smart Agriculture on the other.

Inadequate discussions about the above issues seemed to imply that ‘business as usual’ can continue, instead of making it clear that a fundamental shift towards agroecology is needed. As social movements stated in the Nyéléni Declaration of the International Forum on Agroecology (2015), “*the real solutions to the crises of the climate, malnutrition, etc., will not come from conforming to the industrial model. We must transform it and build our own local food systems that create new rural-urban links, based on truly agroecological food production by peasants, artisanal fishers, pastoralists, indigenous peoples, urban farmers, etc.*”



Outcomes regional agroecology meetings – by theme			
	Latin America and Caribbean	Africa	Asia Pacific
Food and nutrition security	Raise awareness about the nutritional value of agroecological products and promote healthy, adequate food production.		
Natural resources in a changing climate	Ensure producers' access to natural resources, notably land, water and biodiversity. Implement the "Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests".		
	Recognize the role of communities, as guardians of biodiversity. Create a program of exchange for agroecology and seeds.	Promote the development of seeds systems that address availability, access and ownership issues.	Support and revive traditional management practices, local varieties and neglected and underutilised as well as drought-resistant crops.
	Set resources aside for the development of agroecology, as part of climate policies that guarantee food sovereignty for the people.	Identify species that are adapted to climate change; and invest more in applied agroecological research. Develop agroecology independently of Climate Smart Agriculture.	Devote more means to research on agroecology and climate change.
	Create conditions which restrict the practice of monoculture, the use of agro chemicals, and the concentration of land.	Formulate responsive national plans that will strengthen land use systems that promote and sustain agroecology.	
Learning processes	Respect and value traditional knowledge, promoting a knowledge dialogue in participatory research programs.	Strengthen existing local knowledge, farmer-led research as well as farmers research networks with a focus on the co-creation of knowledge and participative research.	Recognize, support and document producers' knowledge. Create a new research and extension paradigm.
	Foster territorial dynamics of social innovation and technology. Create a regional network in Latin America for the exchange of best practices	Launch pilot projects at territorial level such as the creation of agroecological territories. Create platforms to exchange agroecological experiences and innovations	Create platforms for the exchange of agroecological experiences and innovations. Build a regional network of agroecology researchers, CSOs and small-scale food producers.
	Integrate agroecology in the curricula of both formal and nonformal primary and higher education institutions, and in vocational training centers for producers.		
Policies and markets	Promote public policies which boost agroecology and food sovereignty; defined, implemented and monitored with active participation of social movements and civil society groups		Planning, design and formulation of policy for agroecology should be increasingly carried out inclusively in a collaboration between policy makers, scientists, educators, UN, development partners, CSOs.
		Develop and implement public procurement policies that favour agroecological and local food production.	Create dedicated certificates and degrees on Agroecology to enhance the skills of farmers to better understand and use markets.

Source: ILEIA, based on final recommendations of FAO's regional meetings on agroecology (2016)

In the 2nd half of 2016, FAO will organise two more regional meetings on agroecology, one in China and one in Hungary. FAO can potentially play an important role in connecting various actors around agroecology and in catalysing a shift towards an enabling policy environment for agroecology worldwide. While we appreciate the start of the conversation on how to strengthen agroecology in the regions, and the majority of the recommendations are worthy of implementation, bolder steps are now needed. We must emphasise the need to transform dominant approaches to food and agriculture, and put farmer-led agroecology

firmly at the centre of policy, practice and research. Then, agroecology can play a major role in creating fair and sustainable future food systems, food sovereignty and healthy societies.

Janneke Bruil (j.bruil@ileia.org) is Coordinator Learning and Advocacy at ILEIA and Diana Quiroz (d.quiroz@ileia.org) is Research, Editing and Advocacy Officer at ILEIA.

A detailed report by FAO and ILEIA that synthesises the outcomes of the regional meetings will be published in the course of 2016 and made available at www.ileia.org.