

The faces at the frontline

Working with principles of agroecology, women around the world are pioneering new practices in food and farming. *Farming Matters* proudly presents Esther, Ann, Allu, Lilian, Elizabeth, Mariama and Esther.

"Agroecology is a way to produce food that is culturally acceptable"

Esther Malya, farmer and livestock keeper in Tanzania

"I am a farmer, a leader, a trainer, and a mother. I have a piece of land of about 2,5 acres where I grow food and raise animals.

I am part of the board of MVIWATA, a national umbrella organisation that unites smallholder farmers across Tanzania. Within MVIWATA, women come together to discuss problems related to our patriarchal society, women empowerment, health, family, and farming. We also promote agroecology as a way to use available resources in our environment to produce food that is culturally acceptable. Agroecology prevents us from becoming dependent on big companies that sell poisonous

fertilizers and chemicals. We have savings and lending mechanisms that are a huge support for women farmers as this enables us to send our daughters to school.

The biggest challenge we face now is the limited awareness of ecological practices and lack of land for smallholders. We are very much against the current push for hybrids and GMOs and the dependence that comes with them. Thus we call upon our government to declare Tanzania free of such technologies and we encourage farmers to use indigenous seeds and farmers' landraces that are readily available, reliable and affordable. As we are so well organised, the government is now listening to us more than ever before."



Photo: Esther Malya

Interview: Sarah Hobson

“Many young mothers are looking for an alternative”

Ann Doherty, urban farmer in the Netherlands

“I grow vegetables, fruit, herbs and edible flowers in the city. I am also a beekeeper, a worm composter and a seed saver. I work within a collective of mostly women based in Amsterdam and Berlin. We teach a variety of different techniques promoting urban biodiversity, wild plants, and companion planting to school children and others in different city gardens. We also try to build the movement by connecting various urban food initiatives in Amsterdam, for example by offering ‘urban farming bike tours’.

Women form the majority in all of the community gardens we work in. They sustain the gardens, organise the work days, and do the fundraising and re-

porting. Young women are at the forefront of these activities. I have observed that many young mothers are looking for an alternative to the corporate-driven agriculture model that produces unhealthy food. I

myself also started getting more interested in food sovereignty when I first became pregnant.

Agroecology offers that alternative, and it is a great system for urban agriculture due to its flexibility, the focus on observation of natural cycles, the use of polyculture, and the promotion of biodiversity. What is key is that agroecology helps us women to grow healthy and delicious food to nourish ourselves and our families.”



Photo: Het Groene Leven Lab

Interview: Janneke Bruil

“Agroecology helps me realise my dream”

Allu Narayanamma, rice and vegetable producer in Andhra Pradesh, India

“My family owns 3 acres which we use for rain-fed cultivation of rice and vegetables. Half of this was formerly abandoned wasteland. I decided to develop this wasteland into cultivable land by improving the health of the soil through agroecological practices I learnt at the farmers’ association in our village, Yugandhar. This land now provides pulses and other food grains for my family, and we are also able to sell some of our harvest at the market. I also started to practice roof top gardening which provides vegetables for my family. Before we used to eat only the brinjal and beans that were available in the village, but now we consume 10 types of vegetables.

I got elected as a member of the executive committee of the farmer association in our village, and I took

up the lead role in sensitising and influencing fellow women farmers about the use of agroecological practices such as applying neem extract, pond silt and farmyard manure. These practices enhance the health of our soils and help keep diseases away. My paddy nursery now even survives dry spells.

As we use less chemical pesticides and fertilizers, we reduce the costs of all our farming activities. As a result, our income has increased twenty times in two years—from about eight hundred rupees in 2013 to about sixteen thousand rupees in 2015. My family members and I were able to leave our jobs as wage labourers and dedicate ourselves entirely to farming on our own land. Agroecology helps me realise my dream of supporting my family and my community and providing quality education to my daughters.”



Photo: Ranchitha Kumaran

Interview: Siva Krishna Babu and Ranchitha Kumaran

“Agroecological fairs make us more independent”

Lilian Rocío Quingaluisa, mountain farmer in Ecuador

“When I was 22, I formed a group of 46 women in Unalagua. We joined groups in other communities and formed the women’s organisation now called FEMICAN, which operates across the Cotopaxi province.

We struggle to have water and good seeds, and to obtain a good price for our crops. So we are working together to diversify our crops, which not only increases our income but help us to maintain the fertility of our soil. Now, we produce zucchini, lettuce, *puerro* onion, and traditional crops such as white carrots, quinoa and *chaucha* potato. We practice crop rotation, companion cropping and seed selection. Agroecology

for us is about producing with Mother Earth, with the knowledge of our ancestors, and with as few chemicals as possible.

Together with others we created agroecological fairs to promote direct encounters between producers and consumers, enhance local economies and

support the consumption of local healthy food. Engaging directly with urban citizens is great for us as women farmers. It means we have a better income, we do not have to work on other people’s land, we are more independent and we can spend more time with our families and animals. In our community 80% of the leadership positions are now occupied by women.”



Photo: EkoRural

Interview: Guadalupe Padilla and Sonia Zambrano

“With Ankole cows I can produce what is suitable for me”

Elizabeth Katushabe, cattle breeder in Uganda

“I breed traditional Ankole Longhorns, a strong cow that is adapted to my country’s harsh environment and resistant to tropical diseases without antibiotics, unlike the Holstein Frisian cows that are popular here. Traditionally Bahima women did not own cattle or land but today, some women do. Men milk the cows, graze and water them. Women collect the milk and decide how much each family member can drink. We churn the milk to make ghee. We know the names of all milking cows, we can tell an unhealthy cow apart, we take care of the calves, clean their sheds, and cut grass for the newborn.

My approach to cattle breeding with Ankole Longhorns is a form of agroecology, it allows me to rear my cattle in the savanna grasslands of Uganda with all its biodiversity. My cattle live in a herd as a family, they mate naturally, and my calves suckle their mothers.

As a woman, this is a good life. I can manage my livestock easily because of the calm temperament of Ankole. With Ankole cows I do not have to specialise in either milk or meat but I can produce what is most suitable for me and my community. And I hope others will respect my livestock keepers’ rights and appreciate my role and contribution to the economy and food security.”



Photo: PENHA

Interview: Janneke Bruil

"We are the solution"

Mariama Sonko, farmer in Senegal

"As women farmers, we reject agriculture that pollutes with chemicals, pesticides, and GMOs. This is a difficult struggle because we have few resources to fight against multinational corporations. *We Are the Solution* is a campaign led by rural women like myself from Senegal, Burkina Faso, Mali, Ghana and Guinea. Our vision is to promote ancestral knowledge and put pressure on our government to take seriously the preservation of our peasant agriculture.

Agroecology protects all living things and treats nature as sacred. Women are the ones who save the seeds – the soul of the peasant population. Our seeds are

ancient, and each is tied to a certain place. The traditional practice of seed selection preserves the environment and sustains biodiversity, while using our resources which are affordable and accessible. To achieve this we also are campaigning for women to have land ownership and we talk to men about why this is important.

In Senegal, *We Are the Solution* has established a platform of 100 grassroots associations. We now have a model farm field and a store where we sell our family farm products. The women in our movement are promoting agroecology and food sovereignty as the only viable system for healthy lives and a protected environment."



Photo: Fahamu

Interview: Simone Adler
and Beverly Bell

"Eco-friendly and grown by women"

Esther Villca, vegetable farmer in Bolivia

"I live in a rural community called Santa Rosa. I participate in the initiative ECOMUJER (Ecowoman). Established by the Women's Farmers' Organisation of Cochabamba, ECOMUJER is a label we give to our organic products to tell customers that our products are eco-friendly and grown by women.

I migrated from another part of Bolivia and I did not know how to produce. I started cultivating vegetables to feed my family and I sold the

surpluses and I learnt about vegetable production, seed management, and organic fertilizers. Currently 30% is for our family consumption, and I commercialise the remaining 70% through Ecomujer.

Besides the economic benefits, I value this type of agriculture because it is good for our health. I am persuading my neighbours to produce in the same way and I am also pressuring the authorities of our municipality so that they will provide us with support."



Photo: CIOEC-Cochabamba

Interview:
Alexandra Flores