

Building, Defending and Strengthening Agroecology A Global Struggle for Food Sovereignty

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Building, Defending and Strengthening Agroecology

A Global Struggle for Food Sovereignty

This article is based on research about the meaning and politics of agroecology from social movement perspectives.

By Colin Anderson, Michel Pimbert and Csilla Kiss

“Agroecology is the answer to how to transform and repair our material reality in a food system and rural world that has been devastated by industrial food production and its so-called Green and Blue Revolutions. We see Agroecology as a key form of resistance to an economic system that puts profit before life. [...] Our diverse forms of smallholder food production based on Agroecology generate local knowledge, promote social justice, nurture identity and culture, and strengthen the economic viability of rural areas. As smallholders, we defend our dignity when we choose to produce in an agroecological way.”

– Declaration of the International Forum for Agroecology, 2015



Watch the Video

All quotes in this article were taken from a video which explores agroecology through the perspectives of food producers involved in the food sovereignty movement. Watch it at www.agroecologynow.com/video/ag

A movement is growing. While agroecology has been practiced for millennia in diverse places around the world, today we are witnessing the mobilisation of transnational social movements to build, defend and strengthen agroecology as the pathway towards a more just, sustainable and viable food and agriculture system.

Indeed, on February 27, 2015, civil society actors from around the world gathered in the Nyéléni Centre in Mali to write the Declaration of the International Forum for Agroecology (hereafter: Nyéléni Declaration). Together, peasants, farmers, indigenous peoples, pastoralists, fisherfolk, women’s movements and urban

people penned a landmark document that articulates the common vision, principles and strategies of an agroecology that is defined and controlled by the people (box 2).

The Nyéléni Declaration claims agroecology as a bottom up movement and practice that needs to be supported, rather than led, by science and policy. From this perspective, agroecology is inseparable from food sovereignty: the right of citizens to control food policy and practice. (box 1)

“There is no food sovereignty without agroecology. And certainly, agroecology will not last without a food sovereignty policy that backs it up.”

– Ibrahima Coulibaly, CNOP (Coordination Nationale des Organisations Paysannes du Mali), from Mali

undermines food cultures, fails to alleviate hunger and malnutrition and is enabling the unprecedented consolidation of power in the hands of corporate agribusiness and transnational institutions.

Food producers, consumers and social movements around the world are not standing idle in the face of these threats. They are putting alternatives into practice, building and sharing knowledge among themselves and with others, setting up new institutional arrangements and mobilising to establish agroecology as the most important avenue for healthy and just agriculture and food systems and indeed as,

“the only way of resolving the problem of hunger in the world...”

– Jean-Baptiste Chavannes, Mouvement Paysan Papaye, from Haiti

Agroecology includes building alternative markets based on trust, fairness and solidarity.



Photo: Colin Anderson

The dominant model of agricultural development has been largely based on industrialisation, commercialisation, corporatisation and specialisation. The focus on the integration of food producers into global markets at the expense of more holistic territorial development models that support livelihoods, environment and wellbeing has led to deep crises in the food system.

Food and agriculture are now deeply implicated in the climate crisis and loss of biodiversity, the erosion of rural livelihoods, and the contamination of land and water. The dominant food system

Box 1: Food Sovereignty

During the first gathering in the Nyéléni Centre in 2007, social movements defined food sovereignty as ‘the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems’ (taken from the Declaration of the Forum for Food Sovereignty, February 2007).

"Agroecology is the political umbrella for various forms of agriculture and aquaculture".
 - Maria Noel Salgado



Photo: Debdatta Chakraborty

Box 2: The key principles and values of agroecology
 Adapted from the Declaration of the International Forum on Agroecology (2015).

- Agroecology is a way of life and the language of nature
- Agroecological production is based on ecological principles
- Territories are fundamental pillars of agroecology, as are collective rights and access to the commons
- The diverse knowledges and ways of knowing of our peoples are central
- Our Cosmovisions require equilibrium between nature, the cosmos and human beings. Without our land and our peoples we cannot defend agroecology
- Families, communities, collectives, organizations and movements are the fertile soil in which agroecology flourishes. Solidarity between peoples, between rural and urban populations, is a critical ingredient.
- The autonomy of agroecology displaces the control of global markets for self-governance by communities
- Agroecology is political; it requires us to challenge and transform structures of power in society
- Women and their knowledge, values, vision and leadership are critical
- Agroecology can provide a radical space for young people to contribute to the social and ecological transformation underway in many of our societies

The Meaning and Politics of Agroecology: Embedding Science and Practice in the Struggle for Food Sovereignty

Agroecology is a practice, a science and a social movement. Mainstream institutions, however, tend to think of agroecology only as a science that can inform agricultural development. Social movements are rejecting this emphasis on elite scientific knowledge. They demand that science be combined with the local knowledge and the experience of food producers and that the priorities of scientists be embedded in the struggles of social movements for a more just and sustainable world.



Photo: Olga Yanira Juagibioy

"Indigenous peoples have a holistic way of seeing agriculture". - Nicole Yanes

Agroecology: Beyond Production Techniques

Participants in the International Forum for Agroecology shared their perspectives on the importance of the diverse expressions of agroecology in their own territories. These voices are featured in the video associated with this document and in the excerpts below.



“Indigenous peoples have a holistic way of seeing agriculture or hunting and gathering. It includes spirituality, it includes growing food, it includes knowing the seeds. If you put agroecology in the middle, in the nucleus, then that involves all of those aspects of life, community, family, friends, everything.”

– Nicole Yanes, Opata Nation, International Indian Treaty Council, from Mexico.



“Our mode of life and the way we live off the ocean and the resources is very different. It is not commercial, it is livelihoods. It is a spiritual and social interaction.”

- Naseegh Jaffer, World Forum of Fisher Peoples, from South Africa.



“Agroecology is what can help us to have always in mind that organic is not only techniques, but it is also a tool to change our society...to change the market to reconnect the citizens to the farmer, the urban to the rural area.”

– Andrea Ferrante, European Coordination of La Via Campesina, from Italy

“It is climate change that has forced us to practice agro-pastoralism. So the challenges we face are: one, especially the fluctuations in rainfall, frequent water scarcity in the Sahel.”

- Oumarou Cissé, nomadic agropastoralist, from Mopti region, Mali.



“Agroecology embodies all the principles of our world views as indigenous peoples. It can ensure sustainability and biodiversity. Biodiversity for us is the beginning and the end of life, of cultures and of peoples, and I think that agroecology is important in this time of climate crisis.”

– Antonio Gonzales, MAELA (Agroecological Movement of Latin America) and indigenous peasant, from Guatemala.

1. The Practice of Agroecology

“In our own language we call it ‘kurima kwechinyakare’, meaning our traditional agriculture. It describes what we inherited from our parents, which has sustained our parents and our environment for generations... which has become so strong in Zimbabwe especially during the last decade of economic crises, when there was not enough food. Because people had their own resources, knowledge and seeds.”

– Nelson Mudzingwa, ZIMSOFF (Zimbabwe Organic Smallholder Farmers Forum), from Zimbabwe



Agroecology is being practiced and developed by peasants, farmers, fisherfolk, indigenous peoples and pastoralists, often involving new social relations based on solidarity with (urban) citizens. Young people and women are playing a leading role in practicing and developing agroecology. Each of these constituents fills agroecology with different meanings in these diverse contexts, even more so because local resources differ from place to place, as do the aspirations of food producers. This is why agroecology has different expressions in the range of places and contexts where it is practiced:



“Using this agricultural model farmers can reduce their costs. They don’t use many products sourced from the external market, they usually don’t use seeds purchased from outside, they use local seeds. We use the elements that are found around our farm and we prepare our own compost, which is inexpensive.”

– Renaldo Chingore, UNAC (União Nacional de Agricultores Campesinos), from Mozambique

“Agroecology is the political umbrella term for various forms of agriculture and aquaculture practiced by small-scale food producers around the world, in different territories. We propose it as an alternative model, which does not homogenize what we are doing in the territories, but is based on common principles, productive, biological, social, political principles.”

- Maria Noel Salgado, MAELA (Agroecological Movement of Latin America), from Uruguay.



“When state or government support has been lacking women have been creative. Women have contributed a lot to enable learning and various other processes of knowledge building. For us it is clear that this is what women’s contribution has been.”

– Maria Noel Salgado, MAELA (Agroecological Movement of Latin America), from Uruguay

According to the Nyéléni Declaration examples of agroecological production practices include: intercropping, traditional fishing and mobile pastoralism, integrating crops, trees, livestock and fish, manuring, composting, and developing local seeds and animal breeds. These practices are all, ‘based on principles like building life in the soil, recycling nutrients, the dynamic management of biodiversity and energy conservation at all scales.’

Importantly, the principles of agroecology go far beyond the technical and even the social dimensions, and require that agroecology be rooted in political struggles to transform society (box 2).

2. Agroecology as a Social Movement: The Struggle for Food Sovereignty

“We need to have a common definition and a common understanding (of agroecology), and then fight in all the different fora to defend agroecology.”

- Andrea Ferrante, European Coordination of La Vía Campesina, from Italy

The Nyéléni Declaration asserts that ‘agroecology is a key element in the construction of food sovereignty’ and that therefore, it ‘is political; it requires us to challenge and transform structures of power in society’, moving away from corporate control of the food system towards the self-governance of communities.

“We kind of see it as food sovereignty, which means that each community has the sovereignty, the autonomy to choose how we want to do it, what we want to grow, what way of life we want to choose.”

- Nicole Yanes, Opatá Nation, International Indian Treaty Council, from Mexico

This vision differs from the definition of some governments, multilateral institu-

tions, research centres and corporations, who are now recognising the validity of agroecology but have, ‘tried to redefine it as a narrow set of technologies, to offer some tools that appear to ease the sustainability crisis of industrial food production, while the existing structures of power remain unchallenged... This cooptation of Agroecology to finetune the industrial food system, while paying lip service to the environmental discourse, has various names, including ‘climate-smart agriculture’, ‘sustainable-’ or ‘ecological intensification’, industrial monoculture production of ‘organic’ food, etc.’

- Nyéléni Declaration

In response to these contested meanings of agroecology, social movements state in the Declaration: ‘For us, these are not Agroecology: we reject them, and we will fight to expose and block this insidious appropriation of Agroecology.’

They are instead claiming agroecology from the bottom up, while also demanding public policy support for the upscaling of agroecology as defined and practiced by communities:

“The important thing is that agroecology is not a top-down model, it’s a model that should be developed from the bottom up, which counts the most.”

- Renaldo Chingore, UNAC, from Mozambique

“Agroecology must become a concept supported by public policy. I think that the definition of the content and the policy options should be left to peasant communities.”

- Ibrahima Coulibaly, CNOP, from Mali

Upscaling agroecology with the intention of building food sovereignty is a complex process, which requires different strategies. The good news is that many of these strategies are already being developed by food producers and allies. This includes the development of farmer led innovation and learning networks, agroecology schools, alliance building, and advocating for new mechanisms, policies and institutions in local, national and international arenas (box 2).

Box 3: Participating in food sovereignty organisations to advance agroecology

Food producer organisations around the world are working at local, national and transnational levels to practically and politically develop agroecology within the context of food sovereignty. Citizens and food producers interested in advancing agroecology and food sovereignty can get involved in these organisations as a vital component of the strategy to advance agroecology. These can be found at a local level or by contacting organisations such as:

La Vía Campesina, Movimiento Agroecológico de América Latina y el Caribe, Réseau des organisations paysannes et de producteurs de l’Afrique de l’Ouest, World Forum of Fish Harvesters and Fishworkers, World Forum of Fisher Peoples, World Alliance of Mobile Indigenous Peoples, International Indian Treaty Council, World March of Women, Plateforme Régionale des Organisations Paysannes d’Afrique Centrale





Combining farmer knowledge with ecology and scientific insight: the agroecological system of rice intensification.

For those involved in the food sovereignty movement, practicing agroecology is only one part of the struggle, which must be combined with an analysis of the political context. This will form the basis for collective political action through participation in social movements,

“Once we engage in the political study of our own lives as actors in this process and how that intersects with society, and with our communities and hopefully within our organisations we are part of, we can begin to understand what are the collective dynamics of advancing a shared vision.”

- Blain Snipstal, La Vía Campesina youth caucus, from USA

In order for social transformation to occur, this process of developing critical consciousness and politicisation must be combined with a range of other strategies identified in the Nyéléni Declaration.

These strategies include adopting food production practices that cool the planet and help us adapt to climate change, developing participatory forms of knowledge sharing and farmer experimentation networks, recognising the central role of women in agroecology, making life in rural areas attractive for youth, strengthening producer organisations and local economies, building alliances and fighting for specific policies that enable agroecological production and consumption. Such policies include those that secure access to land and other re-

sources, promote truly democratised planning processes and support urban and peri-urban agroecological production. This is detailed further in the Declaration.

3. Agroecology as a Science: Embedding Research in the Needs of Food Producers

Agroecology is also framed as a science that seeks to combine the knowledge and experience of food producers with modern ecology and scientific insight. Crucially, local knowledge needs to be a starting point for agroecological research and development. After all, locally adapted and indigenous farming and food production practices often stem from hundreds of years of collective observation and trial and error in communities, who are constantly adapting their practices and innovating.

Social movements recognise that science can significantly contribute to the development of agroecology for sustainable food systems.

“When it comes to agroecology, this is something that links peasant agriculture with the knowledge of the ancestors. And then there is scientific research. So we have to combine all this.”

- Jean-Baptiste Chavannes, Mouvement Paysan Papaye, from Haiti

However, this can only happen if agroecological research involves a democratic approach based on respectful dialogues between scientists and farmers. Such an approach acknowledges that technological fixes are not enough and views science as part of a bottom-up, participatory development process in which farmers and citizens take centre stage.

In this approach, instead of being passive beneficiaries of ‘trickle down’ development or technology transfer, food producers and citizens participate as knowledgeable and active social agents. Here, food producers work closely with researchers in developing research priorities, co-producing knowledge and in strengthening and spreading agroecological innovations through horizontal networks. The Nyéléni Declaration calls for: ‘Peoples’ control of the research agenda, objectives and methodology’ as well as ‘horizontal exchanges (peasant-to-peasant, fisher-to-fisher, pastoralist-to-pastoralist, consumer-and-producer, etc.) and intergenerational exchanges between generations and across different traditions, including new ideas. Women and youth must be prioritised.’

This integrated and transdisciplinary understanding of ‘agroecology as a



Social movements call for horizontal learning exchanges.



Photo: AS-PTA

Collective self-organisation and action are key to scaling up agroecology.

science’ thus supports the central principles of food sovereignty that require that food systems practice, policy, and in this case research, be controlled by food producers (box 1).

A group of international scientists supported the messages of the Declaration in an open letter to FAO director-general Graziano da Silva, stating that ‘We stand ready, as scholars, to aid the FAO and the world’s small-scale food producers...providing whatever knowledge and analysis we can to advance a comprehensive agenda on agroecology...and look forward to helping build on the dialogue of knowledges that is at the heart of agroecology.’ (www.iatp.org).

Moving Forward: Agroecology at a Crossroads

Mainstream institutions and agribusiness are promoting a narrow science-based version of agroecology that conforms to, rather than transforms, the industrial food system. At this moment in history, transformation for social justice and sustainability will ultimately depend on the capacity of social movements and citizens to resist the cooptation of agroecology by building new institutional arrangements and social movement networks, to advocate for an enabling policy environ-

ment and, most importantly, to self-organise in solidarity for agroecology as a path towards food sovereignty. This point is made explicit in the Declaration, which also argues for the importance of replacing the current economy with solidarity economies between urban and rural communities: ‘Collective self-organisation and action are what make it possible to scale-up Agroecology, build local food systems, and challenge corporate control of our food system. Solidarity between peoples, between rural and urban populations, is a critical ingredient... It requires the re-shaping of markets so that they are based on the principles of solidarity economy and the ethics of responsible production and consumption. It promotes direct and fair short distribution chains. It implies a transparent relationship between producers and consumers, and is based on the solidarity of shared risks and benefits.’

Agroecology is at a crossroads. At the Nyéléni Forum, social movements and food providers have articulated a vision to build, defend and strengthen agroecology in the global struggle for food sovereignty. This vision of agroecology will require a fundamental transformation of practice, policy and research. Social movements are mobilising for this purpose and linking up initiatives of agroecological producers and consumers with political struggles for food sovereignty around the world. ■

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