

Agroecology

**Putting
Food Sovereignty
into Action**





“Agroecology brings communities together in the creation of their own solutions to produce healthy food and conserve soil and water.”

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Preface from WhyHunger

Agroecology is a science and practice defined in the daily lives of millions of families worldwide. It represents both a form of agricultural production and a process for organizing and building community self-determination. As Ibrahima Coulibaly from Mali says, **“Agroecology is not an alternative.” This publication shows that agroecology is a way of life and is one of the paths to end hunger and transform society.**

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Agroecology brings communities together in the creation of their own solutions to produce healthy food and conserve soil and water. Agroecology is based on communities having access to and control of local resources like land, water and seeds and on working toward local food sovereignty. **Because it is developed by communities and maintained through democratic social movements, agroecology nourishes the local and global struggle for food sovereignty and climate justice, which is growing more urgent every day.** Though agroecology relies on local knowledge and local resources, the efforts to “scale up” and “scale out” agroecology are global. “Scaling up” – increasing support from institutions and policymakers – and “scaling out” – spreading agroecology to other farmers and communities – are critical, and the movement is strengthened through sharing the different practices of agroecology from around the world.

This publication is not a technical guide to agroecology. It does not discuss or share the science behind agroecological farming, and it does not include examples of farming practices. This publication does not try to present agroecology as a new technological fix or as a set of farming practices that can be learned and replicated with a “how to” manual. Instead, this publication shares the perspectives of members of social movements and grassroots organizations that are building agroecology and highlights the social, political, cultural, nutritional, and spiritual meaning of agroecology to their communities.

La Via Campesina, a global social movement, says, “the origin of agroecology is the accumulated knowledge of rural people, systematized and further developed through a dialogue of different kinds of knowledge: scientific knowledge, knowledge of organizing communities, and the everyday practical knowledge of agroecology and food production.” This publication embodies the ongoing dialogue of grassroots knowledge and features peasant and indigenous

men, women, and youth who are the stewards of agroecology in the US and the Global South. Agroecology belongs to communities, so we hope that the knowledge summarized here will help to generate dialogue in other communities and among consumers and food producers. And further we hope this publication will expand our collective struggle for justice and international solidarity and support the leadership of communities around the world facing the impacts of the commodification of food and the growing influence of international agribusinesses in our food system.

■ “Scaling Up” Agroecology

The question of how agroecology can make an impact at a greater scale has been at the center of the debates among NGOs, scholars, and policymakers at national and international levels. The question of how to increase the number of people and places impacted by agroecology everyday is important, and we must recognize that peasant and small farmer communities are at the center of agroecology, both as a science and as a way of life. Bringing agroecology to scale means both “scaling up” and “scaling out” agroecology – **scaling up** agroecology by increasing research, training, and supportive policies; and **scaling out** by supporting the dissemination of peasant-led agroecological practices through peasant-to-peasant exchanges and training. Specifically, scaling agroecology up and out needs:

- Increased funding for social movements’ priorities.
- Support for the rights to land, seeds, and water of local communities.
- Substantial government commitment, away from policies that subsidize international agribusinesses and toward significant funding for technical assistance for farmers; farmer-led research of agroecological practices; and basic infrastructure of roads, schools, and other services still lacking in many rural communities.
- Democratic reviews of free trade agreements and other international agreements that disregard and even curb farmers’ rights to multiply, store, and share seeds.



Message from La Via Campesina International

As women, men, elders and youth, peasants, indigenous people, landless laborers, pastoralists and other rural peoples, we are struggling to defend and to recover our land and territories in order to preserve our way of life, our communities, and our culture. The agroecological peasant agriculture we practice is a basic building block in the construction of **Food Sovereignty** and is the first line in our defense of **Mother Earth**.

We are committed to producing food for people: the people of our communities, the peoples of our nations – rather than biomass for cellulose or agrofuels, or for exports to other countries. The indigenous people among us, and all of our rural traditions and cultures, teach respect for Mother Earth, and we commit to recovering our ancestral farming knowledge and adopting elements of **Agroecology** (which in fact is largely derived from our accumulated knowledge) so that we may produce in harmony with, and take good care of, our Mother Earth.



To highlight the social and cultural principles that underlie our peasant view of agroecology, we put forth the following elements – those that we defend and reject:

We defend Agroecology as...

- ✓ Building autonomy
- ✓ Peasant and indigenous seeds
- ✓ A social, cultural, and political process and a tool for the collective transformation of reality
- ✓ Horizontal dialogue between peasant, indigenous, and “scientific” knowledge
- ✓ New familial relationships against patriarchy, where women play a key role
- ✓ Offering new and important roles to youth
- ✓ Liberating and strengthening our collective identity as peasants, indigenous peoples, and other social and cultural rural expressions
- ✓ Directed at feeding people healthy food produced in harmony with Mother Earth
- ✓ Communitarian, with anti-capitalist values

Our Agroecology is not...

- ✗ Technocentrism, academicism, reductionism, or top-down verticalism
- ✗ Agrottoxics, GMOs, or monoculture
- ✗ Mere input substitution and neoliberal organic farming that leaves monoculture intact
- ✗ Agribusiness and commercialism
- ✗ The privatization of knowledge and life
- ✗ The commodification of seeds, water, forests, biodiversity, carbon, and nature
- ✗ Land grabbing and large private estates (“latifundio”)
- ✗ Patriarchy and other forms of exploitation
- ✗ The separation of human beings from Nature





Grassroots Perspectives on Agroecology



Photo courtesy of Judith Hitchman

“...Agroecology is beneficial... for the whole world.”

Why We Need Agroecology

By **Ibrahima Coulibaly**

National Coordination of Peasant Organizations (CNOP)
Mali

Agroecological peasant production is not an alternative! This is the model of production that has allowed us to feed the world for thousands of years, and it is still the dominant model for food production. More than half of the world's population works in peasant agriculture, and the majority of the world's population depends on peasant agriculture for food.

This model of smallholder, agroecological agriculture is the best way to feed the world in the future, to meet the needs of populations today, and to protect the environment and preserve our natural heritage, as well as our common property.

*The model of the Green Revolution has failed: we have almost **one billion hungry people** in the world and an impressive amount of environmental problems. We need a new paradigm, which is agroecology.*

By committing to produce food to feed the world, we have made the commitment to practice peasant, “sustainable agriculture,” because only agroecological peasant production can disconnect the price of food from financial speculation and from market distortions, restore land degraded and polluted by industrial agriculture, and produce local and healthy food for urban consumers and for our people in general.

*So, agroecology is beneficial not just for the agricultural producers (family farmers), but actually for the whole world. **Our future will depend on the attention that we give to family farms, and consequently, to the agroecological practices which underlie their existence.***

We view agroecology as the fundamental instrument to achieve food sovereignty and resiliency in the face of climate change, but this collides with the interests of large multinational companies.

Agroecology represents a chance for all the producers of food in the world. It also represents a chance for the consumers in the cities. Finally it represents a chance for sustainability in our environment and our planet. We have only one planet; therefore we must preserve it for us and those who will come after us. ■

■ **Ibrahima Coulibaly** is the President of the National Coordination of Peasant Organizations of Mali (CNOP-Mali), which is a member of the Network of Farmers' and Agricultural Producers' Organizations of West Africa (ROPPA) and La Via Campesina International.





“We are always studying, always thinking, always observing...”

Agroecology: A Way of Life

By **Dena Hoff**

National Family Farm Coalition (NFFC)
USA

My grandmother, her mother, and her grandmother farmed in the Red River Valley of eastern North Dakota. I was grandma's oldest grandchild and 'garden acolyte' and delighted in all the stories and lore of raising what you needed in a natural, sustainable, holistic way. No one said it was easy – they all said it was really hard – but it was worth it for them, and I knew how much they wanted to be farming, how they would do it again.

“Farming needs to respect the people who work on the land, as well as the land itself.”

We need agroecology for healthy soil, healthy food, and healthy communities. Agriculture has to be integrated, and it has to be local. Accountability is built into local food systems for good food, healthy land, and just labor practices. We are always studying, always thinking, always observing how things work in nature and on our farm. We are saving seeds, and we are feeding ourselves without depending on the marketplace.

We are also about bringing other people in and sharing what we have and what we know. We are here to take care of the land.

Everyone who eats should care who owns farmland and how their crops are grown, because only corporations will be able to farm in the future. And it's not enough to be certified organic, because being certified organic doesn't mean you adopt holistic farming practices. It also doesn't mean you have fair labor practices. Farming needs to respect the people who work on the land, as well as the land itself. ■

■ **Dena Hoff** is a farmer in Montana, USA and a member of the National Family Farm Coalition (NFFC), the co-regional coordinator of La Via Campesina North America.





“Every place in the world must build its own agroecology.”

The Battle of Two Agriculture Models

By **Janaina Stronzake**
Landless Workers Movement (MST)
Brazil

On one side – we have **agribusiness**: large-scale, monoculture production, based on technology and chemicals. Agribusiness is an agriculture without farmers. Practically the only people who live on the land in Brazil these days are the security guards responsible for the property – the workers live on the outskirts and on the margins of the property. Agribusiness investors see the land as a machine that produces profit, no matter what will be produced, to be used until exhaustion – their decisions have nothing to do with people who need and live off the land.

Industrial agriculture, led by agribusinesses, is a technological package: the same set of technologies is used the same way in all regions with no regard for local differences or the people's skills and knowledge. It does not create a harmonious relationship between the Earth and humans, but for us, the peasants, the Earth is where we get everything we need.

Agroecology is a diverse, plural initiative, with practices generated by and from the geography and history of each people in each place.

At the other end we have **agroecology**: where the ownership and possession of land may be individual or collective, but always with participatory and local decisions about what, how and when to produce. Every place in the world must build its own agroecology. It cannot be implemented from outside or from above. Agroecology is a path for better relations between women, men, young children, and the elderly. Agroecology must be an alliance between the countryside and the city, and it must be part of the social movements for structural changes against racism and for the end of violence against women. Along with food sovereignty, agroecology is part of this new society we want to build.

There is no coexistence between agribusiness and agroecology. This is a struggle between two distinct models, and agribusiness has been favored so far. The models are so different that there's no way they can live side by side. Agribusiness only accepts agroecology as “sustainable agriculture” which doesn't threaten the existing structure of agribusiness, and it uses the idea of agroecology to legitimize itself, by “being green.” These are the two antagonistic poles of agriculture. ■

■ **Janaina Stronzake** is a member of the Landless Workers Movement (MST) in Brazil, which is a founding member of La Via Campesina International.





“*The Green Revolution... has erased the traditional systems.*”

Agroecology and the Fight against the Green Revolution

By **Sheelu Francis**

Tamil Nadu Women's Collective (TNWC)
India

The families we work with had lots of health problems – cases of cancer, tumors – and we linked these health problems back to the food they were eating which was produced using chemical fertilizers and pesticides.

What agroecology means is that we are free from chemical fertilizers and pesticides and are growing many crops together – grains, lentils, beans, oilseeds, greens, and vegetables – to create biodiversity, using maximum inputs from the land within the farm, and emphasizing food security.

Women manage the impacts of climate change by saving traditional seeds, especially millet. Millet is the traditional grain for the people of Tamil Nadu because it is nutritious, efficient with water, and its seeds can be stored for many years and still germinate. **Because of the Green Revolution, we gave up traditional practices and traditional seeds.** The Green Revolution and the policies that supported it – programs that provided farmers with hybrid seeds, chemical fertilizers, and pesticides for rice production, as well as a minimum support price only offered for rice – encouraged everyone everywhere to convert to rice paddies. But rice paddies use lots of water (and this is a dry region), and the use of chemical fertilizers has hurt the health of the people. 46% of children in Tamil Nadu are also malnourished now, due to their reliance on white “polished” rice, which is all that is grown by the farmers.

The Green Revolution has impacted human health, children's health, environmental health, and it has erased the traditional systems. That is why we are against it.

The process of marginalizing people's traditional food through caste connotations – poor people eat millet, higher classes eat rice – changes the way they eat, which is very closely linked to displacing people from their land and their seeds and marginalizing their way of farming. That is why we are strongly opposing Monsanto and Syngenta and the whole GMO package and are working to revive, protect, store, and exchange traditional seeds. ■

■ **Sheelu Francis** is the President of the Tamil Nadu Women's Collective (TNWC) in India, which is a member of the World March of Women.





“...Agroecology is the accumulation of ancestral and cultural peasant knowledge.”

Youth, Struggle, and the Historical Context of Agroecology

By **Blain Snipstal**

Southeast African American Farmers' Organic Network (SAAFON)
USA

I'm speaking from the position of the marginalized – that is, the position where food sovereignty and agroecology come from. So, when you are talking about agroecology or food sovereignty within the context of communities of color in the US, we have to start from a place of history and dig into the classist and racist systems that have (and continue) to oppress and marginalize us. **Agroecology is a new codification of our historical struggle given the current onslaught of industrial agriculture on people and the planet. Given this, we have to recognize that Agroecology is part of our history and heritage as people.**

At its core, agroecology is the accumulation of ancestral and cultural peasant knowledge. **As Youth, we need to think and talk about how we will transfer this knowledge to the next generation and how this**

knowledge will continue to evolve in perpetuity; this is the role of youth in agroecology – how will agroecology evolve to be in harmony with nature and people?

Agroecology is a process for social and ecological transformation. It is a methodology for advancing the peasant struggle, from within a movement framework. It is not just about increasing organic matter in the soil, alone. It is also a social and political project and methodology enacted at the base in rural communities for, amongst other things, building infrastructure and power.

For people of color, there has been a disruption with regards to our connection to the land. The knowledge that most families had from, say, 1950 or earlier is disappearing and, in some cases, gone. Knowledge that used to be passed down from generation to generation just doesn't exist, as it once did.

We are facing a profound political moment and opportunity in the transformation of the agrarian dynamics in this society. We have 400 million acres of land up for transition in the next 20 years. What is going to be the future of that land mass in the next 20 years? Will it be stewarded by the industrial model of agribusiness – profit and exploitation – or will it be for small-scale agroecology – feeding people and for more collective and social forms of ownership and organization? ■

■ **Blain Snipstal** is a farmer in Maryland, USA and a member of Southeastern African American Farmers' Organic Network (SAAFON).





“*Agroecology is an opportunity to recover, recuperate, and reawaken the knowledge that we brought with us.*”

Awakening and Rediscovering Agroecology

By **Yolanda Gomez** and **Blanca Moreno**
 Farmworker Association of Florida (FWAF)
 USA

Yolanda: I grew up as a farmworker in the Florida citrus fields, working during the harvest. Through Via Campesina I had the opportunity to travel to Guatemala in 2010. I learned about the living conditions of peasant families there. The visit reminded me of my childhood, and it helped me to be more aware of our practices back home.

Blanca: Working in agriculture was not anything new to me, but when I went to Cuba to participate in an agroecology encounter, we visited several places, and I saw the way people worked in the fields. They used everything. **They pulled the weeds out but left them in the ground to keep the moisture in the soil.** I understood clearly how they practiced agroecology.

Yolanda: Learning exchanges are important spaces to share ideas and experiences about everything that is related to producing food. **I close my eyes and remember other peasants sharing information about their communities.** They showed unity as they worked together to put their agroecological knowledge into practice. ■

Yolanda: *I see agroecology as an opportunity to recover, recuperate, and reawaken the knowledge that we brought with us; the knowledge that was sleeping in our consciousness. We use this knowledge in the daily life we lead in this country, because we came here to work to achieve a better life.*

Blanca: *Agroecology is an interaction between agriculture (food production) and the environment. I understood agroecology as the traditional agriculture practiced by our ancestors – what they used to do – which we are bringing back. But, this time we are doing it with the responsibility to protect the environment, looking to the well-being of the Earth, and to produce healthy food.*

■ **Yolanda Gomez** and **Blanca Moreno** are members of the Farmworker Association of Florida (FWAF), which is a member of La Via Campesina North America.





“*Agroecology is a call to make changes in the way we grow our food.*”

Indigenous Cosmivision, Women, and Agroecology

By **Amarilis Guamuch**

Women's Association for the Development of Sacatepéquez (AFEDES) Guatemala

Agroecology is a process in which we apply different types of knowledge and ways of knowing that also generates new knowledge. For us Mayan indigenous people, this knowledge and these ways of knowing are part of our ancestral memory. For indigenous people, and for peasants, agroecology is a way of life.

In the Mayan cosmivision, we have equilibrium (balance), complementarity, and harmony. These three principles are included in agroecology, as in the life cycle, because all is part of life.

Agriculture requires us to take care of the land. In taking care of the land, we must include all: humans and others beings, including the water and the air. We need each other, because we complement each other. We understand this as the complementarity principle. But we – women and men – are not living it, because the violence against us – women – continues. In order to fully live

complementarity, we all need to decolonize our minds from patriarchy. For us indigenous women, we believe it is not possible to make change without valuing the work, the knowledge, and the life of women.

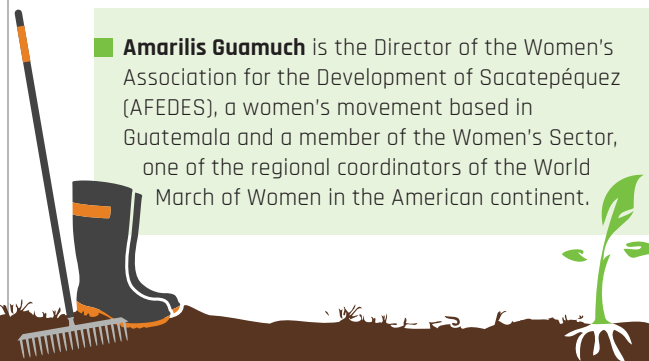
Agroecology is part of the everyday life of women. Since the beginning, women are the first ones to cultivate the fields and save the seeds. They identified the seeds that could be eaten, and they selected and multiplied those that were the most appetizing and enjoyable.

Through the principle of equilibrium, we understand that if we, women and men, maintain an unhealthy environment, we will see negative things happening. For example, climate change represents the disequilibrium between us and nature.

We have been threatened by globalization and mercantilism. Through agroecology, indigenous women are leading a different way of life. We grow healthy food, sell it to others and, more important, we are generating more knowledge and continue saving the seeds.

Agroecology is a call to make changes in the way we grow our food. The harmony principle means we need to live in diversity and comprehend the differences among the animals and among us human beings. Here in Guatemala we have different idioms among the different ethnicities. Likewise, we need to recognize and understand the different ways to live with nature. ■

■ **Amarilis Guamuch** is the Director of the Women's Association for the Development of Sacatepéquez (AFEDES), a women's movement based in Guatemala and a member of the Women's Sector, one of the regional coordinators of the World March of Women in the American continent.





“*Agroecology is a vehicle to bring about justice to communities...*”

Agroecology Empowers Communities

By **Alma Maquítico**

Sustainable Urban Rural Collaborative (SURCO)
USA

We understand agroecology as a series of agricultural principles that have been in existence and practiced by communities throughout millenary times. But it is also a series of political principles that allow communities to develop collective consciousness about restoring bodies, families, communities, and the land in which they live.

Agroecology is a series of tools and knowledge that don't cost us money, which allow us to work with what we have. We have seeds in the community that are inherited from grandparents. The other day

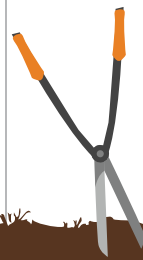
we had a meeting where we shared the seeds and organized a conversation where different generations of families came together and developed consciousness about the importance of their family seeds. When the younger generation and the older generation came into one room to talk about seeds, a whole new world developed.

Food sovereignty is the concept. Agroecology is the plan of action. Agroecology is a vehicle to bring about justice to communities that have been disempowered, primarily by private corporations taking ownership of the food supply. At the local level, our food supply – before our small efforts – depended on Walmart. Now, at least we have a few farms that are producing hundreds of pounds of food that did not exist before.

Agroecology allows you to reclaim the freedom to build your own sovereignty, your own family's independence – particularly for women. I think that as a community, we are continuously put in the situation of demanding justice: for the women disappeared, for the workers in the maquiladoras, for the men and women crossing the border, for the militarized violence.

“Sovereignty” gives us the agency to restore the community's dignity through the resources that we have. ■

■ **Alma Maquítico** is a member of SURCO, the Sustainable Urban Rural Collaborative, in El Paso, Texas, USA.





“*Agroecology is the only way to solve the problems of hunger and the climate crisis.*”

Agroecology: Ending Hunger and Building Food Sovereignty

By **Chavannes Jean-Baptiste**
Peasant Movement of Papaye (MPP)
Haiti

Since the beginning, agriculture had one goal: healthy food for the people. The fundamental mission of agroecology is healthy food for all peoples on the planet with food produced in ways that respect Mother Earth, as well as for future generations to have healthy food and an environment that ensures life.

In today's world, there is rampant land grabbing to develop industrial plantations for agricultural exports and agrofuels, mega tourism and mining projects, and so on. Families and entire communities caught in this process of recolonization are displaced or turned into slaves, and the toxic agribusiness and biotech companies are making billions of dollars from it.

The current context in Haiti is hostile. 70% of the country is rural, yet there is more hunger in the countryside than in the cities. A huge rural exodus

is occurring because the majority of people don't receive basic services from the state. Young people are looking for every way to leave the rural areas for other countries or at least for Port-au-Prince, Haiti's capital, but there is nothing for them to do there. Toxic agribusinesses like Monsanto continue to try to take over our agriculture, and the government tries to deceive us by telling farmers they still have to use chemicals even when they cannot afford them. It is outrageous to promote industrial agriculture, tractors, and chemical fertilizers in a country where farmers are in the mountains.

The corporations defend and promote industrial agriculture by claiming that it feeds people. But the aim of industrial agriculture is not feeding the world's population – it is profit. On the contrary, the goal of agroecology is to feed all nations with healthy food while caring for Mother Earth and attempting to solve the climate crisis. Agroecology is the only way to solve the problems of hunger and the climate crisis. That is to say that agroecology can feed more than seven billion people in the world and simultaneously cool the planet.

Big business is working to change and distort the meaning of the concept of agroecology. Corporations have to destroy peasant agriculture and combat agroecology to continue their destructive practices. It is important to be wary of discourses of governments in industrialized countries. Be careful of the scientists in the service of capital that talk about combining agroecology with industrial agriculture. It is clear that these two models cannot be combined. This is a ploy to kill agroecological peasant agriculture. ■

■ **Chavannes Jean-Baptiste** is the President of the Peasant Movement of Papaye (MPP) in Haiti, which is a member of La Via Campesina International.



Agroecology is not an alternative, but a way of life. It is one of the paths to end hunger and to transform society.



■ What YOU Can Do

- ✓ **Share this publication** with your friends, family, communities, and organizations as a means of introducing the concept and practice of agroecology.
- ✓ **Organize and host discussions** about agroecology and what it means for your community and how it relates to food justice and food sovereignty.
- ✓ **Involve your organization or community** in the global movement for food sovereignty and agroecology and learn more about the US Food Sovereignty Alliance at usfoodsovereigntyalliance.org.
- ✓ **Learn more about the science and practice** of agroecology at agroeco.org and at agroeco.org/socla, the website for Latin American Scientific Society of Agroecology (SOCLA).
- ✓ **Learn more about the organizations, movements, and leaders** featured in this publication, and visit the website for **La Via Campesina**, viacampesina.org, and the **World March of Women**, marchemondiale.org.
- ✓ **Learn more about the work of WhyHunger** to support movements for food justice, food sovereignty, and agroecology at whyhunger.org.

■ **This publication** is possible because of the grassroots leaders and social movements featured here, as well as those not represented but who struggle daily for a life of dignity. Special thanks to La Via Campesina International.