

# avaclim



**How donors and funds can accelerate  
the agroecological transition :  
recommendations from the AVACLIM project**

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## ABOUT THIS PAPER

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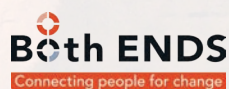
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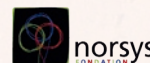
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# SUMMARY

This policy brief is about how financial support for the agroecological approaches and practices of people living in drylands can be improved. Based on both literature research, and the examples, experiences, hopes and dreams of the civil society organisations working together with communities in drylands, we would like to share some recommendations for funds and donors to better connect with the agroecological practices of people living in drylands.

Agroecology is an integrated approach that applies ecological and social concepts and principles to the design and management of food and agricultural systems. It seeks to optimise the interactions between plants, animals, humans, and the environment, while taking into consideration the social aspects that need to be addressed for sustainable and fair food systems.

The central role of the farmer, the importance of traditional and local knowledge, sharing and co-creation of knowledge and practice between farmers and between farmers and researchers, and the emphasis on context-specificity are intrinsic characteristics of agroecology.

Agroecology contributes to several international goals and agreements, such as the Sustainable Development Goals, the Paris Agenda and the international environmental conventions on biodiversity protection, nature restoration, pollution reduction, and climate change response.

The financial mechanisms of donors and funds have the potential to contribute to an enabling environment for agroecological approaches and to support communities living in drylands, especially when the following recommendations are observed:

- 1) Long term collaboration
- 2) Flexibility during the funding period
- 3) Donor and grantee co-creation
- 4) Grantees know best what their funding needs are
- 5) Understanding local contexts for better cooperation
- 6) Linking and learning is vital for accelerating agroecology
- 7) Consistent portfolios help local communities

The aim of this policy brief is to serve as a starting point for the creation of forward-looking strategies on cooperation between civil society organisations that support communities practicing agroecology and donors and funds financing agroecology, in order to accelerate the agroecological transition.

# Agroecological approaches for food, biodiversity, soil health, restoration, mitigation and adaptation in drylands

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The United Nations defines drylands as lands where the ratio of annual precipitation to mean annual potential evapotranspiration is less than 0.65 (United Nations, 1992). Drylands include grasslands, savannahs, and Mediterranean landscapes. Drylands cover more 45% of the Earth's land surface and are home to one in three people (UNCCD, 2022. Global land outlook). Drylands have different types of land cover, and land use varies: they include 27% of the world's forests (1.1 billion ha), 25% of the grasslands and croplands, and 28% of the barren lands. About 16% of drylands are the "hyper-arid zone", comprising mainly desert sandy and rocky landscapes that are not suitable for food production. (FAO, 2019).

Drylands are typified by aridity, and the ecosystems they contain are well adapted to these harsh conditions, characterised by irregular rainfall patterns. In many cases, drylands ecosystems are fragile and prone to irreversible loss of biological diversity and land degradation.

Drylands are often misconceived as marginal lands or «economic wastelands» with low productivity, which are unworthy of investment. However, around 44% of the world's cropland and 50% of livestock worldwide are found in drylands (UNCCD, 2017). Drylands provide crucial ecosystem services to support two billion people (UNCCD, 2017). Some of the world's largest cities, such as Cairo, Los Angeles, Mexico City and New Delhi, are located in drylands (FAO, 2022). Urban areas now cover about 10% of drylands (FAO, 2022). If urban growth in drylands continues, the land and water available in these areas for crop and livestock production will decrease, which is likely to exacerbate environmental and socio-economic tensions (FAO, 2022). Therefore, conservation, sustainable use, and restoration of dryland ecosystems are critical for community well-being, livelihood development and poverty alleviation both in rural and urban areas.

To enable food production guaranteeing the right to food, to ensure that land is used sustainably, and to implement the SDGs in drylands, it is crucial to improve land and water productivity, reverse land degradation, and deal with water scarcity and drought (FAO, 2022). Agroecological approaches build on the natural processes of the soils, plants, trees, and weather. They encourage more efficient use of resources and contribute to the protection and restoration of biodiversity and ecosystems. Agroecological approaches can yield better and more diverse food when compared to resource-intensive monocultures. Agroecological approaches offer promising solutions for various land users to combat land degradation and biodiversity loss, promote soil health and ecosystem restoration, and improve food production and livelihoods. If supported by the right policies, regulations and funding, better soil health will not only result in better yields and greater biodiversity, but also increase the total amount of carbon sequestered (UNCCD, 2022).

Security of land use rights is a crucial component of an enabling environment for agroecological approaches, as a lack of security regarding the long-term use of land is an obstacle to public, private and individual investment in the sustainable use of land, water, and soil. In addition to security of land tenure, inclusive management of natural resources and participation of local communities in land use planning are needed to optimise, accelerate and upscale agroecological approaches (FAO, 2022).

Top-down proposals from governments, authorities, donors, and funds to prevent or reduce land degradation, soil degradation, and water scarcity have little chance of success (UNCCD, 2022). The 14th Conference of the Parties of the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) that took place in New Delhi in 2019 therefore adopted decision 26 “inviting the Parties to ensure that measures to combat desertification/land degradation and drought are carried out in a non-discriminatory and participatory way so that they promote equal tenure rights and access to land for all, in particular vulnerable and marginal groups, within the national context” (UNCCD, 2019).

Financial mechanisms should be brought into line by donors and funds to contribute to an enabling environment for agroecological approaches and to support communities applying agroecological approaches. This policy brief is about how financial support for the agroecological approaches of people living in drylands can be improved. Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) working with communities in drylands have shared their examples, experiences, hopes and dreams. Based on their responses and literature research, we make recommendations for funds, donors, and their financial mechanisms.



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# Upscaling Agroecology

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Agroecology is an integrated approach that simultaneously applies ecological and social concepts and principles to the design and management of food and agricultural systems. It seeks to optimise the interactions between plants, animals, humans, and the environment, while taking into consideration the social aspects that need to be addressed for a sustainable and fair food system.

Agroecology is not a new invention. It can be identified in scientific literature dating back to the 1920s, as well as in family farmers' practices, in grassroots social movements for sustainability, and in the public policies of various countries around the world. More recently, agroecology has entered the discourse of international and UN institutions.

Agroecology has historically been defined as the inclusion of ecology in agricultural farming systems, particularly as a response to the external environmental effects of industrial agriculture, by redesigning and managing agricultural systems on the basis of traditional knowledge and ecological principles. More recently, the definition of agroecology has been broadened to represent a transdisciplinary scientific field of study, an agricultural practice, and a social movement that aims to understand and transform food and agricultural systems for greater ecological sustainability, social justice, and resilience (Altieri, 1995. Wezel, 2009).

Agroecology is fundamentally different from other approaches to sustainable development. The central role of the farmer, the importance of traditional and local knowledge, sharing and co-creation of knowledge and practice between farmers and between farmers and researchers, and the emphasis on context-specificity are intrinsic characteristics of agroecology. Agroecology is based on community-based processes, helping to deliver contextualised solutions to local problems. Agroecological innovations are based on the co-creation of knowledge, combining science with the traditional, practical, and local knowledge of producers. Scientists, academics and food producers work together, and all have an influence on the process and the results. By enhancing their autonomy and adaptive capacity, agroecology empowers producers and communities as key agents of change.

Rather than tweaking the practices of unsustainable agricultural systems, agroecology seeks to transform food and agricultural systems, addressing the root causes of problems in an integrated manner and providing holistic and long-term solutions. This includes an explicit focus on the social and economic dimensions of food systems. Agroecology places strong emphasis on the rights of women, young people, and indigenous peoples (FAO, 2018).

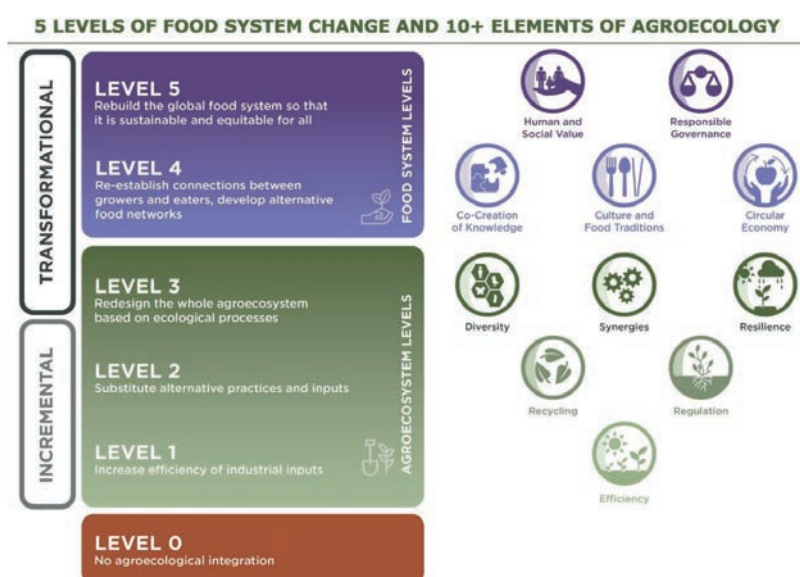
All of these characteristics mean that agroecology contributes to several international agreements, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG1: No poverty, SDG2: Zero hunger, SDG3: Good health and well-being, SDG5: Gender equality, SDG8: Decent work and economic growth, SDG12: Responsible consumption and production, SDG13: Climate action, SDG 15: Life on land), the Paris Agenda, and the international environmental conventions on biodiversity protection, nature restoration, pollution reduction, and climate change response.

In supporting countries to transform their food and agricultural systems, FAO facilitated a process that resulted in “the 10 Elements of Agroecology”. This process involved regional seminars on agroecology and seminal scientific literature on agroecology, in particular, Altieri’s principles of agroecology and Gliessman’s agroecological transition levels. The 10 elements are as follows (FAO, 2018):

- **Diversity:** Diversification is key to agroecological transitions to ensure food security and nutrition while conserving, protecting and enhancing natural resources.
- **Co-creation and sharing of knowledge:** Agricultural innovations respond better to local challenges when they are co-created through participatory processes.
- **Synergies:** Building synergies enhances key functions across food systems, supporting production and multiple ecosystem services
- **Efficiency:** Innovative agroecological practices produce more using less external resources.
- **Recycling:** More recycling means agricultural production with lower economic and environmental costs.
- **Resilience:** Enhanced resilience of people, communities and ecosystems is key to sustainable food and agricultural systems.
- **Human and social values:** Protecting and improving rural livelihoods, equity and social well-being is essential for sustainable food and agricultural systems.
- **Culture and food traditions:** By supporting healthy, diversified and culturally appropriate diets, agroecology contributes to food security and nutrition while maintaining the health of ecosystems.
- **Responsible governance:** Sustainable food and agriculture requires responsible and effective governance mechanisms at different scales - from local to national to global.
- **Circular and solidarity economy:** Circular and solidarity economies that reconnect producers and consumers provide innovative solutions for living within our planetary boundaries while ensuring the social foundation for inclusive and sustainable development.

The 10 Elements of Agroecology are interlinked and interdependent. As an analytical tool, the 10 Elements can help countries to operationalise agroecology.

Based upon Gliessman’s food system change levels and the 10 Elements of Agroecology, the non-profit foundation Biovision has created a visual tool that provides guidance to policymakers, donors, funders, and other stakeholders to help them assess their interactions and interventions for inclusive, just, and sustainable food and agricultural systems (Biovision, 2020).



## Role of Civil Society

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Civil society is crucial because it facilitates a type of cooperation that cannot be generated by the market or the state. Civil society groups such as local organisations, affinity groups, NGOs, and formal and informal civil society networks and movements provide the basis for the collective, coordinated actions needed for agroecological transformation on different scales (Anderson et al, 2021).

Civil society groups can:

- be the linking pin between farmers and researchers and co-facilitate the process of sharing and co-creating knowledge for the validation and improvement of agroecological practices.
- raise awareness in society on the need for agroecological transformation.
- advocate for better enabling policy and finance environments at local, national, and international level.
- support agroecological initiatives of communities through regranting or joint project development.
- link food producers with local markets and consumers.

Civil society groups supporting agroecology are most likely to thrive in contexts where a vibrant civil society is encouraged and nurtured through policies, regulations, and finance (Anderson et al, 2021).

In the next chapter, some examples of CSOs linked to the AVACLIM project will be provided to demonstrate the role of CSOs in supporting land users producing food using agroecological methods.





## Examples of agroecological initiatives supported by civil society organisations

In this section, we will look at some key benefits of agroecological approaches to current international policy discussions and funding themes of donors and funds. The benefits will be highlighted using short examples of groups of land users practising agroecology.

### AGROECOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO FACE DROUGHT

Agroecological initiatives are based upon local knowledge, science, and innovative practices for food production adapted to their specific environment. In drylands, these techniques often focus on the scarcities experienced in food production in these areas, such as smart water harvesting, adaptive seeds systems, soil improvement techniques. They are adapted to locally available resources and are therefore resilient to drought.

Diversity is an important factor within agroecological systems, as this reduces the impact of drought, via techniques such as agroforestry, intercropping, integrated crop-livestock-forage systems, permaculture, etc. Farmers and pastoralists that diversify their food production have a greater capacity to recover from disturbances and are more resilient to drought.

In Senegal, local communities are implementing agroecological practices with the support of CSOs such as ENDA Pronat, Caritas and the farmers' organisation Yakaar Niani Wulli. The people living in the village of Sare Boubou, in the region of Tambacounda, have been working for the past decade to improve their resilience to drought and support the health of the soil, after observing a decline in soil fertility.

The village community received training in agroecological practices in order to:

- Develop knowledge of the use and dangers of agro-chemicals, the importance of diversification of crops and cultivation practices, and how to improve market access.
- Contribute to soil health, through the implementation of farmer-managed natural regeneration consisting of rotational grazing after harvest to support soil fertility, and allowing growth of trees in grazing areas (protecting the trees from grazing) as the trees provide shade for cattle and goats and contribute to soil health.

The cooperation between farmers and pastoralists in Sare Boubou on drought resilience and diversification has resulted in improved soil health in pastures and agricultural fields and better collective management of natural resources, particularly the pastures. This cooperation has also resulted in the creation of a self-managed fund to facilitate access to agricultural materials and seeds.

[SARE BOUBOU – AN INNOVATIVE VILLAGE IN SENEGAL](#)

## AGROECOLOGY, LAND RESTORATION AND FIGHTING LAND DEGRADATION

Soils are the basis of food production. A healthy soil provides the essential nutrients, water and oxygen that plants need to grow and flourish. A healthy living soil is a crucial ally to food security and nutrition (FAO, 2015) Soil health is the capacity of soil to function as a living system. A healthy soil consists of organic material from plants and animals, and material that has been converted by microorganisms in the soil at different stages of decomposition. Healthy soils support a diverse community of soil organisms that 1) help to control plant disease and pests, 2) form beneficial symbiotic connections with plant roots, 3) store and supply essential (micro)nutrients, 4) improve soil structure with positive effects on the water and nutrient holding capacity of the soil. These are vital factors for food production. In addition, healthy soils contribute to supporting biodiversity, mitigate climate change, facilitate land restoration, and reverse land degradation by maintaining or increasing its carbon content. Agroecological practices that include slowing down water run-off and improving organic matter are effective in preserving soil health. In addition, agroecological practices increase biodiversity and thus the resilience of ecosystems. The important role played by trees in agroecological practices reduces the negative effects of wind, sun, and rain on the land, crops, and animals. Trees also provide shade, timber for construction, and non-timber forest products for medicinal, nutritional, and aromatic purposes.

Trench gardening is a vegetable garden approach that can be implemented in home gardens around the homestead. In the districts of Konnaba and Simurobi Gele'alo in Afar Regional State, in the northern part of Ethiopia, the CSO network PELUM Ethiopia has helped people to start trench gardening. Trench gardens are mostly practiced in areas that face drought or water scarcity and low soil fertility, where it is difficult to grow vegetables or herbs. Trench gardening aims to create fertile soils by creating a lowered bed (2.4m x 1m) that is filled with compost, manure and/or organic material and covered with topsoil. The organic matter retains moisture and helps to enhance soil fertility. This technology has been tested and accepted by communities living in dryland areas. Established trenches support restoration of degraded lands by facilitating growth and biomass production of planted species. This technology has become particularly popular with women, elderly people and people with disabilities, as it can be implemented around the homestead and requires little water. They grow cabbages, peppers, mustard, bananas, carrots, and tomatoes for home consumption with trench gardening techniques, enabling them to produce diverse food to support their families' food security, and improve soil health.

TRENCH GARDENING IN ETHIOPIA



## COOPERATION AND CO-CREATION IN AGROECOLOGICAL APPROACHES IMPROVES FOOD SECURITY

Agroecology is a relevant solution to provide healthy food, generate abundant and diversified harvests, and promote local food, thus improving the resilience of local communities. By improving the diversity of crops and the nutritional content of food, agroecology increases the availability of nutritious food at household, market and community level, thereby enhancing food and nutritional security. Promoting local food production and building strong links between and within communities improves the food sovereignty of women, farmers, and land users. More and better connections between producers and consumers contribute to the right to food.

*In Umkhanyakude and Zululand District Municipalities in northern KwaZulu-Natal, in the south-east of South Africa, the CSO Biowatch South Africa – an NGO established in 1999 - has helped local farmer groups to implement a number of interlinked agroecological practices which build new knowledge, based on experimentation and traditional and indigenous knowledge of farming, diversity, soil & water, seeds, and food.*

*At least 2,300 people in these farming households directly benefit from agroecology in the form of increased food security and better nutrition. The participating households have created a network of homesteads that demonstrate resilient agroecology in action, constantly responding to the context, adapting and improving, and providing firm evidence that agroecology works to improve livelihoods, nurture biodiversity and support the ecosystem. Participation in wider farmers' networks is mostly facilitated by civil society organisations, although several lead farmers have reached out to other groups and have been invited to share their knowledge on agroecology.*

*The farming systems of the participating farmers are resilient because of the focus on and adaptation of agroecological practices, including building healthy soil and conserving and recycling available resources such as biomass and water.*

*Some of the innovations that have been added to traditional practices include: adding legumes in the inter-cropping system to provide extra biomass and nitrogen; accessible and locally-adaptable techniques for producing fermented biological soil amendments and pest protection; construction of swales and planting basins; improving harvesting, selection, and storage of seed of well-adapted, open-pollinated crop varieties.*

**BIOWATCH IN SOUTH AFRICA**



## EMPOWERMENT THROUGH AGROECOLOGY

In drylands, it is often women who grow the food for their families and communities. They strengthen local economies, preserve biodiversity, protect local ecosystems, and increase resilience to climate change.

Despite these essential contributions, women's contribution to food production is often unappreciated or unrecognised. Sustainable food systems start with the recognition of women and their role in food production. As agroecology places a strong focus on the rights of women, young people, and indigenous peoples, it is ideally suited to this purpose. It prioritises local food security, ecosystem integrity, biodiversity, climate resilience, soil health, and social justice - and reflects the needs and aspirations of women as farmers. It is a feminist and rights-based approach shaped by women and strongly linked to their knowledge and expertise.

*In the Jenipapo community, in the north-eastern region of the Caatinga Biome in Brazil, feminist farmer Fátima Maria dos Santos (Fafá) runs her farm. Fafá has always applied the principles of agroecology in her farming practice, retaining native vegetation and developing agroforestry systems. The family has a large cistern that is filled with rainwater in the rainy season to support the vegetable garden, cashew trees and an agroforestry system comprising forest, native and fruit trees, and crops such as cassava and beans. She sells her products at the Itapipoca and Fortaleza Agroecological Fair. Fafá is coordinator of the Agroecological Fairs and Solidarity Network in Ceará, Brazil. The Agroecological and Solidarity Fairs allow farmers to sell their produce grown using agroecological principles, and provide a space for family farmers to share their knowledge and showcase their produce.*

*Fafá is also one of the first in her region to be part of the 'Caderneta Agroecológica' project run by the CSO CETRA Fortaleza from Ceará. This project supports women to monitor agroecological practices and food production, to exchange knowledge and experience, and to get visibility and recognition as women farmers. The Caderneta which Fátima is involved in, along with other families, helped them in their discussions about seeds and reducing the risk of crop failure, which led to the creation of the community seed bank. This allows farmers to conserve and share seeds for food production in order to preserve agrobiodiversity and be resilient to climate change. The project also demonstrates the economic contribution of women, broadening the view of monetary and non-monetary income, as well as women's contribution to food and nutritional security. Even during the pandemic, Fafá continued providing healthy food to her family, without the use of damaging agro-chemical inputs. Public policies and social transformation projects for rural women have often benefitted of data and information provided by the Agroecological Notebooks.*

**AGROECOLOGICAL FAIRS AND SOLIDARITY NETWORK IN CEARÁ, BRAZIL**



## AGROECOLOGICAL APPROACHES CONNECT FARMERS, PASTORALISTS AND CONSUMERS

An important dimension of agroecology is building synergies to enhance key functions across food systems, supporting production and multiple ecosystem services. Social connections are a central aspect of agroecological initiatives. There are several types of cooperation: between farmers and pastoralists through governance bodies and land use planning arrangements, between farmers and scientists for knowledge development, among farmers themselves via peer-to-peer learning and exchange of practices, and between food producers and consumers at farmers' markets.

The Conseil National de l'Agriculture Biologique (CNABio/ National Council for Organic Agriculture) is an umbrella organisation created in Ouagadougou in March 2011 that brings together approximately sixty actors from across Burkina Faso (individual producers, NGOs, groups, companies, etc.). CNABio was established in response to the high costs of third-party certification for organic food intended for the export market.

In 2013, CNABio developed the BioSPG label, one of the first national organic labels in West Africa, with technical support from Helvetas and the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM). The BioSPG label is based upon a Participatory Guarantee System, which promotes knowledge and expertise, and collective learning processes among food producers within an area. They cooperate to ensure better prices on the local and national market that reflect the quality of production. Thanks to the BioSPG label, producers benefit from higher sales prices.

Twenty-eight sites are currently certified BioSPG for a total of 344 producers. In addition, 87 jobs have been created in processing and 30 in marketing, as well as seasonal and temporary jobs. The sales prices of BioSPG products are higher than those of conventional products. For example, the price of conventional onions is on average 150 fcfa/kg, compared to 300 fcfa for BioSPG onions. The creation of CNABio has greatly contributed to enhancing connections between producers and consumers and to improving knowledge of agroecology. For example, since 2013, 243 educators have been trained in agroecological and organic farming practices.

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NATIONAL COUNCIL OF ORGANIC  
AGRICULTURE IN BURKINA FASO



## AGROECOLOGY SUPPORTS THE DEVELOPMENT OF LOCAL ECONOMIES

Various agroecological initiatives have demonstrated innovative ways to ensure economic resilience. This economic resilience is often the outcome of lower dependency on external inputs, improved (and often shorter) linkages between food producers and consumers, and a better valorisation of products due to better quality, which result in higher prices for producers and at the same time, better value for consumers.

In Ouarzazate, in Morocco, the population's livelihoods are essentially based on oasis agriculture. In 2010, 49 olive-growing family farms decided to join forces, and established the Al Mohammedia Cooperative. The families wanted to add value to their olive production from their approximately 9800 trees, by adopting agroecological practices to improve production and processing the olives themselves. Al Mohammedia Cooperative mobilised external support from local and international CSOs, such as ORMVAO, Norsys Foundation, Agrisud International. The technical support focused on improving sustainable production of the olive trees based on crop-livestock complementarities and limiting external inputs. This is done by growing special fodder crops in the orchard for sheep, which in turn provide manure and organic matter to improve soil health. The cooperative also decided upon a marketing hierarchy: prioritising family consumption and local market demand before preparing orders for the international market.

At the end of 2016, the cooperative was ready to start negotiating an agreement with Olvea (a supplier to L'Oréal) to jointly set up a sustainable olive oil supply chain. In 2017, after a year spent establishing the safety and quality processes and obtaining specific certifications, the first olive oil was sent from Al Mohammedia Cooperative to Olvea. The economic benefits are remarkable: additional earnings of 23% for the families and a doubling of the cooperative's margin.

AL MOHAMMEDIYA  
COOPERATIVE IN MOROCCO



## HOLISTIC APPROACH

Agroecology is a holistic and interdisciplinary approach to agriculture, that considers the ecological, social, political, and economic dimensions of food production in order to build resilient food-producing communities, ensure food security, and support the ecosystem. Many CSOs work with communities in a holistic way: sharing knowledge and practices regarding soil health, tree growing and rainwater harvesting, whilst organising and mobilising farmers and raising policy makers' awareness of the importance of an enabling policy environment such as land tenure security.

The CSO AME foundation supports small-scale farmers in the drylands of the Deccan Plateau zone in the Kolar, Dharwad and Magadi areas of Karnataka, and the Dharmapuri and Pennagaram areas of Tamil Nadu, South India. AME promotes Low External Inputs and Sustainable Agriculture (LEISA) methods of farming and Participatory Technology Development. The organisation helps farmers to adapt and sustain their livelihoods, despite changing climatic conditions, through better management of natural resources and developing knowledge of agroecological practices such as choice of seeds and crops, in-situ rainwater harvesting, soil fertility improvement, etc. Techniques used by farmers to enhance soil fertility and water efficiency include vermicomposting, composting, and mulching. Farmers select and save their own seeds, and some treat their seeds with *Trichoderma* and *Rhizobium* to enhance biotic processes in the soil. Improved tillage and sowing methods and intercropping enhance the resilience of farming systems.

The approach and methods that have underpinned the transformation of food systems in the area include Farmer Field Schools, actively engaging with young people on agroecological practices, and exchanging knowledge with other CSOs and academics. This has helped bring about scaling of agroecological approaches over a broader area, and wider dissemination of field experiences on agroecology.

Participating communities have developed market avenues to harness the benefits of collective economic power. Experiential learning has enabled farmers to reap the economic benefits of collective marketing. Agroecological practices have improved natural resource management, increased farm incomes, and reduced costs linked to cultivation. Farmer collectives share resources and facilities, create new value-adding enterprises, and manage seed and fodder requirements.

[AGRICULTURE MAN ECOLOGY  
FOUNDATION IN INDIA](#)

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# How civil society groups would like to work with donors and funds to support local communities and their agroecological practices

Land users' agroecological initiatives are often supported and facilitated by civil society organisations, which have the knowledge of agroecological networks, the necessary infrastructure to receive funds from third parties wishing to support the development of agroecological practices, and the experience of advocacy aimed at local authorities, national governments, and international organisations for an enabling environment.

To prepare this policy brief, the CSOs linked to the AVACLIM project were asked about their experiences and knowledge of cooperation between CSOs and donors and funds. This inventory provides insight into the opportunities and barriers involved in relations with donors and funds, and is complemented by literature research. This has resulted in the following 7 recommendations to donors and funds to better support local communities and their organisations in developing and upscaling agroecological approaches.

## 1) LONG-TERM COLLABORATION

A long-term relationship between donors and recipients is very much appreciated by organisations supporting land users, as agroecology is not a quick-fix, but is based upon trust and cooperation between groups of land users, farmers, pastoralists, practitioners, scientists, and civil society organisations. Agroecological transition requires cooperation and activities over a longer period of time. The effects of these activities, such as improving soil organic matter, soil biodiversity and soil health and generate better yields, take years to materialise, and are therefore not visible in the short term.

The time limitations of projects that are financed for a short duration (1.5 years) often put a lot of pressure on cooperation, and make it difficult to achieve meaningful results.

Some donors or funds require frequent changes of village and/or area in order to scale-up the project – however, building cooperation and trust with new groups takes time.

*Reflections on donor-grantee relations of CSOs supporting local communities practising agroecology*

### Recommendations for donors and funds:

- Make money available for projects with a longer duration (5-10 years) to sustain support to communities practising agroecology.
- Allow sufficient time, focus on long-term processes, and incorporate progress indicators such as trust, cooperation, and knowledge development.

### Tips for grantees to engage with donors and funds

- Be mindful of what you are promising, and make sure you do not over-promise. Explain the realities of communities and why longer transition periods are needed to the donor/fund, rather than agreeing to unrealistic timetables.



## 2) FLEXIBILITY DURING THE FUNDING PERIOD

Some donors set long-term goals, and also finance the steps required of farmers, pastoralists, and local land users to achieve these. These donors keep an eye on the bigger picture while considering changing factors/ conditions/ contexts, by supporting a number of intermediate steps which are not necessarily predetermined in the proposal. The flexibility to change planning activities and a budget which can accommodate changes in the political, social, environmental, and cultural contexts is welcomed by CSOs working with local communities, as land users will increasingly need to be able to adapt to changing conditions, such as droughts, floods, adverse climatological changes, COVID measures, insecurity in the region, new governments, changing insights, new knowledge, etc.

Some donors have very strict requirements concerning the implementation of projects.

Some examples of inflexibility are high levels of control regarding activities and budget (which are experienced as low levels of trust), extensive monitoring procedures and reports, imbalance between financial support for outputs and outcomes and financial support for the organisation to function, a disproportional number of bureaucratic requirements.

*Reflections on donor-grantee relations of CSOs supporting local communities practising agroecology*

### Recommendations for donors and funds:

- Allow flexibility, focus on project objectives, and allow and facilitate changes in activities and budget.

### Tips for grantees to engage with donors and funds

- Interact with donors/funds, understand their objectives and their language.
- Assess whether the donor or fund's directives, guidelines, and methodologies are a good fit for the capacity and needs of your project, organisation, and/or context.



### 3) DONOR AND GRANTEE CO-CREATION

Some donors and funds have embraced co-creation for project development, implementation, and monitoring together with the grantee. Co-creation is a form of collaboration between donors or funds and grantees in which all parties have influence on the project. It involves processes to facilitate co-decision on the realistic impact of the cooperation, including milestones and co-monitoring of the progress of the project. In addition, it fosters personal interaction to discuss and reflect upon trends, actions, opportunities, and challenges, and allows space and time to reflect on and learn from actions and collaborations and to implement the lessons learnt in the project.

In this way, the project and the monitoring processes become more meaningful for both the donor and the grantee.

Some donors and funds impose indicators that are only relevant for the donor without considering any relevance for local communities and CSOs.

Some donors impose a PME system that doesn't take into account changing contexts and/or lessons learnt, but only narrowly focus on impact/results/outputs as defined in the project document.

*Reflections on donor-grantee relations of CSOs supporting local communities practicing agroecology*

#### Recommendations for donors and funds:

- Foster co-creation and joint learning in project development, implementation, and monitoring processes with grantees.

#### Tips for grantees to engage with donors and funds

- Engage with donor and funds frequently and share successes, failures, lessons learnt, challenges, and opportunities.
- Organise exchange visits with donors to the “place of action”, i.e., communities practising agroecology and relevant policy arenas.



#### 4) GRANTEES KNOW BEST WHAT THEIR FUNDING NEEDS ARE

It is generally appreciated if a donor/fund supports a wide range of grantee activities. Grantees themselves know best what needs to be funded to achieve agroecology goals. Some of the funding needs mentioned by the CSOs participating in our survey were: direct actions of farmers, pastoralists, and other land users; cooperation between different land users; political work and advocacy; network and movement building; knowledge development; dissemination of information; and institutional strengthening of groups and civil society organisations supporting land users. Many grantees like to submit 'intersectional' and/or 'cross-sectional' proposals, e.g., on both soil health and women's land rights, or community-mapping and access to markets, etc. Grantees greatly appreciate not being forced into 'artificial' programmatic sectors or silos. Donors and funds

with a good understanding of the context, power relations, and power struggles as a factor of influence are very well-equipped to respond to the needs of land users.

It is regrettable to observe donors and funds with a narrow understanding of agroecology, which focus solely on using less external inputs, and do not consider the political, socio-economic, and organisational aspects of food production or the importance of exchange of knowledge and practices.

*Reflections on donor-grantee relations of CSOs supporting local communities practising agroecology*

#### Recommendations for donors and funds:

- Make a greater number of better grants (including small grants) available to support land users in their agroecological activities and initiatives, help develop knowledge and practice networks and peer-to-peer learning between land user groups, CSOs and academics, and support advocacy on agroecology in order to counterbalance the power of agro-industrial businesses and multinationals.
- Include grants for capacity development and institutional strengthening of CSOs that are supporting farmers, pastoralists, and other land users in sustainable food production.
- Support participatory action research and knowledge development by land users and scientists on agroecological practices, including on-farm practices and farmer-consumer market development.
- Support CSOs in the dialogue with other donors/funds, at national and international level.

#### Tips for grantees to engage with funds

- Build smart project consortiums with complementary, like-minded organisations so that a range of activities can be developed within the project.

## 5) UNDERSTANDING LOCAL CONTEXTS FOR BETTER COOPERATION

Civil society organisations are often smaller organisations than the donor or fund and therefore have different accountability systems. We often see that the accountability protocols and bureaucracy that are essential for bigger financial organisations are transposed to the grantee. However, there are other donors and funds that take the reality of smaller civil society organisations into account, by transferring as little bureaucracy as possible to them and providing flexible grant structures, flexible reporting requirements, and easy procedures for changing and/or extending grants.

In addition, many civil society organisations that support land users are not-for-profit structures, and their financial resources are therefore actively used for their work.

They therefore do not have large reserves that can be used to 'pre-fund' activities as agreed upon in the project plan.

It is therefore highly appreciated if a donor or fund has a timely and well-functioning fund disbursement mechanism.

Some donors have disproportionately high financial requirements for grantees that result in high overhead costs.

Some donors lack commitment to support institutional strengthening of CSOs.

Some donors make it difficult to directly communicate with them.

*Reflections on donor-grantee relations of CSOs supporting local communities practicing agroecology*

### Recommendations for donors and funds:

- Be a reliable partner by understanding the grantee(s) and the context in which the grantee works.
- Visit the grantees
- Facilitate direct communication and dialogue with the grantee(s).

### Tips for grantees to engage with funds

- Interact with donors and funds; understand their objectives; understand their language, make sure they understand your difficulties, and stay true to your own values and objectives.
- Implement a good communication system and strategy within the project to engage with the donor or fund.

## 6) LINKING AND LEARNING IS VITAL FOR ACCELERATING AGROECOLOGY

Knowledge and practice development between land users' groups, civil society organisations, research institutes, and extension services is one of the elements of agroecology. Grantees indicate that it is much appreciated that some donors and funds actively finance knowledge sharing and learning within the project and between projects funded by the same donor or fund. Some donors encourage consortia between research institutes, local communities, and civil society organisations to drive knowledge development. Some donors facilitate knowledge exchange and development between different projects and partners. This is often based around specific themes (such as improving organic matter, local markets, etc), similar areas (ecosystems such as drylands, geographical regions, political unions), specific activities (advocacy, technical assistance, education), or institutional strengthening (PMEL, fundraising, etc.).

This proactive attitude is greatly appreciated as it contributes to the consolidation, general support, and acceleration of agroecology.

From the inventory, it is observed that activities for knowledge sharing and active learning should not be organised in a top-down way, that participation should be voluntary, that activities should recognise cultural and language diversity, and that the time spent on knowledge sharing should be included in the project grant. It was also observed that knowledge sharing and active learning should be aligned with existing networks and events in order to avoid duplications.

### Recommendations for donors and funds:

- Fund knowledge development initiatives such as centres of knowledge and expertise, model farms, or farmer field schools, and organise exchange visits to allow farmers, pastoralists, CSOs, and scientists to learn from the successes of others.
- Promote cooperation and social innovation between land users, scientists, and civil society organisations.
- Ensure intergenerational and gender-responsive knowledge transfer, as different groups of people have different knowledge.

### Tips for grantees to engage with funds

- Share knowledge and experience, seek cooperation with others, and participate in networks of organisations.



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## 7) CONSISTENT PORTFOLIOS HELP LOCAL COMMUNITIES

Some donors and funds put small-scale family farmers and pastoralists and their organisations and movements at the centre of sustainable food production and at the centre of their financing. They have a clear drive to support sustainable and inclusive food production via agroecological transitions. They support integrated systems and practices: holistic action for land users that include biodiversity, climate change adaptation and mitigation, and land restoration, whilst supporting the right to food for rural and urban people. In addition, they recognise power relations between people, the power struggle of family farmers, and the power of agro-industrial commercial businesses and agro-industrial multinationals. This is greatly appreciated.

Some donors and funds finance more agro-industrialisation projects than agroecological projects. Agroecological projects make up only a fraction of their portfolios on food production and agriculture. Their funding portfolio is inconsistent.

Projects that favour monoculture farms, agro-industrial commercial enterprises, and agro-industrial multinationals in a given area often work against the agroecological practices of local communities.

*Reflections on donor-grantee relations of CSOs supporting local communities practising agroecology*

### Recommendations for donors and funds:

- Put small-scale family farmers and pastoralists, and especially women and young people, at the centre of your funding portfolio.
- Assess the funding portfolio and push for greater consistency with the agroecological transition.

### Tips for grantees to engage with funds

- Address inconsistent behaviour by donors via constructive dialogue.

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# avaclim

VALUE AGROECOLOGY FOR DRYLANDS

## AVACLIM: CO-CREATION FOR AGROECOLOGY

AVACLIM is a project running over three years (2020-2023) which aims to create the necessary conditions for the deployment of agroecology in arid areas.

To achieve this, a consortium of different actors was established: 9 civil society organisations (CARI - France, Agrisud International / Norsys Foundation - Morocco, ARFA - Burkina Faso, CAATINGA - Brazil, EMG - South Africa, ENDA Pronat - Senegal, GBS - India, ISD – Ethiopia, and Both ENDS - The Netherlands) have joined forces with 3 scientific organisations (IRD, Montpellier SupAgro, and CIRAD – France) and 3 donors (Fonds Français pour l'Environnement Mondial, the Global Environmental Facility, and the Food and Agriculture Organisation).

The project consists of 4 pillars linking practitioners, farmers, scientists, advocates, and communicators with policy makers and funding mechanisms:

1. An inventory of the different agroecological initiatives and the creation of links between different agroecology actors and practitioners.
2. Evaluation of these initiatives by a consortium of scientists, from an agronomic and socio-economic point of view, in order to create a reference framework to guide decision-makers.
3. Advocacy targeting national political actors, as well as donors and international institutions.
4. Wide dissemination of existing experiences, an evaluation grid that can be used by all, and a scientifically validated reference system.

The activities of the project range from exchange visits between farmers and practitioners within countries, to advocacy for a better enabling environment at the 15th Conference of the Parties of the UNCCD. Due to COVID-19, the international and regional activities within the project plan had to be adapted from face-to-face meeting to webinars and zoom discussions. The project has a website which provides a wealth of information on agroecological approaches, practices, and proposals. Based on the scientific evaluations, a reference framework will be developed to help policy makers better link policy with agroecological practices.

More information  
[www.avaclim.org](http://www.avaclim.org)



FONDS FRANÇAIS POUR  
L'ENVIRONNEMENT MONDIAL