

# AGROECOLOGY AND THE GLOBAL ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS

A SOUTH AFRICAN CIVIL SOCIETY POSITION PAPER



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VALUE AGROECOLOGY FOR DRYLANDS



## Agroecology as an essential response to multiple challenges

As the global environmental crisis gathers momentum, the mounting losses and damages caused by extreme weather events to communities, infrastructure and food supplies have become more frequent and extreme. Agroecology is a comprehensive approach that addresses all aspects of the current crisis by advancing more sustainable and equitable approaches to land use and the production of healthy and nutritious foods. Agroecological farming prevents degradation and increases the resilience of cultivated land and agro-pastoral systems to the impacts of drought and floods, as well as to pests and diseases.

South Africa urgently needs policy-supported change to accelerate the positive change being pioneered by some farmers. The transformation of agriculture and food security in South Africa is vital to address the legacies of widespread poverty, food insecurity and social dysfunction that so many South Africans face, as well as the exponential increase of climate-related threats such as floods, droughts and other extreme weather events that we know will exacerbate these challenges.

In South Africa practitioners and organisations supporting agroecology have identified three core elements to the approach:

- Ecological sustainability
- Social justice and redress
- Economic fairness and participation.

These elements are well reflected in the 13 principles of agroecology<sup>1</sup> articulated by the FAO Committee on World Food Security (CFS). These principles incorporate the "10 elements of agroecology" previously published by the FAO<sup>2</sup>, whilst strengthening the social and economic justice dimensions. Agroecology is far broader than a set of farming practices, marketing and self-organisation, but also addresses food sovereignty and social and economic justice. Agroecology offers a framework for system-wide transformation of the food system to create a better world for farmers and consumers of food and fibre.

In farming systems, **ecological sustainability** is secured by applying the CFS principles of recycling, input reduction, soil health, animal health, biodiversity, land and natural resource governance and synergy.

**Social justice and redress** are advanced by the principles of co-creation of knowledge, participation, social values and diets.

**Economic fairness and participation** are promoted by the principles of economic diversification, fairness, and connectivity, as well as participation in decision making.

## Government and civil society must work together

Civil society proposes that government must join its efforts to advance agroecology to achieve the transformational objectives of national policy. The international commitments of our government require interlinked actions that integrate agricultural production and development with ecological conservation and sustainable use. These include the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCDD) on sustainable land management practices, the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the UN Convention on Biodiversity (CBD) and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP).

<sup>1</sup> CFS 2019. "Agroecological and other innovative approaches for sustainable agriculture and food systems that enhance food security and nutrition", <https://www.fao.org/3/ca5602en/ca5602en.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> FAO 2018. "The 10 Elements of Agroecology", <https://www.fao.org/agroecology/overview/overview10elements/en/>



Members of networks of South African agricultural producers are producing healthy food agroecologically, with the support of civil society organisations. Representing thousands of individuals, these networks are active across the country and have capacities to provide technical support on agronomy and livestock, training and facilitation of farmer-to-farmer learning, participatory landscape and watershed management, and organisational capacity building, including farmer associations, cooperatives, and small, medium and micro enterprises (SMMEs).



Recent research in South Africa funded by the Global Environmental Facility has evaluated the contribution of local initiatives to achieving agroecological outcomes, and concluded that they have been changing the ways that we farm and share our planetary resources.





## Civil Society Priorities

Our agricultural sector was shaped by land dispossession and migrant labour in the interests of mining, industrial and agricultural capital. The current dualistic agrarian system of large-scale commercial farmers who were historically supported by the state, and poorly or unsupported small-scale farmers has not been challenged by post-apartheid neoliberal policies. Instead, these policies increased the horizontal and vertical corporate concentration of South Africa's agri-food system, further ensconcing a small controlling elite and creating barriers of entry for new small-scale farmers and entrepreneurs into the food system, as well as hindering progress towards land and agrarian reform. If the goals of our constitution are to be achieved, policy and practice of government must address these inequities.

In September 2022 representatives of a range of civil society organisations and networks met in Johannesburg to identify how government could support the initiatives and imperatives of civil society to advance agroecological production, address food insecurity and hunger and respond to the impacts of climate change. The priorities that they identified for action by various government bodies and agencies are:

### **Release of well-located land by the government for agroecology demonstration sites**

The national Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development, the private sector, large-scale commercial farmers, local municipalities as well as traditional councils all have a part to play in addressing the inequity of the current land tenure system. Most egregious is the reality that many women are unable to own land because of cultural traditions. Suitably located land should be made available for agroecology demonstration sites. Civil society calls for transparent and efficient administration at municipal level to ensure that people can access up-to-date information about local land ownership and availability as well as institute efficient processes for people to engage with on land access and related services.





### **The establishment of a national programme for school garden education**

Many families are child-led, unable to support and feed themselves and children come to school hungry. However, schools are not equipped to teach children how to feed themselves and lack secure sites with the necessary infrastructure and water provision to enable learners to produce food. Schools generally get no support in this regards from the Departments of Agriculture or Education, and school principals expect activists to provide all of the necessary inputs. The ambition of the programme is to ensure that schools are able to offer a school garden education programme as part of the curriculum, supported by the Departments of Agriculture and Education. Practitioners have emphasised that the lack of agriculture in school curricula has contributed to a lack of interest in agriculture amongst the youth.



### **Revision of Act 36 of 1947 to enable the registration and sale of biological inputs**

Act 36 of 1947 is an Apartheid era law that has been outdated since the adoption of the SDGs and the Paris Agreement in 2015. While we are in favour of stringent regulations on the use of toxic chemicals, a blanket approach to crop protection products is not appropriate, especially where these are non-toxic. The act and its associated regulations put in place bureaucratic processes that involve a lot of red tape and high costs that in effect severely restrict the registration of any new agricultural products, including ecological inputs. The cost of this is passed on to organic farmers. The issue must be addressed by the Parliamentary Agriculture Portfolio Committee, which should understand that this law is an obstacle to achieving the SDGs

### **Ensure that the Agricultural Sector Adaptation Plan addresses agroecology**

Government is currently reviewing a draft agricultural sector Climate Change Adaptation and Mitigation Plan, presenting an opportunity to ensure that agroecology is included as a comprehensive approach to both adaptation and mitigation in the agro-food sector. Civil society will develop practical responses as well as seek to contribute to the Presidential Climate Commission via the Adaptation Network, and engage with the Minister of Agriculture through various channels.





### Create extension services that support agroecology

The National Cross-Sectoral Extension Reference Group, which includes SANBI, SANParks, government departments and civil society, will draw attention to the importance of agroecological extension services to meet climate, environmental and social objectives. The Reference Group will promote the convening power of extension services to help land-users and their communities gain new knowledge and stimulus to enable them to improve their production systems, and to access additional resources for agreed priorities, recognising that institutional, social, resource and capacity constraints must be addressed.



### An urgent imperative

The IPCC Special Report *Climate Change and Land*<sup>3</sup>, states that “about a quarter of the Earth’s ice-free land area is subject to human-induced degradation”. Soil erosion from agricultural fields, salination and changes in precipitation patterns have resulted in the desertification of vast areas that were previously productive farmland and rangeland. South Africa is committed to addressing land degradation, maintaining or enhancing the land resource base mainly by *avoiding degradation*, and then by *reducing or reversing* it. Restoring the functionality of soils and

<sup>3</sup> IPCC 2019. “IPCC Special Report on on Climate Change and Land”, <https://www.ipcc.ch/srccl/>

ecosystems that have been destroyed by the erosion of productive topsoil, is a painstaking, often expensive and always long-term undertaking. People need to feel confident that they will be able to benefit from the investments that they need to make to develop their soils. However, many land users in South Africa do not enjoy secure tenure on the land that they use.

## In Conclusion

Urgent action is needed by a range of actors in government and civil society to redirect resources, skills and educational programmes towards advancing the empowerment of agroecological farmers to contribute to transforming the agricultural sector to one which contributes to achieving the SDGs and food security, and to mitigating the impact of climate change on our environment and society.

As farmers and organisations working in the context of agroecology, we understand that agroecology is an integrated and appropriate response to the multiple challenges facing agriculture and food distribution in the current era of climate change and global disruptions. As our country strives to achieve effective democratic transformation, social justice and redress of past injustices, and to create an inclusive economy, the potential of agroecology to contribute significantly to meeting multiple government objectives is clear.

Numerous policies and plans of government, including the (draft) National Comprehensive Producer Support Policy, the conservation agriculture (CA) and climate smart agriculture (CSA) frameworks, food and nutrition security, natural resource management and biodiversity conservation and sustainable use, land redistribution, water access and use, localisation, cooperative and small enterprise development, spatial planning, local economic development, women and youth, and participation will all be advanced by the wider adoption of agroecology. In their recent assessment of food systems in South Africa, the Department of Science and Innovation (DSI)/National Research Foundation (NRF) Centre of Excellence in Food Security has called for support for transitions to agroecological food systems<sup>4</sup>.

Currently there is little policy or practical support from government for agroecological transition. This reflects a broad lack of understanding of agroecological systems of production coupled with inadequate skills to support the transition. The resources of government are too often used in ways that undermine agroecological initiatives through lack of insight into the environmental, social and economic costs of maladaptation or investment in and incentivisation of conventional approaches to agriculture, natural resource use and conservation.

Civil society calls on government to consult widely, and to critically review its policies and programmes to ensure that they “first do no harm” to agroecological initiatives. Thereafter, they should actively seek to support these initiatives in ways that enhance the agency, knowledge and long-term independence of agroecological practitioners. Enabling frameworks are needed for the certification and marketing of agricultural products that are produced in ways that contribute to achieving the broader environmental, economic and social objectives of the country. Our food systems must become more robust, more inclusive and deliver reliable, affordable and improved nutrition to the people of South Africa.

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<sup>4</sup> FAO, European Union, CIRAD and DSI-NRF Centre of Excellence in Food Security (CoE-FS). 2022. “Food Systems Profile – South Africa. Catalysing the sustainable and inclusive transformation of food systems”. Rome, Brussels, Montpellier and Bellville, <https://www.fao.org/3/cc0071en/cc0071en.pdf>

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