



SOWING CHANGE, GROWING TOGETHER CREATING A RESILIENT FOOD FUTURE

SYNTHESIS REPORT OF THE 2023 AGROECOLOGY EUROPE FORUM
CONVERGING MOVEMENTS FOR RESILIENT FOOD SYSTEMS

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1. BACKGROUND

We humans are separated from ourselves, from the soil, from the earth, and nature—the foundation of life. This is evident in the state of the food system we have created: loss of biodiversity, extremes in weather, and unequal distribution, among other pressing issues. The food system, comprising complex processes and interactions within the natural and human world, should be capable of feeding the growing populations and facing unexpected events such as conflicts, pandemics, and climate change. To solve this food crisis, there is an urgent need to realise the interconnection between living beings, humans, and the natural world.

Focusing on connections between living organisms, nature, rural communities, and various actors in the food chain, the 2023 Agroecology Europe Forum was co-hosted by the Hungarian Agroecology Network Association on 16-18 November against the backdrop of the Mátra Mountains in the Hungarian town of Gyöngyös. “Converging movements for resilient food systems” means promoting dialogue between degrowth, agroecology, and climate and social justice movements, focusing on how each endeavour can strengthen and complement each other in completing different pieces of the puzzle of a regenerative future. The Forum shone a light to the agroecological richness of Central Eastern Europe and created stronger alliances between the different actors involved in the science, practice, and movement arms of agroecology in a more rural context.

Attendees embarked on a journey of dialogue and knowledge exchange about degrowth, agroecology, climate, and social justice. The goal was to understand how these diverse efforts can work in synergy to build a regenerative future. The Forum focused on the transition pathway for the food system through key themes of soil health and one health, strategic alliances commonalities and true inclusivity in agroecology, challenges and opportunities for policy and local governance and combining traditional knowledge and technology.

A total of 290 people from all social and professional backgrounds, at various stages of the agroecological learning journey, immersed themselves in knowledge co-creation through lived experiences in the rich biodiversity, folk culture, and culinary and farming traditions of Central Europe. A convergence of farmers, pastoralists, scientists, and policymakers engaged in bottom-up discourse, along with representatives from youth and intersectional and community groups. Attendees from 36 countries, including 26 European countries engaged in participatory sessions, workshops, poster presentations, field visits, folk dance, Roma concert, and local wine tasting. The next Forum is scheduled in Malmö, Sweden in 2025.

Participants envisioned an environmentally sustainable, socially just, and economically viable food system, rooted in systemic change and ecological thinking, that can withstand challenges such as climate change, economic instability, and resource depletion. Apart from the shared vision and the commitment to future actions for the most pressing challenges of today's agri-food system, they concluded the need for collaborative and innovative ways of thinking and doing.

This synthesis report of the 2023 Agroecology Europe Forum is an outcome of the shared learning and inspiration to build a resilient food system. It serves as the representative and meaningful portrayal of collective understanding and vision co-created by diverse participants of the Forum. This report is a critical outlook and synthesis of presentations and discussion notes taken by the volunteers. It explores the current state and envisioned future of a resilient food system and offers actionable insights for food system stakeholders.

2. CURRENT STATE OF PLAY

Agroecology is a holistic and system-level approach that reconnects and rebuilds relationships and movements within the food system and beyond. It is considered the ultimate and most compressive solution for transforming the agri-food system. In Europe, agroecology is actively evolving and expanding from plot to territorial level and beyond. This evolution is evident from the active development and implementation of key initiatives, including agroecological practices, education and training programs, and various ongoing research and scientific efforts. Approaches such as Light House¹, Living Labs², Agroecological-based Local Agri-Food Systems (ALAs) and Territorial Food Systems³ are emerging. At the governance level, the EU's Farm to Fork Strategy recognizes the role of agroecology in achieving sustainable and resilient farming and food systems, evident in the nearly 200 agroecological projects funded by the EU.⁴

The discourse on agroecology is gaining momentum, with 115 movements across 23 countries. However, conflicting views exist regarding the understanding of agroecology, often perceived as vague and unknown to people.⁵ It is sometimes linked with organic and sustainable agriculture, regenerative agriculture, bio-dynamic farming, and other alternative practices⁶. Agroecology may appear different for large-scale and small-scale

¹ Light House is a civic space and learning centre dedicated to implementing and showcasing agroecological principles and practices in action.

² Living Lab is open innovation in real fields aiming to generate dialogue among stakeholders and create an inspiring space for collaboration, action, and knowledge exchange.

³ Territorialized food systems are localized, collaborative approaches working at the level of territory to create shorter, eco-friendly food chains, promoting public health and food justice.

⁴ A. Tataridas & H. Freitas. *Good-Agroecology for weeds: Building an agroecological weed management network*

⁵ B. Grard. *Mapping Agroecology Initiatives in Europe*

⁶ E. Rousselou & V. de Ganay. *Different Labels: To separate or to pull together towards the transition*

farmers. For large-scale farmers, it is shifting from 'working the land' to 'working with nature', adopting regenerative practices to reduce input or permaculture to redesign the farm. Peasant farmers view agroecology as the means to connect with the land, remain democratic, and define their food system instead of relying on the blueprint of industrial agribusiness.⁷ The debate also includes arguments for having a unified definition and understanding of agroecology to push the momentum forward.

Achieving a truly inclusive food system remains challenging, risking the perpetuation of dominant and patriarchal structures. Despite their diverse roles, women often remain invisible in the agroecological transition, labelled merely as "helpers".⁸ While the number of mouths to be fed is increasing and the number of farmers is decreasing, marginalised individuals engaging in seasonal jobs face the harsh realities of low wages and seasonal migration. This raises urgent concerns about a socially just food system. Additionally, the rise of digitalisation adds another layer of complexity, as agriculture giants with corporate control over seeds and agrochemicals push data-driven input recommendations, often under the guise of practices such as Precision Farming.⁹

In the face of these challenges, diverse food system stakeholders across Europe, Asia, Africa, and America are uniting, embracing agroecological principles and working together to improve the quality of life and the livelihoods of farmers around the globe.

2.1 Farming

Farmers are increasingly seeking alternative pathways to grow food and sustain their land, freedom, and knowledge. However, they face challenges due to rapidly evolving and fragmented knowledge of agroecological practices, lacking a clear understanding of anticipated effects. Implementing such practices is often knowledge-intensive and requires knowing the right technique to apply at the right time. For example, to improve your soil, you must first know your soil type and then apply the management practices accordingly. Beyond technical know-how, practical barriers such as labour intensiveness and economic constraints hinder widespread adoption. Citizens are also involved in agroecological farming practices, motivated to regenerate soil and mitigate climate change.

Digital tools hold the potential to play a pivotal role in empowering farmers with informed decisions, enhancing efficiency, and improving farm well-being. For instance, sensors tracking cattle rumination offer insights into health indices, heat stress, distress, and potential miscarriage.¹⁰ The ability to collect, analyse, and act upon real-time data is a

⁷ A. Szócs-Boruss. *The agroecology of eastern European peasantry: doomed for extinction or fundamental for a just food system for Europe?*

⁸ C. F. Bassignana, J. Donham & C. L. Bader. *Walking the agroecological path through feminism*

⁹ ETC Group. *Issues for the Global South: Food Sovereignty or Corporate Control*

¹⁰ M. Biskup. *Non-invasive sensors for cattle farming in Agroecological conditions*

powerful tool for modernising traditional farming practices, However, synergies are weak between agroecological principles and digital technologies with concerns about affordability, scalability, repairability and data ownership.¹¹ In response, digital platforms such as BILM, an open-source, multilingual tool built and owned by a community to share knowledge, have provided a safe space for collaboration. It is essential to approach digitalisation and artificial intelligence tools critically through a systemic approach, rather than focusing solely on specific devices or aspects of the food system.

Despite advancements, farmers feel their practices and challenges are inadequately understood. Peasant and pastoral lifestyles continue to remain crucial in Europe, serving as an open learning opportunity for agroecology. These farming practices advocate for the integration of crop and livestock practices to sustain natural ecosystems and promote alternative food systems. However, if left in the hands of technocrats, agroecology will be learned from the book. Recognising the vulnerability and value of traditional farming communities and establishing a robust support system is imperative.

2.2. Community

Agroecology extends beyond the notion of commons as mere ownership or control of resources; it embraces commoning as a practice that connects farmers and practitioners, fostering stewardship with land and communities. This communal bond is characterised by passion, love, and care, drawing individuals from diverse disciplines. Actors throughout the value chain unite in shared belief to create coalitions, alliances, networks, and partnerships to cultivate change through various initiatives and movements, for instance the Hungarian Women Herding Group.

Local food provisioning systems collaborate with entrepreneurs and businesses to bridge the gap between producers and consumers through initiatives such as Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), communal farms, local businesses, and collection points. These initiatives are self-organised or facilitated by governance or organisations. CSA farms, especially those run by youth and women, showcase dynamic transition towards agroecological principles, contributing positively to environmental, social, and economic change with stable or increasing income trends.¹² Additionally, various local businesses focusing on food are emerging, e.g., community cafes, small boutiques, food sharing, community cooking, and co-housing. An example is the Pod Café in the UK, an award-winning social restaurant supported by the City Council of Coventry, that provides low-cost healthy meals to the public.¹³ However, in many cases, such initiatives remain a privilege for affluent communities.

¹¹ A. Le Rouzo. *Digitalisation in Swedish agroecological contexts: synergies, technology uptake, and future innovation pathways*

¹² R. Savels, J. Dessein, & S. Speelman. *Assessing the Agroecological Performance and Sustainability of Community-Supported Agriculture Farms in Flanders, Belgium*

¹³ G. Felix. *What's good in Coventry? Food Abundance vs Food Poverty*

Agroecology serves as the common ground, bringing people together from diverse backgrounds and disciplines. In recent years, the agroecological community has been getting bigger, stronger, and more inclusive. These communities include international organisations, public donors, farmers' associations, research organizations, Indigenous People's organisations, foundations, and civil society and NGOs. Even professionals from healthcare and hospitality are joining forces, contributing to the broader scaling out of agroecology. Established peasant movements as La Via Campesina amplify the voices of the unheard. However, building farmers' networks is difficult: a lack of knowledge exchange and balancing social impact with financial and time constraints are a hinderance. Despite political differences and trust issues between movements, there is a call for unity to achieve justice for all through networking, story-sharing, and building resilience.

2.3 Research

Studying the intricate relationships of self-sustaining natural ecosystems, agroecology researchers inform on-the-ground practices by combining short and long-term approaches. They generate evidence showcasing the positive impacts of agroecology on climate change mitigation, biodiversity, and the socio-economic resilience of food systems. Collaborating with diverse knowledge and expertise, they engage in agroecological transitions through co-innovation and developing alternative practices. Farmers also play a crucial role as showcase ambassadors¹⁴ or participants in research where they come together and test and discuss solutions.

Researchers employ whole-system and transdisciplinary approaches, aiming for holistic research to drive the transition from farm to policy levels. The research focuses on assessing the continued capacity of soil to function as a vital living ecosystem that sustains plants, animals, and humans through mycorrhiza, soil inoculation, crop rotation, and non-intensive tillage. Efforts include reintroducing forgotten landraces—the Research Institute of Organic Agriculture (ÖMKi) has brought six varieties of tomato into the market in Hungary.¹⁵ Further studies explore pastoral systems, analysing herd social behaviour and long-term impacts. Global experiences, for instance the use of fermented forest litter and Zero Budget Natural Farming, are being explored for their fit in the European context. The role of digitalisation and data mining in agroecology to extract evidence of crop loss from scientific reports is also subject to research. Research spans plot and agri-food system levels, assessing adoption, diffusion, and scaling up through business models and synergies between funded projects.

¹⁴ S. Pfeiffer. *Paving the Way Towards Digitalization Enabling Agroecology*

¹⁵ O. Papp. *Tomato Landraces – A Success Story*

Universities and research institutions emphasise extensive research frameworks and complex methodologies and reward abstract debate. Engaging with practitioners requires applied research that focuses on solving real-world problems. Unfortunately, this type of research may not easily align with academic and publication criteria, hindering the translation of knowledge into practical solutions.

2.4 Education and Knowledge Transfer

Agroecology is a dialogue of diverse knowledge, bridging the gap between practical and theoretical understanding. It aims to unite learning and knowledge sharing through action research and civic engagement respecting traditional, indigenous, and scientific knowledge along with citizen science. While academic knowledge is growing, the open-book knowledge out there is at risk of being lost if not transmitted. Agroecological knowledge, grounded in peasant wisdom, fosters innovation, empowers farmers' autonomy, and embodies practical, action-oriented experiential learning.

In Europe, educational programs, academic courses, and vocational training are available in 9, 18, and 19 countries, respectively. Educational programs prioritise holistic and whole-of-person learning, starting education from the external world to cultivate core agroecology competencies for taking responsible actions like the Agroecology Action Learning Course at the Norwegian University of Life Sciences. Initiatives, such as EU Farm Networks, through the ERASMUS+ program, bring together students, researchers, and farmers to learn about agroecology. Apprentice programs are also emerging for the younger generation interested in farming. When formal education disregards peasant knowledge, Agroecology School provides a self-organized safe space where farmers co-create and share wisdom using a comfortable, local language grounded in empathy.¹⁶ Within these safe spaces, there is a shared belief in learning from successful and unsuccessful experiences.

We shape our knowledge together, recognizing that transforming education is fundamental to reshaping our food and farming systems. Agroecology learning should cultivate systems thinking, emphasising humanity, emotions, and empathy. It should create a holistic understanding from the inside out, fostering a sense of community, collaboration, and a deep connection to the territory.

2.5 Policy and Governance

While the EU and international institutions recognise the role of agroecology, there are competing interests among member states. Some have embraced agroecology into their national policies, while others, e.g., Greece, lack political interest and awareness. Political obstacles hinder agroecological practices in several countries, and even those

¹⁶ A. Ferrante. *Agroecology Schools: "Schools Without Walls": Trust, Feeling, Territory, and the Education of Eco-Political Concern*

with interest, such as Austria and Belgium, face confusion within their governments about the distinction between agroecology and organic agriculture.

Farmers seeking to transition from conventional to agroecological farming encounter challenges, including resistance to new technologies. While the current governance system falls short of promoting the agroecological transition, bridging the policy-farmer gap is crucial. This requires reform within the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) focusing on collaborative, need-based, inclusive, and region-specific approaches. The multi-level strategy involves engaging local communities, promoting evidence-based research, and ensuring policy coherence among different pillars.¹⁷ The proposed solution includes moving away from hectare-based direct payments and towards agriculture working units. Supportive policies, clear transition plans, and awareness campaigns are essential, framing them from the perspective of real farmers rather than influential lobbies, as seen in the case of the CAP. Despite ongoing lobbying efforts of agro-industrial and chemical companies advocating for a silent spring, some local governments, such as those in Bio Districts,¹⁸ are actively promoting synergies and networking, enabling positive change.

European agroecological diversity, ranging from peasant farming to regenerative practices and community partnerships, serves as foundations for transforming food systems. Building resilience in the face of climate and environmental challenges requires a holistic approach to achieving a successful agroecological transition.

3. FOOD FUTURE

Can agroecology flourish in the confines of the current paradigm? No, we should reimagine our food future, embracing the mosaic of diverse transitioning pathways, each unique to our starting point, goals, and desired food system. This transformation takes time, and a technocratic outlook is not going to save us. Building resilience requires achieving harmony and autonomy without being influenced by the dominant system. We need to rethink knowledge, innovation, connection, and economics, paving the way for new ways of acting in alignment with nature. This starts by redefining and reweaving our relationship with food as life rather than a mere market commodity.

3.1 Thinking Beyond

A transformative shift goes beyond the conventional models embracing knowledge thriving within living communities. Open exchange and collaborative learning empower individuals while strengthening local and global networks. Meaningful innovation in

¹⁷ E. Takács. *Environmental Attitudes and Motivations of Farmers: Behavioural and Economic Drivers and Barriers to Green Change in Agriculture*

¹⁸ Bio District is the approach established in Italy for sustainable, integrated, and participatory territorial development which builds around the environmental, social, and economic dimensions.

agroecology requires breaking habits, challenging stereotypes, and nurturing creativity—even with a willingness to accept failure. This fosters both social and technological innovation coming out from the communities who see the need and possess the drive for change. Farmers are not tools but rather collaborate to co-define context-specific, actionable knowledge. Co-innovating requires reflection, anticipating the unexpected, and access to the right tools, knowledge, and experience.

Key drivers for scaling up agroecology include effective practices, supportive markets, and targeted policies. Reaching conventional farmers involves embracing technological opportunities responsibly through digital tools. The scope extends to reutilising wild and landrace varieties, reintroducing them into the food system, and increasing their market presence. Such innovations are sustained by beyond-economic relationships of solidarity and mutual support emphasising the importance of avoiding patents on living organisms.

Radically rethinking economic and social mechanisms is essential for agroecology to flourish within the current paradigm. This means transitioning from profit optimisation models to explore alternatives that prioritise well-being, sustainability, and local production, ensuring no one is left behind. A fair framework should be established where the market price is not solely dictated by the market itself but rather shaped by small-scale farmers and consumers. This aligns with ecological economics and degrowth movements fostering nature- and community-based economies. However, increased funding for agroecology requires careful and strict monitoring across public and private sectors.¹⁹ Major corporations like Cargill, PepsiCo, and General Mills are channelling funds into “regenerative agriculture” to fulfil their sustainability goals through greenwashing.²⁰ We should resist such co-optation, ensuring it does not befall agroecology.

3.2 Embracing Territories

The agroecological approach recognises that one size does not fit all. The shift from the farm or plot level to the territorial level allows for the development of place-based strategies that consider unique regional strengths, challenges, and opportunities. Connecting farmers into organised groups and communities at the landscape level further facilitates the agroecological transition. Working at the territorial level fosters the localised and decentralised food systems while also conserving bio-cultural diversity. Additionally, it has the potential to connect rural, suburban, and urban areas, promoting shared experiences beyond territorial boundaries and developing ecologically and economically embedded food systems.

¹⁹ C. Bader, B. Grard, N. Moeller, S. Féret, P. Vandenbroucke, & A. Wezel. *Funding the Agroecological Transition: The Role of Foundations in Europe*

²⁰ ETC Group. *Issues for the Global South: Food Sovereignty or Corporate Control*

The territorial approach preserves culture, heritage, landscapes, and biodiversity. This builds a strong connection between farmers and the land, enabling them to sustain the bond between animals, people, and the environment. Within traditional and pastoral systems, farmers are cultural shapers, contributing to the preservation of traditional and local knowledge, culture, and cultivation practices, thereby ensuring the maintenance of biodiversity from soil to farming systems.

3.3 Envisioning Together

Achieving systemic change in our food system through innovation and landscape approach requires bringing together diverse individuals with unique experiences, knowledge, and skills. This process, based on collective action and care, is critical in addressing gap in our understanding and bridging the divide between farmers, researchers, policymakers, and all stakeholders who share a vision for a resilient food system.

This sense of togetherness is more than just co-habitation, it is about co-creation and co-existence between people and nature. In the myriad diversity of people, thoughts, and mindsets, we should learn how nature thrives. It is exemplified through One Health, showing the interwoven health and well-being of soil, plants, animals, and whole ecosystems. This understanding guides us to build relationships with one another and with food. Drawing inspiration from feminine energy, we should place life, relationships, care, and balance at the centre of the food system.

As we transcend generations, knowledge, and mindsets, the key lies in connecting, collaborating, thinking, and engaging together both locally and internationally. Showcasing the unity of farmers, activists, scientists, citizens, and policymakers under the banner of agroecology requires converging grassroots movements and top-down approaches, connecting policy and action. This is the path towards a sustainable and just society where the citizens actively shape the food system, which requires education, appreciation, activism, solidarity, and a collective effort. It commences by treating the earth with love and care, listening to marginalised voices, appreciating intersectionality, challenging stereotypes, and dismantling biases.

Imagine farmers and policymakers collaborating to observe the symbiotic relationship between tiny rod-shaped Rhizobia and pea roots and wondering about the role of cover crops in fixing nitrogen, sequestering carbon, and securing a food future.

- Let's envision we prioritise financial security for farmers and build solidarity.
- Let's envision responsible digitalisation serving us, not the other way around.
- Let's envision marginalised communities secure land rights and grow their food.

- Let's envision we cultivate a sense of belonging, seeing ourselves as part of the whole.
- Let's envision we respect and honour animals and other living beings in the entire food system.
- Let's envision we celebrate every milestone, small or big, fuelling our motivation and resilience in the face of challenges.
- Let's envision we reintroduce wild and underutilised crops to the table, reviving, recognising, and reintegrating traditional wisdom.
- Let's envision nutrient-rich, agroecologically grown food becoming the norm and healthcare prioritising prevention through personalised diets.
- Let's envision we are rethinking power dynamics in food production, distribution, and commercialization, creating a fairer and more equitable food system.
- Let's envision that through trust, empathy, and collaboration, communities exchange knowledge and translate ideas into action for an inclusive, resilient, sovereign food system.

Whether peasant or conventional farmers, younger or older generations, producers or consumers, doctors or patients, all orientations, Eastern or Western Europe, the Global North and South – let's unite in action. We can start making positive changes, wherever we are, to build a resilient food system.

4. WHAT WE CAN DO

The following recommendations were collaboratively formulated at the Forum to guide food system actors in fostering a resilient food future.

4.1 Farmers

- Share experience and knowledge with fellow farmers, consumers, and other stakeholders.
- Say no to sole reliance on technological fixes and unsustainable practices.
- Join movements to collectively identify and advocate for agroecology-friendly policies.
- Start small by implementing agroecological practices in the field.

4.2 Researchers

- Validate solutions in real-world settings through research, trials, and demonstrations.
- Explore the potential of landraces, wild and underutilized plants, and identify market opportunities.
- Build trust with farmers and policymakers, sharing knowledge and findings locally.
- Showcase agroecology's benefit for climate change, biodiversity, and resilient communities.

4.3 Policymakers

- Co-create agricultural policies with farmers, addressing their needs and motivations.
- Promote multi-level policy reform, engaging local communities and ensuring coherence in the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP).
- Develop regionally tailored policies with a landscape approach to restore biodiversity and cultural landscapes.
- Shift investment from traditional methods towards knowledge creation and innovation.

4.4 Activists

- Demand land access, fair compensation, and economic freedom for farmers and peasants.
- Advocate for policies securing safe and nutritious food at fair prices for all.
- Raise awareness about the importance of local products, markets, and small-scale farmers.
- Engage consumers with powerful stories showcasing the value of local producers and sustainable practices.

4.5 Citizens

- Start small by growing your own food and supporting a food bank.
- Embrace local and seasonal diets with less meat and healthy produce.
- Share sustainable recipes and bring behavioural change.
- Educate yourself and participate in local initiatives.

4.6 Educators

- Implement hands-on, collaborative learning with real-world applications.
- Regularly update curriculums for current realities and agroecological contexts.
- Shift to transformative, collaborative, and action-oriented learning approaches.
- Design flexible learning environments that ignite curiosity, empower self-directed learning and nurture empathy.

4.7 Advisors

- Share best practices and research findings, instead of imposing generic solutions.
- Tailor advice to the specific needs of territories, considering contextual challenges.
- Engage diverse stakeholders and listen to their concerns, aspirations, and interests.
- Focus on long-term, sustainable solutions that promote social justice and economic viability.

5. THE BOTTOM LINE

Change begins by understanding what went wrong and why. It involves (un)learning and (re)building our connection with food, nature, and each other. Bridging the gap between science, farmers, and policymakers through effective communication and co-creation of knowledge is crucial. We need to embrace innovation and knowledge exchange while considering the entire food chain and its unique territorial context. This is a reminder that food connects us and the path to the resilient food future is not a solitary one, but a collective journey strengthened by bio-cultural diversity and peasant agroecology.

Together, we can overcome the challenges and transition to a more resilient and equitable food future by celebrating the diversity of cultures, peoples, plants, animals, and all living beings.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Kushal Poudel was born and raised in the lap of the Annapurna Himalayas of Nepal. He is currently pursuing a International Double Degree Program, MSc Agroecology. His diverse experiences span Asia and Europe; he is involved in the conservation of local landraces and heritage, as well as teaching and mentoring young individuals on sustainability, entrepreneurship, indigenous knowledge, and climate action.

He believes change can be achieved through transformative action and a shift in behaviour, rooted in experiential learning and reflection. He envisions building resilient communities by embracing bio-cultural diversities.

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