

THE ADDED VALUE(S) OF AGROECOLOGY:

UNLOCKING THE POTENTIAL FOR
TRANSITION IN WEST AFRICA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



West Africa faces a number of urgent and interconnected challenges. With temperatures rising 1.5 times faster than global averages, intense climate variability, reliance on rain-fed agriculture, and limited adaptive capacity, the region is fast becoming a climate hotspot. This, in combination with other stresses, is projected to lead to highly unpredictable agricultural productivity, loss of biodiversity, greater food insecurity, as well as socio-economic and political instability. These risks come in a context where 70-80% of the population lives on less than \$2 a day, and where the COVID-19 pandemic is threatening to plunge millions more into poverty and food insecurity. With one of the youngest populations in the world, questions are also arising about the capacity of West African economies to absorb millions of young people into the labour force.

Food systems are at the heart of these challenges – and are changing fast. Agriculture, livestock, and fisheries account for 35% of regional Gross Domestic Product and employ more than 60% of the population. On one hand, West African agriculture is still characterized by diverse agro-sylvo-pastoral production systems: 90% of agricultural production is accounted for by family farms, producing a range of foods for their households and communities on small plots of land. But export commodity zones, large-scale land acquisitions, and huge influxes of foreign investment ('FDI') are also a feature of this complex and varied landscape – signaling the accelerating efforts to commercialize and industrialize all aspects of West African food systems.

Agroecology is emerging as a compelling response to the challenges West Africa faces, and a viable alternative to the industrial agri-development pathway. Agroecological systems build resilience through crop/species diversity and natural synergies across the whole agro-ecosystem, thereby offering a response to the urgent challenges of climate change and resource scarcity. Furthermore, agroecology is labour intensive, does not require major land restructuring or upscaling, and relies on farmer-to-farmer and intergenerational modes of knowledge exchange – making it well-adapted to the structure and economic realities of West African agriculture.

Despite the multiple efforts and initiatives to develop agroecology in the region, political support remains limited, and blockages are emerging at multiple levels. Through a three-year participatory research process, we identified eight key obstacles to agroecology in West Africa:

OBSTACLE 1:

ACCESS TO FINANCE

While agroecological systems draw on natural synergies and use locally-available resources, transitioning to this model entails some costs at the outset, and requires support. Public and private investment is flooding into West African agriculture, but is mostly accruing to export commodity production, high value-added sectors, and agropoles. These trends have been reinforced by the need to service debts via exports of cash crops, the use of public finances to unlock private investment opportunities (e.g. PPPs, blended finance models), and the influence of a handful of international donors on whom West African countries are highly reliant. Meanwhile, smallholders, and particularly women, struggle to access the credit they would need to move beyond subsistence farming.

OBSTACLE 2:

ACCESS TO LAND AND WATER

Rapid population growth, urban sprawl, and land grabbing have created unprecedented pressures on land and water resources in West Africa. Land laws, often rooted in the colonial era, have generally failed to protect customary tenure and land use. Between 2000 and 2012, some 3 million hectares of land were subject to large-scale land acquisitions across nine West African countries. These land deals have been linked to the eviction of peasant farmers, the loss of access to grazing land, and the depletion of resources for local food production. Large-scale irrigation projects have further reduced access to water for pastoralists and smallholders. In the Sudano-Sahelian area, land and water grabbing has led to the breakdown of traditional pastoral areas, creating conflict between farmers and pastoralists. Climate change is exacerbating these pressures. As a result, potential adopters of agroecology are left with marginal land, resource constraints and competition, and – in the absence of secure land tenure – no guarantee that they will be able to reap the benefits of transition.

OBSTACLE 3:

ACCESS TO SEEDS AND ORGANIC INPUTS

Farmer seed systems, through which farmers select, multiply, conserve, and exchange a wide range of reproducible varieties, account for as many as 75% of varieties grown in Mali, and up to 90% of the seeds used in some countries in Africa. These systems are an essential component of agroecology, which relies on diversity at all levels (including crop genetic diversity). However, they are lacking in legal recognition and policy support, and are relegated to 'informal' status, while privatized seed systems are gaining ground on the back of donor- and industry-led initiatives. While farmer seed systems for cereal crops are highly developed, access to vegetable seeds remains low. Farmers also face major challenges in accessing organic matter, as a result of desertification, deforestation and encroachment on land and natural woodlands, while access to manure is limited by the large distances and poor linkages between animal rearing and cropping zones.

OBSTACLE 4:

ACCESS TO MARKETS

Agroecological produce is valued by a growing number of West African consumers on the basis of its perceived advantages in terms of taste, quality, resistance to transport, and increased shelf life, while concerns about synthetic inputs and diet-related diseases are driving general interest in the nutritional and health properties of foods. Nonetheless, reliable and remunerative sales outlets for agroecological produce are still lacking. Firstly, in a context of high post-harvest losses, producers of the same crop are forced to sell at the same time, resulting in oversupply and lower prices. Prices are further driven down by imported goods – which gain regional market shares and disincentivize the development of local value chains. In general, there is a lack of price differentiation or visual distinction between conventional and agroecological produce, apart from a limited range of certified organic and agroecological-labelled products which tend to price out local consumers.

OBSTACLE 5:

POLITICAL BUY-IN

Agroecology has made its way into regional policy frameworks (e.g. ECOWAS) and national policies (e.g. Burkina Faso, Senegal). However, the policies that mention agroecology also mandate growth corridors for export commodities and the upscaling of family farms, while directing the bulk of resources towards the conventional/ industrial pathway. In some cases, this is a result of 'double speak' where divergent and competing objectives overlap in the statements and policy prescriptions of elected officials. But in other cases, it reflects weak government steering capacity, fragmented funding structures, and the ability of dominant financial partners to lobby for their own interests at the implementation stage. Incoherent policy imperatives at the national level in fact mirror the incoherence within and between the many agriculture, nutrition, and food security frameworks adopted at regional and pan-African levels.

OBSTACLE 6:

UPTAKE OF AGROECOLOGICAL PRACTICES

While industrial agriculture tends to reduce total labour requirements, agroecological practices require significant time and manual labour – particularly if the relevant tools are lacking. The challenge of convincing people to adopt agroecology is compounded by the increasing characterization of farming as a backward livelihood in the region. Furthermore, agroecological practices are context-specific and require a breadth of skills and knowledge. This in turn necessitates considerable training and support in the transition phases. The decline and defunding of public agricultural extension services therefore represents a major obstacle to agroecology in West Africa.

OBSTACLE 7:

BRINGING EVIDENCE TO BEAR

Across West Africa, scientific research is widely funded and shaped by external donors. Total funding for agricultural research, education and extension is stagnating, and represented only 14% of agricultural aid to Africa in 2017. Donors are generally not prioritizing agroecological research, making it difficult for researchers to pursue this pathway. Furthermore, there has been a failure to communicate the existing research and evidence on the performance of agroecology. This reflects the fact that agroecological research does not typically produce evidence of the type valued by the mainstream; the undervaluing of agroecology's benefits under conventional performance criteria; insufficient efforts to communicate and break down the findings of scientific research to policymakers and farmers; and prohibitive dissemination costs (e.g. printing, translation, radio or television fees).

OBSTACLE 8:

FRAGMENTATION OF THE MOVEMENT

While many initiatives and platforms are developing in the region to support agroecological transition, they often remain isolated, poorly documented, and insufficiently coordinated with each other. Further networking of the agroecology movement is essential to build trust, encourage common ownership of the issues, and ensure that the plans, strategic actions, and needs of grassroots actors are transmitted into policy debates. To overcome resistance at the political level and show that agroecology is not purely a form of militant activism, balanced representation among different groups and operational reform proposals are essential.

The obstacles to agroecology are therefore numerous, and mutually-reinforcing. For example, without a secure resource base for agroecological production (Obstacles 2 and 3) and without remunerative sales outlets (Obstacle 4), agroecology remains on the fringes and struggles to be economically viable. This limits its attractiveness to farmers (Obstacle 6) and to policymakers (Obstacle 5). In turn, low political buy-in accentuates funding shortfalls for agroecology (Obstacle 1): external donors, in particular, are unlikely to push for agroecological development pathways without a clear signal from national governments. Furthermore, the obstacles to agroecology in West Africa are reinforced by a series of global dynamics (e.g. short-term and highly compartmentalized policy frameworks, 'feed the world' narratives, and export orientation) that 'lock in' industrial agriculture.

Nonetheless, the foundations of different food systems and different economic systems have remained intact in West Africa, and are being revived by vibrant movements to defend farmer seed systems, smallholder land tenure, and peasant agriculture. We identify four leverage points where sustained action could build on progress already made, overcome key obstacles, and accelerate the agroecological transition in West Africa:

LEVERAGE POINT 1:

ALLIANCE-BUILDING AND COLLECTIVE ACTION

A vocal, visible, broad-based, and unified agroecological movement is essential for advancing change on multiple fronts and unlocking transition in West Africa. Agroecology is already well embedded in the region as science, practice, and social movement, providing strong foundations for broad-based alliances. Furthermore, there are signs that the fragmentation of the movement is being increasingly overcome. Over recent years, the agroecology and food sovereignty movements are finding common cause, with diverse groups coming together around struggles to resist land grabs, counter GMOs and pesticides, and protect peasant seeds. Since 2018, some 69 organizations have joined the Alliance for Agroecology in West Africa (AAO) and committed to working with a breadth of partners (farmers organizations, social movements, advocacy NGOs, research networks and international organizations) to develop a multi-country, multi-scale action plan for advancing agroecology. As well as facilitating collective action, alliances transform the modalities and mindsets of their members, helping actors to see themselves as part of an inter-connected landscape, while increasing creative learning, experimentation, and innovation due to the many perspectives and insights involved.

LEVERAGE POINT 2:

INTEGRATED FOOD POLICIES

Reforming the governance of food systems is a powerful vehicle for advancing agroecology in West Africa and beyond. Integrated food policy frameworks can align various sectoral policies with overarching food system objectives, assign accountability over multi-year timeframes, and allow diverse constituencies to co-define priorities on equal footing.

This approach is particularly relevant in West Africa, given the need to reconcile the competing initiatives espoused by governments, and to re-establish agroecological transition as a top priority. Integrated food policies can build on the basic foundations provided by CAADP, and by the national and regional frameworks put in place to implement it – notably ECOWAP. Furthermore, comprehensive food policies can provide a focal point for bringing together an ever-broader coalition of actors with a shared interest in transforming food systems, including consumers, supply chain actors, public health organizations, youth movements, municipal policymakers, and many others.

LEVERAGE POINT 3:

FOOD SOVEREIGNTY, TERRITORIAL DEVELOPMENT, AND A NEW ECONOMIC PARADIGM

As economic orthodoxies are questioned and new priorities and paradigms gradually take root, favourable conditions for agroecology could start to emerge. Agroecology can thrive when the additional value it creates – for ecosystems and for society – is rewarded, and when hybrid systems (e.g. new knowledge exchanges, new modes of accessing and sharing resources, solidarity-based marketing structures and sales outlets) are able to emerge alongside the mainstream economy. Favourable conditions for agroecology can be accelerated by building on existing political footholds and openings in economic thinking. For example, as civil society and scientific actors have increasingly argued, agroecology may in fact be the most cost-efficient way, and perhaps the only way, for countries to meet the majority of the SDGs. This could be achieved through modest reorientation of economic strategies, realignment with the original CAADP and NEPAD goals, and redirection of some FDI flows towards agroecological markets as a commercialization opportunity. Furthermore, trade-based growth mantras are giving way to new paradigms. The EU and OECD have recognized the need for *territorial* rural development strategies. Meanwhile, the principle of *food sovereignty* has been invoked by a number of West African governments in their economic and food security strategies.

AGROECOLOGY AS CRISIS RESPONSE

As disease and climate threats multiply, agroecology can be positioned as a systemic solution to prevent and build resilience to future shocks.

Agroecology can and must be placed at the heart of the radical climate mitigation strategies the region urgently needs. Through its focus on diversity at all levels, agroecology builds in resilience to shocks. Meanwhile, its adaptability and economic viability for family farms makes agroecology appropriate for the various parts of West Africa and the various forms of extreme weather they will face. The COVID-19 pandemic is also highlighting the need for food systems transformation. COVID-19 is already hitting West Africa hard, with food insecurity projected to rise as a result of supply chain interruptions, access problems, and lost income. However, it is also creating opportunities for new investments and new thinking. At least six West African countries have prepared response plans worth 1.85 trillion CFA (€2.8 billion), but implementation and mobilization of resources is proving challenging. Action is also being stepped up at the pan-African and regional levels. In April 2020, all 55 AU member states committed to strengthen their social safety nets, bolster intra-regional food and agricultural trade, and support access to food and nutrition for their most vulnerable populations. In other words, new ways of intervening in and governing food systems are rapidly being adopted. While agroecology has not been prioritized among initial responses, there is major scope to place it at the centre of crisis responses. As the COVID-19 and climate crises unfold, and the SDGs loom large in the background, the need for cost-effective solutions to support the livelihoods of family farms *and* deliver access to healthy and nutritious food will become more acute. In other words, agroecology can and must become a byword for *systemic response* and for *resilience*.

The challenge remains vast, with the region delicately poised at the threshold of different pathways. Nonetheless, a promising picture emerges: West Africa has all the ingredients to become the epicenter of the global agroecology movement, and one of the frontrunners in transition to sustainable and equitable food systems. All of this relies, most of all, on the continued willingness of those working towards agroecology to keep cooperating, sharing and working together – in line with the foundational principles of agroecology.

ABOUT IPES-FOOD

The International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems (IPES-Food) seeks to inform debates on food systems reform through policy-oriented research and direct engagement with policy processes around the world. The expert panel brings together environmental scientists, development economists, nutritionists, agronomists, and sociologists, as well as experienced practitioners from civil society and social movements. The panel is co-chaired by Olivier De Schutter, former UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, and Olivia Yambi, nutritionist and former UNICEF representative to Kenya.

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