

**Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa (AFSA)
Regional Conference on Agroecology for Climate Resilience and
Drawing a Roadmap towards a Common Food Policy for Africa**

Report



Mary Njeri Karanu
Programs Officer, Rural Outreach Africa (ROA)
Email: knjeri2003@gmail.com

The AFSA agroecology conference and Africa food policy workshop took place in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia on November 5-8, 2019 at Azzeman Hotel.

I attended this conference and workshop to represent our organization, Rural Outreach Africa (ROA) who is a partner in developing a common food policy for Africa, facilitated by Welthungerhilfe (WHH).

The first two days were focused on demonstrating agroecology as a solution to climate change effects, and the third day was dedicated to drawing ideas towards a common food policy for Africa.

The events were attended by about 170 participants from 27 countries in Africa, Europe, USA, and Australia. Sixty percent (60%) of the participants were civil society organizations (CSOs) representatives; others came from research and academia, government, and media.

The hosts were AFSA and MELCA- Ethiopia (Movement for Ecological Learning and Community Action). The conference moderator was Mr. Abdallah Henku from Tanzania.

Welcome remarks were given by Mr. Solomon Kebede, the chair of MELCA- Ethiopia. He talked about the effects of “unchecked” conventional agriculture that contributes to pollution, unfair trade, and climate crisis. He proposed agroecology as a solution and social movement towards sustainable production and conservation of the environment.

Ms. Mariama Sonko, the chair of AFSA, in her introductory remarks reminded participants that we have a relationship with our food, our food is sacred and we should protect it, and food should not be colonized or used as a bargaining chip.

AFSA coordinator, Dr. Million Belay laid out the objectives of the meeting. He gave a brief introduction to AFSA, a network of networks, operating in 50 of the 54 African countries comprised of civil society actors who are a part of the struggle to realize food sovereignty and agroecology in Africa. AFSA chose the name food sovereignty because it speaks to how food is produced; with little or no environmental impact, food that is culturally appropriate, and ownership of food and land resources. AFSA engages in advocacy based on research, they do mobilization and public education. Dr. Belay talked about the hope he has for agroecology as the way for future food production in the face of climate change:

- i. There is more clarity that conventional agriculture is negatively impacting our health.
- ii. There is a growing body of research on soil health “brown revolution”.
- iii. Climate research awareness and international solidarity, for example, Gretha Thunberg’s social movement on the climate crisis.
- iv. Innovations in energy- solar to replace coal and fossil fuels
- v. Scaling up plans for agroecology and recognition by UNFAO
- vi. Food systems now feature in policy discussions
- vii. The Green New Deal, in the USA
- viii. Religious institutions creating awareness, educating people on regenerative agriculture

UNECA representative, Mr. Mahamadou stated that agroecology is aligned with agenda 2063 of the African Union and the SDGs. He stressed the importance of farmer-based and farmer-owned solutions as climate change effects are felt the most in Africa. Soil mapping and fertility analysis are important to know the nutrients present and lacking in our soils.

Mrs. Lucie Attikpa, president of the West African Association for the Development of Small-scale Fishing (ADEPA/WADAF) challenged participants with her statements:

- i. Are we ready to change?
- ii. We should promote food quality at all levels, from production to the plate
- iii. We need concrete actions and spread the word on good practices
- iv. Country development plans should construct roads/infrastructure from agricultural production areas to towns, not from one town to another as is the current practice.
- v. CSOs and development partners should work with women. Women lift up society.

The official opening of the conference was by the state minister of agriculture in Ethiopia, Dr. Kaba Urgessa. He underscored the importance of agriculture in national economies as it contributes 30-40% of Africa’s GDP. There is a need to change the business-as-usual way of agriculture and embrace more sustainable ways like agroecology, in order to counteract climate change risks. Dr. Urgessa launched the

AFSA publication- Seed is Life-, a collection of case studies on African managed seed systems.

Technical Presentations on Agroecology Practices

Agroecology, as defined by AFSA, is “a people-centered system of sustainable agriculture, combining indigenous knowledge with cutting-edge science, making the best use of nature to create healthy communities, and empowering a social movement that resists the capitalization of agriculture”.

Presentation #1: Mrs. Lucie Attikpa

Climate change is degrading the ocean environment by causing acidification of the marine ecosystem, ocean erosion, high winds/tides, and destruction of mangroves. This has negatively impacted households dependent on the ocean for food and income. The organization (ADEPA/WADAF) is working to reverse the negative impacts of climate change by replanting mangroves, using octopus pots to replenish octopus population, training (and practice) of fish farming as a coping mechanism, promoting value addition (fish meat, quiches, sausages), and micro-credit for women fishers.

Presentation #2: Gebremedhin Belay (Ethiopia)

The push-pull technology was promoted in South Wello region in Ethiopia for maize and sorghum farmers, to control Striga weed and stem borer. The intervention capitalized on farmer-to-farmer training, farmer training centers and provision of desmodium seed. The outcome was that 77% of farmers in the region were trained in the technology, 97% of those trained adopted the technology, there was increased farmer participation, and increased sorghum yields. Overall, farmer-to-farmer training was effective in technology dissemination and promoting adoption.

Presentation #3: Mersha Yilma (MELCA-Ethiopia)

MELCA is an organization that helps to bridge the gap between traditional (indigenous) knowledge and modern scientific knowledge through:

- i. Training and capacity building and dialogue
- ii. Promotion of community seed banks to conserve local seeds
- iii. Establishment of research sites
- iv. Promotion of the use of organic inputs
- v. Seed and food fairs
- vi. Policy and advocacy

Presentation #4: Peter Gubbels and Tsuamba Bourgou (Burkina Faso/ Sahel)

The presentation focused on the promotion of agroforestry in the Sahel region of West Africa. Due to population pressure and increasing temperatures, former regenerative practices like fallow land and migration are not currently possible. Other ways, for example, agroforestry, promote natural regeneration, mixed farming of crops and trees,

trees protect the soil from evapotranspiration, trees reduce the speed of wind, and woodlots (bushes and shrubs) are a source of fuel.

The Sahel is a climate hotspot. One degree (1°) rise in temperature leads to a 10% decline in crop yields. How then do we cope? Peter gave some examples of strategies implemented in West Africa.

- i. Tree-based farming, planting crops under trees
- ii. Soil and water conservation using “Zai” that is, micro water catchments
- iii. Fast compost (only 15 days) to retain soil moisture
- iv. Rotational cropping with legumes
- v. Short-cycle seeds
- vi. Dry season gardens by women’s groups

In the end, there is no one answer or strategy to cope with climate change effects. We should use a combination of approaches. Agroforestry has been proven to be one of the best solutions to reverse the accumulation of carbon dioxide.

Presentation #5: Osmond Mugweni (Zimbabwe)

The presentation was about watershed conservation in drylands through agroforestry. Rangeland plants are adapting to overgrazing and over-resting. Indigenous knowledge is important in rangeland conservation, and can be upgraded with modern science.

Presentation #6: Peter Byaruhanga (Uganda)

The presentation focused on biochar as a way to recycle nutrients and sequester accumulated atmospheric carbon dioxide to be put back in the soil.

- i. Biochar retains water and nutrients in the soil and regulates temperatures. For perennial crops, biochar is buried in the soil, and for annual crops it is placed 6 inches below the soil.
- ii. Cover crops: plants pull carbon dioxide from the air during photosynthesis and store it in biomass. Roots decompose into soil organic matter. Soil organic matter improves water retention, physical properties, microbial activity (health), fertility and productivity.

Presentation #7: Timothy Wise (Tufts University)

Tim’s research took a critical look at AGRA’s (Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa) green revolution programs over ten years. The complete publication can be found in the following link.

<https://afsafrica.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/agrawiseprelimfindings2017.pdf>

Some of the limitations of AGRA’s success (from this research) are:

- i. Success was limited to maize
- ii. Success was heavily sustained due to farm input and subsidy programs (FISPs), unsustainable without FISPs

- iii. Existing land did not increase yields (intensification), rather, farmers extensified, that is, new land was put under maize production

Presentation #8: Andre Leu (Australia)

The representative from Regeneration International informed participants of a research statistic that shows only 10% of farms need to go into intensive regenerative practices to reverse the effects of climate change and carbon dioxide accumulation.

Presentation #9: Dakishoni Laifolo (Malawi)

The research was about gender and agroecology in Malawi. The research was farmer-centered, farmers were co-researchers. Some of the findings were better weight for age Z scores in households practicing agroecology, pigeon pea and groundnuts were the preferred crops, farmer-to-farmer methods were successful, crop diversification (legumes) and organic matter improved soil fertility.

Presentation #10: UNFAO

The ten elements of agroecology <http://www.fao.org/3/i9037en/i9037en.pdf>

Presentation #11: Sena Alouka

We can influence policy advocacy for climate change and agroecology through evidence sharing, participation in policy dialogue at regional meetings- African Union, NEPAD, CAADP, and also through UN bodies.

Presentation #13: Regassa Feyissa (Ethiopia)

Takeaways from the policy issues on agroecology in Ethiopia are that agroecology is a way of thinking, a shift towards systems thinking. How does food production interact and impact other resources- biological, ecological and social capital?

Presentation #14: Michael S Tiampati (Kenya)

The National Coordinator of the Pastoralists Development Network of Kenya (PDNK) presented the case for pastoralism and its contribution to agroecology.

- i. In Africa, the rangelands form the largest landmass, and the production system there is pastoralism.
- ii. Historically, the complementarities between crop growers and pastoralists have been extensively documented. For example, the Maasai community relies on farmers to supply grain in exchange for livestock during hard times.
- iii. Grasslands are emerging as some of the best carbon sinks.

Developing a Roadmap towards a Common Food Policy for Africa

Welcome remarks were given by Amadou Kanoute of AFSA.

Dr. Million Belay gave background and motivation for this undertaking by AFSA. There is currently no common food policy for Africa. The food we eat and the current food systems are shaped by distinct policy frameworks: agriculture, trade, environment, health, climate, energy, governance, rural development, etc., policies that are developed in isolation from each other. The development of a common food policy for the continent will be a 4 year process of collaborative research, reflection and citizen

engagement to identify necessary tools to develop a sustainable food system. The work will involve identifying conflicting objectives and potential synergies in existing food policies. A multi-stakeholder approach will be used for the different policy areas (agriculture, health, environment, etc.) and the different policy levels (local, national and regional (AU)).

AFSA is collaborating with partners like Welthungerhilfe (WHH) will facilitate country dialogues towards the common food policy.

To lay the conceptual ground for the work, we had two presentations:

1. Stephano Prato, the managing director, and Editor, Development, Society for International Development (SID).

Some of the main points from his talk were:

- a. It is time to shift from agricultural food policies to food systems policies.
- b. Food systems permeate different sectors like health, environment, business, etc.
- c. Diets are not an individual choice but a social contract involving producers, markets, etc.
- d. A consumer-centric approach is not good. Households will buy food that is affordable to them even if it does not provide adequate nutrition. Consumer-centrism is not sustainable because it conceals the production process and other aspects such as land issues.
- e. Stefano proposed 3 possible policy pathways:
 - i. Policy to redirect the food system framework
 - ii. Technology assessment- look for technologies that favour a food systems approach
 - iii. Policy to address land issues, such as divestment of land.

2. Celine Perodeaud and Olivia Yambi from IPES- Food

- a. Celine and Olivia presented learnings from the development of a common food policy for the European Union (EU)
- b. The process started with identifying the problems to be addressed: environment, social, economic impacts, and health risks.
- c. Next was justifying the need for a common food policy: reduce conflict between policy areas, bridging the gap between governance levels, overcome short-term thinking and path dependencies, and more democratic decision making.
- d. There were 5 policy labs, 4 local labs. The process involved producers, consumer movements, trade unions, private sector, and policymakers.

Celine stressed the need to have a neutral organization lead the process. In the case of the EU, IPES-Food was the organization.

Dr. Laila Lokosang, African Union Food Security and Nutrition Director

Dr. Laila weighed in on challenges facing the African food system. He pointed out that as we develop a common food policy for the continent, we should look at existing gaps

in driving policy. He expressed confidence that AFSA would come up with Africa-led policy solutions to food insecurity.

Important takeaways from the meeting

- The current system of food production is not sustainable for much longer. We are now facing a climate emergency, according to scientists. Agroecology is a possible solution to reverse the effects of climate change.
- We need to employ systems thinking approach. Food and agriculture are interlinked with many other sectors like health, environment, education, social services, governance, trade, and business. The opposite of systems-thinking is working in silos, and this is proving harmful to humans and the environment. For a more sustainable way of food production, all actors must be engaged in dialogue.
- Our indigenous food culture is being lost and at a fast rate. Traditional African diets are diverse and nutritious, drawing from plant and animal sources. As such, we need to protect and promote the use of indigenous seeds and knowledge.
- Continuous awareness about the benefits of agroecology is important for change to happen. More evidence is required, at the farmers' level as well as nationally and globally, that agroecology can produce enough, can work in large scale systems, can sustainably feed a household and improve household economics.
- To effect change in policy spaces on agroecology and climate change, there needs to be a strong advocacy push, involve media, bring policymakers on the ground to show practical applications of agroecology and that it works.
- A lot of this depends on resources. For the message of agroecology to reach the remotest farmers, financial resources are crucial to process implementation.
- The process of developing a common food policy for Africa will involve several country-level dialogues and regional dialogues. Country dialogues will assess existing policies, synergies, and contradictions; focus on climate change, and existing opportunities to inform the common food policy.