

# Moving Forward Strategically Towards Sustainable, Just and Nutritious Food Systems in Africa

---

## Introduction

This document elaborates the outcomes of the Addis Ababa Conference on “Changing Food Systems in Africa: Agroecology and Food Sovereignty and their Role in Nutrition and Health”. The three-day conference brought together representatives of civil society organizations, farmers, fisherfolk, pastoralists, indigenous peoples, consumers, youth networks, women’s networks, food processors, practitioners, government, academics and researchers, to learn, discuss and deliberate on the issues facing Africa in the context of food, nutrition and health of the African people.

The conference was jointly organized by: the Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa (AFSA), Mekelle University in Ethiopia, the Ecological Organic Agricultural Initiative (EOAI), IFOAM – Organics International, and the African Organic Network (AfrOnet).

## The problem

As highlighted in the Addis Ababa Declaration, food systems in Africa must change course towards a strong nexus involving production, nutrition and health. Our food systems have been hijacked by dominant strategies that only treat the symptoms but fail to address the root causes. Evidently, it is widely acknowledged that there are huge problems causing great concern, such as:

- Land degradation;
- Dependency on agrochemicals;
- Loss of biodiversity;
- Poisons spreading all around the environment;
- Health problems related to poor diets;
- Loss of local, context-specific knowledge and skills;
- Unplanned urbanization
- The increasing threat of climate change.

What matters now is that we collectively and strategically respond properly and fully. This means going to the underlying root causes of the problems and dealing with them there, and not simply addressing the symptoms.

## The solution

We are not talking about **tweaking** the current food systems in Africa, with such programmes as Climate Smart Agriculture (CSA) or bio-fortification of foods. We are talking about and calling for a complete **transformation** of food systems across the continent towards those that promote the vibrant health of all Africans in a just and sustainable way. But, in order to achieve this total transformation, there has to be a well-planned period of **transition**. We are calling for a shift to food systems in Africa that:

- Restore and revitalize degraded soils across the continent so that they are once again full of micro-organism activity and life, growing nutrient dense food.
- Are based on increasingly knowledgeable smallholder farmers, sharing and furthering their knowledge and experience within their own context, and with useful ideas from elsewhere, including from networks and scientists.
- Put women producers at the centre of food production.
- Emphasize food for nutrition and health, making the clear link between farming, nutrition and health.
- Have well-informed and empowered consumers who understand nutrition and can confidently make healthy eating choices.
- Equip farmers to be adaptive and resilient in the face of increasing climate unpredictability.
- Respond to most of the Sustainable Development Goals.
- Greatly increase biodiversity rather than diminish it.

The basis for such food systems in Africa, which relates the farming and processing of food to the health of our people, is already there across the continent. This includes a range of sustainable farming practices, from intensive gardens to extensive rangelands, from community seed saving and exchange to farmer study groups, from thousands of local farmer innovators sharing their innovations, to breakthroughs in dry land cropping techniques.

Furthermore, there is a growing awareness amongst consumers about the dangers of the 'modern' industrial diet.

The main problem is that all of this activity towards healthier living, based on eating nutritious food, is still peripheral to the mainstream policies and developments being promoted in Africa by governments and business. As is so often the case where

change for the majority is concerned, ordinary people are taking the lead in forging a new direction. It is now time to spread this everywhere decisively and strategically.

## 10 strategic pathways for change

**Transformation** means that many things have to change. As part of a **transition** to sustainable, just and nutritious food systems in Africa, the conference participants came up with the following set of 10 strategic pathways as top **priorities** for the coming years:

1. Supporting the on-going growth, development and mainstreaming of Agroecology (AE) and Ecological Organic Agriculture (EOA) practices at various levels including farmer, landscape and national levels.
2. Actively supporting joint farmer-scientist research and capabilities to provide further evidence on contribution of AE and EOA to sustainable food systems.
3. Undertaking a massive awareness-raising campaign that stimulates discussion and debate amongst citizens, consumers and farmers across Africa about farming, food, nutrition and health and the linking connections.
4. Strengthening citizen associations' capacity to promote sustainable farming and food systems.
5. Ensuring land tenure security for smallholder farmers and communities as the foundation for nutritious food production.
6. Strengthening community based seed systems in recognition of their crucial role in ensuring diverse, nutritious diets and good health for everyone.
7. Embracing a multi-sectoral and stakeholder approach in the development of policies and programmes that relate to food, nutrition and health.
8. Recognizing and supporting the key roles of women producers at the centre of food systems in Africa.
9. Reorienting and developing policies at all levels to support the pathways outlined above.
10. Supporting collaborative action amongst civil society, including taking forward the collaboration for this conference.

## The way forward

### 1. Supporting the on-going growth, development and mainstreaming of Agroecology and Ecological Organic Agriculture at various levels including farmer, landscape and national levels

There are already thousands of farmers practicing Agroecology/Ecological Organic Agriculture to some degree despite the lack of financial and other support for the

development of these approaches. In fact, the policy environment, such as the widespread subsidy of fertilisers, agrochemicals and hybrid seeds, and dominant control of the inputs by the corporate have worked strongly against the development of these environmentally friendly approaches.

Among the strategic and priority areas of focus to change course include setting up many more **support programmes** for the development of Agroecology and Ecological Organic Agriculture, documenting these experiences in detail, and sharing the learning and evidence widely. These programmes will include a strong emphasis on constant information generation and sharing in various ways between farmers and others in the food chain.

Further, we need a system of **conversion support** to farmers making the shift to Agroecology and Ecological Organic Agriculture, particularly those who are 'addicted' to industrial inputs, and those still struggling with subsistence farming. The huge funds currently spent on synthetic fertilizer and seed input support programmes should be reallocated to give support to Agroecology and Ecological Organic Agriculture practices instead.

In tandem with the aforementioned, local markets must be strengthened. Agroecology and Ecological Organic Agriculture stress the importance of shorter food value chains, which means stronger local markets.

## **2. Actively supporting joint farmer-scientist research and capabilities to provide further evidence on contribution of AE and EOA to sustainable food systems**

**Scientific researchers and farmers must work together much more**, with the research agenda being strongly farmer-driven. This will need the support of public finances. Governments have gone along with the shift to a research agenda driven increasingly by the private sector. This has led to the development of unsustainable agriculture that relies on external inputs as the basis for production. The private sector is not going to put money into research for common good unless it can recoup that money, and a lot more, from the sale of products such as fertilizers, pesticides and hybrid seeds.

Agroecology and Ecological Organic Agriculture are largely based on the use of local and not externally bought resources. There is some potential for the development of EOA farmer inputs, but this will be tiny compared to the current global market for fertilizers, pesticides and hybrid/commercially improved seeds. For more than a century, the focus has mistakenly been placed on research towards the use of external inputs. This grew out of a reductionist mind-set, and seized upon by corporates who could see the huge potential for profits. In the process, this has

created a massive and embedded treadmill that benefits the corporates, but does not benefit small farmers, neither the health of the land nor the health of people.

There is an urgent need to start levelling the research playing field. Even with a transition to Agroecology and Ecological Organic Agriculture, many farmers will need to use some external inputs for many years to come as stocks of organic inputs build, but the transition away from use of the chemical inputs must begin as soon as possible, as part of a strategic move towards sustainable, just and nutritious food systems in Africa. **Building capacity of researchers and supporting them to work closely with farmers as important constituents will be a crucial part of this process.**

### **3. Undertaking a massive awareness-raising campaign that stimulates discussion and debate amongst citizens, consumers and farmers across Africa about farming, food, nutrition and health and the linking connections**

The conference highlighted the fact that there are many misconceptions about farming, nutrition and health based on an out-dated mind-set and understanding. There is thus the need for a massive awareness raising campaign across the continent. The current strategies towards food systems are largely based on experts' interests and decisions on the way forward and training or telling ordinary citizens how they should grow food or how and what they should consume.

It is time that consumers of food, all of us as citizens and farmers included, start to discuss, debate, and learn about food from a holistic, interconnected and 'systems' perspective. The status of our health is closely tied to nutrition and farming practices but there is currently little awareness about this. As consumers we need to understand where our food comes from, how it is produced, how it is processed, and what the implications are for our nutrition and our health.

Instead of decisions being driven by experts, we need an on-going process to keep empowering consumers, including farmers, to negotiate and make their own decisions about what they eat, based on the understanding of linkages across the food value chain, especially as it relates to production, nutrition and health.

### **4. Strengthening citizen associations' capacity to promote sustainable farming and food systems**

Conference participants were in agreement that farmers, and in particular smallholder farmers, should be taking the lead in the discussions about the future of farming. They are the experts on the ground, and in their contexts. They will appreciate and need support from outside specialist experts, but farmers should be the drivers and not the followers as is currently the case.

As part of this process of transition to farmers leading the way, it is critical to strengthen the farmers' associations around diverse constituents promoting Agroecology and Ecological Organic Agriculture at different levels. Farmers should be inextricably involved in the formulation of farming policies and they can only do this effectively through strong associations. This effective national farmers' voice on Agroecology/Ecological Organic Agriculture is needed to help governments formulate policies and support programmes, based on farmers' realities on the ground.

Consumers' associations also need support. Using a food sovereignty as opposed to a food security approach means that consumers need to be part of the policy making processes involving production, processing, distribution and consumption of quality food. They also need their own forums for discussion and debate. This will come most effectively through strengthened consumer associations and similar groups.

## **5. Ensuring land tenure security for smallholder farmers and communities as the basis for nutritious food**

Land is a critical issue in relation to food production. It is even more so when we relate nutrition and health to farming and food systems. At the heart of this relationship are smallholder farmers who do not treat land as a commodity but rather as something timeless, cultural and spiritual. Land is inherited from our ancestors and passed on to our descendants for posterity, which is an enormous responsibility.

When land is perceived as a commodity it becomes a valuable financial resource to speculate with or to exploit by growing short-term cash crops with no regard for the health of the land. Because of this, opportunists continue to grab 'free' land across the continent. These opportunists include local elites, some traditional leaders, and a variety of so-called investors, both national and international.

If Africa is to move towards food systems that are sustainable, just and nutritious, then governments must take the lead in ensuring security of tenure for smallholder farmers. This should include paying much more attention to women's land rights.

As well as ensuring security of tenure, further strategic areas of focus should be:

- Building capacity of communities in participatory land governance and management so that they can review land laws and advocate for favourable laws and policies.
- Development of tools to identify and analyse existing community land practices as the basis for bringing about needed changes.
- Keeping governments committed to and accountable in their implementation of African-driven land policy frameworks and guidelines.

## 6. Strengthening community based seed systems in recognition of their crucial role in ensuring diverse, nutritious diets, and good health for everyone

The growth, development and consolidation of the global seed industry has been happening at high speed. Farmers have spent hundreds of years selecting and improving seed from an incredible variety of edible plants. Suddenly it has been decided that the seed practices of farmers, mostly women, are backward and need to be completely replaced by the work of professional plant breeders.

Fortunately in Africa, this replacement of one seed system by another is still in its nascence, though it differs from country to country. There is still time to reverse the current global trend. The following are the strategic and priority areas of focus if we are going to reverse this trend towards allowing the wisdom of community based seed systems to take place:

- Support the development of Participatory Plant Breeding (PPB) where farmers and scientists work together to draw on both their rich and varied sources of knowledge. This will include documenting the proven experiences and innovations of farmers, active encouragement of farmers and researchers to engage together in participatory research, and finding donors/public finances supportive of peasant participatory research.
- Promote national and regional legislations that are supportive of community based seed systems. This will also mean exposing why the current legislations are wrong. The following measures are proposed:
  - Developing a shared argument and understanding on how traditional/community-based seed systems contribute to health and nutrition to convince decision-makers;
  - Raising awareness amongst farmers and consumers on the adverse effects of the current seed-related laws;
  - Drafting alternative legislations that are supportive of community based seed systems and associated policies.
- Supporting and disseminating participatory action research focusing on improving traditional seeds systems.
- Developing and supporting community validation systems for quality local varieties.

## 7. Embracing a multi-sectoral and stakeholder approach in the development of policies and programmes that relate to food, nutrition and health

Having a multi-sectoral approach to tackling the development of food systems in Africa is a strategy that was repeatedly endorsed during the Addis Ababa conference. Participants emphasized that this should go beyond recognising different stakeholders. Farming and health are closely related aspects when one looks at food holistically. Unfortunately in the current set-ups these two areas are often planned and implemented separately. Only by having different sectors adequately represented will there be improved chances of designing, implementing and evaluating programmes that support the development of food systems that are sustainable, just and nutritious.

## 8. Recognizing and supporting the key roles of women producers at the centre of food systems in Africa

Throughout the conference, participants strongly emphasised the key role of women as producers at the heart of farming and food systems. This is especially the case when we speak about farming and food **for nutrition and health**.

It is women who ensure that their families are properly and nutritiously fed. It is women who play the leading role in community-based seed systems, the basis of the bio-diversity that provides nutritious diets. Yet women continue to be marginalised, disadvantaged and oppressed by patriarchal systems that keep women under-represented in decision-making positions, and ownership and control of land and natural resources. Women's central role in farming, food production and nutrition is further undermined by the shift to industrial farming and food systems.

Women's role in food and nutrition is a crosscutting issue. The conference stressed that it is a strategic imperative to put much more emphasis on advancing the role of women as decision makers in all future policies, strategies and programmes designed towards food systems that are sustainable, just and nutritious.

Strategic actions to place women producers at the centre of food systems would include:

- African governments developing and enforcing gender policies, strategies and workplans for women's effective access to and control of land and land resources;
- Supporting women's national initiatives to combat socio-cultural, economic and financial obstacles to effective access and control of land and financial resources, for example micro-financing women-led agroecological food production and value addition systems;

- Women’s fair and informed representation in all decision-making bodies on land, food production, nutrition and other food issues at local, national and regional levels.

## **9. Reorienting and developing policies at all levels to support the directions outlined above**

The transition requires a significant shift in policies, to create an environment that supports a holistic, sustainable and climate resilient approach to the provision of enough and nutritious food to the people of our African continent. The focus of these policies should be food sovereignty and not food security. The following five core principles should guide the development of all policies in this area:

- i) Does the policy link farming to nutrition and health?
- ii) Does the policy link stakeholders and pertinent issues across food and farming systems?
- iii) Does the policy support the improvement of ecosystems, soils and biodiversity?
- iv) Will the policy empower consumers to make better decisions about what they eat and how it should be produced?
- v) Does the policy support the development and spread of local knowledge and innovation in the production and processing of nutritious food?

One immediate area for shifting policy and supporting the development of Agroecology/Ecological Organic Agriculture would be in the area of public procurement programmes. This has already been tried successfully in Brazil and countries across Africa could learn from this experience.

Policies at all levels, starting with the African Union, should take Agroecology and Ecological Organic Agriculture as the way forward for farming in Africa in order to address many of the Sustainable Development Goals, including better health and nutrition for the African population. Drawing on reliable tools and instruments to measure broadly and with relevant indicators the anticipated changes made and outcomes achieved is very necessary.

## **10. Supporting much wider collaborative action amongst civil society, including taking forward the collaboration for this conference**

The conference was jointly organized by: Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa (AFSA), Mekelle University in Ethiopia, the Ecological Organic Agricultural Initiative (EOAI), IFOAM – Organics International, and the African Organic Network (AfrOnet).

This was the first time that the five entities have worked directly together on an issue of common interest. This is a very positive step forward. Each of these five

networks has many member organisations. Now, they have taken collaboration to another level to engage beyond this conference.

It is important that everyone active in civil society in the food and health sectors across the continent makes effort to collaborate more closely and proactively. Civil society actors, big and small, must work at two levels, in their own area, but also contributing to wider collaborative efforts.

The five organisers of this conference will meet in the next six months to develop in more detail plans on how they can collaborate more closely on the strategic pathways outlined in this document. Furthermore, they plan to hold a follow up conference in 2018 during which they will review progress in each of these 10 strategic directions.

## Conclusion

The Addis Ababa conference developed a shared vision of African food systems firmly based on Agroecology and Ecological Organic Agriculture principles and practices. A system of collaboration that actively supports joint farmer-scientist research, with well-informed citizens, consumers and farmers, with land security, and community based seed systems with women at the centre, supported by effective multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder policy-making, joining up food, nutrition and health, and ultimately ensuring diverse, nutritious diets and good health for everyone.

On behalf of the conference participants, we, the Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa (AFSA), Mekelle University in Ethiopia, the Ecological Organic Agricultural Initiative (EOAI), IFOAM – Organics International, and the African Organic Network (AfrOnet) hereby call upon the African Union, national governments, civil society, development partners and the international community to provide the political will, leadership and full support to establish policies, programmes and plans charting the journey to truly sustainable food systems based on agroecological and organic principles, values and practices for the health and well-being of current and future generations.