



Supporting African Agroecological Enterprises

Strengthening agroecological enterprises to increase agriculture based employment, food sovereignty and climate resilience

By Dr. Chaka Uzundu, Millar Institute for Transdisciplinary Studies

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This policy brief presents policy and programmatic actions for adoption by countries in West Africa to strengthen agroecological enterprises (AEEs) and agroecological markets so that they contribute to a food system that promotes healthy nutritious diets, dignified livelihoods and employment, climate resilient and sustainable agriculture and social justice.

Executive Summary

West Africa is beset by complex challenges. These include: growing inequality, massive youth and rural unemployment, increasing malnutrition (both undernutrition and obesity), intensifying climate variability, land and water degradation, and deteriorating life conditions for the small holder farmers who produce most of the food we eat. The solutions needed must be holistic. Agroecology and agroecological enterprises (AEEs) offer what is needed. They build resilience and adaptability to climate change; agroecological enterprises promote healthy land and water usage, which produces nutritious food; they create employment opportunities by adding value, growing income and wealth and then enabling greater equity in the sharing of benefits. The necessary action steps are clear:

- (1) support agroecological enterprises and markets to grow by supporting (AEEs) access to affordable credit;
- (2) use government procurement to strengthen markets for agroecological enterprises and food (e.g. via school feeding programmes and national buffer stock systems), and
- (3) implement price floors for small holder farmers (12 acres or less) for staple crops along with premiums for agroecological producers. Implemented systematically these policies will help to build healthy, prosperous and sustainable societies in West Africa.

Rationale for Action on the problem

Individually and collectively the challenges below call forth holistic interventions that are systematically implemented to bring about transformative change.

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Some thirty years ago Africa as a continent was a net exporter of food. Currently, it is now a net importer.ⁱⁱ Unfortunately, this has not led to reduced food insecurity. Approximately, 17 million Africans are currently facing a food crisis.ⁱⁱⁱ Indeed, many African countries are simultaneously struggling with what the World Health Organizations calls the double burden of malnutrition; that is, both undernutrition (e.g. childhood stunting) and obesity are negatively impacting people across West Africa.^{iv} Rural impoverishment and underdevelopment across West Africa is a push factor driving urban bound migration.^v Rural impoverishment refers to the extraction of wealth from rural to urban areas. This extraction of rural wealth then leads to the impoverishment of rural areas. For example, the failure of governments in West Africa to provide price floor for important staple foods, the low prices for agricultural produce paid to farmers by intermediaries and high transportation cost associated with moving food to major markets, combine to take wealth out of rural communities. This is accompanied by the failure of West African governments to provide adequate public goods infrastructure (e.g. roads, irrigation services, and storage facilities). These combine to intensify rural underdevelopment and are push factors of outward migration. This in turn, contributes to rapid urbanization which compounds extant challenges: inadequate employment opportunities, especially for youth, an acute housing shortage and inadequate essential services (e.g. water, sanitation, & hygiene), contributing to the rise of informal settlements.





Rationale for Action on the problem



Another challenge facing West Africa is **massive unemployment** as well as mainly informal vulnerable^{vi} employment and underemployment. Unemployment is particularly acute for the youth (15-25), women and rural dwellers. Additionally, many employed youth are in vulnerable jobs which do not pay minimum wages or provide social security yet demand work hours beyond what labour laws mandate.

Growing inequality is a major problem in West Africa; inequality is leading to deepening poverty for millions. Of Africa's regions, West Africa has the greatest inequality. According to a 2019 Oxfam report, "the wealthiest 1% of West Africans own more than everyone else in the region combined."^{vii} The consistent lack of support for small holder farmers is an important factor of growing inequality.^{viii}



Climate change is already negatively affecting West Africa. Rainfall has become less predictable. In a context where most farming is rain-fed, this poses challenges for agriculture and food production. Indigenous farming systems contain many practices that promote resilience in a changing climate. For instance, local seeds have been bred by generations of farmers for their specific environments. However, ongoing attempts to make farmers more dependent on proprietary seeds, the fossil fuel agri-toxins (chemical fertilizers and herbicides) that contribute to climate change and the promotion of monocrop agriculture in place of polyculture (mix cropping), combine to intensify climate hazards and reduce farm biodiversity and resilience.

Criteria for assessing the options

In order to assess the various options that are available to West African governments, it is important to establish criteria for evaluation. A commitment to social, environmental and economic justice undergirds this policy brief. The following are important criteria that ought to be met if governments in West Africa seek to build equitable and just agriculture and food systems that generate employment, enable food sovereignty and build climate resilience:

- Agroecological enterprises and other small and medium scale enterprises (SMSEs) must have ready access to affordable credit.
- Agricultural policies and practices must enable greater equity and women's rights. For example, affirmative action policies for women owned agroecological enterprises and small holder women farmers are essential to increase their access to affordable credit facilities, incubator and accelerator programmes and markets for their products as well as access to and control of arable land.
- Markets for agroecological enterprises and other SMSEs are enabled through public procurement mechanisms that are deliberately designed to meet their needs.
- Capacity building support in processing, packaging and marketing is consistently provided to AEEs.
- Agricultural and food system policies and practices must improve the quality of life of small holder/family farmers and farm workers.

Policy Options

1. Embrace agroecology, transition to agroecological agriculture and prioritize support for agroecological enterprises:

Agroecology, as a science, refers to the combination of agronomy and ecology. For Altieri, agroecology is the “application of ecological science to the study, design and management of sustainable agriculture.”^{ix} It is a holistic approach to agriculture so that it is more sustainable socially, ecologically, and economically. As a movement, agroecology aims to support the realization of food sovereignty by strengthening the autonomy of small holder farmers, landless people, farm workers, indigenous people and others marginalized. Importantly, agroecological agriculture is environmentally sustainable and productive. A study of 208 agroecological projects covering 37 million hectares across 57 countries finds that agroecological interventions led to an average increase of 79% in crop yield. It is important to note that this is probably the most systematic assessment of agroecology to date. The findings are telling – land productivity increased on more than 12 million farms.^x A reassessment of the same data by UNCTAD and UNEP made similar findings. They focused attention on 114 organic projects in Africa where the average crop yields were higher than 79% global average. There

was an average increase of 116%.^{xi}

Governments across West Africa can decide to strategically employ an approach to agriculture and food systems that helps address major challenges rather than exacerbate them. Realizing that agroecological enterprises (producers, aggregators, processors and distributors who subscribe to agroecological principles in their business practice) can create meaningful jobs in agriculture, especially along different parts of the value chain, Governments across West Africa can provide systematic support for AEEs. By creating livelihood opportunities via agroecological enterprises governments in West Africa can support rural development and reduce rural-urban migration and the strain it puts on cities, often already overburdened with inadequate social services. By deciding to prioritize and scale out an approach to agriculture that acknowledges the central role of small holder farmers in realizing food sovereignty while simultaneously building climate resilient agriculture, governments in West Africa will support agroecological enterprises because they strengthen national initiatives to reduce post-harvest waste, increase food processing value addition, and protect the environment (eliminate soil and water pollution caused by industrial agriculture inputs).

2. Continue prioritizing export oriented agribusiness and large scale commercial farmers who are following the industrial agriculture model:

Many governments in West African are pursuing the industrial agriculture model. Moreover, the last 20 years has witnessed renewed attempts to deploy the “Green Revolution” in Africa. The previous “Green Revolution,” relied heavily on mechanization, irrigation, inorganic fertilizers and this “new” attempt does more of the same. Allegedly, the limited impact of the earlier “Green Revolution” in Africa was due, in part, to inadequate penetration and uptake of industrial agricultural inputs – fertilizer and seeds. Promoting the use of industrial inputs is now a key focus of many West African governments and influential global actors. This intensified push for the use of industrial agri-toxins is accompanied by determined attempts to incorporate biotechnology into the latest round of the “Green Revolution.” As a result there are ongoing efforts to attract the moneyed class into farming and promoting larger more capital intensive farms. In this model, industrial agribusiness is perceived as the future of farming and small holder family farming is viewed as archaic.

Governments across West Africa can decide to continue pursuing the industrial agricultural model and support the emergence of larger and larger farms. These governments will encourage agriculture for export and will intensify their focus on the rapid capital intensive mechanization of agriculture and advance regressive land reforms to create and/or support the emergence of larger farms to achieve economies of scale. Governments choosing this path will probably continue subsidizing mainly inorganic fertilizers and encouraging farmers to deploy them in ever increasing quantities. These governments will also promote the use of hybrid and maybe GMO seeds. These governments will also need to enact legislation that would enshrine property rights in seeds and create a legal framework that restricts farmers’ of their rights to save and share seeds. The governments will have to ensure that the autonomy of farmers is reduced and they are rendered consumers of agricultural products, which are mainly imported. These efforts consciously or not will serve to make farming more expensive and unsustainable for small holder family farms. West African Governments continuing on this path will foreclose many opportunities for indigenous agroecological enterprises to grow in strength.

It has been noted that West African Government have essentially said yes to both options. However, the option that has received the majority of these governments’ investments reveals lucidly their current commitments and prioritization.^{xii}

Policy and Programme Recommendations

The two policy options at a glance

Prioritize support for agroecological enterprises as agroecology is embraced	Continue prioritizing export oriented agribusiness and large scale commercial farmers
Contributes to reducing post-harvest loss and increasing value addition activities that creates livelihood opportunities, especially in rural areas	Keeps West Africa economies trapped in a raw product export dependency model that transfers wealth disproportionately out of rural communities.
Supports rural development, especially when multiple agroecological enterprises emerge in rural areas.	Exacerbates rural under-development and impoverishment as the drive for larger and larger farms push small holder farmers off of their land
Creates better quality jobs; requires the (re)skilling of farmers and farmworkers.	Does not aim to create jobs as it strives for greater mechanization
Support adaptive capacity and resilience to climate change due to the maintenance of agroecosystem diversity.	Negative impact on the climate through the generation of greenhouse gases from the extensive use of fossil fuels.
Promotes sustainable production to meet the needs of human and non-human life.	Profit is the primary motive for production leading to compromises on sustainability.

Policy Recommendations

Policy Question: How can West African governments best build agriculture based livelihoods that generate employment, enable food sovereignty and build climate resilience?	Policy Choice 1: Prioritize support for agroecological enterprises and make agroecological agriculture the most supported form of agriculture.	Policy Choice 2: Continue prioritizing export oriented agribusiness and large scale commercial farmers using the industrial agriculture model.
Criteria 1: Promotes small holder farmers' and farmworker rights	Yes	No
Criteria 2: Promotes democratization of the food system	Yes	No
Criteria 3: Promotes climate change resilience	Yes;	No
Criteria 4: Promotes biodiversity	Yes	No
Recommendation:	Transitioning to agroecological agriculture, strengthen agroecological enterprises (AEEs) and markets.	

Key Recommendations for West African Governments

1. **Increase spending on agriculture to not less than the 10% of GDP** that African countries agreed to by signing the Maputo Agreement in 2003.
 - a. Spending should be focused on providing long term affordable credit to agroecological enterprises.
 - b. Spending should focus on supporting more small holder farmers to transition to agroecological farming
2. **Support agroecological enterprises**, especially women entrepreneurs, by using public food procurement schemes (e.g. school feeding programmers) to support markets for their products.
3. **Increase public investments in public goods** such as rural infrastructure (e.g. roads and storage) as well as research in value addition of local agroecological products.
4. **Enable agroecological enterprises to develop capacity for on-farm and off-farm value addition activities** such as processing, packaging, and marketing.
5. **Improve product certification process** so that it is less laborious on AEEs, less expensive, and more decentralized and accessible to AEEs.
6. **Strengthen regulation of private and public-private agricultural investments** to ensure that they do the following: (1) promote socio-economic rights of small farmers and farm workers; (2) strengthen national production and processing of agroecological products; (3) increase the number of agroecological enterprises; and (4) intensify the use of agricultural practices that promote biodiversity and sustainable land and water use.
7. **Provide public incentives** to strengthen the use of agroecological practices (e.g. targeted credit schemes favouring agroecological producers) and utilize disincentives to reduce negative externalities (e.g. increased taxes on imported inorganic fertilizers and pesticides) to minimize negative health outcomes from pesticide use and ground water pollution from inorganic fertilizers.





Notes

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- vi According to Mbaye and Gueye, “over 70 per cent of [Africans South of the Sahara] workers are in vulnerable employment against the global average of 46.3 per cent. These are workers that have limited access to social protection schemes and are often confronted by low and highly volatile earnings. (2018).
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