Ugandan Universities pledge to collaborate with civil society and spearhead action towards transition to Agroecology.

Universities have a vital responsibility of facilitating research, boosting innovation, participatory learning, skills training, and advisory services among others which are key drivers for sustainable food systems.

On 24th April 2024, representatives from eight Universities in Uganda came together in a meeting convened by the Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa (AFSA) at Kyambogo University. These universities are Busitema University, Uganda Martyrs University (UMU), Kabale University, Gulu University, African Rural University, Makerere University, Mountains of the Moon University and Kyambogo University. Representatives from the Rural Community in Development (RUCID) Organic Agriculture Training College and Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture (RUFORUM) also participated in the meeting. Among the attendees were senior lecturers, professors, trainers, researchers, and students pursuing a Doctor of Philosophy in Agroecology and Food Systems who brought on board diverse knowledge and experience from their various fields of work and research. The main purpose of this meeting was to create a road map for collaboration between civil society and Universities in Uganda.

In his welcome remarks, the Kyambogo University Head of Geography Department expressed gratitude for hosting the first-of-its-kind collaboration meeting that would forge an onset of activities related to research, knowledge exchange, and program development between universities and civil society.

Charles Lwanga Tumuhe, the Healthy Soil Healthy Food project officer at AFSA who spearheaded the mobilisation and organising of this meeting highlighted the work being done under the Promoting Agroecological Transition Through Indicator-based Circular Economy (PrAEctiCe) program running in seven universities with two in Uganda (Makerere University and UMU). He pointed out the overall goal of the collaboration meeting which was to propose a framework and a working connection

between the diverse AFSA membership and the academia to facilitate research and knowledge exchange in Uganda and later Africa. "We would like to create a dynamic ecosystem where academic research is not only connected with practical application on the ground but also influencing policy amidst increasing awareness and appreciation of agroecology as the future of sustainable food systems," Charles emphasised. He also highlighted the anticipated outcomes which include strengthened research and development in agroecology and food sovereignty, enhanced capacity of small holder farmers to adopt and benefit from researched agroecological innovations, and informed policy decisions.

The AFSA General Coordinator Million Belay Ali (PhD) led the participants in an activity to enable them to remaster the 13 principles of agroecology. This activity set the pace for an in-depth conversation on why social movements are crucial to the transition to agroecology.

Participants went through the informative exercise on the 13 principles of agroecology.

To make a strong base for the conversation, Million highlighted the challenges to the future agriculture and the proposed solutions emphasising the need to have food that is nutritious, culturally appropriate, and healthy produced without affecting the biosphere. He also explained the various narratives and agricultural revolutions pointing out the green revolution and its devastating outcomes in Africa like the extinction of local plant varieties, high poverty among farmers and limited evidence of improved security, among others. Million then gave the two-faced model of implementation that AFSA follows mainly revolving around building resistance and providing solutions. The resistance is against wrong narratives, control of farmer seeds, the spread of GMOs and gene-edited crops, false solutions, land water and other resource grabbing and control of food systems. Some of the solutions include the Seed is Life campaign, the Healthy Soil Healthy Food program, African agroecological Entrepreneurship and integrating Agroecology into climate policies, among others. These solutions have yielded significant results that have made agroecology the norm for example entrance into higher education system, increased donor community and United Nations bodies engagement and strong social movements.

"Most of our policies address the question of producing more food. Instead, more focus should be put on producing more food which is healthy, nutritious, and culturally appropriate without harming the environment and that is what Agroecology stands for. Universities have got a significant role to play in making this a reality" Million emphasised.

The presentation triggered several reactions which included the critical question of if Agroecology can feed the growing population of Africa and the world at large. Another question was about the similarity between traditional practices which have been practised overtime. "Agroecology when well practiced following the 13 principles can feed the growing population of the World" Professor Charles Sekyewa from UMU accentuated as he shared a recent result from the Teso subregion where farmers who were using traditional practices without any agroecological training only scored 20-50% which is evidence enough for the need to scale up this training.

"I know that agroecology works. I request universities to bridge the gap of the practicality of the agroecology knowledge taught in the classroom with what is on the ground by bringing their students to do internship and research at our diverse training facility" said Mr Nyanzi Samuel the Executive Director of RUCID as he explained the practicality of agroecology from years of hands-on experience.

At the end of the plenary discussion, the academia collectively agreed to a need for universities to start supporting research and innovation in the areas of quantifying the outcomes of food systems driven by agroecology which the drivers of conventional agriculture have for long used as their selling point.

As the engagement came to a close, the attendees were challenged to come up with some research questions to be refined further as outlined bellow.

- Which practices maximise economic performance for the agroecological farming systems?
- How can agroecology be adopted in Uganda both by communities and governments?
- How can agroecology be integrated into curricula at all levels including agricultural extension training? How effective are the current agriculture training programs?
- What are the standards for certification for agroecology?
- What is the relationship between agroecology and food systems?
- What is the role of different actors (CSOs, research and government) in agroecology?
- How is agroecology aligned with African social values?

They were also asked to draw a way forward to guide them in curating a roadmap of action to keep the conversations going. Here are the action points they suggested.

- Developing a database of universities and experts in agroecology in Uganda with their emails and telephone contacts for future engagements.
- Sharing knowledge resources.
- Organising a convening of Ugandan Universities with a purpose of creating a forum /platform.
- Report and feedback.
- Signing of Memorandums of Understanding with each university.
- RUCID training centre ready to host researchers.

While giving his closing remarks, Professor Bosco Bua from Kyambogo University appreciated the efforts of AFSA to bring the universities working on Agroecology in Uganda together and pledged to carry on actions including mentorship of younger professionals and curating a joint proposal amidst coordinating the way forward drawn from the meeting.