

African Women, Agroecology, Food Sovereignty and Community Forestry

09 January 2021

Presentation at:

Oxford Real Farming Conference (ORFC) – UK

By Jennifer Amejja

Centre for Ecological Governance and Gender Initiatives (CEGGI)

P.O. Box 34927

Kampala – Uganda

Email: ceggi@ceggi.org

ceggi.initiative@gmail.com

Website: www.ceggi.org



Introduction

(Three African women, Jennifer Amejja (Uganda), Edna Kaptoyo (Kenya) and Rita Uwaka (Nigeria), speak about the importance of women’s cultural, traditional knowledge and practice for food sovereignty, agroecology and community forest management. How they grow nutritious food, use and protect medicinal plants, select and exchange seed, establish vital community seed banks, provide livelihoods and support the local economy. Also how they protect forests, many of which are sacred, and ensure replenishment and restoration of watersheds.

Indigenous women are especially threatened by climate change and biodiversity destruction, yet their intimate knowledge makes them uniquely placed to protect and restore critical ecosystems; strengthen traditional food systems; conserve species; and transmit indigenous knowledge to future generations.

However, industrial plantation agriculture, often supported by governments and finance institutions in developed countries, is fueling landgrabs, destroying local food systems, and accelerating climate change, biodiversity loss and human rights abuses, especially for women. How should we collectively address this critical issue? <https://orfc.org.uk/session/african-women-agroecology-food-sovereignty-and-community-forestry/>).

What is agroecology?

Agroecology is farming that “centers on food production that makes the best use of nature’s goods and services while not damaging these resources” - (Agroecology Fund).

Indigenous women and food sovereignty

Some have defined Food sovereignty as the right of communities to define and determine their own food systems and cultural or traditional values that address their nutritional needs. (*La Via Campesina*). This is true of the rural women farmers in Uganda. Indigenous women in Uganda are the custodians of food and seeds. They have practiced agroecology, a farming system that has, for ages, fed the communities with safe, healthy and nutritious food.

Promoting agroecology farming system

Engagements with rural women farmers to promote agroecology farming system has yielded good results. Women have embraced the traditional farming methods and are reviving indigenous seeds that have for long been abandoned and lost due to the introduction of improved seed varieties. Women are progressing in indigenous farming knowledge and have recognized that the principles of agroecology provide them with solid foundation for improving plant health, soil quality and crop productivity (FAO), giving them true community “*food security*” – food sovereignty.

Grassroot women are sharing their experiences and capacities to respond to challenges that hinder the achievement of food sovereignty, and are reverting to agroecology farming system to manage their food, land and forests sustainably.

Through Agroecology, rural women farmers are transforming their food systems to what is acceptable for people’s livelihoods and for nature conservation and are reviving indigenous/ local seeds that are resilient and adapt to harsh conditions.

They grow varieties of crops in organic soils within their surroundings which enables them to tender their gardens of crops. This gives the crops the chance to thrive and if one crop fails because of a pest or disease, the women can still make a harvest from another crop that is resilient. This cannot be achieved from industrial single crop agriculture which heavily thrives on chemicals and other external inputs.

Seed sharing

Women farmers endeavor not to buy seeds from the markets as such seeds are not reliable because they are for commercial (*profit*) purposes and not carefully selected (*with the farmer in mind*) for good yields. If the farmers are to buy seeds, then they buy from the local trusted farmers. Otherwise, communities usually share seeds among themselves to sustain community seed system.

Communities practice seed exchange which enables them to get what they don’t have from their friends and give what the friend doesn’t have. The seed exchange is a cause for celebration between communities, especially among women small holder farmers. Intercommunity seed exchanges are helping weave back seed exchange networks between communities, thus improving the health and diversity of seeds available in each community.



Community seed exchange

Seed selection

During harvest, farmers select their seeds carefully, ensuring that they pick the best seeds for the next planting. The seed selection is done on grain seeds, vegetatively propagated seeds, animals and birds for good yields.



Grain seeds

Seed banks

Women prepare seed banks to ensure the seeds are safely kept for planting in the next season and for sharing with a neighbour, a friend and newlywed daughter-in-law. The older women guide the younger women in food sustainability, training them on best practices in seed harvest, selection, storage, sharing and planting.



Traditional food granaries and seed banks

Improved local economies

A return to the local food system – to agroecology is reviving many people’s livelihoods, improving crop diversity, good health, healthy environment and improved local economies. Not only women but the entire community members ensure that their funds rotate within the community by spending their money to buy food from the food store or a farm owned by a local person. That money is likely to be spent locally again and again to buy;

- *Milk and vegetables from local farmers,*
- *Meat from a local seller,*
- *Food from a local restaurant, where food is grown locally.*

The coin will circulate many times within the community, benefiting them, thus sustaining the local economy. But when one spends the coin in the supermarket, soon or later the coin will leave the community and go towards corporate profits, corporates who promote industrial farming.

Communities have learnt that promoting agroecology means reducing purchase of foods that have travelled from different parts of the world, because a lot of fossil fuel has been used in production, transportation, refrigeration and packaging in order to get that food to one’s plate.

Agroecology and Community Forest Management

Agroecology blends well with Community Forest Management and is facilitating women's management of community forests. The forests enable women to access wild foods to supplement on their diets, to have access to medicinal plants, a source of wood fuel and also for environmental stability.

Where forests have completely been depleted, women are implementing nature-based conservation which is enabling them to restore degraded landscapes, have access to wood fuel, to diverse fruit trees and other edible wild plants.



Nature based conservation to improve degraded land

Threats to agroecology

In the recent past, agroecology has been interrupted by industrial agriculture which is not delivering on its promise to feed the world. Instead, it has disrupted community cultural fabric by accelerating:

- Land grab leading to community displacement, loss of identity and livelihoods,
- Ecosystems depletion by replacing natural forests with plantations, leading to climate events such as floods, landslides, prolonged droughts, disease outbreaks, etc.
- Environmental degradation due to heavy use of external inputs on largescale industrial agriculture.
- Food insecurity as false solutions to food security is promoted in the name of improved seed varieties.
- Many other vices that have impacted negatively on communities' will to thrive



Replacing natural forests with plantations

The role of CSOs in promoting agroecology

CSOs that promote traditional farming systems have used these occasions to build and strengthen community capacities with local knowledge on agroecology farming systems. This knowledge has enabled men and women to join hands to ensure there is good and enough food for all. In the course of these campaigns to revive indigenous knowledge on food production, it has been observed that:

- Women empowerment is an enabling force to dismantling patriarchy. It enables women to forge good working relationships with male counterparts and are better placed to influence disempowering situations such as culture, laws, social norms and other power dynamics that hinder the achievement of women's right to access and use land.
- By practicing agroecology farming system, women have strengthened their capacity as custodians of food and seeds, they have a direct connect with land and the ecosystem, working in harmony with it, day in and day out.
- Agroecology and Community Forest Management blends the gender roles in communities and provides people with protective healthy and nutritious foods, a healthy environment and safer territories against climate events, more especially during the current crises of climate change and COVID-19.
- Communities depend on forests for a number of benefits and therefore, agroecology and Community Forest Management gives communities, especially women the opportunity to live in harmony with nature as traditional caretakers.

What can be done to support grassroots women farmers?

- i) Women need support from government to promote traditional and sustainably raised foods.
- ii) They need support from scientific institutions to help in creating inputs specifically for traditional food production to control pests and diseases.
- iii) Scientific institutions need a cultural transformation to appreciate and promote cultural governance systems that have protected food, land and healthy ecosystems for ages, merge these into their studies and research for healthy food production, and use them to promote traditional farming systems.
- iv) Rural women need support from all who have the stake in influencing policies and practices to produce sustainable, diverse, healthy and nutritious foods available for all.
- v) They need empowerment and capacity to say “**NO**” to false solutions to food sovereignty – which are drivers to reduced food production.
- vi) Women are the caretakers of families, they need to have access to land which is the primary source of food production. There is greater need to empower women with knowledge to understand, appreciate and exercise their rights over access to land and other resources and benefits.
- vii) They need empowerment to defend their land from speculative land grabbers. Women's empowerment and development is very key in dispute resolution. It puts them in better position to engage with companies and government on their own for positive policy implementation.

Conclusion

- Transforming the entire food system to favour agroecology farming is the right move now.
- Through these discussions, let us build the resilience of smallholder farmers and the agroecosystems they depend on, because agroecology farming system is one of the simple ways farmers are taking care of the EARTH.
- Together, let us continue elevating the discussions around the numerous threats to traditional food systems and the potential opportunities for leveraging agroecology.
- As the limitations and the negative impacts of industrial agriculture become more evident, agroecology is the best alternative now to feed the world with safe, healthy and nutritious food.

AGROECOLOGY IS OUR FUTURE AND OUR LIFE