

# AGROECOLOGY FUND EXTERNAL EVALUATION: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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AGROECOLOGY  
FUND

# FOREWORD

At its roots, agroecology is about iterative, applied learning. This commitment to collective “action-reflection-action” is what makes the growing global agroecology movement so strong. The Agroecology Fund is similarly committed to a parallel process of learning and reflection. With the support of the IKEA Foundation, an Agroecology Fund donor, we recently engaged in a process of external evaluation. An external evaluation team - the authors are listed above - has concluded its work. The team assessed the progress of the Agroecology Fund against a set of evaluation questions. This Executive Summary provides a synthesis of the 55 page evaluation report.

It has been an illuminating journey to better understand both our strengths and opportunities for organizational adaptation. The insights were many—shedding light on ways that the Agroecology Fund can improve its systems, perhaps most significantly in how it supports the nascent regional agroecology funds. At the same time, we are delighted to report that the shortest possible summary of findings is that the Agroecology Fund is a “growing teenager punching above its weight”.

In the coming months, the Agroecology Fund (AEF) will craft and implement a response plan that will include updates to our 2024 work plans. At the same time, the External Evaluation will inform the Agroecology Fund’s mid-term evaluation of the current strategic plan (2022-2026) as well as our next (2026- 2030) strategic plan.

Onwards towards continued inquiry, learning and transformation!

Towards an agroecological future,  
*IKEA Foundation and Agroecology Fund*

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# 1

## INTRODUCTION

### INTRODUCTION TO AEF

- AEF is a multi-donor fund that was established by four philanthropies in 2012 to support agroecology for just and sustainable food systems in diverse regions of the world, with a strong focus on the Global South
- Its mission is to mobilize resources to build power that transforms food systems and fosters the well-being of people and the environment
- It is governed by: (i) contributing donors, (ii) advisors, and (iii) long-term partners who constitute the Executive Committee. It is managed by a lean and professional secretariat. It funds grantee partners who consist of agroecology collaboratives operating at territorial, national, international, and global levels
- It is guided by seven funding principles and four key grant-making values

### EVALUATION AIM AND CRITERIA

#### AIM

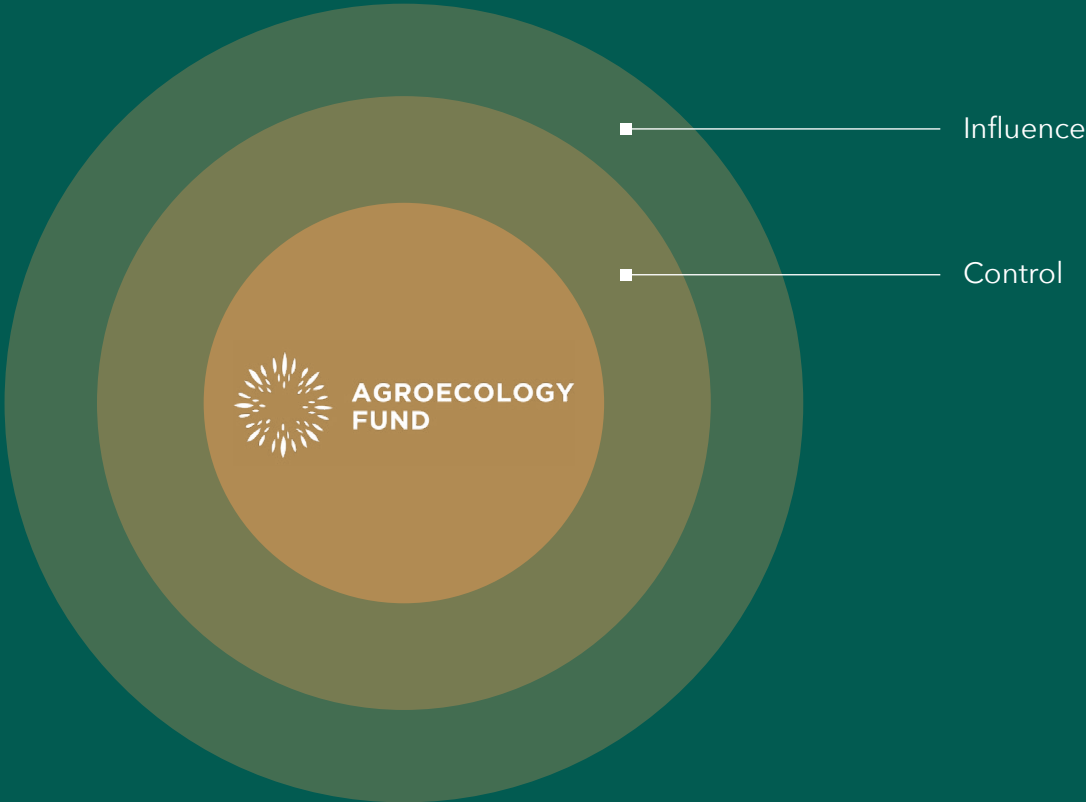
To independently assess the progress and achievements of AEF in the last decade plus.

#### CRITERIA

<b>A. Relevance</b>	Assess the relevance of AEF
<b>B. Effectiveness</b>	Assess the performance of AEF
<b>C. System change</b>	Assess AEF's contribution to strengthened agroecology food systems in the regions in which AEF operates (in its sphere of influence)
<b>D. Learning and adaptation</b>	Generate insights on achievements and challenges to date and make recommendations for the future focus and strategy of AEF

# EVALUATION SCOPE

The scope included geography, intervention areas and differentiation between areas of influence and control.







# 2

## EVALUATION APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY



## EVALUATION APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

<b>APPROACH</b>	Inclusive, participatory, iterative, theory-informed, and utilization-focused
<b>METHODOLOGY</b>	<b>Sampling</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Purposive and stratified</li></ul> <b>Multiple methods</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Desk review: Over <b>70</b> documents</li><li>• Key Informant Interviews (KIIs): <b>81</b></li><li>• Case studies: <b>seven</b></li><li>• Grantee partner online survey (<b>82 = 57 % response rate</b>)</li></ul>
<b>EVALUATION QUESTIONS</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>13</b> covering the four criteria</li></ul>
<b>METHODOLOGICAL LIMITATIONS</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Low initial engagement due to competing stakeholder priorities in November and December 2023</li><li>• Extended fieldwork period to end in mid-January 2024 from mid-December 2023</li></ul>

## EVALUATION PHASES

<b>INCEPTION</b> <p>Multiple meetings were held with AEF and the IKEA Foundation and an inception report was approved.</p>	<b>FIELDWORK</b> <p>A detailed desk review, key informant interviews, case studies, and an online survey. Data was generated with/from: (a) grantee partners, (b) funders, (c) executive committee members, (d) advisory board members, (e) strategic partners, (f) consultants, (g) leading/influential agroecology, regenerative agriculture, and nature-based solutions practitioners and scientists; and, (h) public sector decision-makers.</p>	<b>DATA ANALYSIS AND WRITING</b> <p>Producing a draft evaluation report, executive summary, and PPT subsequently revised based on multiple opportunities for client feedback, including a face to face meeting with representatives of staff, Advisory Board members, donors, Executive Committee members and long-term grantee partners.</p>
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## EVALUATION PARTICIPANTS

TARGETED NUMBERS	REALIZED <sup>[1]</sup>	COMMENTS
<b>Key Informant Interview:</b> 58-83	<b>81</b>	Target reached. 36 key informants were grantee partners (44 % of evaluation participants) of whom 50 % were from India and East Africa. AEF governance and management = 17 %, Donors = 11 %, influential international agroecology promoters = 10 %, AEF consultants = 6 %; public sector policy makers = 6 %, and strategic partners = 5 %. Private sector organizations were the only category that was not interviewed because we could not find suitable organizations as there are very few.
<b>Case studies:</b> Seven 40-64 participants	<b>Seven case studies involving 55 participants</b>	Target reached. Six of these case studies focused on collaboratives of which three (50%) are based in East Africa and India. One comparative case study was on BAF and FAPY.
<b>Grantees Survey:</b> 64 respondents 50 % response rate	<b>82 respondents</b>	The respondents were expanded to include Covid-19 grant call grantees, which increased the total number of potential respondents from 124 to 144. The target was reached with a 57% response rate. A good response rate is from 50 %. Respondents included diverse partners working at territorial, national, international, and global levels operating in diverse regions of the world.

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1. It is important to note that, as expected, some of the evaluation participants contributed to data through more than one data collection method.





3

FINDINGS





## A. RELEVANCE

### MAJOR GLOBAL FOOD SYSTEM CHALLENGES

- Social injustice and ecological unsustainability
- Marginalization of Indigenous Peoples who suffer disproportionately from poverty, loss of land and human rights violations
- Conflicts, which drive large numbers of people from their land, homes, and livelihoods
- Pandemics, such as COVID-19, which disrupt livelihoods and economic activities, and the movement of food between territories, nations, and continents
- Climate change causes unprecedented levels of wildfires, heat waves, floods, rising seas, violent storms, severe droughts, and food and nutrition insecurity
- Biodiversity loss and the degradation of land and water ecosystems, which has been partly attributed to industrial agriculture

### MAIN GLOBAL DEVELOPMENTS AND TRENDS

- Recognition of agroecology as a sustainable alternative to industrial agriculture, capable of generating social, economic, and environmental value
- Growing recognition of the imperative for global initiatives to promote inclusive and sustainable development approaches
- Formation of strategic alliances crucial for advancing inclusive sustainable food system transformation on a global scale
- Urgent call to empower marginalized food producers through people-based food governance and agrarian reform to counter the privatization of territories by the private sector

### AEF'S NICHE

- A multi-donor trust fund that moves money to agroecology and agroecology donor field-builder
- Provider of catalytic grants to grassroots movements operating at territorial, national, international, and global levels to inspire the transformation of their work using a consultative, trust-based, and user-friendly model
- Facilitator of co-learning between and among AEF staff, funders, advisors, and partners
- Does not conduct policy advocacy to influence governments but supports collaboratives to speak for themselves
- Does not provide direct technical support to collaboratives; however, some grants support collaboratives to access technical assistance

## AEF'S RELEVANCE

- Addresses the current funding gaps in agroecology-driven food system transformation
- Helps its funders to reach grassroots movements that are usually beyond their reach
- Makes grants to diverse grassroots agroecology collaboratives including Indigenous and women collaboratives to drive food system transformation
- Supports collaboratives to address interconnected global food system challenges in line with their agendas and contexts
- Facilitates co-learning and relationship-building between its funders, advisors, collaboratives, and staff to generate innovative policy and practice solutions
- Influences the global food system narrative

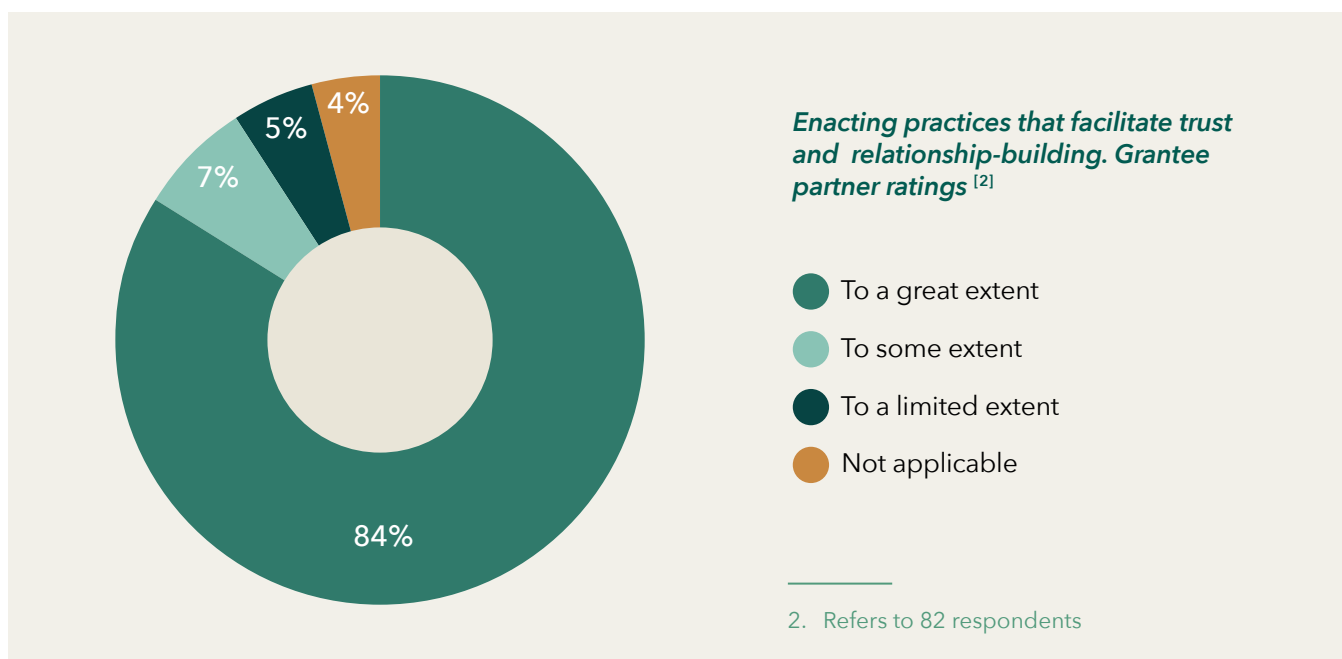


## B. EFFECTIVENESS

### INSTITUTIONAL DEVELOPMENT EFFECTIVENESS

- Developed and implemented a unique funding model that puts grassroots movements at the center of food system transformation
- Broadened its governance structure and professionalized its management
- Developed and implemented two five-year strategic plans, and a MEL system
- Expanded the scale of its work via a 10-fold increase in funding, a 13-fold increase in donors, and a 24-fold increase in grantee partners. Small grants increase the number of grantee partners
- Has evolved from a baby to a teenager who is wise for her age and punches above her weight

### ADHERENCE TO ITS PRINCIPLES AND VALUES

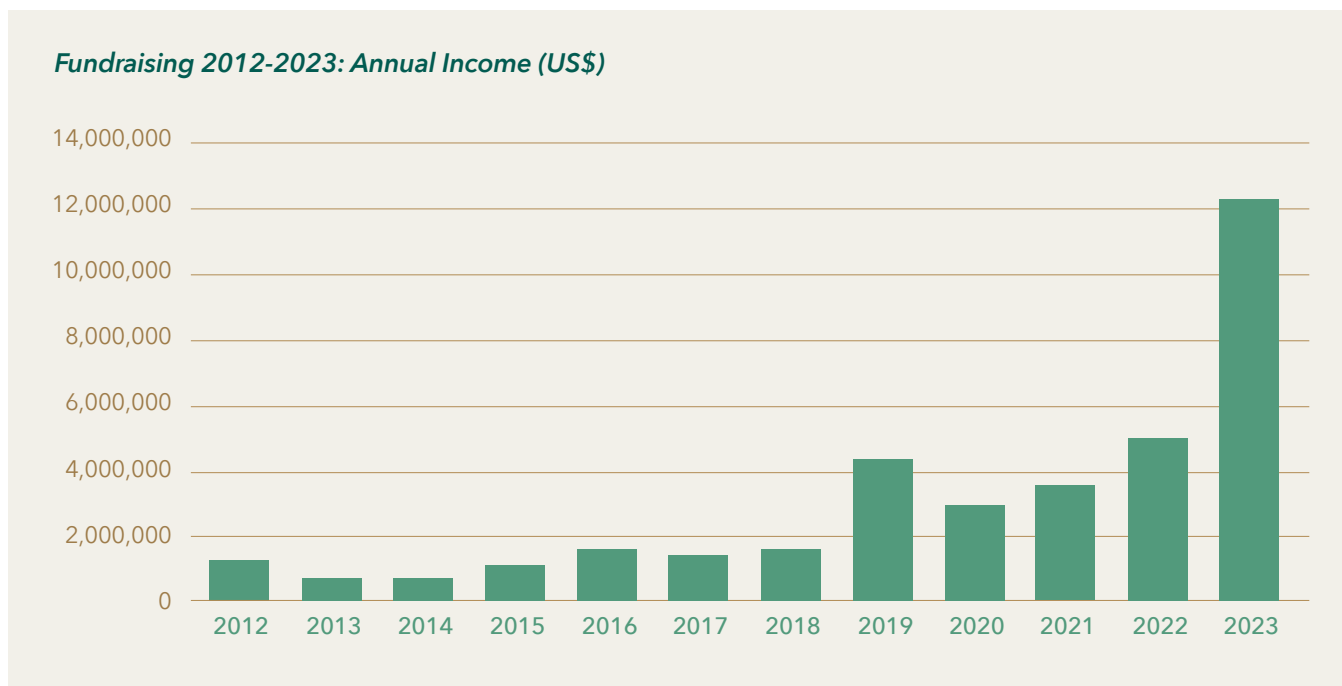


### EFFECTIVENESS IN MOVING PUBLIC, PRIVATE, AND PHILANTHROPIC CAPITAL TO AGROECOLOGY

- Raised a growing volume and diversity of funds from US\$1.32 million annually in 2012 to US\$12 million in 2023, from four to 51 donors
- Influenced donor awareness of and interest in funding agroecology for food system transformation through convening donor meetings (ii) supporting the establishment of the Agroecology Coalition, and (iii) participating in Food and Agriculture Organisation's (FAO) Committee for World Food Security (CFS) Philanthropic Foundations Mechanism
- Number, diversity, and distribution of partners significantly: Increased the number of grantee partners 24-fold (from six-144) operating in 88 countries by 2023
- Developed social capital for transitioning to agroecology for food system transformation through relationship and trust-building among donors and grantee partners. Built relationships between the Fund, its donors, and grantee partners; and enabled partners and donors to co-develop a common agenda



## GROWTH IN AEF ANNUAL INCOME



## EFFECTIVENESS IN ESTABLISHING REGIONAL FUNDS

- **Established four regional funds that have moved more funds into agroecology:** (i) the Yucatan Peninsula Agroecology Fund (FAPY), in Mexico, (ii) Bharat Agroecology Fund (BAF), in India, (iii) the Eastern Africa Regional Agroecology Fund, and (iv) the West Africa Regional Agroecology Fund. FAPY and BAF have already made grants. The regional funds have moved additional funding into agroecology, including from domestic funders in India
- **Scaled the use of its grant-making model through its use by the regional funds to reach** smaller grassroots movements that cannot easily access international funding. They have also shifted decision-making power to regional and local places
- **Extended the reach and responsiveness of agroecology funds.** FAPY has made 58 grants, and BAF has made 12 grants mostly to new grassroots organizations and networks. FAPY has enabled grassroots groups - many informally constituted - to present their proposals verbally or handwritten in the Mayan language
- **Facilitated the emergence of a wider agroecology field-building mechanism in India:** BAF has supported the formation of the Consortium for Agroecological Transformations (CAT) to spearhead a national-level common agenda for harmonized efforts for agroecology-driven transformations

## EFFECTIVENESS IN ESTABLISHING MECHANISMS FOR EVIDENCE BUILDING AND COMMUNICATION

- Developed, shared, and utilized a Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) system that is aligned to its funding model: The MEL system draws evidence and lessons on the utilization of its grants, informs AEF's grant-making strategy, and influences donors
- Co-developed and facilitated the use of a Grassroots Evidence for Agroecology (GEA) methodology in partnership with Statistics for Sustainable Development (STATS4SD). The methodology is aligned with AEF principles and promotes grassroots-generated evidence. It has supported 15 grantee partners
- Established the Collective of Participatory Action Research and Advocacy Collaboratives (CPARAC): it was inspired by the GEA methodology and covers 12 countries in Latin America, Africa, Asia, and Europe to generate evidence for policy influence
- Drafted a communication strategy and produced and communicated various communication products

## IKEA FOUNDATION'S CONTRIBUTION TO AEF ACHIEVEMENTS

- The increased volumes and diversity of funding by investing US \$4.7 million and motivating other big funders to support AEF
- Donor field-building by supporting AEF's participation in the Agroecology Coalition
- The increase in the number of AEF sub-grantees by enabling BAF to reach smaller grassroots movements and mobilize domestic resources and enabling the global fund to support partners in East Africa and India
- The strengthening of AEF's governance systems and management capacity by supporting the development of governance systems and senior and middle management positions, long-term consultants, and the MEL system
- The strengthening of AEF's support for evidence generation and communication by investing in GEA, which attracted funding for Participatory Action Research in Latin America and the Caribbean



## C. SYSTEMS CHANGE

### CONTRIBUTION TO SYSTEMS CHANGE

- Developed a principled-based funding model that serves as a model for other funders, thus influencing some donors to fund grassroots agroecology organizations. The model provides cognitive trails or marks that other funders draw on
- Contributed to the enhanced identity, visibility, and feasibility of agroecology: AEF grantee partners have demonstrated that agroecology can produce social, environmental, and economic value. This has been communicated to donors and government policymakers
- Catalyzed initiatives on the conversion of landscapes into agroecology/food sovereignty zones (e.g., food sovereignty areas in Indonesia, food sovereignty corridors in Argentina, and landscape agroecology systems in Southern Africa)
- Catalyzed direct linkages between farmers and consumers and the consumption of local food through supporting the development of value chains, territorial markets, agroecology enterprises, and food festivals (e.g., in Sri Lanka, India, Kenya, Tanzania, Cameroon, Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, and Peru)
- Contributed to amplifying interactions between agroecology, climate change, and biodiversity agendas by supporting diverse advocacy collaboratives in agriculture and food, biodiversity conservation, economic development, natural resources management (NRM), and climate change resilience
- Catalyzed the recognition of Indigenous Peoples' and farmers' seed rights, including livestock breeding by supporting collaboratives to fight for Indigenous Peoples' rights, farmers' rights, and seed rights (e.g., La Via Campesina, International Indian Treaty Council, Malaysian Food Security and Sovereignty Forum, Seed and Knowledge Initiative, African Biodiversity Network, Seed Savers Kenya, PELUM Association, and Golden Hoof)
- Contributed to amplifying grassroots agroecology knowledge and evidence via supporting GEA to systematically generate evidence, agroecology schools (e.g., farmer field schools using popular education methodology, a master's degree in Latin America to enhance knowledge co-production and improve the practice, and an Agroecology School for Journalists to influence the food system narrative)



## D. LESSONS LEARNED

### LESSONS LEARNED AND APPLIED

- Added relationship-building and field-building to mobilizing resources
- Included long-term grantee partner in governance to enhance its credibility and strategic depth
- Engaged external advisors to complement internal advisors to recommend the selection of proposals in areas where there was little expertise among advisors
- Established regional funds to reach the smaller grassroots organizations that are unable to access global funds
- Approached donors for medium-term funding to address the need for predictable catalytic funding
- Created COVID-19 grants to respond to the pandemic, which undermined food security and disrupted long food chains
- Hired long-term consultants and partnered with specialist organizations to maintain a lean secretariat and spend less than 20 % of its budget on non-grant spending

### LESSONS OF POTENTIAL VALUE TO OTHER DONORS

- A principles-based approach to grant-making and program is critical for ensuring coherence between resource mobilization, making calls for proposals, supporting partners, and MEL
- Decentralized trust-based grant-making is a way of scaling out the model to be responsive to each regional context and tap into regional wisdom
- Treating a collaborative as the minimum unit of food system change in grantmaking is potentially useful for enabling food system transformation
- The relevance, credibility, and effectiveness of pooled donor funding can be enhanced by including knowledgeable and connected advisors and long-term partners in governance structures
- The ability of a donor to listen to stakeholders, trust grantee partners, and grasp their operating context can enable relevance and responsiveness
- Intentional donor-partner relationship building has the potential to create a common understanding, approach, and collective action
- Pooled donor funds interested in catalyzing food system transformation go beyond mobilizing resources for their grant-making but also engaging in donor field-building
- Food system transformation requires a system of mutually reinforcing interventions
- The multi-thematic nature of food systems requires pooled funds to raise funds from diverse donors and support partners working in diverse sectors
- The multidimensional and complex nature of catalyzing food system transformation requires structures and processes (mechanisms) for collective ideation and innovation



## E. AEF GAPS and UNINTENDED RESULTS

### AEF GAPS THAT AFFECT ITS RELEVANCE, EFFECTIVENESS, AND CONTRIBUTION TO SYSTEMS CHANGE

DIMENSION	GAPS
Relevance	Inadequate communication of its focus on donor influencing
Effectiveness and contribution to systems change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The ToC pays inadequate attention to AEF's sphere of control</li> <li>• Delayed processing and communication of grassroots evidence for agroecology</li> <li>• Delays in the completion of the MEL system and the communication strategy</li> <li>• Regional funds' delays in releasing funds for some of their grantee partners</li> </ul>
Institutional arrangements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inadequate communication of the role of long-term partners in governance</li> <li>• Under-staffed middle management and over-stretched co-directors</li> <li>• Inadequate induction of the Executive Committee, regional funds governance and management, and external advisors</li> <li>• Work overload faced by advisors</li> <li>• Lack of a clear process to accompany the regional funds until they become independent of the global fund</li> </ul>
Learning and adaptation	Lack of a process for linking local, intermediate, and global learning

### UNINTENDED TENSIONS ARISING FROM AEF DECISIONS

- Investment in agroecology economies is contested by a few grantee partners who fear that it could benefit producers and well-to-do consumers at the expense of others
- Mobilizing resources from the public and private sectors might result in funding conditions that go against AEF funding principles and stifle the grassroots-centered food system transformation approach
- The recent rapid surge in funding could lead to a boom and bust that could be difficult to manage

# 4

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE FOCUS AND STRATEGIES

Evaluator recommendations were clarified through a face-to-face evaluation debriefing meeting among members of the AEF Executive Committee, members of the Global Advisory Board and long-term partners.

### **AEF should consolidate its current strategic focus for relevance and effectiveness by:**

- Continuing to invest in its current strategic areas of focus as outlined in its current strategy
- Balancing investments across all the dimensions of agroecology
- Striking a balance between providing grants to current partners and new partners
- Managing its rate of growth and regranting in liaison with its donors to avoid a boom-and-bust risk

### **AEF should invest in improving its approaches for greater effectiveness by:**

- Revising its ToC to make its spheres of control and influence distinguishable
- Prioritizing moving capital from the public sector over fundraising from the private sector
- Mobilizing multi-year and less restrictive capital from its donors
- Developing and implementing a strategy to incubate regional funds until they reach maturity
- Finalizing and promoting GEA, the communication strategy, and the MEL system in the AEF community
- Creating a mechanism or process for linking learning processes across scales

### **AEF should strengthen its governance and management capacities by:**

- Conducting the planned organizational capacity assessment and restructuring the organization accordingly. The specific areas needing additional management capacity are middle-level communication, MEL, fundraising, and administration
- Maintaining even power relationships and synergies between its small and big donors
- Streamlining the work of the Advisory Board members to reduce their work overload and formalize hybrid teams
- Developing robust induction processes and tools for staff, regional funds, Executive Committee, and Advisory Board for effectiveness and efficiency

### **AEF funders should promote the movement of capital to agroecology for wider impact by:**

- Continuing to persuade like-minded organizations to contribute funding to AEF
- Participating in donor field-building and AEF engagements with new donors interested in funding AEF and the field broadly
- Making use of the agroecology evidence coming from the AEF processes
- Continuing to encourage their grantees to work in collaboration with AEF partners





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