AGROECOLOGY FUND

Agroecology Fund Learning Exchange

Kufunda Village,
Zimbabwe

September, 2024

Executive Summary

The 2024 African Agroecology Fund Learning Exchange: Charting a Path for Agroecology Economies

Kufunda Village / Zimbabwe

The Agroecology Fund (AEF) hosted a 2024 African Learning Exchange in Kufunda Village, Harare, Zimbabwe, from September 15 to 19, 2024. This gathering was the first of three regional exchanges. It brought together over 125 participants from across Africa, including AEF grantees, donors, and advisors. It built on face-to-face global learning exchanges that were held among the AEF community in 2016 and 2020, and on the numerous virtual gatherings that became a critical learning tool during and after the COVID pandemic. Because of the sharp uptick in the number of AEF grantees, a single large global exchange has become no longer feasible; we have thus moved to regional face-to-face learning exchanges, with one each being held in Africa, Asia, and the Americas. For the African Agroecology movement, a focus on building viable Agroecology economies is a critical strategic priority. While the ecological and social benefits of Agroecology are well documented, its long-term sustainability and its capacity for scaling depend on creating economic pathways that are both principled and profitable for smallholder farmers, entrepreneurs, and local communities. This learning exchange was thus convened to directly address that challenge. By bringing grassroots practitioners to the forefront of this discussion, the exchange aimed

to deepen the field's thinking and accelerate the uptake of economically sustainable Agroecology practices across Africa.

To ensure a co-creative environment, the exchange adopted a participatory methodology. This included thematic sessions with "igniter" presentations, Open Space group-directed discussions to explore additional topics, and a "marketplace" for informal networking. A visit to Mbare Market, Zimbabwe's oldest and largest territorial market, provided a crucial "reality check", grounding discussions in the direct experience of local food systems.

Participants also attended Zimbabwe's annual National Good Food and Seed Festival at Harare's Botanical Gardens. This festival is one of the largest of its kind in Africa and commonly forms part of participants' strategy for making Agroecology public and visible to both producer and consumer constituencies.

>> *Core Theme of the Discussions*

1. Agroecology enterprises

This theme explored models such as the Kenyan Peasants League's (KPL) farmer-led food co-ops, which cut out middlemen, and JVE-Togo's youth-led bio-input enterprises, which offer viable career paths. Challenges include scaling without bureaucracy and providing support during the early non-profit stage.

2. Commercialization and scaling

The group debated how to grow Agroecology's impact. Approaches ranged from integrating value chains to multiplying local initiatives. The discussion highlighted the challenge of scaling without losing core principles.

3. Financial mechanisms

Participants in this discussion focused on accessing affordable credit for smallholder farmers. Representatives from La Concertation Nationale des Organisations Paysannes au Cameroun (National Consultation of Peasant Organizations in Cameroon, or CNOP-CAM) presented their more formal revolving fund, which lowers interest rates, and Agrecol Afrique's "Calabash of Solidarity", a trust-based traditional credit system. The debate centered on integrating formal and informal systems.

4. Participatory Guarantee Systems

This discussion explored farmer-led quality control. The Eastern and Southern Africa Small-Scale Farmers' Forum of Uganda (ESAFF Uganda) shared their established Participatory Guarantee System (PGS), while Le Jardins de l'Espoir in Benin shared their process of building a national standard. Key issues included market recognition and maintaining autonomy if governments get involved.

5. Territorial Markets

This group highlighted the importance of local and regional markets. Representatives from Participatory Ecological Land Use Management (PELUM) Zimbabwe demonstrated how they have used policy advocacy towards market improvement, while L'Institut de recherche et de promotion des alternatives en developpement (Institute for Research and Promotion of Alternatives in Development, or IRPAD) Mali described using research to understand, and build, market demand for Agroecology products. Challenges included outdated laws and simultaneously building both supply and demand.

6. Value chains

This session examined strategies for building local value chains. Inades-Formation Togo has successfully revived the almost forgotten grain fonio, while Support Service for Local Development Initiatives (SAILD) Cameroon has been focusing on substituting imported wheat flour with local alternatives. Success has brought new challenges, including maintaining local control despite increased consumer demand.

>> *Panel Discussions*

Two panel discussions explored the financing of Agroecology. In a panel of donors, calls were made for: 1) direct flexible grants to grassroots organizations and networks, 2) application by donors of better Agroecology assessment tools to prevent "greenwashing", and 3) donors to recognize the grassroots nature of African solutions and provide funding opportunities accordingly. A second panel discussion, involving public officials, highlighted the slow implementation of policies, the lack of market absorption for Agroecology products, and the danger of farmer reliance on handouts. Solutions emphasized evidence-based advocacy, empowering women and youth entrepreneurs, experiential learning for policymakers, and collaborative platforms

>> *Conclusions*

The learning exchange highlighted the challenge of creating an Agroecology economy that is both principled and profitable. It also illustrated a wealth of practical solutions that are already working on the ground to which AEF can provide increased support as it moves forward

Table of **Contents**

List of Abbreviations

AFSA	Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa
AWOLA	Africa Women Leaders in Agroecology
CNOP-CAM	National Consultation of Peasant Organizations in Cameroon
COFERSA	Convergence of Rural Women for Food Sovereignty
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
ESAFF	Eastern and Southern Africa Small-Scale Farmers' Forum
GIZ	German Agency for International Cooperation
HLPE	High Level Panel of Experts
IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development
IKS	Indigenous Knowledge Systems
IPES	International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems
IRPAD	L'Institut De Recherche et de Promotion Des Alternatives en Developpement
JVE	Jeunes Volontaires Pour l'Environnement
KTA	Knowledge Transfer Africa
KPL	Kenyan Peasants League
PELEM	Participatory Ecological Land Use Management
PGS	Participatory Guarantee Systems
SAILD	Support Service for Local Development Initiatives
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNDROP	UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants

00

01

Introduction: **Agroecology Economies in the Wider Context**

02

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The discussions on Agroecology economies that took place at the Zimbabwe Learning Exchange were part of a larger global conversation. The event gave a voice to the people who are building these new economies in Africa, and their work on the ground brings to life the key ideas being discussed at international levels. A key report from the United Nations High Level Panel of Experts (HLPE-FSN 2019), for example, identified agroecology as a core way to fix our global food systems.

The report calls for big changes, including the need to support the territorial markets that are the local and regional food networks connecting an area's producers and consumers. These markets strengthen community ties and have the potential to provide healthy food for all. This call to support territorial markets aligns with the findings of the International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems (IPES Food 2024), which argues that shifting from fragile, anonymous "food from nowhere" to resilient, place-based systems that promote and provide "food from somewhere" is essential for sustainability and democratic control over food.

In Africa, this complex collaboration between civil society and public authorities is being driven by the continent's own movements. The Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa (AFSA) is a network of over 40 African regional organizations and has a clear manifesto (Farrelly, Westwood, and Boustred 2021). It calls for food sovereignty, which is the right of people to healthy and culturally appropriate food that is produced through sustainable methods; it further calls for their right to define their own food and agricultural systems. AFSA's vision is built on secure access to land, seeds, credit and, importantly, to local territorial markets.

This work is also informed and undergirded by international human rights law. The UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People (UNDROP) legally recognizes the rights of farmers to their land and their seeds, as well as their right to have a say in the decisions that affect their lives. This turns Agroecology from just a set of farming techniques and marketing spaces into a political project to make our food systems more democratic.

The learning exchange in Zimbabwe provided a forum for grassroots voices to debate and share insights on these timely topics. Who better than these frontline actors to shape a just and sustainable economy grounded in Agroecology? The stories and strategies shared by participants show how ideas about markets, sovereignty, and rights are not just theories; they also are about food systems that are nested in complex cultures and communities •

01

02

03

The Agroecology Fund and the Diversity of its African Partners

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The mission of the Agroecology Fund is to support the global movement to build fair and just food systems. It pools money from diverse donors and channels it directly to a variety of collaboratives; these include global and continental alliances, regional networks, and organizations that work with communities and grassroots groups involved in the food web. AEF sees Agroecology as an "engine of change" that can solve many problems at once, from climate change to poor nutrition.

AEF's way of working is unique. In a process that is designed to share power, it brings together donors, advisors, and grantees as partners. Instead of decisions being made by staff in a distant office, AEF relies for funding recommendations on its expert advisors who are dispersed around the globe and embedded in movements. A key principle is that at least 80 percent of the money received by AEF goes directly to grants.

AEF's strategy, however, is about more than just giving grants. In order to enhance and positively influence the entire Agroecology field, it supports learning, action research, and evidence-building among grantees; it also collaborates with bilateral and multilateral funders to deepen investments in principles-based Agroecology.

This learning exchange builds on face-to-face global learning exchanges that were held among members of the AEF community in 2016 and 2020; it also builds on numerous virtual gatherings that became a critical learning tool during and after the COVID pandemic. Because of the sharp uptick in the number of AEF grantees, a single large global exchange has become no longer feasible; we have thus moved to regional face-to-face learning exchanges, with one each being held in Africa, Asia, and the Americas.

> *AEF has a strong and growing presence in Africa. To date, the fund has supported 76 different collaboratives/ organizations working in at least 28 African countries.*

The Zimbabwe Learning Exchange illustrated the energy of this group of partners, bringing together over 125 people from across the continent.

Within the diversity of organizations & collaboratives is a cohort that is focused on Agroecology entrepreneurship. In 2023, AEF provided business planning grants to 15 African collaboratives/organizations to help them strengthen their strategies for supporting the businesses that were emerging within their networks. This was a direct response to the challenges faced by partners in getting access to finance and markets.

Among the participants was also a large and diverse delegation of 20 participants from the Congo Basin. They represented 16 organizations that were involved in collaboratives supported by the AEF in Cameroon, the DRC, and Gabon. They took the opportunity to organize a side event to discuss ideas for better coordination of work across the region. This call for better coordination quickly bore fruit. In November 2024, shortly after the learning exchange, all Congo Basin collaboratives sent representatives to the first Regional Forum on Agroecology in the Congo Basin, which was held in Cameroon and organized by SAILD •

Kufunda Village / Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe's Good Seed and Food Festival

The first of these traditional and organic food and seed festivals was held in December 2012 at the Harare Botanical Gardens, and it has been held there every September since then. Many of the AEF learning exchange participants came a couple of days early so that they could attend this two-day gathering.

The first day is a national seed fair that brings together farmers from all over the country. All have come through local seed fairs at both the ward and district levels. Farmers are able to buy/sell/exchange seeds among themselves and can demonstrate to the public the products of their farmer-managed seed systems and also sell them seeds. The festival also provides farmers with a forum from which to advocate nationally for farmer-managed seed systems.

The second day again includes a seed section, but it is focused on a fun celebration of traditional and natural foods, dishes, and cuisines. Stalls and pop-up restaurants sell a wide variety of foods, popular bands perform throughout the day, and a kidzone with educational games keeps children entertained.

An increasing number of such festivals have begun to emerge at the district level. Food and seed festivals are commonly part of AEF grantees' strategy for promoting Agroecology, and the "My Food is Zimbabwean Alliance" is one of the many food and seed festivals across the continent that are part of the broad-based "My Food is African" campaign •

02

03

04

Meeting Methodology

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In the lead-up to the 2024 learning exchange, the Kufunda facilitation team worked closely with AEF staff to design the event. Its methodology was more than a series of participatory exercises; rather, it was a process that was designed to manage different flows of knowledge and power.

Its effectiveness came from the deliberate balancing of three distinct kinds of engagement: structured, co-creative, and grounded.

3.1 Engaging with Structured Knowledge and Power

This part of the learning exchange involved sessions where information flowed from designated experts or formal power-holders to the wider group of participants. These were moments of alignment with established structures. They included thematic sessions where “igniter” presentations set a baseline of knowledge, and panel discussions with donors and public officials. These sessions provided a shared foundation of concepts and language for all participants. They also created a formal space for direct engagement with funders and government bodies—the power structures that the Agroecology movement seeks to influence.

3.2 Cultivating Peer-to-Peer Co-creation

This involved sessions where all participants shared the power to set the agenda and generate ideas. These were moments of grassroots innovation and network building. This was perhaps best represented by the Open Space sessions, where the participants themselves proposed and led discussions on topics about which they were passionate. It also included informal networking during the Market Place and Gallery Walk. This allowed a lot of peer-to-peer learning and the co-creation of knowledge, which is core to Agroecology’s philosophy. By at times allowing the agenda to emerge from the participants themselves, these sessions ensured that the workshop directly addressed their needs and priorities.

3.3 Connecting to On-the-Ground Realities

This session served to connect all discussions to the world outside the workshop. The primary activity here was the visit to Mbare Market, but it also included the sharing of experiences in various discussions, including during activities such as the igniter presentations. This session acted as a vital reality check, preventing discussions from becoming purely abstract or theoretical. By grounding the workshop in the real-life context of local markets and communities, it ensured that the strategies and solutions presented were relevant and practical •

Mbare Market: The Heartbeat of Zimbabwe's Food System

A visit to Mbare Market is a visit to the heart of Zimbabwe's food economy. It is the country's largest "territorial market", that is, a local or regional market that is deeply woven into the social and cultural life of the community. With a history that began in colonial times, Mbare is now a key hub to which food flows from all over Zimbabwe and from neighbouring countries such as Zambia, Mozambique, and South Africa.

How the market works: The market is a complex and organized system with many different sections; these include two large farmers markets, wholesale and retail areas, and specific markets for potatoes, bananas, poultry, and even traditional herbs. Life in the market starts early. It opens at 5 am and some sections close only at 5 or 6 pm. Every day, around 1,000 farmers, 7,000 traders, and more than 12,000 consumers mingle there.

Mbare is more than just a place to trade food, it is a complete ecosystem of activity. You can find people selling airtime, pushing carts, running food stalls, and offering transport and packaging services. It is also becoming a hub for goods such as clothing and solar energy parts and it even has a wellness club that offers fitness training for traders and works to help local youth.

A system built on trust: Unlike formal businesses in shopping malls, the business done in Mbare is built on relationships and trust. Traders selling the same products sit side by side all day, sharing stories and agreeing on prices together. Most contracts between farmers and traders are not written down, instead they are based on long-term relationships. A trader might sponsor a farmer with seeds or may pay them a deposit to reserve a future crop. This system allows farmers and traders to specialize in what they do best. It also creates a powerful way to share knowledge about prices, shortages, and demand, helping farmers who are new to the market.

Challenges and potential: Mbare faces challenges. It is often congested and it must compete with large corporate food companies that have big advertising budgets. Hygiene is always a difficult issue, and this is not helped by the lack of support from local authorities.

The market's real potential lies in the knowledge it holds. Mbare is a living library of information about Africa's food systems. The way it works provides a powerful, real-world example of an African economy built on community and resilience. The key question for the future is how the knowledge from markets like Mbare—in which many AEF grantees participate—can be used to influence and guide national policies for a stronger and more just food system for all.

(Mbare market suffered a devastating fire on October 8, 2024, a month after the AEF learning exchange. AEF has given support for the rebuilding of the market.)

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The Six Themes

The Six Themes

At the heart of the learning exchange was the exploration of six themes that were related to advancing Agroecology economies. On the first day, participants selected one thematic session to join. In each thematic session, two "igniter" presenters shared their theme-related experience in order to open the group's discussion.

4.1 Agroecology Entrepreneurship

The central challenge:

"How can we build and support Agroecology enterprises that are economically sustainable, empower local communities (especially women and youth), and stay true to core Agroecology principles as they grow?"

This session explored how to build viable businesses around Agroecology. The presentations emphasized the creation of enterprises that are not just profitable but are also socially just and true to ecological principles.

The Situation:

Agroecology enterprises are vital for building strong local food economies. These businesses can create fair value for farmers while providing healthy, local food for communities/ consumers. AEF has recognized this as a critical area, and in 2023 it awarded business planning grants to support some of its partners in Africa in building this capacity.

Many grassroots organizations face major challenges. The COVID pandemic reinforced persistent structural challenges, including lack of access to organic seeds, high food waste because farmers could not reach markets, and the loss of traditional food preservation knowledge.

Farmers are often exploited by middlemen who pay low prices. It can also be difficult to make Agroecology attractive to young people and to keep them engaged when economic returns are not immediate.

Insights from Igniter Presentations:

The session was addressed by two speakers who offered distinct but complementary models for building Agroecology enterprises. The first speaker, from the Kenyan Peasants League (KPL), talked about farmer-led food co-ops. KPL's approach focuses on creating a direct link between rural farmers and urban consumers through food cooperatives. This model works to cut out middlemen, thus ensuring that all the profit goes to the farmers.

The co-op is a practical business arrangement whereby consumers tell farmers what they want before the harvest; this reduces waste

Kufunda Village / Zimbabwe

and guarantees a market for the produce. The model is also designed to be self-sustaining, with farmers contributing 10 percent of their earnings back to the co-op to fund its operations. This bottom-up model is built to solve direct economic problems identified by farmers themselves.

The second speaker, from Jeunes Volontaires pour l'Environnement (JVE-Togo), described youth-led bio-input enterprises. JVE-Togo is also the headquarters for JVE across the continent and they have supported around 300 youth enterprises across Africa. They focus on making Agroecology a viable career path for young people but argue that not everyone has to be a farmer; people can build businesses around other parts of the system, such as producing and selling biofertilizers. Their model adds clear economic value to Agroecology practices, making the work more attractive and sustainable than pure volunteerism. JVE-Togo also connects enterprise to culture, supporting activities like agrotourism and art projects that show the deep link between nature and heritage.

Ongoing issues:

> **The challenge of scale:**
The KPL model is effective at a local level, but what happens when it succeeds and grows? How does a grassroots co-op avoid becoming a new form of bureaucracy and losing its connection to Agroecology principles? The session noted the importance of this, but the specific strategies for managing growth remain a key question.

> **"In-between" support for youth:**
This addressed the question of how to support young entrepreneurs during the difficult period between starting a business and seeing a profit. What specific financial and mentorship structures are needed to bridge this gap so that promising youth-led enterprises do not fail before they can become self-sustaining?

> **Quantifying impact:**
JVE-Togo plans to make its impact "calculable". This raises a broader question for the movement: How can Agroecology enterprises measure their success in a way that captures their unique value? Beyond profit, how do they measure improved soil health, increased biodiversity, and stronger community well-being in a way that is credible to funders and policymakers?

Group Insights on Next Steps:

> Strengthen existing Agroecology networks and keep them focused on helping local communities, with funding priority going to existing community-owned projects

> Keep creating learning spaces for Agroecology and providing learning materials for all ages

> Support new enterprises longer in order to ensure that they can sustain themselves until they are viable; this is especially important in the case of young business owners getting through the early unprofitable stage

> Create policies that support local products and bring cultural practices into Agroecology

4.2 Commercialization and Scaling Agroecology

A Core Dilemma:

How can we build food supply chains that facilitate access to healthy food and strengthen local food systems? How can we build commercialization networks that strengthen local markets? The focus of this session was on how to structure commercialization networks so that they facilitate the scaling up of production and increased access to healthy food, as well as increase farmer income. The presentations opened a debate about what "scaling" truly means.

The Situation:

This session highlighted the challenges smallholder farmers face in accessing fair and remunerative markets. Farmers often produce a lot of food but struggle to reach larger markets; this leads to exploitation by middlemen who buy products at very low prices and sell them at high prices. There is a need to ensure a consistent cash flow for farmers and to minimize waste.

Insights from Igniter Presentations

The group was addressed by two "igniters" The first was a representative from the Convergence of Rural Women for Food Sovereignty (COFERSA) Mali, **who spoke on empowering women through cooperatives and market access**. COFERSA's model supports women farmers by having member cooperatives produce goods such as shea butter, tamarinds, and baobabs, which the mother organization then purchases after quality and quantity verification.

The revenue generated is reinvested into training and providing adequate equipment for women within the cooperatives; the aim is to improve product quality and women's income. COFERSA's vision extends to making healthy food accessible across Mali by establishing a store in every village, indicating a focus on local markets and community access. Challenges include achieving consistent quality for remunerative markets, securing proper equipment, and financial literacy, as well as issues with packaging, labelling, and distribution channels. The second speaker was from the Seed Savers Network, Kenya. They spoke on digitally connecting farmers for seed commercialization. This initiative addresses the problem of limited access to diverse seeds and the widespread loss of farmers' genetic resources. Their approach involves establishing community seed banks and actively promoting local, diverse seed varieties to increase demand. They leverage digital tools, including a mobile app and a website, to directly connect farmers who have surplus seeds or seedlings with buyers, thus bypassing middlemen.

This helps navigate legal complexities around seed exchange. They also promote the consumption of local foods and they add value through a recently established enterprise called Nyakazi Organics, which processes and markets solar-dried traditional leafy vegetables. One significant challenge they face is that demand for certain local varieties can greatly exceed the current production capacity, with access thus being primarily limited to their existing network.

Ongoing Issues:

> How can Agroecology products effectively scale to meet high demand, especially for unique varieties, without compromising local access and control?

> What are the most effective strategies for developing the necessary market infrastructure, including distribution channels and value addition facilities, at the local level?

> How can Agroecology products gain wider market acceptance and compete with industrial products, especially with regard to

consistency and quality standards, without losing their unique identity?

> What is the optimal balance of responsibility among governments, the private sector, and civil society in developing and managing robust territorial markets that support Agroecology?

> How can traditional knowledge and local practices be integrated with modern technologies (such as digital platforms) to effectively enhance commercialization efforts?

Group insights on next steps:

> Local communities should be the main group to benefit from Agroecology products and the public should be encouraged to value local produce.

> Farmers should be encouraged to form co-ops; this helps them get better deals and make direct agreements.

> Market infrastructure should be improved, including for waste; community-led quality checks should be used, such as Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS) *(see section below on PGS).*

> Crises should be seen as a chance to focus on local and resilient food systems.

> Women should be empowered to take on leadership roles across the value chain.

4.3 Financial Mechanisms

Accessibility and Affordability:

What kinds of financial models can provide farmers with the affordable and accessible credit they need to scale up Agroecology? How can working and investment capital flow to smallholders? How can formal financial systems learn from community-based initiatives to make financing available to smallholders? This theme addressed a key barrier for Agroecology farmers, that is, access to credit. The presentations highlighted two different solutions, sparking a debate about how Agroecology entrepreneurs can access formal financial institutions while at the same time building more responsive alternatives.

The Situation:

Smallholder farmers, particularly women, are often trapped in a cycle of poverty because they cannot get credit. Traditional banks charge extremely high interest rates (up to 40 percent a year), making loan repayment impossible. Informal local savings groups often do not have enough money for significant investments. Without access to affordable credit, farmers cannot invest in the tools, processing equipment, or marketing needed to grow their businesses. Creating new financial systems for Agroecology is difficult and working with formal institutions like microfinance organizations can be slow and bureaucratic. Purely local, trust-based systems, on the other hand, may not be able to raise enough money for bigger projects. The challenge is finding a model that is both accessible to smallholder farmers and powerful enough to meet their financial needs.

Insights from Igniter Presentations:

A representative from CNOP-CAM, a farmers organization in Cameroon, spoke about creating a self-managed "revolving fund" to solve the problem of high interest rates. The revolving fund is a CNOP-CAM mechanism that is managed by a steering committee composed of the organization's members. It pools money to provide loans to its members, successfully lowering interest rates from as high as 8 percent down to, in at least one case, 2 percent. A key part of their strategy is to work with formal microfinance organizations. They recognized that this requires both farmers to be trained on how to develop business plans and microfinance staff to be trained on how to use the new credit tools. This model aims to bridge the financing gap, making the existing financial system more accessible and affordable for grassroots communities.

The second speaker described an Indigenous "Calabash" system in Senegal; this is a completely different model that has emerged from traditional practices. The "Calabash of Solidarity" is a community savings system run by women. It is built on trust, and group members know each other well. The system has two parts: 50 percent of the money is for social needs such as health and education and is loaned with zero interest; the other 50 percent is for business ventures. This is a self-

sufficient system that operates entirely outside of formal banks; it is based on principles of unity and shared benefit.

Ongoing issues:

> **The risk of formal systems:**
The revolving fund model brings in more money, but what is the risk of partnering with formal microfinance institutions? Can the fund maintain its low-interest, community-first principles if its institutional partners have different priorities? How does the model ensure that it does not become as bureaucratic as the banks it seeks to replace?

> **The limits of informal systems:**
The Calabash model is powerful because it is built on deep social trust. But can this model work on a larger scale, beyond a single, close-knit community? How can it raise the larger amounts of capital needed for significant investments such as buying processing machinery or a truck, which may be beyond the community's ability to save for?

> **Can the models be integrated?**
Is it possible to get the best of both worlds? For instance, could a formal revolving fund provide a single large loan to a trusted Calabash system? The community could then manage the loan internally, using its own social rules for distribution and repayment. This could blend the scale of formal finance with the social strength and integrity of the informal system. Finding ways to build these bridges could be a key strategy for the future.

Group insights on next steps:

> Push for financiers to change their investment products to better fit the needs of Agroecology businesses.

> Connect local credit groups with outside funding to build a stronger financial base for communities.

> Provide financial training, not just for farmers but also for the staff of microfinance groups; this will help them understand each other better.

> Support financial revolving funds; they can lower interest rates and give women more financial control.

4.4 Participatory Guarantee Systems

The Trust Imperative:

How can grassroots communities create their own quality assurance systems that are both trustworthy and powerful? How can these systems gain the broad market and government recognition they need to compete with established labels?

This theme explored how communities can create their own systems for quality control. Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS) are maturing and becoming more consolidated in the form of powerful farmer-led alternatives to expensive certification schemes. The presentations showed how these systems build trust; however, they also highlighted the major challenges being faced in gaining wider recognition.

The situation:

Consumers want to trust that the food they buy is truly healthy and ecological. For farmers, obtaining official certifications like "organic" is often far too expensive and bureaucratic to be useful. This creates a "trust gap" in the market. Farmers need a credible, affordable way to guarantee the quality of their products to consumers. Building this trust is difficult. In many places, consumers are skeptical about the quality of Agroecology products, especially if they do not have a familiar label. Even when local community-led PGS systems are working well, they often lack formal recognition from governments and are unknown to the wider public. This may limit their power in the market.

Insights from igniter presentations:

A speaker from Uganda and one from Benin showcased the PGS at two different stages of development, revealing a clear pathway and its challenges. The representative from ESAFF Uganda, a large network of farmer groups, described their relatively well-established farmer-led PGS system[1]. According to this speaker, the system is built on the key principles of trust, full participation by all members, and transparency.

Communities collectively define their own production standards in a seven-step process and, crucially, the certificate is given to the entire group, not just one farmer. This reinforces shared responsibility for quality. The model provides an affordable, accessible alternative to conventional certification.

The speaker from Benin represented Le Jardins de l'Espoir, which is working to solve the problem of deep consumer mistrust. Because Agroecology is not yet widely understood in the country, their first step is to create a shared definition of quality. They are working with farmers across Benin to create a national "charter of good practices".

This will become the foundation for a new, homegrown certification called "AQSIP". Their work demonstrates that it is possible to build a credible and functional farmer-led quality assurance system. Despite the initial lack of official recognition, the development and uptake of a rigorous model that is rooted in local realities shows that community-based certification is realistic, relevant, and effective.

Ongoing issues:

> How can farmer groups effectively market their PGS label to urban consumers who are used to slick corporate branding? How can they build widespread trust without the budget for expensive advertising campaigns?

> ESAFF Uganda wants the government to formally recognize its PGS, but what happens if they succeed? Could government involvement lead to a loss of autonomy? If officials impose their own rules, it could destroy the non-hierarchical, farmer-led spirit that makes PGSs so effective and empowering.

> The Benin approach aims to create a single national standard. How can one standard be flexible enough for a country with diverse ecosystems and farming cultures? Creating a system that is consistent enough to be credible but adaptable enough to be locally relevant is a major challenge for scaling PGSs.

Group insights on next steps:

> Invest in training for farmers and staff on how to use the PGS.

> Study different PGS models in various countries to share learnings and improve the process.

> Advocate for wider use of PGSs; engage policymakers & academics in the conversation.

> Promote the PGS in the market and emphasize its quality & community-led nature.


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4.5 Territorial Markets

The Transformation Mandate:

How can existing territorial markets be transformed to help create a vibrant, fair, and supportive economic space for Agroecology?

This session focused on the importance of local and regional markets. These markets are the heartbeat of local food economies. The presentations showed that strengthening them requires a dual approach: changing unfair rules and using deep research to guide development.

The situation:

Territorial markets are where most smallholder farmers sell their produce and where most communities buy their food. For Agroecology to thrive, these markets must function well. They need to be accessible, fair, and supportive of local producers. Current markets often fail to support Agroecology farmers. In many places, they are governed by outdated colonial laws that are no longer relevant. They often lack basic infrastructure like clean water and proper sanitation. Unfair pricing is common and women vendors often face abuse. In many markets, there is also simply no specific space or demand for Agroecology products, making it hard for farmers to sell them.

Insights from igniter presentations:

Participants in this session heard a presentation about *transforming markets through policy and dialogue*. PELUM Zimbabwe, working closely with Knowledge Transfer Africa (KTA), starts with the belief that the current market system must be fundamentally changed. They facilitate open conversations about the problems, and their approach is to bring everyone together including farmers, vendors, city council members, and representatives from the national government. Through this process of dialogue, they are building awareness and influencing decisionmakers.

Their advocacy has led to the city of Harare now actively working to improve markets by building new infrastructure, creating storage facilities, and even developing a plan to turn market waste into compost. This shows that change is possible through challenging outdated laws and building political will. The speaker from IRPAD, in Mali, talked about *building markets through research and data*. IRPAD takes a research-first approach, believing that to improve markets you must first understand them with hard data. To that end, they used a detailed, eight-step research process to study how local markets work. A key finding was that in many markets there were almost no Agroecology products for sale. Their research provides the evidence needed to guide investments and to support youth involvement in producing and selling Agroecology goods. Their model also shows the importance of using data to build a market where one does not yet exist.

Ongoing issues:

> **From policy to practice:**
PELUM Zimbabwe has been successful in getting government officials to agree to new policies, but how do you make sure that the promises made in the capital city will lead to real changes in a local village market? What kind of community oversight is needed to hold local governments accountable for implementing these new, better policies?

> **Agroecology Products are Often Absent from Markets:**
The absence revealed by IRPAD's research creates a classic dilemma: Why should farmers grow these products if there is no one to buy them? And why would consumers look for them if they are not available? How do you simultaneously build supply and demand?

> **The Modernization Dilemma:**
Both organizations spoke of improving or modernizing markets. How do you do this without losing the market's cultural identity and its "Africanness"? How do you add new infrastructure without pushing out the small informal vendors that are the lifeblood of these markets? Striking the right balance between improvement and preservation is a critical challenge.

Group Insights on Next Steps:

> Use media to raise public awareness and improve the marketing of local products.

> Build farmer skills and introduce standards to improve product quality.

> Look for new markets for Agroecology products, such as selling to people from the diaspora.

> Generate evidence to support policy changes that help local markets.

4.6 Value Chains

Finding the path to economic resilience:

What practical strategies can be used to build a local value chain that creates income at every step and successfully brings a local product to market?

This theme looked at how to build strong local value chains. A value chain includes every step from growing the food, to processing it, to finally selling it to the consumer. The presentations showed two different strategies, one focused on reviving a forgotten local product and the other on substituting for an imported one.

The Situation:

Strong local value chains are essential for creating food sovereignty and economic resilience. When communities rely too heavily on imported goods, they are vulnerable to global crises that can disrupt supply and cause prices to spike, as seen during the COVID pandemic. Building a local value chain from scratch is complex. For a forgotten product, there may be no public knowledge of how to use it, no seed producers, and no existing market. For a new local product trying to replace an import, there are often major challenges around the quality of the raw materials, lack of proper equipment, and no access to finance.

Insights from igniter presentations: A speaker from Inades-Formation in Togo described the process of reviving a forgotten product. A small grain called fonio was disappearing and

1. ESAFF has produced an excellent manual entitled, The Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS) User Guide For Small-Scale Farmer Groups (https://www.esaffuganda.org/_files/ugd/7283b6_307fa183bdca4885bb1d949648d7971b.pdf?index=true) and a video entitled, Growing Together: The Journey on Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS) (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yFiB9-Z6IJ4).

Inades-Formation set out to rebuild its entire value chain. They started at the beginning by selecting farmers to become specialized seed producers. They then worked to re-educate the public on how to cook fonio, strategically targeting a range of markets from local restaurants to universities and supermarkets.

The strategy has been a major success to the point where the Togolese government has made fonio part of a national program and wants to export it. This shows how a forgotten product can be completely revived by carefully rebuilding every link in the chain.

A representative from SAILD, in Cameroon, spoke about substituting in a locally grown product to replace an imported one. SAILD focused on reducing the country's reliance on imported wheat flour, aiming to help local bakeries incorporate into their bread 10 percent local flours from crops like manioc and sweet potato. They first identified the key bottlenecks: the quality of the local flour was inconsistent, and entrepreneurs used outdated equipment and could not get financing. Their solution was to network all the actors in the value chain and encourage entrepreneurs to form cooperatives to get better access to credit. This model provides a clear plan for building a local industry that can, at least to some extent, replace a dominant import.

Ongoing Issues:

> **The Danger of Success:**
The fonio project in Togo is so successful that the government now wants to export it. How do the original smallholder producers scale up production to meet this new demand? More importantly, as the product goes global how do they ensure that they maintain control and that the profits are not captured by large exporters, leaving them behind?

> **Poor Quality and Consistency of Local Products:**
SAILD's work in Cameroon highlights that the quality and consistency of local products is a major hurdle. How can a network of small decentralized producers guarantee a reliable supply of high-quality flour that can compete with an industrial product? What level of coordination and investment is needed to solve this problem?

> **Competition from Large Bakeries:**
If the Cameroon project succeeds in creating a strong market for local flours, what stops large industrial bakeries from entering that market? How can the small entrepreneurs who built the market from the ground up compete with bigger players who have more money and equipment?

Group Insights on Next Steps:

> Build the capacity of local farmers to increase production and add value to their products.

> Run campaigns to help the public accept and prefer local and traditional foods.

> Use crises as an opportunity to strengthen local food systems and reduce reliance on imports.

> Bring together everyone involved in a value chain to work together and solve problems •

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Financing Agroecology

Financing Agroecology

Imagine if there were sufficient investment in Agroecology, including repurposing the billions of dollars in unfair subsidies to industrial agriculture. At the Zimbabwe Learning Exchange, the key issue of how to finance Agroecology was primarily explored via two panel discussions.

5.1 Donor Discussion

This discussion revolved around a uniting question: how can international donors and investors provide meaningful, direct, and flexible support to the grassroots organizations that are the real drivers of Agroecology?

To discuss how to finance Agroecology, this panel brought civil society advocates together with representatives of funders such as the German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and the World Bank. The conversation revealed a significant gap between how large institutions operate and what grassroots movements express that they need. Large donors and financial institutions are increasingly interested in Agroecology.

They see it as part of the solution for Africa's future and as a way to address challenges such as poverty and food insecurity. Some of them report that a large portion of their projects already include Agroecology principles. Despite this interest, grassroots organizations find it very difficult to get funding.

> *Major funders such as the World Bank and IFAD work primarily by giving large loans to national governments, not by giving directly to communities.*

Several problems were discussed in more detail. Civil society advocate Million Belay argued that the core problem is political, not technical. He stated that international finance is structured to support a "productivity" paradigm with chemicals and commercial seeds, not the holistic, system-change approach of Agroecology. Because direct funding is hard to access, grassroots groups are often exploited by larger organizations that act as middlemen, sometimes stealing their ideas. Participants noted that donors prefer to fund "software" (such as planning and training) rather than "hardware" (essential equipment and infrastructure). The difficulty of knowing if investments are truly supporting Agroecology was noted. Donors acknowledged that many projects follow the principles without using the name, but participants warned of "greenwashing" where the term Agroecology is used incorrectly.

> **Acknowledging the real problem:**
A passionate plea came from Million Belay, who urged donors to stop framing Africa as being simply "problematic" and to instead recognize and fund the solutions and innovation that already exist on the ground.

> **Create better assessment tools:**
To fight greenwashing, AEF and the Agroecology Coalition have developed an "assessment and tracking finance tool". This will help donors assess if their projects truly follow the 13 principles of Agroecology.

> **Provide flexible direct grants:**
The UNDP's Small Grants Programme provides grants of US$50,000 to civil society groups and smaller "planning grants" of up to US$5,000 to help communities initiate and develop their proposals. This helps overcome the capacity gaps that stop many grassroots groups from applying for funds.

> **Focus on knowledge and networks:**
GIZ highlighted its Knowledge Centre for Organic Agriculture and Agroecology project, which focuses on strengthening civil society networks and making local knowledge more accessible. This has helped raise the profile of local organizations so that national governments now ask for their advice.

5.2 Public Officials Discussion

Agroecology cannot be scaled adequately without public policies and budgets. The question was posed to government officials: how do you invest in principles-based Agroecology? A panel featured government officials and representatives from Zimbabwe and from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). It focused on how public policies and spending can either help or hinder the Agroecology movement. Governments across Africa are beginning to create policies that support Agroecology.

Zimbabwe, for example, is in the final stages of developing a national Agroecology policy, while West African states are building youth capacity through 25 dedicated centers and the city of Harare is using its territorial markets to create an enabling environment for farmers; nevertheless, problems and challenges remain.

> **Good policies are often only on paper:**
There is a major gap between policy and practice, and the investment of public funds in Agroecology. Good policies often exist on paper but are not implemented. Very few African governments, for example, have met their Malabo commitment to spending 10 percent of their budget on agriculture.

> **Farmers are discouraged by lack of uptake:**
A key challenge is that the market is not absorbing Agroecology products fast enough, which discourages farmers. There is also a lack of formal training opportunities in Agroecology for farmers and a disconnect between researchers and farmers on the ground.

> **Over-reliance on government handouts:**
This is a problem in some areas and is made worse by drought.

5.3 Necessary Changes

What concrete actions and collaborations are needed to close the gap between policy promises and the reality on the ground for Agroecology farmers?

> **Better research:**
To get policies implemented, advocates need to use research to generate clear evidence. One panellist, Dr. Mujaju from Zimbabwe's Ministry of Agriculture, stressed that researchers must work directly with farmers to gather this evidence, as it is the only way to convince policymakers.

> **Empowering women and youth:**
Several panellists highlighted programmes that focus on empowering women and youth as being the key to progress. This includes leadership initiatives such as the Africa Women Leaders in Agroecology (AWOLA), and programs that provide youth with training and funding through dedicated centers.

> **Experiential learning:**
Panellists highlighted this as a powerful tool for influencing policymakers. PELUM Kenya, for example, had great success when they took their policymakers to see Uganda's established organic policy in action.

> **Build collaborative platforms:**
Participants in the discussion stressed the need to stop working in isolation. ECOWAS, for instance, is bringing all Agroecology actors in West Africa together to form a united front, and in Kenya an Intersectoral Forum for Agroecology brings different stakeholders together to speed up the policy process.

> **Make better use of media:**
Dr. Mujaju argued that the movement needs to use media more effectively to, for example, share success stories and promote the health and sustainability benefits of Agroecology to the wider public •

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Exploring Topics Underlying and Adjacent to Agroecology

Exploring Topics Underlying and Adjacent to Agroecology

The Open Space sessions, where participants themselves set the agenda, were a further demonstration of the participatory nature of the meeting. In all, there were more than 20 sessions! This overview cannot do justice to the breadth of the sessions and the depth of the discussions; it merely gives a flavour of what came up via the three interconnected themes that emerged, which wove together the issues of rights, economics, and culture.

6.1 Theme 1

The Political Struggle for Land and Rights

A clear thread across multiple sessions was the understanding that Agroecology cannot exist without secure access to land and the recognition of human rights. The discussions made it plain that technical farming skills are less meaningful if the land itself is under threat.

Participants highlighted the threat of land grabbing by companies expanding plantations such as oil palm, and they also stressed the negative impact of mining. The issue of secure access to land was linked by participants to the 2008 food crisis and it was felt that the problem is often exacerbated by governments issuing permits that deprive farmers of their land. This remains an ongoing struggle. A link was also made to gender inequality, whereby women's access to land is particularly insecure.

One group concluded that the fight for land is a fight to recover communal territory from agro-industry. A key insight was that power itself needs to be decentralized and balanced, creating safer spaces for communities to assert their rights. The empowerment of women was seen as central to this, with successful models like the AWOLA initiative and the promotion of women to leadership roles in Zimbabwe held up as examples.

The inference from these discussions is that funding Agroecology must also mean funding political advocacy. Supporting farmers to improve their soil is not enough if they can lose that soil to a mining company or plantation next year. Stakeholders must recognize that defending land rights and fighting for policy change is not separate from Agroecology; it is a prerequisite.

6.2 Theme 2

Building a Viable, Principled Economy

The second theme was the practical challenge of building an economy around Agroecology. Discussions on finance, entrepreneurship, and markets all grappled with how to create systems that are both profitable and principled.

A central challenge is the lack of sustainable financing. The international financial system is not designed to support small-scale producers, and small donations are not enough to solve systemic political-economy problems.

> *Entrepreneurs face hurdles in accessing capital, markets, and technical support. At the market level, challenges include poor infrastructure, unfair pricing, and systems that are still governed by outdated colonial laws.*

Two different economic philosophies emerged. One focused on innovating within the financial system, such as women's groups in Cameroon successfully negotiating with microfinance institutions to lower interest rates from 8 to 2 percent. The other focused on building alternatives to the formal system, an example of this being the "Calabash of Solidarity" in Senegal, a traditional, trust-based credit system for women that operates without interest and supports social projects.

In markets, one key insight was the need to modernize infrastructure for things like waste management and storage without losing the cultural "Africanness" of these social hubs. A tension exists between the need for financial capital and the desire to maintain community control. As Agroecology enterprises succeed, they will attract formal investment. A future challenge for the movement is to develop hybrid models that can accept larger-scale funding without sacrificing the local trust and ethical principles that made them successful in the first place.

6.3 Theme 3

Harnessing Culture and Intergenerational Knowledge

Another thread that wove through the discussions was the recognition that Agroecology is a living practice and not just a set of techniques, and that the long-term health of the movement depends on valuing traditional knowledge and engaging the next generation. The risk of losing traditional knowledge is real, and young people often see farming as unattractive or "dirty". This can create a generational gap across which the place-based knowledge of elders does not pass.

The solution, members of the group felt, is to change the narrative. The group discussing "Youth" emphasized using art, nature, and new technologies to connect with young people and to show that agriculture can be innovative. The "Healthy Food Systems" discussion centered on the need to formally recognize and research Indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) and farmer-managed seed systems as the foundation of healthy food. The meaning of economy was reframed as "taking care of your home", that is, grounding the work in cultural values rather than purely in commerce.

The sustainability of Agroecology is as much about storytelling and cultural transmission as it is about soil science. For stakeholders, this implies that investments in cultural events, intergenerational learning programs, and artistic expressions of Agroecology are not "soft" extras; rather, they are investments in the long-term resilience and dynamism of the movement •

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Recommendations for Agroecology Fund's Strategy

Recommendations for Agroecology Fund's Strategy

Subscribing to the principles of trust-based philanthropy, Agroecology Fund is eager to hear critical feedback on its strategic directions from the constituency that it was built to serve, that is, the grantees that form the backbone of Agroecology movements. The learning exchange gathering also serves as a sort of "assembly" for listening to the suggestions of these key stakeholders. During a dedicated session, participants first heard an overview of AEF's strategy and then provided feedback and suggestions.

These recommendations, as well as others gleaned from the Asia and Americas Learning Exchanges, will be part of the deliberations as AEF crafts its 2026–2031 strategic plan. The many recommendations put forward at this learning exchange have been grouped into four main areas, as outlined below.

7.1 Refine Funding and Grant-making Processes

Participants suggested several ways in which AEF funding allocation could be made more effective and accessible:

> AEF should define clear focus areas such as specific high-potential value chains

> It should balance funding between large established partners and smaller emerging grassroots groups

> It should provide some larger grants that could enable more substantial projects

> Funding should include covering "hardware" like equipment and infrastructure; this is often overlooked in favour of "software" such as planning and training

> AEF should simplify its application and reporting processes to make grants more accessible to grassroots organizations

7.2 Deepen Capacity Building and Knowledge Sharing

A strong theme was the need to build the skills and share the knowledge of partners across the network. Participants felt that:

> AEF should continue supporting partners in developing sound business plans, which can help them create viable enterprises

> Traditional knowledge and practices should be documented, including methods of seed production and the creation of healthy food systems

> To facilitate collective learning, AEF should continue to create platforms for network partners to share learnings and experiences

> AEF should invest in research that is participatory and led by the community, to ensure that it is relevant

7.3 Strengthen Network and Movement Building

Participants emphasized the importance of AEF's role in connecting and strengthening the broader Agroecology movement. They felt that:

> AEF should continue to connect different actors; this includes linking funders, policymakers, producers, and civil society

> AEF should support initiatives that specifically empower women and youth; this is seen as essential for the movement's future

> Efforts should be made to build solidarity among all partners to help avoid competition and promote collaboration

7.4 Enhance Strategic Advocacy and Influence

Participants felt that:

> AEF should help partners influence policy at all levels, including local, national, and regional governments

> AEF should identify and support a new generation of leaders within the movement

> AEF could help establish a university focused on Agroecology! This would formalize knowledge and build capacity for the long term •

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Conclusion

Conclusions

The Zimbabwe Learning Exchange led to several clear conclusions about the future of Agroecology economies in Africa, and generated a number of clear next steps. First, the strength of the movement comes from connection.

The most powerful moments of the workshop happened when connections were made between different people and ideas, such as when grassroots reality connected with policy, community finance with formal funders, and traditional knowledge with new business models. Building these connections is the key to success. Second, it became clear that the core challenge is to build an economy that is both principled and profitable.

This requires creating new practical models for finance, markets, and business that are based not just on profit but also on community values. Finally, the event made clear that the Agroecology movement is a movement of solutions. Participants did not just talk about problems; they shared a rich variety of proven, practical, and hopeful solutions that are already working on the ground.

Grantees committed themselves to a continued process of strengthening regional networks, improving communication strategies, and influencing policies to increasingly fortify national and continental movements. AEF, for its part, will continue to actively capitalize and strengthen regional Agroecology funds in Africa in order to move more money into more grassroots Agroecology networks; it will also continue to organize and finance learning exchanges so as to provide an ongoing forum for rich learning experiences.

When frontline communities and institutions with financial resources pool their strengths, the potential for Africa and other parts of the world to achieve just and sustainable food systems can move closer to becoming a reality.

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