



MONEY FLOWS: WHAT IS HOLDING BACK INVESTMENT IN AGROECOLOGICAL RESEARCH FOR AFRICA?

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



With the collaboration of



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Lead coordinating authors: Charlotte Pavageau, Stefanie Pondini, Matthias Geck

Editorial lead: Nick Jacobs

IPES-Food working group: Molly Anderson, Olivier De Schutter, Emile Frison, Steve Gliessman, Mamadou Goita, Hans Herren, Desmond McNeill, Raj Patel

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The rapidly evolving threats to food and farming systems — from climate shocks to pest stresses — make it more crucial than ever to ensure a continuous flow of knowledge and innovation. Agricultural research for development (AgR4D) is particularly important in sub-Saharan Africa, where climate threats are immediate and food insecurity remains high.

With unsustainable forms of intensification driving negative social and environmental impacts in Africa, and with COVID-19 revealing major vulnerabilities in food supply chains, agroecology is emerging as a viable pathway for building sustainable and resilient food systems. Agroecology combines different plants and animals, and uses natural synergies – not synthetic chemicals – to regenerate soils, fertilize crops, and fight pests. Diversity in the field increases access to fresh and nutritious foods for communities and keeps traditional food cultures alive. Agroecology also improves farmers' livelihoods through diverse income streams, resilience to shocks, and short supply chains that retain value in the community. In other words, agroecology has the potential to reconcile the economic, environmental and social dimensions of sustainability.

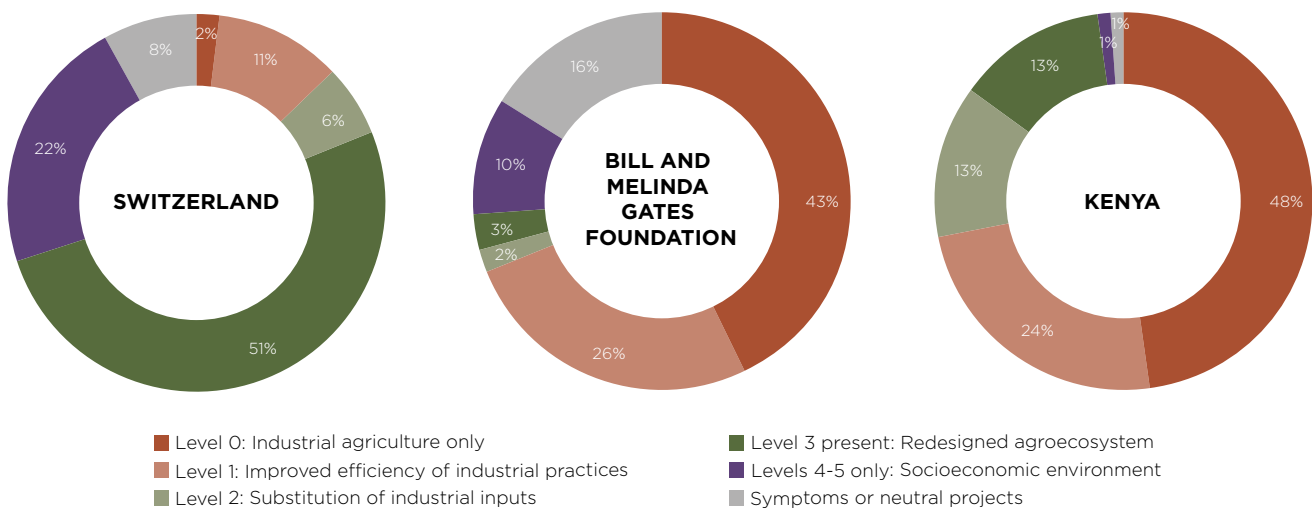
Around the world, farms, communities and regions are engaging in agroecological transitions, and delivering impressive results. Approximately 30% of farms around the world are estimated to have redesigned their production systems around agroecological principles. However, developing and disseminating knowledge on agroecology is crucial in order to sustain this progress and allow it to spread further.

Adopting a holistic definition of agroecology, this report asks to what extent AgR4D flows are supporting the shift to agroecology that is urgently required to transform food systems. The amount of development aid channelled into agricultural research, education and extension has stagnated over the last 10 years, representing only 14% of agricultural aid in sub-Saharan Africa in 2017. The agri-development landscape is also increasingly complex, and donor priorities are highly divergent. Philanthropic donors now play a major role alongside governments and international organisations, with public-private partnerships (PPPs) increasingly widespread, and non-governmental organisations often involved in rolling out projects.

Only a handful of donors — including France, Switzerland, Germany, the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) and the International Fund for Agricultural Development — have explicitly recognised agroecology as a key solution for building sustainable food systems. Recent studies have found that a fraction of United Kingdom and Belgian development aid, and minimal United States agricultural research funding, goes to agroecology. This report adds to the emerging picture of what agri-development funders are supporting, and why. It shines a light on Switzerland, another major bilateral donor; the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF), the biggest philanthropic investor in agri-development; and Kenya, one of Africa’s leading recipients and implementers of AgR4D.

The report found that agroecology remains marginal within many of these funding flows. As many as 85% of projects funded by the BMGF and more than 70% of projects carried out by Kenyan research institutes were limited to supporting industrial agriculture and/or increasing its efficiency via targeted approaches such as improved pesticide practices, livestock vaccines or reductions in post-harvest losses. Meanwhile, only 3% of BMGF projects were agroecological, i.e. they included elements of agroecosystem redesign. For Kenyan research institutes, the figure was 13%, with a further 13% of projects focussing on substitution of synthetic inputs.

Overview of the degree to which agroecology has been integrated in AgR4D projects in three case studies



By contrast, 51% of Swiss-funded AgR4D projects had agroecological components, and the majority of these (41% of all projects) also included aspects of socioeconomic and political change like decent working conditions and gender equality. Just 13% of Swiss-funded projects focussed only on industrial agriculture and efficiency-based approaches.

A considerable number of Swiss-funded (22%) and BMGF (10%) projects addressed socioeconomic or political elements of change directly, but did not include any production-related aspects of agroecology. Even for the better-performing Swiss programmes, truly systemic approaches were the exception: Individual components of agroecology (e.g. agroforestry, complex crop rotations) tended to be addressed in isolation. One Kenyan institute, the National Research Fund, had an agroecological focus in nearly one quarter of projects, but none focussed simultaneously on transforming agroecosystems *and* transforming socioeconomic/political conditions.

National agricultural research systems in sub-Saharan Africa continue to face numerous challenges, including low levels of public investment, dependence on external donors and volatility of funding flows. Research institutions based in the Global North continue to lead on the majority of AgR4D projects, and to attract larger sums of funding. African research institutes are the main funding recipient in just 9% of BMGF projects and 10% of Swiss-funded projects. The projects led by African institutions were often those with the most systemic focus.

Looking behind the money flows, this report found that the obstacles to agroecological research are deep-rooted — but not insurmountable. The majority of donors partially endorse some principles of agroecology while simultaneously supporting conventional approaches. Agroecology is often reduced to the biophysical dimension, and consequently donors like Switzerland pay less attention to concerns like the circular economy, local food webs, food cultures and the co-creation of knowledge with farmers and local communities. For others, agroecology does not fit within existing investment modalities. Like many philanthropic givers, the BMGF looks for quick, tangible returns on investment, and thus favours targeted, technological solutions. In Kenya, low awareness of alternatives to the (new) Green Revolution model emerged as the greatest barrier to supporting and implementing more agroecological projects. Concerns about the profitability and scalability of agroecology, and whether it could fit within short project timeframes, were recurrent across the AgR4D community.

In the three case studies and beyond, AgR4D stakeholders confirmed that research pathways are highly resistant to change, given that most incentives (e.g. funding timeframes, institutional specialisation and career opportunities) favour conventional, specialised approaches. PPPs and multi-donor programmes reinforce existing approaches and amplify the influence of leading donors. Large shares of AgR4D funding continue to be channelled through the Consortium of International Agricultural Research Centres (CGIAR), despite much of its work remaining limited to crop breeding and input efficiency.

But across the AgR4D community, people identified significant opportunities for changing course. Research pathways are aligned with national and global political priorities, and these priorities are changing with efforts being ramped up to meet the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The agenda can also shift in light of crises or via global scientific assessments and landmark reports that usher in a new 'consensus'. Bringing evidence to the attention of donors on the climate resilience of agroecological systems is a major opportunity to change the research agenda. Gender equity, biodiversity conservation, resource efficiency and soil health also transcend the boundaries between different actors, and could provide additional entry points for agroecology. In all organisations, the knowledge and worldview of key decisionmakers is paramount in deciding research priorities. Donor priorities can shift rapidly, particularly in top-down organisations like the BMGF.

Ensuring a steady flow of investment in agricultural research remains paramount. But it is crucial to rethink how, to whom and to what types of projects these funds are allocated. The huge potential of systemic, agroecological research for development has barely been tapped. A series of steps are required to overcome 'lock-ins', change the way priorities are set and accelerate the development and dissemination of agroecological knowledge. The following recommendations are addressed to those seeking to promote agroecology within their own institutions — notably bilateral donors, philanthropic funders and scientific research institutes — and more broadly in the AgR4D world.

RECOMMENDATION #1**FOCUS ON OPERATIONAL ELEMENTS OF AGROECOLOGY AS FIRST STEPS
IN A WELL-SEQUENCED STRATEGY FOR TRANSFORMATION**

- Use entry points such as climate change adaptation, human and environmental health, biodiversity conservation, natural resource management, gender equity and social inclusion to establish dialogues around agroecology.
- Focus on core practices and principles (e.g. closing natural resource cycles, agroforestry, diversification of crops and livelihoods, inter-cropping and crop rotation, push-pull technology, system of rice intensification, circular economy, co-creation of knowledge, localised food web, gender equity, inclusive decision-making) to introduce agroecology to new actors.
- Support organisations in their journey towards agroecology by assisting them in building increasingly systemic approaches into subsequent phases of programming.
- Emphasize agroecology's contribution to normative commitments like the SDGs and the Paris Agreement.
- Organise equitable and inclusive multi-stakeholder dialogues based on evidence from agroecological research; enrol champions or figureheads who can help to enhance credibility and build alliances.

RECOMMENDATION #2**CAPTURE THE BENEFITS OF AGROECOLOGY BY MEASURING FOOD SYSTEM
OUTCOMES HOLISTICALLY**

- Develop a suite of indicators that can be used by donors and research institutes to understand whether existing projects are 'agroecological', building on the Agroecology Criteria Tool used in this study.
- Extend the analysis of AgR4D money flows to other regions and institutions, including the CGIAR system; undertake peer reviews to ensure coherent approaches throughout funding portfolios.
- Support the development of holistic performance measurements for agroecology (e.g. FAO's Tool for Agroecology Performance Evaluation) that highlight alignment with the SDGs.
- Improve transparency and accountability as to how AgR4D projects are funded, how they are monitored and how their impacts are measured, e.g. through an extended common reporting system.
- Invite policymakers and funders to visit projects and get first-hand information about the added value of agroecological research projects; engage policymakers in sustained dialogue to challenge and counter the other perspectives influencing their thinking.
- Initiate an alliance to formulate principles and guidelines for agroecological research and to monitor practices.
- Showcase agroecological success stories by publishing in peer-reviewed journals and organizing awards for innovative agroecological research.

RECOMMENDATION #3**BUILD BRIDGES BETWEEN DIFFERENT PARTS OF THE RESEARCH WORLD**

- Facilitate learning exchanges or 'transdisciplinary labs' with different knowledge-holders based on horizontal and peer-to-peer formats to enhance collaboration between farmer groups, civil society organisations and researchers.
- Provide grants for project development phases that allow for participatory project design and the exploration of farmer-researcher partnerships.
- Include requirements in funding calls on research modalities, including dissemination and research uptake phases, criteria on inclusive research and incentives for highly participatory approaches.
- Identify and showcase best practice transdisciplinary projects that provide benefits to society.

RECOMMENDATION #4**YOU CAN'T TEACH AN OLD DOG NEW TRICKS: CHANGE MUST BEGIN IN TRAINING AND EDUCATION**

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- Break down institutional silos in order to embed transdisciplinarity in the DNA of research and training institutes, starting with interdisciplinary courses at graduate and undergraduate levels that include non-academic actors.
 - Provide training that includes practitioner-led learning; build a culture of accountability where research is undertaken with and for farmers as the ultimate beneficiaries.
 - Develop agroecological curricula at colleges and universities and develop a network of decentralised centres of excellence on agroecology in sub-Saharan Africa.

RECOMMENDATION #5**SHIFT TOWARDS LONG-TERM FUNDING MODELS**

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- Promote institutional rules for donors that provide enhanced flexibility in programme planning and funding, including the removal of obstacles to funding subsequent phases of the same project or programme.
 - Facilitate donor alliances with overlapping funding/financial periods, contributing to long-term research programmes.
 - Harness large finance mechanisms for agroecology, such as Global Environment Facility funds, the Green Climate Fund and the Adaptation Fund.
 - Include the delivery of public goods as well as the integration of different disciplines, perspectives and forms of knowledge in standard public funding criteria.

RECOMMENDATION #6**GIVE PRIMACY TO AFRICAN RESEARCH INSTITUTIONS AND SUPPORT BOTTOM-UP ALLIANCES**

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- Set targets for i) the share of AgR4D going to Africa-based organisations and ii) the share of Africa-based organisations that are project leads.
 - Support the development and functioning of bottom-up alliances with the involvement and ownership of farmers' groups, researchers, NGOs and social movements; use these alliances as a key partner in knowledge generation and sharing.
 - Invest in management capacity-building of African institutions as well as in research facilities and equipment.
 - Facilitate the establishment of South-South exchanges and collaboration on systemic agroecological research.
 - Promote the adoption of clear rules by African institutions to govern their involvement in PPPs; undertake a high-level review of the effectiveness of the PPP model for AgR4D.
 - For donors funding a relatively high share of AgR4D versus traditional agricultural aid, communicate the impacts to other donors regarding effectiveness and relevance vis-à-vis the SDGs.

ABOUT BIOVISION

Biovision Foundation for Ecological Development is a not-for-profit, non-denominational, politically independent foundation based in Zürich, Switzerland. The foundation supports the dissemination and application of sustainable ecological approaches to alleviate poverty and improve food security in sub-Saharan Africa. In addition to field projects with African partner organisations, Biovision is fostering policy dialogue and science-based, integrated policy planning for the sustainability of food systems at national (i.e., in Senegal and Kenya) and international levels (i.e., Agenda 2030 [SDG 2], UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, and Committee on World Food Security). Biovision is also the co-host of the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) Switzerland.

Contact Information

www.biovision.ch - www.agroecology-pool.org - agroecology@biovision.ch

ABOUT IPES-FOOD

The International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems (IPES-Food) seeks to inform debates on food systems reform through policy-oriented research and direct engagement with policy processes around the world. The expert panel brings together environmental scientists, development economists, nutritionists, agronomists, and sociologists, as well as experienced practitioners from civil society and social movements. The panel is co-chaired by Olivier De Schutter, former UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, and Olivia Yambi, nutritionist and former UNICEF representative to Kenya.

Panel Members

Bina Agarwal
Molly Anderson
Million Belay
Nicolas Bricas
Joji Carino
Olivier De Schutter
Jennifer Franco
Emile Frison
Steven Gliessman

Mamadou Goïta
Hans Herren
Phil Howard
Melissa Leach
Lim Li Ching
Desmond McNeill
Pat Mooney
Raj Patel
P.V. Satheesh

Maryam Rahmanian
Cécilia Rocha
Johan Rockström
Ricardo Salvador
Laura Trujillo-Ortega
Paul Uys
Nettie Wiebe
Olivia Yambi
Yan Hairong

Contact Information

www.ipes-food.org - contact@ipes-food.org



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