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Advancing Agroecology through Policy Dialogue and Advocacy: Learning from Three FAO Supported Initiatives

Pierre Ferrand^{1)*}, Alvaro Espinoza Rodriguez¹⁾ & Estelle Biénabe²⁾

In an era marked by unprecedented challenges, the current global agrifood systems, faced with mounting pressures, require a paradigm shift. Population growth, environmental degradation, and socio-economic inequities, coupled with the rising impact of climate change and resource depletion, have uncovered the unsustainable nature of conventional agricultural practices based on intensive agrochemical use. As the world navigates these complexities, agroecology emerges as a transformative

and holistic approach to rethinking food systems. This article delves into the limitations of current systems, the promise of agroecology, and its growing recognition globally and implementation in different parts of the world. It presents three concrete initiatives supported by FAO to advance agroecology through policy dialogue and advocacy at different levels (practitioners, legislative bodies, executive bodies).

Key words: agroecology, policy dialogue, food system transformation, parliamentary action

1. A current situation of agrifood systems calling for a paradigm shift

In the next 35 years, envisioned futures point to complex and interconnected challenges that will put an unprecedented pressure on agriculture. This includes factors like population growth, unhealthy diets (with alarming increase in obesity), increased agricultural markets concentrations, biodiversity loss, environmental pollution and resource degradation, rising impact of climate change and pandemics, increasing price volatility with harmful implications for farmers' incomes, livelihoods, and rural development, and so on.

Concurrently, it is widely recognized that current food systems are not sustainable. They account for 80% of deforestation, 29% of greenhouse gas emissions and the leading share of biodiversity loss (UNCCD, 2022). In particular, they threaten 86% of at risk species and are projected to drive approximately 70% of the projected loss of terrestrial biodiversity

(Benton et al., 2021). Continued loss of biodiversity threatens pollination, natural pest control, and soil health—all ecosystem services upon which agriculture, global food security, and approximately 2.5 billion people's livelihoods depend (UNEP, 2018). They also contribute to environmental pollution, land degradation and the scarcity of water resources, while being vulnerable to climate change.

They currently do not address the triple burden of malnutrition (underweight, hidden hunger—where children suffer from a deficiency in micronutrients—, and overweight), which concerns over 2 billion people, and they maintain social inequity and loss of cultural values. Also, climate change is already reducing food security and affecting water security for millions of people in many locations and communities and globally for Indigenous Peoples, small-scale food producers and low-income households (IPCC, 2023).

The sustainability of these systems is further questioned in light of the planetary boundaries framework.

¹⁾ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), Rome, Italy

²⁾ Centre de coopération internationale en recherche agronomique pour le développement (CIRAD), UMR Innovation, Hanoi, Vietnam

* E-mail: pierre.ferrand@fao.org

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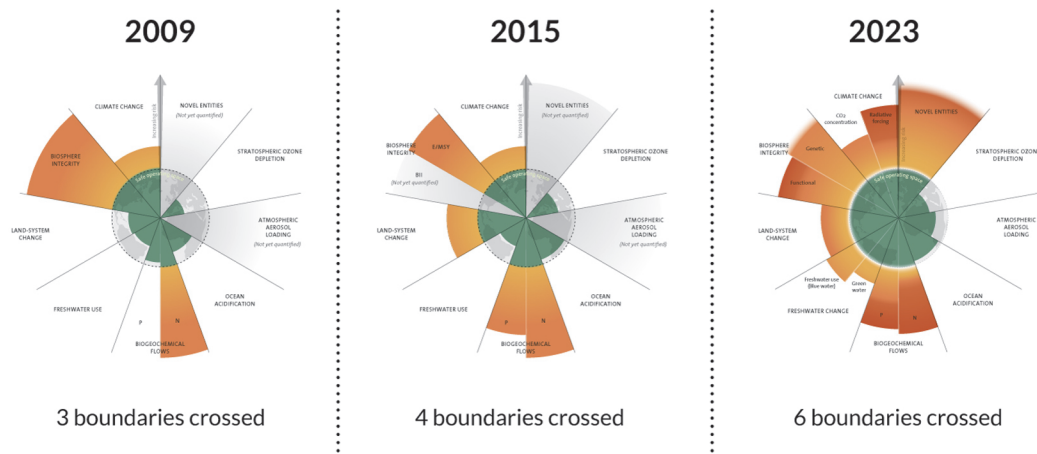


Fig. 1 The Evolution of the Planetary Boundaries Framework

Source: Azote for Stockholm Resilience Centre, Stockholm University. Based on Richardson et al. (2023), Steffen et al. (2015), and Rockström et al. (2009).

Within 15 years, humanity has crossed six out of nine critical thresholds, threatening Earth's capacity for self-regulation (see Fig. 1). Combined with global crises such as pandemics, conflicts, and migration, the need for a systemic overhaul becomes evident.

2. Agroecology: A holistic response

Agroecology offers a pathway toward creating resilient, inclusive, and sustainable agri-food systems. This approach integrates scientific innovation with traditional knowledge and community-based practices to harmonize agricultural production with ecological processes. Rooted in principles of diversification, resource efficiency, social equity, and cultural sensitivity, agroecology is not a one-size-fits-all solution. Instead, it is adaptable to local contexts, addressing specific socio-eco-environmental needs.

While pursuing a common goal of diversified agroecological farming, there is no single pathway: transition toward agroecology can have different starting points, be it from subsistence and extensive agriculture, from degraded environment, or from intensive and industrial agriculture. The 10 elements and the 13 principles of agroecology (as developed respectively by FAO and the High-Level Panel of Expert of the Com-

mittee on Food Security (HLPE-CFS) in their report released in 2019, design an adaptive framework for agroecology transformation (FAO, 2018; HLPE, 2019).

Over the past decade, FAO has mainstreamed agroecology into its program of work. A broad and inclusive multi-stakeholder consultation process, between 2014 and 2018, led to the recognition of agroecology, the endorsement of the 10 elements by all member countries, the launch of the Agroecology Knowledge Hub and the development of Tool for Agroecology Performance Evaluation (TAPE), and the publication of the HLPE-CFS report on Agroecological and other innovative approaches for sustainable agriculture and food systems that enhance food security and nutrition (HLPE, 2019). More recently, FAO also joined the Agroecology Coalition, facilitating and being part of several of its working groups and representing the UN agencies in its steering committee.

At FAO, agroecology is seen as a holistic way to operationalize its Strategic Framework (2022–2031) and to promote transition to sustainable agriculture and food systems. It supports the 4 Betters (better production, better environment, better nutrition, and better life) and integrates them to achieve efficient, inclusive, resilient and sustainable agrifood systems,

leaving no one behind. A 4-pronged approach is promoted in line with FAO's mandate: (1) Raising awareness, aggregating and disseminating knowledge; (2) Generating evidence and strengthening credibility of Agroecology; (3) Fostering policy dialogue and advocacy, (4) Mainstreaming across current and future projects and Building alliances. Sharing vision and approaches with CIRAD which has a long-standing trajectory of supporting agroecology, collaborations have long been established with this agricultural research and cooperation centre working for the sustainable development of tropical and Mediterranean regions, and these are manifesting in a number of joint initiatives across the world, including in supporting policy changes as illustrated by the ASEAN policy guidelines presented in this article.

3. Advancing agroecology through engagement with practitioners: The Asia-Pacific Working Group on Agroecology

Established under the FAO's TAP-AIS project¹ and co-facilitated by FAO and the Asia-Pacific Islands Rural Advisory Services Network (APIRAS), in collaboration with the Asia-Pacific Association of Agricultural Research Institutions (APAARI), the Asia-Pacific Working Group (WG) aimed at discussing the integration of agroecology into agricultural education and extension systems.

This WG was born out of the observation of the rising global interest in agroecology, the succession of events and workshops across the region focusing on this topic and the persisting challenge to bring agroecology to scale and to mainstream it across policies and interventions. It ambitions at connecting the dots, going beyond the succession of stand-alone presentations in disconnected events and fostering continuous interactions between a limited though highly engaged group of people. It focuses on key specific topics, develops counter narratives and actionable recommendations to support advocacy and policy dialogue, engage collective action and joint resource mobilization, and foster peer to peer experience sharing.

The WG brings together 20 to 25 practitioners from a broad diversity of background (Academia, Higher Education Institutions, Research Institutions, Civil Society Organizations, UN agencies) familiar with the development and the promotion of agroecology and from 9 countries of Asia (Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Laos, Malaysia, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Viet Nam).

This WG is an illustration of intervention to advance agroecology at practitioner level. Tapping into the vast expertise of the different members and their commitment towards agroecology transition, the WG published two regional policy briefs (Sulaiman et al. 2023; Sulaiman et al. 2024) and created an online repository of agroecology course curricula. This informal group contributes to providing recommendations and guidance on how to best integrate and mainstream agroecology into higher education and extension services.

4. Advancing agroecology through legislative support: the development of a model law on agroecology with the PARLATINO

In Latin America, FAO has a long-standing collaboration with the Latin American Parliament (PARLATINO) which is a regional, permanent and unicameral organization composed by the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean².

While PARLATINO has been a strategic ally of FAO since its origins as a regional parliament (approximately 60 years), it was in 2008 that a formal alliance was established between both institutions to position the fight against hunger and all forms of malnutrition as a priority on the political agendas of the region. This strategic alliance of over 15 years (2008–2024) has resulted in significant legislative achievements through the approval of model laws, as well as continuous support for the Parliamentary Front Against Hunger in Latin America and the Caribbean (FPH ALyC) since its establishment in 2009³.

Parliamentarians play a crucial role in prioritizing food security and adequate nutrition within national political agendas by leveraging their regional, sub-

regional, national, and local networks. They can contribute significantly by advocating for the adoption of relevant policies, establishing effective legislative and regulatory frameworks, raising public awareness, facilitating dialogue among key stakeholders, allocating necessary resources for policy and program implementation, and promoting coordination across various sectors and agencies engaged in combating hunger and malnutrition.

Aligned with FAO Strategic Framework 2022–2031, which aims to advance the 2030 Agenda through the transformation of agrifood systems to be more efficient, inclusive, resilient, and sustainable, FAO is enhancing its collaboration with parliamentarians through various initiatives. This includes engagement and outreach efforts, such as advocacy aimed at parliamentarians, the promotion of new network formations, and the organization of relevant events. Additionally, the FAO focuses on capacity development by offering sessions designed for parliamentarians and their assistants, ensuring that these initiatives incorporate a gender-based perspective and promote agroecological solutions.

Moreover, FAO provides coordination and policy support by assisting in the design and formulation of policies and legislation, ensuring effective collaboration among relevant entities. Lastly, the organization works on establishing partnerships and cooperation agreements to empower collaborative efforts in tackling food security and nutrition challenges (FAO, 2024a).

The support of FAO to PARLATINO to draft a Model Law on Agroecology exemplifies legislative innovation. Developed through public consultations, the law unifies dispersed regulations, addresses structural inequities, and promotes agroecological transitions at national and regional levels.

Prior to the development of the model law, FAO (2021) carried out a study on “Legislating to Promote Agroecology in the Latin American and Caribbean Region”. The study addressed the international and regional legal frameworks, as well as some best prac-

tices from comparative law, in favor of agroecology, and provided guidelines for the generation of laws on the subject. Then, in close collaboration with a Non-Governmental Organization from Brazil, ASPTA Family Agriculture and Agroecology, three public consultations (South America, Mesoamerica and the Caribbean) were organized to obtain inputs for a proposed Model Law on Agroecology for the PARLATINO. These consultations were instrumental to ground the development of the model law in the regional specificities. Among the various contributions to the debate, several key points were highlighted by the participants:

(1) Policy Development and Sustainability

There was consensus among the participants on the importance of revising legal frameworks and policies that endanger shared resources such as water, biodiversity, and climate. It was emphasized that it is difficult to advance in agroecology when a large part of the means of production is based on unsustainable systems and dynamics, which perpetuate social exclusion, economic imbalance, loss of traditional knowledge and cultures, among others.

(2) Family and Peasant Agriculture

The political and institutional recognition of family and peasant agriculture is thus critical in order to advance agroecological transition in agrifood systems as the social movement they represent has always been a driving factor for change in Latin America.

(3) Urban Implications

Agroecology extends to urban and peri-urban areas, affecting consumers and urban agriculture, which should be acknowledged in legal frameworks.

(4) Territorial Approach

A territorial perspective is critical, involving diverse rural and urban stakeholders within interconnected networks.

(5) Social Inclusion

The discussions highlighted the need to strengthen and revalue the important work of rural and urban women and youth, indigenous peoples and communities, as well as Afro-descendant communities in the

transformation of food systems. The promotion of agroecology implies confronting structural inequalities, which must be reflected in legislation.

(6) Governance Structure

Participants all agreed on the importance to advocate for an intersectoral (i.e., integrating various ministries, secretariats and departments) and participatory governing body, involving government sectors and civil society in decision-making, planning, and monitoring.

(7) Agroecology vs. Organic Certification

Participants stated that it is important to reinforce the articulation, but also the difference, between agroecological transition processes and organic food certification. Agroecology encompasses broader practices and processes beyond organic food certification, necessitating a clear distinction between the two.

Based on the guidelines contained in the 2021 publication and what emerged from the public consultations, the proposal of PARALTINO's Model Law on Agroecology was developed around certain core elements, including 40 articles organized into 10 chapters (FAO, 2024b).

In July 2024, the Agriculture, Livestock, and Fisheries Committee of the Latin American and Caribbean Parliament (PARLATINO) approved the Model Law on the Promotion of Agroecology, an innovative legislative framework that promotes sustainable and resilient agricultural practices in Latin America and the Caribbean. Recently, on December 5, 2024, the General Assembly of PARLATINO approved the new Model Law for the Promotion of Agroecology, which constitutes the first regional regulatory framework approved in this field worldwide.

5. Advancing agroecology through policy support to Member countries: The ASEAN Policy Guidelines on Agroecology Transitions

In 2022, the secretariat of the Association of South-east Asian Nations (ASEAN) published its Regional Guidelines on Sustainable Agriculture (The ASEAN Secretariat, 2022) to provide comprehensive guidance

regarding the characteristics and requirements for sustainable agricultural practices in ASEAN countries. It underscored the need to produce safe, nutritious food while protecting the environment and ensuring economic fairness, alongside the health and safety of farming communities. While conventional intensification has boosted productivity across the region, it has also harmed biodiversity, the environment, climate resilience, livelihoods, and the socio-cultural fabric of agri-food systems. The sustainable agriculture guidelines pointed to agroecology as a “viable transformative approach in the context of a paradigm shift”. In addition, transitioning to agroecology can help ASEAN realizing regional goals, such as the Vision and Strategic Plan for ASEAN Cooperation in Food, Agriculture, and Forestry (2016–2025), the ASEAN Economic Community Blueprint 2025, the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Blueprint 2025, and the ASEAN Master Plan on Rural Development (2022–2026), and international commitments (e.g. Agenda 2030, Paris Agreement, Kunming Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework).

The ASEAN policy guidelines on agroecology transitions have been developed to offer voluntary support to ASEAN member states and bodies to scale up agroecology through interventions that countries can adapt based on their national contexts and priorities. They were elaborated through an inclusive, multi-stakeholder process supported by the ASEAN Secretariat, the Lao facilitated Initiative on Agroecology for ASEAN (LICA), CIRAD, FAO, ESCAP and other partners of the AFD and EU funded Agroecology and Safe Food System Transitions (ASSET) project⁴.

As an initial step, a Human Centred Design (HCD) process was applied in 2023 to ensure that the needs of target users are met. The HCD process involved workshops and interviews with target users among ASEAN Member States. Then, national consultations were organised in Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Philippines, Thailand and Viet Nam, in collaboration with AsiaDHRRA and with support from FAO, the Agroecology Coalition, the Agroecology Learning



Fig. 2 Seven leverage points for agroecology transitions

Source: The ASEAN Secretariat, CIRAD, ESCAP, FAO and LICA (2025) in The ASEAN Policy Guidelines for Agroecology Transitions (not yet published) Infographics

Alliance in South East Asia (ALiSEA) and ASSET project partners.

The guidelines offer practical guidance on agroecology transitions (not on technical practice per se). They aim at supporting key policy actors at national and local levels. Different target users were identified early on in the process, who can be captured under 4 categories: Champions (those who advocate from within Government), Coordinators (who work with others to bring different stakeholders and processes together), Technical experts (who work with “Champions” and “Coordinators”, either within government, or through development partners’ interventions) and Advocates (who are on the outside of government advocating for change).

The guidelines were developed based on the 10 elements (FAO, 2018) and the 13 principles of agroecology (HLPE, 2019) with synergies and co-creation of knowledge as central pillars. Combined with the co-design of ASEAN level theory of change and pathways envisioned under the multistakeholder process, this led to the identification of 7 leverage points for agroecology transitions (Fig. 2). Each of them outlines possible voluntary policy interventions which may be considered and adapted by each country to suit national circumstances and priorities, and together create a coherent framework for policy integration.

The guidelines were finalized in July 2024 and

adopted at the 45th Special Senior Official Meeting of the ASEAN Ministers on Agriculture and Forestry (SOM-AMAF) on 6–8th August 2024. They were then fully notified at the 46th ASEAN Ministers on Agriculture and Forestry Meeting held virtually on the 24 October 2024. The next step is to socialize and disseminate the guidelines, and to accompany governments in tailoring the guidelines to their national and local contexts, embedding them notably into the different National Action Plan for Food System Transformation. This initiative highlights an intervention in support to the executive body, which in the present case was at Ministry of agriculture level.

6. Conclusions

In the face of mounting global challenges—ranging from climate change, biodiversity loss, and socioeconomic inequities to unsustainable agricultural practices—agroecology offers a transformative and holistic solution to redesign agrifood systems. Through the lens of three FAO-supported initiatives, this article demonstrates the importance of multi-level engagement—spanning practitioners, legislative bodies, and executive agencies—to advance agroecology through policy dialogue and advocacy.

The Asia-Pacific Working Group exemplifies how regional collaboration and knowledge sharing can empower practitioners to mainstream agroecology into education and extension systems. Similarly, the development of the Model Law on Agroecology in Latin America highlights the critical role of legislation in addressing structural inequities and fostering agroecological transitions. Lastly, the ASEAN Policy Guidelines underscore the value of inclusive, multi-stakeholder processes in crafting adaptable policy frameworks that address national priorities and regional aspirations.

Together, these initiatives reinforce agroecology as a dynamic approach capable of achieving sustainable, resilient, and equitable agrifood systems. To unlock its full potential, continued collaboration, capacity building, and systemic policy support are essential, ensur-

ing that no stakeholder is left behind in the transition toward a more sustainable future.

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Notes

- ¹ TAP-AIS is a project funded by the European Union and implemented by FAO. The project supports the Tropical Agriculture Platform (TAP) to strengthen capacities to innovate in national agricultural innovation systems (AIS) in the context of climate-relevant, productive, and sustainable transformation of agriculture and food systems in Africa, Latin America, Asia and Pacific.
- ² The member countries of PARLATINO are Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, the Dominican Republic, Cuba, Aruba, Curaçao, St. Martin, Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Paraguay, Peru, Suriname, Uruguay, and Venezuela.
- ³ The FPH ALyC is a network composed of more than 400 parliamentarians committed to promote the food security and nutrition in the region. For more information, see: <https://parlamentarioscontraelhambre.org/>
- ⁴ Agroecology and Safe Food Systems Transitions (ASSET) is a project funded by AFD, the EU and the FFEM. It operates in the ASEAN region, especially in Vietnam, Lao PDR and Cambodia, to transform food and agricultural systems in Southeast Asia into more sustainable, safer and inclusive systems, through harnessing the potential of agroecology.

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