

Building Women capacity for a more sustainable food System



In our previous publications [\[1\]](#) we shared about the unique contribution of women in advancing agroecology as means of achieving sustainable food systems. This present article continues the reflection with a practical experience of a rural community of women in Kenya. In an interview by LEISA India [\[2\]](#), a community educator and food justice activist, Leonida Odongo [\[3\]](#) has an impressive knowledge of the reality of farmers in Africa.

Agribusiness companies try to convince farmers to use chemical pesticides, claiming it makes the work easier and makes them have higher yields. What they don't say is that pesticides destroy biodiversity, make the soil toxic and kill earthworms, butterflies, bees and other organisms. Research in Kenya has found alarming levels of pesticides in fresh foods, which are partly responsible for increases in cancer and other diseases due to the carcinogenic components they contain. Many of the pesticides available in Kenya have been abolished by law in other countries. Unfortunately, the weak legislative systems in Africa are leading to the continent becoming a dumping ground for what is no longer useful in other parts of the world.

This is the sad reality that many farmers don't know or are not allowed to know because they are denied access to useful information and solutions. Using "Tafakari", a Swahili word meaning 'reflection'; Leonida explains that when working with farmers, it is not enough to demonize how they produce and what they are using without presenting alternatives. So, the favorable ground is to hold community sessions where farmers are able to reflect and share their experiences. Farmers often say that 10 or 20 years ago they grew food without using any chemicals. Now they do: prior to seeding, when crops are growing and even during harvest. Often, they say that while these chemicals increased production initially, yields are now declining. This is an entry point to discuss various issues such as soil fertility. Farmers are asked to bring a glass of soil from their farm and to observe how many leaves, earthworms and other organisms they can spot. If there are no leaves, it means there are no microorganisms. If there are no earthworms, it means that chemicals have killed them. With no leaves and microorganisms, it also means that there is no humus in the soil. Then together they reflect on the importance of microorganisms and humus and their roles in soil fertility.

This approach has proved successful because farmers want to see tangible change. The beauty is that together they co-create knowledge informed by the farmers' own reflections and experiences. What is very much enjoyable is transgenerational knowledge sharing, for instance

when elderly farmers talk about the different herbs that can be used to make organic fertilisers and when young people participate in these sessions to learn from elderly farmers. Local, innovative farmers are also asked to come to talk about how they produce and they give good advice. These exchanges between farmers really help to re-emphasize that indigenous, agroecological forms of production really work. There are also practical training sessions on making compost, bio-fertilizers or natural pest repellents, for example from the leaves and bark of the Neem tree.

To the question of what is the role of women and feminism in these initiatives, Leonida responds that Agroecology has a female face. The majority of people who till the land and save seeds are women, who have relationships and knowledge that are important for agroecology. Even if in most of African households men are the ones controlling the land, cattle and coffee or tea plantations, women are the ones on the frontline in practice: they harvest the tea and coffee (deemed to be 'male' crops) and take them to the millers for processing but when the cash gets paid, it is the males who control the money. That is why it is important to start a dialogue about food production and who controls the resources. The community dialogues enable women to have safe spaces where their voices can be heard and their concerns listened to. These platforms also provide opportunities for women to recognize their importance as women, not only in terms of reproduction but also in terms of production.

To read the complete interview, visit: <https://leisaindia.org/agroecology-in-africa-has-a-female-face/>

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[1] <http://aefjn.org/en/beyond-the-rhetoric-of-the-industrial-agricultural-investments-in-africa/> ;
<http://aefjn.org/en/the-woman-at-the-heart-of-sustainable-development/> ;
<http://aefjn.org/en/towards-a-sustainable-food-system-the-deplorable-situation-of-women-in-africa/>

[2] LEISA -Low External Input Sustainable Agriculture. LEISA India is the regional Indian edition of Agricultures Network of the global LEISA magazines (www.theagriculturesnetwork.org). LEISA India is published by AME Foundation (www.amefound.org) in collaboration with ILEIA (1999-2011) and MISEREOR (From 2011 onwards).

[3] Leonida Odongo is an activist and educator working on agroecology, feminism, human rights



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