

AGROECOLOGY

A SLOW FOOD BRIEF

KEY POINTS

- Agroecology has been identified by a series of landmark reports as a key enabler for food systems transformation and offers a pathway for a transition towards sustainable food systems.
- Agroecology re-establishes the relationship between culture and nature, human beings, animals and landscape by strengthening the physical and cognitive connections between producers, retailers, consumers, and the environment, as Slow Food has been doing globally for the last 30 years.
- Slow Food is a global movement of agroecological farmers, fishermen, food artisans, cooks, activists and consumers (co-producers), promoting good, clean and fair food for all.
- By defending biological and cultural diversity, mobilizing citizens and influencing policies, Slow Food puts into practice the agroecological transition to sustainable food systems for all.

About this brief

This document outlines the role of agroecology, Slow Food's perspective on the topic, and how the Slow Food global movement puts agroecology into practice.

1. A pathway for a transition towards sustainable food systems

Agroecology has been identified by a series of landmark international reports as a key enabler for food systems transformation^{1,2,3,4,5}. Agroecology is a science, a set of practices, a social movement that has evolved to expand in scope from a focus on fields and farms to encompass whole food systems. It now represents a transdisciplinary field that includes all the ecological, sociocultural, technological, economic, and political dimensions of food systems, from production to consumption⁶.

In the face of the current crises, agroecology offers a pathway for a transition towards sustainable food systems. The goal of agroecological transitions is to design food systems that ensure food sovereignty, food security and healthy diets for all, now and in the future in a sustainable way⁷. This corresponds to the mission of Slow Food, the global food movement acting to ensure good, clean, and fair food for all.

2. Agroecology and industrial food systems

Agriculture and, more broadly, food systems are the coevolution of culture and nature, human beings, and landscape⁸. Industrial agriculture and the industrial food systems have increasingly invalidated this relationship by increasing the physical and cognitive gap between producers, retailers, consumers, and the environment. In contrast, embracing agroecology means addressing the socioecological nature of agriculture and understanding that agriculture produces social, cultural, and ecological landscapes.

3. Agroecology and global food security

Despite the growing recognition of agroecology's value worldwide, it is still too often perceived as a set of practices to be applied only in certain contexts, and that it cannot contribute to global food security.



It is commonly estimated that an increase in agricultural production will be required to feed a growing global population, expected to reach 9.7 billion by 2050, unless major changes are made in global food systems. However, we contest the need for such an increase in agricultural production. The debate as to whether agroecology can feed the world is based on a false premise since, despite high levels of production, food insecurity and malnutrition persist today^{9,10,11}. Today, almost one-third of food produced for human consumption is either lost or wasted, yet different forms of malnutrition coexist in most countries¹². Globally, around 820 million people are still hungry¹³, about 2 billion are overweight or obese¹⁴ and an estimated 2 billion people suffer from malnutrition caused by micronutrient deficiencies (iron, iodine, vitamin A, folate and zinc)¹⁵. FAO¹⁶ found that a “business as usual” scenario is likely to lead to significant undernourishment by 2050 even if gross agricultural output increases by 50 percent. On the contrary, scenarios in line with agroecological approaches could lead to a drastic reduction in undernourishment and improvement of nutritional security, as well as overall environmental, socio-cultural and economic sustainability¹⁷.



4. The principles of agroecology and of Slow Food

The Slow Food philosophy is strongly intertwined with agroecology. Both are rooted in rebuilding relationships between agriculture and the environment, between food systems and society, between farmers, food artisans and citizens. Agroecology's focus on sustainable farming and food production, fair distribution, qualitative consumption, and environmental responsibility aligns closely with the Slow Food mission of ensuring good, clean and fair food for all.

As a global movement, Slow Food involves actors whose collective impact is bigger than the sum of their individual actions. Likewise, agroecology stresses the relevance of the collective impact of our individual actions on the environment.

Agroecology is a compelling and effective model for food systems, as it is rooted in adapting a set of key principles to the given environmental, economic and socio-cultural context¹⁸. It is not a one-size fits all solution. It is a bottom-up pathway to food sovereignty, building on traditional knowledge systems, supported rather than led by science, where small producers, their communities, and organisations play a central role. Agroecological approaches aim at building resilient and sustainable local food systems, strongly linked and adapted to their territories and ecosystems^{19,20,21}. This reflects the way Slow Food has developed its global work in the last 30 years.

The graph on the following page highlights the connections between the 13 agroecological principles and the Slow Food values of good, clean and fair.

SLOW FOOD PRINCIPLES

GOOD FOOD FOR ALL

Slow Food stands for delicious, healthy, and culturally-appropriate food as a right for everyone: a diversity of people, cultures, places, foods and tastes is key for resilient societies and ecosystems.

CLEAN FOOD FOR ALL

Slow Food supports local and resilient food systems which regenerate the Earth's precious resources rather than depleting them, and which safeguard all ecosystems and living species: our food systems have an important role to play in mitigating the climate crisis and biodiversity loss.

FAIR FOOD FOR ALL

Slow Food creates economies based on solidarity and cooperation that benefit and empower all food workers and consumers, where everyone is a valued decisionmaker: social equity through fair working conditions, inclusivity of all peoples, ethnicities and genders as well as equal access to food, water and land is key for the future of our food systems. Farmers, fish harvesters, food artisans, indigenous peoples, and all food workers are valued as key experts and decision-makers.

AGROECOLOGY PRINCIPLES



SOCIAL VALUES AND DIETS

Build food systems based on the culture, identity, tradition, social and gender equity of local communities that provide healthy, diversified, seasonally and culturally appropriate diets.



RECYCLING

Preferentially use local renewable resources and close as far as possible resource cycles of nutrients and biomass.



SYNERGY

Enhance positive ecological interaction, synergy, integration, and complementarity amongst the elements of agroecosystems (plants, animals, trees, soil, water).



SOIL HEALTH

Secure and enhance soil health and functioning for improved plant growth, particularly by managing organic matter and by enhancing soil biological activity.



INPUT REDUCTION

Reduce or eliminate dependency on purchased inputs.



BIODIVERSITY

Maintain and enhance diversity of species, functional diversity and genetic resources and maintain biodiversity in the agroecosystem over time and space at field, farm and landscape scales.



ANIMAL HEALTH

Ensure animal health and welfare.



CONNECTIVITY

Ensure proximity and confidence between producers and consumers through promotion of fair and short distribution networks and by re-embedding food systems into local economies.



FAIRNESS

Support dignified and robust livelihoods for all actors engaged in food systems, especially small-scale food producers, based on fair trade, fair employment and fair treatment of intellectual property rights.



CO-CREATION OF KNOWLEDGE

Enhance co-creation and horizontal sharing of knowledge including local and scientific innovation, especially through farmer-to-farmer exchange.



LAND AND NATURAL RESOURCE GOVERNANCE

Recognize and support the needs and interests of family farmers, smallholders and peasant food producers as sustainable managers and guardians of natural and genetic resources.



PARTICIPATION

Encourage social organization and greater participation in decision-making by food producers and consumers to support decentralized governance and local adaptive management of agricultural and food systems.



ECONOMIC DIVERSIFICATION

Diversify on-farm incomes by ensuring small-scale farmers have greater financial independence and value addition opportunities while enabling them to respond to demand from consumers.

AGROECOLOGICAL AND SLOW FOOD TRANSITIONS

Around the globe, the Slow Food network translates into practice a shared strategy that focuses on defending biological and cultural diversity; educating, inspiring and mobilizing citizens; influencing policies in the public and private sectors. In other words, the Slow Food strategy and grassroots work embodies the levels of the agroecological transitions. The table below depicts the five levels of agroecological transitions. The table in the next page depicts how Slow Food contributes to the five levels of the agroecological transitions.

THERE ARE FIVE LEVELS OF AGROECOLOGICAL TRANSITIONS:

TRANSFORMATIONAL

5

BUILD A NEW GLOBAL FOOD SYSTEM

Level 5 involves building a new global food system that is not only sustainable but also helps restore and protect Earth's life-support systems.

4

RECONNECT PRODUCERS AND CONSUMERS THROUGH FOOD NETWORKS

Level 4 aims at reconnecting producers and consumers through alternative food distribution networks such as farmers' markets, community-supported agriculture, or fair trade in food products, contributing to secure social equity/responsibility.

3

REDESIGN AGROECOSYSTEMS

Level 3 aims at redesigning the farming system to strengthen its resilience, including through diversification, recycling, improved soil management, self-sufficiency and reduced dependency on purchased input. At this level, there is a strong focus on managing interactions among components of the agroecosystem (animals, crops, trees, soil and water) – for example through the strategic use of crop residues as mulch or animal feed – and on increasing synergies at farm and landscape scales.

Transition levels 4 and 5 broaden the focus to encompass the whole food system.

2

ALTERNATIVES TO CHEMICAL INPUTS

At the second level, alternatives to chemical inputs are envisaged with the view to relying more on ecological processes, taking advantage, for instance, of co-existing biota (such as the plant microbiome or natural enemies) or genetics characteristics (such as cultivars that are resistant/tolerant to biotic stresses) to improve plant nutrient uptake, stress tolerance and defences against pests and disease.

1

RESOURCE EFFICIENCY

At the first level, the transition pathway focuses on improving resource efficiency through practices that reduce or eliminate the use of costly, non-renewable, scarce or environmentally damaging inputs.

INCREMENTAL

THE CONTRIBUTION OF SLOW FOOD TO THE FIVE LEVELS OF THE AGROECOLOGICAL TRANSITIONS

SLOW FOOD FARMS



International advocacy

INFLUENCE PUBLIC AND PRIVATE POLICIES



A global grassroots food movement



European advocacy



Urban food policies



School gardens



Programs for food professionals and educators

EDUCATING, INSPIRING AND MOBILISING CITIZENS



Earth Markets



Cooks Alliance



Slow Food Travel

DEFEND BIOLOGICAL AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY



Ark of Taste



Presidia

5

Build a new global food system

4

Reconnect producers and consumers through food networks

3

Redesign agroecosystems

2

Alternatives to chemical inputs

1

Resource Efficiency

DEFENDING BIOLOGICAL AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY



At Slow Food, when we defend biodiversity, we go beyond the biological diversity of plants and animals and think about the relationship between people and nature, as well as the traditional knowledge that has given rise to thousands of techniques for transforming raw materials into breads, cheeses, cured meats, sweets, and more. Biodiversity begins with the invisible and includes the microscopic organisms that give life to soil and food. Biodiversity is preserved and enhanced within human societies, and it is crucial for promoting and protecting cultural diversity.

Biodiversity is not a simple objective to be reached, but a crucial tool to reinforce our relationship with nature, a concrete agroecological tool.

Promoting biodiversity is about maintaining and enhancing diversity of species and genetic resources and maintain biodiversity in the agroecosystem over time and space, at field, farm and landscape scales. It is about biodiversity being fully integrated in farming, and not simply a marginal feature of farms and agricultural landscapes. The deliberate use of greater agrobiodiversity in agriculture and food systems than is typical in monoculture systems, can make them more ecologically and economically efficient and resilient and contribute to the development of healthier, diversified and seasonally (and culturally) appropriate diets.

THE SLOW FOOD BIODIVERSITY PROGRAMS

CATALOGUING ENDANGERED FOOD PRODUCTS: THE ARK OF TASTE

The Ark of Taste is the world's greatest catalogue of cultural and traditional biodiversity related to food and agriculture. We have identified thousands of plant varieties, animal breeds and traditional food products (including breads, cheeses, cured meats and sweets), highlighting the risk of their disappearance, saving them from extinction, and educating institutions and consumers about the need to protect them.

SUPPORTING FARMERS TO PROTECT AND PRESERVE FOOD HERITAGE: THE SLOW FOOD PRESIDIA

Presidia are formed of groups of producers committed to preserving and passing on traditional production techniques and crafts. These farmers, food artisans, herders, fishers and winegrowers care for their environments across all five continents, valorising landscapes, places, local economies and cultures. They are agroecological farmers or are keen to become so, with the Presidia project supporting the practical uptake of agroecological principles. The Presidia project has saved thousands of native breeds and varieties of fruits and vegetables from extinction, promoted rural landscapes and ecosystems and improved sustainable cultivation, livestock and fishing systems.

PROMOTING SUSTAINABLY THROUGH SLOW FOOD TRAVEL

Slow Food Travel combines the best elements of exploring new cultures, offering a sustainable model for tourism based on the discovery of gastronomic traditions. It connects inquisitive travelers with Slow Food food communities promoting good, clean and fair products, and promotes immersive experiences that combine the pleasure of food with culture and conviviality.



PROMOTING BIODIVERSITY THROUGH A GLOBAL NETWORK OF FARMERS MARKETS: THE EARTH MARKETS

Earth Markets form an international network of markets that involve agroecological farmers, fishermen and food artisans. They sell only what they produce or catch and can personally guarantee the quality of their products, which are local, fresh and seasonal. Earth markets are traded at fair prices, benefiting those who buy as well as those who sell.

SAFEGUARDING BIODIVERSITY THROUGH A GLOBAL NETWORK OF COOKS: THE SLOW FOOD COOKS ALLIANCE

Members of the Slow Food Cooks Alliance share a commitment to protecting agricultural biodiversity while safeguarding food knowledge and local cultures. They serve agroecology in their dishes. These cooks are ambassadors of local producers and food biodiversity and their work raises awareness of what good, clean and fair food is, and how we can make it a mainstay of the meals we create.

EDUCATING, INSPIRING AND MOBILIZING CITIZENS

Slow Food supports those ready to transition and encourages all to embrace the transition. It does so by putting into practice the agroecological principles of knowledge production and dissemination, enhance co-creation and horizontal sharing of knowledge including local and scientific knowledge and innovation. Experiential learning and knowledge-sharing among practitioners, and co-production of knowledge among

multi-stakeholder networks generates innovation and solutions adapted to the local context.

Slow Food works to strengthen a collaborative approach and to facilitate the sharing of knowledge, encompassing both local and scientific advancements, particularly through farmer-to-farmer communication.



THE SLOW FOOD EDUCATION PROGRAMS

SLOW FOOD SCHOOL GARDENS

For more than 30 years Slow Food has been cultivating agroecological school gardens around the world as an excellent learning tool. They engage students by providing experiential learning and allow to tackle food and environmental education, biodiversity loss and climate crisis as well as most of the subject of the curriculum. They enable students to connect with nature, raise awareness about food production systems, and discover local food products and culinary traditions.

EXCHANGES AND TRAINING PROGRAMS FOR FOOD PROFESSIONALS AND EDUCATORS

In the agroecological spirit of co-creation, experimental learning and knowledge-sharing among practitioners, Slow Food organises a wide range of exchanges and training programs, at local as well as at international level.

LEVERAGING THE EDUCATIONAL POWER OF THE BIODIVERSITY PROJECTS

Slow Food's catalogue on food biodiversity is a powerful tool to educating institutions and consumers about the need to protect them. Slow Food farmers' markets and the Slow Food Travel destinations provide physical spaces and dedicated time for exchange of knowledge between farmers, food artisans and citizens, whether through spontaneous exchanges or during the educational events organised by the Slow Food within the framework of these programs. Slow Food Cooks are excellent ambassadors as well as educators on biodiversity towards their clients.



INFLUENCING POLICIES IN THE PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SECTORS

Slow Food engages both public and private sectors and seeks synergies with those who share the vision of good, clean and fair food for all. Our network cooperates to promote the active and collaborative involvement of farmers, fishers, food artisans and consumers in decision-making processes, to support decentralised governance and enable local management of food systems. This forges social connections and empowers stakeholders to contribute to the effective governance and sustainable management of local food systems.

To influence public decision-makers and the private sector, Slow Food focuses on influencing policies so as to promote agroecological systems of production, distribution, marketing, consumption. As a global movement involving a multitude of interconnected individuals, Slow Food informs and mobilizes local and global communities. By providing information and empowering people to become advocates, Slow Food creates a groundswell of support for positive change. By forming alliances with like-minded partners, we amplify our impact and work together towards a common vision.



SLOW FOOD ADVOCACY WORK

INTERNATIONAL ADVOCACY

Slow Food campaigns on a range of food-related topics, including animal farming & animal products consumption, biodiversity, climate change, corporate capture and right to food.

EUROPEAN ADVOCACY

Slow Food operates an advocacy office in Brussels, Belgium, at the political heart of European Union. Here we raise awareness, mobilize individuals, and put pressure on politicians, advocating for them to change our food and farming policies so that they work for everyone.

URBAN FOOD POLICIES

Cities are at the forefront of one of the most critical challenges of our time, and with the world's urban population projected to reach 66% by 2050, sustainable urban food policies have become increasingly crucial.

NATIONAL AND GRASSROOTS ADVOCACY

The Slow Food grassroots network carries out impactful local level advocacy work, in constructive dialogues with local and national authorities.



THE SLOW FOOD FARMS

Slow Food Farms are set to become the largest global network of farms dedicated to producing good, clean, and fair food rooted in agroecological principles. Aligned with Slow Food's philosophy that everyone deserves access to nourishing food that supports communities, honors the Earth, and strengthens local economies, these farms embody the future of sustainable agriculture. By integrating farms into resilient local food systems, Slow Food Farms not only enhance farmers' livelihoods but also ensure fair compensation and long-term economic stability.

Slow Food amplifies the voices of these farmers, connecting them to a global community—including activists, chefs, consumers, food artisans, fishers, and fellow farmers—who have long supported the movement.

To foster the growth of this global network, Slow Food has launched a dynamic training program for activists. This initiative empowers participants to engage with local agroecological farms and offer essential support. Through education, peer-to-peer learning, improved market access, and strong community connections, Slow Food Farms are cultivating food systems that nurture communities and safeguard our planet for future generations.

DRIVING THE AGROECOLOGICAL TRANSITION

Slow Food Farms are at the forefront of the global agroecological movement, embodying practices that go beyond agricultural production to reshape entire food systems. They are not just about growing food—they represent a paradigm shift towards sustainable agriculture that nourishes communities and preserves ecosystems. These farms are living examples of how the principles of agroecology—such as diversity, synergy, and resource efficiency—can be applied to create resilient and sustainable food networks that benefit both people and the planet.



CULTIVATING A NEW FOOD SYSTEM

As integral parts of the Slow Food movement, Slow Food Farms work collectively to foster agroecology on a global scale. This transformation is not the work of farmers alone; it requires the concerted effort of the entire Slow Food network, including local groups, markets, cooks, and consumers. Through these collective efforts, Slow Food Farms are cultivating a new food system that is just, sustainable, and deeply connected to the local communities it serves.

BUILDING STRONG CONNECTIONS

The Slow Food movement plays a crucial role in bridging the gap between producers and consumers, ensuring that food production remains closely linked to the needs and values of local communities. Slow Food Farms serve as hubs of innovation and education, where farmers, activists, and consumers come together to learn, share, and promote the values of good, clean, and fair food. These strong connections are the foundation of a truly transformative agroecological movement, ensuring that every element of the network contributes to a more equitable and sustainable food future.

CONCLUSION

The transition towards agroecology is urgent and requires the commitment and perseverance from all actors in the food system. Slow Food works globally to empower this transition.

Slow Food is a global movement of agroecological farmers, fishermen, food artisans, cooks, activists and consumers (co-producers), promoting good, clean and fair food for all. By defending biological and cultural diversity, mobilizing citizens and influencing policies, Slow Food puts into practice the agroecological transition to sustainable food systems for all.

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