



# HOW AGROECOLOGY CAN HELP REALIZE MORE INCLUSIVE AND CLIMATE-RESILIENT FOOD SYSTEMS

KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR DUTCH DEVELOPMENT POLICY

## DISCUSSION PAPER



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## DISCUSSION PAPER

**AUTHORS:**  
**STEFAN SCHÜLLER**  
 (BOTH ENDS)  
**NOUT VAN DER VAART**  
 (OXFAM NOVIB)  
**JUST DINGERINK**  
 (SUSTAINABLE FOOD  
 SYSTEMS CONSULTANT)

**DESIGN & LAY-OUT:**  
**MENNO VAN DEN ENGEL**  
**MAAIKE VAN DER STAAL**  
 (CREATIEF BUREAU SJAA)

**COVERIMAGE FRONT:**  
**KIMLONG MENG**  
 (OXFAM NOVIB)

**COVERIMAGE BACK:**  
 (ICE KENYA)

This discussion paper has been written to contribute to public debate and to invite feedback on development and humanitarian policy issues. It is a 'work in progress' document based on research and does not necessarily reflect Oxfam Novib and Both ENDS policy positions. For more information, or to comment on this paper, email co-authors Nout van der Vaart ([nout.vandervaart@oxfamnovib.nl](mailto:nout.vandervaart@oxfamnovib.nl)) & Stefan Schüller ([s.schuller@bothends.org](mailto:s.schuller@bothends.org))

Oxfam Novib, a Dutch NGO for development co-operation, is fighting for a just world without poverty. It works together with people, organizations, businesses and governments, locally and internationally, in projects and advocacy. Because poverty and injustice are global problems, related to unjust economic and political relationships. Oxfam Novib works in 60 countries with 860 counterparts.

Together with environmental justice groups from the Global South, Both ENDS works towards a sustainable, fair and inclusive world. We gather and share information about policy and investments that have a direct impact on people and their livelihood, we engage in joint advocacy, we stimulate the dialogue between stakeholders and we promote and support sustainable local alternatives.



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## INTRODUCTION

Global challenges show that most food systems around the world do not produce the outcomes we want. While the number of people facing hunger and malnutrition is on the rise, more than one third of our food is currently either lost or wasted.<sup>1</sup>

Climate change and the more recent COVID-19 pandemic are challenging the resilience of most food systems, while agriculture is continuing to drive large-scale deforestation and rapid biodiversity loss. As a result, there is broad agreement that we need to urgently transform food systems to become more inclusive and climate-resilient. As UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres put it during the UN Food System Summit: 'Change in food systems is not only possible, it is necessary'. But how do we transform food systems in such a way that they produce better outcomes for people and the planet?

A holistic approach that is receiving much attention in current debates around food systems transformation is agroecology. Agroecology aspires to transform food systems into ones that are more sustainable, inclusive and socially just. It builds on both modern science as well as indigenous and traditional knowledge around biological processes, working with the dynamic balance of an ecosystem to produce nutritious food that requires few external inputs. At the same time, agroecology provides a more inclusive alternative to dominant food system configurations by putting small-scale farmers and pastoralists at the forefront of change through responsible governance, close interaction between producers and consumers, co-creation of knowledge, circular economies and the upholding of human and social values.

Internationally, agroecology is increasingly recognized as a promising approach to shape interventions that aim to contribute to more equitable and resilient food systems. It has been adopted by a range of donor and recipient countries and has gained major traction among multilateral and development organizations (more details below). Two recent studies, commissioned by Oxfam Novib and Both ENDS, have analyzed the way agroecological elements are considered in projects funded through Dutch Official Development Assistance (ODA).<sup>2,3</sup>

While a holistic agroecological approach is absent in virtually all assessed projects, there are several examples in which various agroecological elements and principles are already considered.

This discussion paper aims to contribute to the wider debate on how to shape the transition to more climate resilient and inclusive food systems, highlighting the potential agroecology has for shaping future food security and agricultural development policies, and how Dutch ODA policies can contribute to this transition. The two recent studies demonstrate that while only small parts of Dutch ODA spending have supported an agroecological transformation in the past, several programs have already taken incremental steps by integrating one or more agroecological elements. They show that two-thirds of Dutch ODA funding relevant to agriculture has great potential to further deepen and apply agroecological elements more systematically to contribute to food systems *transformation*. This constitutes a solid basis to start using agroecology as a practical approach to support the Dutch policy objective of creating greater sustainability and inclusion in food systems.

## AGROECOLOGY: A SHORT INTRODUCTION

Agroecology is a field of study, a diverse set of agricultural practices and a social movement that aims to transform food systems towards greater ecological sustainability, social justice, and resilience. As shown in Figure 1 on the next page, agroecology, as set out by FAO, incorporates ten elements, ranging from diversity and efficiency to resilience and responsible governance.<sup>4,5</sup>

The High-Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition (HLPE) has further expanded these agroecological elements, finetuning and augmenting them by elaborating 13 refined agroecological principles.<sup>6</sup>

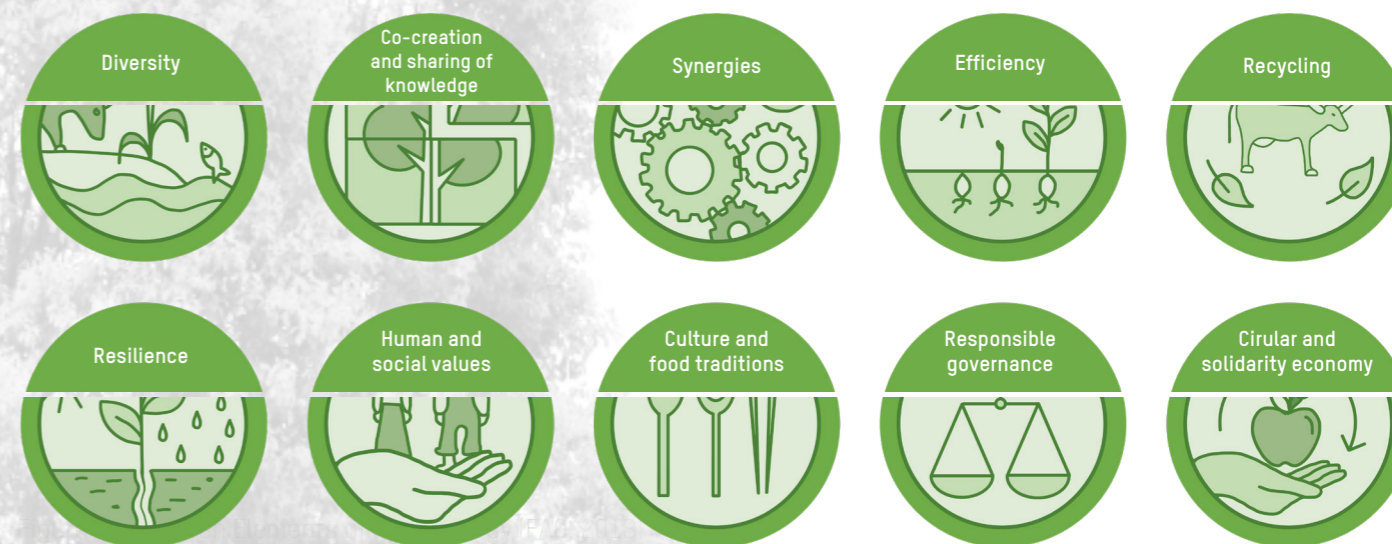


Figure 1: FAO's Ten Elements of Agroecology (FAO, 2018)

Agroecology as a science, combining agronomy and ecology to study the interactions between crops and natural elements, emerged already in the 1930s. This area of research only started truly surging from the 1980s onwards, when researchers became inspired by the Latin American agroecological peasant movements taking a stand against the social injustices that industrial agriculture was causing to smallholder farmers.

Since the 1990s, similar agroecological grassroots organizations have sprung up across the globe, creating a science-based global movement fighting for a more sustainable, equitable and resilient food system. With a broad support from civil society organizations, farmers and scientists, agroecology has recently acquired more and more recognition in the international arena. Multilateral organizations such as FAO and IFAD are recognizing agroecology as an important pathway to transform food systems.<sup>7,8</sup>

Likewise, it is adopted by an increasing number of countries providing ODA (e.g. Belgium, France, Switzerland, Germany) and recipient countries (e.g. Senegal, Sri Lanka and Morocco), with governments adopting agroecology to varying degrees in their agricultural policies and/or starting funding portfolios based on agroecological principles.<sup>9,10,11</sup>

At the same time, agroecology has become an important approach for many NGO's (e.g. ActionAid, Biovision Foundation, Friends of the Earth) and philanthropies (IKEA Foundation, Global Alliance for the Future of Food), developing agroecological activities and programs.<sup>12,13,14</sup>

Recent scientific reviews have solidified the evidence of agroecology having a positive impact on a wide range of indicators, including among others farmers' financial capital (e.g. improved yields and farm profitability), their food and nutrition security (especially in more complex agroecological systems) as well as climate resilience of farms and livelihoods.<sup>15,16,17</sup>

On the next page, two examples are provided which showcase the consideration of agroecology in agricultural programs; one highlighting the ProSoil program funded by the German Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and one showcasing the Working Landscapes program supported by Dutch ODA.

**EXAMPLE 1:  
THE ROLE OF AGROECOLOGY IN GERMAN DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION**

In 2019, the German parliament adopted a resolution calling for the government to continue its commitment to agroecology and expand it with respect to the country's development cooperation. Like many other donors, BMZ is increasingly supporting agroecology, putting it central in its financial and technical cooperation projects (GIZ, 2020). One major program implemented by the German development agency GIZ is ProSoil, an agroecology program active in Benin, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, India, Kenya, Madagascar and Tunisia since 2014. Its aim is to protect and rehabilitate degraded soils using agroecological practices. Since its inception, the program has rehabilitated nearly 353,000 hectares of land, with participating smallholders having increased yields by an average of 43% in comparison to surrounding areas.

MAYO, A ZIMBABWEAN YOUNG FARMER, MEASURING A PLANT. TOGETHER WITH WOMEN FROM NEARBY VILLAGES SHE WORKS IN TEST PLOTS WHERE, IN COOPERATION WITH OXFAM PARTNER CTDI, THEY ATTEMPT TO DEVELOP DROUGHT-RESISTANT CROPS.

**EXAMPLE 2:**

**AGROECOLOGICAL ELEMENTS IN THE WORK OF DUTCH NGO TROPENBOS INTERNATIONAL**

Between 2018 and 2024, the Dutch NGO Tropenbos International has been granted €11,5 million from the Dutch government for its Working Landscapes project, which seeks to promote climate-smart landscapes in Indonesia, Vietnam, Ghana, DR Congo, Suriname, Colombia, Bolivia and Ethiopia. The mission of Tropenbos International is to improve the governance and management of tropical forests to benefit people, biodiversity and sustainable development, and over the years has strongly integrated various agroecological elements in its work. By focusing on sustainable land management, local knowledge generation and inclusive governance, the Working Landscapes project demonstrates how ecological practices integrated with a strong focus on social values can spur transformational change.

THE FARMERS LEARN SIMPLE METHODS TO EFFECTIVELY GROW PLANTS. WOMEN MEASURE THE LENGTH AND EXAMINE THE SORGHUM PLANTS IN VILLAGES IN TSHOLOTSO DISTRICT.





**AMANE AND KEDIRO IRRESO, ETHIOPIAN SMALLHOLDER VEGETABLE PRODUCERS, ON THEIR WAY HOME AFTER WORKING ON THEIR PIECE OF LAND WITH CROPS, NEAR THEIR HOUSE [CREDITS PETTERIK WIGGERS / OXFAM NOVIB]**

## LINKING AGROECOLOGICAL ELEMENTS TO DUTCH DEVELOPMENT POLICY

Dutch (agricultural) development policy has broadened its objectives in recent years from achieving food and nutrition security to realizing sustainable and inclusive food systems. In a joint letter to parliament, the Minister of Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation and the Minister of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality stated the following: ‘To feed 10 billion people in 30 years, a transition to a healthy, fair, climate-neutral and circular food system is needed.’<sup>18</sup>

The Dutch development policy on creating a more sustainable and inclusive food system has several, partly overlapping components. First, the Dutch Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality aims to establish the Netherlands as a leader in circular agriculture.<sup>19</sup> Second, to address climate change, the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs has prioritized the need to increase climate resilience in its focus countries, paying special attention to proven climate-smart practices.<sup>20</sup>

Third, important steps have been taken to make food security programs more nutrition-sensitive, especially since the publication of the critical 2012–2016 review of the Dutch food security policy.<sup>21</sup> Finally, inclusivity has been an increasingly important criterion for Dutch development programming, especially in relation to gender, youth and smallholder farmers.<sup>22</sup>

Agroecological approaches can help the Dutch government in achieving these interlinked objectives and creating more sustainable and inclusive food systems, while at the same time empowering smallholder farmers around the world. As shown in Figure 2, the key elements of agroecology have a strong overlap with all four components of Dutch food security policy. Agroecology is thus a very useful approach to combine rather than compartmentalize Dutch policy objectives and accelerate the transition to more sustainable and inclusive food systems.

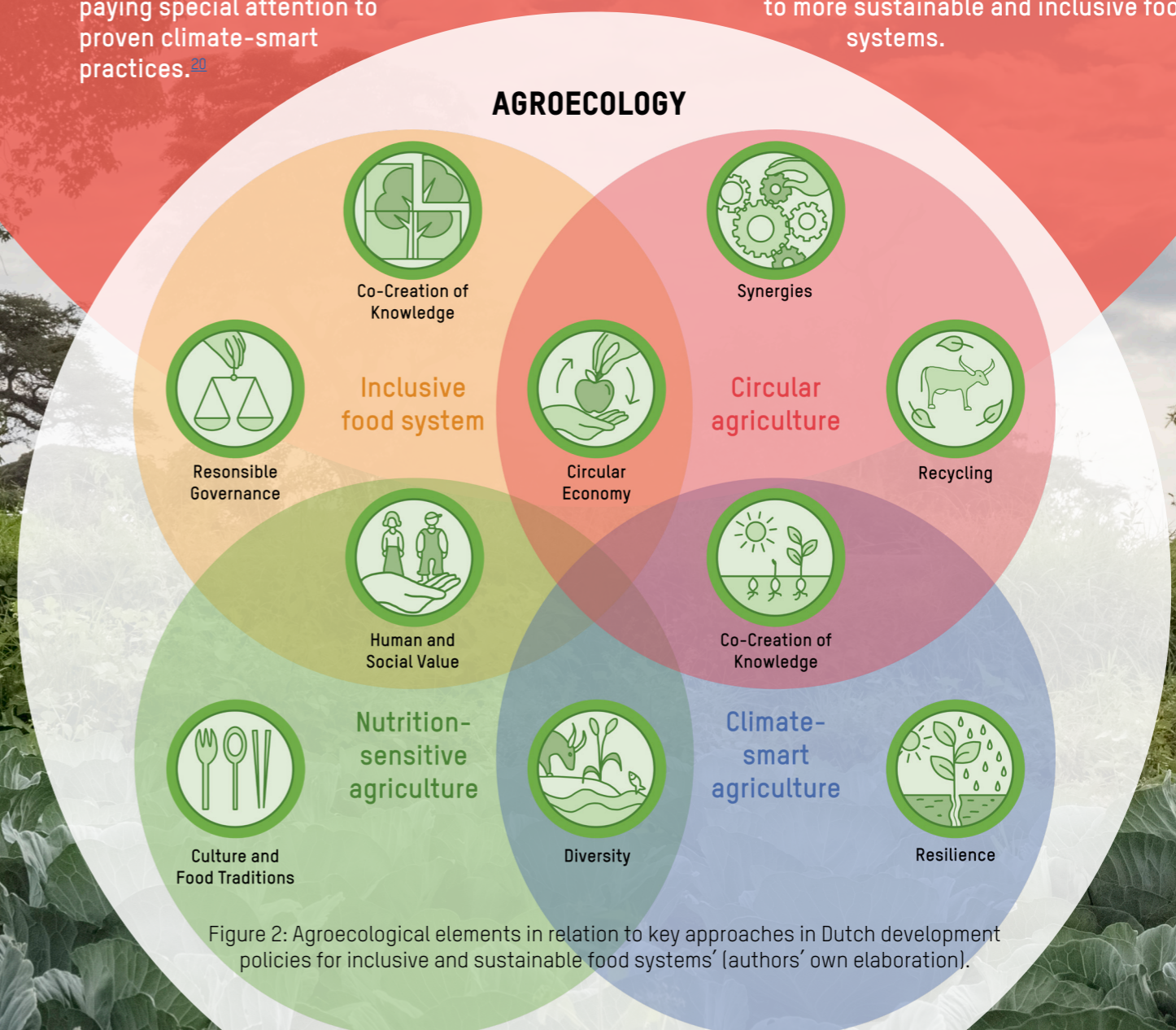


Figure 2: Agroecological elements in relation to key approaches in Dutch development policies for inclusive and sustainable food systems’ (authors’ own elaboration).

### THE CURRENT CONSIDERATION OF AGROECOLOGICAL ELEMENTS IN DUTCH DEVELOPMENT POLICY

The two studies commissioned by Oxfam Novib and Both ENDS have concluded that government support for a holistic agroecological transformation of food systems is still very limited. At the same time, they have shown the potential for agroecology to be more rigorously supported by the Dutch government in order to achieve its ambitious development objectives.<sup>23,24</sup> The study commissioned by Both ENDS covers all agriculture-related Dutch ODA over the last ten years, while the Oxfam-funded study zooms in on Dutch ODA-spending in relation to agriculture in four African countries specifically. Below, we summarize the three key findings from these reports.

#### FINDING 1 ONLY A MINOR PART OF DUTCH ODA CONTRIBUTES TO AN AGROECOLOGICAL TRANSFORMATION

Across Europe, various countries have started supporting agroecology as part of their development cooperation. A number of studies, each with comparable

but slightly different methodologies, have aimed to assess the contribution of ODA to an agroecological transformation of food systems abroad.<sup>25,26,27,28</sup> The review study commissioned by Both ENDS shows that based on the 260 projects assessed, around nine percent of Dutch ODA in relation to food and agriculture can be considered conducive to an agroecological transformation of food systems.<sup>29</sup> This relative contribution is higher than in countries such as the United Kingdom and Germany, but lower than in Belgium and France, where agroecology has already take a more prominent role in different development policies (see Figure 3).

#### FINDING 2 THE MAJORITY OF DUTCH ODA FUNDING DOES NOT PROMOTE A FULL AGROECOLOGICAL TRANSFORMATION, BUT RATHER INCREMENTAL STEPS

Most agricultural projects funded through Dutch ODA have and continue to pay limited to no attention to agroecological elements. As shown in Figure 4, integration of different agroecological elements in Dutch ODA to the four African case countries has been largely limited to *incremental* changes, focused on increased efficiency of external inputs or

sustainable intensification. Up to now, very few projects have applied a more integrated or holistic approach to agricultural change.<sup>30</sup> A major gap persists in Dutch ODA funding for more *transformational* approaches, applying a wide range of agroecological elements, focused at redesigning the whole agroecosystem based on ecological processes. Dutch ODA makes important and crucial efforts to focus on smallholders, particularly women and youth, but does not yet adequately ensure that these projects foster co-creation, adaption to local contexts and bottom-up empowerment.

The review study on the role of agroecology in Dutch ODA to agricultural projects in Africa, commissioned by Oxfam Novib, provided additional insights on how some agroecological elements receive more attention than others.<sup>31</sup> While in one fifth of projects the *efficiency* element is applied, other elements such as *circular economy*, *resilience*, and *recycling* are only integrated in less than ten percent of ODA funded projects. Some elements, such as *knowledge co-creation*, *diversity* and *human and social values*, are part of six to seven percent of projects. Elements of

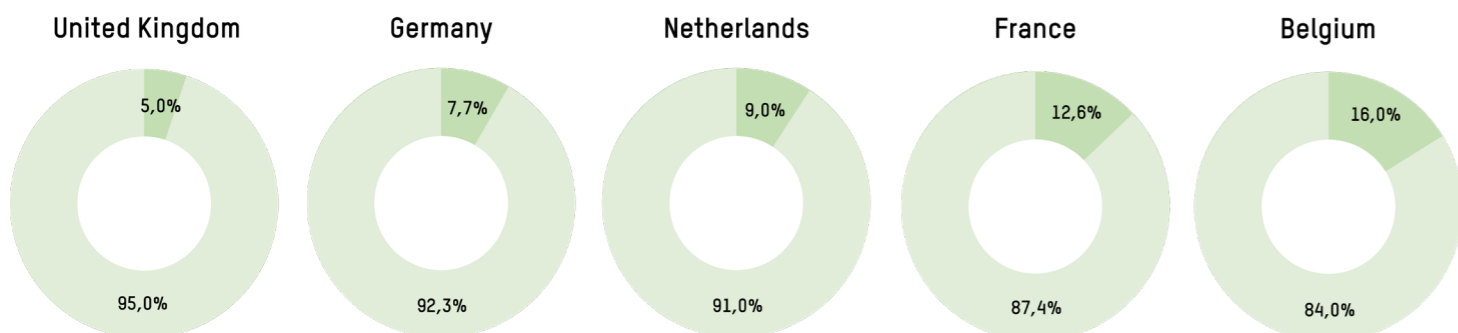


Figure 3: Share of agriculture-related ODA supporting an agroecological transformation in various European countries (Achterberg & Quiroz, 2021a; CIDSE, 2021; MISEREOR, 2020)

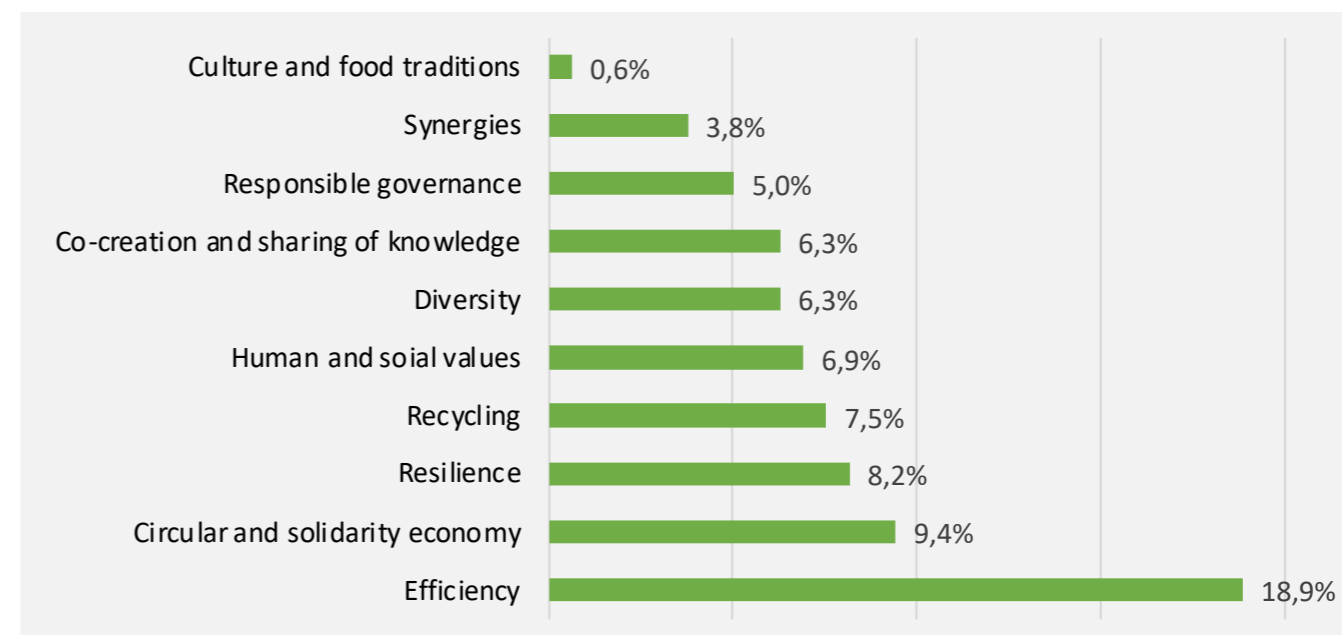


Figure 4: Agroecological elements found in Dutch ODA-funded agricultural projects in African case countries (Achterberg & Quiroz, 2021b)

*responsible governance*, *synergies*, and *culture and food traditions* receive least attention in the projects assessed in the four African case countries.

#### FINDING 3 AGROECOLOGY HAS GREAT POTENTIAL TO HELP REALIZE DUTCH DEVELOPMENT OBJECTIVES

Agroecology has a still small, but promising role in Dutch ODA for food security and agriculture. As shown in Figure 5 below, close to nine percent of Dutch ODA relevant to agriculture is already fully or partially promoting agroecology. Additionally, over half (56%) of Dutch ODA funded agricultural projects does potentially promote agroecology by creating the socially enabling conditions (25%) and governance (10,1%)

structures (10%) that may help support an agroecological transition, or by taking incremental steps towards such a transition (20%). The remaining third of ODA does not promote agroecological elements in any way and instead continues to promote conventional agricultural practices.

This analysis shows that already two-thirds of Dutch ODA related to agriculture *has great potential* to expand and deepen its attention for agroecological elements and more strongly contribute to food systems transformation. Understanding the necessity to take bolder steps to accelerate the shift towards sustainable and more inclusive food systems, this is a solid basis from which to start using agroecology more substantially as a practical approach to support Dutch policy objectives.

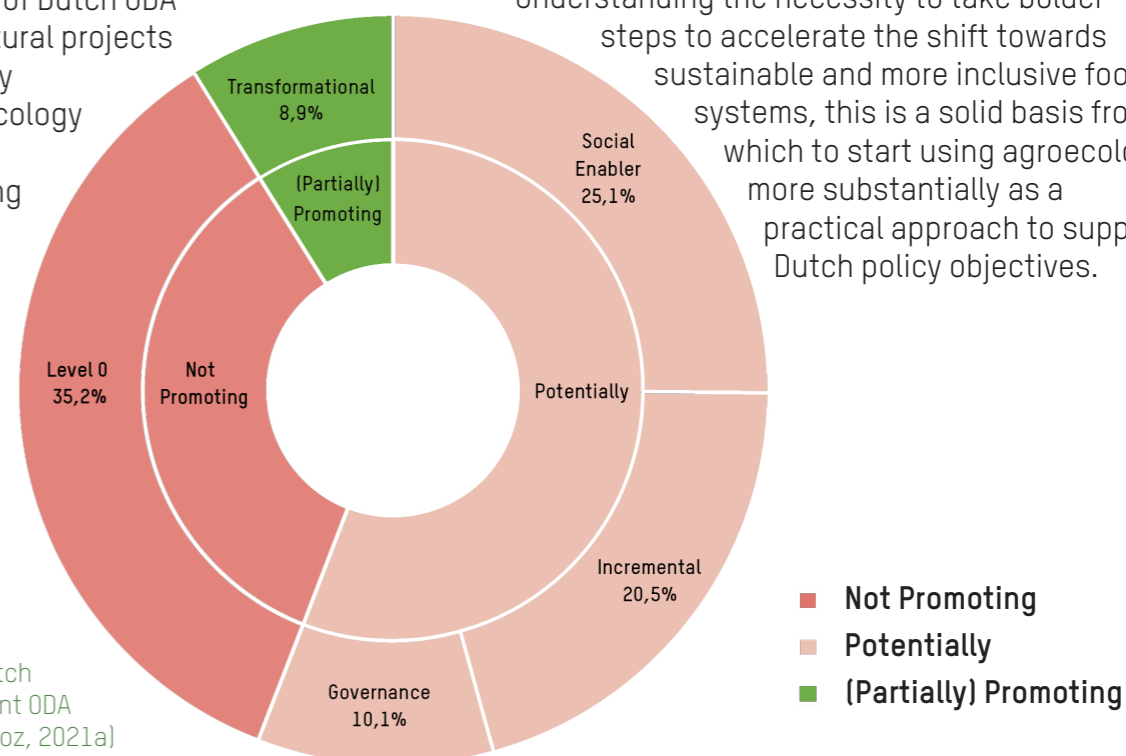


Figure 5: Different considerations of agroecology in Dutch agriculture-relevant ODA (Achterberg & Quiroz, 2021a)

## POTENTIAL WAYS FORWARD FOR AGROECOLOGY IN DUTCH DEVELOPMENT POLICY

Across the globe, agroecology is increasingly recognized as a promising approach to guide the transition to more sustainable, inclusive and climate-resilient food systems. While only small parts of Dutch ODA spending have supported an agroecological transformation in the past, many programs have already taken incremental steps by integrating several agroecological principles. This offers room to more rigorously pay attention to agroecology to achieve the Dutch development objective of creating more sustainable and inclusive food systems. Here, based on the findings and analysis of the research reports, we provide five key points for consideration on how agroecology could contribute to the realization of Dutch development policy objectives.



### CONSIDERATION 1: AGROECOLOGY CAN HELP TO MAKE FOOD SYSTEMS MORE SUSTAINABLE AND CLIMATE- RESILIENT

Agroecological elements and related principles can support the policy ambition of realizing circular and climate-resilient food systems. Food security policies could focus more on overall system resilience, decreasing external input dependencies and strengthening ecological synergies instead of promoting short-term productivity outcomes. Food systems programming could move beyond sustainable intensification, towards a strong integration of ecological principles like recycling, regulation, diversification and the creation of synergies.



### CONSIDERATION 2: AGROECOLOGY CAN BOOST LOCAL FOOD SECURITY AND FOSTER INCLUSIVITY IN FOOD SYSTEMS

To encourage inclusive and participatory decision making around food and agriculture, ODA recipients can be incentivized to adopt more bottom-up approaches by partnering on equal grounds with grassroots organizations. Producing most of the food for local markets in developing countries, more resources could be directed to empower smallholder farmers and their representatives in local civil society. An assessment of ODA programs, funds and instruments could be made focusing on their usability by, connection with, and user-friendliness for local actors that want to spur the development of local or territorial markets for diverse and healthy food, following agroecological principles and practices.



### CONSIDERATION 3: AGROECOLOGY CAN BE USED TO CATALYZE FUNDING FOR FOOD SYSTEM TRANSFORMATION

The recent UN Food System Summit and UNFCCC COP-26 have generated momentum and funding opportunities for programs that aim to transform food systems to become more inclusive and climate-resilient. The transformative potential of agroecology can be used to attract further food and climate related funding to help shape the food systems of the future. Finding out how Dutch ODA and non-ODA funding flows can be further directed more towards agroecological transformation would be worthwhile exploring. In doing so, specific attention would need to be paid on making funding modalities more easily accessible and responsive to the needs of grassroots actors on the frontlines of climate change.



### CONSIDERATION 4: AGROECOLOGICAL RESEARCH CAN CONTRIBUTE TO FINDING SOLUTIONS FOR VARIOUS FOOD SYSTEM CHALLENGES

The global frontrunner role of Dutch agricultural research and innovation can be leveraged for the Netherlands to become a knowledge leader on agroecological solutions. Research and development programs that are (co)funded by the Dutch Government, such as NWO, WOTRO and HORIZON 2020 could integrate a systemic and holistic approach based on the 10 elements of agroecology and could stimulate participatory research activities to foster the co-creation of agroecological solutions together with smallholder farmers and other practitioners on the ground.



### CONSIDERATION 5: AGROECOLOGICAL ELEMENTS CAN BE USED IN PROGRAM FUNDING, DESIGN AND MONITORING

To move towards more climate resilient and inclusive food systems, agroecological elements or principles could be incorporated into funding frameworks, proposal assessments and monitoring of projects that are relevant to the transition to healthy, fair, climate-neutral and circular food systems. FAO's 10 elements of agroecology can offer practical guidance to inform and shape a set of assessment criteria and/or a monitoring system to holistically assess projects and programs that aim to increase food and nutrition security and/or help realize more sustainable and inclusive food systems.

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Novib

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