

Agroecology needs coherent governance and bottom-up action

For all its ecological and social credentials, agroecology as an agricultural practice faces an uphill struggle in a South African policy environment largely stacked in favour of the 'Big Food' industrial complex.



Source: Loren King via [Unsplash](#)

But how, then, to expand agroecology adoption?

This was the question facing speakers and participants at the 17 November meeting – titled 'Agroecological Transitions and Local Governance' – of the Food Governance Community of Practice (CoP), a network of scholars, practitioners, civil society and state officials hosted within the DSI-NRF Centre of Excellence in Food Security (CoE-FS).

"This is a transformative approach to sustainable food systems," summed up researcher and writer Dr Stephen Greenberg in his introduction.

While a working definition remains broad and elusive, agroecology does abide by some common principles, Dr Greenberg pointed out. It improves resources efficiency (in terms of recycling and reducing inputs); it seeks to strengthen resilience (from soil and animal health to biodiversity and economic diversification); and it promotes social equity and responsibility.

But agroecology nonetheless finds itself caught up in a policy tug-of-war, where policies that could be leveraged in its favour vie for dominance against those that favour corporate food producers. Regardless, there are windows of opportunity for this agricultural approach to take root.

"But there is a policy hierarchy," said Greenberg. "There's a selection of policies or elements of policies that get implemented, and this is often driven by the interests of corporates who have ... the ear of government."

That point was underscored by Erna Kruger of the Mahlathini Development Foundation. Kruger started off by explaining some of the work of the organisation, committed to agricultural innovation in rural smallholder farming that is based on collaboration with local communities. But this kind of work faces countless existential threats, not least of late the attrition of NGOs. Against this backdrop, signals from the government have been mixed.

"In terms of governance, yes, we feel that laws and policies are catching up – there are lots of nice things being said – and strategies, there are some," said Kruger. "But we feel that government in [its] entirety has failed to breathe life into any of these things, and we actually find that the neglect of the rural poor and smallholder farmers borders on criminal."

Coordination and collaboration

Beyond policy, there are also social constraints inhibiting the growth of agroecology, insisted Dr Brittany Kesselman, a food systems researcher and postdoctoral research fellow at the University of the Witwatersrand. Foremost among these are a change in diet, with new eating habits growing out of deep-seated historical factors. But with the support of government, there are opportunities for agroecology to be widely adopted in school feeding schemes and gardens, as well as in community and food centres. In this way, it would also pave the way for healthier diets in communities, said Dr Kesselman.

"I think very often we focus on what the farmer can do in the fields to transition to agroecology, or we focus on government policies, which are ... important, but there are other sorts of social and societal factors as well," she noted.

Nonetheless, the very nature of local and metropolitan governance needs to be overhauled, argued Florian Kroll, a researcher with the Institute for Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies (PLAAS) at the University of the Western Cape.

Outlining his current doctoral research, Kroll explained that the regulation of the food system is largely geared towards meeting the needs of cities. At the same time, policies, regulations and ideologies with different government departments

often clash, said Kroll. Overall, governance is very fragmented between government departments and levels.

"What this means, essentially, is that a coherent approach towards the governance of metropolitan food systems, an approach that is informed by agroecological principles, would require high degrees of coordination and collaboration amongst different departments," he said.

This collaboration is hampered by rationalities of state that emphasise hierarchical lines of control and adherence to key performance indicators and scorecards.

But how to prompt action at the local or provincial level from a powerful central government, asked Professor Bruno Losch, the programme investigator for the governance programme of the CoE-FS.

"I think that, very clearly, it's an issue of pressure from the bottom," Professor Losch suggested. "The bottom in the different places means the local municipalities, and it's also the responsibility of social movements."

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