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# Agroecology Farmers Awareness Day: Putting legislation and policy into practice

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ARC

**F**AO (2018) defines Agroecology as an integrated approach that simultaneously applies ecological and social concepts and principles to the design and management of food and agricultural systems. The High-Level Panel of Experts (HLPE) of the United Nations (UN) collated 13 principles that they use to evaluate if projects are aligning with the principles of Agroecology. The agroecological principles are divided into three main groups. Those related to **environmental sustainability** include recycling, input reduction, soil and animal health, biodiversity, land, and natural resources governance, as well as synergies across all the elements of the agri-food system. The **social justice** group includes co-creation of knowledge, maintenance of social values and healthy cultural diets, together with participation of food consumers and producers in decision-making and management of the agricultural-food systems. The third group is **economic fairness** that includes economic diversification, fairness for all role-players based on fair trade, fair employment, fair treatment of all property rights, and equitable benefit sharing from agricultural activities, together with strong connectivity between consumers and producers to enhance local economies. In South Africa and around the world, the concept of Agroecology is gaining traction, yet it is frequently misunderstood. It is often mistaken for practices like regenerative agriculture, conservation agriculture, or organic farming (Garbisu et al., 2025).

Creating awareness regarding Agroecology helps clarify misconceptions and exposes farmers to business opportunities while also preserving the environment. Three objectives were set out for the farmers' day awareness event. These included creating awareness about Agroecology as a sustainable pathway to mitigate against the negative effects of climate change, to re-align Agroecology within the broader context of the ongoing food transformation pathway, encompassing Food and Nutrition, and to initiate a process towards institutionalising Agroecology in South Africa. The Agricultural Research Council (ARC) hosted the event on 16 October 2025. The event was largely dominated by exhibitions, with only one formal presentation delivered on the day. The exhibitions highlighted several farming technologies, encompassing some components of Agroecology. These included, but were not limited to, sustainable farming techniques, such as conservation and regenerative, and organic agriculture techniques. Other exhibitions were about collection and storage for indigenous seed products, bio-inputs derived from grass-roots innovation, organic fertilizer solutions, beekeeping bi-products, wetland management systems, production of biochar and biogas techniques, as well as demonstrations on rainwater harvesting and recycling of grey water. A simulated wetland system, deriving recycled grey water from showers, was presented by the ARC.

A register used to capture profiles of farmers, during the farmers' awareness day event, shows that 41% of the 174 people who attended the event are practicing organic farming, which is one of the important components of Agroecology. Although this might seem a small figure, people are starting to embrace Agroecology, amid emerging empirical evidence, as to the dangers of Conventional Agriculture. As an example, a 2022 report by the World Health Organization (WHO), Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), UN, and Organization for Animal Health (OAH) criticises Conventional Agriculture for several social ills. These include unintentional poisoning caused by excessive application of pesticides which results in pollution of water, air, and soil. In 2015, these factors were responsible for 400,000 human deaths across the world (FAO, UN, WHO, and OAH, 2022).

According to the FAO (2025) report, the annual cost of land degradation, including that caused by excessive use of synthetic fertilizer, is estimated at USD 300 billion. Across the world, as of 2024, 1.7 billion people were living in land-degraded areas with significant crop yield losses (FAO, 2025). The emerging environmental risks associated with CA have now reignited a re-think to Agricultural development, with focus now levelled at sustainable production practices.

### **Highlights from the main presentation delivered at the event**

Prof Raymond Auerbach presented Agroecology as the future for sustainable food systems, with global organic farming shown to have expanded from 15 million hectares in 2000 to 96 million hectares in 2022. The presentation highlighted Africa's growing engagement through the African Union's ecological organic agriculture typology and stressed the transition from chemical monocultures to integrated, organic, and biodynamic systems. South African Organic Sector Organisation (SAOSO) was cited in the presentation as a significant role player when it comes to coordination for activities around organic farming and, consequently, Agroecology. SAOSO is said to have developed national organic standards and promotes Participatory Guarantee Systems to support smallholder farmers. The presentation aligned agroecology with African food sovereignty principles, advocating for localized food systems, farmer empowerment, and biodiversity. Ultimately, agroecology is framed as an integrated approach that integrates science, policy, and community action to achieve climate resilience and inclusive rural development (Auerbach, 2025). Statistics for soil degradation caused by Conventional Agriculture were provided. In South Africa, deliberations and investments



**Small-scale farmers and other stakeholders attending an Agroecology information day at ARC-VIMP.**

into Agroecology draw impetus from a host of environmental legislations and this is discussed in the next section.

### **Policy and legislation as enabling parameters for promotion of Agroecology**

The important legislations in South Africa, supporting Agroecology, include but not limited to, the Constitution for the Republic of South Africa Act No. 108 of 1996, Preservation and Development of Agricultural Land Act (PDALA) 39 of 2024, National Environmental Management Act no 10 of 2004, National Environmental Management Protected Areas Act (NEMPAA) 57 of 2003, National Environmental Management Biodiversity Act (NEMBA) 10 of 2004, Conservation of Agricultural Resources Act (CARA) 43 of 1983, and Agricultural Product Standard Amendment Act (APSAA) No. 63 of 1998.

The constitution makes important stipulations when it comes to food and social security welfare needs of society. Chapter 27 on “health care, food, water, and social security”, stipulates that everyone has the right to sufficient water and food. Chapter 2, on the “Bill of Rights” section 24 of the Constitution, stipulates that everyone has the right to (a) “An environment that is not harmful to their health or well-being”, (b) “have an environment protected, for the benefit of present and future generations. The **NEMA** provides protection and management of the environment. Chapter 7 of **NEMA**, for instance, stipulates the effect of the need for

making applications for permits if biological resources are to be moved from one area to the other. Chapter 6 speaks to issues of bioprospecting, access, and benefit-sharing between research and development practitioners and local communities and clearly states that local communities must be consulted in instances where certain natural resources are to be bio-prospected. Chapter 4 provides for the protection and preservation of threatened or protected ecosystems and species, whereas Chapter 7 stipulates the penalties to be imposed against perpetrators of environmental damage.

**NEMBA** provides for the management and conservation of South Africa’s biodiversity. This includes the protection of species and ecosystems that warrant national protection; the sustainable use of indigenous biological resources; equitable sharing benefits arising from bioprospecting involving indigenous biological resources. **NEMPAA**, provides for the declaration of protected areas and for the management of protected areas; acquisition of rights in or to land by the state; and the establishment of offences and issuing of penalties in instances of wrongdoing. This is an important legislation for the protection of various wetland areas, water catchment areas, mountain areas, world heritage sites, and various parks and resorts. **CARA** is a comprehensive legislation addressing management for a wide range of natural resources. It provides for the management of natural resources at national, provincial



and farm-level, including the following: the management of grazing capacity, control of invasive species and weeds, soil erosion, salinity, and water logging, pollution of water resources, restoration of degraded or damaged natural resources, among others. Several principles for Agroecology, such as recycling, resilience, biodiversity, responsible governance, efficiency, and soil health, are addressed by CARA.

**PDALA** addresses a host of conservation issues on land and further makes provision for the empowerment of farming communities through relevant, dedicated training. PDALB empowers the Department of Agriculture (DoA) in terms of legislative ownership of land to an extent that development practitioners, if they want to appropriate land for non-agriculture purposes (e.g., mining), must first request permission and approval from the Ministry of Agriculture. PDALA provides for the agricultural land evaluation, classification, and declaration of protected agricultural areas.

The effectiveness of these pieces of legislation became apparent at the time of securing a geographic indicator status for the organic Karoo lamb. Where application for a combination of these legislations, including the Agricultural Product Standard Amendment Act, saw Karoo lamb become a premium brand in international markets. Today, this product, which is produced under Agroecological conditions, generates millions of Rands in international markets (Muguti, 2023).

Using legislation, several unencumbered indigenous commodities, e.g., Mopani worms, which are traded in informal markets, and generating millions of Rands, with farmer awareness campaigns currently driven by the ARC, could also secure GI status in the future. So, other than implementing its mandate, as enshrined in the Agricultural Research Act 86 of 1990, the ARC is empowered by a host of favourable legislation to promote Agroecology, as a long-term sustainable strategy to mitigate against the negative effects of climate change.

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