



AGROECOLOGY DIALOGUE SERIES

The interface between agroecology and territorial approaches for food systems transformation

This paper presents five main findings and key recommendations (see summary in **Figure 1**) of a dialogue that explored how integrating agroecology[†] and territorial approaches^{††} might support and accelerate a systemic transformation at scale in food systems.

Agroecology offers values and principles that underpin sustainable solutions to challenges around food insecurity, social inequality, climate change and threats to biodiversity and natural resources. **Territorial approaches meanwhile facilitate the multistakeholder collaboration at scale** that is needed for effective implementation of sustainable development solutions within the framework of the UN's 2030 Agenda. Several shared principles and practices create synergies between the two models that can support the advancement of both.

[†] **Agroecology** is a holistic and integrated approach that simultaneously applies ecological and social concepts and principles to the design and management of sustainable agriculture and food systems

^{††} **Territorial approaches** look at the landscape as an integrated system of resources, actors, processes and flows and address the development of multiple sectors, implemented by a range of stakeholders and structured by multilevel governance.

“Incorporating the agroecological principles in territorial approaches will ensure that we address economic, environmental, climate, health and social objectives simultaneously and foster a fair and equitable food systems transformation”

**Emile Frison, Interim Coordinator,
Agroecology Coalition**

The findings and recommendations aim to support the Agroecology Coalition's work to promote agroecology beyond its community. They reflect dialogue participants' diverse backgrounds, opinions, and areas of expertise, and are not intended to convey the opinions of organizing institutions.

Figure 1: Overview of the key messages and recommendations presented in this outcome brief on the interface between agroecology and territorial approaches for food systems transformation

Overview

During the dialogue, participants first explored how integrating agroecology and territorial approaches might support and accelerate a food systems transformation. **Five key messages can be highlighted from the discussions:**

1

Agroecology and territorial approaches complement, enhance and inform each other.

2

There is a broad range of areas where agroecology and territorial approaches can synergistically address key challenges for food systems transformation.

3

Territories offer a suitable scale to implement and maximize the impacts of agroecological transition.

4

Integrating agroecology and territorial approaches promotes inclusive and cross-sectoral dialogue for food systems transformation.

5

Territorial approaches can facilitate participatory knowledge management for agroecological transition.

Afterwards, participants made a set of recommendations aimed at successful integration of agroecology and territorial approaches. **These are grouped together to align with the focus areas of the Agroecology Coalition's five working groups:**



Research

- Support multidisciplinary research on the interconnection between agroecology and territorial approaches further;
- Value and consider all types of knowledge; and
- Decentralize research and make its work accessible.



Communication and advocacy

- Strengthen the connection between actors within territories;
- Create a supportive and inclusive communication environment for relevant actors in territories; and
- Communicate effectively on how the joint implementation of territorial approaches and agroecology can respond to local needs.



Investments

- Explore and enhance the impact of territorial investment mechanisms;
- Transition from project-based funding to wider funding programmes that consider territorial processes, local actors, and collective organisations to deliver a strategic vision through agroecology; and
- Ensure alignment between different sources of funding for territorial approaches.



Policies

- Develop coherent cross-sectoral public policies aligned with agroecology and territorial approaches;
- Identify and implement localized policy interventions that create an enabling environment for agroecology at a territorial scale; and
- Recognize the role national decentralization policies can play in promoting the development of agroecological territorial approaches.



Implementation

- Consider territories as a strategic nexus for implementing agroecological projects;
- Build trust to promote a shared and transparent understanding of what agroecology represents for a territory; and
- Foster equitable representation in decision-making processes for farmers and under-represented communities inside the territory and beyond.

Five main findings

1 Agroecology and territorial approaches complement, enhance and inform each other

During the dialogue, participants explored the **interface between agroecology and territorial approaches (Figure 2)**.

They identified the shared characteristics, complementary values and potential areas of actions that would make a blended approach a suitable pathway for advancing the transformation of food systems.

Agroecology and territorial approaches are **both people centred and process based**, and they aim at **long-term solutions**. They share key core values, such as sustainability, resilience, equity and justice. They are also both holistic and synergistic in nature. For example, agroecology views society as an integral component of food systems and believes that community culture should be a key consideration when designing context-specific solutions. A model that blends both approaches therefore has the potential to **enhance social and ecological connectivity**, enabling a holistic comprehension of the dynamics within a territory. Participants agreed that agroecology can inform territorial approaches. A blended model that incorporates agroecology's focus on rural communities and sustainable food systems with territorial approaches' methodologies and tools for multistakeholder engagement and decision-making can help **empower rural**

populations and bring agroecology to scale.

Such a blended model could help improve farmers' representation in decision-making processes and put agroecological transition on territorial agendas. It would favour collective actions through the development of suitable institutions and structures (e.g. community seed banks), support the identification of common objectives, and facilitate the development of **responsible governance schemes for land and natural resources**. An integrated approach can similarly connect a more diverse range of actors and stimulate **agroecological knowledge-sharing and co-creation**. By enabling the demonstration of agroecology's benefits to a wider range of actors (e.g. through farmer-to-farmer initiatives), a blended model can help raise awareness about agroecology and increase its visibility.

Lastly, territorial approaches are multidisciplinary and enable negotiations and coordinated action by actors from diverse sectors and levels of government. Marrying territorial approaches with agroecology can therefore help trigger systemic change at the landscape or territorial level and advance the agroecological transition within and beyond agriculture-focused solutions.



Figure 2: Synthesis by participants of the interface between agroecology and territorial approaches: shared characteristics, complementary values and synergistic areas of action

An exploration of the interface between agroecology and territorial approaches: potential commonalities and synergies

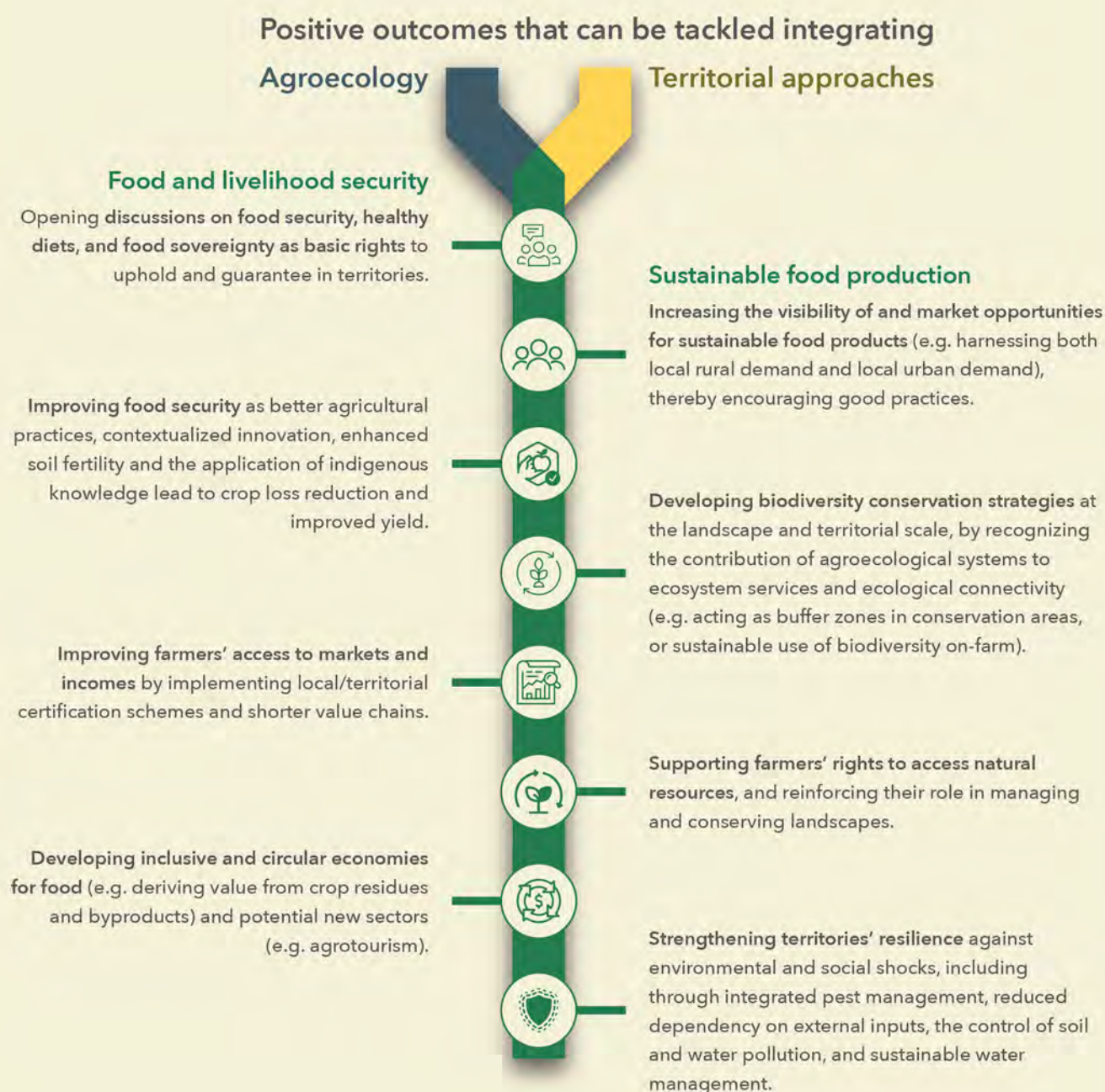


2 There is a broad range of areas where agroecology and territorial approaches can synergistically address key challenges for food systems transformation

Participants agreed that **agroecology's vision and principles can act as a compass** for concrete efforts towards the transition of food systems. They identified areas where

using agroecological values and principles to guide the tools of territorial approaches might lead to positive outcomes. **Here are some examples:**

Figure 3: Positive outcomes that can be tackled integrating agroecology and territorial approaches





Case study - Rede Ecovida in Brazil

The Ecovida network was created 24 years ago in Brazil with the ambition of **acting as a nexus for the advancement of agroecology**. It is divided into 34 nuclei, which each act as the operational entity for one territory. These nuclei bring together actors including family farmers, cooperatives, NGOs, consumer groups, and local and regional governments.

The entire network has benefited from the diverse **experiences, activities and lessons learned** in each nucleus, with a wealth of knowledge about agroecological practices accumulated and disseminated among farmers. Ecovida has successfully connected

farmers with consumers through daily local markets and fairs. The **development of participatory guarantee systems**, based on Brazil's national law on organic farming, has further stimulated local stakeholder engagement.

By participating in **education programmes and fairs**, and directly involving decision-makers in the network, Ecovida has raised agroecology's profile and encouraged other entities to adopt it. Today, the network advocates for greater support for agroecology through policies and investment.



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3 Territories offer a suitable scale to implement and maximize the impacts of agroecological transition

Throughout the dialogue, participants agreed that territories and landscapes offer an **ideal size or scale for implementing agroecology principles**. They are also a space where bottom-up and top-down decision-making processes collide.

The integration of agroecology with territorial approaches enables agroecology to expand its reach beyond individual farms to larger geographical areas and broader spectrums of decision-making, where critical issues such as pollution control, natural disaster mitigation, access to natural resources, and ecosystem restoration can be tackled more efficiently.

From a social perspective, participants also identified territories as the **minimum scale within which collective and institutional actions can be coordinated effectively**. A model that blends agroecology and territorial approaches can benefit from existing networks (e.g. territorial food markets, urban-rural food networks and innovation networks) to raise awareness and generate support for agroecological production systems through participatory guarantees, landscape certification and other schemes. There is also potential in territories for **building on**

local synergies to integrate farming and non-farming activities, including through food and livelihood diversification, market development, learning and knowledge exchanges and agrotourism.

An integrated approach also enables agroecology to **benefit from multilevel governance processes**, which territorial approaches focus on. Bottom-up knowledge-sharing and grassroots networks (e.g. farmer cooperatives, groups of agricultural producers-researchers and informal agriculture networks) are among agroecology's strengths, helping ensure all stakeholders contribute to decisions related to agroecological transition.

However, **agroecology needs stronger support from higher decision-making levels**. Territory-based networks are better placed to reach and gain commitments from these levels, including around climate change, biodiversity, human rights and development. Concrete measures and policies can facilitate the agroecological transition and **guarantee consistency between local, national and international policies**, particularly regarding seed patents, farmer subsidies and targeted investment.





Case study - Organic farming territories: a tool to advance agroecology in Madagascar

In 2020, the Government of Madagascar promoted the **Territoires à Vocation Agricole Biologique** (TVAB, or Organic Farming Territories) to respond to challenges like reducing chemical pollution, tackling over-exploitation of natural resources, improving urban food supplies, and securing farmers' incomes and access to lands.

The objective of TVAB is to facilitate the development of organic farming through **context-specific actions and the establishment of multiactor governance committees**. Territories are selected based on the pre-existence of a structured social organization operating in the area, of a

market, and farmers' interest in the initiative.

The implementation of TVAB relies therefore on territorial tools: actors, land uses and existing projects are mapped out and steering committees are set up to **develop a coherent governance structure and a collective and strategic vision**. Possible actions include promoting the development of value chains, particularly through certification schemes or public-private financing mechanisms.

Today, the TVAB brings together numerous government institutions, farmers' organizations, NGOs and private-sector actors in multilevel governance processes.



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4 Integrating agroecology and territorial approaches promotes inclusive and cross-sectoral dialogue for food systems transformation

Dialogue participants viewed integrating agroecology with territorial approaches as an **opportunity to balance power asymmetries in food systems and empower small-scale producers, Indigenous Peoples' communities, and vulnerable groups**. A blended model can make space for such groups within the agroecology movement while enabling them to build stronger networks to participate in food system governance processes and negotiations.

Agroecology particularly values the critical role played by women in agriculture to push for agroecological transition. A model that combines agroecology with territorial approaches can therefore **empower women's groups** and amplify their voices in larger and higher-level forums.

An integrated agroecological territorial approach can help reconnect farmers with their communities and territories. It can similarly facilitate dialogue between farming communities that adopt different agricultural models, helping them develop joint strategies to realize food systems transformation.

Territorial approaches value and recognize the potential role of all stakeholders and sectors to facilitate desired processes. Blending agroecology with territorial approaches can therefore **facilitate the engagement of non-agriculture-related actors**, including from rural development, health, tourism, and industrial sectors, to advance agroecology. These stakeholders can range from intermediate actors that connect farmers with consumers to people who live outside territories but have interests in them (e.g. migrants who send remittances, or people who benefit from ecosystem services) and investors.

By opening a dialogue among multiple actors, an integrated approach can raise awareness about agroecology while building trust and facilitating consensus among stakeholders. **Incorporating local food-related cultures, values and beliefs** in the goals and strategies of food systems transformation also aligns with agroecology's principles. Territorial labelling and participatory certification schemes are examples of solutions designed with a variety of stakeholders to provide direct support to farmers and enhance food security.





Case study - The Parma Biodistrict: tailoring a social and economic model to diverse local needs

In Italy's Parma region, the concept of biodistricts has emerged as one option for promoting **sustainable production and commercialization schemes that support the agroecological transition and strengthen local value chains**. The University of Parma has been solicited to act as a catalyzer and engage all stakeholders, including farmer and consumer associations, schools and universities, food suppliers and other commercial entities, researchers and local or regional governments and authorities.

It has worked since 2018 to develop an **integrated and active governance structure**, resulting in the creation of a Promoter Committee. This convenes the above-mentioned stakeholders with the goal of providing technical support to farmers, offering economic market solutions through collective brands, and designing governance

regulations aimed at influencing local food policies.

The number and diversity of actors involved mean a flexible strategy that ensures all actors are represented is needed. An association in which all actors can participate democratically in decision-making processes and define technical regulations will therefore be developed. To support the marketing of its produce, the initiative aims to establish agroecological production as a valuable differentiator for consumers when buying food. This requires raising awareness about the benefits of agroecology. A **transparent system for labelling produce** (e.g. indicating who produced it and with which agricultural method) will also build trust between producers and consumers and support the scaling up of agroecology.



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5 Territorial approaches can facilitate participatory knowledge management for agroecological transition

Agroecology recognizes the **value of indigenous, traditional and local knowledge** in developing context-specific solutions to food and agriculture challenges.

An integration of territorial approaches and agroecology can advance knowledge co-creation processes that draw upon a variety of experiences, including from farmers, researchers and practitioners. Developing a shared understanding of farmers' realities and challenges supports the development of sustainable and adapted practices and ensures farmers' long-term engagement.



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Participants stressed the **need for participative, transparent and inclusive knowledge management** to increase farmers' interest in agroecology and make them active players in the transition. To this end, territorial approaches can facilitate experiential learning activities and promote agroecology as a tangible solution to explore. Participants also called for researchers' roles in this process to change from those of experts to facilitators.

Lastly, territorial approaches can raise awareness about agroecology and help **establish a common definition and understanding of agroecology** among all stakeholders. Providing clear messages in simple language about the multiple benefits of agroecological transition can help agroecology reach a wider audience and expand within and beyond sectors and territories.



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Case study - The EFICAS project in the Lao People's Democratic Republic: farmers as solution designers for a successful participatory transition towards agroecology

The Eco-Friendly Intensification and Climate Resilient Agricultural Systems (EFICAS) project was developed by a consortium of national and international research organizations in response to land degradation and natural resource management challenges caused by a massive shift by farmers towards cash crop agriculture.

The project took a transformative territorial approach, using **participatory processes to build a common language with farmers**, translate their realities into research and catalyze knowledge co-production.

Promoting local ownership has ensured farmers are engaged in managing the trade-offs between economic development and resource preservation through sustainable land uses that fit their needs and aspirations. Through monitoring, evaluation and learning, plus annual renegotiations, twelve villages have developed their own **indicators and pathways towards developing agroecological landscapes and livelihoods**. Farmers and local administrations rediscuss and adapt objectives and strategies based on a common understanding of what's happening in the field and what action is necessary.



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Recommendations

Dialogue participants made a set of recommendations aimed at successful integration of agroecology and territorial approaches. These are grouped together to align with the focus areas of the Agroecology Coalition's five working groups:



Research

- » **Support multidisciplinary research on the interconnection between agroecology and territorial approaches further.** New research areas should address knowledge gaps around i) agroecology's contribution to multifunctional ecosystem services at the territorial scale, ii) the role of agroecology in boosting landscape resilience against shocks such as the current food crisis, and iii) the broader social contributions of integrated agroecological territorial approaches (e.g. regarding land and territorial rights for Indigenous Peoples, responsible governance structures for local rural communities, and the nutritional content of food baskets produced at territorial levels);
- » **Value and consider all types of knowledge** through processes that foster co-creation processes and more inclusive research. This could be achieved by democratizing on-farm research infrastructure (e.g. access to monitoring equipment), or by monitoring and stimulating innovation through farmer field schools. Also, use adapted tools and methods to encourage local communities' participation in decision-making. For example, methodologies related to true cost accounting for food and the valuation of externalities at the territorial level could be simplified; and
- » **Decomartmentalize research and make its work accessible**, including by using exchange platforms and knowledge-sharing events to present on ongoing research projects and share databases and results with stakeholders in territories working on similar topics. Develop researchers' soft skills to enhance knowledge dissemination and advance collaboration.



Communication and advocacy

- » **Strengthen the connection between actors** (e.g. agroecological farmers and urban consumers) **within territories** by convening them to discuss common concerns such as the local economy, cultural identity and safety issues regarding food or nutrition. This can create a sense of belonging and trigger behavioural changes. Produce labelling schemes, supported by an effective communication strategy, can also engage consumers to strengthen local demand for agroecological products in territorial markets;

- » **Create a supportive and inclusive communication environment for relevant actors in territories**, by tailoring messages to specific actors' expectations and interests and adapting language and channels of communication accordingly. This can help reach marginalized farmers, women's groups and other under-represented actors; and
- » **Communicate effectively on how the joint implementation of territorial approaches and agroecology can respond to local needs** in specific environmental and socioeconomic contexts. Focus on building a positive narrative around these local solutions by showcasing examples of good practices and highlighting the potential health benefits of agroecological produce.

Investments

- » **Explore and enhance the impact of territorial investment mechanisms**, adapting them to agroecological principles and objectives. These could include public-private partnerships to leverage local social and technological agroecological innovations, fiscal mechanisms by local government to incentivize farmer groups to transition to agroecological practices, or membership fees for local actors to access services and training;
- » **Transition from project-based funding to wider funding programmes that consider territorial processes, local actors, and collective organizations to deliver a strategic vision through agroecology**. This transition can be supported by funding the coordination and facilitation of multistakeholder platforms involving farmers and consumers, or by providing early-stage equity funding ('seed capital') to establish local participatory certification schemes. Funding arrangements should be flexible so that farmers and other local stakeholders can regularly adjust their objectives and activities to incorporate lessons learned; and
- » **Ensure alignment between different sources of funding for territorial approaches** by encouraging local stakeholders to agree on short- and long-term agroecological objectives, such as improved soil fertility, social cohesion or ecosystem restoration. Prioritize investments that have a multidimensional scope (e.g. social inclusion or biodiversity), that reward both environmental and social values related to food systems, and that are proven to be inclusive. Financing should prioritize family farming and rural community development.

Policies

- » **Develop coherent cross-sectoral public policies aligned with agroecology and territorial approaches**, including but not limited to those related to land access, agricultural extension, food security, health and the environment. This involves developing common policy goals by demonstrating the contribution of an integrated model to various sectoral outcomes and ensuring the participation of policymakers from different sectors and domains in territorial

networks and institutions;

» **Identify and implement localized policy interventions that create an enabling environment for agroecology at a territorial scale.** These include local public procurement for locally produced agroecological products, support for local seed systems, integrated and participatory land-use planning that facilitates diverse production systems, and support for advisory services adapted to agroecology practices; and

» **Recognize the role national decentralization policies can play in promoting the development of agroecological territorial approaches.** This includes strengthening territorial autonomy with regard to food-related challenges, formalizing and supporting territorial schemes while ensuring flexibility in their implementation, and limiting bureaucratic barriers to enable the participation of all actors.



Implementation

» **Consider territories as a strategic nexus for implementing agroecological projects** and advocating for a common sustainable future. Mapping out local stakeholders in a territory is necessary to ensure all actors are involved in projects and to identify different attitudes towards and interest in agroecology. This creates an understanding of what agricultural models are in place and an awareness of any power imbalances. It also facilitates the identification of a neutral facilitator that will be accepted by all stakeholders to orchestrate activities and stimulate dialogue;

» **Build trust to promote a shared and transparent understanding of what agroecology represents for a territory,** as well as the opportunities it can bring to farmers and all users through ecosystem services, local markets development, rights promotion and protection, food security and more. Awareness raising and participatory activities can encourage farmers' participation and consumers' commitment; and

» **Foster equitable representation in decision-making processes for farmers and under-represented communities inside the territory and beyond,** to identify collective strategies to transform food systems. Capacity-building and empowerment activities ensure farmers can contribute to the development of a shared long-term vision for food production and natural resources management in their territory.

About the agroecology dialogue series:

The agroecology dialogue series is an initiative of FAO and the Biovision Foundation in support of the Coalition for food systems transformation through Agroecology (Agroecology Coalition). It consists of thematic dialogues that aim to identify entry points, opportunities, building blocks, innovative approaches and institutional frameworks that can support the upscale of agroecology. They ultimately aim to contribute to the emergence of a broader framework on multiple pathways for food systems transformation that highlights concrete steps to promote agroecology at the national policy level, and set priority areas for a food systems transformation. Between 60 and 90 participants contributed to each dialogue from various backgrounds (scientists, government representatives, civil society organization, intergovernmental organizations, private sector and others) and sectors. The agroecology dialogue series furthermore supports and feeds into the Agroecology Coalition that launched during the UN Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) 2021, with the ambition to advance adapted policies, strengthen research and development programmes and secure public and private investments to promote agroecology worldwide.

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