



# Autonomy Through Agroecology.

## What Women Farmers Expect From Sustainable Food Systems.

### Introduction

The report “Autonomy Through Agroecology” offers an analysis<sup>1</sup> of what women farmers expect from Sustainable Food Systems based on qualitative, semi-structured interviews with six women farmers from the global South and Switzerland.

Women in agriculture belong to a social category whose expertise and demands are routinely ignored and marginalized. In the present report, they take center stage: Aïssa Issaka, Anne Chenevard, Amina Ally Makame, Rut Mendoza Quiacain, Chathurika Sewwandi and Kathrin Lenz Raymann are the protagonists. They live in Niger, Switzerland, Tanzania, Guatemala and Sri Lanka, and all are farmers.

The results of these discussions were summarized in the present report, in time for the UN Food Systems Summit and as a contribution for stakeholders looking to achieve Sustainable Food Systems, building on what is already there in terms of knowledge and experiences. It is addressed to the UN Secretary-General, H.E. António Guterres, and especially the UN Member States as key decision makers. However, recommendations are also addressed to the Private Sector, Non-Governmental Organizations, Philanthropic Organizations and Research Institutions.

### The Results

The common thread running through the women’s biographies, is their drive to increase their autonomy. They seek self-determination as individuals and as farmers. The motive drives all six women to keep on innovating in order to have the productive means in their own hands to control their successes and failures.

#### Their Autonomy as Women

To different degrees, all six cases show that **there is a close relationship between treating women as right holders and their autonomy as farmers.** The women are constantly negotiating their space of rights and freedom in the household and in their communities. Being recognized as right holders by their male family members and in their communities is key. It is a prerequisite to make it acceptable that they farm and that they earn their own income. Where women lack such recognition, where they may even be subject to domestic violence for instance, they lose the ability to stand up for themselves and their children, to take their own decisions. In such circumstances, they also cannot provide the family with healthy diets. **Protecting, respecting, and implementing women’s rights is a pre-condition for the realization of the right to adequate food.**

<sup>1</sup> The chosen methodology was a so-called Insights Process. The methodology is based on qualitative interviews and combines deliberation design and aggregation of results with qualitative content analysis.

However, enforcing the rights of women, does not automatically lead to their better access to resources in agriculture and food systems. Structural, social barriers exist, despite national legislation easing access to land for women (as is the case for all six women). While a legal frame guarantees women access to inheritance and land, without which they could not legally farm, **it is key to invest in a mutual understanding of the needs of men and women alike at community level.**

### **Their Autonomy as Farmers**

Five out of six women have found a way to enhance their independence by building on the emancipatory potential of agroecology. They work based on contextualized, chosen agroecological practices: They replace commercial synthetic inputs by maintaining soil fertility with compost, mulching and manure. They select and multiply their own seeds, they associate trees and crops, they make their own organic phytosanitary products. They experiment and teach their knowledge to their peers.<sup>2</sup> Finally, the women seek to be as self-reliant as possible in conducting their farming enterprises: they would rather work with neighbors they trust and build up the knowledge in their own community to support each other, than relying on costly services and technology of external private companies. Gaining control over their production thanks to the relevant knowledge is a prerequisite for women to successfully realize the right to food. Or, as Amina puts it:

*«Previously, women were farming randomly, but now food availability has improved, because they have been trained in different techniques to help ensure food throughout the year. Before, (...) it was mostly men who were farming, they could do farming during a single season of the year. Women were not much involved. After getting education and agroecological know-how, women went on to do farming throughout the year. Agriculture is now seen as a business that allows for a better life; it is a new mindset.»*

Farming in accordance with agroecological principles, allows these women to produce highly nutritious food and to generate an income on local markets, based on self-determination and an increase of collective organization, instead of competition. Such a farming system keeps away from technological lock-ins and dependencies on costly inputs as well as volatile food commodity markets, because these dependencies present a risk to the farm and livelihood. This is consistent with scientific studies demonstrating that **agroecology helps develop ecologically healthy, socially cohesive and economically viable and less commodified agroecological territories and thereby supports the farmers' autonomy.**

### **Invest in Solidary Economies, Pay for Quality Food**

All women are innovative and claim independence in the way they interact with their consumers. Chaturika Sewwandi has built up a direct, organic distribution channel from her parent's farm in North Western Sri Lanka to local end consumers and urban consumers in Colombo. To get enough products ready just in time, she also sources from neighboring farms. In return, she provides these farmers with the family's own organic fertilizer, she shows them how to acquire the Participatory Guarantee System (PGS) certification for organic produce and teaches them courses in agroecology. The neighbors are attracted by this business model, because they get higher prices by end consumers than if they were just selling to any intermediary. And they also get interesting services out of this mutual agreement.

Anne Chenevard in the canton of Vaud in Switzerland, has created a label called Fairswiss with a brand that could be translated as "Fair Milk" (or "Le Lait Équitable" in French). Farmers get paid a better price per litre of milk by end consumers, and this milk can also be bought in supermarkets. Anne says that in this model, which is still a rather short value chain, the key is to be able to reassure consumers that the premium is truly reaching farmers.

**The leverage to get better prices, lies in direct sales to end consumers or short value chains. Engaging fellow producers allows to share the benefit and the cost of such a model, e.g. to cater for an increased demand. On the demand side, the leverage is consumer literacy about the benefits and costs associated with agroecological food production.**

Finally, the women farm sustainably, because they want to maintain the natural resource basis that allows them to produce healthy food now and in the future. **Healthy food and an intact natural resource base are two sides of the same coin, as the women are convinced that healthy food cannot come from a polluted or degraded natural resource.**

### Recommendations:

Based on the insights the women have provided, and SWISSAID's experience in development policy, food system stakeholders should implement the following recommendations:

#### The United Nations:

- Ensure that women's rights are protected, respected and fulfilled;
- Define a process at the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) and its High Level Panel of Experts (HLPE) to guide, monitor and evaluate the implementation of agroecological territories and food systems, based on CFS' existing recommendations. This process is best established in collaboration with the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food and the unfolding mechanisms to follow-up on the implementation of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants (UNDROP). It must include relevant links to the process around the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP);
- Ensure that any engagement with peasant and family farmers builds on their own assessment and their thrust for autonomy;
- Ensure that interventions urgently advance the

transformation of current food systems and value chains into localized agroecological territories and food systems based on proximity and solidarity. Therefore, agroecological knowledge and practice must be mainstreamed.

#### Governments:

- Invest in consumer literacy about the benefits of agroecology;
- Protect, respect and fulfill the rights of women and girls;
- Provide regular assessments and reports to the CFS in accordance with the outlined process (see UN recommendations above), and with a strong participation of farming communities, especially the most vulnerable people;
- Urgently provide financial support to agroecological public research in accordance with the ten principles of agroecology by FAO, building on farmer-led research and their co-creation of knowledge;
- Build on community-based policies to provide know-how and investments for the transition to agroecology;
- Review policies to remove wrong incentives and barriers to the implementation of agroecological territories. Regulate value chains, where profit margins are too unequally distributed and incentivize those, where farmers get adequate prices for agroecological produce (see next recommendation);
- Support farmers' self-organization and support the creation of marketing and certification schemes for alternative value chains that reward agroecological production through better prices;
- Restrict harmful intellectual property rights,



policies and regulations such as UPOV 91, to strengthen farmers' seed systems;

- Shape the national food system to protect locally significant value chains from international competition;
- Oversee extensionists, buyers and sales stakeholders engaging with farmers and provide regulation that makes them comply with the ten principles of agroecology.

#### **The Private Sector:**

- Abandon business practices that lead to lock-ins and dependencies of farmers;
- Put Human Rights at the center of any business practice;
- Adapt to shorter value chains where profit margins are distributed more equally to reflect the pivotal value of farmers in the food system;
- Pay an adequate price for agroecologically produced goods;
- Invest in the provision of organic soil fertility measures, organic inputs and biocontrol measures, and source seeds from farmers' seed systems;
- Invest in locally adapted rainwater harvesting and irrigation, replicable by farmers;
- Focus know-how and research on agroecology and climate change;
- Provide open access data.

#### **Non-governmental actors and philanthropic organizations:**

- Support the above-mentioned individual rights; support women and girls in negotiating their decision space and autonomy in the household and community;
- Invest in consumer literacy about the benefits of agroecology;
- Base interventions on bottom-up, participatory designs and longer-term, non-invasive projects, led by local communities.

#### **Research institutions:**

- Respect the above-mentioned rights and actively support their implementation, e.g. by supporting the implementation of UNDROP;
- Focus on interdisciplinary, agroecological research; ensure that it supports farmer-led research designs and implementation, monitoring and evaluation of projects;
- Carefully adapt the requirements for scientific evidence to include farmers' experience in order to publish such results in the scientific community;
- Provide a credible knowledge-policy interface (as mentioned before).

Ultimately, any intervention by any stakeholder group that intends to strengthen these women farmers, will have to take their thrust towards autonomy into account.

---

The full report with all the recommendations can be downloaded here:

[www.swissaid.ch/en/articles/listen-up](http://www.swissaid.ch/en/articles/listen-up)

