

TREND REVERSAL FOR AGROECOLOGY IN SIGHT?

A MID-TERM ASSESSMENT OF THE LEGISLATIVE PERIOD OF THE GERMAN TRAFFIC LIGHT COALITION

Half of the time has elapsed – not only of the legislative period of the German coalition government, but also of the implementation period of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the UN 2030 Agenda. Under SDG 2 (“Zero Hunger”) the global community aims to end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition for all, and promote sustainable agriculture. Similarly, the German Federal Government has committed itself in its coalition agreementⁱ to advance food security and access to clean drinking water through sustainable agroecological approaches as well as knowledge and technology transfer, in particular in the area of smallholder agriculture.

In this policy paper, a coalition of 43 organisations and associations from the fields of development cooperation, small-scale agriculture, organic farming, environmental protection and artisanal food production is once again scrutinising the (international) commitment of the German Federal Government.ⁱⁱ Numerous organisations and associations from these sectors has urged the German Federal Government to pursue a policy shift in line with agroecological principles, as outlined

in a position paper published four years prior.ⁱⁱⁱ

As we have reached the midpoint of the coalition government’s legislative period, now is an opportune moment to highlight both the success and shortcomings of its work to date and to assess its overall performance. To come straight to the heart of the matter: while there have been some positive developments, we cannot in any way claim to have witnessed a significant shift in government policies. This is why – contrary to the voluntary commitment formulated in the coalition agreement – it has been difficult to identify coherent government action with the aim of strengthening agroecology.

Considering the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, the accelerating climate crisis, increasing hunger and ongoing crises, conflicts, and geopolitical instability, the fundamental transformation of agri-food systems has become even more pressing. However, Realpolitik shows that these multiple challenges frequently result in the preservation of existing systems. Moreover, there is a

prevailing prioritisation of investments in the promotion of capital-intensive technologies over the crucial initiation of a much-needed trend reversal. And yet, a transformation in line with the guiding vision of agroecology^{iv}, the principles of organic farming and the human right to adequate food could play a key role in ensuring the livelihoods of current and future generations and overcoming hunger, malnutrition and, ultimately, also the climate crisis.

The present policy paper is based upon the understanding that the basis of agroecology does not consist of a multitude of arbitrarily selectable principles, but rather follows a holistic approach demanding societal change which applies to all policy domains. A transformation of food systems can only be achieved through the comprehensive integration of ecological, social, economic and political principles (see Chart). Approaches that solely focus on individual principles, such as more efficient agricultural inputs, typically only result in gradual improvement of the existing system and often even hinder initiatives that promote agroecology.

Positive trends

1 The German Federal Government recognises agroecology in international cooperation

The German Federal Government sent a clearly positive signal by **incorporating the promotion of agroecological approaches in the coalition agreement**. The Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) promotes projects in several regions in Africa and India^v, that have a clear focus on ecology.

Through the continuation of the **Knowledge Hubs for Organic Agriculture and Agroecology** a network of about 40 partner organisations has been established across five African regions. The network has three primary objectives: to document and disseminate knowledge through multipliers, to strengthen local

Under the previous government, financial support for agroecological projects in development cooperations doubled between 2018 and 2020. Only a portfolio analysis currently being conducted by the BMZ will show whether the current government and the BMZ management will continue to focus on this topic.

organisations and to establish sustainable structures with the aim of enhancing sector-wide networking across the continent. However, funding for the Knowledge Hubs for Organic Agriculture and Agroecology is to expire by 2029 at the latest and the subsequent course of action remains uncertain.

Agroecological approaches have also become more important within the framework of the **Bilateral Cooperation Programmes (BKPs)** of the Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture (BMEL). Through the BKPs, the BMEL strives to contribute to the right to food and to adopting the principles of organic agriculture, agroecology and a feminist foreign policy as a guiding vision. Positive approaches aimed at promoting agroecology have already been integrated into the framework of the BKPs with Brazil and Columbia. The current realignment of the BKP with Zambia offers opportunities to adopt similar approaches.

2 International participation and commitment to agroecology

In June 2023, the German Federal Government joined the international **Agroecology Coalition**, collaborating with over 40 countries and 90 organisations to advocate for the transformation of agri-food systems through agroecology and its 13 principles. A key objective of the Agroecology Coalition is the transition to sustainable agriculture through the implementation of policies, knowledge sharing and the allocation of financial resources.

Furthermore, in October 2023, the German Federal Government championed farmers' rights by **calling for the establishment of a monitoring mechanism to oversee the implementation of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP)** in the United Nations Human Rights Council. It voted in favour of a resolution that set the stage for the establishment of an independent UN Working Group of rapporteurs dedicated to ensuring the effective implementation of UNDROP. UNDROP is an important instrument for empowering and advancing agroecology within peasant movements.

3 Human rights-based approaches and cooperation with civil society

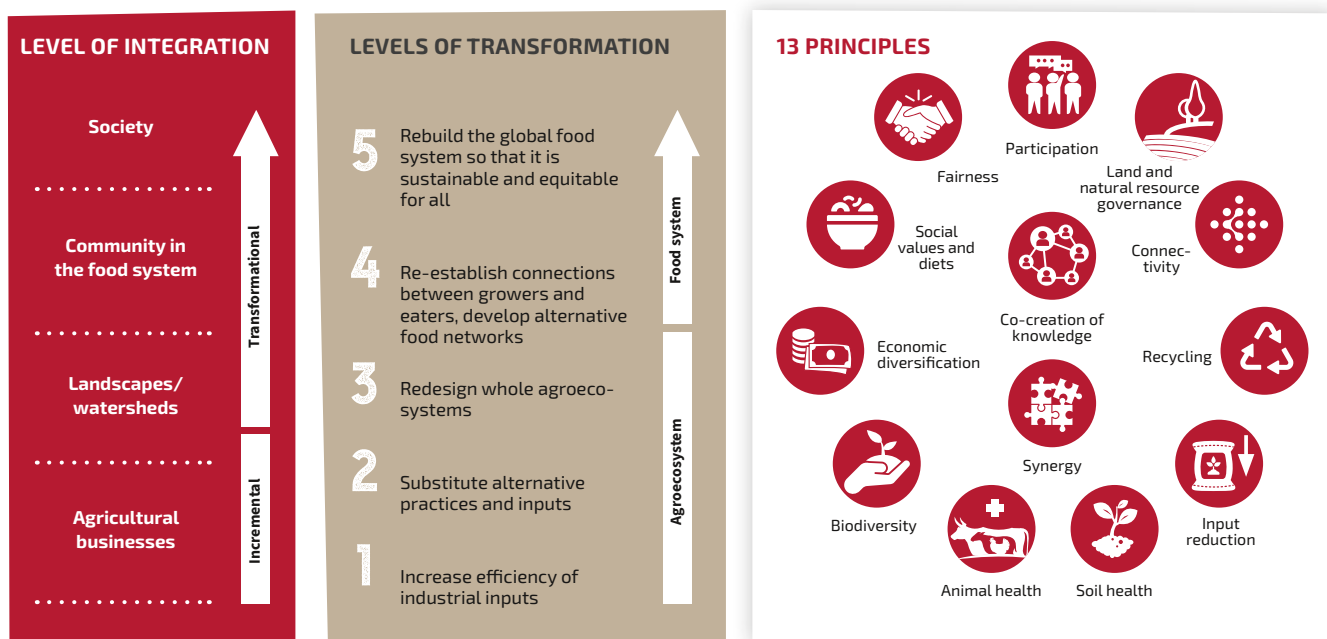
The recognition of agroecology as a strategy for the implementation of the right to food is evident in specific initiatives as well as cross-departmental cooperation within the BMEL. A **Department for the Right to Food** was established at the BMEL to underscore its commitment to this issue.

This realignment is also evident in international initiatives such as the annual Policies against Hunger conference organised by the BMEL and the Global Forum for Food and Agriculture (GFFA). The Federal Ministry took a **clear stance for human rights-based approaches** in connection with the transformation of agri-food systems by inviting Michael Fakhri, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, to the above-mentioned events and is planning to lobby for human rights-based approaches in other international processes. In this context, the issue of food systems in conflicts and conflict areas was also addressed for the first time.

Additionally, the BMZ is funding part of the **United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food's work** (from 2023 to 2024) to develop fundamental principles for a rights-based transformation process of food systems at the national level and to support its implementation in the participating countries.

The positive developments are also reflected in the BMEL's dedicated and effective engagement with the **Committee on World Food Security (CFS)** aiming at establishing a coordinated **mechanism for multilateral crisis responses**. This not only enhances the cooperation with civil society but also demonstrates the Ministry's commitment to put the voices of those affected at the centre of political decision-making processes.

Chart: 13 principles (HLPE, 2019), based on the 10 elements of the FAO (2018), applied to the five transformation stages of agroecology (Gliessman, 2015)^{vi, vii}



Negative trends

1 Political regression instead of agroecological crisis response

During recent global crises numerous challenges have emerged regarding the transformation of agri-food systems. However, this situation alone has not sufficed to prompt action from the German Federal Government. Following the COVID-19 pandemic and increasing geopolitical tensions, particularly due to the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, the global economy has been marked by instability and insecurity accompanied by high inflation rates. In this context, highly concentrated and globalised supply chains for food and inputs such as synthetic nitrogen fertilisers have shown to be particularly vulnerable to crises. In addition, agricultural exchanges have tended to exacerbate global shocks rather than alleviate them. Consequently, food prices have become extremely volatile, reaching record levels in 2022 and remaining very high, in

particular in low-income countries. Consequently, the **situation of smallholder farmers and low-income consumers has deteriorated dramatically, while shareholders, agri-food corporations and supermarkets have reaped billions in profits.**

In the past, governments often reacted with one-sided measures to these global challenges, aimed at **increasing production in the short term.** For example, the use of synthetic nitrogen fertiliser was further promoted instead of scaling up organic fertiliser production and advice on agroecological improvements to soil health. In Germany, the eco-standards GAEC 7 and GAEC 8 were suspended for one year after the European Commission authorised the use of ecological focus areas for the purpose of food production. These short-term responses do not contribute to sustainably resolving the ecological crisis, social injustices and economic inequalities in the long term.

2 Apparent solutions instead of policy coherence

The European Commission is planning a far-reaching **deregulation of new genetically modified plants.** This would make GMO-free farming impossible. The current draft ignores the precautionary principle enshrined internationally in the Convention on Biological Diversity as well as the freedom of choice. Unfortunately, the German Federal Government is not clearly opposed to deregulation. Peasant seed systems that have a long tradition and represent a basis of agroecology due to their genetic diversity would be threatened in their existence by the deregulation of genetic engineering.^{viii}

The **export of highly hazardous pesticides,** which are not authorised in the EU for reasons of human health protection, also runs counter to the principles of agroecology. The governing parties in the coalition agreement have agreed on

the export ban of these pesticides, and a corresponding draft regulation was already submitted for consultation among different government departments by the BMEL in early 2023. However, the ban has so far been blocked by parts of the German Federal Government and the draft has still not been adopted. This obstructionist attitude must be overcome as quickly as possible, and the export ban must be put in place.

In addition, the German Federal Government has begun to promote the **production of synthetic fertiliser from green hydrogen** in Africa and South America. The BMZ committed to finance the production of artificial fertiliser from green hydrogen in the water-sensitive region of Lake Naivasha in Kenya. Initially declared a standalone project, this evolved into a broader strategic approach in the German Federal Government's climate foreign policy^{ix} as outlined at the COP28. Even if mineral fertilisers are produced nationally instead of being imported, small farmers remain dependent on unsustainable agricultural chemicals. Furthermore, the production of ammonia from green hydrogen requires a lot of energy and water. The use of these synthetic fertilisers deteriorates soil health and releases harmful nitrous oxide. In essence, this initiative resembles the unsuccessful approaches of the Green Revolution rather than a shift in line with agroecological principles.

Trade policy plays a decisive role in the context of the current challenges in the agri-food sector. **Trade agreements**, such as the planned Mercosur agreement, continue to promote **monoculture farming and the export of produce grown with socially and environmentally harmful methods**. Examples include sugar cane, soy for cattle feed and bio-ethanol, some of which involve the use of highly hazardous pesticides. The focus of these agreements is to benefit the agricultural industry and not to respect the rights of small farmers and local communities. This imbalance continues to deepen social injustices. It is therefore crucial to ensure inter-ministerial policy coherence in order to effectively promote

agroecology and avoid negative impacts on society and the environment.

3 Lack of recognition in strategy papers and international initiatives

Agroecology does not only contribute to food security and poverty alleviation, but also plays an important role in the adaptation to climate change and the conservation of biodiversity. Notwithstanding, agroecology is still not given the importance it deserves in terms of climate and species protection.

Prior to the COP 28, the German Federal Government joined **AIM4C/AIM for Climate** (a joint initiative by the United States and the United Arab Emirates to increase efficiency in capital-intensive agricultural production). This initiative stands in the way of a **holistic transformation of food systems** because of its narrow focus and the suspicion of **greenwashing**. The German Federal Government's participation in the initiative therefore sends a wrong signal, even if its aim is to secure a seat at the negotiating table.

In the strategies of the BMZ, **agroecological approaches in development cooperation** continue to be of **secondary importance**. Neither the recently unveiled Africa strategy nor the food systems transformation strategy consistently and specifically highlight agroecology as a central approach within the BMZ.

The ongoing debate about **cuts to the development budget** translates to less **financial resources allocated** to the promotion of agroecological approaches within the BMZ. At the same time, the BMZ is **strengthening its commitment to the World Bank** by increasing its funding by EUR 305 million.^x The BMZ's increased commitment to the World Bank is criticised for three reasons: the Bank's top-down approach, centralised decision-making and the formulation of development policies with limited opportunities for participation. Historically, the World Bank has predominantly supported the expansion of industrial agriculture

The AIM for Climate (AIM4C) initiative is designed to portray industrial agriculture and large technology companies in a more positive light. The initiative paints a picture of industrial agriculture and large technology companies as if they were contributing to climate protection. Under the leadership of the USA and the United Arab Emirates, Aim4C presented projects worth 13 billion US dollars, which often involve high-tech "climate-smart" solutions favoured by the industry. These include some problematic technologies that have not yet been tested on a large scale, such as the production of "low-carbon" nitrogen fertiliser.

through existing funding mechanisms, which include costly subsidy programmes for synthetic fertilisers and the privatisation of seed rights.^{xi} It must also be noted that future funding decisions may no longer be solely determined by the German Federal Government.

The creation and financing of parallel structures such as the Coordination Hub of the UN Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) and the Global Alliance for Food Security of the G7 under German leadership **weaken already established structures such as the Committee on World Food Security (CFS)**. The UNFSS and its follow-up processes are criticised by large sections of international civil society for their non-binding multi-stakeholder approach, the excessive influence of the agri-food industry and their political and financial competition with the CFS. Such processes and bodies fall well behind the CFS, particularly in terms of inclusiveness and human rights orientation, which makes the sustainable transformation in line with agroecological principles and the right to food even more difficult.

Demands to the German Federal Government

Agroecology represents a holistic approach that requires systematic implementation and promotion at the political level. A coherent agriculture, food and trade policy aligned with agroecological principles is essential for achieving the necessary socio-ecological transformation of agri-food systems and ensuring food security.

Promoting stronger institutionalisation of agroecology

1 By the end of 2024, the long-anticipated **action plan** (including measures, implementation plan and monitoring) for the systematic and coherent expansion of agroecological approaches in all BMZ agricultural projects should be finalised. This plan should include concrete target values (in per cent and volume) for funded agroecological projects evaluated transparently through regular **portfolio analyses** that are accessible to the public. These analyses should consider the Agroecology Coalition's monitoring mechanisms.

2 By the end of the legislative period at the latest, agroecology should be institutionalised in the form of a **separate department within the BMZ**. This would send a strong signal highlighting the importance of agroecology, provide additional human resources and contribute to greater coherence within the BMZ.

3 Agroecology should be the **central funding concept for climate protection, climate change adaptation and biodiversity** in the agri-food sector and should be set out in writing and consistently implemented in all thematic and regional strategies. Targets from the Global Biodiversity Framework by Kunming-Montreal^{xii} (agroecological approaches – target 10, reduction of pesticides – target 7) should be considered and implemented as guiding principles.

4 Agroecology should be the **guiding principle of all Bilateral Cooperation Programmes** and of the BMEL's new strategy for cooperation with Africa and ensure increased involvement of local civil society.

5 In fragile and conflict-affected contexts, the German Federal Government should advocate for an **agroecological transformation in line**

with the **"triple nexus"** (humanitarian aid, development cooperation and peacebuilding). This is to be achieved through targeted measures that promote sustainable agriculture, strengthen food security and build ecological resilience in order to enable inclusive, participatory approaches and support peacebuilding.

Expanding support for agroecological projects

6 The potential of agroecology must be maximised through **consistent and sustainable financial support**. The BMZ should continue to support the Knowledge Hubs for Organic Agriculture and Agroecology and fund further projects with far-reaching visibility and replicability. In this context, it is crucial to build on previous experience and apply the knowledge gained to a greater extent. A new **funding programme "Agroecology and Gender Justice"** should be established, targeted at supporting the work of women's organisations.

7 Funding for **agroecological research** should be drastically increased by the end of the legislative period. The aim is to gain deeper scientific insights into the impact of agroecological practices on an ecological, social and economic level and to better understand its long-term effectiveness in terms of sustainability, biodiversity and climate resilience.

Putting an end to harmful practices

8 The German Federal Government should implement the national **export ban on pesticides banned** in the EU as set out in the coalition agreement and advocate for a corresponding ban at European level. At the same time, it should consistently oppose the **deregulation of genetic engineering and GMOs** at European, national and international level in order to protect peasant seed systems.

9 Instead of **capital-intensive initiatives** that run counter to the agroecological transformation (such as the financing of synthetic fertilisers from green hydrogen), systemic, resilient and local initiatives that **improve soil health through agroecological measures and the expansion of organic fertiliser production** should be promoted.

10 The German Federal Government should pursue a trade policy that supports **sustainable production from smallholder agriculture** and prioritises human and labour rights as well as climate and forest protection.

Strengthening transparent exchange formats and the participation of civil society

11 The format of the **Roundtable on Agroecology** should be further strengthened **as a central platform** for dialogue on agroecology. Participation should be extended to inter-ministerial stakeholders, members of the Bundestag (German parliament) and representatives of the BMEL, and the format should be geared towards the political agenda.

12 The German Federal Government should step up its efforts to **strengthen and organise the global coordination function of the CFS**. Issues raised by civil society organisations and governments of the countries most affected by food crises should be given special attention. The German Federal Government should consistently advocate for the **implementation of the CFS resolutions and guidelines** and provide appropriate funding for this purpose.

The following organisations support this policy paper:



i Coalition agreement: "Mehr Fortschritt waren - Bündnis für Freiheit, Gerechtigkeit und Nachhaltigkeit", p. 120.

ii A first stocktaking was done in 2020: *Jahresbilanz Agrarökologie*. Analysis one year after publication of the position paper "Strengthening agroecology" 2019.

At this point, we also refer to the *Policy Paper* on EU Food Policies for a global food transition (2024): "Agroecology for Future".

iii *Positionspapier: Agrarökologie stärken*. For a fundamental transformation of agri-food systems (2019).

iv See for example *The 10 Elements of Agroecology of the FAO* (2018) and the *13 principles of the HLPE Reports* (2019).

v BMZ Factsheet. *Indisch-Deutscher Leuchtturm zu Agrarökologie*

vi Gliessman (2015): *Agroecology: The ecology of sustainable food systems*, 3rd ed.

vii GIZ (2020): *Themeninfo Agrarökologie*

viii For more on this topic, see the *position paper*: Keine Deregulierung neuer Gentechnikverfahren!

ix *Klimaaußenpolitikstrategie der Bundesregierung* (2023), p. 40

x *BMZ press release* (2023): Entwicklungsministerin Schulze: Antworten auf globale Krisen müssen multilateral sein

xi Cafod (2023): *Sowing the seeds of poverty*: How the World Bank harms poor farmers.

xii Convention on Biological Diversity (2022): *Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework*