

bulletin

Agroecology: More than growing food

Agroecology is more than a set of farming practices.

It's an approach to agriculture that works *with* nature. It's communities growing healthy food while stewarding the environment. It's women accessing land and resources and shaping their local food systems. It's a climate solution and a movement.

In your *Bulletin*, we explore agroecology through a conversation with a gender expert from Burkina Faso. We look at how stronger local markets support women's economic autonomy. And our counterparts reflect on how exchanging local knowledge strengthens solidarity and community-led solutions across West Africa.



Coumba Barr harvests bitter eggplant in her garden in Senegal. Women farmers play a central role in producing food, sharing knowledge and sustaining their communities. | Photo: Cherif Khoury

A feminist approach to agroecology: Interview with Mariamé Ouattara

Mariamé Ouattara has worked across West Africa to advance gender equality and women farmers' rights for most of her life. Based in Burkina Faso, she's collaborated with Inter Pares and our counterparts for more than 20 years to strengthen women's leadership in agroecology and food sovereignty.

We spoke with Mariamé about what makes our approach to agroecology—farming that works with nature to produce food sustainably—feminist. >>>

◀◀◀ ● What is a feminist approach to agroecology?

We work in countries that are deeply agricultural and vulnerable to climate change. Women are at the centre of both realities. Unfortunately, they're often limited to being labourers.

Taking a feminist approach to agroecology means creating the conditions in the community so women can act as free agents, on equal footing with men, at every stage of agroecology and climate action.

This means paying attention to the context and realities of both women and men. As long as we fail to address these power dynamics in agroecology, the agroecological transition will fail.

● You've been working with our counterparts for more than 20 years. Over the years, what changes have struck you the most?

The first change I've noticed is the strong sense of self-confidence that has grown among the women.

They now understand that they have rights. They've had the courage to ask landowners or traditional authorities for land so they can grow what they want to grow themselves. They participate in their communities' decision-making bodies.

Some have been able to obtain ID cards. To access credit, obtain land or participate in certain decision-making bodies, you must be legally recognized. Today, they are proud to exist as citizens in their own rights.

But there are also changes that aren't easily measured. One woman told me, "I communicate better with my husband." Now she discusses her work at the cooperative and her plans with her husband. She feels valued in her relationship.

That is where sustainable social transformation begins.

● Why is it essential to involve men in this process?

In our contexts, patriarchy grants men many privileges, but they, too, have been socialized within this system. If we want to dismantle these unequal power dynamics, we must involve them.



Mariamé Ouattara
Photo: Eric Chaurette/Inter Pares

We've developed an approach centred on "feminist champions": men who use their influence to support women and raise awareness among other men. They support women when they seek to obtain land or engage with authorities. This completely changes how their efforts are perceived.

● Why do you think this approach works?

It's an approach that empowers local counterparts while respecting sociocultural norms and sociological frameworks.

When we talk about gender equality or feminism, we're touching on sociocultural foundations. The key is not to ignore these foundations, but to understand how to build on them to drive change. Our counterparts start initiatives tailored to their specific contexts and empower communities by asking them, "How do you envision change?"

We cannot simply copy and paste a model from one country to another. We must start from the realities on the ground.

Many people thought this feminist approach came from abroad. Our counterparts have succeeded in translating it into national languages and grounding it in local realities. Communities have come to understand that it speaks to their own lives. That explains the sense of ownership I've observed.

That's what gives me the most hope for the future.



Where food finds its value

Across West Africa, women produce much of the food that nourishes families and communities. They tend fields, harvest crops, save seeds and sell food at local markets. Their knowledge and labour are the backbone of local food systems.

And yet, women who farm often struggle to earn a fair living from it.



Seynabou Sambou (right) prepares a biopesticide in Senegal. Using local ingredients like chili peppers and garlic, she makes a natural treatment that protects crops from insects and diseases without relying on synthetic pesticides. | Photo: Cherif Khoury

In Guinea-Bissau, Togo, Senegal and Burkina Faso, where our counterparts work, many women farmers face barriers to economic security at every turn. Patriarchal social norms mean what little land they have access to is often not in their names, making it a struggle to secure financing. Limited funds mean limited access to storage

space and processing equipment, forcing many women sell their harvests quickly, at low prices.

Removing these barriers strengthens food systems—and local economies.

That's why we support women's farming cooperatives through our counterparts. Organized under a common banner, women can pool resources and collectively process and market their products. Our counterparts help the cooperatives learn how to set fair prices. Paired with the added power that comes from negotiating sales as a group, women earn more for their goods.

As for the goods themselves, women are growing the crops using agroecological methods that protect soil and biodiversity. Women are learning how to ensure that effort is recognized—and valued.

Cooperatives are also opening doors to new markets, like specialty food shops and restaurants. In Togo, for example, women traditionally cultivated and sold small quantities of raw fonio, a nutrition-packed ancient grain, after processing it by hand. It's a labour-intensive process that limits quality. Today, co-ops we support through our counterpart Inades-Formation Togo, produce fonio in multiple formats, from flour to ready-to-cook, and earn more from the same harvest.

When women have control over how their products are processed, marketed and sold, the benefits extend well beyond income, explains gender expert Mariamé Ouattara. Families invest more in food, health care and education. Cooperatives become stronger. Women gain the confidence needed to negotiate with buyers, access credit and participate more in community life.

"Economic power shapes political power," says Mariamé.

When women have more control over their livelihoods, they gain greater influence over decisions that affect their families, communities and futures.

This work is about more than producing food. It is about ensuring that the people who feed their communities also have the power to shape local economies, build secure livelihoods and benefit from the full value of their work.



Djinille Diémé displays onions she grew using agroecological practices in Senegal. Her harvest feeds families in her community while providing her with an important source of income. Photo: Cherif Khoury

Building on shared knowledge



Women farmers from Guinea-Bissau learn how to harvest honey during a learning exchange in Senegal. At dusk, they use smoke to calm the bees before collecting the honey, gaining hands-on experience to assess whether beekeeping could be adapted in their own communities. | Photo: Cherif Khoury

Over four days in spring 2026, women farmers from Guinea-Bissau joined their peers in Senegal to learn from each other. Though Rugui Baldé helped facilitate the learning exchange, she too learned a tonne.

“We took so many lessons from them and vice versa.”

Rugui is on the team at Tiniguena, an organization we helped to get its start in Guinea-Bissau in 1991. For Rugui, one priority was exploring whether beekeeping could become a new source of income for women Tiniguena works with.

To this end, the Bissau-Guinean group met with women beekeepers in Senegal. Despite traditionally being considered “men’s work,” the women have become skilled honey producers with the support of Apisen, a local organization that provides beekeeping training, equipment and community outreach.

“We think beekeeping could work in our villages, with equipment and training,” says Rugui.

“We saw that their microclimate and the forests were very similar to our own communities.”

Creating opportunities for our counterparts and the people they support to learn from one another is one way we

help strengthen social justice movements. Cross-pollination is key; when people come together in common cause, they share what has worked in their own contexts, inspire one another and develop new ideas for action.

Enda Pronat, our Senegalese counterpart organization for more than two decades, also took part in the learning exchange. Rugui was interested in their simple system for monitoring mangrove regeneration.

The exchange continued a few weeks later when members of the management committee for the Abéné Marine Protected Area in Senegal travelled to Guinea-Bissau. There, they learned how people in the remote Urok Islands manage their community marine protected area. The groups swapped stories about mangrove restoration, community governance and strategies to safeguard coastal ecosystems.

“Enda Pronat and Apisen took away some of the good lessons and good practices that we are using here in Guinea-Bissau,” says Rugui.

These conversations planted the seeds for relationships and ideas that will continue to grow long after the exchange, strengthening community-led efforts to protect ecosystems and build resilient livelihoods in Guinea-Bissau and Senegal.

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