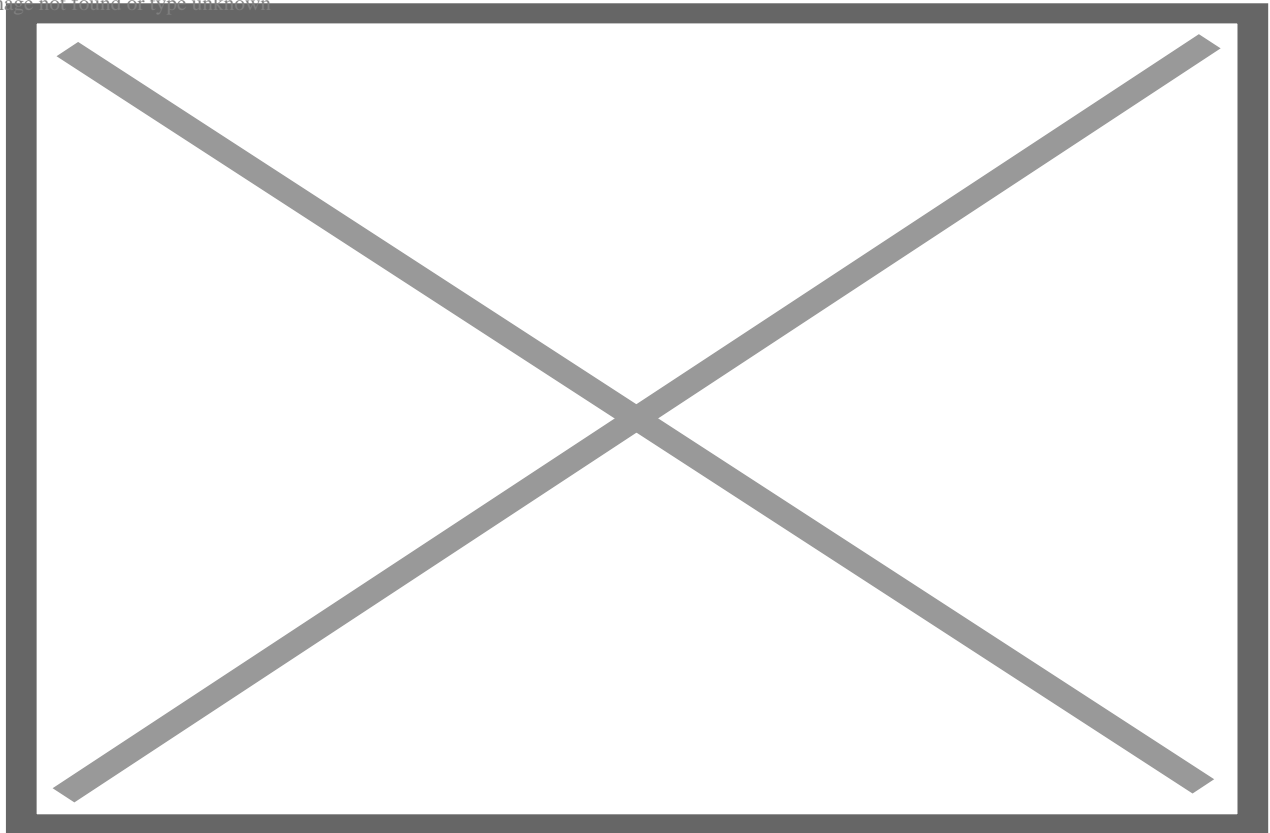


## Relying on agroecology will jeopardize Africa's food security, farm official warns

**A**n international push for Africa to adopt agroecology as its main agricultural production method threatens to jeopardize the continent's food security, warned Ghana's Deputy Minister for Food and Agriculture.

Although agroecology is an acceptable form of production in some instances, it cannot be used to feed the growing world population, asserted Dr. Sagre Bambangi, an economist and Member of Parliament for the Walewale Constituency.

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Dr Sagre Bambangi

"Agroecology is a very good method of production in agriculture. And we have not lost sight of it. The only challenge is that where we are, if we are to insist that we are only going to go that way and no other way, immediately, we will encounter serious food security challenges," Bambangi explained.

"There are people who want to eat foods produced using organic fertilizer and all [and] some people can afford to do that," the Deputy Minister told a public forum in Accra. But under a strict agroecology model, others "will starve and die .... [and] some children will suffer malnutrition and they can't even [live] beyond five years. So, we have to be careful. These are ideas we can pursue, but the generality of our population, they need food. And these other fast methods need to be used to make us food secure. So, I must be

frank with you. We cannot strictly say we are going with this [agroecology] method.”

A number of international aid organizations, including [ActionAid](#) and [Oxfam](#), as well as the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), have promoted agroecology in Ethiopia, Uganda, Burkina Faso, Ghana and Senegal, among other countries, as the future of agricultural production. Some Western academics and NGOs, including Pesticide Action Network, the Community Alliance for Global Justice and Regeneration International, are also pushing Africa to adopt a very narrow definition of agroecology, to the exclusion of other forms of production.

The Ghana Alliance for Agroecology and Food Sovereignty describes agroecology as a farming and food production system which works with the natural ecology, rather than trying to control it. The group defines agroecology as organic, meaning no genetic engineering, synthetic fertilizers or pest control products are used. The group also criticizes modern and improved farming practices — including the use of heavy machinery like tractors — describing them as unsustainable.

Edwin Kweku Andoh Baffour of the civil society group Food Sovereignty Ghana told the Accra forum that improved agriculture is damaging food production and the planet. “How many years are we going to do agriculture the way we are doing?” he asked. “The soil is being depleted, fertility is being depleted, the biodiversity is being lost because we don’t want to look at the long-term needs and introduce agroecology.”

He later told the Alliance for Science in an interview that “the last United Nation’s sustainability report said the world needs to shift away from large scale commercial agriculture to adopt agroecology for the sake of the sustainability of the planet.”

When Bambangi was asked what advice he would give to other African countries where activist groups are championing the adoption of agroecology, he urged governments to allow farmers to make their own choice about what production methods to use.



Credit: Neil Palmer Photography

“We must not lose sight of the fact that we have to address the immediate food security needs of the people. Because once we are food insecure, diseases and war can set in. We have to create a very, very good balance between these ideals we are talking about,” Bambangi cautioned.

“Farmers who want to practice agroecology can do it,” he told Alliance for Science in an interview. “You can’t sit on anybody’s rights. You can replant your own seeds. But we are also sensitizing farmers that improved seeds produce better yields. We as a government will get a very good mix of the two [methods]. We will not go solo on agroecology.”

Dr. Irene Egyir, an associate professor in the Agricultural Economics Department at the University of Ghana, agreed with Bambangi that the world cannot survive on agroecology alone. She criticized the push for agroecology to be adopted across the board, describing it as backward.

“We have moved from there,” she told the Alliance for Science in an interview. “In the agricultural progression, that was the frontier and conservation model. This was in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. So, we can depend on it as a niche. But not to be adopted as the only option. Saying Ghana’s own seed, soil, water, Ghana’s own everything, it may not be possible...”

“When I was born, we were six million and now we are 30 million,” she continued. “And the mouths are becoming a lot. So, for me, it [agroecology alone] is not possible. African governments should pursue it as a parallel policy. It should be parallel with all the other farming systems so we can have food security.”

The main problem with agroecology, she said, is it lacks the capacity to produce enough to feed the world.

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But Andoh of Food Sovereignty Ghana insisted that any form of agriculture other than agroecology damages the planet. “The long-term cost is much more expensive than you are thinking,” he claimed. “We should go side by side.”

He dismissed concerns that better technologies are needed to ensure a food secure world where the population which is estimated to hit 9 billion by 2050. “The reality about food and hunger is the politics of food distribution,” Andoh insisted. “That is why you have food mountains in some countries... and poverty in others. Ghana grows enough foods. It’s about the politics of where food ends up... We have arable lands that are not being used.”

On its website, the Ghana Alliance for Agroecology and Food Sovereignty claims agroecology is cheaper for farmers because they are producing their own organic fertilizer rather than buying costly agro-chemicals. But many poor farmers cannot afford to keep livestock, and others do not have enough animals to produce sufficient quantities of manure to fertilize their fields.

Egyir disagreed that agroecology is a cheaper form of food production.

“[It is] even more expensive because it takes time,” she explained. “And a lot is dependent on labor. A lot of it is not using machinery. That is the challenge... You spend so much time managing and making sure pests won’t come up. It takes time and effort. People may die because it is slow and expensive.”

Ugandan agriculturalist Nassib Mugwanya has argued that agroecology’s limitations will make it difficult to scale it up food production across Africa.

“Whatever the problems and limitations of modern agriculture may be, dogmatic adherence to a model based fundamentally on traditional farming is not the answer,” [he observed](#). “African agriculture needs transformation.

“Like the farmers themselves, we should stop fixating on practices and technologies and instead focus on goals and outcomes, both human and environmental,” Mugwanya continued. “We should jettison the arbitrary distinction between traditional and modern — the only criterion that gives coherence to the practices that agroecology promotes and eschews — as one that carries little meaning or import for poor farmers themselves.”

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