

*Agroecological Movements for Women's and Youth Empowerment:
A Route to Sustainable Land Governance and the Transformation of
Africa's Food Systems.*

ABSTRACT.

Agroecology is more than a farming technique it is a holistic and integrated approach that intertwines ecological and social principles to transform agriculture and food systems. At its core lies a vision of sustainability that goes beyond environmental conservation, embracing equity, justice, and community empowerment as pillars of resilience.

In Africa, where agriculture forms the backbone of livelihoods yet often perpetuates inequality, agroecology offers a clear picture of how we grow and share food. Through empowering women and youth groups who bear the weight of systemic barriers yet they also hold the key to innovation, agroecology emerges as the best solution. It not only preserves biodiversity and promotes sustainable land use but also redefines governance and rights, ensuring the voices of the marginalized resonate at the heart of transformation.

This paper delves into the transformative potential of agroecology, exploring how movements that uplift women and youth can break the cycles of inequality and environmental degradation, while building sustainable food systems and just land governance across the continent.

INTRODUCTION

Rapid population increase in Africa is projected to reach 2.2 billion by 2050 and this significantly influences the demand of food and market structures (Hathie, 2020). Currently, Africa's agricultural systems face a complex web of socio-economic and environmental challenges, shaped by historical inequities, rapid population growth, and climate change. While agriculture employs over 60% of Africa's workforce and contributes significantly to the GDP (Adamon N. Mukasa, 2017), the sector struggles with low productivity, unsustainable practices, and vulnerability to global market fluctuations. Additionally, climate change worsens land degradation, water scarcity, and unpredictable weather patterns, threatening food security across the continent (Garnett, 2021).

Moreover, structural barriers significantly hinder the participation of women and youth in agriculture. Women, who constitute 60–80% of Africa's agricultural workforce, own less than 20% of agricultural land due to patriarchal norms, restrictive land tenure laws, and systemic

injustices (CARE, 2020). Similarly, Africa's youth, representing over 70% of the population, face limited access to land, capital, and knowledge (Kubik, n.d.). With land ownership concentrated among older generations and the legal systems favouring the elderly, the youth are often excluded from shaping the future of agriculture.

The African Union Land Governance Strategy emerges as a vital framework to address these challenges. Rooted in principles of equity, inclusivity, and sustainability, the strategy advocates for participatory governance, equitable land distribution, and the recognition of land as a fundamental human right (Hathie, 2020). When these principles are aligned with agroecology practices, the strategy aims to empower marginalized groups, including women and youth, as key players in transforming agricultural systems. This relationship shows the potential of agroecology not only as a sustainable farming approach but also as a tool for fostering social equity and resilience.

SIGNIFICANCE

This paper is significant as it highlights the transformative potential of agroecology in addressing systemic inequalities in land governance and food systems across Africa. Through focusing on the empowerment of women and youth two groups disproportionately affected by land insecurity and agricultural exclusion the paper provides a framework for sustainable and equitable development. It emphasizes the importance of integrating human rights-based approaches into land governance, demonstrating how legal empowerment, community advocacy, and policy reforms can drive meaningful change. Furthermore, by showcasing CEFROHT's efforts and the role of agroecology learning centers, this paper serves as a model for replicable and scalable solutions that can enhance food security, environmental sustainability, and social justice. In a rapidly growing and climate-vulnerable Africa, these insights are critical for shaping policies and practices that promote resilient and inclusive food systems.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilizes a multidisciplinary approach to analyse the role of agroecology in promoting sustainable land governance and the empowerment of marginalized groups. A combination of qualitative and legal research methods was employed, including case studies of CEFROHT's legal aid clinic, mediation efforts, and community advocacy initiatives. Field data was collected through participatory observations, stakeholder interviews, and focus group discussions with women, youth, and local policymakers to capture lived experiences and structural challenges.

Additionally, policy analysis was conducted to assess the effectiveness of existing land governance frameworks, particularly Uganda's Human Rights Enforcement Act, in advancing equitable land access. Secondary data sources, including scholarly articles, reports, and official government documents, were reviewed to contextualize findings within broader agroecological and human rights discourses. By integrating legal, social, and ecological perspectives, this methodology ensures a holistic understanding of how agroecology can drive systemic change in Africa's food and land systems.

RESULTS

Barriers to women and youth inclusion

Agroecology is transformative and yet women and youth face significant barriers that hinder their participation and leadership in sustainable agri-food systems.

1. Unequal Access to Resources and Decision-Making Power

Women and youth in Africa are disproportionately excluded from access to critical resources such as land, water, and agricultural inputs. Although women make up 60–80% of Africa's agricultural labour force, they own less than 20% (CARE, 2020) of the continent's agricultural land due to patriarchal norms and discriminatory inheritance practices. Youth, who represent over 70% (Kubik, n.d.) of Africa's population, face similar challenges, with many unable to inherit or purchase land due to exorbitant prices and restrictive land tenure systems. This lack of access not only reduces their capacity to innovate contribute to food security but also limits their ability to adopt innovative agroecological practices. The women and youth need independent access to land so that they can have the decision-making power around use of technology and practices needed to enhance agricultural productivity and entrepreneurship.

Women and youth have to be empowered to be part of the decision-making process in matters of land using legal mechanisms, raising awareness among the youth on sustainable access to land and the tools they need to manage it sustainably. Through this, we can drive agricultural innovation, promote rural development, and also contribute to resilience against climate change.

Additionally, in decision-making spaces, women and youth are often excluded, with traditional systems prioritizing older, male-dominated voices. This exclusion reduces the diversity of perspectives in shaping agricultural policies and practices, perpetuating inequities.

2. Legal and Institutional Barriers

Land policies that promote secure access to land are influential in terms of job creation for the women and youth and increase economic growth. However, many African countries have legal frameworks that have failed to promote, protect and respect the rights of women and youth in agriculture. Land tenure laws often favour the males, leaving women dependent on male relatives for access to land (Adamon N. Mukasa, 2017). Similarly, women and youth face institutional obstacles, such as lack of financial inclusion and restrictive loan requirements, which prevent them from investing in sustainable agricultural practices.

Efforts to address these barriers are further hindered by weak enforcement of progressive laws and policies. For instance, even where gender-sensitive land laws and policies exist, their implementation is inconsistent due to corruption, lack of political will, and inadequate resources.

3. Limited Economic Opportunities for Marginalized Groups

Marginalized groups, particularly women and youth, have limited access to funds, training, and markets. Without access to financial resources, they cannot invest in the tools, seeds, or knowledge needed to practice agroecology.

Economic marginalization also stems from their exclusion from profitable agricultural value chains. While women are responsible for producing a large portion of food crops, they are often confined to subsistence farming and excluded from cash crop markets that drive income generation (Adamon N. Mukasa, 2017). For youth, unemployment rates remain high, with agriculture perceived as an unattractive sector due to its low profitability and the lack of modern infrastructure.

Case Study: CEFROHT's Work.

CEFROHT recognizes the fundamental role of land rights in ensuring agroecology, food security and safety within Uganda and other local communities. CEFROHT uses the Human Rights Based Approach to empower women and youth, in securing equitable land rights and fostering sustainable livelihoods. This approach integrates human rights principles such as participation, accountability, non-discrimination, transparency and empowerment into land governance initiatives. Using Uganda's Human Rights Enforcement Act CAP 12, CEFROHT facilitates women and youth in land disputes, enabling them to reclaim their rights to land ownership and use.

CEFROHT has registered a legal Aid Clinic and has 2 satellite offices in the districts of Kiboga and Kyankwanzi which have been a haven of hope for the people in rural communities and Uganda at large in ensuring access to Justice. So far, CEFROHT operates as a legal aid clinic giving free legal services to people in the district of Kiboga, Kyankwanzi and Buyende. Through strategic litigation, mediation and advocacy, CEFROHT has successfully recovered land for over 300 women and youth across Kiboga, Kyankwanzi, and Buyende districts, and achieved justice in as little as one month of instituting the suit.

CEFROHT as a legal aid clinic has also provided a toll-free number so as to bridge the gap in access to justice, making it easier for women and youth to seek legal assistance hence allowing clients to seek legal aid without incurring phone call costs and this has encouraged clients to seek legal assistance without hesitation

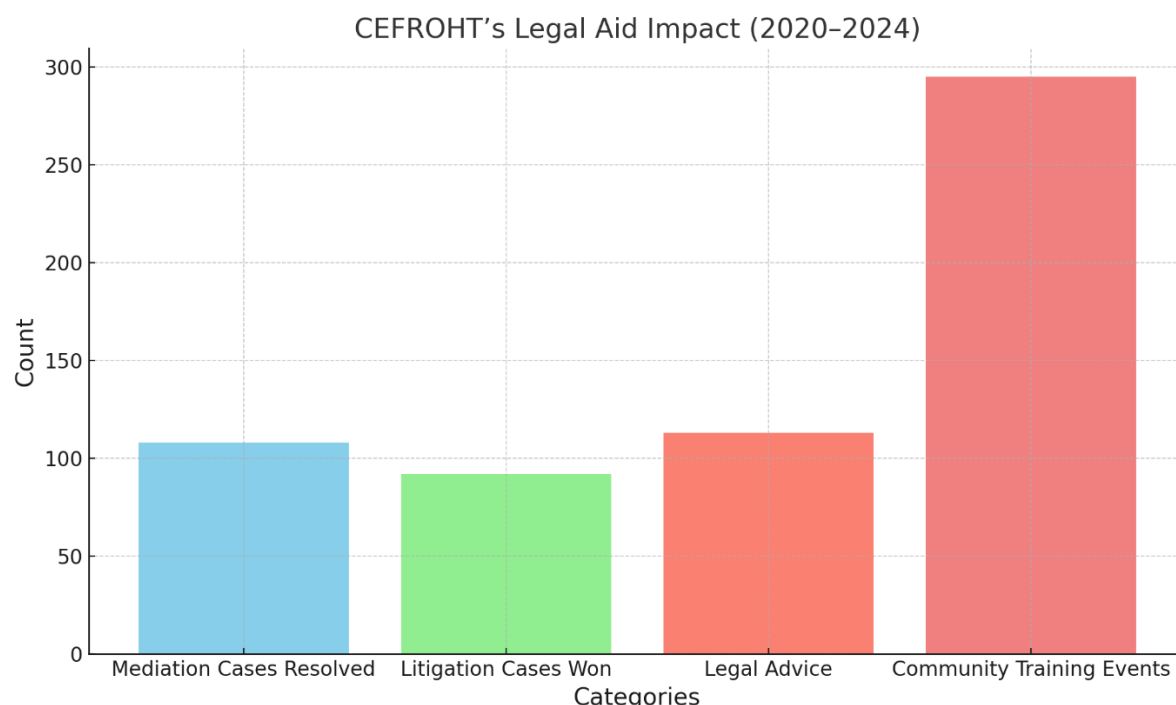
CEFROHT has trained magistrates, court clerks and local government leaders on the use of the Human Rights Based Approach through using the Human Rights Enforcement Act of Uganda. The Magistrates have been equipped with knowledge of how to handle and determine cases using the Human Rights Enforcement Act. Initially the magistrates and other judicial officers were not aware of how the Human Rights Enforcement Act operates however after the training they were able to adjudicate cases using the Act in the shortest time ,the court clerks also are using the knowledge from the training they obtained on the Human Rights Enforcement Act to help the communities in filing cases, the local government officers are also utilizing the knowledge to identify and refer Human Rights cases and refer them to our community advocacy group officers.

Additionally, CEFROHT trains Community Advocacy Groups (CAGs) comprising legal clerks to provide legal guidance, facilitate mediations, provide the necessary support and knowledge to these youth and women to be able to represent themselves in court thus empowering women and youth to navigate judicial systems independently.

CEFROHT has also facilitated community barazas in Buyende and Kyankwanzi districts respectively and these have continued to take place every after 3 months. These barazas discuss pertinent issues on land rights for women and youth and to have discussions with the duty bearers and hold them accountable for their inaction. The community barazas introduced CAGs and community members to the duty bearers, identified and raised issues concerning land rights violations, in these communities. The barazas are also used as a learning platform for duty bearers and rights holders to share and understand the human rights violations and redress

mechanisms provided under the Human Right Enforcement Act 2019 and how redress can be achieved in all matters.

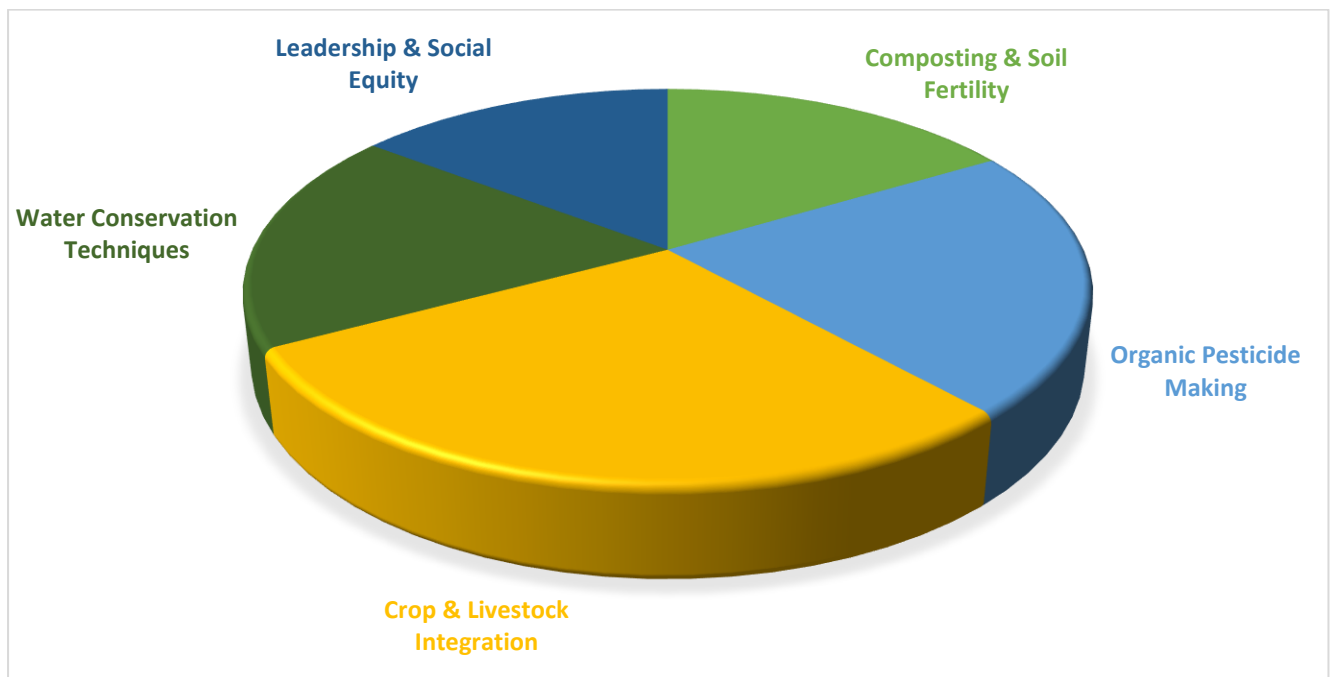
CEFROHT's Legal Aid Impact (2020–2024)



CEFROHT has established 5 Agroecology Learning Centers in Kiboga, Kyankwanzi, Mukono, Naggalama and Gayaza districts. These centers act as hubs for knowledge exchange and practical training, emphasizing key agroecological principles such as diversity, recycling, synergies, and social equity. Farmers are taught to cultivate diverse crops and integrate livestock to enhance ecosystem functionality while adopting practices like composting, mulching, and organic input production to improve soil fertility and without depending on chemical inputs. Women, in particular, play a key role in knowledge sharing, demonstrating how to make organic pesticides using locally available materials like neem leaves and chili peppers, and creating compost from farm waste. Training at the centers also covers water conservation techniques, such as rainwater harvesting and efficient irrigation systems, fostering resource efficiency and resilience to climate variability. Beyond technical skills, the centers promote social equity by empowering women and youth to take leadership roles, share indigenous knowledge, and actively participate in decision-making processes. These learning centers enhance agricultural productivity by blending scientific knowledge with traditional practices through participatory learning, and we are able to build the capacity of women and youth to advocate for sustainable farming systems and community resilience. As a result, the

Agroecology Learning Centers serve as an inspiration for sustainable rural development, demonstrating how education, collaboration, and empowerment can transform agroecology into a tool for food security, environmental preservation, and social justice.

Training Activity Breakdown by Topic



The Economic Viability of Agroecology.

After being equipped with skills on how to sustainably produce agroecologically, CEFROHT farmers have witnessed firsthand the economic and ecological benefits of agroecology. Agroecology is not only a sustainable farming practice but also makes strong economic sense. Through focusing on the integration of biodiversity, soil health, and water conservation, agroecology reduces reliance on expensive synthetic inputs like chemical fertilizers and pesticides. This shift leads to significant cost savings for farmers while enhancing productivity through healthier ecosystems. For many farmers, this transition has not only improved the quality and quantity of their harvests but also helped to lower operational costs, making their farming practices more resilient and profitable.

Furthermore, agroecological systems promote local economies by fostering food sovereignty, creating job opportunities in sustainable agriculture, and reducing market unpredictability. As CEFROHT farmers continue to adopt these practices, they are able to rely less on external markets and more on local resources and sustainable production methods. This economic

resilience is crucial, especially in rural areas where access to external markets may be limited. The shift towards agroecology has enabled these farmers to ensure their own economic stability and also contribute to the broader goal of food security and sustainability within their homes and communities.

Transforming Land Governance. Scaling CEFROHT's Human Rights-Based Approach for Equity and Sustainability in Africa.

The work done by CEFROHT shows the transformative potential of integrating human rights principles into land governance and agroecology practices. These efforts not only address systemic inequities but also offer valuable insights for replicating and scaling similar models across other regions in Africa.

1. A Model for Replication

CEFROHT's approach combining legal aid, community empowerment, and institutional training provides a replicable framework for advancing land rights and fostering sustainable livelihoods. The establishment of legal aid clinics, satellite offices, learning centers and toll-free support systems ensures accessible justice for women and youth in Africa. Through using strategic litigation, mediation, and self-representation through Community Advocacy Groups (CAGs), this model demonstrates how resource-limited settings can effectively deliver justice and empower communities.

Other regions facing similar challenges of land inequity and systemic barriers for women and youth can adopt CEFROHT's strategies, including capacity-building programs for judicial officers, grassroots legal education, and community forums like community barazas. These initiatives can be tailored to address local contexts, ensuring scalability and sustainability.

2. The Role of Policy and Advocacy

CEFROHT's success shows the importance of aligning grassroots initiatives with robust policy frameworks. The use of Uganda's Human Rights Enforcement Act demonstrates how comprehensive legal frameworks can accelerate equitable land governance when effectively implemented. Advocacy plays a critical role in raising awareness about such frameworks, ensuring that policies are not only enacted but also operationalized to benefit marginalized groups.

For scalability, governments and organizations must prioritize policy reforms that are evidence based and facilitate equitable land access, promote participatory governance, and incorporate human rights principles. Advocacy campaigns should also focus on educating communities about their rights and the mechanisms available to protect them, as demonstrated by CEFROHT's community barazas.

3. Community Engagement as a Catalyst for Change

Community participation has been central to the success of CEFROHT's initiatives. Platforms like barazas foster dialogue between community members and duty bearers, ensuring accountability and collaborative problem-solving.

These engagements also provide opportunities for learning and capacity-building, empowering individuals to advocate for their rights and hold institutions accountable.

Other regions can leverage similar community-based approaches to bridge gaps between local communities, leaders and policymakers. Regular forums for dialogue and accountability create a culture of transparency and trust, which is essential for addressing complex challenges in land governance and agroecology.

Findings

The findings of this study reveal the significant impact of agroecology in promoting equitable land governance and sustainable food systems, particularly for women and youth. Evidence from CEFROHT's work demonstrates that legal empowerment, community advocacy, and agroecology training have improved land access and decision-making power among women and youth groups. Case studies from Kiboga, Kyankwanzi, and Buyende districts highlight how strategic litigation, mediation, and the establishment of Agroecology Learning Centers have enhanced food sovereignty, food security, environmental sustainability, and economic resilience. Additionally, policy analysis indicates that while legal frameworks such as Uganda's Human Rights Enforcement Act provide a foundation for securing land rights, gaps in enforcement and institutional support remain key barriers. The results emphasize the need for integrated approaches that combine legal, social, and ecological strategies to ensure inclusive and sustainable land governance in Africa.

CONCLUSION.

Integrating human rights into agroecology has significant implications for sustainable development. Secure land tenure for women and youth promotes investment in sustainable farming practices, which enhances food security, preserves biodiversity, and mitigates climate change. The intersection of human rights and sustainability provides a model for addressing global challenges such as inequality, poverty, and environmental degradation. CEFROHT's work emphasizes the need for a comprehensive approach that combines legal frameworks, community empowerment, and participatory governance. When such models are adopted in various regions across Africa and beyond, they can foster equitable and sustainable land governance, transforming agriculture into a tool for social justice and resilience.

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