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PAPER

The East African Legal, Institutional and Policy opportunities for unlocking Agroecology's potential in Agri-Food Systems.

Abstract

Agroecology offers a transformative approach to tackling food insecurity, malnutrition, and climate change by combining ecological principles with social equity and economic inclusivity. This paper explores the legal, institutional, and policy frameworks required to realize agroecology's potential in East Africa, focusing on the initiatives of the Center for Food and Adequate Living Rights (CEFROHT) and the broader regional and global contexts. By leveraging human rights-based approaches, participatory governance, and grassroots mobilization, this study identifies actionable pathways to integrate agroecology into agri-food systems while addressing systemic challenges such as climate variability, industrial agriculture, and inequitable access to resources.

Introduction

Agroecology has emerged as a transformative response to the interconnected challenges of food insecurity, malnutrition, and climate change. In East Africa, these issues are particularly acute, with an estimated 62 million individuals facing food insecurity (Akunaye, 14 May 2024)¹. The region's reliance on rain-fed agriculture and vulnerability to climate variability exacerbate these

¹ <https://www.wfp.org/publications/2023-annual-regional-achievements-wfp-regional-bureau-eastern-africa#:~:text=The%20Eastern%20Africa%20region%20continued,Impacting%20Lives%20in%20Eastern%20Africa.>

challenges, while industrial agriculture practices, such as monocultures and heavy pesticide use, further threaten ecological balance and biodiversity (Nations, 2015)²

The Legal and institutional mechanisms play a pivotal role in fostering sustainable agri-food systems. In the face of industrial agriculture practices, including the growing influence of GMOs, robust legal frameworks are essential to protect smallholder farmers, preserve biodiversity, and ensure equitable access to resources. Such frameworks can mitigate the adverse impacts of industrialization and promote agroecological practices that are environmentally sustainable and socially inclusive.

This paper examines the opportunities to enhance the adoption of agroecology through the initiatives of the Center for Food and Adequate Living Rights (CEFROHT). By leveraging regional collaboration and advocacy, the study aims to highlight how legal, policy, and institutional frameworks can support the integration of agroecology into East Africa's agricultural systems. Particular attention is given to addressing seed sovereignty, promoting participatory governance, and combating the threats posed by industrial agriculture.

Significance of the Paper

This paper is significant in several ways, addressing critical gaps in the legal, institutional, and policy frameworks needed to promote agroecology in East Africa.

On strengthening Agroecology for Food Security and Climate Resilience

The paper highlights how agroecology serves as a transformative approach to tackling food insecurity, malnutrition, and climate change. Given that 62 million individuals in East Africa face food insecurity, the study provides insights into how agroecology can build climate resilience, enhance soil health, and support biodiversity conservation.

In regards to the Legal and Policy Reform for Sustainable Agri-Food Systems

² <https://openknowledge.fao.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/a4fd8ac5-4582-4a66-91b0-55abf642a400/content>

By analysing the legal and institutional mechanisms that govern agriculture in East Africa, the paper demonstrates the urgent need for stronger legal protections against industrial agriculture, GMOs, and corporate seed monopolization. It advocates for comprehensive legal frameworks that prioritize smallholder farmers, indigenous seed sovereignty, and ecological sustainability.

The paper emphasizes a human rights-based approach to agroecology, ensuring that marginalized communities especially women and youth small holders' farmers have equitable access to land, seeds, and markets. It also emphasizes the role of participatory governance in shaping agricultural policies that reflect the interests of smallholder farmers.

Drawing lessons from international frameworks such as the African Union's Model Law on Food and Nutrition Security and the PARLATINO Model Law on Agroecology, the study proposes actionable recommendations for East African policymakers. The alignment of regional and global commitments is crucial for scaling up agroecological practices.

Through the work of CEFROHT, the paper documents significant advocacy efforts, including engagements with the East African Legislative Assembly (EALA) and the development of an Agroecology Legal Network. These efforts demonstrate how legal advocacy can drive institutional change and policy reform for agroecology.

The paper warns against the increasing dominance of industrial agricultural practices, including GMOs and monocultures, which threaten biodiversity and farmer autonomy. It makes a compelling case for the adoption of policies that promote agroecology as a countermeasure to combat the threat of industrial Agriculture.

By providing evidence-based policy recommendations, the paper contributes to sustainable development goals (SDGs) related to food security, climate action, and responsible production. The study's findings support the formulation of a regional agroecology policy that will drive sustainable agricultural transformation.

This paper is a crucial contribution to the discourse on sustainable agri-food systems in East Africa. It provides a roadmap for integrating agroecology into legal and policy frameworks ensuring a resilient, inclusive, and sustainable agri-food system that prioritizes ecological balance, food security, and economic justice for smallholder farmers in the East African region.

Methodology

A multidisciplinary approach combining legal analysis, policy review, and case study evaluation. This methodology draws on qualitative methods to provide a comprehensive understanding of the legal and policy frameworks influencing agroecology in East Africa.

Data Sources:

Regional Legal Instruments such as the *East African Community (EAC) Treaty* focuses on fostering regional cooperation, including provisions for sustainable development in agriculture. The *African Union Model Law on Food and Nutrition Security* provides a guiding framework for food systems that prioritize sustainability, equity, and resilience.

CEFROHT Initiatives: Advocacy campaigns such as community barazas, strategic dialogues and capacity building training with the EALA members which engage stakeholders on agroecological practices and legal frameworks. School feeding programs that demonstrate the practical benefits of agroecology for food security and child nutrition. Development of the Agroecology Legal Network in Africa, which supports legal advocacy for smallholder farmers and biodiversity conservation.

Lessons from International Frameworks: The *PARLATINO Model Law on Agroecology* in Latin America, which provides insights into institutionalizing agroecological practices within national policies and the high-level panel of experts (HLPE), reports on Agroecology by the FAO, which emphasize the scalability of agroecological systems for global food security (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations).³

Analysis of the EAC Seed and Plant Varieties Bill: The Bill highlights provisions for farmer-managed seed systems (FMSS) and protections against corporate monopolization of seed resources. CEFROHT's contributions ensure the inclusion of a human rights-based approach to

³ [FAO HLPE Reports](#)

protect indigenous seed varieties and empower smallholder farmers. *GRAIN Reports on Seed Sovereignty*: Explores the threats posed by GMOs and industrial seed systems.

Objectives

1. To analyze the challenges and vulnerabilities posed by industrial agriculture in East Africa with a focus on its impact on food security, malnutrition, and climate resilience.
2. To explore the legal, institutional, and policy opportunities for promoting agroecology in East Africa, emphasizing its potential to transform agri-food systems through ecological principles and social equity.
3. To assess CEFROHT's initiatives in advancing agroecology, such as community barazas, school feeding programs, seed sovereignty advocacy, and capacity-building workshops, as models for participatory governance and inclusive policy development.
4. To examine the role of the Agroecology Legal Network of Africa in integrating agroecology into legal and regulatory frameworks, fostering collaboration among regional stakeholders, and advocating for a Pan-African legal framework.
5. To evaluate lessons from existing frameworks, such as the African Union's Model Law on Food and Nutrition Security and the Latin American PARLATINO Model Law on Agroecology, to propose actionable recommendations for the East African context.
6. To identify strategies for aligning regional legal obligations with grassroots agroecological practices, with a focus on biodiversity conservation, equitable market access, and resilience to climate shocks.
7. To propose coordinated advocacy strategies and policy innovations that promote agroecology as a pathway to ensuring the right to adequate food and adequate living for smallholder farmers, especially women and youth, in East Africa.

Agroecology in East Africa: Opportunities and Challenges

East Africa predominantly relies on rain-fed agriculture, which is highly susceptible to climate variability and extreme weather events. This reliance undermines agricultural productivity and food security, especially in drought-prone areas. Climate change has intensified the frequency of floods and droughts, disrupting planting cycles and reducing crop yields. Furthermore, industrial agriculture practices, characterized by monocultures and pesticide dependency, have exacerbated

soil degradation and biodiversity loss, making ecosystems less resilient and Agroecology has become a panacea for all these challenges (Fund)⁴

National and regional policies frequently lack the necessary implementation frameworks, leading to gaps in the promotion and implementation of agroecological practices. These gaps are compounded by the dominance of industrial agricultural interests that undermine sustainability goals.

The East African Community's legal framework, particularly the Treaty establishing the East African Community, limits its actions to specific provisions. This constraint along with other laws like protocols and rules of origin hinders the implementation of Agroecological practices.

The East African Community's legal framework contains implicit obligations for sustainable agri-food system which are not explicitly stated. Unfortunately, these obligations are often overlooked and under utilised by development partners, members states, civil society organizations, and local communities due to limited awareness and weak enforcement mechanisms.

Although there are efforts from civil society and some government departments to promote agroecology, these efforts are about to be lost with the advent of industrial agriculture practises like GMOs being introduced in the region with very weak legal, institutional and policy frameworks. There is no guard against biodiversity loss, bio-piracy, servitude and rural economies' suffocation. These industrial agricultural practices will be and are a danger to progressive adaptational practises already supported by development partners. Therefore, there is an urgent need to support the formulation of Comprehensive legal, Institutional and policy frameworks that promote Agroecology, Seed equity, Food and Nutrition security in the East African region.

In addition to national efforts for comprehensive legal and policy frameworks for agroecology, there is an urgent need to have a law and policy at the East African Community government. All

⁴<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/57d4a042414fb51a88b0c5d4/t/64120bd3516b5c1b7c173e4d/1678904281920/Eastern+Africa+Regional+Fund+Brochure+230315.docx.pdf>

partner states in East Africa agreed to be bound under the East African Treaty. Any law that is made and passed at East African level supersedes the national law. As civil society, there is need to bridge this gap before the industrial agriculture sponsors and influences a law or policy in this regard. Secondly, such law and policy with institutional understanding at East African level will promote agroecology at a regional scale and the adaptation to climate change.

This highlights the need for a comprehensive regional policy on agroecology that will encompass issues of seed security and sovereignty, and food and nutrition security. The policy will not only operationalize the aspects of the country-specific agroecology strategies but also ensure uniform strides in accelerating agroecology promotion within the region.

Agroecology has emerged as a trajectory to sustainable agri-food system, offering a holistic approach to agriculture that prioritizes, climate change adaptation and resilience, soil health, biodiversity conservation, improving food and nutrition security, social justice, and human well-being. Eastern Africa offers significant opportunities. The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) projects that agricultural growth will contribute to a 134% increase in GDP per capita by 2043, driven by investments in sustainable agri-food systems.⁵

Agroecology thrives in systems where local communities, including smallholder farmers, actively participate in policy design and implementation and encouraging participatory governance can ensure that policies align with the needs of grassroots actors.

With the Democratic Republic of Congo, the East Africa is the fastest growing region in Africa. The African Development Bank (AfDB) projects that East Africa's real GDP growth will be 4.9% in 2024 and 5.7% in 2025. This is a significant increase from the estimated 1.5% growth in 2023 (Group)⁶. This therefore presents with many business and industrial approaches including GMOs and other conventional and industrial agriculture practises in the region. A case in point is the Kenyan government which has opened up its market for Genetically modified seeds, food and

⁵ <https://reliefweb.int/report/uganda/fao-stresses-innovation-partnerships-and-efficiency-address-food-insecurity-eastern-africa>

⁶ https://www.afdb.org/sites/default/files/2024/06/06/aeo_2024_-_chapter_1.pdf

feed. This is a great danger to many East African due to their nature as smallholder famers in terms of seed poverty, biodiversity and ecology yet small holders' farmers for example account for 70% of the food grown globally (Jamila Abass CEO & Co-Founder, M-Farm Ltd, Mar 21, 2018)⁷. Secondly these industrial agricultural practises use mono cultures with too many pesticides. This is dangerous to ecology and exacerbates climate change catastrophes. Agroecology emphasizes the protection of biodiversity and the empowerment of farmers to maintain control over their seeds and food production systems. This aligns with global goals for food sovereignty and ecological balance.

It is a sad reality that majority of small-scale farmers particularly women are seed poor. There is seed inequity; attributed to lack of access to quality indigenous seed varieties, the influx of fake seeds in the markets, and increasing pressure from multinational seed corporations that affects their seed sovereignty.

Promoting Farmer Managed Seed Systems (FMSS) is essential to counter seed monopolies and ensure equitable access to quality seeds. FMSS not only enhance genetic diversity but also empower farmers to adapt to local climatic and ecological conditions.

CEFROHT's works and the results

CEFROHT working through a partnership with the East African Legislative Assembly (EALA) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) have for instance held capacity building sessions on agroecology with the EALA Committee on Agriculture, Trade and Natural Resources that yielded commitments and signed a resolution officially recognizing agroecology as a strategic priority for formulating and recommending sustainable policies in agriculture, tourism, and natural resource management across the East African region. (East African Legislative Assembly, 18 Nov 2024)⁸

Understanding that policies formulated and enacted the East African level supersede national policies, CEFROHT presented position paper on promoting agroecology using the legal and policy framework within East African region highlighting the importance of creating institutional

⁷ <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2018/03/women-farmers-food-production-land-rights/>

⁸ <https://www.eala.org/media/view/east-african-legislative-assembly-signs-a-resolution-with-food-agriculture-organization-fao-recognizing-agro-ecology-as-a-strategic-priority-in-the-eac>

frameworks for agroecology strengthening and promotion of seed equity and food sovereignty within the East African region.

CEFROHT is currently engaging the East African Legislative Assembly into a policy and a law specific to agroecology and also push for the enactment of the East African Bill on Agroecology because a law or policy enacted at the regional level takes precedence over national and municipal laws on the same subject. This is a huge milestone as it will bring agroecology into governance and accountability into the East African.

An agroecology coalition including civil society organizations, government ministries, departments and agencies, academia, farmers, women, youths, persons with disabilities and agripreneurs has been formed to work as a movement and cause citizen agency for support of the legal, institutional and policy frameworks for agroecology in the region.

More to that, recognizing that agroecology's transition requires supportive legal and policy frameworks an agroecology Legal Network in Africa was formed in 2024 to cause lawyers into social justice for sustainable agrifood system and promote agroecology. This has not been the case. Many lawyers and legal partitioners only focus and support industrial agriculture. The Network will therefore and is already supporting civil society and individual agroecology farmers in case of legal challenges and documentation in support of Agroecology This network connects legal practitioners committed to promoting agroecology and supporting smallholder farmers through litigation and advocacy though it needs support to grow.

CEFROHT has maintained its stance at the East African Court of Justice (Reference No. 3 of 2023; CEFROHT Vs Attorney General of Kenya) challenging Kenya's lift on the ban of GMOs which are highly likely to cross to the EAC through porous borders. CEFROHT avers that the lifting of the ban is in contravention of the treaty for the establishment of the East African community and the African charter on people and human rights (*article 21(5) that provides for states' prevention of foreign economic exploitation particularly by international monopolies*).

Additionally, CEFROHT has started engaging into contribution to the EAC seed and plant varieties bill. The EAC has made progress in developing a harmonized EAC seed law through the EAC seed and plant varieties bill. This legislation intends to address seed inequality in the region by establishing provisions for the production, certification, distribution, and marketing of seed

both inside and outside the EAC region. It also calls for the establishment of national seed authorities, phytosanitary measures on seed, import and export documentation, and plant variety protection systems. However, for such legislation to be effective, it must be rooted in a human rights-based approach that puts smallholder farmers and local communities at the center which eventually empowers them to take the lead, which calls for coordinated advocacy efforts and partnerships.

The bedrock for these proposals is that laws, and policies passed and adopted at the East African level supersede National and Municipal policies. CEFROHT with the agroecology coalition intends to leverage on the partnership to further build and strengthen the capacity of the EALA, EAC secretariat, EAC cabinet ministers on agroecology in view of development of a comprehensive East Africa agroecology policy that will lead to the enactment of an East African Agroecology Bill that will provide the foundation for agroecology promotion and protection in East African member states.

In order to promote institutional frameworks for agroecology at the E.A. level, CEFROHT plans to employ a human rights-based approach to ensure that the vulnerable, particularly smallholder farmers, participate and have an impact on the decision-making process. It also aims to ensure that the development process is transparent and free from interference from the seed industry, and that legal and policy frameworks uphold the principles of accountability, inclusivity, human dignity, empowerment, and the rule of law. By coordinating an agroecology movement that can employ a human rights-based strategy to interact with policy makers and garner public support for agroecology promotion, CEFROHT hopes to achieve the aforementioned goals.

CEFROHT is also before the High Court of Uganda Civil division challenging government's failure and omission to ban the use of glyphosate-based herbicides (GBHs), arguing that continued use of GBHs threatens and is a violation of the right to life, health, right to adequate food and to a clean and health environment guaranteed under the Uganda Constitution.

The government's (respondent)'s failure and omission to regulate and control the chemicals used in the agricultural sector is a violation of the Constitutional provisions on economic rights and rights to adequate food, clean and health environment. CEFROHT seeks for the court orders for the government to issue an immediate ban on the use of glyphosate-based herbicides and all

internationally banned agro-chemicals in Uganda, should initiate a shift from conventional agriculture to agroecology, implement the National Organic Agriculture Policy (NOAP) and its action plan, introduce use of sanitary and phytosanitary measures to examine food products before their supply on the market by farmers. Banning the use of GBHs in Uganda will not only uphold smallholder farmers' rights to health, right to adequate food, right to clean environment but also farmers' economic rights enhancing economic diversification a principle of Agriculture.

CEFROHT is an adequate living rights and a food systems organization. Food is culture, social science, social norm, and not a commodity. CEFROHT looks at food in a food systems approach. CEFROHT recognizes the fundamental role of land rights in promoting Agri-food systems, food security and safety and has been a haven of hope with proven track record advocating for the protection and promotion of land user rights particularly for the vulnerable small holder women and youth farmers in the rural and urban communities in Uganda recognizing the intricate link between land access, food sovereignty and the right to an adequate standard of living.

To demystify their fears and promote governance on land and natural resources, CEFROHT offers legal representation in the courts of law and the use of Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) mechanisms such as mediation, and drafting of court documents to support and empower vulnerable communities in asserting their rights to land, challenging unjust evictions, and promoting sustainable land use practices to promote Agroecology.

We leverage on an instrumental law, the Uganda Human Rights Enforcement Act Cap 12 to ensure swift and sustainable access to justice for the vulnerable smallholders' women and youth farmers on land tenure and user rights. A total of 313 land cases finished in a very short time of with another 295 cases solved using non-contentious means in communities and empowering the women and youths on standing out for their ownership and user right, and upon recovery of the land, the smaller holders' women and youth farmers are encouraged to promote Agroecology.

Additionally, CEFROHT trains Community Advocacy Groups (CAGs) who work as our community paralegals comprising legal clerks to provide legal guidance, facilitate mediations, provide the necessary support and knowledge to these women to be able to represent themselves

in court empowering smallholders' women and youth farmers to navigate judicial systems independently in pursuit of access to justice.

CEFROHT has also facilitated community barazas in the local communities Kiboga, Buyende and Kyankwanzi districts respectively and these have continued to take place every on a quarterly basis. These barazas discuss pertinent issues on land rights for women and youth where they engage 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 in relation to land matters.

CEFROHT has and is continuing to create public awareness on agroecology on media houses such as NTV Uganda highlighting the dire state of food security in Uganda with 18.5 million Ugandans suffering acute food insecurity attributed to lack of governance with no comprehensive model law on food and nutrition and the destabilizing impacts of extreme heat caused by severe forest degradation. CEFROHT has pioneered media discussions on TV shows, the need for establishment of a framework law and policy on food and agriculture aimed at regulating the food and agriculture sector: preserve the natural resources and biodiversity, protect the agriculture sector from the multinational seed corporations and ensure smallholder farmers realize seed equity and sovereignty. CEFROHT has called out policy makers to embrace agroecology and a food systems approach in the new food and nutrition policy that is being formulated by MAAIF to address the food insecurity in the country. (David, 2024)⁹

CEFROHT filed a constitutional petition challenging the government's reliance on a parent-led school feeding program arguing that this approach neglects the realities of many vulnerable children, including orphans, those from child-headed households, and families grappling with acute malnutrition. Despite education being a constitutional right, the government claimed that children could not demand such rights constitutionally. CEFROHT advocates for shared

⁹ <https://youtu.be/XUVHqWB4hc?si=kjafMA8pUHsKyL33> and here <https://youtu.be/EqMLku1tttE?si=kFSTQ1J3CQnxx8QV>

responsibility between parents and the government, emphasizing the government's obligation to provide for vulnerable children.

The organization calls on the court to hold the government accountable for ensuring school meals, safeguarding the rights of orphans and underprivileged children to adequate nutrition and equitable education. CEFROHT is set to hold awareness campaigns in 5 model schools promoting school gardening to ensure accessibility to safe food for learners in each parish, work with the local communities to ensure that there is a PDM business enterprise in every parish to sale food to schools and also mobilize PDM SACCOs to farm and supply safe food to schools to integrate Agroecological principles as a way of improving nutrition while supporting local and small holder farmers.

Comparative Analysis of Regional and Global Frameworks

African Union's Model Law on Food and Nutrition Security puts emphasis on multisectoral collaboration and accountability mechanisms. The model law provides a framework for aligning agroecology with national and regional food systems to enhance resilience. CEFROHT leverages this framework to promote agroecological principles as integral components of food security strategies.

PARLATINO Model Law on Agroecology is a model law that offers practical insights into integrating agroecology into national policies, emphasizing participatory governance and local stakeholder engagement. CEFROHT draws from this approach to advocate for agroecological policy reform in East Africa.

EAC Treaty Obligations here opportunities exist for aligning legal commitments with agroecological practices through the EAC Treaty, which emphasizes regional collaboration for sustainable agricultural development. CEFROHT works to ensure these obligations are operationalized to benefit smallholder farmers and preserve biodiversity.

Key Findings and Experiences

This paper reveals that agroecology presents a transformative solution to East Africa's challenges of food insecurity, malnutrition, and climate change. The region's reliance on rain-fed agriculture makes it highly vulnerable to climate shocks, necessitating sustainable farming approaches that enhance soil fertility, biodiversity, and resilience. However, weak legal and policy frameworks

continue to hinder the adoption of agroecology, leaving smallholder farmers exposed to the dominance of industrial agriculture, GMOs, and corporate seed monopolies.

The findings highlight the critical role of legal advocacy and institutional engagement in promoting agroecology. Through strategic partnerships with the East African Legislative Assembly (EALA), the Center for Food and Adequate Living Rights (CEFROHT) has played a pivotal role in shaping agroecological policies, including securing a resolution that recognizes agroecology as a regional priority. Additionally, CEFROHT has established the Agroecology Legal Network in Africa, a platform that supports legal advocacy and protects smallholder farmers' rights.

The paper also emphasises the importance of grassroots initiatives and participatory governance in agroecological transformation. Community barazas have been instrumental in empowering farmers with knowledge on land rights and sustainable agriculture, while school feeding programs integrating agroecological principles have improved child nutrition and supported local food systems. Furthermore, CEFROHT's legal interventions, such as challenging Kenya's GMO policy at the East African Court of Justice, demonstrate the urgency of safeguarding food sovereignty and biodiversity.

A key recommendation from this study is the need for a regional agroecology policy and law under the East African Community (EAC). Such a framework would ensure policy coherence, protect smallholder farmers, and institutionalize agroecological governance. Strengthening existing legislation, such as the EAC Seed and Plant Varieties Bill, would further secure farmers' access to indigenous seeds and prevent corporate monopolization.

In conclusion, the paper highlights that agroecology is not just an agricultural model but a human rights-based approach to food security and sustainable development. However, realizing its full potential requires strong legal frameworks, policy advocacy, and community-driven initiatives to counteract industrial agriculture and secure the rights of smallholder farmers. Through coordinated efforts, East Africa can build a resilient, inclusive, and sustainable food system that prioritizes ecological balance and social equity.

Policy Recommendations

To unlock the transformative potential of agroecology in addressing East Africa's pressing challenges of food insecurity, malnutrition, and climate change, a comprehensive and coordinated approach to policy and legal frameworks is essential. The following policy recommendations are designed to create an enabling environment for agroecology to thrive, benefiting smallholder farmers, protecting biodiversity, and fostering sustainable development across the region.

First, there is a pressing need to develop a comprehensive East African agroecology policy under the East African Community (EAC) framework to harmonize agroecological strategies, promote seed sovereignty, and ensure food and nutrition security. It must include provisions for biodiversity conservation, farmer-managed seed systems (FMSS), and climate-resilient agricultural practices.

To complement this, the enactment of an East African Agroecology Bill would establish binding legal standards to promote agroecology uniformly across the region. This bill should prioritize human rights-based principles, protecting smallholder farmers, especially women and youth, from exploitation and marginalization caused by industrial agricultural practices.

Strengthening regional legal and institutional frameworks is also crucial. Building the capacity of the EAC Secretariat and East African Legislative Assembly (EALA) will ensure effective policy implementation. Additionally, creating a regional body dedicated to monitoring agroecological practices and enforcing compliance will support accountability and sustainability.

To address the critical issue of seed equity, it is essential to promote farmer-managed seed systems (FMSS). These systems will empower farmers to conserve indigenous seeds, enhance genetic diversity, and adapt to local ecological conditions while reducing dependence on multinational seed corporations. The inclusion of FMSS in the EAC Seed and Plant Varieties Bill is vital to achieving this goal.

Agroecology thrives on the active involvement of grassroots actors. Therefore, enhancing participatory governance is key to ensuring that policies reflect the needs of smallholder farmers,

civil society, and marginalized communities. Community barazas, capacity-building workshops, and inclusive policy dialogues should be institutionalized to empower stakeholders.

The growing threats posed by industrial agriculture, including genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and monoculture practices, require urgent attention. Robust regulatory frameworks must be established to limit these practices, which degrade biodiversity and undermine agroecological principles. Enforcement of regional commitments to combat biopiracy and protect agricultural resources is equally critical.

Lessons from the international frameworks, East Africa should align its policies with frameworks such as the African Union Model Law on Food and Nutrition Security and the PARLATINO Model Law on Agroecology. These models emphasize participatory governance, sustainability, and accountability, providing valuable insights for institutionalizing agroecology in the region. To advance advocacy and coordination, the establishment of a regional agroecology coalition is imperative. This coalition, comprising civil society, government agencies, academia, and farmers, can drive resource mobilization, public awareness, and policy reforms. The Agroecology Legal Network in Africa should also be strengthened to provide legal advocacy and support for smallholder farmers.

At the national level, agroecological principles must be embedded in food and agriculture policies to address food insecurity and malnutrition. School feeding programs based on agroecology offer a practical avenue to improve child nutrition while supporting local farming communities.

Finally, agroecology must be integrated into climate resilience strategies. Policies should emphasize practices that improve soil health, conserve water, and strengthen ecosystem resilience, ensuring that agriculture adapts to and mitigates the impacts of climate change.

Conclusion

Agroecology presents a transformative pathway for addressing East Africa's critical challenges of food insecurity, malnutrition, biodiversity loss, and climate change. By leveraging ecological principles, social equity, and inclusive governance, agroecology offers sustainable solutions that prioritize the needs of smallholder farmers and local communities. However, realizing its full

potential requires a supportive legal, policy, and institutional framework that addresses the systemic barriers posed by industrial agriculture and weak enforcement mechanisms.

This paper underscores the importance of a comprehensive regional approach under the East African Community (EAC) framework to harmonize agroecological strategies and establish robust legal protections. Promoting farmer-managed seed systems, combating the dominance of GMOs, and fostering participatory governance are critical steps toward ensuring food sovereignty and resilience. Drawing lessons from international frameworks and regional initiatives, East Africa can build a unified movement to champion agroecology as a pillar of sustainable agri-food systems.

By integrating agroecological principles into policy and practice, the region has the opportunity to not only safeguard its natural resources but also empower its most vulnerable populations, particularly women and youth, to thrive in an equitable and sustainable agricultural system. The time to act is now—through collaborative advocacy, innovative policy development, and grassroots mobilization, East Africa can lead the way in building resilient and inclusive food systems for future generations.

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