

Concept note on the agroecology conference 2024

Background to the 1st Zambian agroecology conference

In Zambia the agriculture sector is an integral part of national development and it plays a critical role in people's livelihoods in terms of food and nutrition security, income and provision of employment. The agriculture sector has evolved since time in memorial from mere natural farming to its complex state where it has become highly mechanised. The current food production system has had a number of positive effects such as sustaining high production levels for certain crops especially maize and other cash crops. However, it has had its fair share of negative impacts such as reduction in soil productive potential where initially farmers were able to realise almost 8 tons per hectare, they are now harvesting less than 0.3 tons per hectare, loss of biodiversity, emission of GHGs and general degradation of the soil. This is mainly due to the over reliance on external non bio-degradable input such as synthetic fertilisers supplying nitrogen, Potassium and urea. Also there has been a drive to use herbicides and pesticides chemicals that have had an effect on soil biophysical properties. The sector has also emphasized the production of fewer crops thereby reducing diversity that is in turn affecting the nutrition security of the people, especially the lactating women and children.

The food production system which is anchored on industrialization being driven by national programmes and frameworks such as the Farmer Input Support Programme (FISP), Food Security Pack (FSP) and the Food Reserve Agency (FRA) has not been able to solve some of the current problems which see most of the food producers living below the multidimensional poverty index which stands at 48.4%, land and soil degradation. The industrial form of food production agenda has contributed to increased maize production, the so-called "bumper harvest", they have largely supported maize mono-cropping, and have contributed to the current state of food insecurity and widespread hunger in Zambia as evident in the Global Hunger Index (GHI) of 2020. Furthermore, the food production system of productions exposes our food systems to external shocks and the negative impacts of climate change, biodiversity loss, water body pollution and environmental degradation. Admittedly, the most affected are the rural communities that largely rely on agriculture for their livelihoods, but more specifically, the youth and women are even left more vulnerable.

It is with this background that PELUM Zambia and its partners have been advocating for the transformation of the food production system to a more holistic, inclusive and environmentally friendly narrative. The current form of production has not worked.

Conference Theme

"Agroecology for inclusiveness, social, economic and environmental sustenance".

The 1st Agroecology conference will highlight some of the major sustainable agroecology technologies that have successfully worked to improve the lives of the rural food producers who currently feed the nation. It will also expose the effects of industrial agriculture on the current food production system and its overall impact on the more vulnerable populations of the society. The theme will also highlight current change in food consumption patterns and outline some of environmental impacts of industrial agriculture that have been overlooked for a long time. Lastly, Agroecology technologies and techniques will be showcased as evidence that agroecology is working and has been used by farmers since time in memorial.

The conference will run under the following themes

Agroecological production technologies: Our food system should be able to address the social, economic, health and environmental issues. Thus, it is important to identify best practices that can address these issues and how interrelated they are. Thus, sharing of practical experiences and research will help in understanding best approaches that can be adopted and practices.

Sub themes

- Soil health
- Ethno veterinary /Animal health
- Appropriate technology / implements for small scale farmers
- Plant health

Ecological Trade, Markets: While global markets are opening up for more organic products, statistics in Zambia and the region show low market activity in terms of organic foods. The push for organic production of food will only make meaningful sense if markets are able to respond accordingly. Thus, the conference will endeavour to explore the regulatory, business and consumer environments. Do we have the standards and related systems/What stimulants and barriers exist to trade? Current trends such as the ACFTA will be explored and interrogate them if they work for the small-scale food producers. Trade barriers within the SADC will also be discussed under this theme.

Sub themes

- Territorial markets
- ACFTA
- Standards and quality assurance
- Access to profitable markets by small scale farmers
- Ecological markets

Policy and investment frameworks around agroecology: Policy direction and institutional capacities play a vital role in stimulating production and investment in the sector. Policies around food system require review to ensure that agroecological practices are supported. These policies must rely on local data and evidence so that they adequately address local needs and challenges.

Sub themes

- Agroecology strategy development processes; lessons from PELUM Uganda / PELUM -/ AFSA
- CATSP
- NAIP
- Biosafety and biotechnology policy / act of Zambia
- SADC Seed harmonisation policy

Farmer managed seed systems and biodiversity conservation: The FMSS is under threat from extinction due to the over use and reliance of the conventional seed system which promotes the use of hybrid seeds. Most indigenous (Landraces) seed varieties are either extinct or at the verge of extinction. This has resulted in reliance on the hybrids that are produced by multinational companies. The result has seen the loss of local germplasm and reduction in biodiversity.

Sub themes

- Biodiversity
- Nutrition
- Support for Farmer Managed Seed System
- Food security
- Opportunity costs

Women and youth in agriculture: A number of women are directly involved in the food production system. Any change in the food production will affect how women live. It has become important to appreciate the role women play in the whole value chain and in the promotion of the local food consumption. Youth have for a while been left behind. But in recent years a number of youth farmers have occupied a significant space in the agriculture sector. Therefore, under this theme, the role of women and youth will be explored.

Sub themes

- Role of women in food production and household food security
- Youth in Agriculture – gaps and opportunity
- Traditional seed and food – what can be done differently
- Gender responsive agroecology agriculture

Information and networking; Information dissemination plays a critical role in agroecology development. In fronting agroecology, it is important to use all forms of media that will reach out to the farmers in all parts of the country. Digital formats can be developed so that farmers are able to use them. To spread the information networks are a major driver and these need to be used at a large scale.

Sub themes

- Education and capacity building
- Scientific evidence generation and dissemination
- Social media and Digital information system
- Stronger network building
- Agroecology as a holistic approach

Conference Aims and Objectives

The overall objective of the conference is to gather evidence on agroecological practices and create awareness, promote the adoption of agroecology and influence policy change in our food system.

Specifically, the conference will:

Bring together researchers, practitioners, farmers, women and youth-led/rights organisations, policy makers, private sector, Civil society organisation, donors and interested groups in agriculture and agroecology.

Provide space for cross learning and knowledge and information sharing on issues around agroecology.

Outline how the stakeholders can understand and appreciate the challenges our food system is facing and what agroecological interventions can be used to mitigate the negative impacts on our food system and;

Outline policy options that can be explored to create an enabling environment for the promotion and popularisation of agroecology at scale.

Conference rationale

The conference comes at a time when the agriculture sector is undergoing a transformation process to enhance sustainable production, distribution, processing, consumption, markets and improve livelihoods- ultimately contributing to the national development agenda.

The conference also provides space for women and youth to find opportunities and situate themselves in the sector along the value chains of importance.

The conference provides an opportunity for decision-makers, private and public players to show how the current food systems can be transformed through supportive policies and legislations.

The conference follows the United Nations Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) to share national and regional food systems transformation paths in support of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda) and promote the 2023 year of the millet.

The conference aims to invoke consciousness and motivate nation and continental communities to dialogue how to invest in interventions that can better the negative impacts of the current unsustainable food systems by transitioning towards more environmentally friendly solutions with long-term vision and planning.

How the conference feeds into national priorities.

The 1st Agroecology conference theme “Agroecology for inclusiveness, social, economic and environmental sustenance” speaks to several national policies and frameworks that fosters national development.

The Government of the Republic of Zambia has formulated a number of macro economic and policy documents to which the conference speaks to in the following ways:

1. The 8th National development plan: The theme of the 8th NDP “Social- economic transformation for improved livelihoods” is building on to the attainment of the national's vision 2030. The theme of the conference is feeding well in both policy frameworks as it will create space for discussions on matters that affect the citizens and national development addressing some of the critical areas with the 8th NDP under the following strategic areas in the plan;

1. Strategic development area 1: Economic transformation and job creation under development outcomes 1, 2 and 3.

2. Strategic development area 2: Human and social development under development outcome 1.

3. Strategic development area 3: Environmental sustainability under development outcome 1 and 2 and

4. Strategic development area 4: Good governance environment under development outcomes 1, 2

Within the National Agriculture policy, the conference will contribute to attainment of the following objectives: 1, 2,3,4,7,8,9 and 10.

The conference will also address some of the Sustainable Development goals such as goal 2, 5, 9, 10, 12, 13 and 17.

Under the leadership of the Ministry of Agriculture, the conference will not be an end to a means by a means to achieve the priorities set by the nation in the agriculture sector with the aim of improving food and nutrition security but at the same time sustaining the environment. The multi sector collaboration during this event will set a high tone for national development within the agriculture sub sector.

Expected Outcomes

Consensus on transformation of our food system in Zambia in line with agroecological practices reached.

Enhanced networking and information sharing

Enhanced. Support for agroecological oriented policies and systems by Government and other stakeholders in Zambia.

Expected Outputs

Challenges in adoption and scaling up best practices identified.

Awareness on the potential of agroecology to transform the sector, created.

Successful practices and initiatives on agroecology showcased and amplified.

Conference participants

Practical examples of agroecology in work through the field trip

Policy briefs with key recommendations.

Conference Report.

Participants will be drawn from all sector of the economy involved in food system. These will be from national and regional level.

Farmers and Farmer groups

Policy makers (Ministry officials, Members of Parliament, etc.)

Women-led/rights organisations

Youth-led/rights organisations

People with Disability organisations

Civil Society Organisations

Private Sector

Academia and Research

Strategic partners and funding partners

Media

Certifying Agents

Processers

Farm equipment companies

Virtual Participants: Other participants will be attending virtually

At least 200 participants will attend the conference.

Conference topics of discussion

Topics for the thematic groups

1. Agroecological production technologies

Topic- WHAT IS THE ROLE OF RESEARCH AND INNOVATION IN AGRO-ECOLOGICAL FARMING SYSTEMS.

If the overall objective of agroecological farming systems is achieving a system re-design based on agroecological principles, it is clear that the technical improvement of farming practices is not sufficient. Such a re-design requires collective thinking, the involvement of new actors and different forms of coordination between stakeholders. It is clear that Science and innovation are at the heart of not only advancing knowledge, know-how and technology development of agroecological transitions but should be at the center of all policy and practice.

2. Ecological Trade, Markets

Topic: Improving market access and participation for small holder farmers: Local and Global view.

Market access and participation by the small holder farmers continues to be an issue. It then becomes critical to enhance access and participation of SHF in the market and trade sectors so as to enhance their incomes and consequently improve their well being.

3. Policy and investment frameworks around agroecology

Topic: Creating an enabling policy environment for agroecology: do we have the right narrative to create this at national, regional and continental level?

The development, implementation and scaling up of agroecological practices requires an appropriate enabling environment. To achieve a fundamental shift and improvement in the food production system, we need policies that unlock the potential of agroecology farming and development for the short and long term.

4. Farmer managed seed systems and biodiversity conservation

Topic: FMSS for food and nutrition sovereignty

How can we create a robust and effective FMSS that responds to threats that are continuously multiplying. These may include technologies and practices for seed management.

5. Women and youth in agriculture

Topic: Are women really the real food producers, if yes why are they left out? How can youth participate.

Women play a critical role in the food production especially in Zambia and Africa. Their role has been overshadowed by their male counterparts to an extent that most financial gains go to the male irrespective of who produced the food. Youth participation remains low, how can we ignite that interest among youth to take up farming as a business and livelihood.

6. Information and networking

Topic: Are we ready for the digital takeover in the agriculture sector?

How can we take advantage of the changing digital space to advance agroecology development, networking and information and knowledge sharing?