



FINANCE FOR AGROECOLOGY: MORE THAN JUST A DREAM?

AN ASSESSMENT OF EUROPEAN AND INTERNATIONAL
INSTITUTIONS' CONTRIBUTIONS TO FOOD SYSTEM
TRANSFORMATION

KEY FINDINGS

As prominent public investors, the Green Climate Fund (GCF), the European Union (EU), European countries (EU Member States and others), the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the World Food Programme (WFP) have the potential to play a big role in supporting the transformation of our food systems. Unfortunately, our findings show that public money channelled towards agroecology is insufficient in quantity and quality:

- **Projects supporting transformative agroecology were only found in the GCF portfolio and represent 10.6%** of the money invested in agricultural projects by the GCF.
- **Projects partially supporting agroecology represent only 2.7% of the EU funds channelled through FAO, IFAD and WFP projects between 2016 and 2018.**
- **79.8% of the EU funds channelled through the FAO, IFAD and WFP and 79.3% of the GCF agricultural money flows** are still targeting programmes and projects focusing on conventional agriculture and/or efficiency-oriented approaches (such as sustainable intensification).
- The room for improvement compared to the current situation is huge.

ABOUT THIS PAPER:

This policy brief was developed by CIDSE and builds on the research led by Nina Moeller at the Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience (CAWR) of Coventry University in the UK. CIDSE would like to thank Nina Moeller for her support and valuable research work. The briefing and the related [background report](#) by Coventry University are available in English at www.cidse.org.

CIDSE is an international family of Catholic social justice organisations, working together to promote justice, harness the power of global solidarity and create transformational change to end poverty and inequalities. We do this by challenging systemic injustice and inequity as well as destruction of nature. We believe in a world where every human being has the right to live in dignity.

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COPING WITH THE MULTIPLE CRISES WE ARE FACING REQUIRES FOOD SYSTEM CHANGE

Over the past years, discourses have changed rapidly. There is now a clear consensus to profoundly transform our food systems in order to cope with the multiple crises we face. The Covid-19 outbreak sheds light on the vulnerability and the lack of resilience of our food systems. Agroecology is key to that transformation and as such the approach has gained momentum in the past years. IFAD and FAO underlined that agroecology is key to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)¹. The FAO presented it as a “promising option to implement the Paris Agreement”² as it addresses climate change adaptation and mitigation simultaneously. Recent reports by the IPBES³, the IPCC⁴ and the High-Level Panel of Experts (HLPE) of the UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS)⁵ all highlight the important role that agroecology plays in the fight to overcome the crises we are facing. More recently, agroecology has found its way into the European Green Deal through its Farm to Fork⁶ and Biodiversity⁷ strategies.

In parallel, the importance of agricultural investments to eradicate poverty, hunger and malnutrition has been repeatedly underlined⁸ but public investments in agriculture have stagnated globally⁹, representing around 5.5% (or 10.2 billion USD in 2018) of total Official Development Assistance (ODA). In this context, Public Private Partnerships and blending finance – mechanisms which rely on partnerships with private sector companies and financial actors – have multiplied but have focused on industrial agriculture, and have failed to demonstrate their benefits for smallholders. A 2019 Oxfam report found that “the assumptions that blended finance is inherently beneficial for agricultural development and that it is an efficient way to finance smallholder agriculture, are not supported by the evidence currently available”¹⁰. Does public finance support the food system transformation required by the crises we are facing? This was our initial question.

What is agroecology?

Agroecology is a way of redesigning and managing food systems, “from the farm to the table, with a goal of achieving ecological, economic, and social sustainability”¹¹ by applying a series of principles. Such principles have been captured in the [FAO 10 elements of agroecology to guide the transition towards sustainable agriculture and food systems](#)¹ as well as in the [HLPE consolidated set of 13 agroecological principles](#)¹². The latter draws on CIDSE’s “Principles of Agroecology”, highlighting the environmental, economic, social and political dimensions of agroecology.

» [see CIDSE infographic and report \(available in 7 different languages\)](#).

¹ The 10 elements were approved by the FAO council in 2019.

SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

In order to conduct such an assessment, CIDSE established a partnership with the Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience (CAWR) at Coventry University.

We chose to focus on:

» **EU Official Development Assistance (ODA) funds** channelled through the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the World Food Programme (WFP) - referred to hereafter as the Rome-based agenciesⁱⁱ - because of the importance of those institutions in setting the tone of food security policies and projects at the international level and because of their recent engagement in favour of agroecology.ⁱⁱⁱ

» **The Green Climate Fund (GCF)**, which describes itself as “the world’s largest dedicated fund helping developing countries reduce their GHG emissions and enhance their ability to respond to climate change”¹³. As “over 90% of countries’ Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) include agriculture targets” and as 12.5% of NDCs specifically refer to agroecology¹⁴, one would expect money flows to reflect this increased focus on agroecology.

The findings of the CIDSE-CAWR study are based on a thorough analysis of 152 projects^{iv} of the United Nations (UN) Rome-based agencies financed through the EU budget^v over 3 years (2016-2018) and of the entire GCF portfolio (from its creation until December 2019). The methodology used builds on Gliessman’s 5 levels of transition towards sustainable food systems¹⁵ as well as additional categories. These categories were then grouped together depending on the impact they have on a transition towards agroecology:

1. PROJECTS THAT DO NOT SUPPORT A TRANSITION TOWARDS AGROECOLOGY

- a. **Other agricultural projects:** industrial or conventional agriculture and other rural development objectives such as energy, information systems and infrastructure
- b. **Level 1:** efficiency-oriented approaches such as sustainable intensification

We are referring to those projects as “business as usual” or as projects enabling conventional agriculture and efficiency improvements.

2. PROJECTS WITH UNCERTAIN POTENTIAL TO SUPPORT AGROECOLOGY

- a. **“social enablers’ projects”:** conventional agriculture projects with a social dimension such as strengthening community-based organisations, smallholder participation and access to land
- b. **Governance organisations:** financial support for international governance bodies and mechanisms

3. PROJECTS THAT PARTIALLY SUPPORT AGROECOLOGY - LEVEL 2

- Substituting industrial inputs and projects that involve multiple approaches to sustainability

4. PROJECTS THAT SUPPORT TRANSFORMATIVE AGROECOLOGY - LEVELS 3, 4 AND 5

- a. **Level 3:** projects that focus on the redesign of agroecosystems
- b. **Levels 4 and 5 or “food systems change”:** projects that also contribute to a broader transformation of the food system, including through alternative forms of economic exchanges and market relationships

Overall, the study which this briefing summarises has applied a generous interpretation of the projects’ potential contribution to agroecology, regardless of whether the term ‘agroecology’ was used in the project documentation.

» [See Coventry University background report¹⁶ for more detailed information about the methodology used.](#)

ⁱⁱ The three UN agencies working on food security (FAO, IFAD, WFP) are based in Rome.

ⁱⁱⁱ In particular, through their collective contribution to the “scaling-up agroecology” initiative launched in 2018 during the FAO second international symposium on agroecology.

^{iv} 152 projects out of the 367 that were funded through FAO, IFAD and WFP during that period of time (so 41.4% of the overall portfolio). 215 “emergency responses” projects (or 58.6%) were excluded from the dataset.

^v 70% of European ODA is financed directly by the EU budget, with the remaining 30% financed through the European Development Fund.

EU ODA FUNDING FOR UN ROME-BASED AGENCIES' PROJECTS

» MAIN FINDINGS:

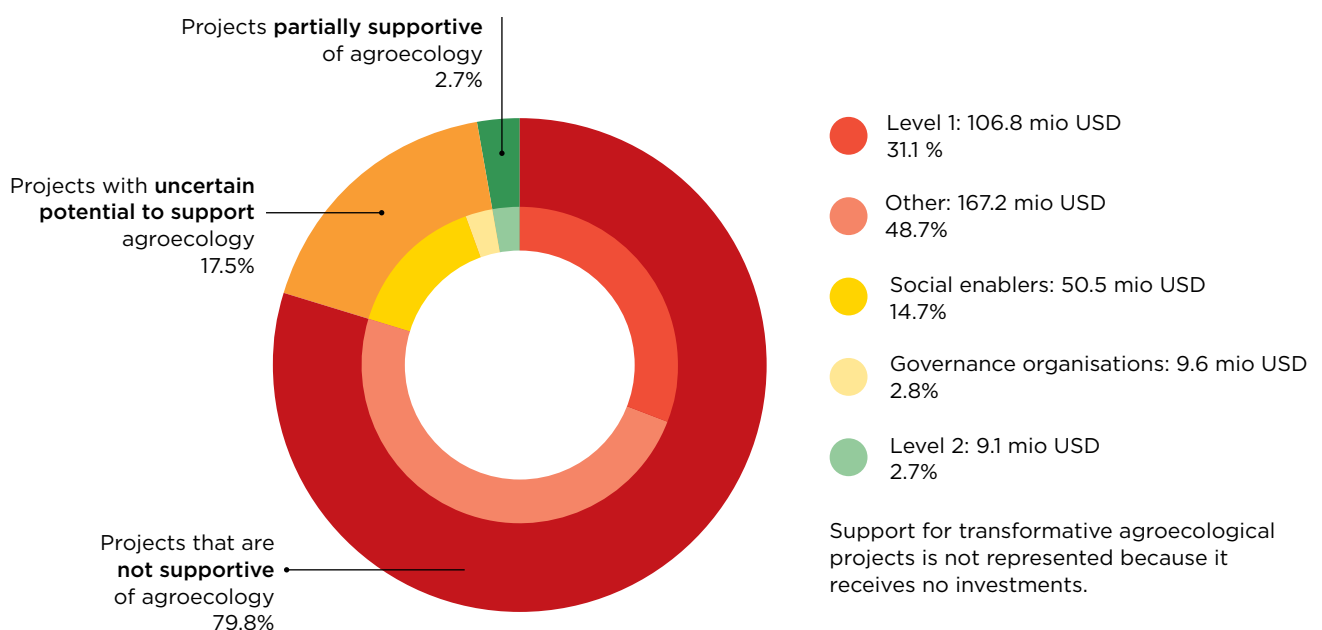
- **None of the projects of the UN agencies financed through the EU were supportive of a transformative agroecology** (targeting food system change or the redesign of the agroecosystem as a whole).
- Projects at level 2 – which should be the starting point of a transition towards agroecology – only represent 2.7% of the money channelled by the EU to the Rome-based agencies while in comparison, around 31.1% is dedicated to level 1 programmes, focusing on efficiency-oriented approaches, with a simplistic approach to food production.
- **Overall, 79.8% of the money flows are supporting business as usual approaches**, with an additional 17.5% of flows representing an uncertain potential to support agroecology.

Focus on social enablers' projects

Social enablers' projects – which represent just around 15% of the money flows – should not be overlooked. As such they represent the sole category of projects taking a more systemic approach, by targeting agricultural production AND the social and economic context. If this social dimension were coupled with level 3 interventions, it could represent a strong contribution to food system transformation. Assessing how such projects could progressively shift towards agroecology would be a step in the right direction.

Figure 1:

Total investments per category in USD millions of EU flows towards FAO, IFAD and WFP (2016-2018)



THE GREEN CLIMATE FUND

» MAIN FINDINGS:

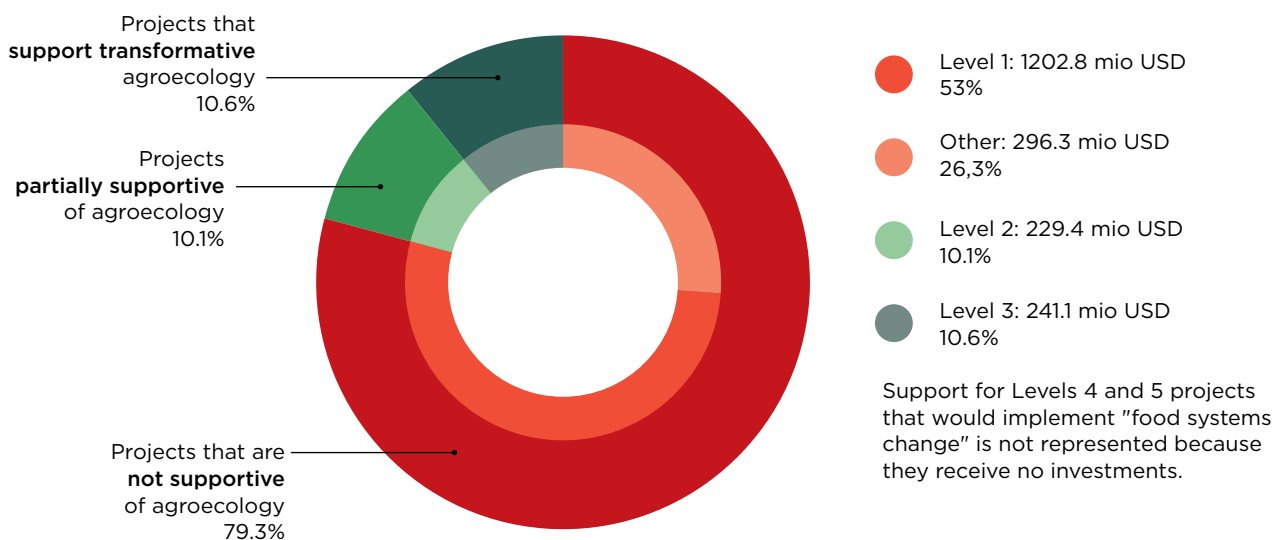
- Out of the 58 projects related to agriculture (representing 47% of the GCF portfolio), **8 projects are supportive of a transformative agroecology** (5 of them being secondary funds – see box). **It represents 10.6% of the money invested in agricultural projects by the GCF.**
- **Another 10.1%** of the money invested in agricultural projects by the GCF **are channelled towards projects partially supporting agroecology.**
- Overall, **79.3% of the money flows are going towards business as usual approaches** (enabling of conventional agriculture and efficiency improvements).
- All agriculture-relevant projects are either focused on climate adaptation (46.1%) or cross-cutting both adaptation and mitigation (53.9%). Projects focusing only on mitigation are all non-agricultural projects.

Focus on finance facilities

5 of the 8 projects which matched level 3 (transformative agroecology) set up finance facilities in project regions: operating as secondary funds, they channel grants and/or loans towards Micro, Small and Medium-sized enterprises (MSMES) or community-based organisations. Though we have categorised them as level 3, we have little information on how such funds are or will in fact be operating and if local communities were consulted as part of the development of the project proposal. Nevertheless, in principle such facilities could play an important role in supporting a transition towards agroecology, provided that they support people and organisations in submitting proposals; that they include social and environmental safeguards; that grants are an important component of the project; and that there is a window of small grants that smallholder farmers and food producers can access.

Figure 2:

Total investments per category in USD millions for the total amount of GCF agricultural projects



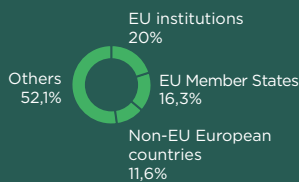
A CLOSER LOOK AT EUROPEAN COUNTRIES' FUNDING

Are the trends that were identified above also reflected at the national level? To answer this question, we have examined a growing series of research reports mapping national financial flows in support of agroecology (in Belgium¹⁷, Germany¹⁸, Switzerland¹⁹, the United Kingdom²⁰). In the case of Switzerland “51% of [...] agricultural research for development projects had agroecological components²¹. In all the other cases available at national level, the financial support for transformative agroecology is either minimal (Belgium, Germany) or inexistent (UK) – as it is the case for the GCF and the EU partnership with Rome-based Agencies. Regardless of the support given to some agroecological projects, in most country cases, agroecology is not a category used to report agricultural spending (e.g. UK, Ireland).

These studies have also shown that public money channelled through and handled by NGOs and Africa-based institutions tended to be much more supportive of agroecology. In Belgium 48% of the non-governmental flows promoted transformative agroecology. In Switzerland they identified that “projects led by Africa-based institutions tend to be more systemic and inclusive, but these organisations receive relatively little [...] funding from Swiss public donors”²².

The European Commission and European countries are major donors of agricultural ODA and a major source of finance for international institutions focusing on food security. European countries are also key players in most of the governing bodies of these institutions and the EC is only represented at FAO.

Key facts about European countries, the EU and the Rome-based agencies



FAO

EU institutions are the second largest funder of the FAO (representing around 20% of the budget in 2017²³). Together with EU Member States (14 of them having financed the FAO in 2017²⁴), the EU contributed to 36.3% of the FAO 2017 budget. Contributions by European countries which are not members of the EU (Switzerland, Norway and the UK) represent an additional 11.6% of the 2017 budget.



EU Member States (Austria, Belgium, Finland, France and Germany²⁵) represent around 10% of the FAO Council members. The UK is also a Council member.



23 EU Member States and the Commission²⁶ are sitting on the Committee on Agriculture that advises the Council and reviews the FAO work programme, representing 20% of its members. The Committee also includes Norway, the UK and Switzerland.



IFAD

EU Member States with an IFAD membership represent 26.7% of the votes²⁷ in the Governing Council. Norway, Switzerland and the UK represent an extra 8.27%²⁸.



Currently (September 2020), 10 EU Member States: France, Germany, Italy, The Netherlands (members) and Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Greece, Spain, Sweden (alternates) are sitting on its Executive Board (representing 28% of the total)²⁹. The UK, Switzerland and Norway are also sitting on the Board.



WFP

Austria, Denmark, The Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, UK, Hungary, Poland are currently sitting on the Executive Board of the WFP representing 25% of its members.

Key facts about European countries, the EU and the GCF

- Though EU institutions are not channelling money directly into the GCF, “collectively, EU Member States have disbursed USD 4.78 billion to the GCF, making them the biggest provider of finance to the GCF”³⁰.
- Development cooperation agencies of Germany, Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, France, Austria, and Spain have been accredited to propose projects and support implementing organisations, as was the European Investment Bank.
- European countries represent 43% of the 44 members and alternates of the GCF Board. European Union Member States represent around 32% of them³¹.

CONCLUSION

- As prominent public investors, the Green Climate Fund, European countries, EU Member States and the European Union have the potential to play a big role in supporting the transformation of our food systems. Based on the current situation, the room for improvement is huge.
- Our findings all highlight a lack of support for transformative and holistic interventions which do not reflect the objectives and the urgency set by both the SDGs and the Paris Agreement.
- Nonetheless, an important part of the Belgium ODA channelled towards non-governmental organisations as of the Swiss-funded agricultural research for development projects and 8 GCF projects have shown to be supportive of transformative agroecology. Such cases should be investigated further and the lessons learned used to scale up support for an agroecological transition.
- As it is clear that food systems need to be profoundly transformed in order to address the crises we face, the current financial architecture also needs to be designed and equipped to support such radical transformation.

How can financial flows catalyse transformation?

This is a critical question that CIDSE and the Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience at Coventry University have started addressing through action research and dialogue with various stakeholders. The findings of this research will be released later this year.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the key findings of this research we recommend that European countries, the EU, UN Rome-based agencies and the Green Climate Fund:

- Redirect investments and finance towards agroecology and end funding of projects which are detrimental to the transformation of food systems towards greater sustainability and social justice;
- When the evidence is available, identify which projects have a transformative potential, review them and identify ways to increase funding for such type of projects;
- When the evidence is not available, undertake an analysis of governmental or institutional financial flows to assess their contributions to a transition towards agroecology;
- Increase the funding for agroecological projects and programmes by: using an assessment tool that includes the principles of agroecology to develop and select future agriculture projects; developing agroecological criteria in funding proposals;
- Focus on supporting farmer organisations and local NGOs that are accountable to smallholder farmers – especially those focusing on agroecology – and who have been shown to be more inclusive, systematic and to take a more transformative approach;
- Support the creation by the public sector of an enabling environment for smallholders' investments in agriculture, taking into account the fact that farmers are the primary investors in agriculture³²;
- Review the financing mechanisms in order to decrease the number of intermediaries; maintain grants as a primary source of finance; remove complex requirement to access funds; decrease the minimum size of funds so that local organisations can easily access them; decentralise access to funding.^{VI}

SPECIFICALLY:

The Green Climate Fund should:

- Support region or country-wide programmes on the transition towards agroecology in such a way that they allow/afford the flexibility and efficiency to deliver finance to small scale projects;
- Include a strong focus on agroecology in the fund sectoral guidance related to agriculture, food security, ecosystems and land-use.

The EU should:

- Include a strong focus on agroecology in the programming guidance for cooperation with third countries in the period 2021-2027;
- Cooperate with Rome-based agencies to increase support for agroecology.

The FAO, the IFAD and the WFP should:

- Increase support to the “scaling-up agroecology initiative” and give increasing visibility to it;
- As GCF accredited entities, the FAO, the IFAD and the WFP should encourage submissions and support the implementation of agroecological projects.
- Cooperate with the EU to increase support for agroecology.

^{VI} Ensuring that control over decision-making and access to funds sits with those most directly affected by and best able to identify strategies to cope with current and future crises.

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Contact

François Delvaux, Agroecology and Food Sovereignty Officer - delvaux(at)cidse.org
CIDSE – Rue Stévin 16 – B-1000 Bruxelles
T: +32 (0)2 230 77 22 – F: +32 (0)2 230 70 82 – www.cidse.org