

Capturing the Rain:

Thoughts on how to make best use of the momentum for agroecology in Eastern Africa

An Essay

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“Human rights are not things that are put on the table for people to enjoy. These are things you fight for and then you protect.”

- **Wangari Maathai**

“Rights take shape and are constituted by and through struggle. Thus, they have the capacity to be elements of emancipation, but they are neither a perfect nor exclusive vehicle for emancipation. (...) They articulate a vision of entitlements, of how things might be, which in turn has the capacity to advance political aspiration and action.”

- **Alan Hunt (1991)**

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Introduction

Momentum for agroecological food systems transformation is growing in the Eastern African region. The governments of Uganda, Tanzania, and Kenya have adopted policies on agroecology or on organic and ecological agriculture. Philanthropic donors are aligning grants to maximize impact in selected localities. Ministers publicly acknowledge the potential of agroecology to achieve food security. International donors, including the International Fund for Agricultural Development, have dedicated programmes on agroecology. At major conferences, agroecology is no longer the oddball—it is an accepted part of discourse on food systems transformation. The times have truly changed. Agroecology has demonstrated its capacity to contribute to food security while reducing agriculture’s impact on our environment. It offers a systemic approach to transform food systems and is arguably the best strategy to respond to the systemic challenges of the climate crisis.

Yet, this momentum unfolds on a playing field heavily skewed against it. A few corporations dominate the markets for mineral fertilizer, pesticides, and hybrid seeds. Demand-driven agricultural extension services emphasize conventional agriculture. Agroecology is often framed as backward or anti-innovation. Research funding is still a fraction of what is available to conventional agriculture. Recent cuts to international cooperation budgets have intensified competition for already-scarce grant resources. Cooperation and solidarity are even harder to achieve under these conditions. Though these serious challenges can feel overwhelming and immutable, continuing to merely describe them is not enough. In this crucial moment, it is of utmost importance to instead devise strategies that aim to change these structures.

For structural change to occur, there is an urgent need for agroecology actors to organize differently and more effectively. For example, although conceptual discussions on distinctions between the organic, ecological, and agroecological agriculture are valid, it is much more important to focus on commonalities in order to build broad alliances. Like capturing rain to keep water on the farm for crops, we must create strategies that harness the current momentum for lasting change.

Knowledge for change—knowledge for agroecological food system transformation—must advance political aspiration and action. To successfully engage current opportunities, we believe that the highly diverse set of actors working to advance agroecology must find new ways to cooperate. Otherwise, it may be very difficult, if not nearly impossible, to overcome the challenges created by the structures emerging from decades of investment in an extractive agricultural system.

Some of this essay's arguments are deliberately pointed. We therefore want to emphasize that we see ourselves as part of the agroecology community, and that our critiques are also of ourselves. We argue this way because it is all too possible to become comfortable with the hard-won progress in building momentum for agroecology. Yet too many progressive policies end up as mere technical instruments, broken down by unending discussions on small details such as indicator frameworks and ultimately losing their emancipatory power. The current momentum in Eastern Africa is too precious for us to waste.

This essay builds on thirty key informant interviews with agroecology actors in Malawi, Uganda, Tanzania, and Kenya during July and August 2025. A review of secondary sources complements and has further contextualized the information gathered through these interviews.

We offer this essay as a contribution to the emerging debate on how best to utilize the current momentum for agroecology in the region. A more powerfully led and guided discourse is needed if we are to succeed in building food systems that nourish people, eradicate hunger, and protect the planet on which humanity depends.

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Momentum alone does not equal structural change

How should we assess the changes that the recent momentum has already brought to the agricultural sector? Judged by the number of agroecology strategies and policies coming up (Biovision, 2024), or the number of events, conferences, and symposia on agroecology in the region, progress seems strong. Irony apart, there is a risk that the current buzz on agroecology overshadows the hard work needed to maintain it, and blurs the measurement of true growth.

We propose the below as a kind of crude “back-of-the-envelope” assessment, recognizing that it is partly unfair, as policies are recent and implementation takes time. The intention of this assessment is twofold: as a first proposal for a contribution to the debate on how to measure progress, and to help maintain focus on the forces that are shaping the agricultural sector, some of which actively work against change.

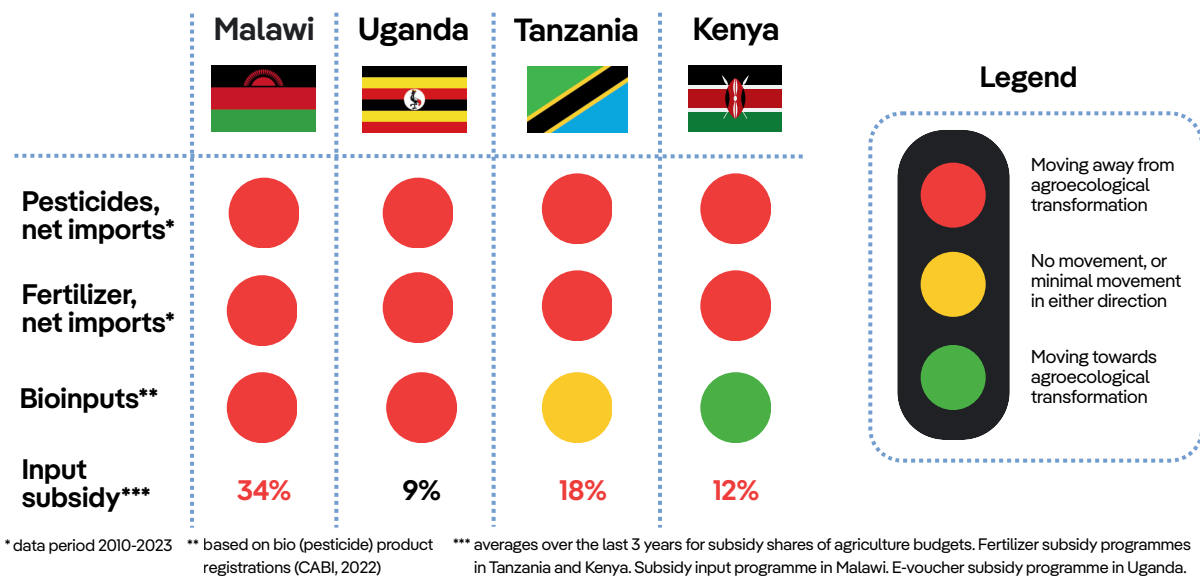


Figure 1: Proposed indicators of change

This assessment relies on four indicators of change: net imports of pesticides as well as fertilizers, registrations of bioinputs, and shares of the agricultural budget used for fertilizer subsidy programmes. Trends are presented as if on a traffic light. Red indicates movement away from agroecological transformation, yellow indicates minimal or no change, and green indicates movement towards transformation. Data on pesticides and fertilizers covers the years 2010 – 2023 (FAOSTAT). Data on bioinput registration is from CABI (2025), assessing the number of registered products per country. Information on the size of input subsidy programmes is obtained from budget policy statements and other supplementary sources.

In essence, the analysis shows that adoption of agroecology policies in Eastern and Southern Africa has yet to create the structural changes needed in agriculture and food systems in the four countries.

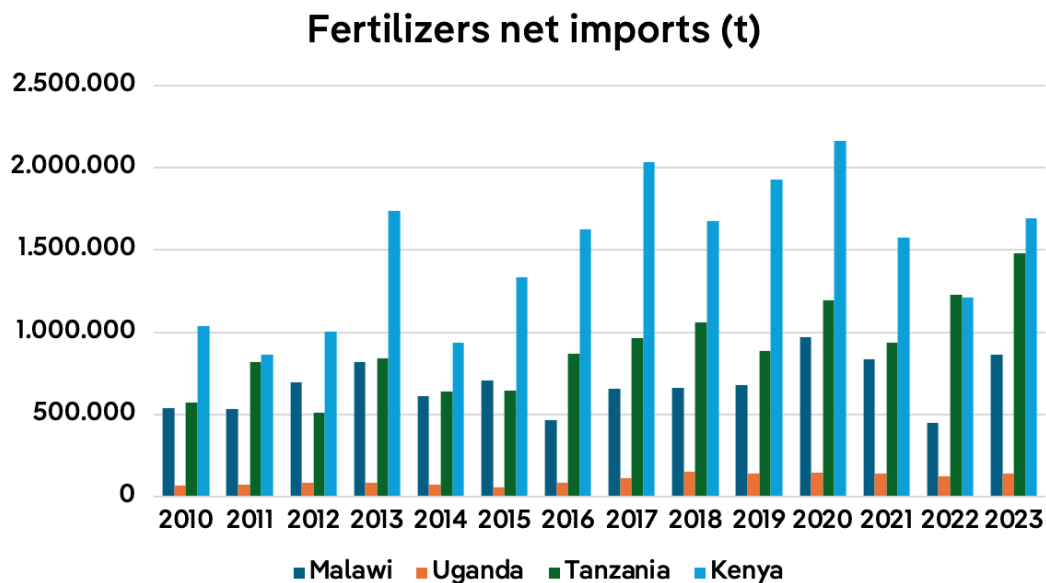


Figure 2: Net fertilizer imports by Malawi, Uganda, Tanzania, and Kenya in tonnes during the period 2010 – 2023. Source: FAOSTAT.

All four countries are net importers of fertilizers, with synthetic fertilizer imports doubling over the last fifteen years. Kenya led every year except in 2011 and 2022, when Tanzania overtook it. Kenya’s fertilizer imports peaked in 2020, with 2.26 million metric tonnes of assorted types of fertilizers imported in that year alone. Of the four countries, Uganda recorded the lowest imports, but volumes still grew by 112% between 2010 and 2023 (FAOSTAT, 2025). When assessed by nutrient type, Kenya leads in nitrogen imports; Tanzania shows the fastest growth in nitrogen and the highest relative share of phosphorus; and Uganda has the highest relative share of potassium.

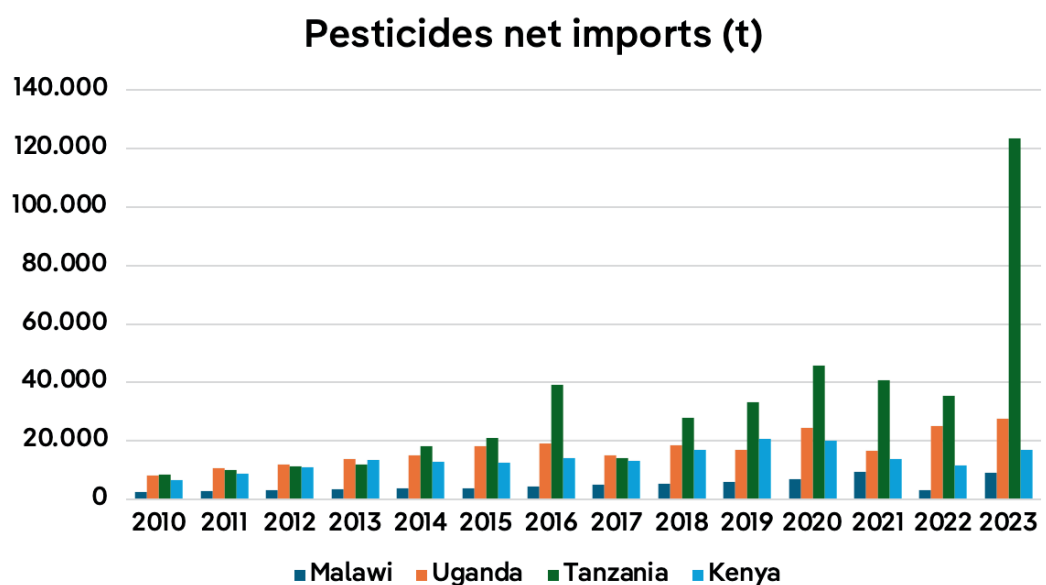


Figure 3: Pesticide imports by Malawi, Uganda, Tanzania, and Kenya in tonnes during the period 2010 – 2023. Source: FAOSTAT.

Bioinputs such as biopesticides offer a vital alternative to synthetic inputs, reducing their negative impact. Pesticide registration data reveal significant disparities in biopesticide availability across the four countries. While these data cannot tell the whole story, they could still provide a good starting point for an analysis of the regulatory landscape, markets, and access to agroecological inputs. Malawi has 11 registered biopesticides, Tanzania has 27, and Uganda has 37. Kenya leads with 150 (CABI, 2025). These disparities result in part from differences in access to biopesticides in the region. In 2023, Malawi, which has the lowest number of registered biopesticide products, initiated reforms to streamline its pesticide registration process by reducing fees and data requirements. For all four countries, there is very limited data on the production and use of bioinputs, making it difficult to assess their actual availability and use.

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In front of the mirror: Structure, risks, and pathways to strengthening agroecology actor networks for transformation

The agroecology movement in Eastern Africa is rapidly gaining traction (Pokupec et al., 2024), fuelled by a diverse group of actors, including producer and consumer organizations, civil society, non-governmental organizations, private sector actors, researchers, and government institutions, all working to advance sustainable agriculture and food systems rooted in agroecological principles. Yet, even as interest, actor diversity, and interventions continue to grow, it is still unclear whether the current actor landscape is sufficiently connected and cohesive to capably drive a transformative shift in food systems.

Our analysis of the agroecology actor landscape in Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, and Malawi reveals a dynamic landscape with a mix of both distinct and converging challenges, as well as attempts towards institutionalized, effective coordination mechanisms for agroecology stakeholders.

- **Kenya:** The National Agroecology Strategy for Food Systems Transformation (2024–2033) is introducing the first attempt to institutionalize coordination through platforms such as the Intersectoral Forum on Agroecology and Agrobiodiversity (ISFAA), which convenes hundreds of actors across government, civil society, research, and the private sector (Government of Kenya, 2024). While multi-stakeholder platforms and emerging agroecology dialogue forums do strengthen actor coordination, continuing historical dominance by a few influential actors poses a risk to inclusive leadership and meaningful collaboration.
- **Uganda:** Historically led by civil society and producer groups, Uganda’s agroecology movement is now entering a new phase of government engagement. Platforms such as the National Agroecology Actors’ Symposium and the forthcoming National Agroecology Strategy are fostering broader coordination beyond membership-based networks. However, balancing emerging state leadership with grassroots movements’ autonomy and preventing political co-optation remains essential for sustaining an inclusive and coherent agroecology agenda.
- **Tanzania:** The National Ecological Organic Agriculture Strategy (NEOAS) (2023–2030) is presenting a crucial opportunity to unify previously fragmented efforts. Coordination mechanisms proposed in the NEOAS are creating a unique opportunity to align state and non-state actors around a shared vision for agroecology (The

United Republic of Tanzania, 2023). Strengthened convening mechanisms could engender the meaningful dialogues and engagement necessary for coordination despite conceptual differences. While there is initiative to include the voices of producers and marginalized groups, more effort is needed to move from consultative engagements to meaningful collaboration embodying the spirit of co-creation.

- **Malawi:** Momentum for agroecology is steadily rising. Stakeholder engagement is currently organized through the Malawi Agroecology Hub, which connects diverse actors for co-learning and joint action (Global Collaboration for Resilient Food System, 2025). However, multiple parallel platforms continue to operate without structured alignment, limiting collective impact. Strengthening the Hub's convening power and aligning it with other relevant networks and coalitions is essential for it to serve as an effective convening mechanism.

Challenges and risks identified in the agroecology actor landscape

The agroecology movement in Eastern and Southern Africa faces several risks that could impede its transformative potential. Our analysis identifies the following potential risks and challenges in the agroecology actor networks of these four countries:

- **Overreliance on a few key actors:** Agroecology efforts tend to depend heavily on a small number of champion organizations, funders, or even individuals. While these champions have been indispensable in driving the agroecology agenda in the past, continuing this overreliance into the future poses significant risks. The failure to systematically broaden the base of actors with capacity and influence limits effective collaboration and restricts the possibilities of tapping into new, dynamic ideas. Furthermore, networks that rely on a few actors as main nodes are less resilient than networks characterized by a larger number of organizations that serve as nodes performing key network functions (e.g., introducing new actors and sharing information).
- **Fragmentation and poor coordination:** Despite the existence of numerous networks, coalitions, and multi-stakeholder forums in the region, coordination among agroecology actors is still fragmented. Siloed efforts too often lead to duplication in some areas and gaps in others. This splintered approach gives rise to inefficient utilization of increasingly scarce resources, creates parallel messages and confusion, and ultimately slows the agroecological transition.
- **Echo chambers and insular dialogue:** Engaging primarily within an insular "echo chamber" poses significant risks for agroecology advocates. Such isolation can alienate potential allies and exclude important critics, leaving valid external concerns unaddressed. Internal discussions may stagnate, repetitively affirming shared beliefs

without adapting to new evidence or acknowledging weaknesses. By communicating only among themselves, agroecology actors risk reinforcing their marginalization.

- **Power imbalances:** In all four countries, established interests such as fertilizer companies and large-scale agriculture dominate the political economy. These actors possess expansive resources and exert powerful political influence, making it difficult for agroecology actors to effect substantial policy change or secure funding. Although multi-stakeholder platforms exist, their influence on high-level decision-making remains limited.
- **Limited knowledge and technical capacity in key areas:** Knowledge gaps in several critical issues continue to limit the agroecological community despite substantial progress in research and understanding of agroecology and its associated topics. Insufficient knowledge of complex systems related to the environment, agriculture, and food systems—climate change, management of water and other natural resources, agronomy, animal husbandry, nutrition, and health outcomes, among others—limits the ability to link agroecological principles and practices to broader systemic transformation.

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Whereto from here?

From fragmentation to connection: strengthening agroecology actor networks for transformative action

The momentum for agroecology in Eastern and Southern Africa is reaching a pivotal moment. Adoption of national strategies, rapid growth of agroecology networks, and lively discussions across the four countries highlight a growing acknowledgment of agroecology's potential to transform food systems. However, our findings indicate that, to achieve genuine change, the agroecology community must shift its attention toward better organization. This requires deliberate efforts to broaden meaningful participation, align agendas, strengthen the capacities of actors, and encourage participatory dialogue among diverse stakeholders, including those with opposing views. Our recommendations are to:

- **Expand and redistribute leadership and influence within networks.** Our analysis highlights the risks of overreliance on a few established NGOs to lead the agroecology agenda. It is essential to create opportunities for contributions from and engagement with emerging actors. Evidence shows that well-facilitated multi-actor hubs can serve to redistribute influence and assign thematic responsibilities across various actors. This must be done transparently and equitably to avoid reinforcing existing power imbalances, ensuring that leadership roles are dynamic and open to all actors.
- **Institutionalize coordination mechanisms for greater alignment.** To tackle coordination challenges within the agroecology movement, it is essential to establish institutional multi-stakeholder platforms with formal mandates and adequate resources. Kenya and Tanzania propose government-led, institutionalized coordination bodies with thematic working groups, and Uganda's strategy suggests similar structures. In Malawi, the Agroecology Hub has created a valuable dialogue platform that could be better aligned with other networks for enhanced effectiveness. To become stable, these mechanisms should be integrated into national policy and budgets and accompanied by clear stakeholder engagement protocols to ensure ongoing participation and support.
- **Bridge conceptual divides through strategic dialogue.** Divergent conceptual understandings of agroecology and food systems transformation often lead to fragmentation among and within government, civil society, and private sector stakeholders. Structured national and regional dialogues can cultivate a shared vision that aligns these approaches with goals such as climate resilience, nutrition,

food security, and improved rural livelihoods. Such collaboration can help mitigate the "echo chamber" effect and attract broader political support by addressing relevant challenges. Annual agroecology gatherings must play a stronger role in bridging these gaps and fostering broader strategic alignment across stakeholders.

- **Strengthen knowledge systems and technical capacities.** One key challenge identified in our analysis is the inadequacy of knowledge and capacity in key areas such as agriculture, food systems, environment, climate, and natural resource management and conservation. These gaps include the technical articulation of key concepts and relevant global, regional, and national policy and legal frameworks. They limit actors' ability to communicate the value of agroecology to policymakers and funders. Strengthening knowledge systems involves two complementary dimensions:
 - **Linking research, knowledge, and practice:** Creating and expanding existing multi-actor learning groups (e.g. Malawi's Learning and Change Groups) is crucial to enhance the capacity of agroecology actors on technical concepts as well as relevant policy and legal frameworks. Connecting these platforms to broader sources of research, information, and insights would further strengthen their impact.
 - **Building capacities beyond agriculture:** Supporting actors in policy engagement, systems thinking, gender mainstreaming, and cross-sectoral analysis would enable them to participate more effectively in relevant forums and dialogues.

- **Create inclusive spaces for marginalized and grassroots actors.** Agroecological transformations fundamentally rely on the knowledge and experiences of local communities to develop context-specific solutions. Yet the voices of these grassroots actors are often overlooked. Truly transformative networks must establish inclusivity as a core principle, not just a token gesture. The example of MVIWATA (2021) in Tanzania demonstrates that consistent inclusion of smallholder federations in coordination efforts produces more grounded and legitimate policy debates. To achieve meaningful inclusion, we recommend the following structural changes:
 - Allocate dedicated representation seats for producers and consumer organizations within actor convening and coordination structures.
 - Establish decentralized sub-national forums that are linked to national platforms, ensuring that grassroots actors can effectively contribute to strategy discussions.
 - Provide robust capacity support and facilitation resources to ensure genuine participation beyond mere tokenism.

- **Engage beyond the agroecology community.** Mobilizing wider support for agroecology requires engagement with actors outside the immediate movement, including the private sector, industrial agriculture advocates, and policymakers in other sectors such as health, trade, and the environment. Strategic dialogue and alliance-building could help position agroecology as a practical and inclusive solution to shared challenges. For example, symposium dialogues in Uganda have shown that involving commercial seed companies in discussions on local seed systems can identify regulatory gaps and potential collaborations. Similarly, linking agroecology with national climate adaptation and nutrition agendas can attract new allies and funding streams. Regional platforms that leverage existing African agroecology gatherings could promote cross-border learning on engagement tactics, helping stakeholders navigate political economies heavily influenced by major agribusiness interests.

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Capture the rain!

There is a common denominator to our arguments: if we are to “capture the rain” and make the most of the current momentum for agroecology in the region, we must consciously address the political economy of change. Change within and of a system heavily skewed against agroecology demands strategies conscious of the power dynamics involved. The agroecology policies we are advocating for must be implemented in the very system which in the first place engendered the problems that necessitate the struggle for these policies. To successfully advance the implementation of agroecology policies and confront structural barriers to change, agroecology actors need better ways of organization, ones which channel momentum and will into powerful collective action.

The scale of this challenge is too big for civil society movements alone. The entirety of our diverse agroecology networks must become conscious of the political economy of change and find their respective roles, which necessarily vary and yet are all be embedded in a broader political economy strategy of change.

This is therefore also a call to the agroecological research community. Not every invitation to contribute to policy processes is a step in the right direction—some may even be a deliberate move to channel critical voices away from fields in which actual change takes place. Whether research responds to or actively works to create windows of opportunity, it is crucial to do so while remaining aware of the political economy in which research work is embedded.

To truly “capture the rain,” the agroecology community must recognize that change is as much political as it is technical. Advancing agroecology requires creating alliances that bring together sectors, disciplines, and power divides. The challenge now is to deepen strategic dialogue, bridge gaps, and create inclusive spaces for alignment, moving from fragmented efforts to a coherent movement for resilient and equitable food systems. The current momentum offers a rare opportunity to turn shared aspirations into collective transformation—an opportunity too precious to waste.

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TMG is headquartered in Berlin, with a team in Nairobi. Our research focuses primarily on the European Union and Africa, including Benin, Kenya, Madagascar, Malawi and South Africa.

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