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Principles and Applications of Agroecology: A Review

Dushyant [a++], Krashanakant Sharma [a++*], Shalini Roy [a++], Km. Rooma [b#], Nisha Mahan [c†], Praveen Kumar [a++], Manish Kumar [d†], Sudhir Kumar Singh [e†], Brijesh Kumar [f‡], Arshad Hussain [f‡] and Sujal [f‡]

[a] Department of Agronomy, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel University of Agriculture and Technology, Meerut, Uttar Pradesh, India.
[b] Department of Horticulture, CCS Haryana Agricultural University, Hisar, India.
[c] Department of Agronomy, Bundelkhand University Jhansi, Uttar Pradesh, India.
[d] Department of Vegetable Science, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel University of Agriculture and Technology, Meerut, Uttar Pradesh, India.
[e] Department of Soil Science, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel University of Agriculture and Technology, Meerut, Uttar Pradesh, India.
[f] Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel University of Agriculture and Technology, Meerut, Uttar Pradesh, India.

Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration among all authors. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Review Article

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++ Research Scholar;
 # M.Sc. Fruit Science;
† Research Scholar;
‡ M.Sc. Agronomy;
**Corresponding author: E-mail: krashanakant6459@svpuat.edu.in;*

ABSTRACT

Agroecology is a holistic approach to agriculture that combines ecological principles with farming systems. Its primary goal is to create sustainable, resilient, and productive agricultural ecosystems. In this review, we will explore the fundamental ideas and various applications of agroecology. We will delve into the biological components of agricultural landscapes, focusing on natural pest control, biodiversity, and nutrient cycling. Furthermore, we will showcase successful case studies from different regions, demonstrating how agroecology benefits smallholder farmers, food security, and climate resilience. However, we will also address obstacles to its widespread adoption, such as technological and regulatory challenges. Additionally, we will examine the environmental impacts of agroecology compared to traditional agriculture, emphasizing how it promotes soil health, conserves biodiversity, and mitigates climate change. Taking into account its social and economic aspects, we will underscore the importance of preserving indigenous knowledge while highlighting the economic feasibility of agroecology and its empowering effects on local communities. The review will conclude by emphasizing the need for scalable techniques, improved research, and supportive policies to fully integrate agroecology into mainstream agricultural practices, thereby creating a resilient and sustainable agricultural environment. We will also propose potential pathways towards achieving this goal.

Keywords: Agroecology; biodiversity; nutrient cycling; climate change; sustainable agriculture.

1. INTRODUCTION

Agroecology is an interdisciplinary approach that integrates ecological concepts with agricultural methods, emphasizing the interconnectedness of the ecological, social, and economic aspects of farming systems. Its aim is to enhance resilience, biodiversity, soil fertility, and ecosystem services within agricultural landscapes [1]. By combining traditional knowledge with contemporary research, this comprehensive framework promotes socially just, economically viable, and environmentally benign agricultural systems.

The historical roots of agroecology can be traced back to indigenous and traditional farming techniques. However, it was not until the mid-20th century that the field gained recognition as a scientific discipline. The negative impacts of industrialized agriculture on the environment and society sparked the emergence of agroecology. In the 1960s, pioneers like René Dumont laid the groundwork by advocating for more sustainable farming methods and recognizing the ecological interdependencies within farming systems [2]. The 1980s marked a significant turning point in the history of agroecology. Researchers like Miguel Altieri played a key role in mainstreaming agroecological principles as a competitive alternative to conventional agricultural practices. Their research focused on understanding and utilizing natural processes in agriculture, with agroecosystem pest management, biodiversity, and nutrient cycling as central themes [3].

Agroecology is of paramount importance in modern agriculture as it holds the potential to address critical challenges such as environmental degradation, food insecurity, and climate change. By integrating ecological concepts, it offers sustainable pathways for farming systems. Resilient agricultural practices benefit from agroecology's emphasis on biodiversity, improved soil fertility, and reduced reliance on external inputs [4,5,6]. Through agroforestry and diverse cropping systems, agroecological methods mitigate the risks associated with monoculture farming and promote essential ecosystem services for sustainable food production [7]. Furthermore, agroecology provides a comprehensive response to contemporary agricultural problems by incorporating traditional knowledge and empowering local communities while ensuring social equity and fairness in farming techniques [8].

2. PRINCIPLES OF AGROECOLOGY

1. Ecological Principles in Agroecology: The principles of agroecology include:

A. Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services: Agroecology emphasizes the importance of biodiversity in improving ecosystem services in agricultural environments. It promotes species richness and functional variety through practices like agroforestry, diversified cropping systems, and habitat conservation [9,10,11]. This biodiversity supports essential ecological services such as pollination, natural pest control, soil fertility, and nutrient cycling [12]. Agroecological techniques also enhance farming systems' resilience to environmental shocks and climate change. For example, diversified plantings improve agricultural resilience to changing climatic conditions and make crops less susceptible to pests and diseases [13]. Therefore, agroecological practices that enhance biodiversity contribute to vital ecological processes and maintain agricultural output.

B. Nutrient Cycling and Soil Health: Agroecology places a high priority on soil health and nutrient cycling. It promotes methods that preserve and improve soil fertility while minimizing external inputs. These methods involve promoting a wide variety of microorganisms and beneficial interactions between plants and soil organisms. Techniques like cover cropping, crop rotations, and agroforestry optimize nutrient cycling and improve soil structure, organic matter content, and nutrient availability - all crucial for sustainable agricultural production [2]. Agroecological practices also help reduce soil erosion and degradation, mitigate nutrient runoff, protect water quality, and ensure the long-term health of agricultural soils.

C. Organic Pest Management: Agroecology aims to reduce the use of artificial pesticides by employing natural and ecological pest management methods. Integrated Pest Management (IPM) is a cornerstone of agroecological practices, which combines various tactics such as biological control, crop diversity, habitat modification, and the use of botanicals to control pest populations [14]. By reducing pest pressure and preserving ecosystem resilience, these techniques promote the presence of natural enemies, enhance biodiversity, and establish ecological balances [15]. Adopting these strategies helps maintain the health of agricultural ecosystems, protect beneficial organisms, and minimize the negative effects of pest management on the environment.

2. Comprehensive Agriculture Methodologies:

A. Integration of Crops and Livestock: Agroecology supports the integration of crops and livestock to maximize resource usage and improve sustainability. By combining crop cultivation with animal husbandry, agroecological systems facilitate nutrient recycling, pest control, and increased farm output [16]. Varied crop-livestock systems allow for the use of animal dung as fertilizer, thereby improving soil fertility and reducing the need for external inputs [17,18,19]. Agroecological farming methods, such as rotational grazing and mixed farming, also enhance ecological processes, reduce environmental impacts, and increase landscape diversity.

B. Crop Rotation and Polyculture: The keystones of agroecology are crop rotation and polyculture, which emphasize varied planting methods that enhance soil fertility, pest control, and overall ecosystem resilience. Crop rotation involves planting and harvesting different crops in succession on the same piece of land to improve soil structure, control pests and diseases, and cycle nutrients [20,21,22]. On the other hand, polyculture involves growing multiple crops simultaneously in a specific area, promoting plant-to-plant interactions and increasing biodiversity. This method uses natural pest management processes to minimize pest pressure and optimize resource utilization [23]. Furthermore, polyculture systems resemble natural ecosystems, fostering positive interactions among different plant species in terms of resource usage and pest repellence.

C. Agroforestry and Silvopasture: Two significant agroecological techniques that combine trees or woody perennials with livestock or agricultural crops to create multipurpose and sustainable land-use systems are agroforestry and silvopasture.

Agroforestry intentionally incorporates trees into agricultural landscapes, either with crops (agroforestry) or livestock (silvopasture), to provide ecological, financial, and social benefits. Trees in agroforestry systems enhance soil fertility, water retention, and carbon sequestration, while also providing additional sources of income for farmers [24,25]. Silvopasture integrates trees with pastureland or forage areas, improving fodder quality, offering shade to animals, and generating extra revenue from tree products [26]. This approach improves the sustainability and well-being of grazing systems, as well as reduces heat stress on cattle.

Both silvopasture and agroforestry greatly contribute to ecosystem services such as microclimate moderation, erosion control, and biodiversity conservation. They mitigate environmental degradation by creating diverse habitats for wildlife and beneficial insects. These methods also help combat climate change by storing carbon in biomass and soils, thus increasing resistance to its effects in agricultural landscapes [27]. Furthermore, by providing farming communities with additional resources and income streams, they enhance socioeconomic resilience.

3. APPLICATIONS OF AGROECOLOGY

1. Role in Climate Resilience: Agroecology plays a crucial role in fostering climate resilience within agricultural systems. It encourages practices that improve flexibility, reduce climatic risks, and aid in carbon sequestration.

Farming systems become more resilient to climatic fluctuation when they implement a variety of agroecological practices, such as crop diversification, agroforestry, and soil conservation [28]. Crop diversification distributes crop failure risks among several crops with different degrees of weather tolerance. Agroforestry techniques help to moderate microclimates, shielding crops from excessive heat and promoting more consistent growth factors [29].

2. Soil Health: Agroecological methods also enhance the resilience and health of the soil. Techniques like conservation tillage, cover crops, and organic soil amendments improve soil structure and water retention, lessening the negative effects of droughts and floods on agricultural productivity [2]. Furthermore, agroecology's emphasis on carbon sequestration contributes to climate resilience. Techniques like agroforestry and diverse cropping systems that boost soil organic matter help store carbon, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and aid in climate adaptation [30].

Overall, agroecology provides a comprehensive method of fostering climate resilience by diversifying agricultural output, preserving natural resources, and reducing risks associated with climate change.

3. Economic Viability and Social Equity: Agroecology has the potential to promote economic viability and social equity within agricultural systems by prioritizing sustainable and diversified farming practices that benefit local communities.

Agroecological methods can increase farm profits by lowering input costs through less dependency on outside inputs such as synthetic fertilisers and pesticides [7]. Additionally, the value addition and diversification of agroecological products can create opportunities for smallholder farmers to enter new markets and generate additional revenue streams [2].

Agroecology also places emphasis on community empowerment, particularly for small-scale producers. It enhances social networks and collective action, bolstering resilience and social capital within communities through information sharing, participatory research, and cooperative models [2]. Furthermore, agroecological methods often prioritize regional food systems, ensuring food availability and reducing food insecurity in underserved communities [5].

Moreover, agroecology promotes gender parity by giving women in farming communities the opportunity to participate in decision-making and revenue generation [31]. Its focus on agroecological education and capacity building helps farmers acquire greater skills and empowerment, leading to improved social equality and resilience.

In conclusion, the emphasis on sustainable and community-focused farming methods in agroecology greatly enhances the economic sustainability.

4. Case Study of Successful Agroecological System: Sikkim **-** A Transition to Agroecology is Not Only Possible but Necessary.

India's Sikkim state is located in the Himalayas and is renowned for being the first Indian state to receive FAO certification for complete organic farming.

Twenty-five years, Sikkim began the transition from industrial to organic agriculture by implementing various policies aimed at moving away from chemical fertilizers and adopting an agrobiodiversity model. The delegation from Sikkim, led by Chief Minister Pawan Kumar Chamling, asserts that this shift is not simply due to the good fortune of a single Indian state, but rather a result of years of political activism in support of localized solutions for the environment and economy.

"To understand the success of the Sikkim model, it is important to acknowledge that our party, the

Sikkim Democratic Front (SDF), has been in government for 25 years," said Prem Das Rai, an Indian scientist and member of the Sikkim Parliament. This information is significant because the transition to organic farming requires a lengthy implementation period rather than a quick fix. However, politics alone does not account for Sikkim's success. Education also plays a crucial role. "We have introduced modules on organic agriculture in primary schools, specifically in fourth and fifth grades, to explain its function and the certification process within the broader context of human development," stated Khorlo Butia, secretary of Sikkim's department of agriculture. Sikkim is a prime example of the need for and possibility of an alternative to industrial agriculture. It not only enhances the quality of life and promotes health but also contributes to environmental sustainability.

The success of the Sikkim model has already rippled beyond its borders. For instance, efforts are being made to transition the entire Himalayan region to organic farming practices, with the Earth University of Navdanya, an institution established by Vandan Shiva, collaborating on this initiative.

4. CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS OF AGROECOLOGY

1. Adoption Challenges in Agroecology: Agroecological approaches have shown significant benefits; however, several obstacles hinder their widespread adoption. The major challenges include:

Knowledge and Education Deficit: Farmers may lack formal education or access to information about agroecological techniques. This ignorance of methods and advantages can impede the adoption of agroecology [7].

Resource Acquisition: Farmers often face difficulties in obtaining resources such as land, capital, high-quality seeds, and appropriate technology. Financial constraints and upfront expenses pose implementation challenges for agroecology practices [32].

Market and Policy Support: Inadequate market infrastructure and policies supporting conventional agriculture may discourage farmers from adopting agroecology. Limited market incentives, subsidies, and price premiums for agroecological products can restrict their economic viability [2].

Cultural and Social Influences: Community social structures, customs, and norms can impact the adoption of agroecological practices. Resistance to change, skepticism towards new methods, and reliance on conventional wisdom may hinder farmers' willingness to adopt new approaches [33].

Perceived Risk and Uncertainty: Farmers may consider agroecological techniques risky due to uncertainties regarding yields, pest management, and climatic variability. Concerns about potential financial losses and agricultural disasters can discourage adoption [34].

2. Policy and Institutional Barriers: Institutional and policy restrictions pose significant challenges to the acceptance and expansion of agroecological methods. These barriers often stem from institutional structures, legal frameworks, and agricultural policies that favor conventional farming practices and hinder the transition to agroecology.

Assistance & Assistance Programs: Subsidies and support initiatives for conventional, input-intensive agriculture—such as those for chemical pesticides and fertilizers—are often provided by agricultural policies. These policies create a financial incentive system that discourages farmers from implementing agroecological practices [3].

Research and Extension Facilities: Agricultural research and extension services predominantly favor conventional farming methods over agroecology. Insufficient funding, lack of agecological expertise, and biases towards high-input agriculture impede the distribution of information and technical assistance for agroecological approaches [2].

Regulatory Restrictions: Regulatory frameworks frequently promote and support the use of synthetic inputs while limiting or neglecting certification procedures for agroecological products. This can pose challenges for the recognition and accessibility of agroecological produce in the market [33].

Land Tenure and Access: Land tenure systems that favor large-scale, monoculture-based agriculture may restrict the availability of land for diverse agroecological techniques. Regulations that support large-scale farmers or agribusinesses can hinder smallholders' adoption of agroecology [7].

To overcome these obstacles, it is essential to reform institutional structures and policies to acknowledge and promote agroecological methods. Policy interventions should be implemented to support diverse farming systems, encourage agroecological practices through market mechanisms and subsidies, and integrate agroecology into agricultural education and extension services [2].

3. Technological and Knowledge Constraints: The widespread adoption and use of agroecological approaches face significant limitations in terms of knowledge and technology. Various factors, such as limited access to appropriate tools, knowledge, and skills, hinder the success of agroecology.

Obtaining Appropriate Technologies: Agroecology often requires low-cost, context-specific technologies tailored to local conditions. Limited access to and availability of such technology, particularly in rural and resource-constrained areas, impede the adoption of agroecological methods [2].

Expertise and Instruction: Agroecological training and technical expertise are often lacking among farmers. Adoption of these approaches is hindered by limited access to education on agroecological principles and techniques, as well as extension services and training programs [3].

Exploration and Originality: Agroecological innovation and research are crucial for developing and improving methods suitable for different agroecological contexts. However, innovation in agroecology is hindered by inadequate funding, a lack of collaboration between academics and farmers, and the prioritization of conventional agriculture in research [33].

Data Access and Information: In order for farmers to make informed decisions, they need access to reliable data, knowledge, and best practices in agroecology. However, the implementation of such access is hindered by inadequate platforms for sharing agroecological information, language barriers, and limited distribution channels [7].

To overcome these obstacles, there is a need for funding dedicated to agroecological research and development, improved accessibility to information and training programs, and the establishment of knowledge-sharing platforms. Additionally, cooperative efforts among farmers, researchers, legislators, and extension agencies are essential for co-producing and distributing knowledge specific to agroecology in a particular setting.

5. ECONOMIC VIABILITY AND SOCIAL IMPACTS

1. Economic Benefits of Agroecology: Many of the economic advantages of agroecology may not align with traditional economic measures. These advantages encompass various factors that support the long-term resilience and sustainability of agricultural systems.

Lower Input Costs: Agroecology emphasizes reducing reliance on external inputs such as insecticides and synthetic fertilizers. By leveraging natural processes, recycling nutrients, and promoting beneficial ecological interactions [3], agroecological techniques often result in lower input costs for farmers.

Improved Soil Health and Fertility: Practices such as crop rotation, cover crops, and agroforestry enhance soil health and fertility. Better soil structure and nutrient availability not only increase yields but also reduce the need for expensive soil additives over time [2].

Crop Diversification and Risk Mitigation: Agroecological systems like crop diversification, polyculture, and agroforestry distribute risks among multiple crops and species. This diversification acts as insurance against crop failures, minimizing susceptibility to market and weather changes [7].

Market Opportunities and Value Addition: Agroecological products, due to their environmental and social benefits, often find niche markets and command higher prices. Increasing farm incomes can be achieved through value addition using fair trade methods, organic certification, and a focus on local markets [33].

Resilience to Climate Change: Agroecological farming methods contribute to the resilience of agricultural systems against climate change. Improved soil water retention, biodiversity, and adaptability to climate uncertainties help maintain productivity and reduce financial risks for farmers [3].

Although agroecology's economic benefits may be challenging to measure within conventional economic frameworks, it is crucial to recognize its broader socio-economic and environmental advantages.

2. Socio-cultural Impacts on Farming Communities: Agroecology has a complex sociocultural impact on farming communities, protecting customs and cultural heritage while promoting empowerment, knowledge exchange, and community resilience.

Empowerment and Involvement: Agroecology promotes participatory methods, giving farmers the ability to actively participate in choosing farming techniques. Communities become more cohesive and self-sufficient when farmer-led projects, group education, and information sharing networks are implemented [3].

Maintaining Customary Wisdom: Agroecology combines contemporary scientific ideas with indigenous knowledge and customary farming methods. It preserves local knowledge, cultural customs, and biodiversity preservation strategies that have supported farming communities for many generations [2].

Social Inclusion and Gender Equity: Agroecology encourages gender-inclusive methods and provides opportunities for women to take the lead and participate in farming operations. It promotes better gender equity and social inclusion by recognizing women's roles in community development and agriculture [7].

Food Sovereignty and Community Resilience: Agroecology places a strong emphasis on regional food systems, promoting food sovereignty and reducing dependence on external resources. Community-based seed banks, cooperative farming methods, and diverse output contribute to increased food security and resilience in farming communities [33].

Cultural Preservation and Identity: Agroecology frequently incorporates regional customs, cultural beliefs, and practices into agricultural systems, thus enhancing the connection between farming techniques and cultural heritage. This integration contributes to the preservation of cultural identity [34].

The value of agroecology extends beyond agricultural production, as these socio-cultural implications emphasize the importance of community well-being, cultural resilience, and sustainable livelihoods.

Future Directions and Recommendations: These are the directions and recommendations for agroecology:

1. Strategies for Scaling Up Agroecological Practices: A comprehensive strategy involving various stakeholders, legislation, and innovative approaches is required to promote the widespread acceptance of agroecological practices.

Encouragement of Policy and Institutional Reforms: It is crucial to implement policies that promote agroecology. This can include providing financial incentives, subsidies for sustainable practices, and establishing legal frameworks that support the practice. When agricultural policies align with agroecological principles, it encourages farmers to adopt these techniques and invest in sustainable agriculture [7].

Investing in Knowledge Sharing and Research: Increased funding for research and development specific to agroecological methods is imperative. Allocating resources to interdisciplinary research, participatory action research, and farmer field schools can accelerate the adoption of agroecological techniques by efficiently disseminating knowledge [3].

Education and Capacity Building: Enhancing agroecology knowledge and skills among farmers, extension agents, and agricultural experts is essential. Workshops, farmer-to-farmer exchanges, and training programs can equip stakeholders with the necessary information and abilities to successfully apply these techniques [12].

Involvement and Engagement with the Community: To ensure ownership and cultural relevance, local communities are included in decision-making processes and given the opportunity to co-design and implement agroecological initiatives. Farmers are empowered through participatory methodologies and social learning networks, which also enhance the acceptability and scalability of agroecology [33].

Market Accessibility and Consumer Knowledge: To encourage farmers, it is important to develop market systems that recognize and reward agroecological products.

Market accessibility and consumer demand can be increased through certifications, labeling, and market connections that emphasize the social and environmental benefits of agroecological produce [34].

Scaling up agroecology requires a comprehensive strategy that includes information exchange, capacity building, community involvement, and supportive policies. Cooperation between governments, non-governmental organizations, research institutions, and local communities is essential to create an environment conducive to the widespread adoption of agroecological practices.

2. Research Needs and Innovation in Agroecology: The advancement of agroecology, filling knowledge gaps, and developing context-specific solutions that support sustainable agricultural systems heavily rely on research and innovation.

Research on Agroecology in Context: Research should aim to understand the complexities of regional agroecosystems. Contextualized research on different farming systems, customs, and indigenous knowledge is essential to customize agroecological methods for specific socio-ecological settings [3].

Integrated and Interdisciplinary Approaches: Prioritizing interdisciplinary research that integrates anthropology, socioeconomics, ecology, and agronomy is essential. These comprehensive approaches aid in understanding agroecological systems and the relationships between their ecological, social, and economic components [2].

Research Involved with Farmers: Engaging farmers in research through participatory methods enhances the application and relevance of agroecological advancements. Collaborative approaches where farmers share their knowledge, experiment with new methods, and provide feedback help co-create effective solutions [7].

Adaptive Strategies Focused on Resilience: Research should focus on developing adaptable techniques to enhance agriculture's resilience against pest outbreaks, market fluctuations, and climate change. To improve effectiveness, strategies such as crop diversification, soil conservation, and agroforestry need constant refinement [33].

Research on and Markets: It crucial to examine consumer behavior, government frameworks, and market mechanisms that promote agroecology. Key research themes include advancing regulatory reforms that encourage agroecological practices and understanding consumer preferences for sustainably produced goods [34].

Increasing funding, fostering collaborations among legislators, farmers, and academics, and establishing platforms for information exchange and innovation sharing are all essential to meet these research demands. By prioritizing these research directions, agroecology can evolve into a discipline that supports resilient food systems and sustainable agriculture.

3. Policy Suggestions to Promote Agroecological Agriculture: Promoting agroecological agriculture through policy requires a comprehensive strategy that combines incentives, knowledge sharing, and the adoption of sustainable techniques. Several policy recommendations can facilitate this transition:

Monetary Rewards and Subsidies: Redirect agricultural subsidies to incentivize agroecological methods. Offering financial incentives for transitioning from conventional to agroecological farming practices, such as subsidies for organic inputs or diverse farming systems, can accelerate adoption [3].

Services for Research and Extension: Increase funding for research and extension services focused on agroecology. Dedicated research programs, farmer training initiatives, and extension services aligned with agroecological principles can facilitate the diffusion and acceptance of knowledge [2].

Integration of Policies and Enabling Laws: Incorporate agroecology into agricultural laws and policies. Developing regulatory frameworks that support biodiversity conservation, prioritize sustainable practices, and provide regulatory assistance can encourage the adoption of agroecological products and markets [33].

Market Access and Certification: Create markets for agroecological products and establish certification schemes. Certifying and promoting the ecological and social benefits of agroecological produce through labeling and certification can incentivize producers and consumers [7].

Building Capacity and Education: Invest in capacity building and educational initiatives. By equipping stakeholders with necessary information and skills, agroecology can be successfully integrated into agricultural curricula, training programs, and farmer field schools [34].

Collaboration among governments, international organizations, research institutions, and farming communities is essential to implement these policy recommendations. By establishing a supportive and incentivizing policy framework for agroecological farming, these programs can promote sustainable agricultural practices and strengthen equitable and resilient food systems.

6. CONCLUSION

Resilient food systems and sustainable agriculture rely on agroecology, which this paper explores as a transformative strategy. This paper envisions a future where farming harmonizes with nature, combining ecological wisdom, social equality, and economic prosperity. The review has highlighted the various dimensions of agroecology. It is a field of study that provides solutions to urgent global issues, drawing from both ancient agricultural practices and modern applications. Agroecology effectively addresses environmental degradation while enhancing agricultural productivity through its focus on biodiversity, soil health, and integrated farming systems. Moreover, it supports inclusive participation, preservation of indigenous knowledge, and civic empowerment. Agroecology offers opportunities for economic growth, especially for smallholder farmers, while also redefining agricultural landscapes and promoting social justice and local food sovereignty. It should be noted that agroecology is not solely a farming method, but rather a paradigm shift that necessitates cooperation, innovative research, and policy support. Embracing agroecology demonstrates a commitment to eco-friendly practices that safeguard the environment, ensure food security, and empower farming communities worldwide. By promoting agroecology, we pave the way for a future in agriculture and society that is more resilient, equitable, and sustainable.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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