



UNDROP SERIES

AGROECOLOGY IN UNDROP



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AGROECOLOGY

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In The UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working In Rural Areas

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (hereinafter, UNDROP) was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 17 December 2018. This briefing note on agroecology is part of a series of briefings published by FIAN International to better explain the content adopted in UNDROP.

Other sources supporting the recognition of these rights: ILO C100- Equal Remuneration Convention 1951 (No. 100) Article 1(b); the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Articles 7.A.I & A.II, Art. 11, Art. 12.1 & 12.2; Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) (1979), Preamble, Articles 14.1, 14.2 (a-h), Art. 10, Art. 11.1 (e) and Art. 12.1 & 12.2; General Recommendation No. 13, 16, 19, 21, 24 and 34; General Comment No.16 and 20 of the Committee on Economic Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR); FAO Voluntary Guidelines on the responsible governance of tenure of land, fisheries and forests in the context of national food security (2012) 3B.3-4, 5.4, and UN-REDD Guidelines on Free, Prior and Informed Consent (2013) 3.5.

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The first series of briefings cover: the right to sovereignty over natural resources, development and food sovereignty; the right to land and other natural resources; the right to seeds and biological diversity; states obligations; rural women's rights; right to a decent income and livelihood; collective rights; and the right to water.

The second series of briefings cover: rural women's rights; rights to water and sanitation; the right to adequate food and nutrition, and to food sovereignty; the rights to biodiversity and seeds; interlinkages between UNDROP and UNDRIP; environmental and climate justice; agroecology; businesses and human rights; the right to land; and digitalization.

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1.

HOW DOES UNDROP RECOGNIZE AGROECOLOGY?

Agroecology may be defined as a science, a set of practices, and a social movement. It promotes agricultural practices that are environmentally sustainable and socially just.² It is based on peasant and traditional knowledge, practices and innovations.³ Protection and fulfillment of the rights of peasants and other people working and or living in rural areas is therefore essential in order to move towards agroecology.

UNDROP is a helping hand in this regard. Due to the non-discrimination principle under which it develops, UNDROP protects a wide range of small-scale food producers. This includes “any person who engages or who seeks to engage, alone, or in association with others or as a community, in small-scale agricultural production for subsistence and/or for the market, and who relies significantly, though not necessarily exclusively, on family or household labour and other non-monetized ways of organizing labour, and who has a special dependency on and attachment to the land.”⁴ Rights holders are protected both individually and collectively.⁵ A collective dimension of the rights established in UNDROP protects peasant and other rural communities as a group. This is especially important for agroecology since it implies the protection of collective management of natural resources, decision-making processes and participation.⁶ It also encompasses states’ obligations to take collective measures to redress and compensate those who have been arbitrarily or unlawfully deprived from their land.⁷

² | See Peter M. Rosset and Miguel A. Altieri. *Agroecology: Science and Politics*. 2017. Agrarian Change and Peasant Studies: Little Books on Big Issues.

³ | For an analysis on the innovative aspects of agroecology, see: Nyéléni Newsletter, *Agroecology: Real innovation from and for the People*. Number 36, April 2019. Available at: https://nyeleni.org/DOWNLOADS/newsletters/Nyeleni_Newsletter_Num_36_EN.pdf

⁴ | Article 1. UN General Assembly, *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas: resolution / adopted by the General Assembly, 17 December 2018, A/RES/73/165*.

⁵ | Idem.

⁶ | Idem. Articles 2, 10 and 17.

⁷ | Idem. Article 17.

8 |
Idem. Article 5.

9 |
Idem. Article 18.

10 |
Idem. Article 25.

Some of the rights enshrined in UNDROP essential for agroecology are: the right to land, seeds, biodiversity, water for irrigation, the right to have access to and to use in a sustainable manner the natural resources⁸, the right to the conservation and protection of the environment⁹, the right to adequate training suited to the specific agroecological environment in which peasants find themselves¹⁰, and the right to food sovereignty. Realizing these rights would support the transition towards agroecology, and in turn, implementing agroecology would support the realization of these rights on their own.





2.

WHAT ARE STATES' OBLIGATIONS?

According to the states obligations outlined in UNDROP, states should stimulate sustainable production, including agro ecological and organic production, whenever possible.¹¹

Guidelines in this regard can be inferred from adopted states obligations over management of natural resources. For example, states should take measures aimed at the conservation and sustainable use of land and other natural resources used in peasant production, including through agroecology, and ensure the conditions for the regeneration of biological and other natural capacities and cycles.¹² In fulfilling the right to adequate food and the right to food sovereignty, states should also ensure peasants' and other rural communities' participation in decision-making processes on food and agriculture policy and the right to healthy and adequate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods that respect the cultures of their peasant and rural communities.¹³ Within the framework of the right to active and free participation, states are also instructed to respect the participation of peasants' organizations' in the preparation of environmental standards that may affect them.¹⁴

Peasants and other rural communities should also benefit from training programs linked to agroecological practices. More notably, such programs should include the ability to “cope with pests, pathogens, system shocks, the effects of chemicals, climate change and weather-related events.”¹⁵

¹¹ |
Idem. Article. 16 para. 4

¹² |
Idem. Article. 17, para. 7

¹³ |
Idem. Article 15.

¹⁴ |
Idem. Article. 10.

¹⁵ |
Idem. Article 25.

In addition to UNDROP, states may also find sources in other international human rights instruments, such as the International Covenant on Social, Economic and Cultural Rights, that encourage the adoption of public policies that could support and encourage the transition to agroecology. For instance, as a part of their obligation to devote the maximum of their available resources to the progressive realization of the right to food.





3.

WHAT ARE THE SOURCES SUPPORTING THE RECOGNITION OF AGROECOLOGY IN UNDROP?

International environmental law articulates various principles that support states' efforts to promote agroecology as a way to protect the environment and mitigate climate change. These principles exert influence both in the multilateral environmental realm as well as in the international human rights framework. They can therefore assist a fitter implementation of UNDROP in the context of agroecology.

Agroecology relates directly to several of these principles:

- **Healthy environment:** Agroecology can contribute to ensuring a healthy environment, which is a principle of environmental law. This is the case as agroecology reduces emissions, contributes to environmental health and eliminates the use of pesticides; and prevents the negative impacts of monocultures and pests on biodiversity and resilience.¹⁶
- **Sustainable development:** This principle calls on states to ensure that development can meet the needs and aspirations of present generations, without compromising the ability of future generations to do so. Agroecology can help restore and improve soil quality – thereby contributing to ensuring the food security of present and future generations. Agroecology is in line with “sustainable use”, defined as using “components of biological diversity in a way and at a rate that does

¹⁶ | Stockholm Declaration on the Human Environment and 2018 Framework Principles on Human Rights and the Environment.

not lead to the long-term decline of biodiversity, [...] of present and future generations.”¹⁷ Also for fisheries, agroecological practices can support the long-term conservation and sustainable use of fisheries to avoid depletion of stocks, needed to secure the ecological foundation for food production and livelihoods of local communities, and meet the challenges of climate change and food security.¹⁸

— **Intergenerational equity:** It is a principle of environmental law that requires States to protect the climate for the benefit of present and future generations; every generation holds the Earth in common with different generations. The environment defines the quality of life and health of human beings, including that of future generations. Agroecology is a mode of production aligned with this principle.¹⁹

— **No transboundary harm:** The use of pesticides in industrial agriculture can pollute water and rivers, moving beyond borders. The “no transboundary harm” principle requires states to ensure that the “activities within their jurisdiction or control do not cause damage to the environment of other States or of areas beyond the limits of national jurisdiction.”²⁰ Agroecology, on the other hand, does not lead to transboundary harm.²¹

— **Precautionary principle:** According to this principle, even in case of doubt about potential environmental impact, or irreversible damage, states must adopt measures of protection. In the case of glyphosate (a chemical herbicide), for example, even in the face of risks for nature and health, powerful actors continue allowing its widespread use, putting profit before human rights and the environment. Agroecological practices do not pose risks or doubts about risks for nature or human health, being therefore aligned with this principle.²²

— **Participation in government decision-making:** According to this principle, environmental issues “are best handled with participation of all concerned citizens, at the relevant level.”²³ It would be expected that food production models would look differently if that were the case, benefitting society and respecting nature, rather than a few. Agroecology, as described above, puts peasants at the center. Some case studies show that agroecological peasants and government institutions can collaborate fruitfully to advance these practices.²⁴

— **International cooperation:** According to this principle, States should “cooperate in a spirit of global partnership to conserve, protect and restore the health and integrity of the Earth’s ecosystem.”²⁵ It is clear that to do so, developed states should prioritize supporting agroecological practices in their international cooperation, as opposed to

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Article 2. Convention on Biological Diversity, 5 June 1992 (1760 U.N.T.S. 69).

18 |

Sustainable Development Goals; Rio Declaration; Brundtland Report: Our Common Future; Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD); FAO Voluntary Guidelines for securing sustainable small-scale fisheries in the context of food security and poverty eradication; CFS Voluntary Guidelines on Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests.

19 |

The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (the SSF Guidelines), ICJ Advisory Opinion on the Legality of the Threat or Use of Nuclear Weapons.

20 |

Article 3. Convention on Biological Diversity, 5 June 1992 (1760 U.N.T.S. 69)

21 |

Customary International Law. Pulp Mills case (Arg. v. Uru.). Certain Activities case (Costa Rica v. Nicaragua).

22 |

The Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication, and the Convention on Biological Diversity.

23 |

Principle 10 UNCED/Rio Declaration on Environment and Development (1992) U.N. Doc. A/CONF.151/5/Rev.1, 31 I.L.M. 874.

24 |

Idem. Principle 10.

25 |

Idem. Principle 7.

supporting industrial export-oriented food systems that contribute to green-house emissions, and degrading soils and biodiversity. Indeed, both at the national and international levels, public support must shift towards diversified agroecological production systems.²⁶

Furthermore, the work of Special Rapporteurs has helped to clarify and reemphasize that agroecology is fully aligned with the principles of, and effectively contributes to the realization of the RTFN, and is thus consistent with and a part of states human rights obligations.

In 2011, the then UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Olivier De Schutter, published a seminal report on agroecology, urging states to encourage the transition to implement it. As De Schutter outlined in his 2010/11 report²⁷, food systems must meet three main objectives to be consistent with states international human rights obligations for the realization of the RTFN: 1) ensuring the availability of food for all; 2) increasing incomes of smallholders – hunger is largely the result of poverty (not lack of food production), thus increasing income of the poorest is the most effective way of fighting it and breaking the cycle; 3) ensure agriculture ability's to satisfy future needs, which is at stake due to the loss of biodiversity, unsustainable use of water, and pollution.

Agroecology can achieve all this.²⁸ It can contribute to the realization of the RTFN in its five dimensions:

— **Availability:** Despite the argument often used by those promoting the industrial agricultural model as the most productive to feed the world, evidence increasingly shows that the agroecological model can increase productivity at field level, considering that also less external inputs (pesticides, technology) are needed.²⁹ The issue of future availability is also key: as land degradation advances through the cultivation of monocultures and use of agrochemicals, productivity will continue to decrease in the industrial model. As a result, agroecology can support in guaranteeing availability of food not only for present, but also for future generations. Additionally, agroecology promotes biodiversity, which is key for plague control and therefore also for food availability.

— **Accessibility:** Agroecology promotes on-farm fertility generation (e.g. using livestock manure, planting trees to produce nitrogen). It thereby decreases peasants' dependence on external inputs and as a result, it increases rural income and reduces rural poverty. Not depending on having to buy inorganic fertilizers – which are in any case sometimes inaccessible in remote areas – means peasants in poorer areas can

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The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, OHCHR Report on the Relationship between Climate Change and Human Rights.

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Olivier De Schutter, Agro-ecology and the right to food. Report presented at the 16th Session of the United Nations Human Rights Council [A/HRC/16/49]. March 2011. Available at:www.srfood.org/images/stories/pdf/officialreports/20110308_a-hrc-16-49_agroecology_en.pdf

28 |

Idem. Paras. 6-11.

29 |

Idem. Paras. 16-20.

30 |

Idem. Paras. 21-25.

continue to produce.³⁰ Women can benefit most from agroecology, as they are the ones who face the greatest difficulties in accessing external inputs or subsidies.³¹

Additionally, agroecological practices can be more labor-intensive (particularly in the short-term), which may lead to job creation and increased incomes in rural areas, reducing rural-to-urban migration.³² As complemented by Elver, this is key: if current trends continue, by 2050, 75% of the entire human population will live in urban areas. Providing new “possibilities and incentives to small farmers, especially for young people in rural areas” is key to reverse these trends.³³

— **Adequacy:** Agroecology contributes to improving nutrition in different ways. In agroecology, there is more diversity of species, providing a more diverse sources of vitamins, micronutrients, as compared to diets based on the production of monocultures (e.g. rice, wheat and maize). In other words, more diversity in the field, more diversity on the plate. Agroecology also helps recover and improve the quality of soils, which is also important to ensure more nutritious food. This is particularly important for women and children.³⁴

— **Sustainability:** agroecology improves resilience and contributes to adapting to climate change. This is done on various levels. First, agroecological practices can mitigate the negative impacts of extreme weather-related events, which are increasing as a result of climate change. These events include hurricanes, more frequent and severe droughts and floods. Second, the diversity of species and of farm activities applied in agroecology are ways to mitigate risk from such extreme weather events, and also from the invasion of new weeds, pests and diseases. For example, genetic diversity applied in agroecology can help to improve crop resistance to diseases, which can be more severe in monocultures. Third, agroecology contributes to delinking food production from the reliance on fossil energy, and thereby contributes to mitigating climate change both by avoiding GHG from farms by reducing energy use (direct and indirect), and by increasing carbon sinks in above-ground biomass and soil organic matter.³⁵ De Schutter also emphasizes that “moving toward sustainability is vital for future food security.”³⁶

— **Participation:** Finally, agroecology calls for peasants to be at the center – and participation is a key human right principle, especially participation of food-insecure groups in the design and implementation of policies that most affect them. Agroecology is largely based on the “campesino-a-campesino” (“peasant-to-peasant”) approach. Evidence shows that peasant farm schools are effective in reducing use

31 |
Idem. Para. 41.

32 |
Idem. Paras. 21-25.

33 |
TNI, “UN: only small Farmers and Agroecology can feed the World.” September, 23, 2014. Available at: www.tni.org/my/node/13492

34 |
Olivier De Schutter, Agro-ecology and the right to food. Report presented at the 16th Session of the United Nations Human Rights Council [A/HRC/16/49]. March 2011. Available at: www.sr-food.org/images/stories/pdf/official-reports/20110308_a-hrc-16-49_agro-ecology_en.pdf Paras. 26-27.

35 |
Idem. Paras. 28-31.

36 |
Idem. Para. 43.

of pesticides, and other external inputs – the dissemination of good practices is more effective when peasants actively participate, rather than being passive recipients of trainings (top-down approach).³⁷

In the final section of the report, De Schutter makes a strong call for transition towards agroecology and outlines that states should implement public policies supporting the adoption of agroecological practices as part of their obligation to devote the maximum of their available resources to the progressive realization of the RTFN.

In 2015 organizations and international movements of small-scale food producers organized through the IPC adopted the Declaration of the International Forum for Agroecology in Nyéléni, Mali. Although this Declaration, compared to other international human rights instruments, is not binding for states, it sets a common understanding of agroecology as a key element of food sovereignty and includes the common pillars and principles, as well as strategies on agroecology.

One aspect highlighted in this important document is that territories are a fundamental pillar of agroecology – and that peoples and communities must have rights to access and control their lands, as well as seeds, water and other natural resources they need to produce food, individually and collectively. These issues have been elaborated in the Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security, a key instruments adopted by the UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS) in 2012.

Most recently, in December 2019, the FAO Council adopted a document titled “The Ten Elements of Agroecology” aimed to help countries operationalize agroecology.³⁸

The ten elements are:

- 1.** Diversity (of species and genetic resources);
- 2.** Co-creation and sharing of knowledge and practices, science and innovation;
- 3.** Synergies (between crops, livestock, aquatic animals and trees; and also among actors);
- 4.** Efficiency (in the use of natural resources);
- 5.** Recycling (of nutrients, biomass and water, to reduce waste, emissions and costs);

37 |
Idem. Paras. 32-34.

38 |
“Ten Elements of Agroecology”. FAO Council Resolution. 163rd Session. Rome. December 2-6, 2019. Available at: www.fao.org/3/ca7173en/ca7173en.pdf

6. Resilience (of people, communities and ecosystems to extreme weather events, such as drought or floods, which will increase with climate change, to pest and disease attacks, and to economic shocks);
7. Human and social values (agroecology can empower people to overcome poverty, hunger and malnutrition, and improve opportunities for women and youth);
8. Culture and food traditions (agroecology improves diets and nutrition, reminding of cultural values and eating habits in different cultures);
9. Responsible governance (as necessary to create an enabling environment for the transition to agroecology, including secure access to land and natural resources); and
10. Circular and solidarity economy (to reconnect producers and consumers, create local solutions and sustainable markets).





4.

HOW CAN THE UNDROP BE USED TO ADVANCE THE STRUGGLE FOR AGROECOLOGY?

UNDROP provides a human rights framework for a transition to agroecology. This further supports the relationship between agroecology, the right to food, international environmental law and international human rights law. This means that due to the purpose and object of this instrument, UNDROP keeps peasants, rural workers and communities at the center of every policy and law. This is ensured by the recognition of peasants and other people in rural areas as political subjects and right holders in the scope of UNDROPs Article 1, as well as through a systematic interpretation of all individual and collective rights enshrined in UNDROP.

Since its adoption in 2018, **UNDROP is now part of the body of international human rights law**, therefore the first legal instrument adopted by UN Member States in which agroecology is recognized in the sense described in section one of this briefing. Even though UNDROP is considered to be *soft law* within public international law, a good part of it rests on binding customary international law and international treaties. UNDROP is therefore a source able to provide with interpretative guidance to binding law and effectively impact the decisions of policy makers and judicial decisions relevant to agroecology.



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