

FORUM FOR AGROECOLOGY BILIM COMMUNITY

Nilüfer, Bursa, TURKEY
July 10th - 14th, 2023

REPORT



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Schola Campesina (Italy)

Çiftçi-sen, EKODER, and Nilüfer Kent Konseyi (Turkey)

Eco Ruralis (Romania)

Agency of Development Initiatives (Kyrgyzstan)

Elkana (Georgia)

FORUM PARTNERS:

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INTRODUCTION

BARBARA KUREK

From July 10th to 14th, 2023, due to the efforts of Schola Campesina (Italy) and Çiftçi-sen, EKODER, and Nilüfer Kent Konseyi (Turkey), Eco Ruralis (Romania), Agency of Development Initiatives (Kyrgyzstan), and Elkana (Georgia), the first BILIM Forum for Agroecology Development and Networking in Eastern Europe and Central Asia took place. This initiative was funded in partnership with the Agroecology Fund, the Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia (FAO REU), and the Heinrich Böll Foundation in Warsaw. The event was hosted and supported by the Nilüfer municipality (Bursa, Turkey).

Barbara Kurek and Wioletta Olejarczyk from the Agro-Perma-Lab Foundation, along with Anna Jakubowska from the Heinrich Böll Foundation, learned about multiple ideas for agroecology development in the Central and Eastern European as well as Central Asian region. The Polish delegation was able to participate in the event thanks to the support of the Heinrich Böll Foundation.

WHAT IS BILIM?

Years of effort by organizations dedicated to the development of agroecology have led to the creation of an international network in Europe and Asia. This community is named after the Turkish word "bilim," which means knowledge or wisdom.

The BILIM community is a coalition that brings together grassroots movements and organizations from Eastern Europe and Central Asia working towards agroecology development. Among its members are farmers, smallholders, indigenous people, non-governmental organizations, scientists, women, and youth.

Members of BILIM practice and promote agroecology, protecting biodiversity and cultural heritage while placing the knowledge of small farmers at the centre of food systems.

In their work, they are guided by cultural diversity and declarations such as the Nyéléni Declaration on Agroecology, UNDROP (United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas), and UNDRIP (United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples). The network is primarily supported by four organizations: Schola Campesina (Italy), Elkana (Georgia), Eco Ruralis (Romania), and ADI (Kyrgyzstan).

A key initiative of the community is the Bilim.network platform, which facilitates information sharing and communication among organizations and individuals involved in agriculture. This platform is designed for work purposes, not as a social media, and it provides support for coordination and participation in various processes. The key features of the Bilim.network platform include independence from large corporations, self-determination, and data security.

The Agro-Perma-Lab Foundation is also involved in the development of the BILIM community through educational and knowledge dissemination activities. As part of the RITA Co-financing program, materials have been prepared for the BILIM community:

- A Toolkit for Agroecology Schools in the BILIM Community, prepared by Joanna Bojczewska (an internal BILIM network document).
- Thursday Dialogues with organizations working in the field of agroecology, led by Joanna Bojczewska ([LINK](#)).
- An interview series conducted by Paulina Jeziorek and Barbara Kurek: Agroecological Stories from the BILIM Network: Europe and Central Asia Region ([LINK](#)).

Agroecological newsletter of the BILIM network ([LINK](#)).





A FEW WORDS ABOUT THE ORGANIZATIONS ANIMATING THE BILIM COMMUNITY:

Schola Campesina is an international agroecology school based in Italy (Biodistrict delle Via Amerina e delle Forre, province of Viterbo). They are involved in agroecology education, particularly in global food and agriculture management. The International Nyéléni Agroecology Forum 2015 is a foundational source of values for those involved with Schola Campesina.

EcoRuralis is an association founded in 2009 in Romania, representing the interests and rights of peasants, small food producers, and others working in rural areas. Currently, they have 20,000 members from across the country. EcoRuralis's vision and mission include the right to use (reproduce, exchange, improve) and sell peasant seeds, the right to land and access to markets, as well as the right to participate in shaping and deciding on public policies related to agriculture and food.

Agency of Development Initiatives (ADI) is a non-governmental and apolitical organization operating in Kyrgyzstan. They facilitate effective and innovative income-generating activities for local communities in remote rural and mountainous areas. ADI's main thematic areas of work include social activation, agriculture, organic farming, local development, school gardens, agrobiodiversity, healthy nutrition, agrotourism, and traditional knowledge.

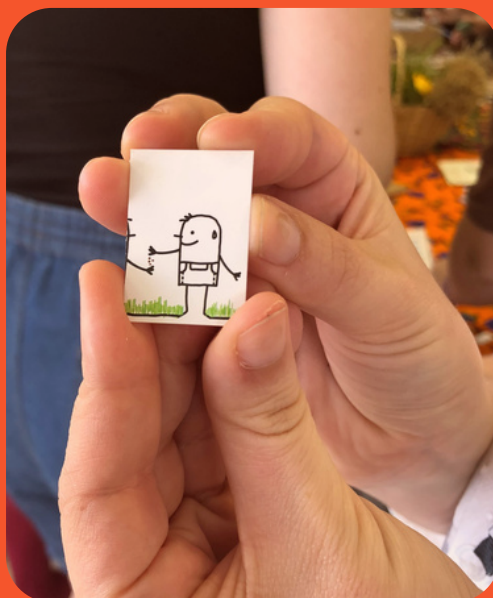
Elkana Association for Biological Farming is a Georgian non-governmental organization founded in October 1994. It currently collaborates with over 2,500 farmers and organizations throughout the country. The organization's activities focus on improving socio-economic conditions in Georgia and protecting the environment by supporting the development of organic farming and increasing the self-reliance of rural populations.

SUMMARY OF THE BILIM FORUM

The main topics discussed at the BILIM Forum included agroecology schools, UNDROP, seeds and biodiversity, the right to land, and access to markets. The wealth of experiences and skills shared by participants at the Forum is challenging to condense into a brief report. Spending several days with agroecological experts from 18 countries allows for a fresh perspective on various issues. For instance, we operate in different political realities that affect our national agriculture. All countries represented at the Forum are members of FAO, specifically falling under FAO REU. However, Poland is not a direct member of FAO; we belong to this organization through the European Union. Poland's agriculture is primarily influenced by the Common Agricultural Policy, which focuses mainly on agricultural production and the common development of agricultural markets. Food systems in EU countries and non-EU countries face different challenges, so engagement and support from FAO vary. On the other hand, many factors unite us: a shared history and past linked to the Eastern Bloc, the majority of our region's population residing in rural areas, and the dominant model being small and family farming. By joining forces in Bilim, we can exchange knowledge and experience, positively impacting the effective work of organizations and grassroots movements. As a Polish organization, we can directly witness that large-scale agriculture has effective alternatives.

Agroecology Schools

The framework of agroecology schools is based on the 11 pillars of agroecology outlined in the Declaration of the International Agroecology Forum of 2015. Agroecology schools are institutions without walls or hierarchies, fostering the exchange of knowledge and experience. Anyone can participate in an agroecology school because each of us possesses valuable knowledge and experience. The methodologies of these schools vary depending on the region and the needs of local communities. The aim of agroecology schools is to build awareness among farmers that they possess invaluable knowledge worth passing on and implementing in practice. Examples of agroecology schools presented at the Forum demonstrate that education tailored to the needs of local communities is essential. These schools teach various skills, including drip irrigation, herbalism, micro-entrepreneurship, and computer literacy.



UNDROP

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP) is the result of 17 years of work and negotiations by grassroots movements. In our region, there still needs to be more awareness that UNDROP exists and can be used in daily work to change the current agricultural model and food system. Knowledge about UNDROP should be disseminated, and peasants and rural people should be aware of its existence. The declaration addresses many crucial aspects of the lives of those engaged in agriculture, showing us how comprehensive and multi-dimensional food production work is. Together, we should implement the provisions of the Declaration, with peasants and farmers as its greatest ambassadors, fighting for their rights. More about how to use UNDROP [LINK](#)

Seeds and Biodiversity

Biodiversity in agriculture encompasses the diversity and variability of animals, plants, and microorganisms at genetic, species, and ecosystem levels. Biodiversity safeguards agricultural production, serving as a source of food and non-food products. Biodiversity in the food and agriculture sector includes numerous elements that support agricultural production and provide various services, such as pollination, water purification, soil creation, carbon sequestration, and pest control. According to FAO, local communities and indigenous people are the guardians of biodiversity. They constitute less than 5% of the population but protect and manage 80% of global biodiversity. Biodiversity loss is a loss for all of us, so all those involved in agriculture and local communities must engage in biodiversity conservation.

Regarding seeds, many organizations emphasized that there are two systems in seed management: the formal and informal systems. The formal system is dominated by large corporations that monopolize genetic material and aim to eliminate biodiversity for their profits. The informal system sustains biodiversity and our right to seeds, which, being part of nature, should not be patented. The complexity of existing laws makes them difficult to understand. Those involved in food production must have access to high-quality genetic material that adapts to local conditions and climate change. Thus, scientific institutions should collaborate with farmers, representing not only their own interests but also those of all consumers, rather than being driven by large corporations focused on profit. Currently, seed libraries and community seed banks owned by farmers are the best solution. Advocacy for the responsible creation of laws and raising awareness about the right to seeds and real food is essential. Questioning existing laws is one way to bring about change.



Right to Land

Access to land varies, but in most countries, starting agricultural activities is challenging for individuals without land. Land purchase costs are usually high, and leasing rules are often complicated. In many countries, there are also limitations for individuals without agricultural education and experience. Women may not have the opportunity to buy land even if they have the means. Young people, especially without support, may struggle to start farming. Other challenges include soil destruction, rendering it unsuitable for agriculture. Recent earthquakes in Turkey damaged farmland, and conflicts in Ukraine lead to soil contamination, making it unsuitable for farming. Landmines on fields pose a direct threat to the health and lives of farmers.

Access to Markets

Competition from large-scale farms and agricultural policies favouring mass production make it difficult for farmers to access markets on fair terms. One organization from Central Asia shared experiences with shortening supply chains. Their experience highlights the importance of connecting rural and urban populations. Establishing strong relationships between food producers and consumers builds resilience in short-supply chains. Even small actions can change reality. A pioneering project connecting female farmers and consumers involved milk. An urban investor financed the purchase of a cow, which was then leased to a female farmer under a contract. In return, the investor received a set quantity of milk and dairy products for several years. The female farmer sold the remaining milk and dairy products to other consumers, learning micro-scale entrepreneurship. Initially, a coordinator from a non-governmental organization managed the transaction, but over time, a bond formed between the consumer and the farmer, and the coordinator's involvement became unnecessary. This model satisfies the needs of both parties: a female farmer without the means to buy a cow can lease one, while the urban consumer receives fresh and healthy dairy products at a fixed price for several years. It's a fascinating example of a short supply chain that creates deep connections between urban and rural areas.



BILIM FORUM IN NUMBERS

4

MAIN SUBREGIONS

Central and Eastern Europe, Western Balkans, South Caucasus, Western Asia, and Central Asia

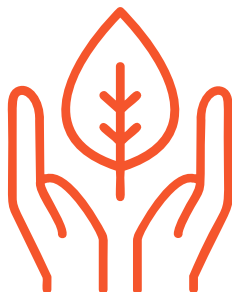
5 DAYS OF MEETINGS



22 ORGANIZATIONS



**4 SUPPORTING ORGANIZATIONS
AND INSTITUTIONS**



18 COUNTRIES





NİLÜFER
MUNICIPALITY
BURSA



**Doğu Avrupa Ve
Orta Asya Agroekoloji
Uygulamaları
Ağı Forumu**

**Eastern Europe and
Central Asia Agroecology
Network Meeting**

**Встреча сообщества
агроэкологии
Восточной Европы и
Центральной Азии**



A HANDFUL OF AGROECOLOGICAL PRACTICES STRAIGHT FROM TURKISH SOIL - HOW TO PRACTISE AGROECOLOGY IN THE CITY

WIOLETTA OLEJARCZYK

The Forum of the Bilim Community of Practice on Agroecology was held in Nilüfer, Turkey. It is a district of Bursa Province located in the northwestern part of Turkey. The Forum was co-organized and supported by the Nilüfer municipality.

Many people were surprised that such a meeting was organised in a large city, not in a more natural environment or on a farm.

However, the Nilüfer municipality can practise agroecology in the city as well. This decision was deliberate, as it is one of the most environmentally friendly places in Turkey.

They were among the first to introduce green and innovative solutions in their region. Also, this municipality is very active in building a resilient system, developing local food chains, and supporting smallholder food producers in the local area.

It is a good example of how cooperation among the municipality, institutions, NGO's, and regular folks can actually be like.

Our guide was Arca Atay, an agricultural engineer and advisor of the mayor of Nilüfer Municipality on environmental and agricultural issues. He also co-founded the NGO EKODER and the NILKOOP cooperative (Agricultural Development Cooperative) which has about 75 members.

Arca states that everyone should have access to healthy, natural, and trusted products and has worked for decades to make it possible.



NILÜFER

CASE STUDY

In Turkey, agroecological farming is disappearing and villages are becoming deserted. Action is needed to protect small farms and farmers and to ensure access to quality food for all.

On the first day of the Forum, we were joined by the mayor of Nilüfer Municipality, Turgay Erdem, along with people working in the agriculture and environmental departments. They talked about their work and goals. Agroecology emerged as a goal for action and as a solution to many problems related to, for instance, climate change. The mayor emphasised the importance of access to healthy food and cooperation between institutions and civil society. Making sure the food system can adjust to social and climate change is a key part of looking after food security.

During the meeting of the Agroecological Network of Eastern Europe and Central Asia in Nilüfer, we made field visits to unusual places in the host municipality.

These are the fruits of cooperation between representatives of institutions, NGOs, cooperatives, and grassroots initiatives.

We visited one of their farms in the municipality, the **Konakli farm**.

NGOs and the municipality manage it together. Cereals, vegetables, herbal and aromatic plants, fruit, and olive orchards are grown on a dozen hectares. That cultivation is carried out without pesticides and with care for the environment and the quality of the products.

Nilüfer Municipality has 100 hectares of agricultural area, and NILKOOP use 50 hectares of this land for agricultural activities.

Our next agroecological stop was the **Ürünlü city garden**, covering less than a hectare of land. We saw biodiversity in the most beautiful colours of summer there: several hundred varieties of vegetables, aromatic plants, and herbs. We saw a patch of land with many different kinds of tomatoes, and it looked really pretty.

Apart from several employees, the garden is cared for by volunteers. All together, they grow old traditional varieties, collect seeds, and create a **seed library**. They have more than 700 traditional varieties of edible plants in the library. The seeds are made available free of charge to all interested people and are very popular, especially during organised exchanges. They focus on plants that adapt to climate change, produce good yields, and are resistant to diseases and pests.

Find more information and photos about the seed library - [LINK](#)

When the season starts, vegetable seedlings are distributed at no cost. In 2022 they gave out around 450,000 of them. The seedlings were grown by several farmers from local seeds.

The garden also has a professional **composting** facility. Organic waste from urban gardens and markets goes there to be turned into compost. It goes back to the city gardens and to interested parties at no charge.

On the Konakli farm and in several city gardens, you can see that organic vegetable cultivation and environmentally friendly food production are possible. Wander around, and you'll catch glimpses of different techniques for fertilising soil, tackling those problematic weeds, and smart water conservation practices. The city garden also serves an educational function. It's a hot spot for many schools of all kinds, from kindergartens to universities. They learn how to start a garden at their school.

But that's not all - here's the cherry on top of this agroecological sundae: the recently launched **FOOD HUB Hasanağa**. It is a processing plant for local products, a storage facility, and a laboratory.

Fruits of the land municipally-run farms and local growers end up here.

Then, they are processed into tomato sauce, flour, pasta, oil, jam, or pickles, to name a few.

Plus, women's agricultural cooperatives receive the biggest support.

Once the goods are good to go, they are mainly sold locally in local places such as Nilüfer Bostan. In these spots, locals can buy good food, making a tight-knit community vibe.

The biggest highlight during the Forum was visiting the **local market**.

That is another place where the municipality of Nilüfer and the NILKOOP Cooperative implement agroecology into everyday life. Only female farmers and farmers from small local farms sell at the market. They do not pay any fees for their stands. This is a real help for farmers to sell their products and to protect the culture and traditions associated with food. The market was full of veggies, jars of preserves, dried herbs, ointments, soaps, and vinegars. Each stall displayed the farm's name. The language barrier didn't stop us from shopping, chatting, and sharing appreciation for each other's work.

Another interesting fact, but no longer surprising to folks here, is that the municipality has several **campuses for NGOs**. They're letting organisations use offices and mailboxes for free. Actually, a few Forum meetings happened at one of these places.



The municipality is also leading the European **FUSILLI project**, which supports the transformation of the urban food system. The goal is to build a holistic long-term ecosystem. Ensuring access to nutritious food for everyone as a strategy for food security will be given special attention, especially in neighbourhoods facing economic challenges. For more information about the project, you can click on this [LINK](#)

A project with the University of Agriculture is being conducted simultaneously: a detailed **soil survey** in the Nilüfer municipality alongside the preparation of land use maps. Farmers can examine their soil, plants, and water without any cost.

We wrapped up our several-day meeting with a **joint lunch**, joined by the mayor and people representing local institutions. During this time, we made plans to collaborate and take the inspiration we gained back to our region, sharing insights from our own experiences.

Agroecology doesn't often steal the spotlight, but this time it was in the centre.

Local press and television accompanied us for those few days and all local media reported on the meeting and agroecology.

It was fascinating to observe how this urban municipality takes a holistic approach to topics concerning food and agriculture - from management and production to processing, distribution, consumption, and waste management. They have successfully engaged citizens in many of their activities.

These experiences are highly inspiring and reinforce the commitment to promoting agroecology and sustainable agricultural practices throughout Europe and Central Asia. This summarises the underlying themes of our behind-the-scenes discussions.

So, how did the Nilüfer municipality achieve such success?

It is rooted in several decades of work of many people who persistently and courageously acted regardless of the conditions. The key lies in a cooperative attitude, linking representatives of institutions and science with farmers and consumers. Additionally, governmental representatives working for the common good and implementing long-term actions, regardless of the length of their terms, play an important role.



The foundations of agroecology are emerging from these examples of the Nilüfer municipality's good practices.

Local and good food is something everyone should have - it is a way to keep our traditions alive and take care of one's health. It also means that we can build close relationships based on trust to create food communities that are resilient to crises.

In the centre, there is the knowledge of farmers and the creation of conditions for its transmission and practice. The right to seeds, and not patents on them.

In agroecology, direct relationships between those who produce food and those who consume it as well as local government and scientific institutions, are very important. Together, laws and customs can be created that uphold the well-being of both people and the environment. Agroecology can be practised in small villages as well as large urban metropolises, because we all need it, no matter where we are.

What we should do now is to respect both tradition and science. Also, we should plan activities that keep future generations in mind.

Looking at what's happening in Nilüfer, it's very uplifting. They show that one can reach agroecology goals along with working persistently and organising in cooperation.

What can we do with this beautiful postcard from Turkey? Well, just knowing that these kinds of practices are possible gives us a chance to learn and get inspired. Those seeds which we brought back are living proof that it wasn't a dream. We're planting them, and I'm hoping for a fantastic harvest.





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