A CASE STUDY OF THE BILIM COMMUNITY

Organizations and Networks as Engines of Agroecology Transitions in Eastern Europe and West-Central Asia

This series explores praxis in agroecology transitions. Praxis is a critical concept in participatory research and action and can be understood as the dialectical interaction of theory/reflection and practice/action that opens the possibility for contributing to social transformation.

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Introduction

Bilim means knowledge. Eastern Europe and Central Asia are reservoirs of ancient knowledge of seeds, crop varieties, traditional diets, animal breeding, and pastoralist practices - all woven into the fabric of social life. Agroecology has found a place in this large geographic area and is offering a perspective for organizations - mostly led by women - to consider, value and share that knowledge; start agroecology schools; inspire one another to honor local practices; save seeds; and organize communities. The Bilim Alliance is a grassroots network of agroecology organizations with a diversity of language, culture and history which promotes cross-pollination of ideas. Engagement across the organizations has inspired local actions and innovations that have strengthened agroecology in the region. This brief highlights the importance of knowledge sharing, network organizing and trust building in an environment marked by past and current wars. With its multiple voices, Bilim is evidence of the power of local organizations and regional networks in advancing agroecology and food sovereignty.

At a Glance

Strengthening networks to share local knowledge and innovations is a path of transformation. Bilim's work...

- Breaks the sense of isolation and separation
- Builds confidence by valuing each participant's experience
- Inspires initiatives such as founding rural agroecology schools
- Fosters concrete collective action like seed-sharing
- Builds an extended family through openness, diversity and agency
- Enables collaborations between informal knowledge systems and formal institutions, challenging the traditionally top-down system of Research and Development

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The Importance of Organizations and Networks in Agroecology

Local organizations and the formal and informal networks that connect them provide the basis for the collective actions needed for agroecological transformations at different scales (Anderson et al. 2019). Civil society-driven networks are crucial because they facilitate a kind of cooperation that cannot be generated by the market or the state and provide the infrastructure onto which collective action can be sustained. Organizations are the "culture medium" on which agroecology grows (Mier y Terán Giménez Cacho et al., 2018). In addition, networks like Bilim can develop the following capacities that are central to agroecological transitions (Anderson et. al 2021):

- Organizing, learning, and continuously improving practice
- Distancing from extractive markets while collectively constructing markets for agroecologically produced goods
- Developing a shared sense of place and identity
- Forging commitments to work towards a common goal
- Facilitating coordinated action for policy and institutional change and building peer-to-peer knowledge

Bilim's History and Purpose

Bilim is an interregional network of Eastern Europe and Central and Western Asia and is an important part of the wider efforts to promote agroecology in the region. The primary aim of Bilim is to facilitate the knowledge-sharing amongst diverse actors who are supporting small-scale food producers and rural territories.

"Bilim", the name of the community, means "knowledge" in Turkic, a language spoken in Turkey and other Central Asian countries. The word reflects the centrality of knowledge-sharing in rural life and agroecology. Bilim not only refers to scientific knowledge, but also encompasses the wisdom and understanding of a territory. This type of knowledge, which is both content and a process, is at the heart of agroecology and the backbone of the Alliance. From this perspective, the knowledge shared in Bilim stands in opposite to narratives of easy technological approaches that neglect the value of local practices and knowledge and are ignorant of the coevolution of agriculture practices with their natural environment, the evolution of crops and animal breeds, and their adaptation to a territory via the generational work of rural communities. This coevolved knowledge between farmers and their territory is articulated by the Bilim organizations and sustains the activities of the Alliance.

What's Unique About the Bilim Community

- Ability to collaborate across a diversity of cultures, languages, and histories in a large geographic region
- Female leadership
- Openness and interest in exchanges and co-learning

Bilim was founded in 2020 through existing collaborations and has since grown as a channel of exchange to reach a broader swath of organizations. Organizations from 12 countries in Europe and Central Asia (ECA), catalyzed by the support and facilitation of Schola Campesina APS (Italy), came together to work with the Tool for Agroecology Performance Evaluation (TAPE), with funding from the Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia (REU) of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). Partner organizations were invited to exchange their insights from TAPE and agroecology as a larger Community of Practice (CoP). From this first stage, the CoP evolved into a group of organizations that shared opinions and experiences about agroecology, with the facilitation of four ally organizations (Schola Campesina, Elkana, Eco Ruralis and Agency for Development Initiatives). The CoP organizations remain active in knowledge-sharing at both the local and regional level, through hosting trainings, workshops and informal gatherings. Based on an agreement with FAO REU (and later on with the support of the Agroecology Fund), Schola Campesina used TAPE data to establish agroecology schools. All these efforts have empowered the ECA region to further share their agroecology initiatives in diverse regional and international spaces. Currently the Bilim network has more than 20 organisations from 18 countries.

Bilim's work is guided by its diverse organizations, the Nyéléni Declaration on Agroecology, the United Nations (UN) Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP), and the United Nations (UN) Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). In the statement released on 17 December 2019, UN human rights experts underlined that "peasants and other people working in rural areas shall be recognized as agents of change and essential actors in the local, national and international implementation of the UNDROP, and not just as victims of discrimination or in terms of vulnerability." They also added that "effective implementation of the UNDROP will not be realized without meaningful grassroots engagement." Many of the organizations of Bilim are interested in sustaining the implementation of UNDROP and UNDRIP with different strategies and believe these efforts to be critical in strengthening peasants' rights and livelihoods.

Figure 1: Map of Bilim organizations across Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Each dot represents an organization.

> *We should develop our region and that is what we focus on. But at the same time we need international connections! Networking and sharing experiences with other countries are important. During our international meetings, many people from Bilim inspired me with their experiences in their organizations in other parts of the world.*
>
> - Arca Atay,
> Ekoder, Turkiye

The 2023 Bilim Forum for Agroecology in Bursa, Türkiye. The forum brought together 22 organizations from 18 countries and fostered exchange around Biodiversity and Seeds, Right to Land, Access to Market, UNDROP and Solidarity in Times of Crisis. Photo provided by EKODER.

The Bilim community is a trusted place of knowledge-sharing for agroecology organizations that hold diverse profiles: loosely- and highly-structured, policy-driven, grassroots, smallholder organizations, NGO's and other groups organizing peasants and small-scale food producers, indigenous peoples, and academics. Bilim organizations are often led by women and committed to work with women and youth. Importantly, Bilim offers a network rooted in the regional identity, as described by one of its members:

Group discussion at the 2023 Bilim Forum in Bursa, Türkiye. Photo provided by EKODER.

> *I find it very enriching and empowering to be part of a non-euro-centric network, to discover their diversity and realities, get inspired by and learn from them. Being part of this movement has alleviated the feeling of isolation. We now trust each other and feel like we belong to an agroecology family within this region.*
>
> - Lily Balogh,
> Hungarian Agroecology Network Association, Hungary

Box 1 –Seed Saving

At a meeting of the Bilim forum in 2023, the Stina organization from Kosovo and COSPE (a member organization of the Albanian Network for Rural Development) decided to organize an exchange, which was subsequently funded by FAO REU via Bilim. The Stina women were interested in seeing how COSPE supports local farmers in preserving traditional seeds because they also wanted to create a seed bank in their local community.

The visit included meetings with a group of women from the Shkodra region who had successfully established a local community gene bank in cooperation with the secondary professional school of agriculture Ndre Mjeda" in Bushat and the support of the Italian sector of COSPE for conservation of traditional seeds. The professional school also has laboratories and an experimental field for agricultural crops.

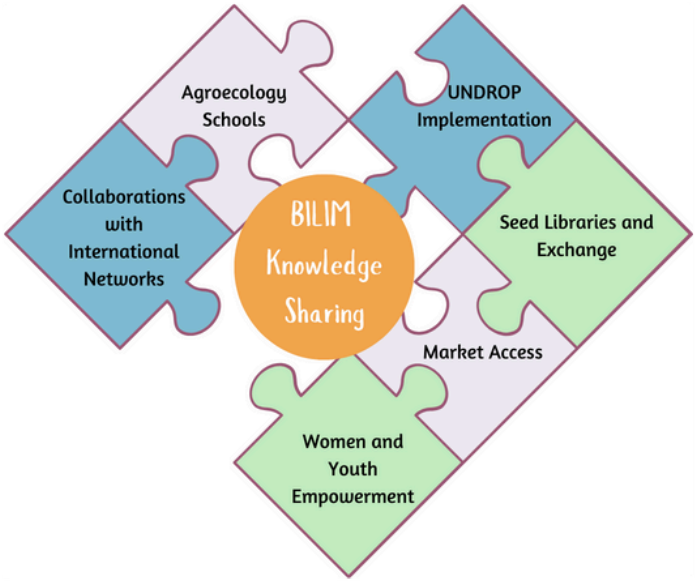
Stina women learn how to create and manage a seed house during a visit to Albania. Photo provided by Cospe Albania Association.

That meeting strengthened the partnership between the agroecology schools of Stina, Bushat, Prishtina and Ferizaj, with continued collaboration and exchange of experiences. During the summer 2024, the Stina group offered a seminar for their members and other guests, where they shared about the visit and presented seeds from Albania as a symbolic step towards the creation of the genetic bank.

How Bilim and its Organizations Advance Agroecology

Industrial agricultural development has led to a process of de-territorialization, which has largely undermined agroecology and local knowledge, subjugating peasants into a labor force. Past and recent wars have also fostered isolation and narratives of separation. Collective organization in networks and the creation of platforms for knowledge sharing have been vital in supporting agroecology in different parts of the world, yet they are under-evidenced in the context of Eastern Europe and West-Central Asia.

The organizations of the Bilim community are currently engaged on many fronts with concrete initiatives that protect biodiversity and cultural heritage in the region. In these initiatives, we see a genuine collective effort to value and recover smallholders' knowledge, find market solutions that connect rural farmers directly with consumers, promote ancient crops and traditional cuisine, and strengthen partnership among farmers and technicians for plant breeding. There is a special emphasis in engaging rural youth who are interested in farming and in co-creating a favorable and viable environment for their future.



Learning workshops are organized locally as well as between Bilim organizations. The organizations meet online regularly and in person when funding is available. Those meetings, especially in-person, offer time to talk about concrete action, product marketing, and land protection. Opportunities like these, where people share their learning generously, are critical for strengthening relationships and deepening reciprocal trust.

Many Bilim organizations are active in seed saving, conservation, local distribution and on participatory guarantee systems (PGS). The participation in Bilim has sustained seed-related work not only through seed exchanges, but also through the formulation of documents supporting seed sovereignty:

> *Through Bilim, we connected with many people who, in one way or another, helped us elaborate this complex document referring to different international instruments (e.g., UNDROP, ITPGRFA, UNDRIP) where we argue for the legal recognition of farmer seed systems as a realization of the Right to Food, which is a Constitutional right in the Republic of Moldova.*

-Anya Benoliel Coutinho, Gradina Moldovei, Moldova

The experience of organizations with existing seed-saving operations is of immense value for those who wish to start similar activities. Bilim provides a place for this sharing, which could increase in frequency with more capacities and resources. The story of the Stina women group from Kosovo and the COSPE from Albania (Box 1) is evidence of a concrete outcome from this process.

The Bilim network also brings together organizations who are building learning opportunities for their members through agroecology schools. These schools facilitate a horizontal sharing of knowledge, thus enabling the emergence of solutions from produce and livestock farmers' collective work. These schools, such as the first agroecology school in Kazakhstan (Box 2), are also places where farmers can inform and hold conversations with public authorities about daily challenges in rural areas and problematic regulations.

Ambari - Zaza Ivanidze's bakery, Georgia. Photo provided by Biological Farming Association Elkana.

Many organizations within Bilim have focused efforts on improving the economic sustainability of agroecological farmers. For example, the Agency of Development Initiatives (ADI) from Kyrgyzstan set up the Sebet farm store to facilitate market access for local small-holder farmers. In 2015, ADI also launched a women-led local vegetable seed savers network called "Dyikan muras" (farmers' heritage). In Kazakhstan, the Zher-Ana Astana organization promotes sustainable irrigation production techniques that alleviate work and generate income. Their project, "Cow on the Balcony," links urban and rural women with direct sales of fresh agroecological produce and dairy products. Such an approach, based on reciprocal trust, has increased income for female producers and more generally supports rural enterprise. In Albania, Georgia, Moldova, and Turkey, other initiatives have been established by Bilim organizations to link urban consumers and rural producers, and those include food festivals, farmers markets as permanent agroecological product sale points and rural tourism. Overall, direct marketing has created new opportunities for income and sustainable livelihoods.

The migration of young people from rural areas to cities or abroad for better economic opportunities is a concern in many rural communities. Within the Alliance, there are examples of concrete actions to retain agriculturally-inclined youth. The Rushnoi and Tomiris organizations in Tajikistan offer youth sustainable and culturally-rooted opportunities to remain in the region and thrive (Box 3).

Box 2: Agroecology Schools

In 2023, the Zher-Ana Astana organization opened the first agroecology school in Kazakhstan. The process was supported by the knowledge and experience of Bilim members. From February to June, the school holds trainings for small organic farmers and small landowners to introduce fundamental agroecology concepts, focusing on techniques like sustainable water use and agroecological production. The collaboration with the Slow Food movement facilitated the establishment of a farmers' market which offers products of local farmers who have participated in the agroecology school. The market is now a place of direct interaction between producers and consumers.

I always encourage people not to be afraid, and to start with small steps. These small farmers can become successful also through participation in agroecology schools with like-minded people who have similar experiences. I want our farmers to become agroecological entrepreneurs and earn fair money. That is why we're creating our regional network! We should develop our region and that is what we focus on. But at the same time, we need international connections! Networking and sharing experiences with other countries are also important. I am very grateful to Schola Campesina and ADI Kyrgyzstan for their support and experience. During our international meetings many people from Bilim inspired me with their experiences in their organizations in other parts of the world. I think this international cooperation helps our agroecological school to develop faster.

-Gulmaira Baymakova, farmer and head of the agroecology school in Amkola Region

Participants taking part in a livestock-focused activity at Olzhas, an agroecology school/farm in the Akmola region (Republic of Kazakhstan), July 18-20, 2024. Photo provided by Zher-Ana Astana organization and Schola Campesina.

The agroecology school is led by women who joined forces to support one another in exchanging ancestral practices and innovating them on their own through testing and tuning. They continue to grow through cultivating exchanges with other organizations within and beyond the Bilim Alliance.

The Bilim collective's experiences show how social organization in networks is needed to increase the reach, depth and potential of innovations that take place on farms. Innovations and actions in agroecology do not automatically spread to other socio-environmental contexts; rather, networks are vital for connecting 'islands of success' in broader territorial and regional processes of agroecological transitions. These networks reduce isolation of farmers and their organizations and shed light on stories of entrepreneurship and ingenuity that otherwise would remain overlooked. That is one of the key successes of Bilim: it connects agroecology actors in a way that provides a sense of trusted community and makes their stories of innovations visible and sharable.

The stories of this brief are not merely informative. They provide evidence of Bilim's message to agroecology communities and actors. A genuine commitment to value, innovate and share local knowledge can stimulate action in response to current priorities, including seed sovereignty, women leadership, adequate local policies for family farming, and youth work opportunities.

> *I thought there is a need for Eastern European farmers to see themselves as real actors, this is why for me it was important to be part of Bilim... they do not see their strengths, they need to regain their confidence. This is my dream, or hope, they can do things together, they can make things, they can make a change*
>
> -Mariam Jorjadze, Biological Farming Association Elkana, Georgia

A group photo during the 2023 Bilim Forum in Bursa, Türkiye. Photo provided by EKODER.

Box 3: Youth Empowerment and Engagement

Mirzosho Akobirov, from the public organization Rushnoi in Tajikistan, joined Bilim in 2023 and has since been a point of reference for other organizations working with agrobiodiversity. Mirzosho founded the Kuhsori Ajam agro-eco center and botanical garden in the Rasht Valley, which focuses on reviving rare fruit tree varieties. His organization undertakes various projects, including pasture restoration and the provision of greenhouses in rural areas with substantial involvement of young people. These are vital opportunities for young people to learn traditional knowledge while improving their living conditions. Akobirov's initiatives aim to retain young people in Tajikistan by creating sustainable agricultural opportunities, which in turn helps preserve the country's cultural and environmental heritage.

Another example of youth involvement in Tajikistan comes from the Cultural Educational Center TOMIRIS. Its focus is on empowering young people, particularly women. The Center raises awareness about civic, legal, social, and cultural rights while fostering intercultural dialogue, particularly in conflict-prone border areas. It also provides education in agroecology and traditional crafts, equipping young women with practical skills to enhance their livelihoods and help them feel rooted in their communities.

A group of people from the Rushnoi organization, including youth, plant perennial grasses for pasture restoration as part of the biodiversity restoration of 10 ha in the Tochikabad and Rasht areas. Photo provided by Rushnoi organization and Schola Campesina.

The Albanian Network for Rural Development (ANRD) supports the Rural Youth Hub (RYH) initiative. This initiative focuses on empowering young people in rural areas by providing them with trainings and opportunities to network with civil society and professionals from Albania. The Hub brings forth a look on the rural world from a youth perspective. Through the ANRD, rural young people advocate for their aspirations and are actively involved in the decision-making for the sustainable growth of their communities.

Looking to the Future: What's Next?

The Bilim alliance has established a foundation on which to strengthen its current activities and build out new programs. This will be supported by efforts to both increase the visibility of the network and foster new collaborations with funders, decisions makers and communities. In those new partnerships, Bilim seeks an extended capacity to leverage knowledge, funding, political support, community engagement, and the mobilization of youth. Some specific priorities for the near future include:

- Encouraging cooperation through knowledge-sharing
- Building confidence in rural women, who play a crucial role in the right to food, but are often victims of discrimination
- Paying particular attention to the rights and special needs of those who live in vulnerable situations and/or who have historically been discriminated against or isolated
- Participating actively in processes which strengthen agroecology and sovereignty of lives, lands, food and knowledge

Bilim's answer to current conflict crises and climate change hinges on sharing knowledge. This choice was intentional when organizations wanted to break isolation and make everyone confident in their experiential wisdom, capable of learning and open to new views. Solidarity borne of sharing knowledge and seeds (which hold knowledge themselves) has been growing in the territories of Bilim and is laying the groundwork for a more just and sustainable future in the region. We invite you to discover more about Bilim in our new video.

Bilim Forum 2023 in Bursa, Türkiye. Field visit (left) and learning about local products (right). Photos provided by EKODER.

The designation of Kosovo is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999

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Bilim webpage: https://www.scholacampesina.org/bilim-eastern-europe-and-central-asia-agroecology-network/

Video on Bilim Community of Practice (scan QR code to the right, or watch here): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6NRv0UkdpYA

Colophon

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The UVM Institute for Agroecology (IFA) is seeding more equitable and sustainable food systems. IFA uses a systems approach that addresses the root causes of problems in the food system. We challenge the status quo by centering equity, participation and social transformation in our work. Through research, learning, action, and connecting across geographies, the IFA mobilizes knowledge to support agroecology research, practice and movements.

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