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Resources to inspire a transformative agroecology: a curated guide

Introduction

Since publication of the IAASTD reports in 2009, agroecology has come into its own. Debates continue about the definition, the impact, the potential and the future of agroecology (De Schutter 2011; Anderson et al. 2019a); however, it is generally agreed that the development of agroecology is critical to address the deepening food systems related crises (IPES-Food 2016; Nyeleni 2015). There is growing evidence of the potential of agroecology as a paradigm for a more just and sustainable food system (HLPE 2019) and, with this, a great deal of effort in social movements, academia, institutions and governments to advance agroecology. Indeed, since the IAASTD, there is a wide range of materials that have been published to inspire, evidence and promote agroecology. This chapter curates a selection of publications and resources that showcase different aspects of agroecology as a transformative vision and practice. These resources are further elaborated in a companion website introduced below at the end of the chapter.

A caution on the multiple meanings of agroecology: from the status quo to a transformative agroecology

Agroecology is being used in different ways and being imbued with different meaning by the wide range of actors (see box) involved in producing publications and other resources (e.g. videos) that highlight aspects of agroecology. Not all of these are compatible with the transformative agroecology supported by many authors of the IAASTD (See Ishii-Eiteman on page 21 in this book). It has been argued that there are multiple 'agroecologies' (Méndez et al., 2013) as it is reinterpreted (Rivera-Ferre 2018) by different actors with different values, intentions and worldviews.

In this chapter, we aim to lift up examples of resources that signal aspects of a transformative agroecology that aims for social justice and sustainability. From this perspective, it is important for agroecology to highlight cases, aspects and dynamics that go beyond techniques and practices (which are also important) to include attention to shifts in political-economic power and questions around agency and control (Nyéléni 2015; De Molina et al. 2019; Video 1).

In contrast, some resources purporting to showcase aspects of agroecology include and promote approaches that maintain power imbalances (e.g. reliance on agribusiness companies) and environmentally harmful practices (e.g. use of synthetic pesticides). These examples are easy to place near the 'status quo' end



Video 1: This film shows voices from different social movements who are acting collectively to articulate a transformative agroecology and to reject both corporate-led industrial agriculture and technocratic meanings of agroecology¹

of a spectrum that spans status quo to transformative (Figure 1). It is also possible to identify approaches to agroecology that are more “reformist” in nature and that inadvertently or explicitly frame agroecology as a technical approach centered around specific production practices that are clearly void of these transformative elements. These often consider agroecology as one tool in the toolbox rather than a paradigm for transformation. They tend to focus on improved resource efficiency and reduced ecological footprint but give limited attention to the political and social processes that lock in the dominant system and undermine agroecology.



Figure 1: One way to view different representations of agroecology is along a spectrum from status quo to transformative. Any publication or resource should be viewed critically and readers might ask themselves: Who is publishing this and why? What is the underlying message and aspirations of the authors/creators of this resource? To what extent does this resource resonate with a transformative agroecology?

The collective actors authoring agroecology resources

A wide range of actors, institutions, authors, activists and researchers are populating the body of work and producing resources to advance agroecology. The field of agroecology resources is authored by actors positioned within eight primary types:

- Social movements and social movement organizations (e.g. African Food Sovereignty Alliance, International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty, La Via Campesina)
- Non-governmental organizations (e.g. Pesticide Action Network, Groundswell, Oakland Institute)
- Farmers and social economy businesses
- Philanthropists (e.g. CIDSE, Global Alliance for the Future of Food, Agroecology Fund)
- Researchers and research institutes (e.g. individual authors, SOCLA, IPES-Food)
- Intergovernmental organizations (e.g. FAO)
- Governmental agencies
- Industry (e.g. CropLife²)

The curated list: seven types of resources

In the following sections, we highlight select examples that we identify as being most exemplary of a transformative agroecology within seven main categories of resources. The resources listed in each category do not comprise a comprehensive, but rather an illustrative, selection of examples.

I. Principles and elements of agroecology

Proponents of agroecology have advanced the idea that agroecology involves a continuous transition that does not follow prescriptive rules, but rather is based on core principles, elements and values that are adapted and applied in particular contexts. Thus, the different proposals for these principles, which are often presented in the form of lists and infographics, are a key resource for anyone looking to engage in agroecology. But, like the growing number of definitions of agroecology, only some of these sets of principles reflect a deeply transformative perspective. Some strong examples include:

- **Social Movements:** The principles embedded in the Declaration of the International Forum on Agroecology³ are perhaps the most political and transformative set of principles. They, however, are not packaged into a ready-to-use format in the same way as other principles or elements, and thus, unfortunately, are less accessible.
- **CIDSE:** Coopération Internationale pour le Développement et la Solidarité presents a framework⁴ (Figure 2) that explicitly emphasizes a political dimension, along with the typical social, economic and environmental pillars used to define sustainability.
- **FAO:** The FAO has generated a widely-used set of 10 'elements' of agroecology, with further details of each element fleshed out in an accompanying report.⁵ These elements are impressively social and political for an intergovernmental institution, reflecting the reality that they were created through engagement with civil society in different regions; however, they do not centre political change, reflecting constraints of FAO's political processes.
- **HLPE:** The 2019 High Level Panel of Experts report on "Agroecological and Other Innovative Approaches",⁶ recognizing the deficiency of the FAO's 10 elements in terms of their lack of focus on social agency and human rights, added further elements related to social equity/responsibility.
- **Biovision and Gliessman:** The Agroecology Criteria Tool⁷ combines Steve Gliessman's commonly used five levels of transition⁸ with the FAO's 10 elements to create a tool for evaluating the extent to which agroecology's multiple dimensions are being satisfied. Biovision attempted to interpret these elements and levels for the purpose of evaluation.

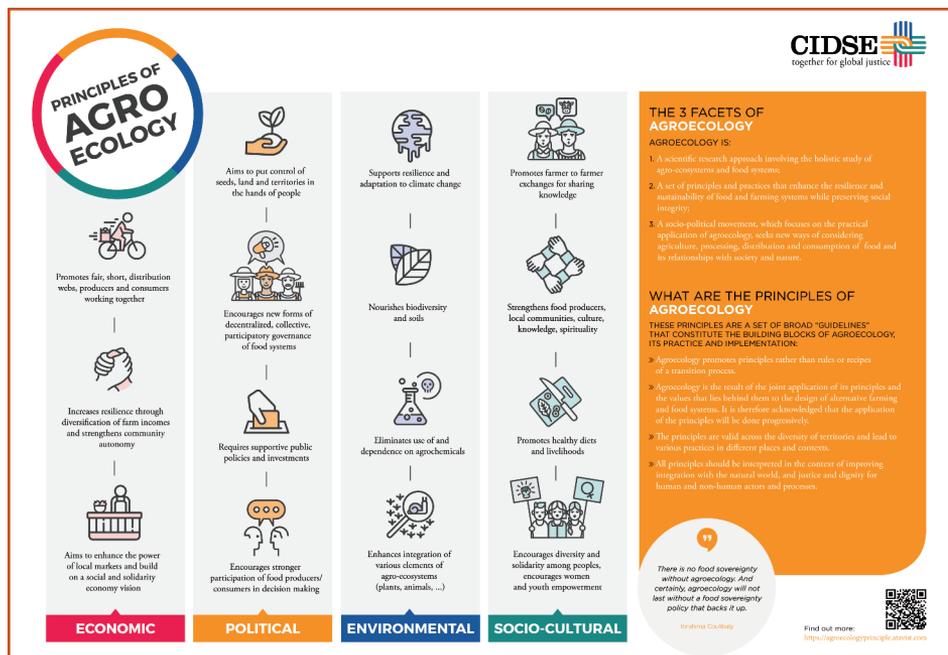


Figure 2: CIDSE's principles and facets of agroecology presented here in infographic form.

2. Practices/case studies

A growing number of case studies at the farm, community or regional level provide either examples of agroecological practices or of how specific areas have made a transition to agroecology. These were often generated to demonstrate that producers are using agroecology now and that, when undertaken in an enabling environment, agroecology can provide multiple benefits and outcomes. They are intended to inspire and inform. Many of these case studies include concrete descriptions of locally adapted agroecology on farms or in territories, highlighting markets, the integration of appropriate technologies, biological or collective approaches to pest-control, women-led efforts or other dimensions of agroecology. The most powerful case studies in this category provide examples of a particular practice (e.g. water harvesting), while also discussing the political dimensions of the issue and practice and including voices of practitioners themselves – especially non-dominant perspectives (such as women, youth, lower caste, indigenous, etc.). This resource type often includes pictures, diagrams or film/videos.

- AFSA: The African Food Sovereignty Alliance and the Oakland Institute provide an excellent set of regionally specific case studies⁹ (Figure 3) of agroecology featuring a blend of examples that combine practical and political considerations.
- La Revuelta Al Campo: The “Revolt in the Fields” project website¹⁰ has a series of agroecology related videos from examples in Spain.

- *Why Hunger: Agroecology: Putting Food Sovereignty into Action*¹¹ provides a strong political contextualization of the need for food sovereignty before presenting nine place-based discussions of agroecology by social movement actors from around the world. This publication is heavy on the political aspects; but a reader looking to learn from practical case studies would be better served by looking elsewhere.
- *TransformAfrica: The series of videos, Women and Agroecology in Africa*, highlight agroecology from the perspective of women, combining the practical with issues of equity.¹²
- *ALISEA: The Agro-ecology Learning Alliance in Southeast Asia*¹³ (ALISEA) has a searchable database including case studies and factsheets about initiatives with many practical case studies.

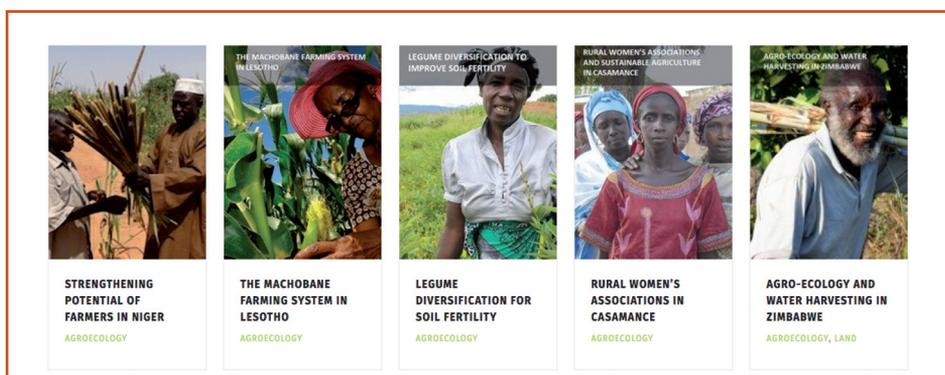


Figure 3: A screenshot of agroecology practice case studies at the African Food Sovereignty Alliances Website.

3. Policies

The relationship between policy and agroecology is complex (see: Giraldo and McCune 2019); therefore, any simple list of policies that support agroecology is a risky oversimplification without an explanation of the context. Further, some lists of policies for agroecology have inclusion criteria that are quite open and not subject to vetting against principles of agroecology. Thus, many of the policies indicated may just as easily support corporate-led, climate-smart or even conventional agriculture. With this in mind, some attempts have been made to collect and present policies that promote agroecology. For example:

- *Latin America Report: The report, "Public policies to support agroecology in Latin America and the Caribbean"*¹⁴ not only lists a set of policies that support agroecology, but also discusses their emergence and history and takes more of a critical perspective.
- *FAO's AgroecologyLex: The AgroecologyLex*¹⁵ is a continually updated online database of legal frameworks, policies and programmes related to agroecology in different national contexts. For each entry, users are able to access a summary

of the policy, focusing on the “purpose and specific objectives, institutional frameworks and main forms of support.”

- ALISEA Library of Policy Documents: The ALISEA online library¹⁶ lists a range of documents related to agroecology policy – many of which are excellent resources not just for the Southeast Asia region but for anyone interested in policy.

4. Agroecology learning and training

Given the new attention to agroecology, many people are creating formal and informal learning opportunities in the form of courses, workshops, learning exchanges, peer-to-peer informal learning programs, series of field-based classes, or entire degree programs. Some of these seem to be a re-naming of existing training as “agroecology” rather than a genuine re-focusing. For example, a large Midwestern US university includes courses in Basic Golf Club Design and Repair

and Introduction to Turfgrass Management in its “Agroecology Specialization”. A transformative agroecology implies a particular approach to learning and pedagogy, most commonly found in programs with social movement backing, and include for example a political analysis, horizontal methods of learning and a dialogue of different ways of knowing. A growing body of literature has highlighted the characteristics of a transformative approach to agroecology learning (La Via Campesina 2017; Rosset et al. 2019; Anderson et al. 2019a, b, c).



Figure 4: Learners from Mali, Morocco and Italy at Schola Campesina’s international course on Global Governance.

Learning rooted in informal and social movement settings:

- La Via Campesina sponsors a set of peasant universities and programs¹⁷ around the world that root the practice of agroecology in a deeply political analysis.
- European programs affiliated with the European branch of La Via Campesina are highlighted in the European Agroecology Knowledge Exchange Network¹⁸ (EAKEN).
- Schola Campesina (Figure 4) is an international agroecology school seeking to share, valorise and develop knowledge on agroecology and global governance of food and agriculture and offer in-person courses and workshops as well as a Schola Campesina online course on global governance of food.
- Escuela Campesina Multimedia presents videos and resources in four languages on the Peasant-to-Peasant learning methodology.¹⁹
- International People’s Agroecology Multiversity involves a research-learning-action approach to agroecology that puts agroecology in the framework of food sovereignty, ecological and social justice. It is coordinated by a network of farmers and women’s organizations, NGOs, researchers and academic institutions.²⁰



Figure 5: Agroecología Map (Brazil)

Learning rooted in formal settings at universities and colleges:

- The Agriculture, Food & Human Values Society²¹ and Sustainable Agriculture Education Association²² maintain lists of educational programs in the U.S. and Canada, which can be searched for “agroecology”.
- Universities in the Netherlands, France, Norway, Spain and other EU countries offer individual and shared programs listed through the European Network of Organic Agriculture Students²³ the European Master in Organic Agriculture and Food Systems²⁴ and Agroecology Europe²⁵.
- In Latin America, one place to find University Programs is through the Red de Programas de Agroecología de Latinoamérica / Red-PAL – an initiative set to enable cooperation, exchange, research, and the training amongst universities engaged in agroecology.
- A number of “massive open online courses” (MOOCs) on agroecology exist, including, for example one based in Argentina.

5. Agroecology mapping initiatives

Organizations and networks are creating online maps of agroecological farms, markets, crop varieties and livestock breeds, soil fertility and water management practices, policies and more. Mapping initiatives respond to a desire to document, better understand and make visible the rapid emergence and evolution of agroecology and to understand where nodes of activity or vacuums exist – or simply to find good projects in a particular area. A recent guide, Mapping for Food System Change²⁶, highlights the issues, challenges and emerging opportunities that might arise when designing mapping processes to support food system change. Maps often have loose criteria for inclusion and might include initiatives that do not align well with agroecology, so users should examine the criteria and transparency of the map and not take for granted that everything matches with a transformative agroecology. Some examples of maps include:

- The open source Agroecology Map²⁷, based in Brazil (Figure 5), aims to help bring urban and rural people together to create and strengthen collaborative networks to exchange experiences and strengthen agroecology.
- Other maps are not specifically focused on agroecology *per se*, but are built around key dynamics and initiatives in a transformative agroecology. The Community Seed Map²⁸, for example, maps people and programs working on seed saving and sharing. The Open Food Network²⁹ is an online platform and global open source community where producers, stores, consumer groups, etc. can join and be listed on the map to connect in local/territorial food systems.

6. Books and longer academic treatments

Scholars and activists have been writing influential books and reports on agroecology for at least 60 years (not to mention the generations of scholarship and knowledge that agroecology research builds on), reflecting a substantial resource for those looking for in-depth treatments of agroecology. This section highlights a selection of recent relevant edited or single-authored academic work and project websites. Google Scholar³⁰ searches for “agroecology” and related terms is a great way to explore the wider literature. Although much academic work requires a subscription or exorbitant fees to access single articles, a request to the author will usually result in a copy. Most researchers are eager to share their work with those who are not able to access it otherwise.

- Key texts on Political Agroecology and Transitions: Examples include *Political Agroecology: Advancing the Transition to Sustainable Food Systems*³¹ by Manuel González de Molina and co-authors, and *Agroecology: Science & Politics*³² by Peter Rosset and Miguel Altieri. A bibliography of articles related to agroecology transition³³ was produced by the AgroecologyNow! Group at the Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience and features many relevant articles for a transformative agroecology. Recent special issues in the *Journal of Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems* focus on scaling agroecology³⁴ and agroecology transformations.³⁵
- HLPE Report: Although it does not emphasize transformative agroecology as the term is used here, the report on “Agroecological and Other Innovative Approaches...”³⁶ by the High-Level Panel of Experts of the United Nations Committee on World Food Security devoted considerable space to the transition to agroecology and more sustainable food systems. Table 4 on page 63 of that report demonstrates clearly that systems that the authors associate with agroecology (organic agriculture, agroforestry, permaculture and food sovereignty) have superior outcomes for food security and nutrition.
- Academic Societies: Several academic societies offer regular conferences or newsletters that contain information about agroecological research that may not be written up in books or journal articles yet. These include: The Latin American Scientific Society for Agroecology SOCLA³⁷, The Agroecology Research Action Collective (ARC)³⁸ in the US and Agroecology Europe³⁹.
- Research Project Websites: Many projects of different scales have generated websites that focus on particular topics related to agroecology. For example,

the “SECuRE Project”⁴⁰ focuses on soil ecological function restoration to enhance agroecosystem services in rainfed rice cropping systems in agroecological transition.

7. Subscription based resources: blogs, newsletters and magazines

Readers can subscribe to a number of different blogs, newsletters and magazines that focus specifically on agroecology. These often share notices related to the other resource types (e.g. case studies, policy analysis, courses) as well as original analysis, commentary and other items.

- Farming Matters⁴¹ (Figure 6) was published by ILEIA in multiple languages over the last two decades and – particularly in the last five years – focused on the political and social as well as the practical dimensions of agroecology. Back-issues and recent special issues on agroecology are great resources, archived online.

- The Nyeleni Newsletter⁴² is pitched as, “the voice of the international movement for Food Sovereignty” and aims to strengthen “the grassroots of the movement”, by providing accessible material on key issues. Most of the back-issues are available online and have articles that speak directly to agroecology.

- Revista Soberanía Alimentaria⁴³ is a Spanish language website that focuses on food sovereignty, biodiversity and cultures.

- FAO’s agroecology newsletter⁴⁴ shares information on upcoming events, publications and other news regarding FAO’s work on agroecology and also other items from the wider global field of agroecology.

- Regional or nationally focused subscription-based resources include, in Latin America, the magazine Biodiversidad⁴⁵, which combines the practical and the political, emphasizing the link between those who work to “manage biodiversity” with cultural diversity and self-government, especially local communities: indigenous and African-American women and men, peasants, fishermen and small producers. In the European context, ARC2020⁴⁶ provides a monthly newsletter on agri-food, rural issues, environmental policy and practices around Europe. In the US context, Civil Eats⁴⁷ provides agroecology-tagged articles in a journalist style that often speaks to scientific, social and political issues.

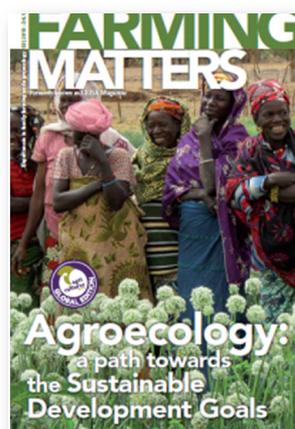


Figure 6: Farming Matters magazine provides many important practical case studies of agroecology.

Concluding thoughts

The growing body of rich and diverse publications and resources is indicative of a robust effort to advance a politically-rooted agroecology as a transformative paradigm for social justice and sustainability in food systems. Yet, it is important to think critically about the resources available, as many of these are framing agroecology in subtle ways that can redefine its meaning, reduce the political dimensions and serve to co-opt agroecology to reinforce the status quo.

The recent uptake of agroecology, including by institutions like the FAO and some national governments, has led to a backlash with agroecology as the object of fierce attacks and confrontations. These interventions are directly obstructing agroecology (e.g. blocking policy) and also serve to confuse policy-makers and citizens so that they cannot distinguish easily among different pathways. This division mirrors the stark divide in the international arena between actors intent on preserving extractive food systems that focus on profit-making and exploitative practices versus those seeking equitable, sustainable and democratic food systems.

While many of the publications and sources reviewed here are excellent resources, it is also important to point out that many of the sources of information and inspiration for agroecology are embedded in local practices that have not been documented at all, even though they may be powerfully transformative for local actors. Local actors may not refer to their work as agroecology; therefore, it is important to connect with and learn about the kinds of political and practical work on food systems that people are doing with their hearts, heads and hands in each locale. It is also important to remember that different kinds of organizations, institutions and authors have vastly uneven funding and power to produce these publications, with former colonial governments holding most of the money and doling it out very selectively based on their own interests. This means that organizations with deep pockets such as corporations and FAO can produce slick products with wide marketing reach that often overshadow grassroots movements and local voices.

In order to deepen the agroecological perspective, readers should consider putting their practices and views on agroecology into conversation with complementary fields that can help to enrich the political understandings and dimensions of agroecology. Readers are invited to connect with the wide body of thinking, scholarship and action in fields such as decoloniality, solidarity and sharing economies, feminism, degrowth and post-development alternatives. These approaches can help to expand the horizons and challenge the assumptions of those advancing agroecology by viewing the world through feminist, anti-capitalist, decolonial, post-developmental, non-Western and other lenses (see Gonzales & Mignolo on page 157 in this book). Linking agroecology to these wider struggles to transform the powerful cultures and structures that oppress and subvert emerging alternatives can build momentum for the deep processes of transformation needed to build a more just and sustainable world. This guide presents only a snapshot in time. The field of agroecology resources is constantly growing and there will be both resources we have missed and ones that are yet to come, in different languages and from a wider range of sources.

We invite readers to visit and contribute to www.AgroecologyCompass.net where the authors offer an evolving webspace with a more in-depth curated guide and a more comprehensive database.

Endnotes

- 1 available in EN, ES and FR, <http://www.agroecologynow.com/video/ag/>
- 2 CropLife, an organization that represents biotechnology industry, have created an infographic, webpage and quiz on agroecology and is one of the most glaring example of co-optation. Their construction of agroecology clearly advances corporate interests, redefines agroecology so it is open for indiscriminate use of chemicals and violates many of the principles of agroecology.
- 3 <https://www.foodsovereignty.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Declaration-of-the-International-Forum-for-Agroecology-Nyeleni-2015.pdf>
- 4 https://www.cidse.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/EN_The_Principles_of_Agroecology_CIDSE_2018.pdf
- 5 <http://www.fao.org/3/i9037en/i9037en.pdf>
- 6 <http://www.fao.org/3/ca5602en/ca5602en.pdf>
- 7 <https://www.agroecology-pool.org/methodology/>
- 8 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/21683565.2015.11130765>
- 9 <https://afsafrika.org/case-studies-agroecology/>
- 10 <https://larevueltaalcampo.wordpress.com/>
- 11 <https://whyhunger.org/images/agro/agroecology-putting-food-sovereignty-in-action.pdf>
- 12 <https://ma.boell.org/fr/2018/11/29/femmes-et-agro-ecologie-en-afrique>
- 13 <https://ali-sea.org/online-library/>
- 14 https://infoagro.net/sites/default/files/2018-06/Persp45_Sabourin_ENG.pdf
- 15 <http://www.fao.org/agroecology/policies-legislations/en/>
- 16 <https://ali-sea.org/online-library/>
- 17 <https://viacampesina.org/en/schools/>
- 18 <https://www.eurovia.org/eaken/>
- 19 <https://agroecologia.espora.org>
- 20 <https://ipam-global.org>
- 21 <https://afhvs.wildapricot.org/Degree-programs>
- 22 <http://www.sustainableaged.org/projects/degree-programs/>
- 23 <http://www.enoas.org/index.php?page=7>
- 24 <https://www.eur-organic.eu/en/79292>
- 25 <https://www.agroecology-europe.org/study-train/study-programme-der/>
- 26 <https://www.agroecologynow.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/MappingForFoodSystemChangeSep26.pdf>
- 27 <https://mapadaagroecologia.org>
- 28 <https://www.communityseednetwork.org/map>
- 29 <https://www.openfoodnetwork.org/find-your-local-open-food-%20network/>
- 30 <https://scholar.google.com>
- 31 <https://www.crcpress.com/Political-Agroecology-Advancing-the-Transition-to-Sustainable-Food-Systems/Molina-Petersen-Pena-Caporal/p/book/9781138369221>
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- 38 <https://agroecologyresearchaction.org/>
- 39 <https://www.agroecology-europe.org/>
- 40 www.secure.mg
- 41 <https://www.ileia.org/about-farming-matters/>
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