Peasant Agroecology
according to ECVC

Peasant Agroecology is a way of life
Index

Peasant Agroecology according to ECVC  

The eleven principles of Agroecology

Agroecology case studies
Agroecology and animal integration
Farm Revenons à nos moutons (Back to our sheep)
Toy Viam, Corrèze, France

Agroecology, gender and maternity
Collective farming in support of gender equality
Bizkaigane Farm - Basque Country, Spain

Agroecology, mechanisation and innovation
Farm Hack - United Kingdom

Agroecology and animal mechanization
The modern animal traction movement

Agroecology and access to market
Fair wages, solidarity payment and other farmers initiatives
Eerlijk Loon (Fair Wages) book - The Netherlands

Agroecology, diversification and farming practices
RaiZen Farm - Vadu Pașii, Buzău county, Romania

Agroecology, collective farming and creating rural-urban links
Bienvenwerder Collective Farm - Bienenwerder, Germany

Agroecology and work with public authorities
Toekomstboeren in dialogue
with the Dutch Minister of Agriculture - The Netherlands
Peasant Agroecology according to ECVC

Peasant Agroecology is a way of life

Peasant agroecology supports life-enriching systems and opposes life-alienating systems. It offers solutions to the major environmental, social, economic and political challenges we are facing today. It is a living practice, as well as a science and a socio-political movement, built and fostered by people over thousands of years. For aeons it has proven to be the most just and sustainable way of sustaining (human) life on planet Earth. Peasant agroecology deeply connects us with our relationships and our feelings toward others and our natural environment. As such, it contributes to the creation of balanced societies embedded within a healthy world. Peasant agroecology does not only concern agriculture but the transformation of our society built upon collective rights, customs and laws acknowledging farmers and communities rights to self-determination and autonomy.

Ecologies of production and knowledge. Peasant agroecology works together with nature and not against nature. Peasant agroecology is based on principles of biodiversity and believes that soil does not require external inputs to be productive, healthy, and resilient. It celebrates the synergies between different plant and animal species to enhance ecological services and agricultural productivity. It does not support the use of monocultures, GMO crops, patents over seeds, plants and animals, and the use of agrochemicals.

Peasant agroecology is rooted in traditional farmer knowledge and has contributed since the beginning of agricultural practices to better understand the relationship between food production and the surrounding ecosystems: agriculture is fully integrated in ‘the territory’ which includes the environmental but also social and cultural dimension. Peasant agroecology respects diverse and regional knowledge based on horizontality and justice principles combined with scientific knowledge. It relies on farmer-to-farmer, intergenerational, and experiential learning processes and legitimizes the role of emotions and feelings in agricultural practices.
An alternative economic paradigm. Peasant agroecology deliberately stands outside the current economic paradigm: it is based on principles of solidarity, cooperation, and exchange and strives for local and circular alternatives such as short food chain systems. Economic activities develop within ecological boundaries and are driven by local conditions and local needs rather than capitalist interests and growth at any cost. Most important, in peasant agroecology, small-scale food producers are respected for playing a leading role in the economy and are fairly rewarded for their work. Peasant agroecology empowers local and circular markets building resilience and autonomy from global corporate markets.

A social and political movement for people’s rights and power. Peasant agroecology puts the rights of small-scale food producers as a priority on the agenda. All small-scale food producers should have free access and rights of decision over seeds, land and the commons like water, air, culture and knowledge. Peasant agroecology permanently challenges the structures of power in society and transforms the power of domination into a leadership defined by those who care for the whole. Peasant agroecology represents a movement towards equality and emphasizes the importance of women, the youth, and systematically marginalized communities in production and the life of future generations. As such, it can ally with other movements which fight for social, environmental, and climate justice.

Peasant Agroecology is essential for a lasting peaceful existence of all life on Earth

IN SHORT:
Peasant agroecology is a way of life
We support life-enriching systems and oppose life-alienating systems

Ecologically we work together with nature and not against it. We cherish synergies between living beings and prioritize traditional farmer knowledge and participatory, transgenerational, and experiential learning processes

Economically we base our principles on forms of economy that is truly beneficial for communities: solidarity, circular, regional, within ecological boundaries

Politically we put the small-scale food producers rights as a priority on the agenda and we form a movement towards equality and social justice for all people worldwide
The Summary Of The 11 Principles Of Agroecology

The “Peasant Agroecology According to ECVC” document is founded upon the joint work of the Agroecology working group and Youth articulation of the ECVC and based on the Nyéléni International Forum for Agroecology, Pillars and Principles\(^1\) with ECVC Agroecology Declaration\(^2\). Below you’ll find a summary of the 11 principles.

1. Fluid in application across territories
2. Ecological and low-input
3. Political, social, and determined by communities
4. Collective rights and access to the commons
5. Horizontality and diversity of learning
6. Spiritual and non commodified connection to the land
7. Solidarity and collective action
8. Autonomous and fair, based upon a solidarity economy
9. Challenging and transforming global power structures
10. Equal power and remuneration across genders
11. Opportunities for rural youth

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Agroecology Case Studies

Agroecology and animal integration
*Farm Revenons à nos moutons (Back to our sheep)*
*Toy Viam, Corrèze, France*
*revenonsmoutons.free.fr*

How can you build a sustainable livestock farming model based on local natural resources, revitalising marginal rural areas? Lise Rolland and Fabrice Merhand settled as sheep breeders on the Limousine Mountain, in France, to address this goal. Together with local and national associations and through peer-to-peer exchanges they are part of the development of a low-input breeding system, also known as frugal agro-pastoralism.

Modern breeding systems use high-cost, grain-rich diets for ruminants, to hugely increase meat and milk production. However, by maximizing the grazing of their sheep herd and fattening their lambs and ewes only on pasture, breeders can dramatically lower their need for fodder -from 350 to just 150 kg per year per animal- and totally avoid the use of grain as feed. Consequently, they will use less machinery and fuel and do not need to fertilize any mown grasslands.

Like any other agroecological system, frugal breeding requires social innovation, notably a deep knowledge of local ecosystems as moors, peat bogs and woods. Since grasslands do not grow all year, Lise and Fabrice must harmonise with the seasons in their region: sheep...
graze grasslands during spring and autumn, moors and peat bogs during summer and underwood and forest fallows during winter. Because the production cycles have to fit the local resources, breeders must choose a locally adapted breed. Pastoral education is important: cattle have to get used to a diverse and complex diet, including ligneous plants. This happens through cubs’ maternal education, but it also depends on the shepherds’ skills.

This prompted breeders to coordinate with each other, creating Pastoral Groups to collectively hire salaried shepherds to access summer pastures in the mountain, manage winter transhumance and promote training on frugal agro-pastoralism. Mutually beneficial exchanges with other figures are fostered, such as grazing the properties of vine growers and forest owners, and new land management systems are developing: some associations are buying abandoned peat bogs, in order to rent them at low prices to Pastoral Groups.

Farmers like Lise and Fabrice are not trying to increase the productivity of their cattle, but rather the efficiency of their work: they produce less but it costs far less per kilogram of meat. It has been demonstrated that a longer and grass-based fattening cycle leads to higher quality meat. However, products from frugal agro-pastoral farms often do not fit the standards of the conventional market. This has encouraged producers to develop their own alternative markets. Most of them sell their meat and dairy products directly to local consumers, but this could be really challenging in poorly populated rural areas.

**Message from farmer to farmers by Lise and Fabrice:**

Agro-pastoral systems provide a real alternative to what is happening in mid-mountain areas: highly mechanised and industrialised production on one hand, and abandonment and depopulation on the other. With the right efforts, it is possible to revitalise rural communities generating employment in these deserted areas, also conserving valuable agro-ecosystems through pastoralism.
Agroecology, gender and maternity

Collective farming in support of gender equality
Bizkaigane Farm, Basque Country, Spain
www.bizkaigane.eus

Bizkaigane is an agroecological cooperative project located in the Basque Country, north of Spain, in a village called Errigoiti. This collective project, established in 1983, has been a member of Ehne Bizkaia for a long time. The cooperative consists of 12 dairy farmers. They described their project as a ‘direct sale dairy transformation initiative’.

Like many other small-scale farm projects, Bizkaigane has been transforming and adapting their production methods. Initially, the project sold cows milk, and later added cheese. They also introduced sheep into the project. Nowadays, they produce around 6 different types of cheese, some yoghurt and raw milk distributed by the farm itself, 2 weekly markets, house by house delivery and food coops. With around 40 cows and 200-300 sheep, they are farming 100 hectares of land. Only 10 are owned by the cooperative, so they rent the other 90 hectares.

A combination of sheep and cows already implies some of the agro ecological principles. They go several steps further by using electric fences that are moved daily. This practice allows the animals to pasture (first the cows and then the sheeps) using a mechanism that is very easy to move. This temporary fencing is a great solution for dividing your pasture into different smaller plots, optimizing several types of grazing. The fencing is not only used in open fields but also as a forest management practice. The animals graze within the bushes, scrubs and forest, cleaning away the lower, mid-size vegetation of the forest they are farming.
Besides agroecological farming practices, Bizkaigane is a great example of gender inclusivity in farming. They are a good example of how combining parenthood and farming can strengthen the cooperative itself. Amets, one of the farmers and cooperative members shared several insights about this process with us.

Due to the pregnancy of two members of the project, they had to reschedule the work days. They proposed a reduction in working hours for the pregnant members so that they could continue to farm through their pregnancy.

With the support of a farmers workers union and a long internal process to adapt working conditions and introduce new members to the cooperative, Bizkaigane not only supported pregnant women within the project but also emphasized and introduced new young farmers to the project. The project grew from 7 to 12 members and most of the members agreed on reducing working hours in order to support the pregnant women but also because several young farmers also wanted to work part time.

What could have become an issue of gender inequality leading to the exclusion of women farmers, pregnancy and maternity, became an improvement in working conditions, an increase in cooperative members and a community supported solution based on solidarity. In addition, by increasing the size of the team, this process meant less individual working hours. This is a direction that all projects should take for a social transformation.
Agroecology, mechanization and innovation

Farm Hack, United Kingdom
farmhack.org

Farm Hack UK is a community-led platform for agroecological knowledge exchange. Volunteers share and develop open-source farming tools at in-person events and online through the Tool Library, forum, and blog. The platform is not only for farmers, but any type of technology creators - like-minded engineers, designers, architects, programmers, hackers, DIYers - to come together to ‘hack’ and apply their collective ingenuity and develop technologies together.

Farm Hack was first started in the USA, generated out of a wider ‘right to repair’ movement. In the UK, there have been twelve in-person events since 2015. Farm Hack exists to reduce dependency on corporate tech providers for machinery inputs. Working towards technology sovereignty, and a creative commons for agroecology, Farm Hack is a platform to improve tools, generate new ideas, increase the confidence and capacity of small-scale farmers to build their own farm tools.

The project recognises a long tradition in small-scale agriculture of tinkering, inventing, tweaking, making, improving, fixing things that break. On their website, Farm Hack lays out some design principles: using standardized components, transparency, modularity, adaptability, disassembly, replicability, affordability. The collective ingenuity and experimentation
of a 2019 event in the Thames Valley built prototypes of a vacuum seeder for a module seed tray, a wheelbarrow mounted flame weeder and a stove for creating biochar without welding.

Farm Hack works on a principle of sustainability, by putting ‘biology before steel and diesel’. It is a platform for all ages, but has a special relevance for young and beginning farmers (‘new entrants’). It is an intergenerational knowledge exchange, representing a place for new entrants and more established farmers to learn from one another.

In the spirit of hacking, the project welcomes tweaks to the model. This has generated its own response to gender equality issues; there have been three ‘Lady Hacks’. While farm hack is about technology, the social and political elements are equally important.

Farm Hack puts power back in the hands of the people who are working on the ground. It operates with no hierarchy. Garethe Hughes, a volunteer with Farm Hack, notes that Farm Hack might resonate with more conventional farmers in the UK, but the relative isolation of the agroecology community has prevented a wide-spread crossover between the mainstream agricultural community and agroecological farmers. He also observes how Market Gardens are poorly served by technology, and he sees Farm Hack as a necessary solution for this gap.

Public policy in the UK is increasingly focused on bigger machinery, and fewer people in the fields. Farm Hack has arisen from a need to serve agroecological practitioners with the tools that policy fails to provide.

In the words of Garethe Williams, a volunteer with Farm Hack:

Farm Hack is open source: you can take the ethos of bringing farmers and growers together to help each other solve their problems and apply it in any way you like. This is no problem that can’t be Hacked, there is no wrong way to do a Farm Hack!
**Agroecology and animal mechanization**

**The modern animal traction movement**

The use of physical power from domestic animals to help farmers goes back to the earliest history of agriculture. In Europe, animal traction is based mostly on the use of horses and bovines, but a variety of animals are used across the many regions of the world. In the Global South animal traction is an integral part of family and agroecological agriculture, but in the European context it is often seen as an ineffective, unnecessary and folkloric practice. However, even in the European region, there are many communities who still use animal traction for agriculture, forestry and transport. There is enormous historical, cultural and peasant knowledge linked to these practices.

The modern animal traction movement is led by several international associations, including Prommata, which was founded in France and spread to Switzerland, Belgium, Italy, the Basque Country, and many more countries outside Europe. The movement is based on grassroots innovation and peasant-to-peasant transmission of simple, replicable, adaptable, and efficient farming knowledge and technologies. The aims are to:

- a) promote peasant agriculture
- b) use versatile instruments to farm in difficult areas while respecting the soil,
- c) avoid producing polluting emissions
- d) achieve a decent revenue.

There is a diversity of animal traction traditions, tools, and methods all over the world. Retracing the local knowledge of elderly farmers, it is possible to discover whether in one
area horses were mainly used for powerful work in the open field; mules or donkeys for precision work in inaccessible areas; or whether oxen were preferred to work deep, heavy soils rich in clay.

It enriches the farm cycle to reintroduce working animal husbandry to horticulture. The heart of the animal traction philosophy lies in the careful planning of the farm: animal work must be useful and perfectly integrated, whether it is to transport wood from a forest, to work a vegetable field, or even to work the soil in a vineyard.

Peasant autonomy, appropriate technology, and affordability of investments are just some of the aspects addressed by the modern animal traction approach. Small scale farmers have to maximise inputs from their physical labour. In addition, new entrants often set up in marginal locations, where land price is lower but mechanisation is less profitable or even impossible. The modern animal traction movement has developed in response to these problems.

The opportunities of animal traction – to reduce dependence on fossil fuels, to work areas that cannot be mechanised – should be embraced by institutions to promote agroecology. Many young people see working with animals as a hope to work on abandoned land.

Farmer to farmer message:

Communities where animal traction is being developed again are experiencing new curiosity, dialogue and collaboration between farmers. Knowledge about modern animal traction must be enriched all together! Maybe your neighbours will think you are a bit crazy for a year or two, but when they start asking for your help, together with your mule, to carry wood from their abandoned woodland, then you will understand that agroecology has broken through.
Agroecology and access to market

Fair wages, solidarity payment and other farmers initiatives

Eerlijk Loon (Fair Wages) book, The Netherlands toekomstboeren.nl/eerlijkloon

Elske Hageraats is a horticulture farmer at a Dutch CSA called Ommuurde Tuin and an active member of Toekomstboeren. Hageraats wrote Eerlijk Loon book describing several payments based on solidarity and inclusion that directly help farmers to get a fair wage for their work.

“Solidarity Payments” is a term used for an alternative way of payment. The main value is a fair price for farmers or producers based on solidarity, where consumers can pay according to their capacities. Solidarity goes in both directions; farmers get a fair wage and the consumers can pay “whatever they want”, shifting a bit depending on which methodology the particular project is implementing. The solidarity concept has a holistic approach, and can include the earth, environment, health, future generations and much more. The main farming approach is based on agroecological practices where the community plays a crucial role.

Three of these solidarity payment types:

**Sliding scale:** a price range is set up by the farmers having a minimum and maximum amount. Opposing a fixed price accessible only by wealthy people, the sliding scale empowers people with lower incomes to pay the minimum amount, and people with higher incomes to pay bigger quantities. This payment is based on solidarity since bigger contributions means people with lower incomes are not excluded from the project.

Some farmers allocate a “dot” in the middle of the scale giving indicators such as minimum wage, project budget goal or others in order to give the members an estimation.
Bid round “Bieterunde”: originated in Germany. A bid round is a solidarity payment method where farmers share in advance the total amount needed for the annual budget. Ideally, this is with a detailed budget document explaining where each cost goes. Then, each individual anonymously pays the amount they want to contribute. If the total amount needed is not achieved, the farmers will contact the members again and the bidding round will start again until they reach the predetermined fee.

Pay-as-you-like: In this case, the CSA member pays whatever they want at their own discretion. The members can pay depending on their financial capacities and willingness to contribute to the project. Farmers can always give “payments indications” or set up a minimum price.

There are also other types of solidarity payments, based on subsidies, donations or payments based on hourly wages. Elske itself implements the pay-as-you-like method in the CSA she is part of, which strengthens the importance of transparency about salaries and material costs.

“We give full trust to people so they can choose how much they want to pay; this is full inclusivity. Members pay at the beginning of the year with the option of paying quarterly.”

Solidarity is also shared with friends and volunteers since they have access to lots of food. Normally, this will be the damaged and weirdly shaped produce but of course, it is as tasty and nutritious as the rest.
RaiZen is an agroecological farm situated in the south-eastern part of Romania. It is close to the village of Vadu Pașii, Buzău county. It has been a member of Eco Ruralis since 2016. The farm consists of multiple plots owned by the farmer’s family or their neighbours, either located in proximity of the village or at some distance. RaiZen is a collective family farm that relies on the work of the farmer Bogdan Suliman, the help of his grandparents, financial and labour support from his brother and, finally, community support from the Eco Ruralis network.

In RaiZen, a number of agroecological practices and approaches coexist: agroforestry, permaculture, monoculture, and biodynamic planning. The farm cultivates 2,100 sqm in permaculture, of which a 900 sqm has no irrigation at all. Monoculture is practiced on 1.7 ha and the rewilding of 1.5 ha in a mountain area is progressing. Mixed crops and biodiversity are strongly promoted: On RaiZen, more than 200 species of plants and trees are present to attract animals. Thanks to years of agroecological practice, there is increased climate resilience and a reduction of soil erosion at the farm. Although located in different plots, the entire farm is considered to be connected. Seed saving and reseeding, soil restoration, biomass and wood valorisation are practised. Animals are essential in the farm ecosystem: ducks has been introduced to eat snails and insects, to keep the garden clean and to provide eggs.
The theoretical and practical knowledge that allows Bogdan Suliman to manage the farm is the result of a lot of field experience and experiments. In a context of lack of official training, peer-to-peer exchanges developed through Eco Ruralis and its Seed Working Group plays a key role. RaiZen works as a demonstrative farm for members’ meetings, and a peasant seed house is being developed there. The farm neither sells nor plans to sell products on the market but rather supplies the needs of the extended family. Indeed, the demand for healthy food in continuity with vanishing local traditions is at the heart of the project. Cost minimisation, peasant autonomy and food sovereignty are RaiZen guiding principles, together with joyful experimentation and research of body and soul health.

On the political level, RaiZen is engaged in agroecology promotion and in the defence of peasant rights, particularly in opposition of the Romanian national seed law, that doesn’t allow the development of a peasant seeds system.

**Message from farmer to farmers by Bogdan Suliman:**

**Understanding how energy is moving in our lives and around us can bring us to an easier and more wise way of growing our own food and using natural resources. The best way to move forward is to use the knowledge we gather from our peasants and grandparents and the technology available today- or to create a new one based on peasant knowledge- so we can keep our environment healthy for our future generations.**
Agroecology, collective farming and creating rural-urban links

Bienenwerder Collective Farm - Germany
hofbienenwerder.org

Bienenwerder Collective Farm is situated in the Märkisches Oderland district, to the east of Berlin. It is close to urban areas. This farming collective aims to build something that is different from the normative, traditional, family-farm structure, by living and organising collectively.

The farm has a diversity of animals: five Pinzgauer mother cows and their offspring graze a standing pasture all year round. There are also up to 25 dairy goats, 4 breeding rams, and working horses, Vorwerk chickens, ducks and bees. The farm uses horses to work the land, avoiding the use of heavy technology dependent on fossil energy. They also serve the farm for riding, transporting loads and moving wood.

There are about 3 hectares for organic vegetable cultivation on the sandy Brandenburg soil, with more than 40 different crops and 250 varieties. There is a focus on heritage varieties.

The vegetables are sold to self-organising vegetable groups in the region and organic shops in Berlin, most of which are collectively operated in order to challenge the growing dominance of organic supermarket chains. By doing this, the farm also avoids intermediaries which, to a certain extent, helps the farm determine the prices themselves. It is important that these organic shops strive for forms of organisation that go beyond the mainstream. This means:

a) flattening hierarchies as much as possible so that all workers have same rights and obligations;

b) a collective way of organising the shop.
In parallel, the farm directly supplies vegetable groups, which function in a similar way to Community Supported Agriculture (CSA). Through this direct route to customers, the farm is able to deliver vegetables to a wider variety of social classes. Once a week, each group receives a vegetable delivery and they are responsible for sharing it among themselves. They pay a fixed monthly fee, giving the farm more security in the event of poor harvests and for financial planning. They also come during the growing season to support the farmers, meaning the farm can usually count on help during work peaks. This also gives the farmers an opportunity to talk to the members about the farm and their collective way of working; creating an interesting exchange by bringing urban and rural ways of life together.

The farm site was bought at auction in 2004 by a group of friends. The group has changed and enlarged over the years. The collective consists of around 10 new entrant members. Every year, the farmers have ecological year volunteers and apprentices. This is an important step to support young people interested in agriculture. The farm hopes they will be inspired by the unconventional farm structure. It provides an opportunity to see how a collective model can work, as well as to become aware of its challenges. The collective is sensitive to gender and sexual aspects, trying to regularly discuss and question the patriarchal patterns that everyone carries. Everyone lives, learns and works on the farm under the principle of “No masters, no servants”.

Agroecology and work with public authorities

Toekomstboeren in dialogue with the Dutch Minister of Agriculture
toekomstboeren.nl

Toekomstboeren (Future farmers) has been working at multiple levels to grow the agroecology movement in the Netherlands. With around 400 members, the association has multiple working groups, including the commons, the international movement, the CSA network and collaborators with local/national authorities. This final group has been working with the National Minister of Agriculture, in order to push for policy change, and land use rights.

In the Netherlands, there is a law which gives power to land-owners, dehumanizing farmers’ work and their right to long-term access to land. Land owners are able to give a one year rent contract for their farmland, which shows how laws, authorities and policy makers are disconnected from the farmers’ reality.

The short timeline contract gives no security nor respect for farmers, since this contract makes it impossible to implement their agroecological projects in the mid-term, and certainly not in the long-term. In 2019, Toekomstboeren started working with the National Minister of Agriculture to initiate a series of encounters. The goal is to propose that the minimum renting contract of farmland in the Netherlands should change from 1 to 9 years.
Moreover, land price in the Netherlands is determined by market prices without any protection for farmland, nor encouragement for sustainable initiatives. Data from 2020 shows that the Netherlands recorded the highest purchase price per hectare of arable land in Europe. Toekomstboeren is in discussion with the Minister of Agriculture in order to address the issue of high land prices. Toekomstboeren is promoting incentives to those proposing agroecological practices.

Those two points—renting contract years increase and accessible land price—are the two points over which the collective is engaging the authorities and lobbying for.

Toekomstboeren will continue the process of listening and inviting people working in the ministry to several farms. Understanding that policy making and law change are slow processes where patience and perseverance are crucial. Toekomstboeren are not alone, as the Dutch CSA network, the federation of Agroecology, grassroots collectives and big NGOs like Greenpeace or Friends of the Earth are collectively putting pressure on authorities to make these changes.