

# Lessons Learnt of the agroecological approach implemented under the Colombia programme between 2002 - 2017



## Introduction

This document summarises the systematization and key lessons learnt of the agroecological approach implemented by SWISSAID between 2002 and 2017. The purpose of the document is to contribute with the lessons learnt and good practices gained in Colombia to the debate, discussion and inspiration for other SWISSAID programmes and for a specialised audience in Colombia and Switzerland.

## Systematisation methodology

The methodology used by the consultants was as follows: Review of SWISSAID documents, visits to experimental sites and partner organisations, farm visits, group meetings with men and women from the partner organisations and workshops with SWISSAID team members.

## The agroecological approach promoted by SWISSAID Colombia

The systematizations based on the experiences of grassroots organisations supported by SWISSAID are a fundamental contribution to the development of the agroecological approach as a science, productive practice and socio-political movement. Agroecology promoted by SWISSAID is not the sum of a series of agricultural techniques applied in the field. It is a vision that seeks to provide local solutions to address poverty and the vulnerability of small scale farmers. The promotion of agroecology is based on the



exchange of knowledge and the use of local knowledge. It is about finding the right technology to strengthen what people already have. Agroecology promotes the recovery of indigenous and ancestral seeds to strengthen food sovereignty and cope with transgenic crops. First, SWISSAID helps the farmers to draw up a farm plan, showing the "current" system, then the farm's goals are projected by specifying what measures are necessary to improve the soil, the nutrient cycle and access to water. It is always considered what farmers can do, what the local resources are and what SWISSAID can contribute. Plans (maps) of the region are prepared to assess the social, economic, productive and biophysical dimensions and existing problems.

## Lessons learnt

**Accompaniment:** SWISSAID's support is essential for the effectiveness of the approach because, without it, agroecological practices, environmental protection and a territorial vision cannot be permanently established. Accompaniment is appreciated for its characteristics: permanent, horizontal relationships, transparency, long duration, continuity and consistency of support, respect for commitments, human warmth and trust.

In areas where armed violence has affected the population, **psychosocial support** and bereavement work have been much more important than technical support, although psychosocial support has not been SWISSAID's core focus of work. However, if these issues are not addressed, intervention to restore post-conflict food security with an agroecological approach may not have much impact. For a holistic and sustainable development, it is important to look beyond its core competences.



**Empowerment:** Agroecology contributed significantly to the empowerment of excluded population groups, such as women and youth. In some cases, agroecology has been the entry point of working with women. If social exclusion, unequal access and control over resources are not addressed, promoting agroecology will eventually strengthen men, and conditions of inequality within the family and community will persist.

**Importance of flexibility - adaptability of approach:** Flexibility is important in the process of developing specific proposals and actions with people and in different contexts. Decisions on how things are done, on what scale, with whom alliances are made, etc. are taken on a case-by-case basis. This not only ensures better ownership of the proposal by each of the partners, but also helps to address the diversity of situations and challenges related to the application of agroecology. It is important to identify locally adapted solutions.

**Documentation / research with academic partners to show strong results** as a contribution to the promotion of agroecology: While SWISSAID has a long history of agroecological success with its partner organisations, there is a lack of robust and solid evidence to explain the potential of the approach to improve agroecosystems and rural livelihoods. It is therefore important to generate tangible and quantitative information on the economic and productive results of agroecological projects.



**Agroecological production at farm level.** It is important to reflect with organizations on the importance of approaching the entire productive system from the perspective of agroecology. This undoubtedly demonstrates the strength of the approach. Success in agroecology requires a full-time agroecologist and not just applying some practices on a part of the farm, for example on the patio (in the yard). In such a case, the approach will not be implemented in the daily practice of farmers and will not be sustainable.

**Revolving credit funds** provided by SWISSAID have generally provided an excellent opportunity for agricultural experiments, for trial and error. Overall, despite the implementation difficulties, revolving funds are an important strategy, especially for agricultural projects with women. However, in order to be able to make the decision to use revolving funds or not and to avoid mistakes, a comprehensive analysis of the socio-cultural aspects of communities should be carried out, for example with regard to the repayment culture or the questions whether farmers in the region have benefited from any other type of credit before, etc.



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