ISAN MAGAZINE

FOR SUSTAINABLE FOOD SYSTEMS

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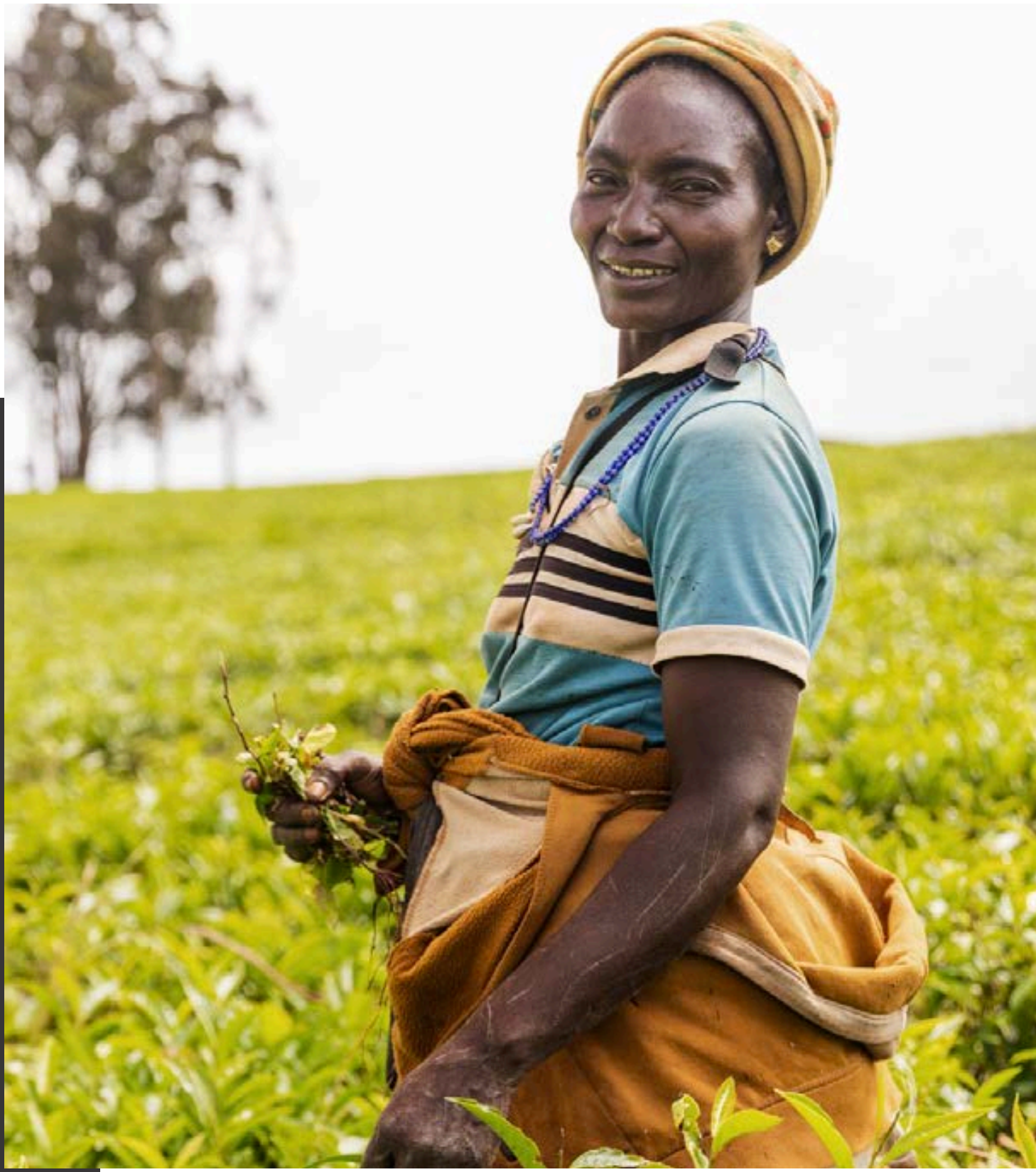

About ISAN Magazine

ISAN Magazine was born in 2021 out of the Knowledge Hub for Organic Agriculture and Agroecology in Southern Africa, a project funded by GIZ and operationalised by African NGOs through five knowledge hubs making up the Knowledge Centre for Organic Agriculture and Agroecology in Africa. The aim of the magazine is to support the emergence of a strong regional network for agroecology and organics in Southern Africa.

Today, we are working towards a sustainable business model that can continue its work to strengthen networks, keep practitioners and consumers informed and advocate for organic agriculture and agroecology as a framework for food systems in the region.

ISAN Magazine is dedicated to building a strong network of informed civil society actors and organisations across the southern African region to advocate for organic agriculture and agroecology as a framework for regional food and farming systems.

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Editor's Note

By Fortunate Nyakanda

ISAN Magazine is dedicated to building a strong network of informed civil society actors and organisations across the southern African region to advocate for agroecological principles and organic agriculture practices as a framework for regional food and farming systems.

Welcome to Issue 12 of Isan Magazine! As Southern Africa prepares for the new farming season, we focus on strengthening food resilience through diverse, sustainable farming systems and practices to navigate these challenges.

We explore biodynamic agriculture, a climate-adaptive and impactful approach, alongside agroecology principles that enhance sustainability. This edition also highlights the importance of indigenous crops and farmer-managed seeds, showcasing how traditional systems increase resilience against unpredictable weather. Equitable food distribution is a cornerstone of food security, and we delve into the role of mass markets in making food more accessible. Additionally, organic agriculture has deep roots in Africa's traditional farming systems, yet there are numerous challenges requiring scientific interventions. The Network of Organic Agriculture Researchers in Africa offers valuable insights on this front.

We hope this edition inspires you to embrace and advocate for sustainable farming practices. Together, we can pave the way for a more resilient future. Do not forget to share this issue widely!

Organically yours
Fortunate Nyakanda

Agroecology

Agroecology has become a hot topic in Africa as civil society organisations, NGOs and farmers in many African countries are demanding that national food and farming frameworks transition towards agroecology. This is to support a transition towards safe and sustainable food systems that are fair, equitable and inclusive. The overview below describes agroecology and its principles.

Elements of agroecology

Agroecology is a holistic approach to farming that integrates ecological principles with agricultural practices. The term was first introduced by American agronomist Basil Bensin in 1928, initially referring to the application of ecological principles to agronomic research.

Over the decades, agroecology has evolved to encompass a broader range of social, cultural and political dimensions, integrating traditional agricultural techniques with modern scientific knowledge. This field continues to grow, driven by the need for sustainable and resilient agricultural systems. The Elements of Agroecology, launched at a Food and Agriculture Organization symposium in 2018, provide a comprehensive framework for sustainable agriculture. These elements address environmental, social and economic challenges in food production systems, promoting practices that enhance food security while minimising environmental impacts.

Together, these elements build resilience in farming systems, enabling communities to adapt to changing conditions and challenges. They encourage biodiversity, which is vital for ecosystem health and sustainability. By emphasising farmers' knowledge and promoting social equity, these elements empower local communities and foster inclusive development.

10 Elements of Agroecology

- **Diversity:** Promoting biodiversity in farming systems is key to enhancing resilience to pests, diseases and climate variability. A diversity of crops and livestock improves soil health and ecosystem functioning.
- **Co-creation and Sharing of Knowledge:** It is important to engage farmers, scientists and other stakeholders in participatory processes to develop and share agricultural innovations.
- **Synergies:** Creating beneficial interactions among crops, livestock and other farm components fosters a self-sustaining ecosystem that leads to improved resource use efficiency and reduced reliance on external inputs.
- **Recycling:** Recycling nutrients and organic matter to improve soil health and reduce waste is important. Emphasising natural nutrient cycling reduces the need for synthetic fertilisers and minimises environmental impacts.
- **Resilience:** It is important to enhance the resilience of communities and ecosystems to withstand environmental and economic shocks. This includes adapting cropping systems to changing weather patterns and protecting against extreme weather events.
- **Efficiency:** Using resources more efficiently to reduce dependency on external inputs. This is especially critical in the face of climate change and water scarcity.
- **Human and Social Values:** Fostering equity, social wellbeing and improved rural livelihoods is important to ensure that all community members benefit from agricultural practices. This involves recognising the rights and contributions of marginalised groups, especially women and smallholder farmers.
- **Culture and Food Traditions:** Agroecology should support culturally appropriate diets and preserve traditional agricultural practices. Respecting and incorporating local cultural values and practices fosters community engagement and sustainability. This helps to ensure that agricultural practices are socially acceptable and culturally relevant.
- **Circular and Solidarity Economy:** Encouraging economic models that prioritise sustainability and social equity.
- **Responsible Governance:** There should be promotion of policies and institutions that support sustainable food systems.

Agroecology Fund's Learning Exchange on Agroecological Economies

Our managing editor, Stef Swanepoel, attended this exciting event on behalf of the Knowledge Hub for Organic Agriculture and Agroecology in Southern Africa (KHSA) in mid-September 2024 in Zimbabwe. The Agroecology Fund was founded in 2011 to amplify agroecological solutions through three overlapping niches:

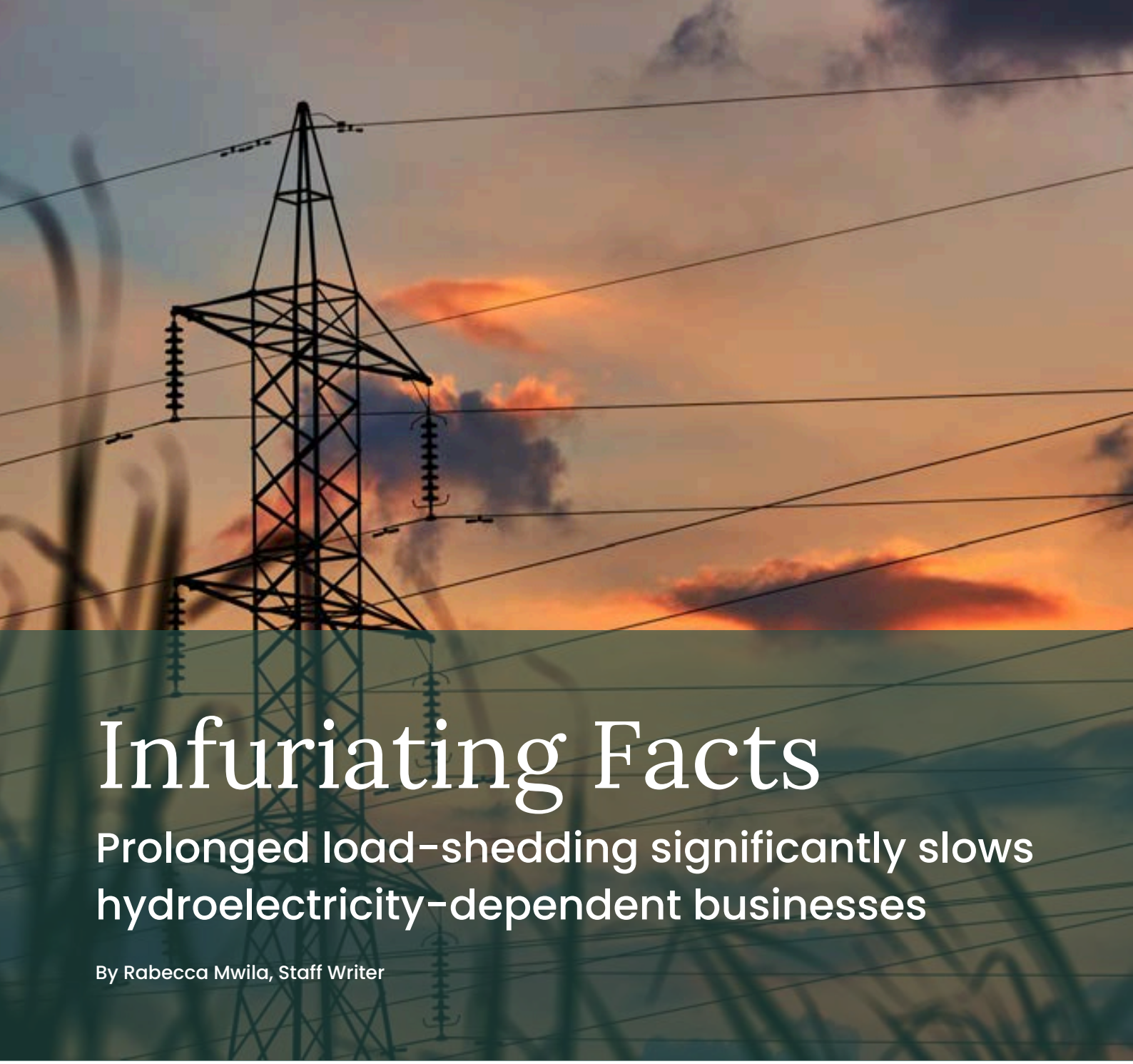
- Pool and grant funds in support of agroecology movements through a participatory process grounded by the expertise of grassroots advisors.
- Influence and collaborate with non-Agroecology Fund donors to support agroecology movements.
- Provide a learning platform to the Agroecology Fund community (donors, advisors and grantees).

The Fund does not offer open calls for funding but works through a trusted advisor network, to ensure that the maximum amount can reach projects on the ground.

The Agroecology Fund does not engage in policy advocacy but supports social movements and civil society organisations in their policy advocacy at local, national and international levels. The learning exchange brought together more than 120 organisations from across Africa to exchange their knowledge and experiences related to expanding agroecological economies. This vibrant four-day workshop was hosted by the living and learning Kafunda Village just outside of Harare.

"This was one of the most stimulating and inspiring workshops that I have ever attended. I came back full of passion and knowledge about territorial markets, the role of women in the informal food sector and agroecological economies at the city level," said Stef Swanepoel about the learning exchange.

Caption: Working group at the Agroecology Fund Learning Exchange, Kafunda Village, Zimbabwe Credit: Stef Swanepoel



Infuriating Facts

Prolonged load-shedding significantly slows hydroelectricity-dependent businesses

By Rabecca Mwila, Staff Writer

Zambia's economy is projected to grow by 2.3 percent in 2024 compared to 5.4 percent recorded in 2023. The slowdown is mainly attributed to the impact of the drought, which has significantly reduced electricity generation and subsequent agriculture production. According to the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), the adverse impact of climate change on Zambia's economy is projected to increase progressively over time and negatively affect food security. IFPRI further projected that in the absence of effective global mitigation efforts, climate change has the potential to reduce the country's Gross Domestic Products (GDP) significantly by the year 2050.

Currently, Zambia is grappling with power deficit challenges with reciprocal effects on the economy. The country has an installed hydropower generation capacity of about 3 356.6 MW, which is depleting rapidly due to drought conditions, creating an estimated 750 MW deficit. **This situation has triggered unprecedented load management of over 23-hours power rationing, the worst in the country's history.** Unless imports and off-grid power solutions supplement this shortfall, Zambia will continue facing challenges in meeting the 55% energy demand from mines and the 45% shared by other end-users.

It is an undeniable fact that the prerequisite for strong social and economic growth in the country is dependent on the existence of a reliable and sufficient energy supply.

According to the country's finance and national planning minister, Dr Situmbeko Musokotwane, during his recent presentation of the 2025 national budget, the country has experienced inflationary pressure over the past year, registering 15.6% in September 2024 from 13.1% in December 2023. Musokotwane observed that the main driver of increasing inflation is the drought experienced in the country, which he said resulted in increased food prices. The Kwacha-United States dollar exchange rate that depreciated by 2.8% has also been a factor in raising inflation. Despite a tightening of monetary policy, most businesses continue to be negatively affected by the power deficit.

Small and medium business entrepreneurs whose businesses are driven by hydroelectricity in various parts of Lusaka have lamented about the unprecedented load shedding with a call to government to devise a clear, reliable and timely plan to avert the energy crisis in the country. Fisho Mwale, founder and chair of Yalelo Fish Company states, "For us we continuously aspire to ensure that we put on the market fresh products of highest standard. Our problem is our consumers, they … buy in smaller quantities meaning we are pushing less tonnage on the market because people are buying on a day-to-day basis."

Poultry Association of Zambia Chief Executive Officer Dominic Chanda observed that the sector anticipates minimal growth and poor profit margins this year due to increased costs of production triggered by the switch to alternative sources of energy propelled by prolonged loadshedding. Chanda explained that the shift to alternative energy has tripled production costs leading to many producers shunning the business. He notes that, "For us the devastating impact has been on different levels along supply chain. If we concentrate on production perspective, we have hatchers who have gone into using diesel and other alternative sources of energy increasing three-times the cost of electricity." Chanda observed a significant reduction in the purchase of chickens during the period of extended loadshedding as consumers are no longer buying in bulk.

And Memory Banda, a Lusaka resident said power outages have compromised people's diet. "We can no longer buy highly perishable food products such fresh meat and fish because we have prolonged loadshedding," Banda said. There is no doubt that the negative impacts of climate change will continue to adversely affect Zambia's key economic sectors such as energy and agriculture affecting fiscal growth and health of the people.

Immediate climate action, including power imports, renewable energy mix and other responses must be employed to mitigate the impacts of the energy deficits.

Surviving The Drought

How El Niño and Climate Change are Reshaping Lives in Southern Africa

By Kabelo Moratwe, Citizen Journalist

The ongoing drought in Lesotho and other Southern African countries, exacerbated by the El Niño weather phenomenon, is a stark reminder of the deepening climate crisis and its devastating real-world impacts. For millions of people living in these regions, climate-induced hardships are not distant projections but a daily struggle for survival. What was once a predictable cycle of dry and wet seasons has morphed into increasingly severe droughts, threatening food security, livelihoods and social stability. El Niño, a natural climate event characterised by warmer-than-average sea surface temperatures in the Pacific, usually brings drier conditions to Southern Africa. However, the severity of the current drought is amplified by the broader and more alarming trend of climate change. According to the latest report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), extreme weather events like El Niño are becoming more frequent and intense due to global warming.

In Lesotho, where most of the population relies on subsistence agriculture, the impact has been devastating. Crops such as maize, wheat and sorghum are failing due to insufficient rainfall. This has led to widespread food shortages, leaving families in rural areas struggling to survive on meagre rations or dependent on inconsistent international food aid. “I plant different crops in my yard, from beans, beetroot, pumpkin, potatoes, and different kinds of spinach. Three years ago, my bean yield would fill three 20-litre buckets; but recently, I’m only getting one 10-litre bucket. I used to sell some of the vegetables in my garden to buy household things like soap but now the yield is too small, so we can’t sell. The situation has left my family suffering. We have not received any assistance from government in a long time, we are suffering due to this drought,” says Mmatiisetso Tsoinyane (54) a resident and smallholder in Ha Chonapase village in the Leribe District of Lesotho.

Farmers have reported catastrophic losses, with crop failure rates exceeding 60% in some areas. As livestock compete for what little water and grazing land remain, many smallholder farmers are selling their animals at depressed prices or watching them die. These losses have ripple effects, eroding the economic stability of farming communities and pushing them deeper into poverty.

“People living in the highlands are most vulnerable to the effects of this drought as they depend on water from the mountains for consumption, livestock, farming and to carry out household chores.

This has caused a lot of frustration in communities as there seems to be no sense of urgency to attend to the issue from the government. Young people have started initiatives for climate change mitigation and educating communities to be better prepared for such events, but they are experiencing challenges due to hideous administrative processes of having their movements recognized by government, this leads to even more frustration leading to young people migrating to lower lands to seek employment, leaving the continued lived reality behind," says Raymond Mosoue, Founder and President of Ray of Sunshine Foundation Lesotho.

As the drought continues, its social impacts are deepening. In Lesotho, rural-urban migration is increasing as families leave their homes in search of work, water and food. This migration is placing pressure on already overstretched urban infrastructures and services.

As wells dry up and sanitation deteriorates, communities are at greater risk of waterborne diseases. In Lesotho, the lack of access to clean water has led to outbreaks of cholera in some regions, further straining health services that are already under-resourced.

For millions of people, the climate crisis is not an abstract issue—it is a matter of life and death. The climate crisis is disproportionately affecting the most vulnerable populations, and without immediate and robust intervention, these communities will continue to suffer. If meaningful measures are not taken soon, future El Niño events, combined with rising global temperatures, will only bring more devastation. For the people of Lesotho, adapting to these new climate realities is a necessity, not a choice. Whether the world responds with the urgency and compassion required will determine the future of these regions.

Future of Food

Looking to the Past for the Future of Food: Indigenous Crops and Their Role in a Changing Climate

By Isaac Mafuel, Staff Writer, featuring insights from Kondwani Khonje, Agroecology Consultant in Malawi

As the effects of climate change intensify, farmers across Malawi are searching for sustainable ways to safeguard their livelihoods and ensure food security. The 2023/2024 growing season, heavily impacted by the El Niño phenomenon, brought erratic rains and prolonged dry spells, posing significant challenges for agriculture. To explore the role that indigenous crops can play in the future of Malawian agriculture, I sat down with Kondwani Khonje, an Agroecology Consultant with extensive experience working with farmer-managed seed systems. His insights shed light on why these crops, often perceived as traditional or outdated, may hold the key to surviving and thriving in an unpredictable climate.

The importance of farmer managed seed systems

"Seventy percent of farmers in Malawi depend on farmer-managed seed systems," Khonje explains, "This shows just how critical indigenous seeds are for ensuring food security." Farmer-managed seed systems, which rely on the exchange, selection and conservation of locally adapted seeds, have been passed down through generations. These systems offer farmers a variety of crops that are well-suited to the local environmental conditions and more resilient to climate variability.

Khonje points to the 2023/2024 growing season as proof of this resilience. While many commercial hybrid seeds failed to thrive under the erratic weather conditions brought by El Niño, indigenous crops performed relatively well. "Farmers who grew a diversified selection of indigenous crops and crop varieties managed to harvest better yields, even though these yields were below the potential of a normal season."

The role of indigenous crops in Mzimba North, Malawi

In Mzimba North, where Khonje has worked closely with local farmers, several indigenous crops stood out for their adaptability. Small grains like millet (wathanga, mutuwila) and sorghum (viswesi, vituwa) fared particularly well, as did indigenous maize varieties such as bingo, kafula, and kamupalapate. Legumes like Bambara nut (masumbi ya holo, ziswesi and zifipa) and groundnuts (tchailosi) also showed remarkable resilience, yielding more than their hybrid counterparts. "These crops have been cultivated for generations, using local knowledge to select varieties that can endure harsh weather," Khonje says. "They are deeply embedded in the community's agricultural heritage."

Shifting perceptions and challenges

Despite their proven benefits, indigenous crops are often seen in a negative light. "There's a misconception that these crops are 'backward' or less productive than modern hybrids," Khonje notes. "This perception has been reinforced by agricultural extension programmes that emphasise improved commercial crops, often to the detriment of local seed systems." In fact, Khonje argues that reliance on hybrids can sometimes lead to disaster in seasons like this one, where unpredictable weather disturbs monocultures. In contrast, the diversity and adaptability of indigenous crops provide a buffer against crop failure. Yet, a lack of political will and policies recognising farmers' rights to save, sell and exchange their own seeds threatens the survival of these indigenous seed varieties. "Many organizations in Malawi are working hard to conserve and multiply indigenous seeds, but there's limited national coordination. Without greater collaboration and stronger policy support, we risk losing these vital resources", he warns.

A path forward: revitalizing indigenous crops

Organizations supporting farmer-managed seed systems are focusing on improving access to and the quality of indigenous seeds. They are training farmers in good seed production practices, advocating for policy reforms, and raising awareness of the importance of maintaining seed diversity in the face of climate change. Khonje is optimistic that, with the right support, indigenous crops can once again take centre stage in Malawian agriculture. "We need to shift the narrative and see these crops as the future, not the past. They are resilient, nutritious and adaptable—exactly what we need in a changing climate."

Farming Systems

What is Biodynamic Agriculture?

By Fortunate Nyakanda, Editor-in-Chief, ISAN Magazine

Biodynamic agriculture is a holistic, ecological and ethical approach to farming. Developed in 1924 by Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner, who combined scientific understanding with spiritual insights, biodynamic agriculture is a sustainable farming system that views the farm as a living organism and that goes beyond organic methods to incorporate spiritual and cosmic principles. It aims to maintain the balance and health of a farming system where soil, plants, animals and humans are interconnected and seen as a self-sustaining system. Biodynamic practices also focus on the spiritual wellbeing of the farmer and vitality of farm products.

Key elements of biodynamic agriculture

- **Holistic approach:** Soil, plants, animals and humans are treated as interconnected parts of a single system.
- **Organic practices:** The philosophy and practices align with organic agriculture principles of Care, Ecology, Health and Fairness. Biodynamic farming prohibits use of synthetic pesticides, herbicides, chemical fertilizers, and genetically modified organisms (GMOs). Natural methods and biodiversity are used to control pests and diseases. Use of biodynamic sprays, such as hornsilica, are used to strengthen plants' natural immunity to pests and diseases and natural methods for pest control, such as planting insect repellent plants like marigold or neem around crop fields, are used.
- **Biodynamic preparations:** Unique to this method is the use of specific preparations to enhance soil and plant health. Specific herbs like yarrow, chamomile and stinging nettle as well as mineral preparations are used to enhance soil fertility and plant growth. The herb preparations are applied to compost, fields and crops to stimulate biological processes.
- **Astrological influences:** Astrological influences matter in biodynamic agriculture. Farmers must consider the influence of cosmic forces, particularly lunar and planetary rhythms. Farmers plant, cultivate and harvest crops in accordance with astrological calendars, believing that these natural rhythms affect plant vitality.
- **Biodiversity:** Farming practices focus on integrating a variety of plants and animals to create a balanced ecosystem. Animals contribute to soil fertility through manure, while diverse crops help maintain soil health and attract both beneficial insects and pollinators. The farms engage in seed saving, particularly with heirloom or local seed varieties, to maintain genetic diversity and produce plants that are well-adapted to local conditions.

To ensure that the principles of biodynamic farming are upheld and clearly communicated to consumers, biodynamic products are certified. This also helps to build trust, open market opportunities, protect the biodynamic brand and guarantees that producers are following sustainable and ethical farming practices. Certification is undertaken by organisations such as Demeter, Soil Association and Ecocert.

Smallholder farmers can apply biodynamic agriculture in their everyday lives by integrating its core principles and practices into their farming systems, even on a small scale. They can start by incorporating just one or two biodynamic practices, such as composting or following the lunar planting calendar, and gradually expand their biodynamic methods over time.

More info about biodynamic agriculture click here

Movements & Advocacy

In this section, we profile the innovative work undertaken by Southern Africa organisations, national movements and networks to systematically transform our food and farming systems. They work tirelessly at multiple levels to reawaken our connection with nature, raise awareness of the need for agroecological approaches to agriculture and engage with farmers, farmer organisations, policymakers, consumers and other stakeholders to support a transition to sustainable food systems.

People of Faith Caring for a Living Earth

By the Southern African Faith Communities' Environmental Institute (SAFCEI)

SAFCEI is a multi-faith environmental justice organisation supporting and working with faith leaders and their communities across Southern and East Africa to raise awareness, build skills and take decisive action on eco-justice, sustainable living and climate justice. www.safcei.org

SAFCEI works with people of all faiths and none in emphasising a spiritual and moral imperative to care for the Earth and all living creatures. The organisation actively speaks out on eco-justice issues, calling for greater leadership on ethical action and holding decision-makers accountable. **Through capacity building on advocacy and campaigning, and practical implementation of environmental change, SAFCEI supports faith leaders to be agents of change in their communities.**

The three programme areas that the organisation focuses on are Energy and Climate Justice, Food and Climate Justice, and Animal Justice. The Food and Climate Justice programme seeks to empower faith communities to better understand and to actively advocate for agroecological systems that promote sustainable consumption, nature-based farming and help to build climate resilience. Because the dominant industrial global food system is contributing to climate collapse, social injustices, ecological devastation and health pandemics, especially in the context of Africa, SAFCEI works to oppose destructive food systems including factory farming, industrial agriculture and genetically modified organisms (GMOs), while advocating for sustainable, equitable alternatives.

Through advocacy, campaigns and social networks, and leveraging partners' activities to reach wider faith communities and civil society networks, SAFCEI promotes the application of ecological principles to agricultural systems and practices. The programme also aims to raise awareness of the impacts of the industrialisation of food systems on human and environmental health, it aims to strengthen the capacity of faith leaders and their communities to advocate for food and climate justice, and to address key industrial food system policies and practices. The hope is that this will be done by practically supporting sustainable farming, ethical food production and transparency in food systems.

Caption: SAFCEI Faith leaders at seed swap event 2024 Credit: SAFCEI

Amongst other areas of work, faith leaders are trained on the principles of agroecology and food sovereignty, the importance of spiritual, nutritional and traditional connections with indigenous foods, and the impacts of the industrial food system on climate change and human and environmental health. SAFCEI also invites faith leaders to partake in seed swaps, during which the seeds of indigenous plants and foods are exchanged between faith leaders and organisers, along with tips for companion planting, harvesting, consumption and storage of indigenous foods.

Faith leaders are also supported in growing a sharing community through participation in the global Green Action Week campaign. During September, October and November, inspirational faith leaders from Kenya, Malawi, South Africa, Tanzania, Zambia and beyond are showcasing sustainable consumption practices through seed swaps, an indigenous food festival, marches, food gardening and tree planting, urban agriculture, best practice demonstration, and more.

Additionally, SAFCEI hosts Faith Leader Environmental Advocacy Trainings (FLEATs), which are peer-learning networks empowering people of faith leaders to advocate for the environment and justice in their communities.

Faith communities are calling on industry and government to radically transform the food system, to restore our spiritual connection to food and farming. We also urge decision-makers to implement ethical, social and environmentally just food governance. SAFCEI and faith leaders from across Africa have written an open letter calling on the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and other funders of the Green Revolution (AGRA) to acknowledge the failures of their interventions in Africa's food and farming systems and to make reparations for the resulting ecological and social damage. You can sign onto the open letter to the Gates Foundation, demanding reparations for damages caused by its Green Revolution.

Caption: SAFCEI Faith leaders at seed swap event 2024 Credit: SAFCEI

Water School Africa

Water School Africa (WSA) is a collaborative partnership focused on improving water literacy and promoting water-holding practices across Africa. By working closely with communities, WSA aims to enhance their ability to manage water resources in harmony with the natural water cycle, regenerate water catchments, and improve access to clean water for both people and ecosystems.

Vision and objectives

WSA is building a network that rallies individuals and communities around the theme of water conservation, seeking to grow a movement that fosters environmental resilience.

The initiative promotes rainwater harvesting and other sustainable water management techniques, empowering communities to become custodians of their water resources.

Principles of effectiveness

WSA's work is guided by six principles:

- **Community-centred focus:** Prioritising practices that allow communities to retain water in their landscapes.
- **Decentralisation**: Ensuring that processes are driven and owned by the communities.
- **Inclusivity:** Actively involving women, youth and men in all initiatives.
- **Documentation and sharing**: Recording and sharing knowledge to foster learning and scalability.
- **Peer learning:** Encouraging knowledge exchange and implementation across all levels.
- **Collaborative growth:** Building partnerships organically and ambitiously with other stakeholders.

For more information and additional resources, click here

Caption: A swale collecting rainwater so that it sinks into the ground
Credit: WSA

Caption: Farmers learning how to make and use an A-frame to peg contours in order to dig swales for harvesting rain water into the ground Credit: WSA

Caption: Sarah Tobaiwa trained in water harvesting by Zephaniah Phiri through Muonde Trust in 2013 Credit: WSA

Caption: Mbare Market, Harare Zimbabwe Credit: Charles Dhewa

Delving Into Markets

Mbare mass food markets: an integral component of the social fabric

By Charles Dhewa

Update: Mbare Musika Territorial Market experienced a large-scale fire on 9 October, reportedly started by an exploding gas tank. The fire spread rapidly causing millions of dollars in damage and destroyed the livelihoods of more than 5 000 traders. This tragic incident highlights the vulnerability of local businesses and communities who rely on such markets for their daily income and sustenance

ISAN Magazine extends its wishes for a full recovery of this vibrant market and calls on the Zimbabwean government to invest in economic hubs such as this market by providing the necessary infrastructure to ensure that a tragedy like this never happens again. Learn more about the fire here.

Mbare Market, also known as Mbare Musika, is the largest and most vibrant market in Harare, supporting more than 5 000 traders and their families. Located in the oldest high-density suburb, Mbare township, the market has grown organically since its establishment in 1907. It serves as a major hub for fresh, dried and processed produce, small livestock and non-agricultural items such as uniforms and protective wear. Mbare acts as an aggregator, distributor and price setter for other markets across Zimbabwe, attracting wholesalers, retailers and traders from various provinces. The market handles goods not found in formal markets, including lower-grade produce, while also offering high-grade products. Mbare's daily financial turnover reaches millions of dollars, driven by transactions in fresh produce, livestock and other goods.

Mbare market daily operations

Mbare market has different segments – the farmers' market that opens at 5am daily and closes around 1pm and wholesale and retail markets that both open at 6am and close at 6pm and 5pm respectively. Both the retail and wholesale markets have plus or minus 3 500 traders, depending on the seasons and in line with the more than 80 agricultural commodities traded in all three markets. Millions of United States dollars are believed to circulate in this market.

Delivery of commodities to the market

The primary mode of transport for delivering commodities to the market are 1-30-ton trucks, which park around the market, awaiting hire. Each transporter establishes their own relationships and employs runners to find business opportunities. Traders frequently use public transport to travel to farming areas in search of produce. Once a consignment is ready, they contact the transporter for delivery. Additionally, many commodities are transported to the market from distant rural areas using long-distance buses.

Packaging practices and trends in Mbare Market

Over 45% of potato pockets sold in Mbare come from local sources. Specialists import packaging materials at prices significantly lower than those offered by formal companies. Often, the same pockets are used to package a variety of products, including onions, butternuts, garlic and others. Additionally, vendors use plastic polybags for packing chilli peppers, okra and other commodities. Mbare handles a substantial volume of various sizes of sacks distributed across the country. The market accounts for more than 50% of the 50-kilogram bags in circulation, including both new and reused sacks. Companies that import bran, flour and feedstock often dispose of their used sacks at Mbare. Bigger packaging sacks are preferred over the smaller ones as transport charges are per sack rather than total volume. Wooden crates in different sizes are also used for highly perishable produce such as tomatoes. These wooden crates are slowly being replaced by plastic crates.

Units of measurement in commodity trading

Units of measurement for commodities are primarily influenced by consumer preferences and affordability. Some consumers purchase for household use and favour smaller packaging, while those buying for resale in smaller markets typically opt for larger packages. Retailers also dictate measurement units; for example, dozens are the standard for green mealies, while bundles of leafy vegetables containing 200-220 leaves are commonly used. These bundles are often broken down for street vending, with sizes depending on product availability – larger units during periods of surplus and smaller ones during shortages. Formal markets, such as retail shops, prefer bundles weighing between 850 grams and 1 kilogram. To minimize double handling, leafy vegetables must go directly to organised markets.

Certain commodities are often sold by quantity rather than weight. The trend of heaping reflects a demand for affordable measurements, particularly among consumers living from hand to mouth who cannot afford large volumes. For instance, buying heaped potatoes can yield more product – typically, 8 to 9 heaps may provide more than a single 15 kilogram pocket, saving consumers around US$12. To streamline the buying process, market actors have collectively agreed on standard measurements to eliminate the need to weigh commodities for each transaction. This agreement prevents long queues of buyers waiting for their consignments to be weighed. Consequently, the market has established a consistent understanding based on common measurements, facilitating agreement and satisfaction among participants familiar with these standards.

Tins are commonly used to measure volumes that cannot be easily counted, with sizes typically ranging from 5-20 litres.

However, this method of measurement can be inconsistent, as tin sizes vary. Some feature brims and collars while others do not, which can often favour the seller. Tins may also be unsuitable for small commodities, such as small fish and soya chunks, which do not fill the gaps effectively. Additionally, indigenous chickens cannot be sold by weight due to their lightness. In these instances, it is essential to consider other benefits beyond mere consumption, such as superior natural taste, mothering ability, egg production capacity and resistance to pests and diseases.

Information sharing

Knowledge Transfer Africa, through its E-Mkambo platform, collects and distributes weekly market information for Mbare Market. This data includes the quantities of commodities arriving at the market and their respective selling prices. The information helps both buyers and sellers make informed decisions about the optimal times to buy or sell their products.

Caption: Mbare Market, Harare Zimbabwe Credit: Charles Dhewa

Produce found in Mbare market

- Saved seeds and grain of different varieties of indigenous rice, (shelled and unshelled), cow peas, groundnuts (fresh and dry, shelled and unshelled) Bambara nuts (fresh and dry, shelled and unshelled), maize, sorghum, Pearl and finger millets, wheat, sunflowers, popcorn and soybeans.
- **Processed produce:** Dried vegetables mostly of indigenous nature, processed and packaged local rice, milled small grains, cooked and dried green mealies.
- **Fresh vegetables and other fresh produce:** Kale, cabbage, mustard, green beans, peas, tomatoes, onions, Irish potatoes, sweet potatoes, yams, cassava tubers, Okra, ginger, garlic, baby marrow, butternuts, green mealies.
- **Herbs:** Onions, shallots, coriander, radish, leeks, green, red, yellow pepper, chilies, parsley.
- **Fruits:** Bananas, pawpaws, coconut, strawberries, mangoes, avocado pears, apples, plums, pears, oranges, pineapples, blueberries (some fruits are bought from farmers, and some are imported), watermelons, cucumbers.
- **Non-timber forest products**, including indigenous fruits, tamarind, Mopane worms.
- **Live small livestock:** Free-range chickens, guinea fowls, pigeons, broiler chickens.
- **Others:** Dried Kapenta.

Caption: Cup measurements, Mbare Market Harare Zimbabwe Credit: Stef Swanepoel

Caption: Runners and their trollies for hire, Mbare Market, Zimbabwe Credit: Stef Swanepoel

Soil Life

Building life in the soil

By Rabecca Mwila, Staff Writer & KCOA Digital Knowledge Officer

This blog appears on the Knowledge Centre for Organic Agriculture and Agroecology in Africa (KCOA) knowledge platform. You can access many other blogs and innovative knowledge products by registering on this platform. kcoa-africa.org

Soils are an essential element of plant growth. Its quality determines plant growth, water flow and storage. Healthy soils filter pollutants and support biodiversity and ecological balance.

What is soil health?

Soil health is a broad term that focuses on the biological aspect of soil. Healthy soils are characterised by a balanced ecosystem of microorganisms, fungi and earthworms that work to break down organic matter and cycle nutrients. The key to successful soil health is the build-up and correct management of organic matter.

Characteristics of healthy soils include:

- Good structure that allows air and water to circulate.
- High levels of organic matter content. Active soil organisms like bacteria, fungi, and worms.
- The ability to retain moisture and nutrients.

Poor soils encourage occurrences of disease and pest infestations, and poor yields. What is soil fertility? Soil fertility refers to the soil's ability to provide essential nutrients to plants in the right amounts for optimal growth.

Fertile soils contain:

- **Macronutrients:** These are nutrients required in larger quantities such as nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium.
- **Micro-nutrients:** These are nutrients required in smaller quantities such as Iron, zinc, manganese and copper.
- **Organic matter:** Decomposed plant and animal material that provides nutrients and improves soil structure.

Fertility also depends on the soil's capacity to:

- Retain and release nutrients to plants as needed.
- Hold water without becoming waterlogged Prevent erosion and maintain structure.

Practices to improve soil health and fertility

- **Incorporate organic inputs:** Incorporate compost, manure or green cover crops into the soil to increase organic matter and improve its fertility, structure and microbial life.
- **Rotate crops:** Crop rotation helps manage nutrient depletion, enhances biodiversity in the soil and helps control pets.
- **Practice conservation tillage:** Reducing tillage minimizes soil disturbance, preserves soil structure and reduces erosion.
- **Use cover cropping:** Cover crops help prevent erosion, fix nitrogen and add organic matter.
- **Balance fertilisation:** Proper use of organic fertilisers ensures that plants get the right nutrients.
- **Maintain pH Levels:** Regular soil testing and the application of lime (for acidic soils) help maintain the right pH for nutrient availability.
- **Manage water:** Appropriate irrigation and drainage systems prevent waterlogging and salinity issues while preserving the soil's structure.

Download this resource in poster format here.

KCOA

Knowledge Centre for Organic Agriculture and Agroecology in Africa

KCOA is a collaborative country-led partnership that aims to scale up the adoption of organic and agroecological farming practices through a network of five Knowledge Hubs in Africa. KCOA partners are based in 18 countries and with the involvement of over 30 civil-society organisations.

Scan to discover more!

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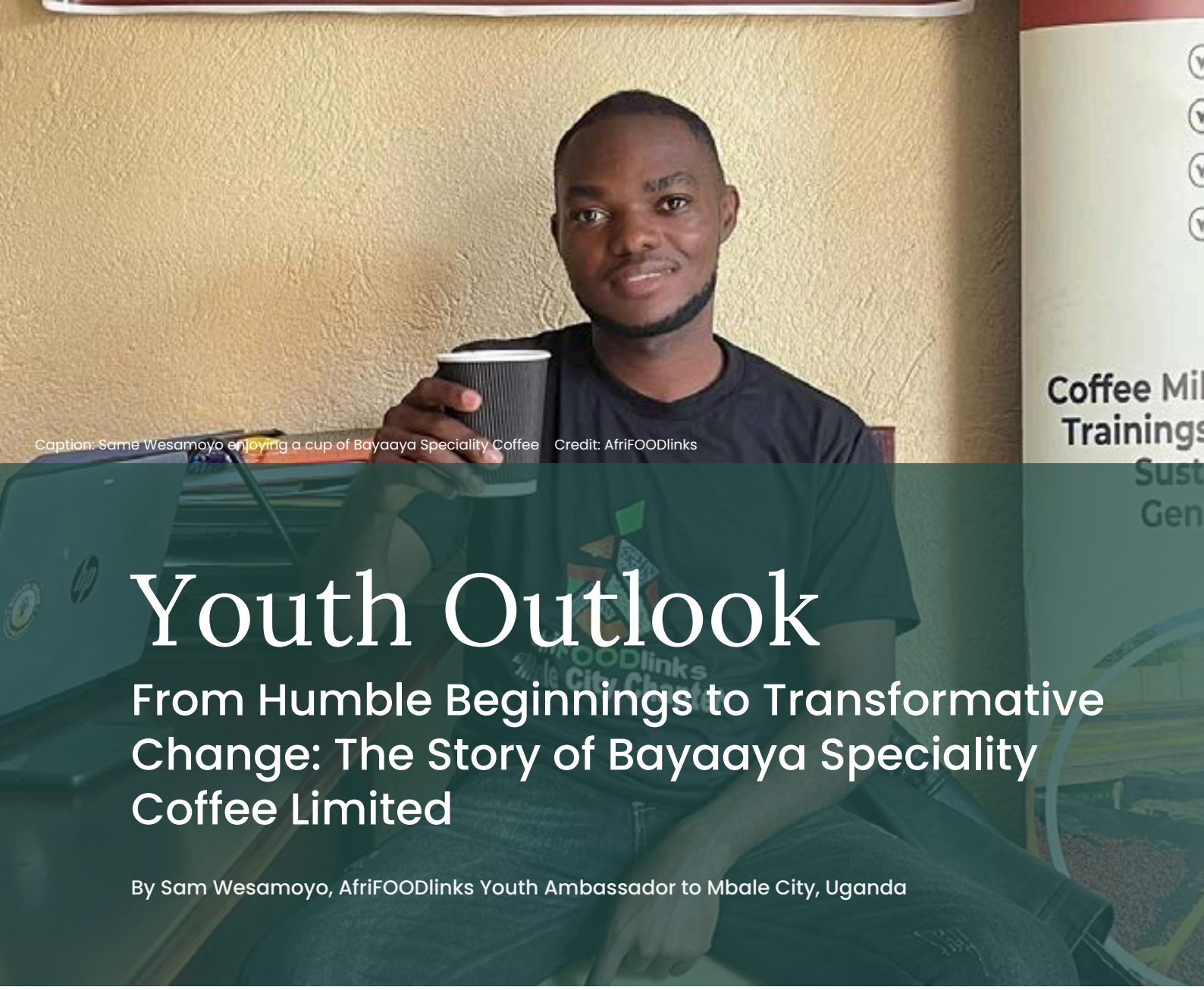


Caption: Same Wesamoyo enjoying a cup of Bayaaya Speciality Coffee Credit: AfriFOODlinks

Youth Outlook

From Humble Beginnings to Transformative Change: The Story of Bayaaya Speciality Coffee Limited

By Sam Wesamoyo, AfriFOODlinks Youth Ambassador to Mbale City, Uganda

The AfriFOODlinks project is revolutionising urban food systems from Africa to Europe, with a special focus on empowering young leaders through its Youth Ambassadors Programme. This initiative harnesses the energy and creativity of youth to drive social innovation and foster community engagement across 20 cities. By amplifying young voices, AfriFOODlinks aims to inspire transformative actions and deepen understanding of urban food system challenges and opportunities. Read more about the project here.

Sam Wesamoyo, AfriFOODlinks Ambassasor shares a story of the steady growth and impact of Bayaaya Speciality Coffee Limited under the great leadership of Nandudu Meridah (Director) who sought to use coffee as a tool to fight domestic violence, poverty, hunger and unemployment among youth.

Bayaya Speciality Coffee Limited

In the heart of Mbale, a city known for its stunning beauty, rich culture, and the famous Malewa delicacy, lies a hidden treasure—the Arabica coffee, renowned worldwide for its distinctive flavor and aroma.

While coffee is the main cash crop of the Elgon region, its production often brings gender inequalities to the forefront. Women, particularly mothers, bear the brunt of the work, only to see men take over when it's time to sell.

Nandudu Meridah grew up in this environment and witnessed these gender disparities firsthand. Determined to make a difference, and armed with a degree in social science, she founded Bayaaya Specialty Coffee in 2018; registered as a company in 2022.

"Bayaaya" means "Sisterhood or Brotherhood" in Lugisu/Lumasaba, a name that perfectly reflects the company's mission to empower women and young mothers through coffee farming.

Caption: Women empowered through the Bayqaya Speciality Coffee Limited Credit: Abass Mbe

We as women came together to use coffee as a tool to fight domestic violence and poverty in our community" says Meridah. This initiative contributes to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) particularly SDG 1, 2 and 5.

Bayaaya has grown rapidly yet steadily over the years despite a number of gender-related challenges, such as the community attaching coffee business to men; not believing in her and financial constraints as the coffee business is capital intensive.

Nandudu started with 85 farmers, the numbers grew to 353 farmers as of early 2023 and now more than double that. "We are working with 615 women, with a total of 1 000 farmers who are supplying us with coffee," she says.

The coffee purchases have also grown significantly resulting in considerable revenue growth. "We started in 2018 with 300kgs of parchment coffee but as of 2023, we were able to sell more than 175 tons," says Nandudu.

The company not only processes and adds value to coffee but also creates employment for youth and women as it employs two full-time staff and the majority of others on a seasonal basis. "In season, we employ more than 30 women that do hand sorting of coffee, and 5 men that do loading and coffee drying," says Meridah. The company provides training on good agricultural practices that has led to improved yields for the farmers and ensured sustainability of the coffee supplies.

This growth has been attributed to the support in terms of mentorship, grants like the AVSI foundation (scale up grant), challenge fund, the rising woman grant & the Hi-innovator by NSSF, and a passionate team. Nandudu Meridah's journey with Bayaaya Specialty Coffee Limited is a testament to the power of setting goals, staying committed, and maintaining a positive mindset. Her success story has inspired many young people, showing that with hard work, perseverance, and a willingness to learn, they too can achieve their dreams, no matter how humble the beginnings are.

Caption: Marketing material for Bayaaya Speciality Coffee Credit: Sam Wesamoyo

Research Roundup

Unbundling Organic Agriculture for Scientific Intervention

By Prof Olugbenga O. AdeOluwa, Network of Organic Agriculture Researchers in Africa

Organic agriculture is one of the fastest-growing sectors in agriculture worldwide, yet it remains one of the most misunderstood. While it presents numerous opportunities for scientific innovation, the development of organic agriculture in Africa has lagged other regions. This gap is often attributed to a poor understanding of its principles and practices. To fully realize the potential of organic agriculture in Africa, a deeper and more accurate understanding is essential, paving the way for more effective scientific interventions and sustainable growth.

History of organics

Organic agriculture has deep roots in ancient farming practices, where early farmers relied on natural methods to maintain soil health and biodiversity. However, the 20th century saw the rise of industrial farming, which introduced synthetic fertilisers and pesticides, leading to a decline in traditional agricultural methods. The modern organic movement took shape in the early 1900s in the United States led by pioneers like J.I. Rodale and Sir Albert Howard, who promoted sustainable farming practices. By the 1960s and 1970s, organic farming gained momentum, driven by growing concerns about environmental and health impacts. Today, organic agriculture focuses on regenerative practices that foster a sustainable food system.

Early organic community

In its early stages, organic farming operated without formal governmental oversight or established markets. Farmers depended on community-shared knowledge, often passed through word-of-mouth or through institutions like the Rodale Institute. During this time, organic farming was more of a grassroots movement, with no premiums for organic products and no formal certification processes. The United States organic movement gained momentum in the 1960s, driven by concerns over the environmental and health impacts of industrial agriculture. Issues such as pesticide-related health hazards, declining soil quality, water pollution and the increasing financial strain of synthetic inputs fuelled the movement. The European organic movement began between the 1920s and 1950s as a reaction against industrial farming practices. Advocates in Europe stressed the importance of preserving soil health and using farming methods that enhanced, rather than depleted, the land's fertility. These early efforts laid the foundation for today's organic farming practices, which emphasise sustainability and ecological balance.

In Africa, organic farming was traditionally the foundation of agriculture, based on practices like seed saving, slash-and-burn techniques, and using manure to maintain soil fertility. These methods, inherently sustainable, supported the land's natural cycles long before the formal organic movement began. However, the industrial revolution disrupted this balance with the introduction of chemical fertilisers and pesticides. The widespread use of these chemicals not only caused pesticide resistance, leading to the need for even more chemicals, but also degraded soil quality and harmed ecosystems. This resulted in declining productivity and increased reliance on synthetic inputs. In response, many African farmers have returned to their organic roots, focusing on regenerating soil health and restoring ecosystems, fostering a more sustainable and resilient approach to farming.

Organic agriculture definitions

A general definition states that organic agriculture refers to farming practices that avoid the use of synthetic fertilisers, pesticides, genetically modified organisms (GMOs), and other harmful chemicals. Instead, organic farming relies on natural methods to improve soil health, control pests and diseases, promote biodiversity and enhance ecosystem services. The European Union defines organic agriculture as sustainable agriculture systems respecting the environment and animal welfare, but also includes all other stages of the food supply chain. United States organic regulations describe organic agriculture as the application of a set of cultural, biological and mechanical practices that support the cycling of on-farm resources, promote ecological balance and conserve biodiversity. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization Codex Committee on Food Labelling, organic agriculture is a holistic production management system that promotes and enhances agro-ecosystem health, including biodiversity, biological cycles and soil biological activity.

The International Federation of Organic Agricultural Movements (IFOAM) Organics International (2008) defines Organic Agriculture as a production system that sustains the health of soils, ecosystems and people, noting that organic agriculture relies on ecological processes, biodiversity and cycles adapted to local conditions, rather than the use of inputs with adverse effects. It combines tradition, innovation and science to benefit the shared environment and promote fair relationships and good quality of life for all involved.

Principles and components of organic agriculture

Organic agriculture is based on four principles of Care, Health, Ecology and Fairness. It consists of several key components that ensure its integrity and success. These include quality control and certification, which guarantees that farming practices meet specific organic standards. Labels play a crucial role by providing consumers with clear identification of certified organic products. Additionally, access to appropriate markets helps organic farmers reach consumers who value sustainable and eco-friendly practices. Lastly, accreditation ensures that certification bodies are recognised and operate according to international standards, adding credibility to the entire process.

The benefits of organic agriculture are numerous and far-reaching. It promotes improved human health by reducing exposure to harmful chemicals and pesticides in food. Animal welfare is also prioritised, ensuring that livestock are raised in humane and natural conditions. Organic farming leads to enhanced food quality and safety, offering consumers healthier and more nutritious options. It also supports local economies by encouraging the growth of small-scale farms and businesses, fostering sustainable livelihoods for farmers. Moreover, organic practices contribute to climate change mitigation by reducing greenhouse gas emissions and enhancing biodiversity. Additionally, they play a vital role in soil conservation, preserving the land's fertility and promoting long-term environmental health.

Current challenges for organic agriculture in Africa

Organic agriculture stakeholders in Africa encounter numerous challenges that require scientific interventions to ensure sustainable development and food security. The development of quality organic inputs, including seeds and fertilizsers, is critical, as many farmers struggle to find reliable sources that meet organic standards.

Additionally, there is a pressing need for increased awareness and information dissemination about organic and ecological agriculture practices, which can empower farmers to adopt these methods effectively. Access to organic markets remains limited, hindering producers' ability to connect with consumers and obtain fair prices for their products.

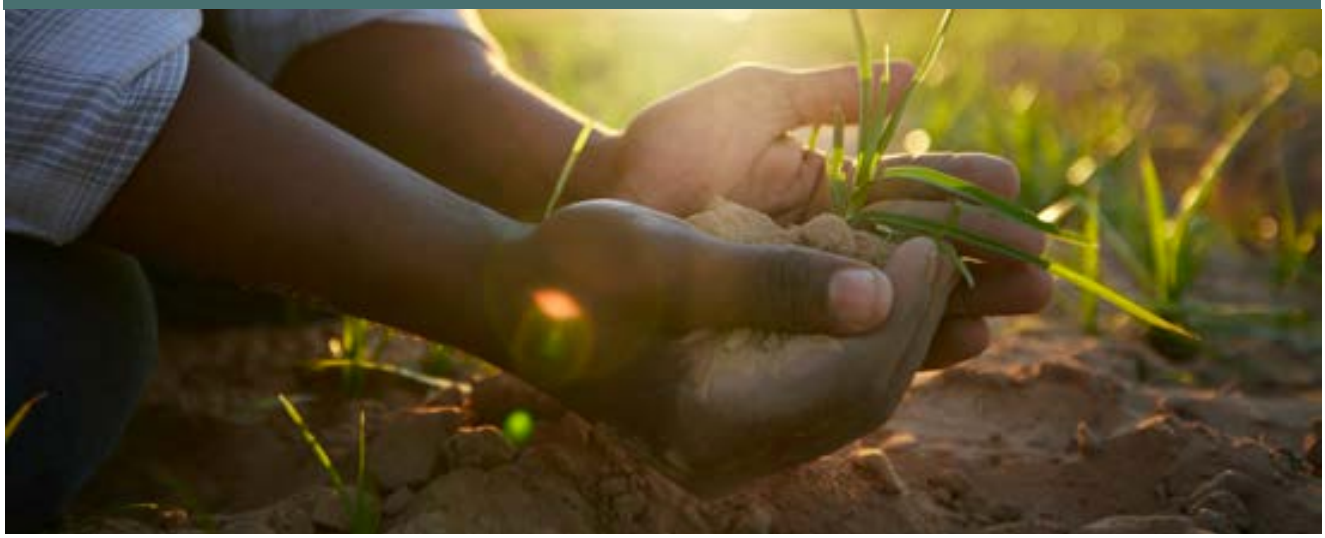
Effective pest and disease management is also a major challenge, as traditional methods often fall short in the face of emerging threats, leading to significant crop losses. Advocacy for organic agriculture is essential to influence governmental policies that support the sector, but many stakeholders lack the resources to engage effectively. Moreover, research focused on organic practices is often insufficient, leaving gaps in knowledge and innovation.

Lastly, addressing issues related to processing, storage, and value addition within the organic supply chain, alongside effective soil management practices, is vital for enhancing the overall viability and competitiveness of organic agriculture in Africa.

In conclusion, there is a significant opportunity for win-win partnerships and collaborations in advancing organic agricultural development in Africa through scientific innovation. The Network of Organic Agriculture Researchers in Africa (NOARA) welcomes and appreciates partnership and collaboration efforts aimed at further developing the organic sector across the continent. By working together, stakeholders can drive sustainable agricultural practices that benefit both the environment and communities in Africa.

About NOARA

NOARA was established to unite and coordinate scientific and technical activities of researchers in the field of organic and ecological agriculture, focusing on Africa. It envisions Africa with zero hunger, poverty eradicated, improved livelihoods and sustained ecosystems through innovative organic and ecological agriculture research. Its mission is to generate and disseminate sound evidence-based scientific organic agricultural knowledge that can ensure healthy ecological, fairness and care of organic agriculture actors in Africa for sustainable livelihood and ecosystem, leading to food security, incomes, and sustainable development.
Learn more about NOARA here.



Addressing Hunger and Malnutrition with Climate-Resilient Crops

By Karalyn Hingston, Executive Officer, Food Plant Solutions
Learn more here or contact them directly by email.

Food Plant Solutions (FPS) was formed in 2007, to address hunger, malnutrition, and improve food security by enabling individuals, communities and NGOs to identify and grow highly nutritious local food plants. Leveraging information from the Food Plants International database, FPS creates educational resources that identify highly nutritious local food plants. Alongside information on how to grow the plant and its use, is key nutritional information that explains how these nutrients contribute to overall health and wellbeing. With a strategic focus on climate-resilient food production, communities can make informed choices on the foods they grow and eat, while taking into consideration the nutritional, economic and environmental impacts.

Our impact

Cameroon: Partnering with Hope 4 a Better Future Foundation (H4BF), "Your materials have been used by over 200 women in Cameroon, taught them about nutrition, the value of different crops, and how to grow the right crops to meet their nutritional needs. Other projects train women to cultivate vegetables, but your materials give them the choice to decide to cultivate more of those that are high in nutrition. You don't just help women grow food; you make them understand the value before growing them. That is innovative."

Vietnam: What began as trial gardens in two schools in 2012 expanded to two provinces, 14 schools, benefiting 3 000 children and 380 adults. The students enjoy nutritious lunches from the plants they grow, families replicate school gardens at home, and malnutrition has been eradicated in some areas.

Uganda: A joint project in Uganda linking Food Plant Solutions Rotary Action Group (FPSRAG), the Rotary Club of Jinja (Uganda), and the Rotary Club of Southport Links (UK) enabled FPSRAG resources to be translated into the local tribal language. Grandmother groups support more than 500 families by sharing sustainable agricultural techniques learned from FPSRAG translated resources. This empowered the women with skills to grow food, providing a nutritious diet to their charges and families. This project is now being expanded to all of Uganda, with plans underway to translate the resources into 17 of the most common Ugandan languages.

With more than 150 published resources for nearly 60 countries, Food Plant Solutions has an experienced team who know how to communicate and promote information about highly nutritious local food plants to laypeople. The style and presentation of the resources can add significant value to food, nutrition and sustainability development projects and allows decision makers to act.

Caption: Learning from Grandmother Groups, Uganda
Credit: FPS

Doing It For Yourself

DIY Homemade Pest Repellents

Garlic Spray

Ingredients

- 3 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 litre water
- 1 teaspoon mild dish soap

Instructions: Spray on plants to repel aphids, spider mites and other pests.

Hot Pepper Spray

Ingredients

- 1 cup hot peppers, chopped
- 1 litre water
- 1 teaspoon mild dish soap

Instructions: Combine ingredients and spray on plants to repel aphids, whiteflies and other pests.

Neem Oil Spray

Ingredients

- 2 tablespoons neem oil
- 1 litre water
- 1 teaspoon mild dish soap

Instructions: Mix and spray on plants to control a wide range of pests.

Soap Spray

Ingredients

- 1 tablespoon mild dish soap
- 1 litre water

Instructions: Spray the mixture on plants to control aphids, mealybugs and other soft-bodied pests.

Basil Repellent

Ingredients

- 1 cup fresh basil leaves
- 1 litre water 1 teaspoon
- Mild dish soap

Instructions: Blend and spray on plants to repel aphids and mites.

Mint Repellent

Ingredients

- 1 cup fresh mint leaves
- 1 litre water
- 1 teaspoon mild dish soap

Instructions: Mix and spray to repel aphids, spider mites and ants

Precautions:

1. Always test a small area of the plant before applying homemade pesticides.
2. Wear protective clothing and eyewear during application.
3. Avoid spraying during peak sun hours to prevent plant damage.
4. Keep homemade pesticides away from children and pets.

Tips for Using Homemade Pesticides:

1. Use a spray bottle for easy application.
2. Prepare your pesticide mixtures just before use to ensure freshness.
3. Store any leftover pesticides in labeled containers.
4. Rotate between different types of pesticides to maintain their effectiveness.

Reminder: Correctly identify the pests before applying homemade pesticides. Monitor your garden regularly and adjust your pest control methods as necessary.

Resources & Events

Quick reads

- The keynote address delivered at the Thousand Youth Summit on Agroecology and Food Systems held from October 14 to 16, 2024, in Addis Ababa, Nnimmo Bassey, Director, Health of Mother Earth Foundation (HOMEF), explores the role of indigenous knowledge in promoting resilient food systems in Africa. Read the address here.
- A pre-COP message warning that "Humanity is "on the precipice" of shattering Earth's limits, and will suffer huge costs if we fail to act on biodiversity loss". Read more here.
- A historic judgement made in South Africa by the Supreme Court of Appeal to set aside commercial approval of GM drought-tolerant maize. Read more about the African Centre of Biodiversity's victory here.

Call for applications

- In April 2025, during the 3rd Global Nyéléni Forum—the most important event of the global movement for food sovereignty, systemic transformation, and justice for all—the **Nyéléni Virtual Gallery** will be launched as a space for committed artists engaged in popular struggles. We invite artists from all backgrounds to submit their works in various formats by January 31, 2025. Read more here.

- **Urgent Action Fund-Africa** is a feminist, pan-African, Rapid Response Fund committed to transforming power relations through resourcing African feminists and womn's human rights defenders and their formations as an act of solidarity. More information can be found on our website: https://www.uaf-africa.org. They are looking for a new Board member. More information here.

Must watch

- The documentary "The Green Vein" has been released to the general public after a series of screenings in more than 20 festivals throughout the world, winning four of them and receiving honourable mentions in two others. The film emerged from the Food Systems Caravan project, which was coordinated by FiBL Switzerland, and portrays positive and inspiring examples of agroecological initiatives in West Africa. Watch it here.

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