

# Agroecology & organic farming

## Context

Agroecological approaches and organic farming are gaining importance in the international debate on sustainable agricultural and food systems. Often the terms agroecology and organic farming are used interchangeably - however, while they both to support the development of diverse, resilient and productive agricultural ecosystems, and strive to reduce the use of synthetic chemical inputs, there are significant differences between agroecology and organic farming.

### A brief introduction to organic farming and agroecology

#### Organic farming

The [International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements \(IFOAM - Organics International\)](#) describes organic farming as a production system that sustains the health of soils, ecosystems and people. It is based on ecological processes and -wherever possible- on closed cycles that are adapted to local conditions. As a general principle, organic farming does not use synthetic chemical inputs such as fertilisers and pesticides, and prioritises crop rotation, humus management, biological plant protection and animal welfare. Organic agriculture stands for fair and responsible land management that aims to protect the health and well-being of present and future generations and the environment. In line with that, [IFOAM proposes four ethical principles of organic agriculture](#): health, ecology, fairness and care.

In many regions, organic agricultural production is strictly regulated by defined standards. In Europe, for example, the [EU regulation on organic production and labelling of organic products](#) sets minimum standards that define which products can be certified and marketed as organically produced. Individual producers' associations (such as Bioland or Naturland) might develop their own standards, stricter – either partially or in their entirety- than those of the EU.

Regulations mostly address the production, labelling and verification of food and feed, and the processing of plant and animal products. Some standards, such as Naturland-Fair, also include additional social criteria. The use of certain bio-labels usually allows products from organic farming to achieve higher prices.

#### Agroecology (see also dedicated [Factsheet](#))

Agroecology is an overarching, holistic concept that advocates for a transformation process towards overall sustainable agricultural and food systems. It is simultaneously a science, a set of agricultural practices and a social movement. However, there is no universally agreed definition for it.

The UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) describes agroecology as a dynamic, transdisciplinary approach that includes all ecological, socio-cultural, technological, economic and political dimensions of food systems from production to consumption. The so-called “13 agroecological principles” of the High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition (HLPE) offer guidance for an agroecological transformation (see *figure 1*).

At farm and landscape level, the gradual transformation of food systems takes place through the use of resource-conserving production practices and farm management approaches based on closed production cycles. Particularly important is the use of territorial approaches that take into account agricultural ecosystems, where landscape functions are considered and enhanced whenever possible. In addition to ensuring diversity in the agricultural ecosystem (biodiversity, functional diversity, genetic diversity), agroecology also seeks to diversify on-farm income and opportunities for value addition.

For this transition to happen, societal changes at large are equally important. Agroecology also promotes the development of fair, diversified and preferably local food systems that are based on social principles such as participation, justice and co-creation of knowledge. In this, the focus lies on strengthening the institutional enabling environment, social

organisations that involve producers and consumers, broader participation in decision-making processes and the horizontal dissemination of knowledge.

The [HLPE report on agroecology \(2019\)](#) describes organic farming as one of several agroecological approaches, which further include agroforestry and permaculture among others. Organic farming can therefore be understood as one of the elements encompassed by the holistic approach of agroecology, with the additional requirement of its production adhering to certain standards.

## Organic agriculture as an agroecological approach in German development cooperation

Land-use systems in many partner countries have already trespassed the boundaries of sustainability. Particularly in Africa the positive outcomes of conventional approaches to land management have often fallen short of the countries' expectations. BMZ is hence promoting agroecological approaches such as organic farming as a promising alternative. The sustainable management of rural areas in the spirit of an agroecological transformation makes a significant

contribution to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

BMZ supports organic farming as a component of the agroecological transformation in different contexts and through diverse approaches, working in close collaboration with national and international partners. In the frame of the "One World, No Hunger Initiative", a transnational working group on organic farming was set up by the Green Innovation Centres for the Agricultural and Food sector programme in seven countries of Africa and India. It supports issues on sustainable agriculture and organic farming such as value chains and marketing organic products. Under the same Initiative, the global project Knowledge Centre for Organic Farming in Africa collects existing and newly acquired knowledge on organic farming and agroecological practices in North, West, East, Central and Southern Africa, thus promoting joint efforts to develop and disseminate this know-how. Furthermore, BMZ has funded 25 develoPPP.de projects over the last 10 years, particularly on sourcing in the organic sector; 15 of these projects are still going on. Moreover, projects supported by the Import Promotion Desk in 13 partner countries aim at an improved market access for small and medium-sized enterprises in the organic food sector.

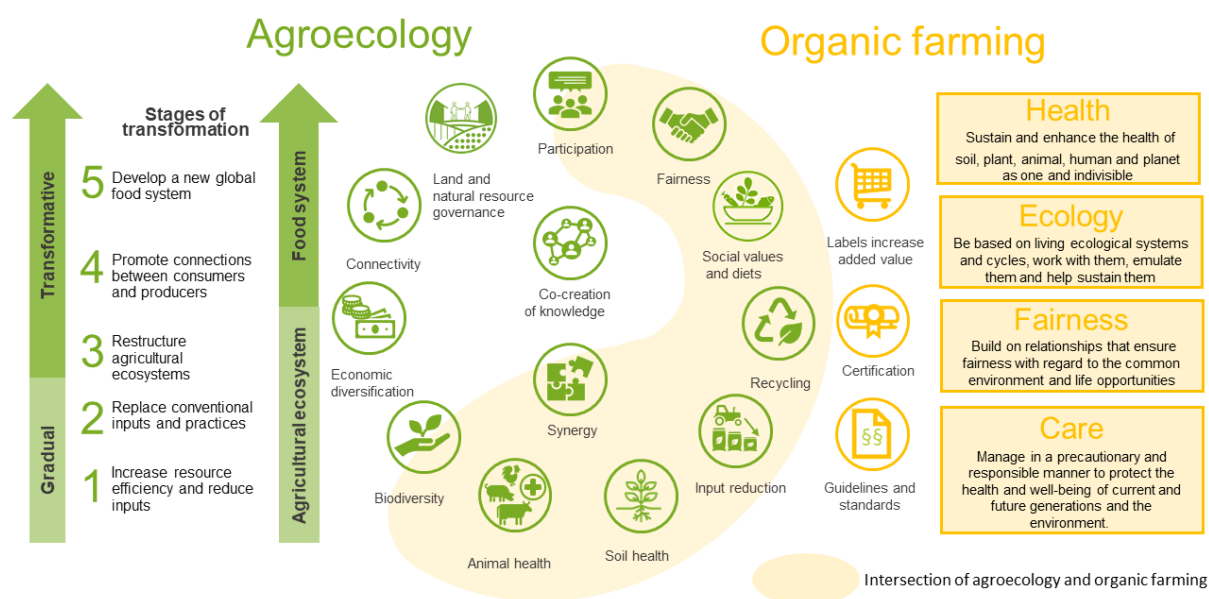


Figure 1: Principles of agroecology (green circles) and organic farming (yellow boxes)

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