



**CASE STUDY: KEY
ROLE OF SOCIAL
MOVEMENTS IN
AGROECOLOGY**



www.safcei.org

About this paper

The Southern African Faith Communities' Environment Institute (SAFCEI) commissioned a series of case studies focused on agroecology in South Africa, Tanzania, Zimbabwe and Zambia. SAFCEI aims to use this work to further deepen its understanding of the linkages between climate and food justice in Africa and to support the generation of advocacy material and practical recommendations it can offer to its members. This case study highlights the potential of agroecological social movements to drive transformative change of agri-food systems. It uses the work of the Zimbabwe Smallholder Organic Farmers Forum (ZIMSOFF) as an illustration.

The base research for this paper can be found in:

South African Faith Communities' Environment Institute (SAFCEI). 2023. [Agroecology: A food and farming framework for transformative change. A synthesis report.](#) Cape Town: SAFCEI.



Contents

Acronyms	i
Executive summary	ii
1. Introduction	1
2. The important role of agroecological social movements	2
3. Case study: ZIMSOFF	4
3.1 About ZIMSOFF	4
3.2 Guiding principles and values	5
3.3 Country context	5
3.3 ZIMSOFF in action	6
3.3.1 Building collective consensus	6
3.3.2 Educating agri-food system stakeholders	6
3.3.3 Building networks	7
3.3.4 In summary	7
4. Conclusion	8
References	9

Acronyms

AFSA	Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization (United Nations)
PELUM	Participatory Ecological Land Use Management
SAFCEI	Southern African Faith Communities Environment Institute
ZIMSOFF	Zimbabwe Smallholder Organic Farmers Forum

Executive summary

This paper focuses on the role of social movements in scaling agroecology as a transformative lever of change. It uses the Zimbabwe Smallholder Organic Farmers Forum (ZIMSOFF), an agroecological movement in Zimbabwe, to illustrate best practice in this regard.

Zimbabwe has made the necessary conceptual linkages between healthy food systems and higher resilience to climate change. It is focusing on food system transformation as an entry point to building wider societal adaptivity to a changing climate. This is critical because of the significant nutritional and food insecurity in the country, worsened by a weak economy and recurrent extreme climatic events.

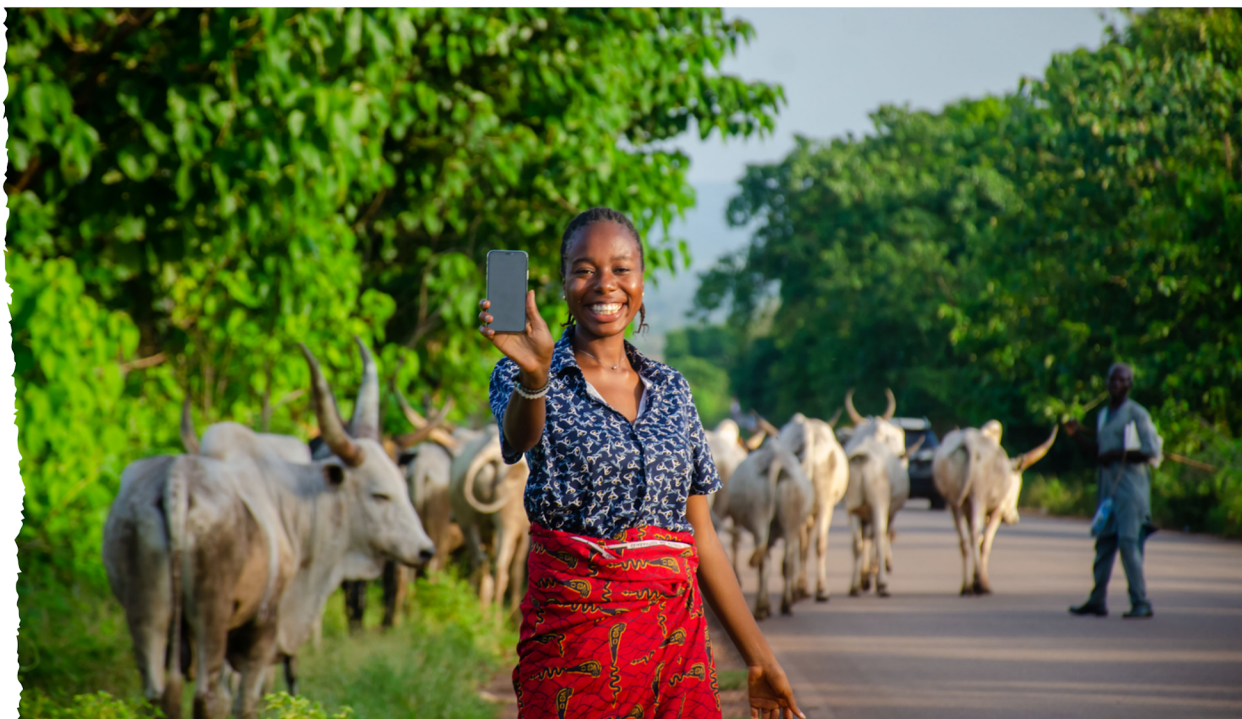
There are, however, significant obstacles to this food system transformation becoming a reality. A primary obstacle is that the government's framing of food and farming systems is still rooted in the industrial agricultural model. The government continues to support the industrial model through subsidised inputs and a focus on the private sector as the way out of the quagmire. For example, it plans to invest significantly in growing the domestic fertiliser industry, while the funds could be better spent in training on compost making and enhancing soil fertility with elements that do not harm the planet.

It is only a flexible, contextual and holistic framework such as agroecology that can lead Zimbabwe towards a food

system that does not harm people or planet, and that can address critical challenges such as climate change, hunger and rural poverty.

Key findings

- The farmer must play a central role in the social movement to enable the voice of farmers to reach decision-making circles. These movements must be built from the bottom up to ensure that they remain inclusive, democratic and equitable.
- Social movements are political in nature in that they directly challenge the status quo of the dominant system, and they uphold the notion of seed and food sovereignty.
- Social movements act at multiple levels to influence producers, consumers and government on the need for agroecology and its suitability as a response to current challenges.
- Social movements are involved in on-the-ground programmes/projects with farmers through training, creation of spaces and platforms for knowledge sharing and co-creation, demonstration sites, support in conceptualising markets and new farming economies.
- Social movements work collaboratively to scale agroecology as a suitable response to the devastation wrought by the dominant industrial system.



1. Introduction

The industrial-style agri-food system has failed. It is a model geared towards producing profits for private actors at the expense of safe, affordable and nutritious food for all. It is a primary driver of biodiversity loss and climate change emissions. And it has marginalised the voices of farmers and consumers and effectively stripped the 'culture' out of agriculture.

Food is not a commodity, it is at the centre of our family life, our cultures and our spiritual relations. We urgently need a radically transformed food system that can support social, environmental and economic health. Agroecology provides a framework for this transformation, which must go beyond environmental considerations to also focus on social justice within the agri-food system. SAFCEI understands a just food system to be one that can produce a range of nutritious foods that are accessible and affordable to even

the most vulnerable, one that farms animals ethically, one that empowers women, and one that restores the health and diversity of life on Earth.

Agroecology is an innovative way of combining science, lived experience and local and traditional knowledge to support agricultural systems that are productive and resource conserving (Agroecology in Action 2022). As a set of practices, it uses natural processes to create beneficial biological interactions that enhance farming productivity while minimising damage to the environment (Wezel et al. 2020). It also combats the effects of climate change by lowering greenhouse gas emissions (mitigation) and building more resilient farming systems (adaptation). As a social movement, it works to make the agri-food system more equitable and inclusive for producers and consumers (Wezel et al. 2020).

2. The role of agroecological social movements

Social movements have a critical role to play in advocating for agroecology as a framework for farming and food systems. They also have a vital role to play in preventing agroecology being co-opted by commercial interests and those with a narrow view of its potential. Social movements therefore contribute to the scaling of agroecology in several significant ways, namely they:

- **Build collective consensus** from the bottom-up – from farmers and consumers who are end-users of the food system. This ensures that the system remains inclusive, democratic and equitable.
- Ensure that **people and planet remain central to food and farming systems**, holding firm to the notion of rights and access to the commons (Anderson et al. 2015).
- **Protect the notion of food sovereignty**, “the right of people to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agricultural systems” (Anderson et al. 2015).
- **Educate a range of stakeholders** (from farmers to consumers and policymakers) on the need for and benefits of agroecology, and they advocate for support from government to do this.
- **Build the networks** necessary to take agroecology to scale – national networks joining regional and global ones, as an example.

Elements of Agroecology

	Efficiency - using innovative practices to produce more, using less external resources		Human and social value - improving rural livelihoods and social wellbeing
	Diversity - supporting diversification for food and nutrition security while protecting and enhancing natural resources		Builds resilience of communities and ecosystems
	Co-creation of knowledge to create relevant and context-specific appropriate responses to local challenges		Recycling of inputs and resources that lowers costs and generates ecological benefits
	Synergies that enhance key functions across food systems		Circular economies that connect producers and consumers to provide innovative solutions to living within planetary boundaries
	Culture and food traditions - supports health, diverse and culturally appropriate diets		Land and natural resource governance that is responsible and effective at all levels

A review of literature on agroecological social movements highlights the need for sharing of information beyond production techniques.

La Via Campesina – one of the world’s most successful agricultural movements – notes that agroecological social movements are more successful when they educate or support learning in soft skills – communication, presentation, organisation of field trips or holding demonstrations (Anderson et al. 2015). They also emphasise the importance of leaders of the movement being farmers themselves.

The goal of these movements should be to build “social and ecological synergies that can create resilience in local and national food systems” (Anderson et al. 2015). The Nyeleni Declaration of 2015 was a collective call to action of social movements, individuals and government to support agroecology (in its true form) as a framework for food and farming systems.

The Declaration notes that agroecology is key to the construction of food sovereignty and that those supporting it must ‘challenge and transform structures of power in society’ (Anderson et al. 2015). This requires the development of a critical understanding of current structures and how to change them.

These movements must therefore act from the ground up, provide training on a range of aspects beyond production, and work at a multitude of levels to

create the enabling ecosystem that will support a transition. They also must play a unifying role across the range of stakeholders necessary to drive the transition towards an agri-food system that is equitable, fair, inclusive and capable of delivering good health and nutritional outcomes without damaging the planet.

This case study focuses on the role of social movements within an agroecological transition using ZIMSOF as an illustration of the power of agroecological social movements to manifest a different agri-food system.



3. Case study: ZIMSOFF

3.1 About ZIMSOFF

ZIMSOFF is on a mission to “influence policies and public awareness towards agroecology and smallholder farmers’ rights struggles for farmer-managed seed systems” (Food and Agriculture Organization [FAO] n.d.).

The organisation was founded in 2002 during the World Summit on Sustainable Development held in Johannesburg, South Africa. Its programmatic focus areas are organic agriculture, natural resource management, climate justice, advocacy, value addition and seed bulking of open pollinated varieties (Thousand Currents 2022).

ZIMSOFF has been repeatedly recognised for the calibre of its work. In 2016, ZIMSOFF’s chairperson was recognised by the United Nations’ FAO as the Special Ambassador for the Year of Pulses in the African region (FAO n.d.).

In 2017, the organisation was awarded the United States Food Sovereignty Prize for its role in supporting seed and food sovereignty in Zimbabwe (FAO n.d.). In 2019, it was awarded the Spring Prize for its work as the “voice of peasants struggling for social justice in Zimbabwe” and for its activities on the ground, including training, demonstration and festivals (Spring Prize 2019).

The Spring Prize (2019:1) committee noted that ZIMSOFF is:

“...developing living examples on managing living soils, seed and water in order to provide evidence for its advocacy work. Walking the talk on regeneration ideas means setting up convincing actions that make sense”.

3.2 Guiding principles and values

ZIMSOFF works according to set principles, including the primacy of farmers' voices, emphasising nutrition as the first priority for agriculture, respecting farming as a cultural way of life, valuing indigenous and local knowledge, and promotion of agroecology, among others (ZIMSOFF 2022). The organisation's values stress the need for integrity, mutual trust, equal partnerships, respect, transparency and accountability.

3.3 Country context

Zimbabwe is ahead of other African countries in recognising that a sustainable agri-food system will help the country build resilience to climate change, particularly at the community level (Tinarwo 2021). Resilience is the ability of a system, such as the agri-food system, to deal with shocks and continue to function (SAFCEI 2021). Through its National Development Strategy (2021-2023), the Zimbabwean government aims to (Tinarwo 2021):

- Make the agri-food system more efficient.
- Enable it to deliver safe, nutritious and affordable food.

- Include farmers, particularly women and youth, in decision-making structures.
- Strengthen sub-national governance structures to protect natural resources.

Zimbabwe is embracing food system transformation within a resilience-building framework because it is experiencing the cumulative shocks of economic collapse, very poor nutrition and health outcomes, and rapidly degrading ecosystems. This is happening in a context of climate change, which is exacerbating already significant challenges.

Zimbabwe faces significant obstacles to realising a transformed agri-food system, including budgetary constraints and institutional capacity to work across government ministries in an integrated way (SAFCEI 2021).

A key constraint is the lack of a suitable framing of the agri-food system that supports transformative shifts.

Agroecology provides such a framework because it tackles social, environmental and economic dynamics simultaneously.

Country context: Zimbabwe's agri-food system

Degraded natural environment

- Ecological integrity of wetlands is deteriorating.
- About 330 000 hectares of forest cover lost each year.

Concentrated input market

- Reliant on imported fertilisers:
 - About \$236 million was spent on importing fertilisers in 2021, up \$38 million from 2019.
 - 70% of agricultural budget spent on farm input subsidies.
- Corporate-dominated seed system:
 - 19/45 seed companies are international.
- Escalating price of inputs:
 - Farmers paying Zimbabwean \$11 000 more for maize seed.

Hunger and malnutrition

- 1 in 4 children is stunted.
- >80% of children under the age of 5 do not consume the minimally accepted diet.

Climate change

- 1 of 10 countries most affected by climate change.
- Predicted increase in temperature of 1-3 degrees Celsius.
- Average rainfall is decreasing.

Poverty

- 70.5% of population classified as poor in 2017.
- Covid-19-related lockdowns have pushed more than 1.3 million into extreme poverty.

3.4 ZIMSOFF in action

ZIMSOFF's work aligns closely with the elements desired within an agroecological social movement. The following elements in particular serve to place the organisation as a lever for change in Zimbabwe.

3.4.1 Building collective consensus

ZIMSOFF works in rural areas through regional clusters of local farmer organisations – households are organised into a group or 'club', these clubs come together to form a smallholder farmer organisation, and then a number of these form a cluster. ZIMSOFF works with four clusters comprising about 19 000 members (ZIMSOFF 2022).

The farmer remains at the centre. Farmers hold all leadership and training positions (Via Campensina 2013). There is a focus on gender inclusivity with women taking on leadership positions and entering decision-making spaces. Women lead most clusters (FAO n.d.a). ZIMSOFF has a gender policy in place. Members of ZIMSOFF organise farmer-to-farmer exchange visits, group meetings and workshops, along with seed festivals and other events (Via Campensina 2013). These meetings are regarded as an important way to share and gain knowledge.

3.4.2 Educating agri-food system stakeholders

ZIMSOFF organises training on broader systemic elements of the agri-food system – from understanding seed regulations and marketing laws to the complexities of the harmonisation of seed laws taking place in Africa.

Work undertaken spans from production (through farmer-led trainings, demonstration sites and peer-to-peer knowledge exchange) through to political education and policy advocacy work. The Shashe Agroecology Village is living testament to how agroecology can deliver against Zimbabwe's primary challenges.

Shashe Agroecology Village

ZIMSOFF is driving an 'agroecological revolution' through the Shashe Agroecology Village. It is home to hundreds of families that were beneficiaries of government's Fast Track Land Reform Programme. Shared farming and grazing land sustain the production of a wide diversity of food crops, medicinal plants and livestock. Surplus is exchanged or sold locally. The national ZIMSOFF coordinator Nelson Mundzingwa notes that the initiative challenges dominant farming and food models (Monjane et al. 2019).

Its success perhaps lies in the extensive understanding of members of the need to conserve land and the importance of indigenous knowledge and cultural traditions; many had this interest before moving here.

A school was established that offers agroecology training, integrated land use design and participatory methodologies (Via Campensina 2013). The facilitators work closely with government extension officers in attempts to influence policymakers.

ZIMSOFF actively collects case studies of good practice and finds examples on the ground that act as an illustration of agroecological success to policymakers, among other influential stakeholders. It is developing a curriculum on lobbying and advocacy, with a particular focus on youth to build their capacity to engage at the political level (ZIMSOFF 2022). ZIMSOFF will work with the Fambidzanai Permaculture Centre to advocate to the Ministry of Agriculture for a certified course on agroecology, based on food sovereignty principles (ZIMSOFF 2022).

3.4.3 Building networks

The organisation works in partnership with others to influence policy related to food sovereignty in Zimbabwe. One such project is the Regional Pathway to Climate Justice project in collaboration with Afrika Kontakt (Denmark) and La Via Campesina Southern and Eastern Africa region (ZIMSOFF 2022).

Started in 2019, the project aims to build political agency of smallholder farmers in nine countries in the region (ZIMSOFF 2021). This will enable them to represent themselves in decision-making bodies and orient agricultural frameworks to more conducive ones, and ones able to support climate change adaptation. Farmers are organised into collectives and provide input into international La Via Campesina collectives that influence policy in spaces such as the Human Rights Council and the United Nations' FAO.

Two of the most active collectives are those focused on Climate Justice and Seed/biodiversity. ZIMSOFF as a partner of the Zimbabwe Seed Sovereignty Programme also helps to organise the annual national seed fair. This takes place within the larger Good Food and Seed Festival and brings together smallholders from across the country to learn about, swap and trade farmer seeds (PELUM Zimbabwe 2022). It not only acts as a networking and knowledge exchange event, but also raises awareness with consumers of the need to support agroecology. These kinds of events help to cement the understanding that how and what we farm is directly linked to our health, and that of the planet.

It is an active member of the Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa (AFSA) and is the only farmers' organisation in the regional Seed and Knowledge Initiative that brings together civil society organisations, research institutions and academia on the issue of seed, among other related issues (ZIMSOFF 2022).

3.4.4 In summary

ZIMSOFF's work is strongly aligned to agroecological principles of building circular and solidarity economies, using environmentally friendly production practices, building social and cultural values and co-creating and sharing knowledge. The recognition of their work and the scale of their network is testament to important role that social movements play in actively advocating for and supporting a transition to a sustainable and just agri-food system.



4. Conclusion

ZIMSOFF's success can be accredited to the multi-level approach that it takes and its engagement with multiple stakeholders, always placing the farmer at the centre. This enables collective consensus being built from the bottom-up and ensures that the movement stays representative, participatory and democratic.

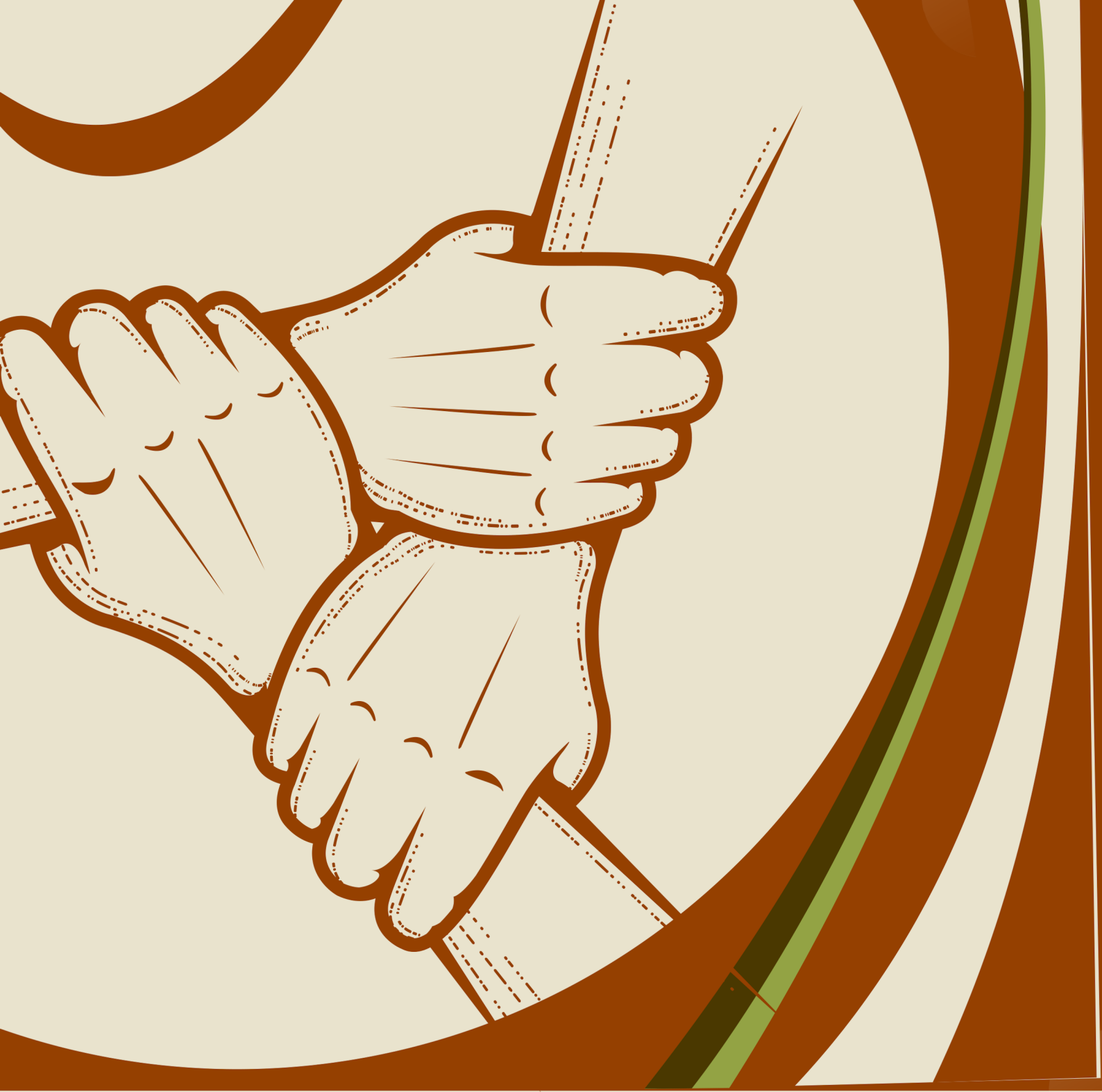
Social movements need to engage throughout the value chain to liberate all areas of the market economy from outside control – this means supporting primary production, providing training and support for processing and marketing, and in building the agency of farmers to speak at the highest levels of their needs and concerns.

It also means educating agri-food system stakeholders – from farmers to policymakers. Successful social movements also place emphasis on building networks.

Social movements, such as ZIMSOFF, have a critical role to play in building an agroecology movement to such a scale that it becomes viable as a national framework for agriculture.

References

- Agroecology in Action. 2022. What is agroecology? [Online] Available: agroeco.org/.
- Anderson, C., Pimbert, M. & Kiss, C. 2015. Building, defending and strengthening agroecology. [Online] Available: grain.org/article/entries/5283-agroecology-voices-from-social-movements?.
- Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). n.d. Zimbabwe Smallholder Organic Farmers Forum ZIMSOFF. [Online] Available: www.fao.org/family-farming/network/network-detail/en/c/170898/?msclkid=ac772296bf2011ec9915a4f30bd26d4a.
- Food Sovereignty. 2015. International Forum for Agroecology. 2015. Nyeleni. [Online] Available: www.foodsovereignty.org/forum-agroecology-nyeleni-2015-2/.
- Monjane, B., Bruna, N. & Gilolmo, P. 2019. Zimbabwe's Shashe agroecology village: an inspiration for emancipatory rural initiatives. [Online] Available: www.pambazuka.org/land-environment/zimbabwe%E2%80%99s-shashe-agroecology-village.
- PELUM Zimbabwe. 2019. 2019 Zimbabwe National Seed Fair. [Online] Available: 9acf97d6-3320-4bfc-86a4-d3479ba50719.filesusr.com/ugd/5abd3d_22e4eb03e9c9444b826cd3ed3c7f2a20.pdf.
- SAFCEI. 2021. Synthesis report: Food system and climate change governance in South Africa, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Cape Town: SAFCEI.
- Spring Prize. 2019. Zimbabwe Smallholder Organic Farmers Forum. [Online] Available: <https://springprize.org/shortlisted/zimbabwe-smallholder-organic-farmers-forum-zimsoff-2/?msclkid=ac775b4fbf2011ec8da3799097947ef5>.
- Thousand Currents. 2022. Building an agroecological movement in Zimbabwe. [Online] Available: thousandcurrents.org/partners/.
- Tinarwo, J. 2021. Resilience-focused transformation to meet Sustainable Development Goals. [Online] Available: www.agrilinks.org/post/resilience-focused-food-systems-transformation-meet-sustainable-development-goals-zimbabwe?.
- Via Campesina. 2013. ZIMSOFF and the Shashe Agroecology School in Zimbabwe. [Online] Available: <https://viacampesina.org/en/zimsoff-and-the-shashe-agro-ecology-school-in-zimbabwe/>.
- Wezel, A., Herren, B.G., Kerr, R.B., Barrios, E., Gonçalves, A.L.R. & Sinclair, F. 2020. Agroecological principles and elements and their implications for transitioning to sustainable food systems. A review. Agronomy for Sustainable Development 40:40.
- Zimbabwe Small Holder Organic Farmers' Forum. 2021. About us. [Online] Available: <http://zimsofforum.org/>.
- ZIMSOFF. 2022. What we do. [Online] Available: [WHAT WE DO \(zimsofforum.org\)](http://WHAT_WE_DO(zimsofforum.org)).



safcei

www.safcei.org