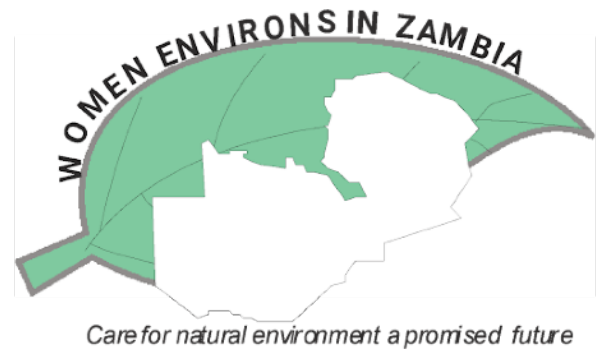


Women Environs Zambia – 23 May 2024

Zambia's 1st Agroecology Conference Report



Zambia's 1st Agroecology Conference

Date: 21-22 May 2024

Venue: Mulungushi International Conference Centre

Contact

+260 976 124 503

www.pelumzambia.org



A Crossroads for Zambia's Food System - Embracing Agroecology for a Sustainable and Inclusive Future

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Zambia, a nation where agriculture forms the backbone of the economy, stands at a crossroads. With a growing population placing increasing demands on its arable land, the current agricultural practices face mounting challenges. The 1st Agroecology Conference in Zambia, held on May 21-22, 2024, emerged as a timely and critical forum, sparking a much-needed dialogue on the future of the country's food system. This introduction delves into the context that set the stage for this pivotal conference, highlighting the pressing issues plaguing conventional agriculture and exploring the potential of agroecology as a transformative solution.

The Engine of Zambia's Economy: A Reliance on Agriculture

Agriculture remains the cornerstone of Zambia's economic and social well-being. As PELUM Zambia, the conference organiser, highlighted, at least 60% of the population relies directly or indirectly on agriculture for employment and sustenance. The nation boasts approximately 16.35 million hectares of arable land, with roughly 5.3 to 6 million hectares currently under cultivation. However, despite this significant land resource, agricultural productivity in Zambia remains low. This report by PELUM paints a sobering picture, with maize yields averaging a meagre 0.8 to 1.72 tons per hectare, far below the potential yield of 10 to 12 tons per hectare.

The Looming Shadow of Unsustainability: The Challenges of Conventional Agriculture

The conference exposed the limitations and drawbacks of the current, predominantly conventional agriculture model. This system, characterised by intensive tillage, monoculture practices, and heavy reliance on chemical

fertilisers, pesticides, and genetically modified organisms (GMOs), has yielded diminishing returns. The Ministry of Agriculture, in its presentation, delineated the issues of low soil fertility, acidic soils, and inadequate application of essential nutrients. This overexploitation of the land has resulted in a decline in soil health, leading to erosion, reduced water retention capacity, and ultimately, a decrease in agricultural productivity.

Furthermore, the conference shed light on the environmental consequences of conventional agriculture. The extensive use of chemical inputs disrupts natural ecological balances, contaminates water sources, and harms biodiversity. Care International, in its presentation, emphasised the negative impact on food diversity, highlighting how industrial agriculture has led to a decline in the number of cultivated crops, favouring a few commercially viable varieties. This not only reduces dietary diversity but also weakens the resilience of agricultural systems in the face of climate change and pests.

The Growing Threat: Climate Change and its Impact on Food Security

The conference acknowledged the looming threat posed by climate change to Zambia's food security. The Ministry of Green Environment and Economy emphasised the vulnerability of the agricultural sector to erratic weather patterns, extreme weather events, and rising temperatures. These changes disrupt traditional planting and harvesting cycles, impacting crop yields and jeopardising food security, particularly for small-scale farmers.

Social Injustices: Unequal Access and the Marginalisation of Women Farmers

The conference also brought to light the social injustices embedded within the current food system. Caritas Zambia, in its presentation, highlighted issues of land tenure, unequal access to resources like water, seeds, and credit, and unfair market practices that disadvantage small-scale farmers, particularly women. Women Environs in Zambia (WEZ), a community-based organisation representing rural women farmers, further emphasised the marginalisation of women in decision-making processes related to food production. Limited access to land titles and financial resources often restricts women's ability to invest in agroecological practices and improve their livelihoods.

A Call for Transformation: The Promise of Agroecology

In the face of these multifaceted challenges, the 1st Agroecology Conference presented a compelling alternative: agroecology. Defined by Gliessman (1998) as "the application of ecological concepts and principles to the design and management of sustainable agroecosystems," agroecology offers a holistic approach to food production. It emphasises working in harmony with natural processes, promoting biodiversity, and fostering ecological resilience.

The presentations by various stakeholders, including GIZ, highlighted the numerous benefits of agroecology. By adopting practices like cover cropping, integrated pest management, and organic soil amendments, agroecology can improve soil health, conserve water, and enhance natural pest control mechanisms. This not only leads to increased productivity and improved food security but also contributes to a more sustainable and environmentally friendly food system.

Furthermore, agroecology promotes social equity by empowering small-scale farmers, particularly women. By fostering knowledge sharing and local solutions, agroecology equips farmers with the skills and resources to manage their land sustainably. Additionally, agroecology promotes fair trade practices and local food systems, ensuring that farmers receive fair prices for their produce and contribute to a more equitable distribution of resources within the food system.

Breaking Down Silos and Embracing Diverse Perspectives: A Catalyst for Change

A crucial theme that emerged throughout the conference was the need to break down silos and embrace diverse perspectives in the quest for a more sustainable food system. CARE International, in its presentation, emphasised the importance of decolonizing food systems by dismantling power imbalances and promoting local solutions. This requires collaboration across sectors, including government agencies, research institutions, and development organisations, the private sector, and most importantly, farmers themselves. Traditional knowledge systems held by local communities, particularly women farmers, offer invaluable insights and practices that can be integrated with scientific advancements to create context-specific solutions.

The presentations highlighted various initiatives that exemplify this collaborative approach. GIZ, for instance, showcased its work on promoting integrated pest management techniques and keyhole gardens, empowering small-scale farmers with knowledge and resources to manage their land sustainably. Similarly, the Ministry of Agriculture's focus on conservation agriculture and promoting access to high-quality seeds demonstrates the government's commitment to supporting agroecological practices.

Empowering Women Farmers: A Central Role in Food System Transformation

WEZ's participation in the conference underscores the critical role women farmers' play in Zambia's food system. As primary caregivers and often responsible for household food security, women farmers possess a deep understanding of local conditions and traditional practices. However, as WEZ

pointed out, they often face significant barriers, including limited access to land, credit, and decision-making power.

The conference recognised the need to empower women farmers and place them at the centre of the agroecology movement. Presentations by various stakeholders emphasised the importance of advocating for women's land rights, promoting access to resources and training opportunities, and ensuring their voices are heard in shaping food system policies. WEZ's work in promoting indigenous seed rights and traditional knowledge systems serves as a powerful example of how women can lead the way in creating a more sustainable and equitable food system.

A Call to Action: Seizing the Moment for a Just and Sustainable Food Future

The 1st Agroecology Conference in Zambia served as a powerful call to action. By fostering dialogue, sharing knowledge, and highlighting the potential of agroecology, the conference brought together a diverse group of stakeholders committed to transforming Zambia's food system. The urgency of addressing the challenges of conventional agriculture and building resilience in the face of climate change necessitates a paradigm shift. Agroecology offers a promising pathway towards a future where food production is not only sustainable but also empowers small-scale farmers, promotes social equity, and nourishes both people and the planet.

As we move forward, the onus lies on stakeholders to translate these discussions into concrete action. Governments can create enabling policies that support agroecological practices and ensure equitable access to resources, particularly for women farmers. Research institutions can play a crucial role in bridging the gap between scientific advancements and local knowledge systems, co-creating solutions that are both effective and context-specific. Development organisations can facilitate knowledge sharing, capacity building, and market access for small-scale farmers adopting agroecology.

Ultimately, the success of this transformation hinges on collaboration and collective action. By breaking down silos, embracing diverse perspectives, and empowering women farmers, Zambia can seize this opportunity to build a just and sustainable food system for future generations. WEZ, with its dedication to empowering rural women farmers and promoting sustainable agriculture, is well-positioned to play a pivotal role in this transformative journey.

WEZ Key Takeaways

- **Embrace Agroecological Practices:** WEZ will continue promoting agroecological practices among its members, such as composting, crop rotation, water harvesting, and integrated pest management. These

practices can improve yields, reduce reliance on expensive inputs, and enhance soil health.

- **Advocate for Policy Change:** The conference highlighted the need for policies that support agroecology. WEZ will continue advocating for policies that ensure access to land, seeds, and credit for women farmers, promoting gender equity in agriculture.
- **Promote Indigenous Knowledge and Seed Security:** WEZ will continue championing the use of indigenous seeds and traditional knowledge systems in agroecological practices. This has empowered women farmers, preserve biodiversity, and reduce dependence on external inputs.
- **Capacity Building and Knowledge Sharing:** WEZ will continue facilitating workshops and training sessions for its members on agroecological practices, farmer-to-farmer learning exchanges, and knowledge sharing among women farmers.

Collaboration: Partnering with other organisations working on agroecology, sustainable agriculture, and women's empowerment can strengthen WEZ's impact

Conclusion

The 1st Agroecology Conference in Zambia provided valuable insights for WEZ. By embracing agroecology, advocating for policy change, promoting indigenous knowledge, and facilitating knowledge sharing, WEZ can empower rural women farmers to become stewards of a more sustainable and equitable food system in Zambia.