



Agroecology: for Climate Resilience & Food Democracy



Photo courtesy of PODER

Without a doubt, these are challenging times. We are confronted with evidence that climate change is fast unravelling the systems of the natural world that have evolved over millennia to create a habitable planet; what we hear far less of are the powerful stories of resilient communities coming together to create healthy, vibrant systems to sustain and nourish us long into the future.

Climate resilience through agroecology

Faced with the stresses of extreme and erratic weather patterns, indifferent (at best) government leaders and unstable markets, family and peasant farmers around the world are increasingly turning to agroecology. This ecologically resilient, highly productive approach to farming enables farmers to build healthy soil and provide nourishing food, medicine and fiber for their communities while sustaining ecosystem functions and adapting to and even mitigating climate change (see The Science box on the back page).

The Ecovida Agroecology Network in Brazil is one initiative among many that illustrates the power of agroecology. In Brazil's three southernmost states, 5,000 families have organized themselves into a collective that promotes agroecology, local economic solidarity, democratic governance and a mutually supportive relationship between producers and consumers.

Farmers like Zelma and Valdeci Steffen produce a highly diversified mix of over 100 varieties of fruits, roots and vegetables on their five-hectare farm. Their certified organic farm includes an agroforestry system that integrates bananas, açai palms and endemic trees from the Atlantic Forest—practices that draw down atmospheric carbon and sequester it deep in the soil. These perennial plants can hold significantly more moisture than chemical-intensive monocropped systems—strengthening the farm's ecological resilience

through the droughts, torrential rains and erratic weather patterns associated with climate change.

The Steffens feed their family almost entirely from the farm, and market their surplus through street markets and a local organic products consumers' cooperative—bolstering the economic resilience of their approach as well.

One of Ecovida's most creative innovations is "polycentric governance." Ecovida's Participatory Guarantee System (PGS) was co-created by producers and consumers as an alternative to expensive international certification schemes. PGS has spread to many countries in Latin America, Africa and Asia, and is provoking thoughtful discussions about what democratic governance of food systems might look like here in the United States.

Justice with joy: agroecology in the U.S.

Alondra Aragon (pictured above with her son) is a visionary farmer, activist, young mother and member of Urban Campesinx, a collective

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Celebrating Farmer Equity in California

Chowing down on tamales and pozole over festive music at a farm in the heart of the San Joaquin Valley, a mosaic of farmers and their allies recently celebrated progress in advancing racial equity in California's agricultural system. Just over one year ago, California Governor Jerry Brown signed the landmark Farmer Equity Act, focusing state resources on historically underserved farmers. The bill signaled, for the first time, that California would acknowledge racially diverse farmers who had been largely invisible — due to language, immigration status, education, economics or social networks.



Farmers and activists of the California Farmer Justice Collaborative

PAN is one of the founding members and facilitators of the California Farmer Justice Collaborative (CFJC), an active group of farmers and farmer advocates that sponsored the bill and has since watched its implementation. The new law requires the state to legally recognize “socially disadvantaged farmers,” produce an in-depth report detailing the barriers these historically underserved farmers face and ensure appropriate resources reach them.

The history of racial discrimination in agriculture is not a thing of the past. From loans and credit to land access and markets, structural challenges and problems persist. The USDA Ag Census continues to show that farmers of color own less land, make less money, and receive less government support than their white counterparts.

“While historic discrimination won't be solved overnight, the Farmer Equity Act opens the door, requiring that state officials identify and address the ways farmers of color—including Black farmers—have largely been ignored,” said Dr. Gail Myers, PhD, co-founder of Oakland-based Farms to Grow, and a founding member of CFJC.

The law also requires the California Department of Food and Agriculture hire its first Farm Equity Advisor to ensure ongoing implementation. The officer, who was hired in September, has a

high-level leadership post in the agency to ensure the successful evaluation of programs, grants and governance bodies, and make sure services and resources are reaching overlooked farmers.

The Farmer Equity Act laid the groundwork for additional progress. PAN and CFJC celebrated the passage of another law, AB 2377, that will provide new technical support to farmers to access important grant programs for soil health and water efficiency. Building on the Farmer Equity Act, the new bill reserved 25% of all technical assistance funds for historically underserved farmers.

While there is much work yet to be done, one year later PAN and our CFJC partners are celebrating California's progress in addressing historic inequities, setting the state and its farmers up for future success. 🌱

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ABOUT PAN PAN works to create a just, thriving food system, working with those on the frontlines to tackle the pesticide problem — and reclaim the future of food and farming. One of five regional centers worldwide, PAN North America links local and international consumer, labor, health, environment and agriculture groups into an international citizens' action network. Together, we challenge the global proliferation of pesticides, defend basic rights to health and environmental quality, and work to ensure the transition to a just and viable food system.

“We Don’t Want Tokenization, We Want a True Shifting of Power”

Mai Nguyen (they/them) is a grain farmer, the California Organizer with the National Young Farmers Coalition (NYFC), a cat companion, and a founding member of the California Farmer Justice Collaborative (CFJC). PAN’s Farmer Justice Fellow Moretta Browne recently talked with Mai about co-organizing the California Farmer Justice Collaborative.



How were you involved with co-founding the California Farmer Justice Collaborative?

I received the email from Paul (Paul Towers, PAN Policy Advocate) who was starting to put together the group in late 2016. Our preliminary conversations around what this group would do focused on the question: “What does racial equity look like in our food and farming system?”

Why has the current political climate centered your work around racial equity?

Trump was elected after a devastating summer of unarmed Black men being hunted down by the police—and we saw no justice. The election signaled to me that many citizens supported these modern-day versions of public lynchings witnessed by millions and condoned anonymously behind the ballot box.

The first weeks after the U.S. presidential election kicked off a series of unsurprising yet disappointing occurrences: Latinx neighbors being beaten, mosques getting defaced, and children being told by their classmates to go back to Mexico. In a

time where people say we live in the most peaceful time in human history, we need to acknowledge that there isn’t peace across different communities.

How has race-based violence influenced your work as a community organizer?

I have worked to mobilize urban allies in defense of rural people of color—strengthening phone trees for sanctuary spaces, training people to be witnesses, companions, and advocates for people of color, especially immigrants and pregnant women seeking medical attention, and connecting organizations and community members in the interest of safety. After the election, my immediate reaction was to take direct action, though I also knew that to counter the political change we needed to make policy change.

What does your experience as a farmer bring to the CFJC?

The group began with only a few participating farmers, with very different life experiences and farming businesses (like geography, age, race,

gender, financial background). I wanted to ensure that I was representing other farmers I know, and could develop a system of accountability to them such that my participation in the CFJC brought many perspectives, not only my own, and with their depth and with their consent.

Having true farmer representation is still an ongoing challenge. We are still working to determine what kinds of collaboration can best support these communities. There’s the direct action of standing with communities, combined with the challenges of policy work and engaging everyone in the voting process as much as possible. We need as much power as we can hold in the legislative process. —

The CFJC’s Farmer Equity Act created a new position for a Farmer Equity Advisor to serve the needs of historically underserved farmers and ranchers in California. Read more here: www.panna.org/blog/farmer-equity-advisor

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in the Excelsior neighborhood of San Francisco that is building community from the ground up. An initiative of PODER (People Organizing to Demand Environmental and Economic Rights), the farmers of Urban Campesinx are committed to “growing our own food and medicine, and reconnecting to land and our ancestral roots to improve the health and well-being of our community.” Bringing youth and elders together on the land, they embody the power of intergenerational organizing to combat climate change by sharing knowledge and skills, and creating safe havens for people, pollinators, native plants and beneficial soil microorganisms.

As with Ecovida, PODER believes the how is just as important as the what. To restore the earth to health and create a sustainable and resilient food system for the future, we need to reclaim control of our land, labor and lives. Many of us wonder where to begin with such an urgent, yet immense, undertaking.

Urban Campesinx (who use the “x” in their name to honor all gender expressions) are showing us the way. Together they are building a food system grounded in justice with joy, creating “a safe and inclusive space where neighborhood folks are able to come together to govern collectively.” As June Jordan has famously said, “We are the ones we’ve been waiting for.”

Wherever you are, there is a way forward. It starts with each of us and grows immeasurably through collective action. That’s

why PAN—as a global network committed to freeing our food systems from dependence on hazardous pesticides and rooting them instead in agroecology and food democracy—prioritizes working in coalition with farmers, workers and other frontline communities and in partnership with thousands of members around the world. We hope you will join us. —🌱

The Science

for your conversations about pesticides

Agroecology is a dynamic approach to the co-creation, study and management of sustainable farming systems. It emphasizes farming in harmony with nature, and integrates cutting-edge ecological sciences and principles with local and Indigenous knowledge and practice.

Because people and communities are recognized as part of the agro-ecosystem, agroecology encompasses not only the ecological, but also the social, economic, political and cultural dimensions of sustainable farming. It manifests also as a movement that centers leadership of small-scale farmers and workers, supports the health and livelihoods of communities, and encourages democratic, decentralized decision-making by farmers.



PAN October Board Retreat: Highlights included an in-depth review of our 2018 strategic plan and program budgets, and visits with some of our grassroots partners. After an inspiring presentation from Erin Rupp of Pollinate Minnesota, we traveled to the JD Rivers’ Children’s Garden in North Minneapolis where Erin keeps a number of hives. There we toured the space and learned more from MaryLynn Pulscher about pollinator-friendly initiatives happening throughout the Minneapolis Parks System.

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