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A reflexive collaborative workshop on agroecology narratives and researcher's postures

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Abstract - Agroecology has multiple interpretations and goals, driven by social movements, political contexts, and scientific needs. In this paper, we analyse a reflexive workshop that explored how agroecology narratives challenge researchers in supporting its implementation. While diverse interpretations and goals enrich the field, they can also lead to conflict. Researchers must navigate the tension between social activism and evidence-based policy solutions. The study findings highlight the need for creating new researcher profiles, including facilitators in long-term partnerships, establishing clear expectations, and developing "third spaces" for collaboration. Qualitative research assessment and new epistemological approaches are crucial for sustainable science that bridges the gap between knowledge and local realities in agroecological transitions.

Keywords: agriculture / research / sustainability science / transdisciplinarity / knowledge community

Résumé - Un atelier collaboratif réflexif sur les narratifs en agroécologie et les postures de recherche. L'agroécologie est un terme polysémique qui peut être porté par des courants parfois contradictoires. Les processus de transition agroécologique induisent des tensions entre les initiatives enracinées dans les mouvements sociaux et les processus d'institutionnalisation. Les chercheurs sont ainsi tiraillés entre deux tâches potentiellement contradictoires : (i) conseiller les décideurs politiques et (ii) soutenir les agriculteurs et les parties prenantes dans leurs trajectoires endogènes. Cet article aborde cette tension en se concentrant sur le rôle des scientifiques dans les collaborations transdisciplinaires à long terme. L'étude passe en revue un atelier transdisciplinaire de deux jours organisés par la communauté de savoirs "Terres et Sols" (CoSav Terresol) qui est portée par l'Institut national français de recherche pour le développement durable (IRD). Les 40 participants, comprenant principalement des chercheuses et chercheurs, mais aussi des agricultrices, des représentantes d'ONG et des représentants des décideurs politiques, se sont engagés dans des activités réflexives et des ateliers collaboratifs afin de partager leurs expériences et d'explorer les différents narratifs de l'agroécologie et les postures de recherche impliquées dans des transitions agroécologiques. Les résultats soulignent le besoin de compétences transversales et de facilitateurs pour aider les scientifiques à dialoguer avec les différentes parties prenantes. Cela inclut la nécessité de questionner les narratifs et de considérer les implications éthiques des partenariats à long terme dans la production de connaissances agroécologiques.

Mots-clés : agriculture / recherche / science de la durabilité / transdisciplinarité / communauté de savoirs

Introduction¹

Agroecology encompasses agricultural practices inspired by ecology, environmental sustainability, social movements, and scientific challenges (FAO, 2018; López-García *et al.*, 2021). It has gained significant traction in science and media due to its intersection with multiple societal expectations. Despite its longstanding development across different world regions, the inclusion of agroecology in the political discourse and agricultural policies is uneven. The socio-political regional or national dynamics can strengthen or limit transition initiatives led by farmers or civil society. Depending on the national context or the actors’ position in society, various agroecology narratives meet and/or confront. Altogether, stakeholders are caught between an activist/militant approach rooted in agroecology as a social movement, and pathways for institutionalising its principles (Giraldo & Rosset, 2018), as was the case with organic farming (Van Dam & Nizet, 2014). These dynamics set up a tension between proponents of a full paradigmatic and radical transformation in agriculture and food systems and those advocating a gradual, cautious, evidence-based approach (Walthall *et al.*, 2024).

In the academic realm, this tension also creates credibility issues in the knowledge production process. Scientists can be actors in the transition process with at least a twofold task. They are solicited, on the one hand, to advise policymakers by providing scientific evidence and, on the other hand, to support farmers and citizens in their innovative and adaptive practical experimentations. This dual role is crucial for both legitimising agroecological transitions within agricultural policies and strengthening sustainable agricultural practices through appropriate assessment and action research methodologies. This paper focuses on the second task although it draws on a broader view of the complexity of positioning scientific research between policy-making and local stakeholder expectations (Giraldo, 2019; Tittonell, 2014).

Indeed, the whole academic community is called to move towards more sustainable and transdisciplinary goals and methods. Achieving sustainable science requires exploring reflexive postures and elaborating new pathways for co-constructing knowledge (Dangles & Fréour, 2023; Kates *et al.*, 2001). In the case of agroecological transitions, it is important to engage in a transdisciplinary dialogue that recognises the relevance and credibility of farmers’ knowledge. Furthermore, it is crucial to consider farmers as research actors

and partners. Collaborative and action-oriented research are essential dimensions in sustainable agriculture transition processes. They allow farmers to anchor their transition pathway in an enriching and rigorous knowledge dialogue (Méndez *et al.*, 2013). In this context, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary platforms, as well as collaborative workshops, can be fertile ground for deepening thoughts and experiences in scientific paradigms and methodological transitions.

This paper presents a review of a reflexive collaborative workshop on agroecology narratives and researcher’s postures organised by the “Lands and Soils” knowledge community (called in French “CoSav Terres et Sols”²). This knowledge community is part of the French National Research Institute for Sustainable Development (IRD) commitment to more sustainable and inclusive research through nine key societal challenges, including land, climate, sustainable cities, and biodiversity. The “Lands and Soils” knowledge community was established in 2022 and comprises over 260 members originating from various institutions worldwide. Its purpose is to provide a platform for inter- and transdisciplinary dialogue with Southern countries on sustainable land and soil management and to contribute to IRD’s long standing regional partnerships. This community serves as an example of a reflexive trajectory of a knowledge community towards a transdisciplinary approach.

Approach and methods

The “Lands and Soils” knowledge community holds an annual thematic workshop to promote an open and reflexive dialogue among its members. In 2023, the workshop focused on agroecology narratives and questioned the political positioning and epistemological posture of researchers in agroecological transitions. The topic was selected considering the growing diversity of how agroecology is integrated into the agenda by public policies and social movements in Southern and Northern countries. Accordingly, the workshop addressed the following questions: what are the missions expected from research in the context of agroecological transitions? How do researchers reconcile their commitment to agroecology with their research goals? How do researchers commit to finding solutions with people? One of its goals was to share and compare the narratives and experiences of agroecology within the cultural context of the members of the knowledge community. It was attended by 40 participants, which included a variety of actors such as farmers, NGOs and public policy representatives, even though researchers

¹ The paper focuses on a reflexive collaborative workshop on agroecology narratives and researcher’s postures organised by the Lands and Soils knowledge community, promoted by the French National Institute for Sustainable Development. The study has been proposed as an oral communication for the 15th conference of the International Farming System Association, whose main

topic is systemic change for sustainable futures
<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.12733006>

² <https://terresetsols.ird.fr/en/>

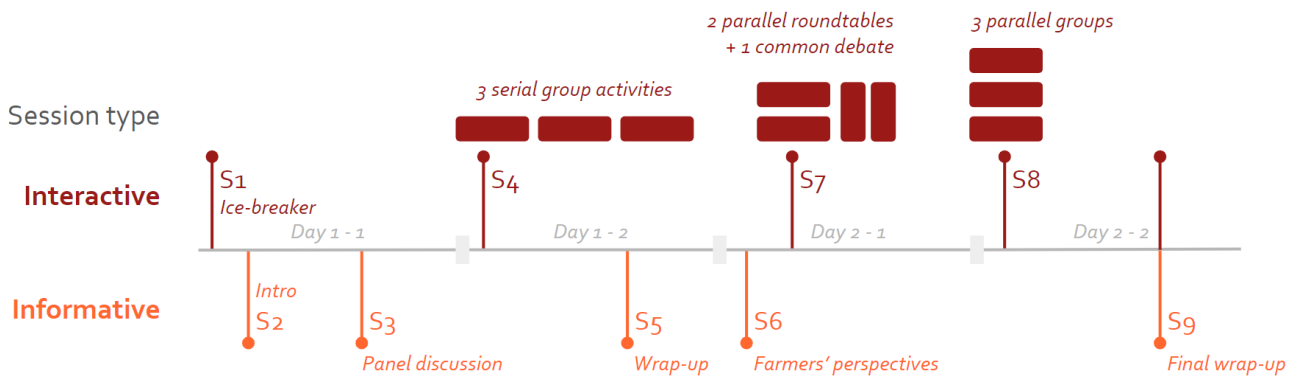


Fig. 1. Diagram of sessions (S1 to S9) and activities of the two-day workshop.

were in the majority.

The two-day workshop alternated interactive and informative sessions for a total of nine slots (**Figure 1**). Four interactive sessions rhythmized the workshop with gradually increasing engagement of individuals in different group activities. Participants either rotated between activities in series or were assigned to one of two or three in parallel groups. The five informative sessions provided instructions for and concluded the interactive sessions; they also involved speakers from different backgrounds to establish common ground among participants. The interactive sessions were designed with the assistance of a professional cooperative consultancy in participatory approaches (LISODE³). The focus of the workshop organisation was twofold: to allow for individual expression of concepts and experiences, and to formulate shared answers to the introductory questions. Participants were divided into groups to promote active participation. These groups were redefined after each activity to stimulate the mix of individual perspectives.

On the first-day opening session, speakers from various spheres, including practitioners, researchers, and policy-makers, gave voice to different entities promoting agroecology in several contexts. The session mainly covered West Africa, Maghreb, Latin America, South-East Asia, and France. Then, the interactive session moved participants through three serial group activities: (1) choosing keywords to define agroecology, (2) providing critical feedback on personal experiences in agroecology, and (3) identifying relevant stakeholders. Stakeholder identification took place as part of a simulated agroecology project, which was based on a description of a generic rural context and community. This allowed for the comparison of narratives without reference to any specific geographical framework.

The second day began with an informative session that focused on the perspectives of farmers regarding agroecological research. This was represented by the testimonies of two women farmers: a member of the

European Coordination Via Campesina⁴ and a farmer involved in the Tarassac onion breeding (De Bon, 2022). After this session, the participants were split into two parallel groups to discuss for an interactive session. One group discussed the interactions between research and peasant agroecology, while the other focussed on the prerequisites for collaborative research. Then, both groups addressed a common question: how should research consider societal and policymakers' expectations? In the afternoon, the participants engaged in a final interactive session where they simulated the meeting with a local community to report on a five-year agroecology project that was introduced on day one. During this session, three groups simulated distinct approaches: top-down, fully collaborative, and open-ended. Participants alternated between playing the project consortium and the local community members. In the closing mixed interactive-informative session, participants were asked to evaluate the workshop anonymously by writing their feedback on post-it notes and placing them on a structured board. This was followed by a final synthesis and debate of the key insights.

Findings

The international panel of the opening session provided feedback from a diversity of actors coming from Senegal, Algeria, Cambodia, and Brazil. This international roundtable offered an overview of the heterogeneity of local and global agroecological transition processes. For example, participants learned about Senegal's multi-stakeholder DyTAES network⁵ which champions agroecology and has gained some recognition from the Senegalese authorities. However, the 'Feeding Africa' summit in January 2023, as outlined in the 'Dakar 2' Declaration, did not include agroecology in its strategic discussions (Africa Food Summit, 2023). Despite notable interest from farmers and pioneering initiatives such as the living lab implemented

³ <https://www.lisode.com/home/>

⁴ <https://www.eurovia.org>

⁵ <https://dytaes.sn/>

by the NATAE EU project in Algeria⁶, agroecology remains conspicuously absent from the Maghreb's agricultural framework. The agricultural system of the oasis is an example of how new farming practices can threaten a source of agroecological knowledge and practices, potentially leading to its disappearance. In Southeast Asia, agroecology is present in public institutions and funders' discourses but its practical application is not as effective as it could be. Finally, Brazil was presented as the most advanced region in agroecology institutionalisation but these politics tend to be associated with leftist governments and rejected by right-wing parties. This situation illustrates that changes in the political majorities can weaken the continuity of agroecological policies and transitions. These discrepancies highlight the crucial role and difficulties policymakers face when implementing long-term agricultural and agroecology policies. Support for agroecological transitions may be hindered by political ideologies and/or policymakers' need for clear agronomic and economic benchmarks before endorsing significant policy shifts.

Agroecology is a polysemic term, as confirmed by the group activity on its collective definition. The resulting three distinct definitions emphasise: (1) the importance of the social and farmer components, (2) the scientific and multidisciplinary aspects of agroecology, and (3) the need for sustainable farming practices. These definitions are complementary but also reveal a potential conflict arising from the plurality of understanding and priorities. Only two keywords were consistently present in all three definitions: diversity (used alone or in combination with 'bio' or 'socio') and systems (used alone or in combination with 'agro', 'eco' or 'socio-eco'). The differences and similarities highlight the importance of contextualising agroecological transitions and considering the diverse range of actors involved in these processes at different levels. Each experience is unique and context-specific. However, sharing experiences is fruitful in identifying common constraints and successes. Successful initiatives can inspire others by clarifying paths and mistakes.

Heterogeneity in agroecological transition pathways also operates at both local and individual scales. At the farm level, the farming system defined as the starting point (Tittonell, 2020) of the transition processes (e.g. industrialised or peasant systems) induces specificities and requires adaptations in the adopted transition pathway. Doing research in agroecology involves dealing with complexity and heterogeneity and considering socio-agroecosystems as a whole. To support and assess transition pathways, it is important to consider not only ecological and physical contexts but also socio-political and cultural contexts.

At an individual level, personal and professional trajectories also influence the adoption and implementa-

tion of agroecology. The activity dedicated to describing the individual trajectories highlighted the variety of key elements that have influenced personal involvement in agroecology. The discussion was focused on sharing experiences of implementing agroecology in professional practices by different spheres, such as scientists, farmers, civil society actors or policymakers. A framework designed for this exercise was based on four stages in order to describe these trajectories: fertile grounds, barriers, actions to go through, and paths for the future (**Table 1**).

Collective thinking and transdisciplinary collaboration, involving researchers and extra-academic stakeholders has allowed us to start from a diversity of individual experiences shared by a limited group of people, to reach more general trends in terms of agroecological trajectories. This collective learning, presented in table 1, can contribute to a better understanding of the complexity of agroecological transition pathways by addressing the multifaceted nature of these systems and the issues (mentioned in the "barriers" section of the table) that arise at different spatial and temporal levels. The political significance of agroecology and the deep connections to institutions, power structures and policy-making processes can be a barrier at the individual and collective levels and challenges the traditional notions of scientific neutrality. This reality underlines the expectation for researchers to engage actively with socio-political dimensions and to shift working *for* the partners towards doing research *with* them. The integration of diverse knowledge systems is mentioned also as a challenge, highlighting the critical importance of synthesising scientific expertise with local, experiential wisdom. The persistent resource constraints affecting both research activities and the practical implementation of agroecological methods is a barrier that is more difficult to overcome. Taken together, these findings highlight some important challenges presented in actions and paths sections. These include the need for a holistic, system-wise approach to agroecological research and practice that can both integrate reflexivity, ethical perspectives, and political realities and work towards more equitable resource distribution and knowledge complementarity.

This session provided an opportunity for actors involved in agroecological research and transition to share and discuss the uncomfortable position they experience of being caught on the edge of socio-political engagement and scientific requirements. The session emphasised the importance of consolidating networks and working collectively to break down feelings of isolation. When addressing agroecological transitions, a researcher is expected to collaborate with farmers to find solution to practical problems but also to respond to scientific evaluation standards and publication requirements. This can result in conflicting and sometimes incompatible timeframes and objectives, calling

⁶ <https://www.natae-agroecology.eu/>

Tab. 1. Stages in the agroecology individual trajectory (source: elaboration of workshop's results).

Stage in the trajectory	Description by the participant
Fertile grounds	<i>Initial interests in ecology and “nature”</i> <i>Interdisciplinary experiences face complex questions</i> <i>Discrepancies between personal and institutional visions</i> <i>Teaching experiences</i>
Barriers	<i>Complex systems at different spatial and temporal levels</i> <i>Political issues (agroecology is not neutral)</i> <i>Diversity of knowledge</i> <i>Access to funds</i>
Actions	<i>Reflexivity and personal transformations</i> <i>Transforming practices and paradigms (e.g., research posture)</i> <i>Individual resistance</i> <i>Counter reductionism</i> <i>Assume ethical positions and engaged values</i> <i>Form teams to work collectively</i> <i>Changing teaching programs</i>
Paths	<i>Adopting more sustainable lifestyles</i> <i>Communicate a more attractive vision of agroecology</i> <i>Consider political dimensions in agroecological research</i> <i>Co-design research project focused on actors' concerns</i> <i>Formations to inter/transdisciplinarity methodologies</i> <i>Contribute to more inclusive narratives</i> <i>Give time and places for expressing and sharing agroecological experiences</i> <i>Lobbying funders</i>

for an adaptation of research frameworks and valorisation criteria to reflect the specificities of collaborative transdisciplinary research. Transforming practices and paradigms and, more specifically, adopting a transdisciplinary research posture can be challenging. Therefore, experience sharing is necessary to foster a reflexive approach and consolidate experimental methodologies. Transdisciplinarity goes beyond academic issues and resonates with the needs and concerns of society. Assessing the risks and impacts of transitioning towards agroecology and sustainable farming practices presents an opportunity to explore multiple pathways for scientific experimentation with field actors (Cuéllar-Padilla & Calle-Collado, 2011). Collaborative assessment and experimentation are needed to consider the understanding and knowledge of local actors and to open a debate on paradigms and practical implications related to the definition of indicator frameworks.

The second day of the workshop was dedicated to collaborative research and postures included two parallel sessions. The presentations by the two farmers and the following roundtables and debates were a special opportunity to hear the point of view of farmers and their organisations. They made clear that crucial issues might remain unaddressed if this dialogue does not occur. For example, the ethical and legal aspects of seed production and distribution were identified as critical aspects to be defined from the outset of a participatory breeding project. The speakers also shared the importance of considering sensitivity and affectivity as essential aspects of agroecological experiences; this invitation was also a source of emotions for the researchers. They also expressed the desire to be considered as partners in knowledge production rather than just practitioners or farming knowledge holders. This meeting session was a small step through the long process of

mutual understanding between scientists and farmers. It was also a moment to consider agriculture as a way of life and farming practices as an immersive and sensitive experience. Knowledge dialogue should take into account understandings, perceptions and sensitivity beyond the technical aspects of transition.

During the last session on research posture and methodologies based on a simulation exercise, it was challenging to avoid caricatures, such as an extreme top-down academic approach or an overly inclusive participatory approach. Nonetheless, it was a valuable exercise to practise humorous self-criticism and collectively imagine alternatives. This session concluded that fundamental science and participatory and cooperative approaches need to complement each other to varying degrees throughout long-term research partnerships.

In the individual evaluation at the end of the workshop, the participants indicated that the activities met their initial expectations. The activities made explicit the need to include funding bodies and have greater feedback from the field in such an open and reflexive workshop on researchers’ postures. In this vein, the participants pinpointed the central role of social sciences in elucidating the relevance of field-based knowledge to anchor agroecology within a wider sustainable development strategy. Living labs and other long-term partnerships were mentioned as critical frameworks. The main novelty of the activities was the double-sided claim of researchers and other actors for a mutual understanding of professional goals and acknowledgement of skills and capabilities in the production of knowledge to support the development of agroecology.

Methodological and practical implications

This open and reflexive workshop provided a platform to identify shared concerns and recommendations within the “Lands and Soils” knowledge community. These key elements are expected to resonate with other agroecological research experiences and strengthen transformative initiatives. They also inform the orientation strategy at the institutional level, yet require addressing implications and opportunities for funding, as well as the inclusion of a wider panel of expertise from various professional and geographical backgrounds.

The following methodological and practical outcomes have emerged from the discussions and are summarised below:

- Create new researcher profiles with transversal skills to facilitate transdisciplinarity
- Include a facilitator profile in transdisciplinary long-term research projects and partnerships
- Clarify prerequisites and warnings to elicit formal commitment in collaborative research

- Create “third places” to ease multi-actor meetings and co-construct research questions and projects
- Boost qualitative changes in research and researcher assessment framework to improve the inter- and trans-disciplinary considerations

The originality of those outcomes lies in the fact that they are emerging from a reflexive process based on practical experiences and contextualised in order to improve research practices in a specific knowledge community (the CoSav Terresol). However they can be linked with older research approaches such as Participatory Action Research (Grant *et al.*, 2008; Mackenzie *et al.*, 2012) or Collaborative Research (Desgagné, 1997; Morrissette, 2013). Indeed these research approaches are based on researcher-actors partnership and experiment and develop tools, methods and profiles to facilitate and dynamise those processes (Basagoiti Rodríguez *et al.*, 2001). In this context, “third places” emerge in citizen science approaches (Lhoste, 2020), along with a variety of living labs and similar concepts, also in agroecology (McPhee *et al.*, 2021).

These methodological and practical implications highlight the need to articulate short and long-term projects, on the one hand, to generate practical knowledge and impact assessments and, on the other hand, monitoring and supporting agroecological practices and system transitions. Multidisciplinary research institutes like IRD are well positioned to facilitate dialogue between agroecological research and local stakeholders. This opportunity requires stable means and long-term partnerships to be deployed as far as possible.

Theoretical Implications

The present study contributes to transdisciplinary thought on the role of researchers in the knowledge-production processes of agroecological transition. The urgency to design sustainable pathways for agricultural production must include the consideration of the complex local socio-technical systems. Both researchers and local actors acknowledge the need to deal with multi-stakeholder platforms. In this perspective, mutual understanding and reckoning are of paramount relevance for the success of transdisciplinary projects, which can be better achieved through long-term partnerships. This study also discusses the interest to improve the synergy between short-term, even directive projects, to produce quantitative evidence on agroecological practices and the long-term collaborative projects mobilising both empirical and academic sources of knowledge in a broader socio-technical context.

In terms of research positions and postures, this study highlights the need for strengthening skills in a holistic and system-level approach that encompasses ecology, agronomy, socio-anthropology and complexity science. This implies several epistemic challenges

concerning the need for (1) deconstructing and contextualising narratives, (2) clarifying ethical considerations for partnerships, (3) skills in collective governance and legal aspects, and (4) inter/transdisciplinary theoretical frameworks and methodologies. Despite the awareness of these challenges in promoting knowledge co-creation, transdisciplinarity, and the related “wisdom dialogues” (Anderson et al., 2019; Méndez et al., 2013), researchers more easily propose new conceptual frameworks (Walthall et al., 2024) and principles (Sumberg et al., 2023), rather than own-reflexivity (Fernández González et al., 2021; Rossi, 2020). In this regard, the present study draws upon the general epistemic trends, yet with an example of researchers' community self-criticism on the postures fostering new patterns of commitment to systemic change for sustainable futures.

Sustainable sciences are complex and demanding for researchers, whose tasks are multiple and submitted to markers that should account for heterogeneous and innovative pathways. In the field of agroecology, partnerships with social actors are crucial to generating relevant local knowledge. These partnerships also guarantee that local stakeholders' concerns and priorities are considered when making advice to policymakers. The twofold task mentioned in this study can ultimately be seen as two aspects of the same engagement to place science at the service of more sustainable and equitable human societies.

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