

Concept note on a ASEAN position on agroecology A Lao PDR initiative for ASEAN Ministers of Agriculture & Forestry

Safe food and safe environment: the SEA agroecology route

After several decades of *Green Revolution* focusing on yields (*e.g.*, varietal improvement, irrigation, use of chemicals, mechanization), agriculture in Southeast Asia is now facing a “quality challenge”, because of dramatic surges in rural chemical pollution, soil degradation, imbalanced diets and emerging food scares. Indeed, agroecology can help to **address these environmental and health challenges**, as reducing chemical use, enhancing soil quality and biodiversity, and diversifying farm production (thereby improving dietary balance).

Furthermore, if appropriated policy support, agroecology not only can lead to better environment and health but also to enhanced cost-effectiveness. While encouraging using local resources (local species & seeds, green fertilizers, local practices...), agroecology **decreases dependency on imported inputs** (seeds, chemicals...) and diversify adaptations to challenging environment (*e.g.*, drought, flood, degraded soil). Yet importantly, agroecology helps modernize the image of agriculture, environment-friendly and profitable. It thus **offers young adults promising job opportunities** by proposing a revamped ecological and profitable alternative to both traditional and industrial farming.

However, to get these achievements agroecology requires **a common position and strategy at the SEA level**, as both economic and environmental dynamics have intricate regional linkages. Lao PDR is asked to lead an ASEAN initiative on this topic. This concept-note presents elements for this forward SEA common position on agroecology.

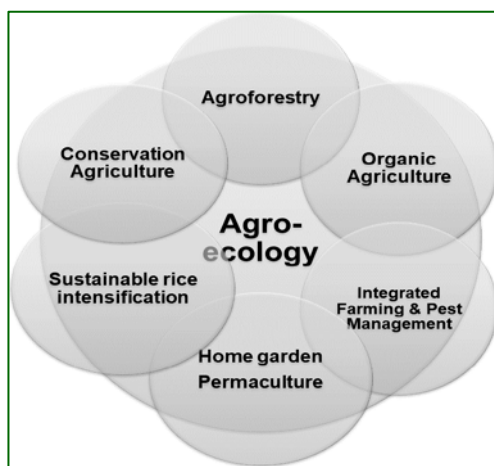
Summarize of proposed elements for a SEA common position on agroecology

- Agreement on a shared purpose: the agroecology transition.
 The diversity of environment-friendly agricultural practices in SEA can be seen as **different stages of an agroecology transition**. This reasonable and operational view leaves room for diversity within a common policy framework that accompanies a gradual shift towards agroecology farming systems.
- A shared mechanism gathering SEA gained experience to boost AE transition:
 - A facilitation mechanism for an **ASEAN community of experienced AE practitioners**, (public and private actors, experienced farmers, processors, traders, and other practitioners) which structures and eases experience transferring to countries teams, trainers, and practitioners.
 - An **on-line resources platform** that links countries information, knowledge, tools and sourcebooks.
 - An **ASEAN agreement of common of agroecology standards**, labelling and testing processes, and their country adaptations.
 - An **AE farming & marketing apprenticeship scheme** in partnership with small-scale social farms, benefiting from marketing experience and networks of these farms.
 - **A decentralized multi-stakeholder mechanism for an enabling environment**: Information campaign, trainings, participatory labelling, private-public partnerships, value chain structuring... have to be designed then managed at local territory levels, in order to be adapted of local AE issues and to succeed on involving key local actors (like traders).

1. A shared understanding of agroecology in SEA

A set of agricultural practices. Agroecology designates at the same time a set of agricultural practices, a scientific field of research (focusing on the efficiency of its practices), and a social movement (focusing on the most environmental-friendly practices). Within the policy perspective of an ASEAN collaboration, agroecology will be understood as a set of agricultural practices.

Agroecology as a purpose: the agroecology transition. Many farming practices in SEA that contribute to environment restoration and safe food production are still quite far from a fully agro-ecological farming. However, such efforts have to be supported for a progressive shift towards agroecology: a regional policy should focus on accompanying an *Agroecology transition*.



The most found agroecology practices in SEA (source: Actae project)

Agroecology as a method: an integrated understanding of environmental and economic issues. The agroecology perspective highlights the links between safe consumption, profitable development, environmental preservation, and local-level issues. At a policy level, that drives to integrate in a same policy framework not only different sector policies, but also global level (countries and SEA) mechanisms and locally contextualized approaches, as follows.

2.1. Mobilizing and boosting countries experience: An ASEAN community of agroecology experienced practitioners

AE experiences have flourished in SEA, but remain scattered and often unwell exploited. In Lao PDR, working meetings have been hold during 2017 in order to benefit from **experienced persons, from different topics related to agroecology (agronomy, value-chain, financing, capacities building, communication and awareness, accompanying research...), and from different backgrounds (public and private actors, experienced farmers, processors, traders, and other practitioners)**. This rich diversity of Lao experienced practitioners is now gathered in a country community, that can be mobilized on request to value gained experience in next AE supports in the country. Countries practitioners communities will shape an *ASEAN community of agroecology-experienced practitioners* that make the rich SEA experience in AE available to for every new AE action and partnership in SE.

Efficiency of this ASEAN experts community will be enhance by an *ASEAN on-line resources platform* that links countries on-line resources platforms and other sources of knowledge, tools and sourcebooks. Numerous but scattered are the available and useful materials: training schemes, resource books, extension guidelines, awareness plans, etc.

2.2. ASEAN agreement of common of agroecology standards

The labelling process is a condition to economically value AE transition and drive stakeholders to invest in AE value chains. The diversity of current countries process as regards AE standards and labels (OA, national GAP...) should be structured and harmonized at the ASEAN level. It will ease consumers understanding and export flows, both in ASEAN and towards other world markets.

2.3. A partnership with small-scale farms for an apprenticeship on agroecology

The purpose is to use farming & marketing experience and networks of market-based social enterprises (small-scale private farms, as well as processors or traders) to train young farmers and insert their production in profitable value chains. Within an apprenticeship scheme, these enterprises provide young adults with both technical support and marketing opportunities. Some of these partnerships have succeeded in increasing farmer incomes, transferring agroecology-farming skills, and structuring local value chains. These successes can be scaled-up by strengthening training capacity

of market-based social enterprises, and adding a setting-in support after the training period. These apprenticeships will be set up in partnership with market-based social enterprises, extension services and educational institutions.

2.4. A decentralized mechanism for an enabling environment

Farmers shift to agroecology farming only if they experience a suitable local environment, and local administrations have a key-role to play for this. A farmer alone can rarely successfully practice agroecology farming, because of the negative biophysical impact of neighbouring activities (chemicals, erosion), incompatible agricultural calendars, and markets that privilege large volumes...

Successes have been achieved when local administrations get a coherent and long-term strategy that deeply involves the diversity of local key actors. Experience, especially in Lao PDR, showed that an efficient solution is to set decentralized AE transition plans that are managed by **a local multi-stakeholders committee**, under the local authorities, and which benefits from an **AE local fund** (which can be supported by specific local fees). This AE transition plan addresses a diversity of challenges:

- farmers awareness about environmental and economic assets of agroecology farming;
- setting partnerships with colleges for specific educational courses on AE;
- transferring farming and marketing skills, and developing a fitted extension support;
- launching participatory labelling and monitoring;
- adapting financial supports to this technical transition shift (for farmers as well processors);
- Institutional settings for an enabling environment (pesticide policy, secure markets access...)
- Valuing agroecology products, by consumers' awareness and by labelling agroecology standards.

A key condition to spread out agroecology practices is to improve the stakeholders' sound understanding of agro-ecological advantages and existing rules. Moreover, being farmer, processor, or trader, going into agroecology activity is a long-term investing. These stakeholders cannot bear costs alone and without adapted financial mechanisms (adapted long-term loans, starting grant, preferential prices...). Charges exempting is one of the efficient support already succeeded. As emerging fragile sector, value chains for labelled products (OA, AGP) are jeopardized by additional costs like taxes and charges (chargeable organic label, fee for agroecology market stall, taxation of transport or organic fertilizers...). Local policies have to subsidize, or at least not tax, smallholders of these emerging value-chains.

Producers still are insufficiently attracted and organized to meet market demand both in quantity and in quality. Deep exchanges between smallholders, private and banking sectors have to be promoted at local level. These dialogues help to develop profitable yet fair value chains. When fair, these initiatives increase farmer incomes, create efficient value-chains, strengthen the country's economic network, and create new market niches for small-scale private farms.

Some agroecological practices can be valued through a market value of their products (e.g. labelling), but for others (e.g. fodder crops, local market or consumption, subsistence crops...), value better rests on their environment impact (restoring soils, water conservation, preserving biodiversity...). A participatory labelling scheme will aim to achieve three essential milestones of a labelling policy: reassuring the consumers, organizing an affordable but wide-ranging control, and ensuring a continuous progress on quality processes. Regarding practices that provide environmental services but have not been directly valued by the market (e.g., soil restoration, water conservation, agrobiodiversity), local administration initiatives have a key-role: awareness and training, fiscal policy, premiums, investment fund... Implementing the local administrations capacity-building plan (see above) is the best way to make administrations able to set an enabling environment.