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“Solidarity in a competing world —  
fair use of resources”

## Agroecology in the Context of Rural Development Interventions in Burkina Faso: A Smallholders’ Livelihoods’ Catalyst?

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### Abstract

Based on qualitative field research in Bilanga, eastern region of Burkina Faso, and on a thorough literature review about agroecology, we debate the effects of rural development programs implemented by a NGO under the umbrella of agroecology. We ask whether agroecology turns into just another imposed technical package or if it can sustainably improve smallholders’ livelihoods as a whole.

Combining ecological and socio-economic principles, agroecology is an ambitious and complex transdisciplinary concept. In Bilanga, the local NGO ARFA – Association pour la Recherche et la Formation en Agro-écologie – introduced several agricultural techniques and field management strategies that should allow farmers to better cope with unpredictable rainfall patterns, soil degradation and loss of biodiversity. Our research results indicate that the adoption of these practices change farming systems towards meeting the ecological principles of agroecology and strengthen the natural capital base at the field and farm level. Farmer Field Schools and Farmer Groups organised by ARFA in the region’s villages allow for transferring knowledge, creating social cohesion and providing access to farming tools and inputs and hence address some of the socio-economic principles of agroecology: the strengthening of social and knowledge networks, the development of market access and local production-consumption cycles and the socio-political empowerment of smallholders. But, looking closer, our data reveals unequal access to the groups and schools, material grabbing and misappropriation of funds by the groups’ leaders, as well as top-down oriented knowledge diffusion processes.

As development projects are not power- and interest-free bubbles, but conflicted arenas where interests and visions of different actors enter into play, our original research enlightens the potential of agroecology in the context of rural development. In our case study, results demonstrate that the programmes risk creating new inequalities where more solidarity and fair access to resources were wished for, while not excluding potential pathways for more truly agroecology-based livelihoods.

**Keywords:** Agroecology, Burkina Faso, impact evaluation, livelihoods, rural development programs, smallholder farmers

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