

# **Unlocking the Transformative Potential of Agroecological Networks**

## **Full Workshop Summary**

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## Continuing the Transformative Journey

This workshop focused on transformative change in agroecology networks and how to enhance their effectiveness. The session included personal reflections, a dialogue between experts, a presentation on transformative pathways, and structured breakout discussions to gather collective insights on what makes networks transformative.

## Welcome and Check-in

Participants placed themselves in a virtual "scenery" on the Miro board, adding their names and indicating if they felt anything was missing in the picture.

## Grounding in Reality (Myriam Dumortier and Lisa Norton)

Myriam Dumortier (Research Institute for Nature and Forest in Belgium) and Lisa Norton (UK Centre for Ecology and Hydrology) sharing experiences working on agroecology and transformative change, in a format of casual conversation.

## Key points

### *Successful projects*

Small-scale, bottom-up projects with farmers as their most inspiring work

- [A project with farmers, millers, and bakers](#) on agro-ecological cultivation of cereals that led to testing 16 old wheat varieties, producing flour and bread, and creating lasting collaborations
- Pasture Fed Livestock Association on a transdisciplinary [project](#) involving ecologists, social scientists, and economists to evidence sustainable grazing practices

### *Scaling challenges*

Small projects with individual farmers are difficult to scale, while larger projects involving conventional farming organizations often lose their transformative edge and get bogged down in technical details.

### *Barriers to transformation*

- Entrenched interests of industrial agriculture, agrochemical production, and seed companies
- Resistance from conventional agricultural networks that don't believe transformation is possible

- Funding calls focused on "good practices" and "win-wins" rather than addressing barriers, along with rigid project structures (work packages, deliverables, milestones) that leave no space for co-creation

### *Motivations despite challenges*

- Nelson Mandela's quote that "everything always seems impossible until it is done," drawing parallels to past social movements
- Engagement with farmers at the grassroots level and collaboration with like-minded colleagues keeps them motivated
- Increasing awareness about the need for transformative change across institutions, including in agricultural ministries

## Vision & Frustrations: Personal Reflection & Group Sharing

Participants reflected on their motivations, frustrations, and hopes for agroecology transformation. An analysis of their responses reveals several key themes:

### Motivations for Contributing to Agroecology

Participants' motivations clustered around three main dimensions:

**Values and Vision for the Future:** Many were driven by core values of sustainability, equity, and intergenerational responsibility. They expressed a desire for "a better world," "social equity," and "a future for our children." These motivations reflect a deep concern for long-term wellbeing that transcends immediate economic interests.

**Connection to Natural Systems:** A significant theme was the recognition of humans' interdependence with nature. Participants valued "biodiverse landscapes" not only for their ecological function but also for their "aesthetic appeal" and contribution to "human well-being." Several noted the importance of "coexistence with nature" while still generating value—suggesting a rejection of the nature-economy dichotomy.

**Professional Purpose and Community:** Many found meaning in their work building bridges between different actors in the food system. The creation of "intra-cultural dialogue with farmers" and acting as "information dissemination conduits" highlighted the importance of connection and translation across different knowledge systems and communities.

## Frustrations in Changing the Current System

The obstacles identified by participants revealed structural, political, and cultural barriers that reinforce each other:

**Power Imbalances and Political Resistance:** The most commonly cited frustrations related to concentrated power—"corporate interests," "industry lobbies," and "backroom politics." Many noted how these power structures enable resistance to transformative change, manifesting in unfavourable policies and "political currents against agroecology."

**Economic System Constraints:** Participants pointed to fundamental tensions between agroecological principles and dominant economic paradigms. References to "supply chain imperialism," "capitalism," and "profit-driven systems" suggest that transformative change requires addressing root economic structures rather than surface-level symptoms.

**Knowledge Integration Challenges:** A recurring frustration was the difficulty in meaningfully integrating different forms of knowledge—particularly the "inclusion of practitioners in research." This suggests that despite growing recognition of the value of transdisciplinary approaches, practical implementation remains challenging.

## Hopes and Visions for Change

Participant visions for the future integrated systemic reforms with personal and community-level transformations:

**Reimagined Economic and Policy Frameworks:** Many called for fundamental reforms to "agricultural policies," "financing/subsidies," and addressing "vested interests." A notable theme was the need to overcome "the tragedy of the commons" through new governance arrangements.

**Cultural and Social Transformation:** Participants emphasized that technical solutions alone are insufficient without accompanying shifts in "mindsets about natural systems," building "stronger rural communities," and fostering "youth involvement." The emphasis on "generation to generation knowledge sharing" suggests valuing traditional knowledge alongside innovation.

**Regenerative Practices and Agency:** Concrete hopes focused on practices that rebuild rather than deplete — "regenerating soil," increasing "diversity of cropping systems," and bringing "more people on the land." The emphasis on "the will of young farmers" points to the importance of agency and empowerment in driving change.

These reflections reveal a group that understands transformation as requiring coordinated change across multiple dimensions—from individual mindsets to economic systems—with particular emphasis on addressing power imbalances and bridging diverse knowledge systems.

## Presentation on Social Context and Transformative Pathways (Robin Dianoux)

The presentation provided context on the challenges facing agroecology and presented a framework for understanding how networks can create transformative change.

### Social context and challenges:

- **Ecological issues:** Decline of birds, pressures on surface and groundwater, and climate change impacts like water scarcity
- **Social tensions:** Farmer protests (examples from France) against controls and regulations, including protests against research institutions
- **Policy setbacks:** In France, a recent law reinforced productivity orientation while erasing references to ecological transition
- **Structural barriers:** Decreasing support for organic farming, corporate influence, consumer perception issues, price concerns, and network fragmentation

### Three Transformative Pathways for Networks:

1. **Collaboration:** Working within existing systems
  - a. Building coalitions and working with players at the center
  - b. Being inclusive and seeking consensus
  - c. Example: Farmers reaching out to policymakers to integrate agroecology into subsidies
2. **Challenge:** Taking a more critical stance
  - a. Exposing flaws and pointing out responsibilities
  - b. Empowering actors to apply pressure on key players
  - c. Example: Advocacy groups exposing greenwashing in corporate sustainability claims
3. **Disruption:** Taking more radical approaches
  - a. Breaking down harmful practices
  - b. Reconfiguring systems fundamentally
  - c. Using rights of nature approaches and activism
  - d. Example: Creating alternative markets and local food networks outside existing systems

## BioAgora Project and Workshop Relevance

The workshop's focus on transformative agroecology networks directly contributes to the BioAgora project's mission:

- **Science-Society-Policy Bridge:** BioAgora aims to build effective science services for biodiversity that strengthen connections between researchers, policymakers, and practitioners—the exact relationships being explored through the agroecology network discussions
- **Transformative Knowledge Transfer:** The project focuses on transforming how stakeholders interact, making the workshop's findings on effective network function immediately applicable to BioAgora's design of biodiversity science services
- **Network Approach to Implementation:** Rather than creating top-down solutions, BioAgora works through networks to implement change—making the workshop's collective insights into network functioning critical to the project's success
- **Reciprocal Learning:** While BioAgora offered a theoretical framework for transformative change, the workshop participants provided practical, on-the-ground experience of what works in agroecology networks—creating a valuable two-way exchange
- **Strategic Application:** The lessons about when to collaborate, challenge, or disrupt would inform BioAgora's strategic approach to engaging different stakeholders across biodiversity policy domains

This workshop was positioned not as a standalone event but as part of BioAgora's ongoing process of co-creating knowledge with practitioners. Insights gathered would directly shape how the project builds its science services and engages with different actors in biodiversity governance.

## Breakout Groups I: Assessing Transformative Potential

In this first round of breakout discussions, participants analysed how different strategies and approaches contribute to system transformation. Using Robin's framework of Collaboration, Challenge, and Disruption, they assessed activities from their own experience and categorized them according to their transformative impact.



## Patterns in Transformative Potential

An analysis of the categorized activities reveals important insights about what drives transformative change:

### *What Makes Collaboration Transformative?*

**From Documentation to Empowerment:** Activities with low transformative potential tended to focus on documentation and standardization (like "developing best-practice handbooks" and "measuring agroecology transformation"). In contrast, highly transformative collaborative activities emphasized empowerment and knowledge exchange across boundaries—particularly those that "empower young farmers" and create "exchanges between different agroecology networks across geographic locations."

**Scale and Embeddedness Matter:** The most transformative collaborative approaches were deeply embedded in specific contexts while connecting to broader networks. The "[Farming for Nature](#)" initiative exemplifies this balance—working within specific ecological contexts while connecting to larger movements for nature-positive farming systems.

**Process vs. Outcome Focus:** Less transformative collaborative activities focused primarily on outputs (reports, handbooks), while more transformative ones emphasized the process of collaboration itself, particularly where this built capacity and agency among marginalized actors.

### *What Makes Challenging Transformative?*

**Beyond Awareness to Action:** Many challenging activities categorized as "not transformative" focused primarily on raising awareness (like "making clearer for consumers the link of their choices to environmental impacts"). Activities with higher transformative potential moved beyond awareness to concrete action, such as "collaborative land acquisitions" that directly changed ownership patterns.

**Challenging Economic Fundamentals:** The most transformative challenging actions addressed underlying economic structures rather than surface-level symptoms. Examples included revealing the "costs and timescales of Agroecology compared to conventional agriculture" and demonstrating how conventional approaches externalize environmental and social costs.

**Power-Shifting vs. Persuasion:** Less transformative challenging activities relied primarily on persuasion, while more transformative ones actively shifted power dynamics (like "lobbying for agroecology in regional and national policy").

### *What Makes Disruption Transformative?*

**From Individual to Collective:** Individual disruptive actions (like "avoiding supermarkets" or "diet and consumer choice") were consistently rated as less transformative than collective ones (like "small cooperatives of farmers selling products directly to consumers"). On the other hand, these two cannot exist without each other.

**Creating Alternatives and Opposing Problems:** Simply participating in alternative systems (like CSAs) was considered less transformative than actively building new infrastructures and models. The most transformative disruptive activities created viable alternatives, while simultaneously opposing problematic systems.

**Institutional Impact:** The disruptive activities rated most transformative were those that created lasting institutional change, such as "ensuring long-term financial support for research and businesses" that operate outside conventional paradigms.

### **Cross-Cutting Success Factors**

Several factors appeared consistently across all approaches as markers of higher transformative potential:

1. **Direct farmer involvement and agency** emerged as crucial regardless of approach, with small-scale, bottom-up projects involving farmers consistently rated as most effective
2. **Addressing root causes** rather than symptoms distinguished highly transformative activities, particularly legal actions and initiatives that challenged problematic policies or created alternative economic models
3. **Creating new connections** across traditional boundaries (geographic, sectoral, social) enabled deeper transformation, exemplified by initiatives that built coalitions across different stakeholder groups
4. **Long-term commitment** versus one-off interventions correlated with transformative impact, with ongoing processes like community gardens that "start small but can scale up" showing particular promise
5. **Balanced network composition** that ensures diversity while avoiding "bubbles" proved critical for maintaining both innovation and practicality
6. **Clear structures and adequate resources** for network maintenance, including transparent decision-making processes and appropriate compensation for participants' time

7. **Strategic agility** in combining multiple approaches (collaborate, challenge, disrupt) based on circumstances allowed networks to respond effectively to different challenges
8. **Attention to power and trust dynamics**, particularly creating level playing fields and making marginalized actors feel valued and heard

These findings suggest that transformative potential is not inherent to any specific approach (collaborate, challenge, or disrupt) but rather depends on how these approaches are implemented. The most effective networks appear to be those that can strategically combine and sequence different approaches depending on context and opportunity.

## Breakout Groups II: Activating Transformative Potential

In the second round of breakout discussions, participants explored how network structure and function influence transformative capacity. Five thematic groups analyzed different dimensions of network effectiveness, revealing critical factors that enable or constrain transformative change.

### Network Structure and Composition: Key Insights

**Balance Between Structure and Adaptability:** Participants identified a fundamental tension in how networks organize themselves. Successful networks maintained clear frameworks for decision-making while remaining adaptable enough to incorporate diverse perspectives. The presence of "a paid coordinator" was cited as a crucial structural element that enabled both organization and flexibility.

**Breaking Out of Echo Chambers:** A recurring pattern across examples was the risk of networks becoming too comfortable in their "own bubble." Transformative networks actively countered this tendency by "inviting other perspectives" and practicing "pluralism." Participants noted that external crises often catalyzed this outward orientation, with several mentioning how housing movements and the Occupy movement expanded their reach during moments of social tension.

**Learning from Social Movements:** Participants drew inspiration from networks outside agroecology, particularly those with strong track records of adaptation. Housing unions and social justice movements were cited for their ability to "invite others, unknowns" into their work, suggesting that boundary-spanning is a critical competency for transformative networks.

## Internal Network Functioning: Critical Factors

**Resources and Reciprocity:** Effective networks recognized that inclusivity requires resources—both financial and temporal. Participants emphasized that networks must ensure "participants are compensated for their time" and have "enough resources for maintenance." This pointed to a broader ethic of reciprocity, where networks actively "give back" to their members rather than extracting value.

**Power Awareness and Governance:** The "danger of co-optation from powerful actors" emerged as a persistent challenge. Successful networks developed explicit mechanisms to address power imbalances, including "clear decision-making processes," "grievance mechanisms," and "enshrining participation of less powerful actors in collaboration agreements a priori." These formal structures helped prevent what one participant described as being "submitted to the power of the founders."

**Trust as Foundation:** Across examples, "effective communication and trust" emerged as perhaps the most fundamental enabler of transformative work. The erosion of trust through power imbalances was identified as a primary reason networks fail to achieve their transformative potential.

## Strategic Approaches and System Engagement

**Strategic Versatility:** The most effective networks demonstrated versatility in their strategic approach, "combining collaboration, challenge & disruption" as appropriate to the context. The [URGENDA](#) initiative was specifically mentioned as exemplifying this adaptive approach. Most participants agreed that agroecology networks should "challenge more" while maintaining collaborative relationships.

**Balancing Vision and Practicality:** Successful networks combined aspirational "dreaming" with practical action. Participants contrasted initiatives that were "bonding, but not SMART" with those that created concrete pathways for change. Networks comprised solely of scientists "not directly related to agricultural practice" were consistently identified as failing to achieve transformative outcomes.

**Engaging Established Powers:** When engaging with status quo players, several patterns emerged as critical. Working through "intermediaries" rather than direct confrontation often proved effective. Several participants noted that "status quo players tend to dilute work and make networks focus on details," suggesting the need for strategic clarity when engaging with powerful institutions.

**Relationship Building:** Perhaps surprisingly, many participants emphasized seemingly simple relational practices as crucial for transformation. Suggestions to "have a drink

together!" and "learn to know each other" highlighted the human dimension of transformative work. Building trust was described as "a long-term activity" that cannot be rushed or automated.

## Impact and Change Mechanisms

**Narrative and Evidence:** Networks that successfully influenced change combined compelling narratives with robust evidence. Participants noted the effectiveness of drawing "links between individual well-being and planetary health" while ensuring claims were "backed by strong scientific evidence."

**Connection to Economic Realities:** Networks that failed to make an impact often suffered from a "lack of clear economic benefit" and "lack of effective links to consumers." This highlighted the importance of addressing economic dimensions alongside ecological and social concerns.

**Recognition and Value:** A recurring theme was the importance of ensuring that "farmers feel important" within networks. Networks that failed to validate the knowledge and experience of practitioners consistently underperformed, regardless of their technical merits.

## Main Challenges for Transformative Networks

Participants identified several persistent challenges that networks must address to enhance their transformative impact:

**Scale and Impact Tension:** Small projects generate enthusiasm but struggle with limited reach, while larger projects involving conventional organizations risk losing their transformative edge—finding the right balance remains difficult

**Structural Constraints:** Funding calls focused on "good practices" and "win-wins" rather than addressing barriers to transformation, combined with rigid project structures that leave little space for co-creation

**Embedded Interests:** The entrenched power of industrial agriculture, agrochemical companies, and seed producers creates strong resistance to fundamental change

**Network Isolation:** Many agroecology networks remain in their own "bubbles" rather than connecting with diverse stakeholders, limiting their transformative potential

**Implementation Gap:** A persistent disconnect exists between academic outputs and practical, farmer-focused tools and approaches that make a difference on the ground

## Synthesis: Common Patterns Across Dimensions

Synthesizing across all five breakout groups, several overarching patterns emerged:

1. **Practitioner Inclusion:** Every single group independently identified "inclusion of practitioners in research" as a concrete action to enhance transformative potential, suggesting this is a critical and currently underaddressed need.
2. **Formal/Informal Balance:** Successful networks balanced formal structures (secretariats, governance mechanisms) with informal relationships (having drinks, building personal connections).
3. **Power Consciousness:** Transformative networks actively identified and addressed power imbalances rather than ignoring them or hoping they would resolve themselves.
4. **Strategic Flexibility:** The ability to move fluidly between collaborative, challenging, and disruptive approaches emerged as a key competency.
5. **Economic Integration:** Networks that addressed economic dimensions alongside ecological concerns demonstrated greater transformative potential than those focused solely on environmental outcomes.

## Conclusion and Next Steps

The workshop concluded with a focus on how insights from the discussions would contribute to the BioAgora project's mission of building effective science services for biodiversity.

### BioAgora: From Workshop to Implementation

The facilitators outlined how the workshop findings would be integrated into the project's ongoing work:

- A feedback survey would be distributed to participants not merely for evaluation but to gather additional insights for improving the design and implementation of biodiversity science services
- The project would share its [report on assessing the transformative potential of networks](#), connecting the workshop discussions to a broader analytical framework
- The connections formed during the workshop would be maintained and strengthened to create a more robust network connecting research, policy, and practice

## Continuing the Transformative Journey

Participants were invited to remain engaged with the BioAgora project as it works to:

- Strengthen science-policy-society connections in the biodiversity domain
- Support networks in reaching their transformative potential
- Transform processes of interaction between diverse stakeholders in agroecology

This workshop represented not an endpoint but a milestone in an ongoing process of building transformative capacity within agroecology networks. By integrating the practical wisdom of participants with theoretical frameworks for transformation, the BioAgora project aims to enhance how scientific knowledge, practitioner experience, and policy decisions interact to create more sustainable agricultural systems.