

ILEIA legacy is living on - December, 2022

ILEIA - Centre for Learning on Sustainable Agriculture, had its start in 1984. It started from the observation that family farmers in remote, diverse and risk-prone farming conditions did not benefit from 'modern' agriculture based on external inputs: chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and improved seeds and breeds, irrigation, mechanization and science-based research and development. For the specific conditions of these small-scale farmers in for example rainfed, dryland, sloping, upland and mountainous areas, far away from markets, these external inputs were too expensive, often not available, not fitting, and full of risk for health and ecology. Probably they could benefit more from good practices in ecological agriculture.

However, initial learning showed that it was not so much the external experiences with ecological / organic agriculture or permaculture that brought most tangible benefits. Empowerment of farmers by giving them back status for their own traditional and local practices, seeds, breeds and knowledge was far more effective. It strengthened farmer experimentation with technologies and concepts that fitted the conditions of their own place, culture and economy. Development and extension workers and scientists from outside can support and 'validate' these processes with their skills and scientific knowledge. This was called 'Participatory Technology Development'. In this way scientists can benefit from the insights of farmers as well.

It became clear that sustainable agriculture is rooted in site and culture specific family farming and all its aspects and dynamics, combining subsistence and market, internal and external resources, knowledge and power relations, in astonishing diversity and creativity. Hence the place for agricultural development to start from.

ILEIA became a collaborative learning effort between practitioners: Thematic issues of the ILEIA Newsletter (later called LEISA Magazine and still later Farming Matters) brought experienced authors together to assess experiences with subjects like water harvesting, integrated soil fertility management, integrated pest management, diversity, animal integration, micro-climate management, mountain agriculture, dryland agriculture, agroforestry, traditional seeds and breeds, ecological intensification, etc., combining traditional, local and scientific knowledge. Together with leading people from development organisations, action research, universities and policy agencies, workshops were organised to learn lessons from experiences with joining farmer experimentation. This led to a series of workshop *readers*, publications that contained a compilation of articles around a specific theme to share the results with the fast growing network of interested readers: fieldworkers, researchers, trainers, students, farmers, policy makers, etc. ILEIA editors also took part in workshops and conferences organised by other organisations and networks to enhance exchange and cooperation.

In 1992 all the 'new' and 'old' concepts explored over the past years were brought together in one resource book *Farming for the Future* which has been translated into seven world languages. This book became an important learning tool for training and education in participatory development of *Low-External-Input and Sustainable Agriculture*. It made an important contribution to the growing body of knowledge which today is known as *Agroecology*. More books followed, among others the *ILEIA Learning guide on agroecology*.

Practical cooperation with local organisations and networks was started in many countries all over the world with the aim to scout, document and assess valuable experiences and insights, and to start regional magazines and other publications in local languages. Thus a multi-lingual network of networks emerged which was named the *AgriCultures Network*. In 2017, this Network was

producing one international (*Farming Matters*) and thirteen regional and local language magazines on agroecology and family farming. This move towards regional networks made efforts to systematise local and regional experiences more grounded in the regions and villages where it all happens. At the same time also more social, cultural and economic themes were covered such as: youth and learning, gender relations, land rights, farmer organizations, money for farming, food sovereignty and climate crises. With all these publications (see ILEIA publication list) more than one million readers were being reached four times a year.

ILEIA and the AgriCultures Network, together with their wider network of allies, authors, subscribers and fellow networks, have become important players in the international quest for up-scaling and amplification of family farming rooted in agroecology during the past 33 years. Agroecology comes in small steps, two forwards, and one backwards. Growing awareness of the health and ecological problems which are resulting from conventional agriculture, but also economic stagnation and higher prices for modern inputs and the climate crisis, are stimulating farmers to shift to agroecology. But processes like modernization, economic growth, urbanization and globalization often are working against family farmers and agroecology. But, when benefits are very clear, agroecology can come fast. The positive experiences with the System of Rice Intensification (SRI), Conservation Agriculture, Sloping Agriculture Land Technology, Pond Farming, Runoff Farming, Agroforestry and Analogue or Syntropic Farming, for example, show that there is a lot of potential for improving and sustaining agricultural production in the agroecological way.

Agroecology is increasingly gaining official recognition. Important international players, like the FAO, are now actively promoting the up-scaling of agroecology. Hopefully this will help to speed up the process of transformation.

Upscaling agroecology to achieve Sustainable Development Goals, preventing and mitigating climate change and loss of biological and cultural diversity is a tall and crucial order for young farmers and for societies at large. What has to be scaled up is the spirit of innovation, fairness, health, justice, diversity, gender and social equality, inclusiveness, implied in the foundations of sustainable and holistic development. Agroecology is an important component of this large change process.

ILEIA gradually expanded from a mainly practical and technical perspective towards a more holistic and inclusive perspective. With farmers, fieldworkers and practice-oriented scientists it developed a dynamic perspective on local food systems, food sovereignty and agroecology. It supported them in strengthening institutional links between the grassroots and regional and national governments. It saw the growing importance of local and regional markets and an emerging generation of young farmers. These 'new farmers' are opening new doors, at a moment when outmigration of young people from rural areas to the booming cities is bigger than ever.

Unfortunately ILEIA had to close its organisation in 2017, due to an unforeseen reduction of funding support. In the months following this news ILEIA received a lot of support, from its readers, authors and allies. Many of them expressed their appreciation for ILEIA's original perspective and its practical, diverse and unique magazine *Farming Matters*. Former ILEIA staff are proud to have contributed to the creation of the legacy that ILEIA leaves behind.

However, the closure of the ILEIA programme is not the end of its legacy. ILEIA's magazine (presently called *Farming Matters*) has existed for over 35 years, but since 2018 Cultivate Collective (www.cultivatecollective.org) has taken over its production and publication at an irregular basis. Besides, *Farming Matters* still has four sister magazines:

- **LEISA revista de Agroecología** produced by Asociación ETC Andes based in Peru (www.leisa-al.org), in Spanish.
- **Revista Agriculturas** produced by AS-PTA based in Brazil (aspta-org.br), in Portuguese.
- **AGRIDAPE** produced by IEDAfrique based in Senegal (www.iedafrique.org), in French (2003 – 2017).
- **LEISA India** produced by AME Foundation based in India (www.amefound.org), English and several local language editions.

(BOX: ILEIA's contribution to upscaling agroecology)

- Since December 1984 ILEIA produced **127 issues** of Farming Matters
- ILEIA collaborated in magazine making with **twelve regional partner organisations**
- Together the magazines are produced **one global, five regional and seven local language editions and in eleven languages**
- The magazines are read in **every country** of the world (according to Google)
- Together they reach (substantially) **more than a million readers** per quarter, in digital and paper format
- The total production cost per magazine per reader is **less than one Euro**
- Since 1984 ILEIA collaborated with at least **2000 authors** who contributed articles to Farming Matters
- The outreach of their articles was up to **100 times higher** than they would have got through a scientific journal
- About **50 editors** worked in ILEIA since 1984
- Lastly, ILEIA worked with dozens of **farmer philosophers, champions of agroecology, SRI, NPM, FMNR, and so on...** Inspiring people whose contribution to sustainable development cannot be captured in simple figures and numbers.