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Agroecology

The Role of Culture in Transforming Individuals, Communities, and Agri-food Systems

The role of community dialogues of elders

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Executive Summary

The Community Dialogue of Elders (CDE) was established under the Agroecology Initiative (AEI) in Zimbabwe to facilitate agroecological transformation by integrating Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) with modern agroecological practices. Led by Biohub Trust in collaboration with CIMMYT, the Initiative aims to leverage the wealth of traditional knowledge possessed by elders, spiritual leaders, and local authorities to foster sustainable agricultural practices, promote social equity, and drive behavior change. The dialogues in Mbire and Murehwa districts focused on key themes such as traditional agricultural practices, governance of natural resources, gender inclusion, intergenerational knowledge transfer, human-wildlife conflict management, and integration of modern agroecological techniques.

A carefully structured process was followed to establish the CDE, including stakeholder engagement, agenda-setting, and capacity-building efforts. Traditional leaders, spiritual figures, women, youth, and local government authorities were actively involved to ensure inclusivity and legitimacy. The dialogues emphasized the critical role of cultural practices in fostering ecological stewardship and social cohesion, highlighting rituals such as seed sanctification and rain-making as essential mechanisms for sustaining agroecosystems.

The communication plan, developed to support these dialogues ensures that information flows effectively across different levels of governance and community structures. It emphasizes structured engagement, feedback loops, and capacity-building to enhance participation, motivation, and long-term behavior change. Traditional communication methods, complemented by modern tools, were used to disseminate information and gather feedback, ensuring cultural sensitivity and inclusiveness.

The CDE aligns with the broader aspirations of the Agroecology Living Landscapes (ALLs) approach by promoting co-design and knowledge integration. The CDE fosters Trust and community buy-in by involving key opinion leaders such as elders and spiritual guides, which are critical for successful agroecological transformation. However, challenges remain, particularly in ensuring greater gender equity and addressing structural barriers faced by women and youth. The findings from the Vision to Action (V2A) report (Sibanda et al., 2024) underscore the importance of leveraging local actors and participatory processes to bridge these gaps and create a more inclusive food system.

Key lessons from the CDE process highlight the importance of cultural relevance, stakeholder ownership, and intergenerational knowledge transfer in driving sustainable change. Integrating traditional and modern knowledge systems, policy support, and resource allocation presents an opportunity to scale the Initiative across other communities. The CDE offers a model for promoting socially inclusive, culturally grounded agroecological transitions in Zimbabwe by institutionalizing the dialogues and fostering partnerships between local leaders and government authorities.

List of abbreviations

AEI – Agroecology Initiative

ALLs – Agroecology Living Labs

CDE – Community Dialogue of Elders

CIMMYT – International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center

DDC – District Development Committee

IKS – Indigenous Knowledge Systems

RDC – Rural District Council

V2A – Vision to Action

Agritex – Agricultural, Technical and Extension Services (Zimbabwe)

Background

Culture and Agri-food Systems

Culture, as a concept, has been the cornerstone of anthropological inquiry for over a century, providing a lens through which human behavior, social structures, and collective identities are understood. (Silva et al., 2024). Anthropologists such as Edward Burnett Tylor and later Clifford Geertz viewed culture as a system of symbols and meanings that shape human experience (Rosa, 2023; Silva et al., 2024). Geertz, in particular, argued that culture provides the interpretive framework through which people construct their reality, making it indispensable for understanding social transformation (Silva et al., 2024). In agri-food systems, culture defines how communities interact with their environment, determines what constitutes sustainable resource use, and establishes norms around food production, distribution, and consumption(Assan, 2023; Gutiérrez & Macken-Walsh, 2022). It shapes how local actors respond to environmental challenges, making it essential to engage with the cultural dimensions of agrarian life when promoting sustainable agricultural transitions.

A key theoretical perspective relevant to cultural transformation in agri-food systems is the Theory of Cultural Materialism, developed by Marvin Harris (Vishwalingam, M., & Saravanan, 2024). This theory posits that material conditions, including the environment and technology, shape cultural practices and social organization (Fåhraeus, 2020). The interplay between ecological realities—such as soil fertility, rainfall patterns, and biodiversity—and cultural practices is evident in agricultural communities. Traditional farming methods, crop selection, and conservation techniques reflect decades of adaptation to local environmental conditions. This also aligns with the process of indigenization, which refers to the adaptation and integration of external technologies into local contexts by aligning them with cultural norms, traditional practices, and community needs (Jjuuko & Munyarukumbuzi, 2023; Makananise & Madima, 2024; Reihana et al., 2023). Thus, efforts to transform agri-food systems must engage with these deeply rooted cultural practices, recognizing that they are not arbitrary but rather adaptive responses to material constraints. For example, seed selection rituals or rain-making ceremonies, though spiritual, serve ecological functions by preserving biodiversity and ensuring community resilience against climatic uncertainty. These practices reflect a deeply ingrained relationship between people and their environment, emphasizing the need to engage with those who have lived experiences of such practices when fostering agroecological transitions.

Another relevant framework is the Theory of Structuration by Anthony Giddens, which highlights the duality of structure and agency in social systems (Chen-Levi et al., 2024; Farrall, 2021; Santiago & Martuccelli, 2022). According to Giddens, while social structures—such as cultural norms and traditions—constrain individual actions, they are also reproduced and transformed through those very actions. In the context of agroecology, this implies that while cultural practices may initially seem rigid, they can evolve through reflection, interaction, and experience. The transformation process, therefore, is not imposed from outside but co-created from within (in most cases, an individual), involving those who possess both historical memory and lived knowledge of local systems. This highlights the importance of recognizing community agency and fostering inclusive spaces where cultural knowledge can inform new approaches to sustainable agriculture.

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus—the internalized dispositions and ways of being shaped by one's cultural environment—further explains why understanding culture is critical in agri-food systems (Andrews et al., 2023). Bourdieu argued that habitus influences how people perceive possibilities for action and change. In agricultural communities, habitus shapes everything from the tools farmers use to the crops they grow and the communal rituals they perform (Radogna, 2022; Sharlamanov et al., 2024). External interventions that fail to account for the local habitus often encounter resistance, as they disrupt long-standing practices without offering culturally resonant alternatives. When such interventions lack cultural resonance, they are perceived as foreign or irrelevant, leading to skepticism, mistrust, and resistance from the community. Without meaningful engagement and co-design, these interventions struggle to gain local ownership, resulting in superficial adoption or outright rejection, ultimately undermining the intended outcomes (De Luque-Villa & González-Méndez, 2024). Therefore, successful transformation in agrifood systems requires working within existing cultural frameworks, gradually introducing changes that align with the community's worldview and practices ((Kuria et al., 2024; Sobratee-Fajurally & Mabhaudhi, 2022). Engaging with the custodians of cultural knowledge becomes critical in this process, as they hold the tacit understanding of local habitus and can help mediate the introduction of new ideas in ways that are culturally coherent.

Cultural transformation, as understood through these theoretical perspectives, is a process that involves both continuity and change. While new ideas and practices can be introduced, they must resonate with existing cultural norms and values to be sustainable. This resonates with the Diffusion of Innovations Theory, developed by Everett Rogers, which explains how new ideas spread within a community (Dissanayake et al., 2022; Montes de Oca Munguia et al., 2021). According to Rogers, the rate of adoption of innovations depends on factors such as compatibility with existing values, perceived benefits, and the influence of opinion leaders. In many agrarian societies, traditional leaders and elders are critical in influencing community decisions, as they are often seen as the custodians of social norms and ecological knowledge (Borges et al., 2019; Feder & Umali, 1993; Manzano & Pérez, 2023). Engaging with these influential figures can facilitate the adoption of agroecological innovations by ensuring that they are introduced in a manner consistent with community values.

Integrating Indigenous Knowledge (IK) with scientific innovations exemplifies this delicate balance between preserving cultural heritage and promoting necessary change in agrifood systems. IK, often transmitted orally through generations, encompasses a deep understanding of local ecosystems, climatic patterns, and resource management. Unlike formal scientific knowledge, which frequently adopts a reductionist approach, IK takes a holistic perspective, emphasizing interconnectedness and context-specific adaptation. Studies in agroecology have shown that IK can complement scientific knowledge in promoting biodiversity, enhancing soil fertility, and improving resilience to climate change. For instance, indigenous pest control methods using locally available plants (Naidu et al., 2023)or the use of medicinal plant extracts as an alternative to synthetic chemicals in postharvest protection and preservation of horticultural crops (Nxumalo et al., 2021) reflect a nuanced understanding of ecological processes developed over generations. When such practices are acknowledged and validated through participatory processes, they become integral to the sustainable transformation of agrifood systems.

Furthermore, theories of participatory development and critical pedagogy, as articulated by Paulo Freire, emphasize the importance of engaging communities as co-creators of knowledge rather than passive recipients of external expertise (Utter et al., 2021). Freire's work underscores that genuine transformation occurs when people reflect on their reality, question existing structures, and collectively envision alternatives (Fernando & Tajan, 2024; Geurts et al., 2024; McLaughlin-Borlace et al., 2024). In agroecology, this approach ensures that transformation is rooted in local realities, enhancing its relevance and sustainability. By fostering inclusive spaces for dialogue, communities can articulate their needs, identify culturally resonant solutions, and co-develop pathways for sustainable agricultural transitions.

Cultural transformation

Cultural transformation is an inherently disruptive process, occurring continuously as communities navigate socio-economic and ecological changes. It is neither linear nor entirely predictable but instead evolves through the dynamic interplay of internal agency and external influences. While such transformations are inevitable, they can either strengthen or undermine social cohesion, ecological resilience, and local identity, depending on how they are managed. When viewed through an agroecological lens, cultural transformation becomes an opportunity to drive positive and sustainable change by building on existing cultural frameworks, fostering inclusivity, and amplifying marginalized voices. Agroecology offers a holistic perspective that integrates ecological principles with social equity, making it uniquely suited to address the complex, context-specific challenges that rural communities face (Cattaneo et al., 2018; González De Molina & Lopez-Garcia, 2021; Snapp, 2017). By engaging deeply with local cultures—through their symbols, meanings, practices, and knowledge systems—agroecological initiatives can guide cultural change in a way that respects heritage while promoting innovation. For example, the integration of IKS with scientific innovations does not merely enhance farming practices; it reshapes how communities interact with their environment, creating new pathways for ecological stewardship and collective empowerment.

This process of cultural transformation also challenges long-standing power structures, social norms, and entrenched ways of thinking. It requires communities to question existing practices, reflect on their relevance in a changing world, and adopt new behaviors that are culturally resonant and ecologically sound (Anderson et al., 2022; Bezner Kerr et al., 2023; Mdee et al., 2019). Theories such as Bourdieu's concept of habitus and Giddens' Theory of Structuration highlight that while cultural norms constrain actions, they are also malleable and can be transformed through individual and collective agency. In this context, cultural transformation is not simply about adopting new farming methods but about redefining identities, social roles, and power dynamics to empower communities to navigate change on their own terms. As such, agroecological transitions, when guided by cultural engagement, become a form of social innovation that acknowledges the past, addresses present challenges, and envisions a sustainable future. This involves more than technical interventions; it

requires co-creating a shared vision for the future with those who hold deep cultural and ecological knowledge. As Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy suggests, transformation happens when communities become active agents in their own development, questioning established norms and envisioning alternatives that align with their values and aspirations.

Cultural transformation, offers a powerful framework for achieving systemic change. It creates a pathway not only to improve agrifood systems but also to build equitable, resilient, and adaptive communities capable of thriving in the face of complex socio-ecological changes. By recognizing cultural transformation as a continuous and necessary disruption, agroecology can harness this process to promote sustainable development that is deeply rooted in local realities yet adaptable to future uncertainties. This approach aligns with global discourses on agroecology, which call for the integration of ecological science, cultural contexts, and governance mechanisms to foster inclusive and enduring change..

Community Elders as Custodians of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) and Gatekeepers of Transformation Potential

Indigenous Knowledge Systems are intricate bodies of knowledge that have evolved over generations, reflecting a community's cumulative experience in interacting with their environment (P. L. Mafongoya & Ajayi, 2017; Manyani et al., 2017; Radcliffe et al., 2021). These systems are repositories of ecological and agricultural wisdom and encapsulate a community's values, spiritual beliefs, and social governance structures (Radcliffe et al., 2021). Within rural agrarian communities, elders play a central role as custodians of IKS. Their lived experiences, historical memory, and authority in cultural matters position them as both the protectors of traditional knowledge and the gatekeepers of transformation potential (Enaifoghe, 2021; Radcliffe et al., 2021). Engaging elders in agroecological transitions is, therefore not a mere formality—it is a necessity for ensuring that transformations are contextually appropriate, socially acceptable, and sustainable.

Elders as Custodians of IKS

Community elders hold a wealth of knowledge accumulated through generations of interaction with the land, weather patterns, and ecosystems. This knowledge includes a deep understanding of local biodiversity, soil management, water conservation, and traditional pest control methods. For example, practices such as crop rotation, intercropping, and the use of organic fertilizers are often embedded in traditional farming systems and passed down through oral traditions. Through storytelling and communal rituals, elders ensure that such knowledge is preserved and transmitted to younger generations (Khumalo et al., 2018; Ntshangase et al., 2018). Moreover, many traditional ceremonies and rituals led by elders, such as rain-making ceremonies or seed-blessing rituals, serve dual purposes—spiritual and ecological (Son et al., 2021). While these rituals are often perceived as religious or cultural acts, they are also practical mechanisms for managing community cohesion, ensuring seed biodiversity, and regulating agricultural cycles in harmony with the environment. By involving elders in agroecological dialogues, these practices can be critically examined, revitalized, and adapted to contemporary challenges, thus strengthening the ecological foundations of agrifood systems.

Elders as Gatekeepers of Transformation Potential

In many traditional societies, elders serve as moral and cultural authorities, wielding significant influence over community decision-making. This makes them pivotal gatekeepers in processes of transformation. According to Diffusion of Innovations Theory, innovations are more likely to be adopted when they are endorsed by trusted opinion leaders within a community (Manzano & Pérez, 2023). Elders often occupy this role, as their approval can legitimize new ideas and practices in the eyes of the wider community. Conversely, even well-intended interventions may face resistance or outright rejection without their endorsement. This gatekeeping role is especially important in the context of agroecological transitions, where proposed changes often involve not only new farming techniques but also shifts in social relations, resource governance, and community organization. Elders' involvement ensures that these changes are introduced in ways that respect local customs and beliefs, thereby minimizing potential conflicts and fostering community buy-in. For example, introducing a new crop variety may require the endorsement of elders who understand its ecological implications and can guide its integration into existing farming systems.

Bridging the Past and the Future

One of the key contributions of elders to transformation processes is their ability to bridge past practices with future innovations. While they are seen as the keepers of tradition, many elders are also pragmatic and open to

change when it is presented in a manner that aligns with the community's worldview. They can help reinterpret traditional practices in light of new ecological realities, ensuring that transformation is both innovative and rooted in cultural continuity. This ability to mediate between the old and the new makes elders invaluable partners in co-developing agroecological solutions that are sustainable, resilient, and culturally coherent. For example, scientific research on pest ecology may enhance traditional pest management methods—such as using ash to deter insects or intercropping to reduce pest prevalence. By sharing their knowledge of such practices, Elders provide a foundation upon which scientists and development practitioners can build, resulting in hybrid solutions that draw on both IKS and modern agroecological science. This collaborative approach ensures the cultural relevance of innovations and fosters a sense of ownership and pride within the community, further enhancing the likelihood of successful adoption.

Elders and the Governance of Natural Resources

In many communities, elders are also key actors in the governance of natural resources, such as forests, water bodies, and communal grazing lands. Through traditional governance systems, they establish rules and norms around resource use, ensuring that these resources are managed sustainably. These governance systems often include mechanisms for conflict resolution, which are critical in contexts where access to land and water can become contentious. By engaging elders in agroecological dialogues, such governance systems can be strengthened and integrated with formal regulatory frameworks, creating a more robust approach to resource management. Furthermore, elders often hold the cultural and spiritual authority to mediate between human communities and the natural world. In many indigenous belief systems, natural resources are seen as sacred entities with which humans must coexist respectfully. As the intermediaries in these relationships, elders play a crucial role in maintaining the balance between human activity and ecological integrity. This perspective is particularly valuable in agroecological transitions, where the goal is to increase agricultural productivity and enhance ecosystem services and biodiversity.

Community Dialogue of Elders in the Agroecology Initiative (AEI) in Zimbabwe

The Agroecology Initiative (AEI) in Zimbabwe established the Community Dialogue of Elders (CDE) as a critical strategy for fostering sustainable agricultural transformation by integrating IKS into agroecological practices. The rural communities in Mbire and Murehwa districts, where the AEI operates, have long relied on traditional knowledge, passed down through generations, for managing crops, livestock, and natural resources. The establishment of the CDE was also driven by the recognition that sustainable transformation in agrifood systems cannot be achieved through external interventions alone. Conventional agricultural models often overlook the socio-cultural contexts within which smallholder farmers operate, leading to low adoption rates of new practices. The AEI acknowledges that successful agroecological transitions require locally adapted solutions rooted in community knowledge and practices. Elders possess invaluable insights into climate adaptation, soil fertility management, water conservation, and biodiversity preservation—knowledge accumulated over generations interacting with local ecosystems.

Furthermore, the CDE provides a platform for intergenerational dialogue, ensuring that elders can share their knowledge with younger generations while also learning about emerging agroecological methods. This participatory process fosters co-learning, builds Trust, and strengthens community ownership of agroecological transitions. The dialogues also facilitate inclusive governance, where key stakeholders, including spiritual leaders, traditional authorities, and government representatives, collaborate on sustainable resource management. By institutionalizing these dialogues, the AEI ensures that agroecological innovations are socially acceptable, culturally relevant, and ecologically sound, ultimately enhancing resilience, food security, and social cohesion in rural Zimbabwe.

Process of establishing the Community Dialogue of Elders

The establishment of the CDE in Mbire and Murehwa districts was led by Bio-Hub Trust in partnership with CIMMYT, under the auspices of the Agroecology Initiative (AEI) in Zimbabwe. This process aimed to create a participatory platform where community elders, key stakeholders, and development partners could

collaboratively foster agroecological transitions by integrating traditional knowledge with modern agroecological practices. The CDE initiative was implemented through a series of carefully planned steps, guided by key considerations and involving multiple stakeholders.

Steps in Establishing the CDE

Pre-organization and Stakeholder Engagement

The initial step involved proactive communication and coordination with key stakeholders, including ARDAS (formerly Agritex) officers, local government authorities such as the District Development Committee (DDC) and Rural District Council (RDC), as well as traditional leaders. Referred to as the pre-organization phase, this process was carried out ahead of the dialogues held in Mbire and Murehwa on March 6th and 8th, respectively. Early engagement with ARDAS officers and CIMMYT members was prioritized to ensure effective coordination. The strategy focused on inviting a selected number of community members from designated wards, which helped streamline discussions and promote more focused and meaningful interactions. This targeted approach aimed to enhance community engagement and participation, laying a strong foundation for the dialogues. Additionally, Bio-Hub Trust facilitated scoping meetings with village head representatives to explore existing local dialogue mechanisms and identify elders possessing extensive traditional knowledge in agriculture, resource management, and conflict resolution.

Identifying Elders and Key Community Members

With the support of local leaders, elders recognized as custodians of cultural and agricultural knowledge were identified. Their selection was based on their experience, reputation, and influence within the community. Additionally, representatives from spiritual and religious groups, local governance structures, village heads and councilors, and youth leaders were included to create a diverse and inclusive dialogue platform.

Agenda Setting and Terms of Engagement

The agenda-setting process for the CDE followed a structured, participatory approach designed to ensure inclusivity and relevance. Key stakeholders—including elderly men and women, village heads, chiefs, spiritual leaders (both traditional and religious), and representatives from government technical departments—were convened to assess whether existing elder dialogue mechanisms could be revitalized or if new ones needed to be established. The process commenced with a plenary session, during which stakeholders engaged in open discussions, sharing their perspectives on the state of traditional dialogue mechanisms within their communities. This broad consultation helped identify key themes and areas of interest that were significant to the community. Following the plenary, a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) approach was employed to facilitate deeper engagement. Participants were divided into four mixed groups—elders, village heads, government personnel, and youths—with each group addressing specific agenda-setting elements, including ethical considerations, terms of engagement, and communication protocols. Upon completing their discussions, the groups presented their outcomes to the plenary, where feedback was provided, and the proposed agenda was validated. This iterative process ensured that the final agenda was comprehensive, culturally appropriate, and aligned with the community's collective needs.

The dual approach of plenary discussions and focused group work fostered broad participation and consensus-building, establishing a strong foundation for the subsequent dialogues. Ethical considerations, such as voluntary participation, respect for cultural values, and the safeguarding of vulnerable groups, were prioritized. Additionally, clear terms of engagement were established, ensuring that participants understood their roles and responsibilities, while mechanisms for conflict resolution were agreed upon to maintain a constructive and respectful dialogue environment.

Conducting Initial Dialogues

The first dialogues were held in wards 2 and 3 in Mbire and wards 4 and 27 in Murehwa. These initial meetings provided an opportunity to test the format of the dialogues, gather initial feedback from the community, and refine the process. Elders shared their knowledge on traditional agricultural cycles, ceremonies such as rain-making, and the cultural governance of natural resources. Participants also identified key issues affecting their communities, such as human-wildlife conflict, and proposed potential solutions grounded in both traditional practices and agroecological principles.

Documentation and Feedback

Bio-Hub Trust and CIMMYT ensured that each dialogue was thoroughly documented. The outcomes of these meetings, including proposed actions and insights from elders, were shared with local authorities and other stakeholders. Feedback from the dialogues was disseminated to the broader community to enhance transparency and foster wider engagement.

Institutionalizing the Dialogue Process

Following the success of the initial dialogues, the process was institutionalized through the creation of a calendar for regular meetings. Proposed dates for subsequent dialogues were agreed upon, ensuring continuity and sustained momentum. Bio-Hub Trust developed a communication plan to facilitate coordination between different stakeholder groups, including elders, local leaders, government departments, and development partners.

> **BOX1: KEY CONSIDERATIONS**
>
> *Cultural Sensitivity* - Respect for local customs and traditions was a primary consideration throughout the process. Bio-Hub Trust engaged community leaders early on to ensure that the dialogues were culturally appropriate and aligned with existing governance structures.
>
> *Inclusivity and Diversity* - The CDEs were designed to be inclusive, involving not only elders but also women, youth, and representatives of marginalized groups. This ensured that the dialogues captured a wide range of perspectives and fostered intergenerational learning.
>
> *Building Trust and Ownership* - Trust-building was central to the process, with Bio-Hub Trust and CIMMYT adopting a facilitative rather than directive approach. By allowing the community to lead the agenda-setting and decision-making processes, the dialogues fostered a sense of ownership and collective responsibility.
>
> *Sustainability* - To ensure the sustainability of the dialogues, local leaders and institutions were empowered to take charge of organizing future meetings. Bio-Hub Trust provided capacity-building support to strengthen local governance and enhance the community's ability to manage the dialogues independently.

Feedback and findings from the Community dialogues

Stakeholders Involved

The CDE participants play a central role in shaping the transformation of agrifood systems within the context of the Agroecology Initiative in Zimbabwe. Each group—community elders, local government authorities, spiritual leaders, youth, and women—contributes distinct strengths that enhance agroecological interventions' relevance, legitimacy, and adaptability. Community elders, for instance, are the primary custodians of IKS, carrying generations of lived experience and ecological wisdom. Their deep understanding of local agroecological conditions, such as soil fertility management and climate adaptation strategies, offers a critical foundation for building context-specific, resilient food systems. However, while elders provide essential historical knowledge, there remains a risk that their adherence to long-standing practices may hinder the integration of necessary innovations, particularly where such changes are perceived as conflicting with tradition.

Local government authorities, including Agritex officers and Rural District Council (RDC) representatives, bring technical expertise and formal governance capabilities, bridging the gap between traditional knowledge and modern agricultural policy. Their role is essential in institutionalizing the outcomes of the dialogues and ensuring that community-driven solutions can be supported through formal structures and resources. However,

their participation is not without challenges. Bureaucratic procedures and policy rigidity may slow down the pace of community-led initiatives, while top-down approaches can undermine local ownership of the transformation process. Nonetheless, the partnership between traditional leaders and government officials presents a valuable opportunity to create hybrid governance models that combine local customs with formal regulatory frameworks, enhancing the sustainability of agroecological transitions.

Table 1: Key Stakeholders in the Community Dialogue of Elders (CDE): Roles, Designations, and Sectors

Participant Role	Designation	Sector
Dunzvi (Spiritual Leader)	Spiritual Leader	Spiritual Sector
Vanobikira Vemasvikiro (Cooks for Spirit Mediums)	Support for Spirit Mediums	Spiritual Sector
ALLs[1] Leaders and Members	Community Representatives	Agroecology initiative
Agritex Staff	Government Officials	Public Sector
Church Representatives	Religious Sector	Religious Sector
Traditional Leaders	Traditional Authority	Traditional Authority
Local Authorities	Local Government	Local Government
Government Departments (DDC, Council, Women Affairs)	Government Officials	Public Sector
Chief	Traditional Authority	Traditional Authority
Councillors	Local Government Officials	Public Sector
Vanoomberera Mvura (Water Diviners)	Spiritual Leader	Traditional Authority
Kukomba Mvura (Rainmakers)	Spiritual Leader	Traditional Authority
Local Elders	Traditional Elders	Traditional Sector
Agritex	Government Officials	Public Sector
Homwe Dzemasvikiro (Spirit Mediums)	Spiritual Leader	Traditional Authority
Church Envoys	Religious Sector	Religious Sector
Traditional Dignitaries	Traditional Authority	Traditional Authority

[1]Agroecology living landscape

Spiritual and religious leaders provide another critical dimension to the dialogues by anchoring them in cultural and spiritual practices. Ceremonies led by spirit mediums, such as seed sanctification and rain-making rituals, reflect the interplay between ecological stewardship and spiritual governance. Such rituals reinforce social cohesion and embody principles of environmental sustainability deeply rooted in local cosmologies. While their involvement strengthens the cultural relevance of agroecological interventions, it can also pose challenges in terms of reconciling spiritual practices with scientific approaches. Nevertheless, fostering dialogue between spiritual leaders and technical experts offers a pathway for blending tradition with innovation, ensuring that food system transformation resonates with cultural and ecological values.

Youth and women representatives introduce perspectives often underrepresented in traditional settings but are crucial for ensuring agrifood systems' long-term sustainability and equity. As primary actors in household food production, women bring practical knowledge about food storage, processing, and biodiversity management, while youth offer the potential for technological adoption and innovation. However, social and cultural barriers may limit their influence within the dialogue process, particularly in patriarchal communities where elders and male leaders hold greater authority. Addressing these barriers through targeted capacity-building and leadership development can unlock significant opportunities for inclusive transformation. Involving youth and women more actively in decision-making processes fosters intergenerational knowledge transfer and promotes a more equitable food system, reflecting the community's diverse needs.

Gender considerations within the community dialogues

Participation in the CDE was intentionally inclusive, involving both men and women across all wards, as indicated in Table 2 details the gender distribution of participants in Ward 3 and Ward 2 of Mbire District and Ward 27 and Ward 4 of Murewa District. The total number of participants across the four wards was 179, with 128 males and 51 females attending the dialogues. The gender distribution shows a significant male majority in all wards, with men constituting approximately 71.5% of the total participants, while women accounted for 28.5%. This gender imbalance reflects broader socio-cultural dynamics prevalent in rural Zimbabwe, where traditional decision-making forums are often male-dominated. However, the inclusion of women, albeit in smaller numbers, is noteworthy, as it represents a deliberate effort by the organizers to ensure that women's voices are heard in discussions on agroecological transitions.

Table 2: Total number of men and females that participated in the Community Dialogue of Elders (CDE)

Area (Ward)	Males	Females	Total
Ward 3 Mbire	32	14	46
Ward 2 Mbire	36	7	43
Ward 27 Murewa	28	15	43
Ward 4 Murewa	32	15	47

According to Voss et al. (2024) and Voss & Zingwena, 2024), an agency within agrifood systems is deeply intertwined with socially constructed identities, which often position men as primary decision-makers and landowners, granting them greater access to participatory forums. In traditional rural communities, men predominantly occupy leadership roles, including those of chiefs, headmen, and councilors, who are key actors in local governance and resource management. This explains the high male turnout in the CDE sessions, as many of these positions were represented. Additionally, men are often seen as custodians of land and agricultural knowledge, which grants them legitimacy in dialogues concerning agrifood systems. The high male representation ensured that discussions captured long-standing cultural practices and governance structures critical for sustaining agroecological systems.

However, the limited female representation is concerning, given women's central role in food production and household nutrition. Women in these communities are primarily responsible for managing household gardens, preserving biodiversity through seed selection, and ensuring food security. Their exclusion or underrepresentation in decision-making processes can lead to the oversight of critical perspectives necessary for holistic agroecological transformation. Voss et al. (2024) emphasize that interventions risk reinforcing existing power imbalances without equitable representation rather than fostering inclusive change.

BOX 2: Factors Influencing Gender Participation

The disparity in gender participation can be attributed to several interrelated factors:

Cultural Norms and Gender Roles: Traditional gender roles often confine women to domestic spheres, limiting their visibility and participation in public forums. As noted in Voss et al. (2024), patriarchal norms in Mbire and Murehwa districts dictate that men dominate public spaces, while women's contributions are largely confined to informal, household-based activities. This cultural expectation was reflected in the low turnout of women during the CDE sessions.

Access to Resources and Mobility: Women's limited access to resources such as land and transportation further constrains their participation in community dialogues. Voss et al. (2024) report that in many cases, women's ability to exercise agency is curtailed by their dependence on male household heads for access to productive resources. This structural dependency reduces their capacity to engage meaningfully in decision-making platforms.

Social Perceptions of Women's Agency: The perception of women's agency within these communities also plays a significant role. As highlighted by Voss et al. (2024), many women perceive themselves as lacking the power and voice to influence community decisions, a view reinforced by long-standing gender hierarchies. Such internalized perceptions deter women from participating in public forums.

Agenda setting

The Community Dialogue of Elders agenda-setting process encompassed key themes reflecting the intersection of culture, transformation, and agroecology. Traditional agricultural practices formed a central topic, highlighting indigenous methods that have sustained communities for generations. Discussions on governance underscored the importance of traditional leaders in managing natural resources and resolving conflicts, emphasizing the cultural dimensions of land stewardship. Cultural ceremonies and rituals, such as rain-making and seed sanctification, were recognized as integral to maintaining ecological balance and social cohesion.

Gender roles and inclusion emerged as critical themes, reflecting ongoing efforts to promote equity in decision-making. Women and youth were acknowledged as essential actors in agroecological transitions, with a focus on amplifying their voices. Intergenerational knowledge transfer was another key topic, underscoring the need to

preserve and adapt indigenous wisdom for future generations. The dialogues also addressed human-wildlife conflict management, drawing on traditional strategies to enhance coexistence with wildlife.

Finally, participants explored opportunities for integrating modern agroecological techniques with traditional knowledge. This blend of old and new approaches was vital for fostering resilient and sustainable agrifood systems. Overall, the agenda-setting process demonstrated a holistic approach to transformation, rooted in cultural heritage and oriented toward sustainable agroecological futures.

Main topics discussed during the agenda-setting included

Traditional Agricultural Practices were a key focus of the CDE sessions, emphasizing indigenous methods that have sustained communities for generations. Discussions highlighted practices such as seed sanctification rituals and rain-making ceremonies. In Ward 3 (Shange), participants underscored the role of spirit mediums in guiding agricultural activities through ceremonial processes. As noted during the meeting, "*Our practices, like brewing Muperera and consulting spirit mediums before sowing, have always ensured good harvests.*" Participants from Ward 2 (Angwa) also emphasized the importance of traditional soil fertility management, noting that, "*We have always relied on natural methods, such as ash application and organic compost, to keep our soils productive*". The dialogues revealed a deep connection between cultural rituals and ecological sustainability, stressing the importance of preserving such traditions while exploring agroecological innovations. In Ward 27, elders shared how specific rituals marked the beginning of the planting season and helped strengthen social cohesion within the community. "*When we gather for Chipwa, everyone knows it is time to plant. It brings us together and reminds us to respect the land*," one elder remarked. The discussions highlighted that these practices are not merely agricultural techniques but also cultural expressions reinforcing respect for nature and promoting sustainable resource use.

Moreover, participants emphasized the spiritual significance of agriculture, with rain-making ceremonies serving both ecological and cultural purposes. "*Without the blessings of the spirits, the rains do not come*," noted a spiritual leader in Ward 4 (Nehanda). This belief underscores the intricate relationship between spirituality and ecological management, illustrating how IKS integrates cultural values with practical solutions to environmental challenges. Participants agreed that while modern agroecological techniques are welcome, they must respect and complement these long-standing traditions to ensure cultural continuity and community acceptance.

Photo Credit: Tigzozo

The **Governance of Natural Resources** was a critical theme during the dialogues, emphasizing the enduring role of traditional leaders in overseeing land, water, and forest use. In Ward 2 (Angwa), elders and community leaders discussed the responsibilities of chiefs and headmen in enforcing customary laws, which have historically ensured equitable resource distribution and conflict resolution. "*Our chiefs have always been the custodians of the land, ensuring that resources are shared equitably*," remarked one attendee. The dialogues highlighted traditional governance systems as essential mechanisms for resolving conflicts and ensuring sustainable resource use. Participants also reflected on how external pressures, such as land commodification and climate change, have challenged traditional governance systems. "*Nowadays, we see people fencing off communal land, disrupting our shared grazing system*," remarked a village elder. This has significant implications for land configuration and planning, where traditional leaders could play a pivotal role in ensuring equitable and sustainable land use. The dialogues highlighted the need to strengthen traditional governance by involving chiefs and headmen in community-driven land-use planning, while integrating modern policies to address emerging issues and external pressures.

Cultural Ceremonies and Rituals were presented as integral components of ecological management and social cohesions. In Ward 27, participants detailed the annual rituals to invoke rain and protect crops. "*We rely on ceremonies like Chipwa, where sorghum is offered to the spirits*," shared a village elder. Deeply rooted in cultural heritage, these practices serve spiritual and ecological purposes by reinforcing sustainable farming practices. Also in Ward 27, participants emphasized the significance of rain-making ceremonies, known locally as Mukwerera, which involve offerings to ancestral spirits to invoke rainfall. "*When we hold Mukwerera, we not only ask for rain but also strengthen our unity as a community,*" shared a spiritual leader. These rituals are deeply embedded in the community's belief system and serve as a reminder of the interconnectedness of people and nature.

In addition to rain-making, rituals such as seed sanctification were discussed in depth, highlighting the community's reliance on cultural practices to ensure agricultural success. "*Before planting, we always bless the seeds to ensure a bountiful harvest*," noted a participant from Ward 3 (Shange). These rituals, often led by spirit mediums and elders, serve as spiritual invocations and mechanisms for fostering biodiversity conservation. Participants pointed out that such rituals symbolize respect for the land and act as communal events that strengthen social ties.

Beyond their spiritual value, these ceremonies are seen as critical to agroecological transformation. "*Our ancestors believed that without proper blessings, the land would not yield*," stated an elder from Ward 27, underscoring the belief that ecological balance is deeply tied to cultural observance. Participants acknowledged that while modern agricultural technologies are valuable, integrating them without disrupting these cultural practices would be key to achieving community buy-in and long-term sustainability. "*If we abandon our traditions, we lose more than just rituals; we lose our way of life*," remarked a spiritual leader. This reflects the community's desire for a blended approach, where traditional rituals coexist with modern land management and agricultural planning innovations.

The discussions on **gender roles and inclusion** highlighted the need to amplify women's voices in agroecological transitions. were key topics, with participants recognizing the indispensable role of women in sustaining agrifood systems. Despite the fewer female participants, their contributions during the dialogues were highly valued. Women from Ward 4 (Nehanda) shared knowledge of indigenous methods of food preservation, seed selection, and pest control. "*Our grandmothers taught us how to store grain using ash and clay pots, techniques that have helped us survive difficult seasons,*" remarked a female participant.

Women's involvement in traditional agricultural practices, such as brewing ceremonial beer and participating in rain-making rituals, highlights their crucial role in preserving cultural heritage. Older women, especially those beyond childbearing age, are often entrusted with significant cultural responsibilities, such as preparing ceremonial beer for key events. This underscores their central role in maintaining traditions and transmitting cultural knowledge. "*Without the women to brew for the ceremonies, our rituals lose meaning,* " an elder noted. This participation showcases how women's specialized knowledge is valued within these practices, emphasizing their importance in upholding cultural heritage. However, societal pressures still limit the agency of younger women, who, despite their skills and knowledge, are often expected to conform to subservient roles. A participant observed, "*Young women are skilled, but they are not often given the chance to lead or speak during these gatherings*." Addressing this gap could allow younger women to leverage their traditional knowledge more meaningfully.

Incorporating women's expertise in medicine, agriculture, and food preparation is essential for community sustainability. Documenting and preserving this knowledge alongside men's contributions can offer a balanced

understanding of cultural heritage, promoting gender equity within traditional practices without compromising their essence. Participants proposed forming women's groups to enhance their participation and influence in future dialogues.

Intergenerational Knowledge Transfer emerged as a priority, with elders emphasizing the need to pass down traditional wisdom to younger generations. In Ward 3 (Shange), participants expressed concern over the erosion of cultural knowledge. "*We must teach our youth the ways of our ancestors before it is too late,*" urged a senior participant. The dialogues provided a platform for fostering intergenerational learning, ensuring that indigenous practices are preserved and adapted. The dialogues underscored the urgency of intergenerational knowledge transfer, with elders emphasizing the importance of passing down traditional wisdom to younger generations. Again in Ward 3 (Shange), participants expressed concern over the loss of indigenous knowledge due to the influence of modern lifestyles and migration. "*Our youth are moving to the cities, and with them, our knowledge is disappearing,*" lamented an elder. This concern is echoed in broader research findings, where rural-to-urban migration among youth has been identified as a significant barrier to generational renewal in agriculture (Makanza et al., unpublished).

Participants proposed structured mentorship programs to address this challenge where elders could teach youth about traditional farming, resource management, and cultural practices. "*If we do not teach them now, they will forget who we are,*" stated a senior participant. The dialogues served as a platform for initiating such intergenerational learning, fostering a sense of responsibility among the youth to preserve their heritage. Additionally, studies have highlighted that involving youth in agroecological practices can serve as a pathway to revitalizing rural economies and ensuring sustainable livelihoods (Makanza et al., unpublished). The potential of agroecology to bridge generational gaps was emphasized by participants who noted that combining traditional ecological knowledge with modern innovations could attract youth back to farming (Makanza et al., unpublished)

Moreover, youths interviewed in related studies consistently indicated that they grew up in farming households and learned agricultural practices from their elders, but many expressed a desire for additional training and resources to modernize these practices (Youth AE Draft, 2024). One young participant stated, "*We learned from our parents, but we need new skills to make farming viable in today's world.*" This dual need for preserving indigenous knowledge while adapting to contemporary challenges underscores the importance of creating intergenerational learning platforms. By fostering such engagements, communities can ensure that traditional wisdom is preserved and enriched by new ideas, promoting resilience and sustainability in agrifood systems.

Human-Wildlife Conflict Management was another key topic, with participants sharing traditional methods for mitigating conflicts with wildlife. In Ward 2 (Angwa), participants discussed how rituals and sacred laws had historically protected communities from wildlife intrusion. "*Our ancestors respected the wildlife and knew how to coexist,*" noted a participant. The dialogues emphasized the relevance of these practices in modern contexts, notably as wildlife conflicts increase due to environmental changes. These cultural beliefs helped regulate human-wildlife interactions, reducing conflicts over land and resources. However, participants acknowledged that increased human populations and shrinking wildlife habitats have intensified conflicts recently. "*We now see elephants destroying our crops more frequently,*" noted a farmer. The dialogues emphasized blending traditional knowledge with modern wildlife management techniques to develop sustainable solutions. Biohub Trust et al. (2024) documented that community members in Mbire District rely on traditional deterrents, such as burning elephant dung and constructing barriers, to protect crops from wildlife. While rooted in IKS, these practices are increasingly insufficient, given the frequency and severity of wildlife intrusions driven by habitat encroachment and climate change.

The elders further highlighted the spiritual dimension of human-wildlife relations, where sacred groves and rituals deter wildlife. "*When we conduct ceremonies in the sacred groves, it is believed that the spirits keep the animals away,*" explained a spiritual guide. Despite the effectiveness of these culturally grounded approaches, legal and bureaucratic restrictions often impede timely local actions. According to Biohub Trust et al. (2024), communities feel marginalized by conservation policies prioritizing wildlife over human safety, leading to frustrations and reduced support for conservation efforts. Participants proposed integrating traditional practices with modern conflict mitigation strategies to address these issues, such as participatory land-use planning and establishing community-led wildlife response units. This collaborative approach aims to foster coexistence by leveraging both indigenous knowledge and scientific innovations, creating a balanced framework for managing human-wildlife interactions and supporting agroecological transitions.

Integration of Modern Agroecological Techniques: The integration of modern agroecological techniques with traditional knowledge was explored as a pathway to sustainable agriculture. In Ward 27, participants

expressed openness to blending scientific approaches with indigenous practices. "*We welcome new ideas, but they must respect our traditions,*" stated a local leader. This theme underscored the importance of co-creating innovative and culturally grounded solutions. Integrating modern agroecological techniques with indigenous practices was widely discussed as a pathway to sustainable farming. In Ward 27, participants expressed openness to adopting new technologies, provided they complemented traditional methods. "We are not against modern ways, but they must respect what we have always done," remarked a local leader. Examples of successful integration were shared, such as combining organic composting with traditional soil fertility practices. "*We have started using both ash and organic manure, and it has improved our yields,*" noted a participant from Ward 4 (Nehanda). The dialogues highlighted the importance of co-creating solutions that respect cultural heritage while enhancing productivity and resilience.

Sibanda et al. (2024) documented that participatory co-design approaches in Mbire and Murehwa districts demonstrated that agroecological technologies, such as push-pull and biochar, can be successfully adapted when aligned with local practices and knowledge systems. The co-design process involved iterative testing and farmer-led adaptation, underscoring that meaningful integration requires technical efficacy and socio-cultural compatibility. "*Farmers appreciated conservation agriculture for its water conservation benefits, but they adapted it by incorporating traditional mulching techniques to suit their context,*" the report noted. Furthermore, participants in the dialogues emphasized the need for flexibility in adopting agroecological innovations. "Modern techniques help us, but they must be tailored to our needs and resources," remarked a farmer. This aligns with findings by Sibanda et al. (2024), who highlighted that technologies with high labor or input demands faced lower adoption rates unless complemented by existing indigenous practices.

Integration efforts also fostered knowledge exchange, where younger farmers learned modern techniques while elders shared indigenous methods, promoting intergenerational learning. "*We must learn from each other to succeed,*" stated a youth participant, reflecting the collaborative spirit of the dialogues. By blending scientific and traditional knowledge, communities can create locally relevant solutions that enhance resilience, productivity, and sustainability.

Communication plan

An effective communication plan is critical for achieving transformation, motivation, and sustained behavior change in agroecological transitions. The CDE communication plan, developed in collaboration with local stakeholders, serves as a tool to foster trust, build shared understanding, and catalyze collective action. In agroecology, where cultural norms and modern innovations must coexist, a clear strategy ensures the unification of diverse perspectives. This plan facilitates transformation by fostering coherence across multiple levels—local communities, traditional authorities, and government bodies—ensuring that all actors remain aligned in pursuing shared goals. Motivation is enhanced through inclusive engagement, where stakeholders feel a sense of ownership by contributing to decisions. The structured dissemination of information and feedback loops encourages communities to refine practices, essential for sustained behavior change continuously. Resistance to change, often driven by uncertainty, is addressed by involving trusted leaders who can communicate with credibility. Furthermore, the plan ensures greater social equity by amplifying the voices of marginalized groups such as women and youth. This participatory approach, combined with transparent information flow, promotes learning, builds Trust, and reinforces commitment, making the communication plan indispensable for agroecological transformation.

Box 3: Key Elements of the Communication Plan

Stakeholder Engagement and Coordination: The communication plan emphasizes structured engagement with key stakeholders, including traditional leaders, spiritual mediums, local government authorities (RDC, Agritex, DDC), women's groups, and youth representatives. Meetings are initiated at the village level, with information cascading through designated channels, ensuring that all key actors, including the ALLs facilitators, remain informed.

Communication Protocols: Clear communication protocols are established to ensure information is disseminated both vertically (from grassroots to policymakers) and horizontally (across wards and communities). The village head communicates updates to the ward assembly, which informs the headman, who then relays the message to the chief and spiritual leaders. Conversely, spiritual leaders can initiate communication when necessary, ensuring bi-directional flow of critical information. This traditional protocol is complemented by modern communication tools where feasible, such as the use of mobile phones and written notices.

Modes of Communication: The communication process integrates both traditional and modern methods: Traditional Methods: Drums, horns, and public gatherings are used to summon community members for urgent meetings or to announce significant events, such as ceremonies or Chisi (sacred day) observance. Modern Methods: Written invitations, reports, and verbal announcements by government officials are used in formal communications involving stakeholders beyond the local community.

Information Dissemination and Feedback: To ensure inclusivity, information dissemination is structured to include updates on meeting outcomes, decisions made, and upcoming activities. Feedback loops are integral to the communication process, where participants provide their inputs during plenary sessions and focus group discussions, which are then compiled and communicated back to stakeholders for action.

Capacity Building: Recognizing the need for sustained engagement, the plan includes capacity-building initiatives for local communicators, including youth and women, to act as liaison officers who can document and relay information effectively. This approach not only enhances communication but also promotes social inclusion by giving marginalized groups a voice in agroecological transitions.

Cultural Sensitivity and Ethical Communication: The communication plan prioritizes cultural sensitivity, ensuring that all messages respect traditional values and practices. Ethical considerations, such as voluntary participation, confidentiality, and safeguarding of children and livestock, are incorporated into the communication protocols.

Can Community Dialogue of Elders support agroecology transformation?

The Vision-to-Action (V2A) process outlined by Sibanda et al. (2024). provides a strategic framework for guiding agroecological transitions in Mbire and Murehwa districts, Zimbabwe. By engaging communities in participatory visioning exercises and co-developing actionable pathways, the initiative seeks to address pressing agricultural challenges while promoting sustainability, resilience, and equity. Through stakeholder-driven dialogues and shared decision-making, key behavior changes were identified, such as adopting sustainable farming practices, enhancing market access, and increasing women's leadership in agricultural governance (Sibanda et al., 2024).. These actions are tailored to local conditions, ensuring that the transition process is both contextually relevant and rooted in community priorities.

The aspirations of the CDE and the broader ALLs in the Initiative share common goals but differ in their scope and mechanisms of action. Both frameworks aim to promote agroecological transformation, yet they approach this transformation through distinct, complementary pathways. The CDE focuses on fostering cultural transformation, behavior change, and social inclusion by leveraging local knowledge, traditional governance systems, and community participation. In contrast, ALLs in the V2A emphasizes systemic change at the landscape level, integrating ecological, economic, and social dimensions to create resilient agroecological systems. Then again, the CDE aligns with specific aspects of the agroecological vision articulated in the Vision to Action (V2A) for agroecology transformation (Sibanda et al., 2024). A key pillar for operationalizing the ALLs in the Initiative is shifting cultural norms and behaviors to promote sustainable farming practices and equitable resource use. The CDE directly contributes to this by involving elders, who are custodians of IKS, in co-designing agroecological solutions. The dialogues embed ecological practices within the community's cultural framework through rituals, ceremonies, and traditional governance. As noted by a participant, "*Our ways are tied to the land; if we lose our culture, we lose our land*" (Sibanda et al., 2024). The transformative potential of the V2A process is amplified by its integration of key insights from the CDE. Elders' perspectives on ecosystem services, traditional farming methods, and social governance informed the identification of sustainable resource management strategies and the promotion of social equity. For instance, in Mbire, strategies for minimizing human-wildlife conflict draw heavily from indigenous practices documented during the CDE.

Both frameworks (V2A and the CDE) emphasize co-design to foster inclusivity and equity. Moreover, the emphasis on enhancing women's participation in governance and income-generating activities reflects the intergenerational learning fostered by the CDE. By ensuring that local traditions and contemporary agroecological innovations are merged, the initiative promotes not just ecological sustainability but also cultural preservation and social resilience. While ALLs focus on multi-stakeholder partnerships involving researchers, policymakers, and farmers (outward focused), the CDE leverages local power structures—chiefs, elders, spiritual leaders, and women's groups—to ensure that marginalized voices are heard (inward focused). The presence of youth and women in the dialogues, albeit limited, represents a critical step toward achieving social justice. However, as observed during the dialogues, younger women often lack agency in decision-making, highlighting a gap in achieving full equity. Addressing this requires deliberate interventions, such as targeted capacity-building and leadership programs, as suggested by Sibanda et al. (2024).

The aspiration of AEI to integrate scientific knowledge with local practices is reflected in the CDE's emphasis on blending modern agroecological techniques with traditional farming methods. Participants in Ward 4 (Nehanda) cited examples of combining organic manure with traditional ash-based soil fertility practices, demonstrating a readiness to innovate without losing cultural identity. However, achieving meaningful integration requires sustained external support, particularly in technical training and market access, where AEL can provide critical linkages.

The strong linkage between the CDE and V2A ensures a continuum of community engagement, where elders remain central in guiding and validating agroecological transitions. This ongoing dialogue fosters trust, inclusivity, and a shared sense of purpose, essential for long-term success. Additionally, the Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) framework developed under the V2A initiative includes local indicators that reflect priorities highlighted during the CDE, such as resource conservation, food security, and conflict mitigation. By maintaining this connection, the initiative not only drives tangible agricultural improvements but also strengthens the social fabric of communities, ensuring that transformation is both sustainable and locally owned.

Leveraging actors with power and influence for transformation

The CDE should leverage several key actors to foster cultural transformation, behavior change, and social equity. For instance, chiefs, headmen, and elders play a pivotal role in driving cultural transformation by legitimizing agroecological practices and influencing community behavior. Their endorsement of innovations ensures that new practices are culturally acceptable and more likely to be adopted. "*Without the chief's blessing, no one would have followed the new planting cycle,*" remarked a participant during the dialogues. Spiritual leaders, including spirit mediums, anchor agroecological practices in cultural rituals and beliefs. Their involvement ensures that ecological stewardship is framed as a moral and spiritual obligation. By blending spirituality with agroecology, the CDE creates a holistic framework that resonates deeply with the community. Despite structural barriers, women's groups have significant potential to drive social equity. Their biodiversity, seed preservation, and food processing knowledge is critical for agroecological resilience. Empowering these groups through targeted interventions can enhance their influence in decision-making, fostering gender equity in local food systems. Engaging youth is crucial for ensuring the continuity of agroecological practices. While the dialogues

highlighted the challenge of youth migration to urban areas, they also presented an opportunity to involve younger generations in modernizing traditional practices. V2A findings noted that attracting youth to agroecology requires integrating digital tools, entrepreneurial opportunities, and modern farming techniques with indigenous practices (Sibanda et al., 2024).

While the CDE provides a strong foundation for agroecological transformation, several challenges remain. Limited policy support, inadequate resource allocation, and entrenched gender inequities hinder the potential for large-scale impact. Nevertheless, the involvement of traditional leaders and local authorities presents an opportunity to bridge these gaps by advocating for policy reforms that support community-led agroecological initiatives. The CDE's emphasis on culturally grounded solutions complements the broader aspirations of AEL, particularly in fostering social cohesion and ecological stewardship. By building on the strengths of both frameworks, a more comprehensive approach to agroecological transformation can be achieved—one that respects cultural heritage while promoting innovation and inclusivity.

Recommendations

1.   Institutionalize the Community Dialogue of Elders (CDE)
The CDE has demonstrated potential as a platform for fostering sustainable agroecological transformation by integrating Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) with modern practices. Institutionalizing the CDE ensures its long-term sustainability and formalizes its role within local governance structures. Establishing formal roles for community elders, spiritual leaders, and local government representatives in agroecological governance is essential. The feasibility of this recommendation is supported by existing partnerships with BioHub Trust and CIMMYT, who have facilitated the CDE's initial stages. To enhance communication and coordination, a local governance framework should be developed with clear roles and responsibilities for each stakeholder group.Promote Intergenerational Knowledge Transfer

2.   Enhance Women's Participation and Leadership
Women in the Mbire and Murehwa districts play essential roles in food production, biodiversity conservation, and household nutrition. Despite their contributions, they are underrepresented in decision-making processes. Enhancing their participation addresses a critical gap in achieving gender equity in agroecological transitions. Leadership and capacity-building programs should be implemented to empower women in agroecological governance. Establishing women's groups focused on agroecological practices and ensuring their representation in local governance bodies will promote equity. Tailored communication strategies should be adopted to create safe spaces for women to contribute actively

3.   Strengthen Intergenerational Knowledge Transfer Mechanisms
Elders, as custodians of IKS, play a pivotal role in preserving traditional agroecological practices. However, there is an urgent need to pass down this knowledge to younger generations to ensure its continuity. This aligns with concerns raised during the dialogues about the erosion of indigenous knowledge due to youth migration and modern influences. Structured mentorship programs can facilitate this transfer, where elders teach youth traditional agricultural techniques, resource management, and cultural practices. Incorporating digital documentation platforms can help capture and disseminate this knowledge widely. Given the feasibility of involving existing youth groups and elders identified during the CDE sessions, this approach is both actionable and contextually relevant.

4.   Integrate Modern Agroecological Techniques with Indigenous Knowledge
Participants in the CDE expressed openness to blending modern agroecological innovations with traditional practices, emphasizing that new techniques should respect cultural traditions. Successful integration fosters innovation while preserving local heritage. Co-developing agroecological practices by combining scientific innovations, such as conservation agriculture and organic composting, with traditional techniques can enhance resilience. Conducting pilot projects in selected wards to test these integrated approaches and providing ongoing training and technical assistance can support these efforts..

5.   Address Human-Wildlife Conflicts Using Collaborative Approaches
Human-wildlife conflict was identified as a recurring challenge in both districts. Traditional methods for managing these conflicts, while valuable, are becoming less effective due to increased wildlife pressures. Integrated conflict management strategies should combine traditional deterrents, such as sacred grove protection and ceremonies, with modern wildlife management techniques. Establishing community-led wildlife

response units and engaging conservation agencies can foster coexistence. This approach is feasible given the existing knowledge and practices highlighted in the CDE dialogues.Address Human-Wildlife Conflict through Collaborative Approaches

6.   Strengthen Policy Support and Resource Allocation for Agroecological Initiatives
Limited policy support and insufficient resources are key barriers to scaling agroecological transitions. Advocacy efforts are necessary to secure government and donor support for community-driven initiatives. Engaging with local and national policymakers to advocate for supportive policies and increased funding for agroecological programs is critical. Building partnerships with private sector actors to develop value chains for agroecological products will enhance economic sustainability. Collaborating with district-level authorities to mobilize resources for the CDE's continued operation is crucial for long-term success.Develop a Comprehensive Communication Strategy

7.   Develop a Comprehensive Communication Strategy
Effective communication is essential for fostering trust, ensuring transparency, and promoting sustained community engagement. The initial communication plan developed for the CDE highlights the importance of culturally sensitive and inclusive communication methods. Expanding the communication plan to include regular updates, feedback loops, and capacity-building for local communicators can improve stakeholder engagement. Utilizing both traditional methods, such as village assemblies and drums, and modern tools, including mobile messaging and digital platforms, will ensure that information reaches all groups, including marginalized populations.

8.   Establish a Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) Framework
A robust M&E system is critical for tracking progress, learning from implementation, and ensuring accountability. The lack of a structured M&E framework limits the ability to measure the impact of agroecological initiatives. Developing an M&E framework with clear indicators for agroecological outcomes, community participation, and social equity will strengthen ongoing efforts. Stakeholder engagement in participatory monitoring processes can foster collective ownership and improve learning. Findings from M&E activities should be used to refine strategies and scale successful practices.

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