

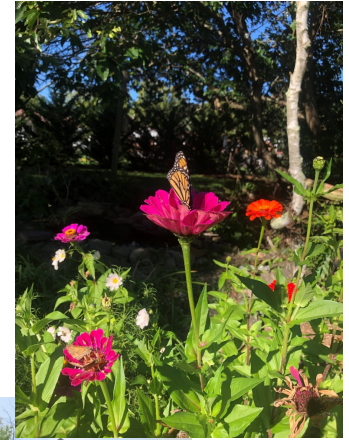
# **The Social Science of Agroecology: Policy and Praxis Implications**

Fellows Talk  
Center for Food Systems and  
Community Transformation  
Virginia Tech, 04/20/2022

Dr. Lia Kelinsky-Jones, she/her  
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Agora Institute  
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# Introduction

- University-community climate policy engagement
- Background in university-led international development & community engagement
- Raised in 5 different countries
- Avid home gardener of food and flowers
- Equally avid cyclist



# Contents

1

## **What is Agroecology?**

Science, Practice, Movement, and Discourse

2

## **Policy for Agroecology**

Research on how USAID's policy influences agroecological possibilities at land-grant universities

3

## **Agroecology for Policy**

Future Directions and Discussion

# Agroecology is....

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## SCIENCE



<https://www.fao.org/agroecology/knowledge/science/en/>

## PRACTICE



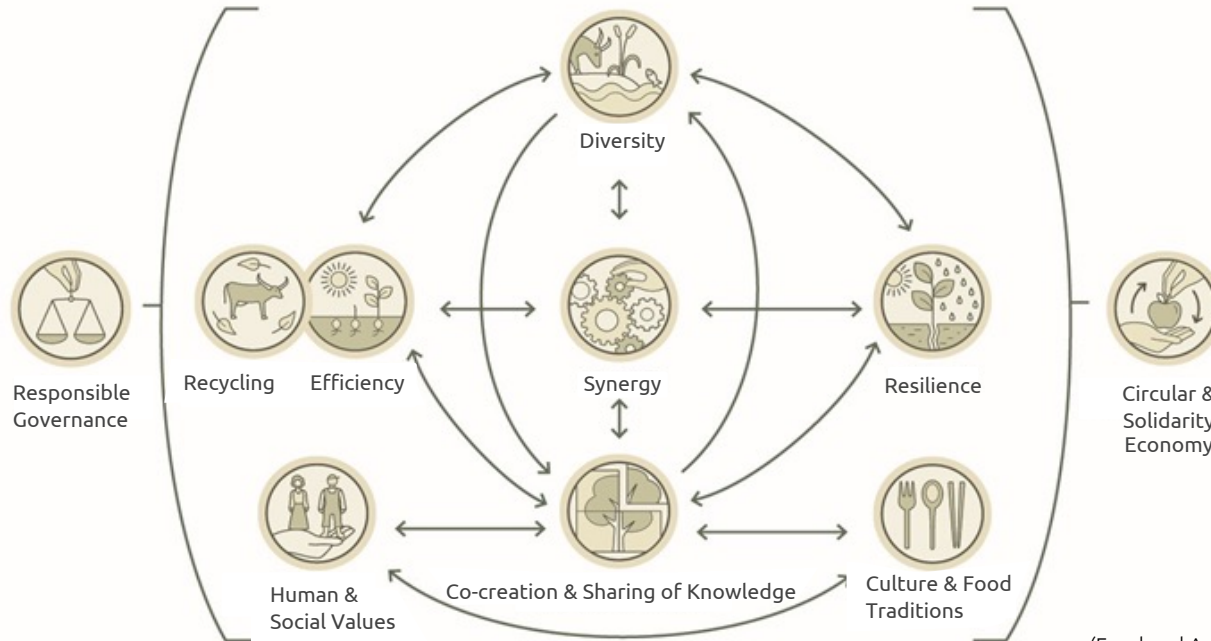
## MOVEMENT



<https://peoplesdispatch.org/2018/07/24/agroecology-in-puerto-rico-building-alternatives-to-colonialism-and-capitalism/>

(Wezel et al., 2009)

# 10 Elements of Agroecology



(Food and Agriculture Organization, 2019)

# Levels of Agroecological Food System Transformation

## Incremental & Agroecosystem change

## Food System Transformation

Level 1: Reduce input use and environmentally-damaging inputs

Level 3: Redesign agroecosystems

Level 5: Build a new global food system based on participation, fairness, and justice



Level 2: Substitute conventional practices for agroecological alternatives

Level 4: Develop alternative food networks to reconnect consumers & producers

(Wezel et al., 2020)

# Agroecology Open to “Co-Optation”

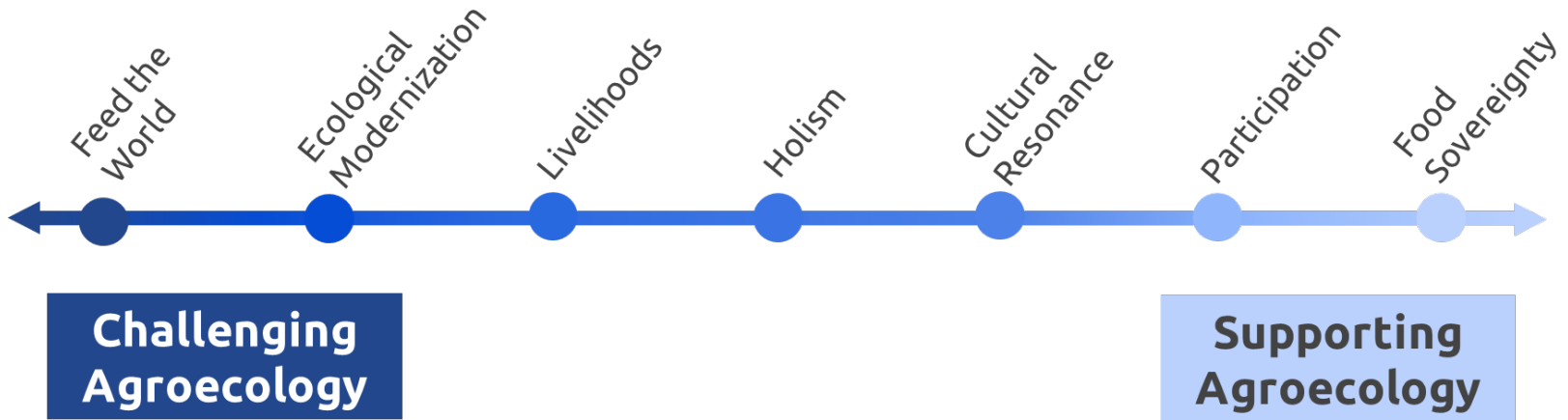
## ‘JUNK AGROECOLOGY’:

THE CORPORATE CAPTURE OF AGROECOLOGY FOR A PARTIAL  
ECOLOGICAL TRANSITION WITHOUT SOCIAL JUSTICE



(Alonso-Fradejas et al., 2020)

# Agroecology as a Discourse



(Anderson et al., 2021)



# USAID Policy & Agroecological Opportunities

- In 2018, USAID oriented its entire policy framework to achieve self-reliance (United States Agency for International Development, 2019)
- Self-reliance varies (Hébert & Mincyte, 2014)
- Agroecology and self-reliance share some similarities (Agarwal, 2014; Altieri et al., 2012; Altieri & Nicholls, 2017; Altieri & Toledo, 2011; Anderson et al., 2021)
- It is unclear what USAID means by self-reliance means, how that influences agroecology, and how that impacts land grant universities international agricultural work



Photo credits: USAID The Journey to Self-Reliance policy materials

## Research Questions

How is self-reliance represented in a selection of policy texts from The Journey to Self-Reliance between 2018 to 2020?

How, if at all, does the discourse of self-reliance reflect agroecological possibilities?

What are the material implications on international food security development praxis for land-grant universities?

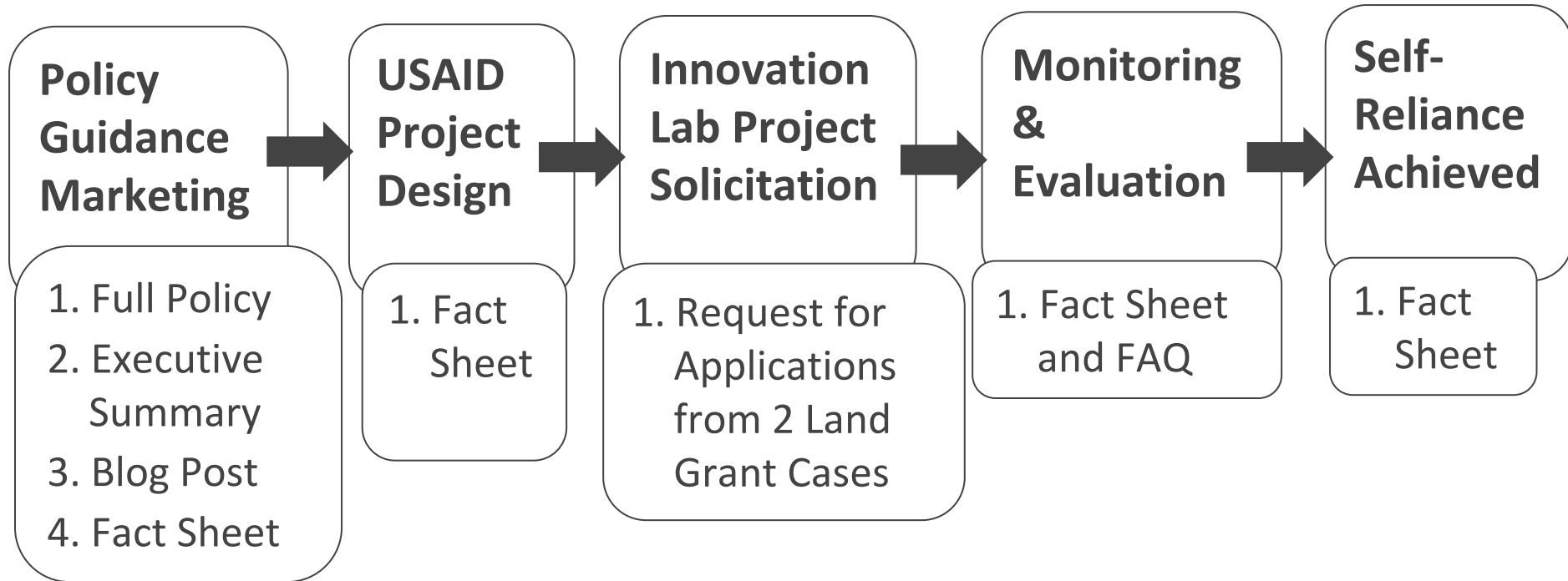
# Why study agroecological possibilities and land-grants?

- The current food system is problematic (Holt-Giménez & Altieri, 2013; IPES-Food, 2020; Morens & Fauci, 2020; Wittman, 2010)
- Agroecology tied to increased food security, nutritional outcomes, climate-resilience, pest management, and environmental restoration (Altieri et al., 2015; Anderson et al., 2021; Bezner Kerr et al., 2021; Leppert et al., 2020)
- Agroecology not widely adopted or prioritized at the policy and funding levels (Pavageau et al., 2020; Wise, 2020)
- Land-grant universities (LGUs) complicit in current food system (Buttel, 2005; Hudzik & Simon, 2012; Peters, 2006)
- For some, to change these systems, we must influence land-grant praxis (Anderson et al., 2021; Fraser, 2017)



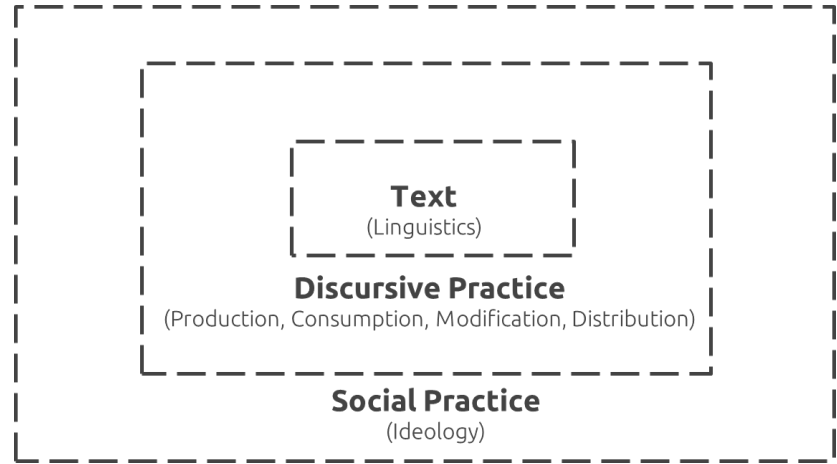
<https://www.agroecologynow.com/lume/>

# 9 USAID Policy Texts (Corpus) from 2018-2020



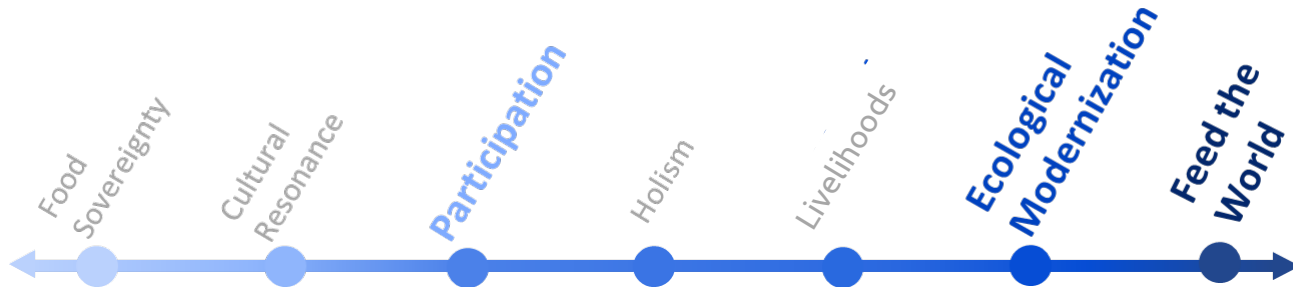
# Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as Theory & Method

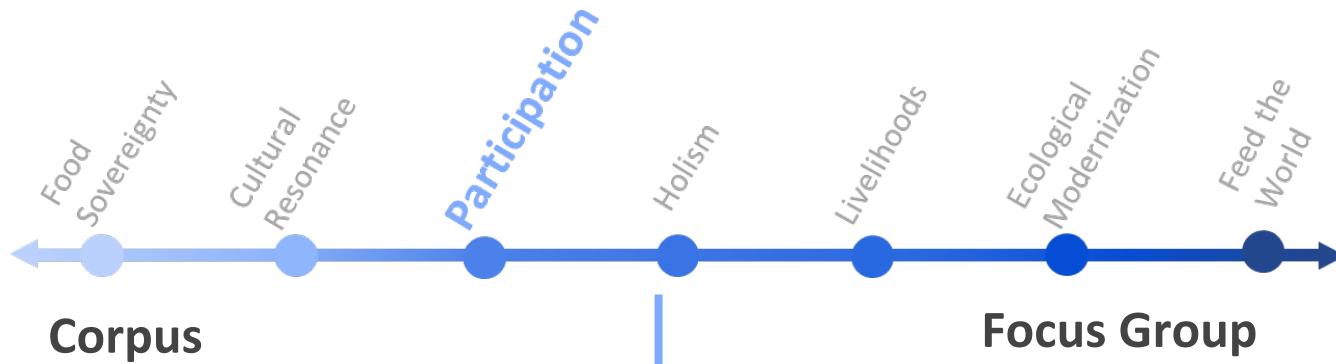
- Policy texts communicate what SHOULD happen and what COULD happen (Fairclough, 2003)
- CDA blends word choice with human interpretation, and then meaning-making/praxis together (Fairclough, 2003, 2012)
- Analyzed 9 different texts according to agroecological frames & CDA
- Presented CDA findings to focus groups with 2 land-grant universities



Three-dimensional conception of discourse. Reprinted from *Discourse and social change* (p. 73), by N. Fairclough, 1992, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2074659>. Copyright 1992 by Polity Press. Reprinted with permission.

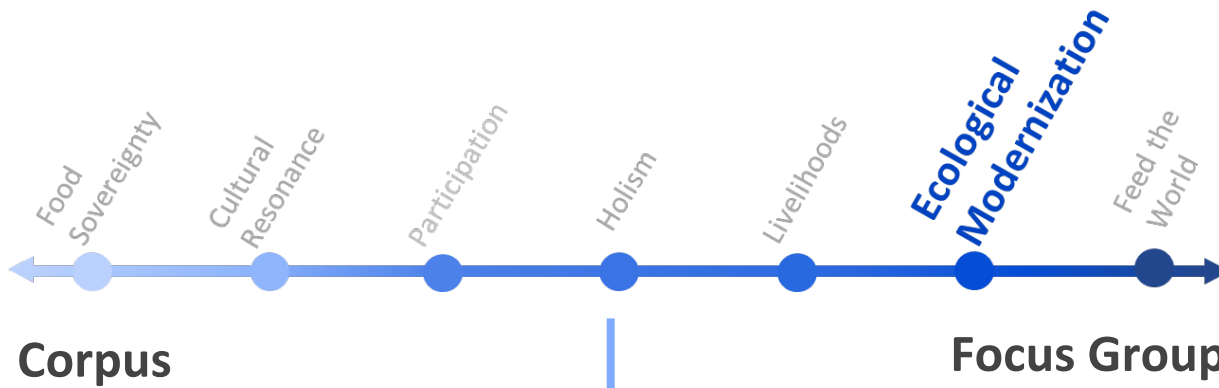
## Select Enabling/Disabling Findings





“Where local partners have already identified strategic research areas...[the project should] **support these partners’ ability to implement their agenda**” (PRCI RFA, p. 17)

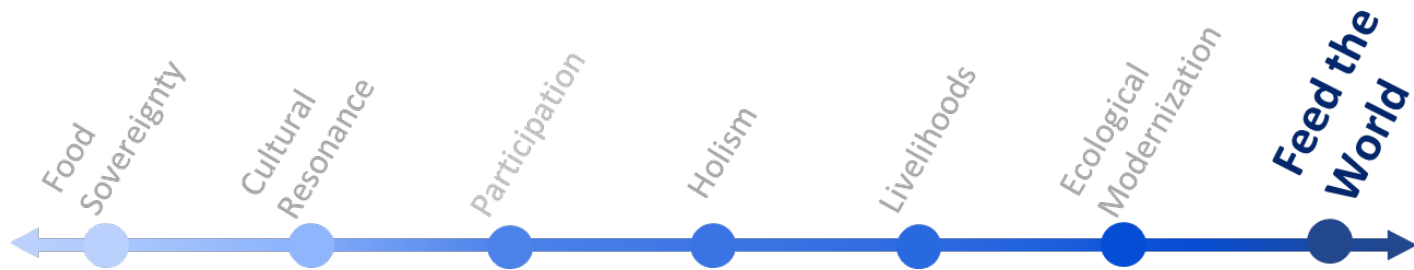
“I do appreciate the effort to give my work a voice, it’s kind of, you know, to **self-determine the agenda within some boundaries**...but at least my voice as a researcher in this part of the world can be heard in terms of determining the kind of matters and issues that we like to look into” (Mary, Economist from Ghana)



“this Innovation Lab Applicant may have the opportunity to promote climate resilience by analyzing possibilities for **government policies to promote climate-sensitive inputs, technologies, and practices through its policies and programs**” (PRCI RFA, p. 19)

“...it depends on how you define agroecological...**If we relax that definition, and think about agroecological approaches, as I'm simply paying a lot more attention to issues like soil health, right? Water quality...insect populations and other animal populations....** If you take that broad approach to agroecology, while, **not excluding the idea of using external inputs, then I think that there is a lot of scope for doing it**” (Dwayne)






## Corpus

- “This [IL] will identify and implement a global research agenda to inform critical global food security policy and strategy challenges, such as those pertaining to **stagnant productivity**” (PRCI RFA, p. 14)
- “[Advanced self-reliance] programs might seek to (but are not limited to) further mobilizing private capital, **deepening trade relationships and access to international markets...**” (Strategic Transitions FS, p. 2)

## Focus Group

“I mean, the conversations I have with people who are the **soil scientists and the agroecology people, they have a math problem. That, the basic math involved in feeding and producing food in the developing world is moving entirely in the wrong direction...**” (Keith)



# Research Question 3 – Material implications on land grants’ international development praxis

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## Key Findings:

- Agroecology represents epistemic tensions.
- Participatory discourse and land grant partners.

# Epistemic Complexity of Agroecology

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- **“As economists, we have a certain framework that we're working with, and certain terminology that we're accustomed to using...So agroecological, for me, would not have suggested that it is a label for a much broader approach”** (Elliott)
- **“I don't see them to be necessarily exclusive from one to another so you can still be food sovereign and feed the world...So, we see that with so many big countries probably like the U.S. where we grow so much of our food and we're also exporting...”** (Violet)
- **“I've often found the rhetoric of La Via Campesina sort of almost naïve...but, you know, unless you make land a non-marketable commodity, which, you know, you can certainly try to do that. Right? I'm not sure that's actually a very smart thing”** (Matthew)

## Participatory Discourse & Global South

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- “So, you know, so the traditional model funds researchers at land-grants...with the “All In” program, **we took a portion of our research budget, and we put it out to bid to PIs who are based in African research institutions, sort of taking out the land-grants completely...** If that Journey to Self-Reliance language had not been there, I'm not sure we would have actually tried” (Matthew)
- “[the J2SR will change] **the funding relationship from development agencies to land-grant institutions will change from direct recipient of funds to sub-recipients (via local institutions)**” (Maya)

## Research Institutions as Primary Land Grant Partners

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**“...as a land grant institution, we're working on better partnering, with the universities we work with, and the universities in these countries of research, to create research systems that are self-reliant and can address local problems, come up with local solutions, do local research, [and] I think that's going to have an, I hope that's going to have an enduring impact on both the way in which U.S. institutions, particularly land-grants, like ours, work with local research organizations, I hope that endures” (Tiffany)**

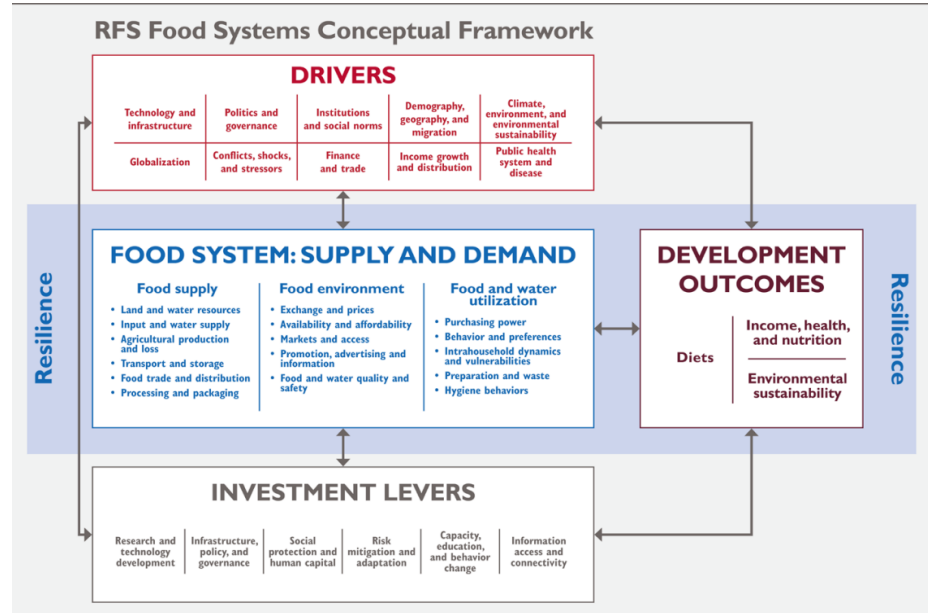
# Conclusions

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- Scientific agroecology most possible (Bellamy & Ioris, 2017; Gliessman, 2016)
- Agroecology for LGU's reflects epistemic tensions (Clapp & Ruder, 2020; Montenegro de Wit & Iles, 2016; Niewolny, 2021)
- Agroecology's social agenda less commonly employed (DeLonge, Robbins, & Basche, 2020)
- Without engagement with civil society, food system transformation likely to be limited (Gaventa & Bivens, 2014; IPES-Food & ETC Group, 2021; Niewolny, 2021; Stephenson, 2011)

# Recommendations/Where do we go from here?

1. USAID to deliberate on agroecology as an approach to food systems
2. Prioritize civil society engagement
3. Pilot agroecological research via an Innovation Lab in W. Africa with the Alliance for Agroecology (69 organizations) (IPES-Food 2020)



(United States Agency for International Development 2021)

# Future Directions: Using Agroecology as a Lens for Policy

- How can we use agroecology as a guide for policy towards sustainable, just, and resilient food systems?
- Worked with the Town of Blacksburg (2020-2021) to develop policy possibilities through an agroecological lens
- Example: Consider Good Food Purchasing Program for public procurement

### Good Food Purchasing Program

**Policy Statement:** To prepare for changes in the global food supply system caused by the effects of climate change, we encourage the adoption of the **Good Food Purchasing Program (GFPP)** by Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) to incentivize purchase of food produced from equitable, local, ecologically responsible, and humane sources.

**Project Background:** In September 2020 - the Town of Blacksburg published a [Climate Vulnerability Assessment](#) aimed at:

- Understanding the potential impacts of climate change on key town functions
- Identifying risks to local food security
- Recommending a climate food resiliency and security stakeholder team develop a food resiliency plan

Our team reviewed literature and surveyed **100+ similar localities** to determine practices and policies used to address food system risks caused by climate change.

**GFPP was repeatedly mentioned** for monitoring and encouraging sustainable food purchases, including in [Winston-Salem, NC](#), [Buffalo, NY](#), and [Washington DC](#).

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<b>What it does:</b> Encourages institutions to purchase food based on <a href="#">5 core values</a> :	<b>GFPP Overview</b>	<b>How it works:</b> GFPP (The Center) issues verification to institutions based on:
<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li><b>1. Local economies</b> - Buy local</li><li><b>2. Nutrition</b> - Make healthy/nutritious food equitable/affordable/accessible</li><li><b>3. Valued Workforce</b> - Safe conditions/fair compensation for all workers</li><li><b>4. Environmental Sustainability</b> - Buy from sustainable producers</li><li><b>5. Animal Welfare</b> - Healthy/humane care for animals</li></ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li><b>1. Standards</b> - Baseline standards in each of 5 values met</li><li><b>2. Reporting</b> - Standards required in contracts</li><li><b>3. Verification</b> - Participate to verify compliance</li><li><b>4. Transparency</b> - Supply chain transparency established</li></ol>	



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### Research Findings

The GFPP has been **adopted and implemented in several cities across the US**. It is currently being developed in school districts similar in size to MCPS. In 2018, the [Boulder Valley School District](#) invested **\$890,700 (41% of total food spend)** into the Colorado economy through local food purchasing, **10% of which came from local farms**. In 2018, DC adopted their [Sustainable DC 2.0 Plan](#), which prioritized nutrition, the local economy, and sustainability, and led to the city adopting the GFPP into their school system with hopes of adopting it city-wide in the near future. The program functions through engaged collaboration of 30 local food-related organizations. In the [2018 - 2019 fiscal year](#), DC spent over **\$14M** on food, **\$2.1M** of which was invested into the local economy (~15% of total food spend).

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### Policy Recommendations

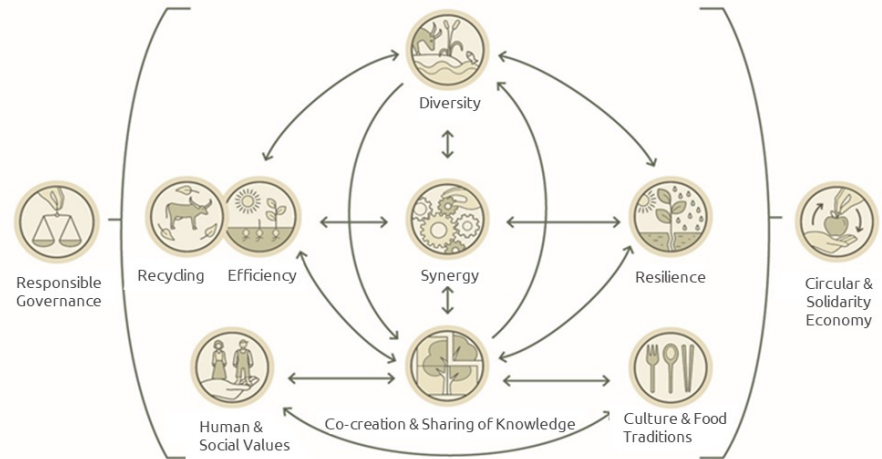
- **Town of Blacksburg adopts the GFPP policy and commit to:**
  - Establish supply chain transparency to the farm of origin
  - Incorporate the Good Food Purchasing Standards and reporting requirements into all new RFPs and contracts
  - Participate in the Center's program to verify compliance and measure progress
    - The Center provides tools/technical support/verification systems to assist in program implementation
    - The Center provides [annual independent analysis](#) of purchasing data
- **Town of Blacksburg engages in partnership with VT to adopt GFPP policies for their food purchases**
  - May allow for further cooperation between the university and local/regional food producers





# Thank You, Questions, & Discussion

- What do you already do that aligns with agroecology?
- Do you see agroecology being a useful framework for community development and/or food system policy work?



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