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Agroecology Leadership Academy 2024

Lessons Learnt

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The Agroecology Leadership Academy is conducted with financial support from the European Union (EU) as part of the EU co-funded programme "ProSilience: Enhancing soils and agroecology for resilient agri-food systems in Sub-Saharan Africa". ProSilience is integrated into the global programme "Soil Protection and Rehabilitation for Food Security (ProSoil)", commissioned by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and implemented by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH.

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The Agroecology Leadership Academy 2024 - Lessons Learnt

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Introduction

GIZ's Agroecology Leadership Academy was a comprehensive learning and developing programme for 38 participants from seven countries (Benin, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Kenya, India, Madagascar, Tunisia), implemented over 11 months in 2024. It aimed at empowering leaders and transformation agents from the public sector, civil society, private sector and academia to catalyze sustainable development, to navigate complexity and to advance agroecology.

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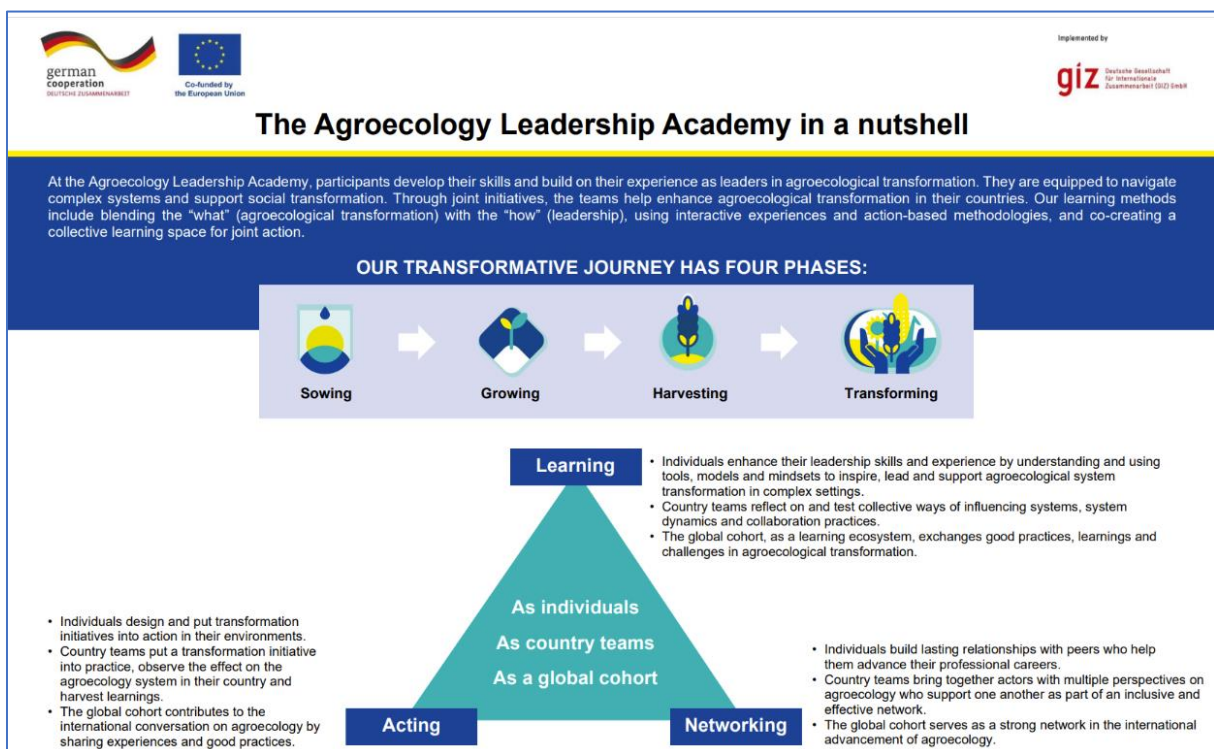
As a core part of the Academy, the country teams from the seven countries were supported to put transformation initiatives into actions. Within a few months, the participants catalyzed effective action by advancing national policies, bringing a wide range of stakeholders together, spreading hands-on knowledge and developing innovative media products.

This document summarizes Lessons Learnt on the base of internal reflection and harvesting workshops, a meeting with country facilitators, a survey by participants and focus group interviews with participants. It aims to openly share experiences with other practitioners interested in setting up similar programmes.

Objectives of the Academy

The purpose of the Academy was to support participants to develop skills and experience for leadership to navigate complex systems and support agroecological transformation. Using action learning, participants applied their learnings from the Academy to develop initiatives to advance agroecological transformation in their countries.

This purpose was translated into the three key objectives: **Learning, Acting and Networking**. The following overview chart specifies these objectives on the **three levels of individuals, country teams and global cohort**.



Structure of the Academy

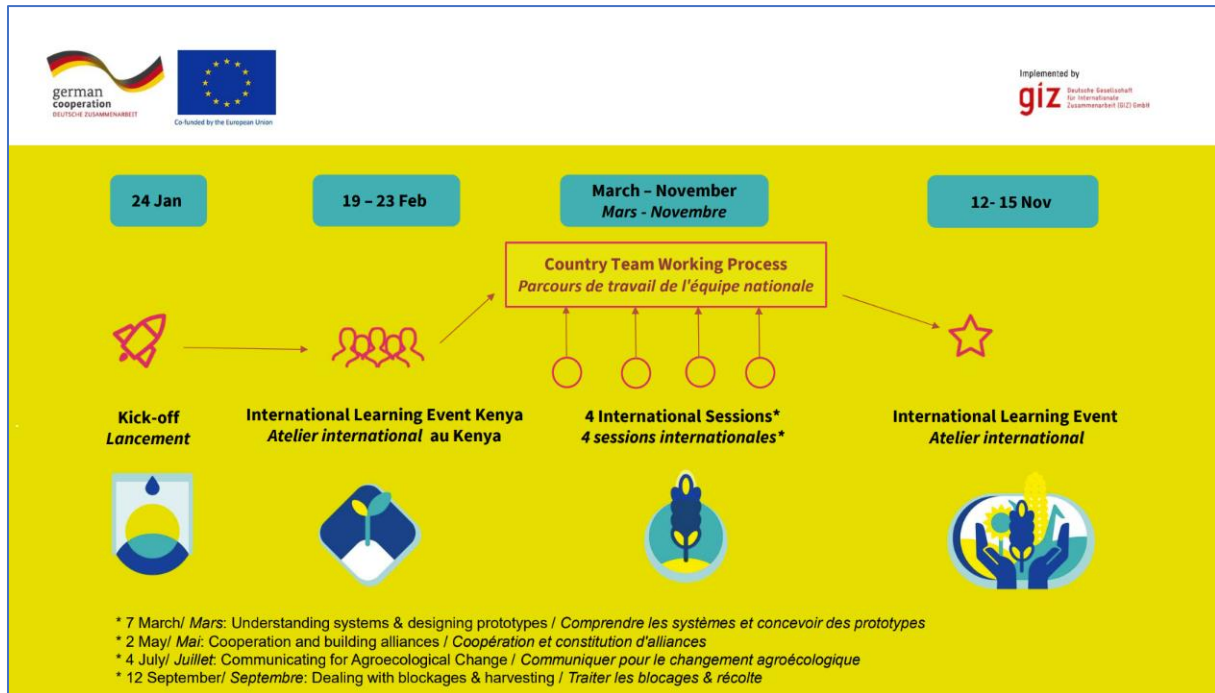
After a three-month concept development phase (July – September 2023), potential participants from Agroecology-networks in the respective countries were asked to apply within a 3-week application period in October 2023. The focus on selecting participants in each country was not so much on identifying highly performant individuals, but on selecting a country team that can drive agroecological transformation and collaborate closely. The selection of individual participants was primarily viewed with the criteria of "country team fit". In addition, the following criteria were considered in the participant selection process. A maximum of 5 participants for each country package from each country was selected. Applicants from all sectors - public, private, civil society (CSO, NGO) and research - were invited to apply. Participants were asked to present:

- valuable experience of engagement or work in influencing roles or members of professional influencing circles,
- good language skills English or French (B2 or better),
- activity and engagement in a field widely related to agroecology, with possibilities to influence their environment (ability to make things happen, especially by making connections, were in an environment that's open to innovation, took time for reflection and were willing to bring inner transformation processes into the social processes),
- aspiration gap: an idea for change or transformation where they are stuck and experienced a gap – frustration or intention, between their current reality and their aspiration for the future (*Internal remark not to be shared with participants: This could be a base for the joint action*),
- availability to attend and fully participate in the sessions of the programme.

The curriculum of the Agroecology Leadership Academy ran from January to November 2024 and featured the following key elements:

- **Online kick-off meeting** (2 hours / January 2024):
Participants were introduced to the Academy goals, structure and thematic content as well as meeting each other for the first time virtually.
- **1st International learning event** (4 days in Kisumu, Kenya / February 2024):
The cohort came together for the first time in the spirit of peer learning and international networking. Participants were introduced to key concepts of leadership, transformation and agroecology. They developed stakeholder systems maps for advancing agroecology in their countries and began working together to develop a vision for change in their countries. A field visit took participants to a local demonstration farm (BIOGI) and a farm practicing agroforestry supported by the NGO Trees for the Future.
- **Country-specific transformation initiatives** (9 Months):
Between the two international learning events (i.e. from February to October) participants were tasked with developing **country-specific transformation initiatives** to work on as a team. Each country team was supported by a local country facilitator throughout this period.
- **International online sessions** (4 half day webinars)
The work in the country teams was inspired and supported by four international online sessions. These sessions provided participants with additional input, for instance on models and tools for leading transformation initiatives or advancing agroecology, such as communicating effectively, dealing with obstacles and impacting political narratives. These meetings were also a chance for the group to reunite, to maintain collective momentum, and to learn from one another.

- **2nd international learning event** (4 days in Hawassa, Ethiopia / November 2024):
This workshop concluded the Agroecology Leadership Academy. Participants reflected and shared learnings with other country teams and explored key topics around personal ecology, individual leadership and habit formation and communication. A field visit took participants to a local coffee co-operative processing facility as well as a diversified small-scale farm. The participants further planned their onward journey as transformation makers for agroecological transformation.



The Academy is well documented for further use by other practitioners. Material such as presentations, handouts and videos used by the Academy is uploaded in an easy-to-use modular structure by GIZ onto the website of the [Transformative Partnership Platform of Agroecology \(TPP\)](#)¹ where the Agroecology Leadership Academy is already integrated as an aligned project.

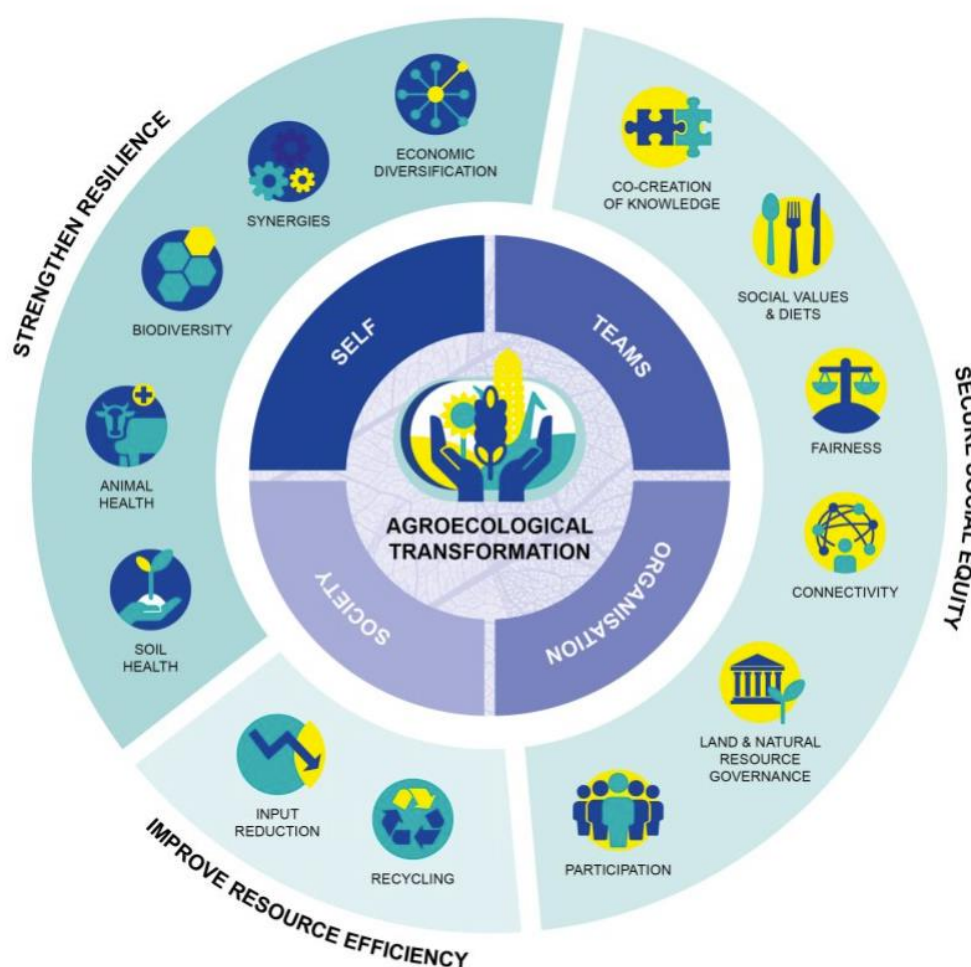
¹ For further information please visit: [Transformative Partnership Platform of Agroecology \(TPP\)](#).

Methodology of the Academy

The methodology of the Agroecology Leadership Academy was based on 7 principles:

1. Linking the topic of Agroecology (the “*What*”) with Transformation and Leadership (the “*How*”)

The Agroecology Leadership Academy aimed to enable participants to become transformational leaders and support national, regional and global agroecological transformation. Leadership, transformation and agroecological content were therefore closely intertwined as presented in the Academy’s core model (image below).



Throughout the Academy, models, tools and exercises that were introduced on transformation and leadership were immediately translated into the context of agroecological transformation. Agroecology-related activities (e.g. farm field trips) were also used for learning about transformation and leadership. Technical agroecological inputs were developed in an iterative fashion responding to participant’s learning goals and existing knowledge. This approach was taken rather than attempting to provide an exhaustive technical training programme given the limited contact time and breadth of possible topics. During the development of the methodology, approaches of other programmes were screened and

considered, for instance Ecological Organic Agriculture Leadership Course (EOALC) by International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM).

Feedback received by participants and conversations with participants showed that they appreciated this link of leadership, transformation and agroecology topics.

2. Clear focus on transformation skills and mindset

Central to the Academy's theory of change was a specific focus on transformational leadership. Participants were supported to advance transformation and shifts within the organizations in which they work and beyond. For instance, they explored how to identify acupuncture points for change, were introduced into the theory and practice of social transformation and were supported to develop inclusive, self-reflected and value-based mindsets for effective leadership.

Feedback received by participants suggests that this transformative mind and skill set considerably contributed to their personal development.

3. Transformation initiatives as core learning projects

The seven country teams were supported to carry out an action learning process by means of developing a transformation initiative between the two international learning events. The nature and the topic of the transformation initiative was not prescribed but deliberately left considerably open. Participants were asked to work on an action which

- addressed a leverage point on agroecology in which the team felt it was able to make a difference,
- was achievable within the timeframe of the Academy,
- targeted or involved people beyond their teams, and
- enabled the team to learn about leadership, transformation and agroecology.

Participants reported a great depth and intensity of learning in these initiatives, on leadership, teamwork and on agroecology. Most of the initiatives were very successful and will be carried forward after the closing of the Academy. For instance, in India, a roadmap for agroecological transition for a district was developed. In Burkina Faso, amongst others, a tour for journalists was organised, leading to agroecology being better known in the country.

4. In-Country facilitators to support the country teams

Each country team was supported by a local country facilitator. Often, these country facilitators acted like a "glue" for the country team and the work on the transformation initiatives. By coming from the respective countries, the country facilitators knew the local context and were able to provide very flexible support to participants. They conducted, as required, three to five full-day country team workshops to each country team, helped the group to stay on track for their transformation initiative, addressed specific learning needs, fostered action and reflection and provided individual support to participants. The International Facilitation Team and the country facilitators were in constant exchange to allow a smooth Academy process. The country facilitators were coached and supported by the international facilitation team and amongst themselves built a strong network.

In their feedback the participants stressed the key role the country facilitators had for the learning process and the transformation initiatives.

5. Linking Learning, Acting and Networking

As described above, the Academy clearly followed three key objectives: Learning, Acting and Networking. These three objectives were reflected in the design of every session and supported on three levels:

- Firstly, the individual participants in the context of their current roles in their organizations and in agroecology-related networks
- Secondly, the country teams, which in many cases developed into pioneer teams for the advancement of agroecology in their country.
- Thirdly, the international cohort level which grew together and is motivated to continue to work together as alumni.

The evaluation of the feedback received by participants and conversations with participants showed that objectives were met in all three areas.

6. Systemic, experiential and relational leaning

The methodological approach of the Academy was built on transformational action-orientated learning. It was based especially on a combination of the following models and approaches: Theory U (MIT), transformation labs, awareness-based system change, social transformation theory storytelling-for-action approaches, transformational leadership, vertical leadership and neuroscience-based learning. Experiences from other programmes were evaluated and brought in. The learning approach was based on the four factors of the *AGES model*, namely Attention, Generation, Emotion and Spacing. It involved a balance of individual work and group work, the work in stable cross-country teams and learning- on-the-job. The international facilitation team tried to “Walk the talk”, being open to adapting the programme to the needs of the participants, holding space for personal transformation and serving as a model for cooperation in diversity. This approach aligned very closely with overarching aspects of agroecology, including the need for systems thinking, emphasizing the importance of participation and collective action, and of encouraging the co-creation of knowledge.

In their feedback the participants greatly appreciated the methodology of the Academy.

7. The strong role of communication

Throughout the Academy, communication played a key role, reflecting the central role of communication for leadership. Participants were supported in various ways to develop their communication skills, for example through learning how to effectively plan communication messages for target groups, how to motivate and successfully convene and convince individuals, as well receiving dedicated communication sessions around effective communication and presentation skills. Working with videos - as a future skill - played a key role in the Academy. Participants were asked to hand in an application video, the international facilitation team produced videos to support the learning of participants – and each country teams produced a summary video of the transformation initiatives at the end of the Academy.

The evaluation of the feedback received by participants and conversations with participants showed that effective and efficient leadership and transformation communication was one of the key learning fields for participants.

Overall feedback from participants

Feedback from participants was consistently evaluated and used as a base for further iterative development and finetuning of the programme, content and methodology. It is also addressed in the lessons learned below. In the final survey, participants expressed extremely high overall satisfaction with the Academy. The results of this survey can be summarised as follows:

- **Learning process:** Participants appreciated the structured approach and found the learning events and workshops effective. Some requested more time for in-depth exploration of topics. The learning process was well-received, with calls for extended engagement on complex topics.
- **Event formats and balance:** Physical and digital formats were considered balanced, but there was interest in more interactive sessions during online components. The balance of formats worked well, though online sessions could have been carried out on a platform that allowed for more interaction.
- **Overall satisfaction:** Many participants expressed a very high overall satisfaction, valuing the Academy's structure, networking opportunities, and relevance to their work. Participants were highly satisfied with the Academy's impact on professional and personal growth.
- **Recommendations and continuity:** Participants called for GIZ to continue similar programmes and suggestions for ongoing alumni networking and resource sharing. There was a strong endorsement for continuation and expansion of the Academy.

Lessons learnt and recommendations for future Academies

→ General methodological aspects

- **Balancing design and flexibility:** The general structure and duration of the Academy seemed appropriate. The 11-month duration, the mix of live and online events, and transformation initiatives was helpful for the learning. Feedback from participants was incorporated into the implementation of the Academy.

It is recommended to leave session titles and topics undefined for the international online sessions before the start of the programme so they can be adapted to the needs of participants.

- **Using a core model as key structural element:** The core model was helpful for both the facilitation team and the participants. It helped to structure the topics covered in the Academy. Generally, the more team-orientated topics were the focus towards the beginning of the programme to start the country work well. Individual- or self-leadership themes were therefore focused on toward the end of the programme to support participants in their individual learning transfer.

It is recommended to replicate this structure in future Academies.

- **Integrating participants feedback continuously:** The kick-off survey and the survey at the end of the first learning event led to helpful results. The mid-term survey unfortunately had a very low response rate. Despite frequent engagement with participants to gather learning needs (e.g. through surveys) some topics were expressed in participant feedback at the end of the programme as missing (see participant feedback section).

It is recommended to use short surveys with not more than 10 questions at the beginning of the Academy and after each international learning event.

→ Transformation initiatives // Country work process

- **Implementing transformation initiatives:** The transformation initiatives were a highlight in the learning process for participants. Learnings were intense on individual and collective level. It helped to give a general inspiration and outline of the idea of the transformation initiatives but not to be prescriptive in terms of content of the initiatives and process. This helped participants to learn and self-organise and led to increased ownership. Participants described that this motivated them to develop an idea that they could achieve together. Some of the transformation initiatives were too ambitious in the beginning and had to be downscaled.

It is recommended to plan for group coaching session at the beginning of the work on the transformation initiative to challenge participants about the feasibility of the initiative.

- **Working with country facilitators:** The work with country facilitators was a success factor for the learning within the transformation initiatives. The country facilitators motivated the country teams, inspired them and provided guidance along the way. Many country facilitators have built a very positive relationship with their teams. It was helpful that country facilitators came from the respective countries.

It is recommended to include the work with country facilitators in future Academies under the same contract as the international facilitation team.

- **Close collaboration with the international facilitation team:** While the country facilitators supported the country teams, they were guided in their professional development and facilitation capacities by the international facilitation team. The international facilitation team conducted seven online meetings for all country facilitators during the Academy. In addition, the lead facilitators had

around seven 1:1 sessions with each country facilitator. A weakness of the Academy was to not include country facilitators for the international learning events.

It is recommended to include country facilitators in the international learning events to kickstart and finish the country work together with their teams in these events. Alternatively, a day-long online onboarding session with facilitators at the beginning could be planned for.

→ Content on leadership, transformation and agroecology

- **Maximising coherence in Academy content:** The effort to link leadership, transformation and agroecology worked well and was appreciated by participants. From the feedback it can be understood that the programme was perceived as one coherent programme. The participants appreciated the focus not just on leadership but on leadership for transformation. This focus made the choice of tools and methods more poignant – and enabled a direct link to the action that participants took individually and jointly in their transformation initiative.

It is recommended to continue working with this approach.

- **Responding to agroecology-specific needs:** Given the contextual nature of agroecology it was necessary to stay at a relatively high-level in the agroecology-related content to ensure global relevance for the participants. More time for direct engagement per country on country-specific agroecological topics would be useful in future iterations. Agroecology as a science, movement and set of agricultural practices was effectively communicated and the 13 principles of *High Level Panel of Experts (HLPE)* on food security and nutrition were used as part of the guiding core model throughout the Academy. Other core learning requests that emerged and were catered for during the Academy included monitoring and evaluation tools for agroecology; agroecological practices for soil health (via field visits to a vermicomposting facility and an agroecological demonstration farm); and agroecosystem mapping. Further topics such as market development, gender, land governance, and the linkage between human rights and agroecology were facilitated through participant-led sessions in an 'open-space' format.

It is recommended to allocate an additional 10 days to support country teams with agroecological specific needs to allow for greater tailored support for their individual contexts.

- **Field trips as key elements in live events:** Participants valued the field trips. These were possible because the international learning events were not carried out in capitals. The field trips had a focus on farms and were very experiential, also allowing participants to join into the work on the farm. Preference for future events would be to focus on a single field visit per learning event and to spend more time, even an entire day on the farm. Effective and timely coordination with country partners is required to ensure suitable location, logistics and adequate facilities are available on-site.

It is recommended to host trainings at (or close to) agricultural training centres or demonstration farms with accommodation, rather than seeking field trips once a hotel had already been confirmed, if possible with local regulations regarding tender processes and security issues.

- **Adapting the programme to the needs of participants:** The team acted dynamically to create a programme that responded to the learning needs of the participants. Rather than establish a fixed curriculum at the start, agroecological topics were developed based on feedback from the participants. This worked very well.

It is recommended to continue working with this approach.

→ Participant selection

- **Having a restricted selection process:** The participants selection process worked well and had good results. Instead of an open call, invitations to apply were distributed in agroecology-related networks in country with the aim of having about two or three times as much applications as places. The application process was based on simple and lean forms. Handing in the videos as part of the application process seemed very helpful for getting an impression on participants.

It is recommended to continue working with this approach.

- **Ensuring availability of participants:** Country facilitators reported the availability by participants as a major challenge in the Academy. Country facilitators suggested that country teams could have been bigger. This would help to bring in more perspectives and to balance the workload.

It is recommended to work with teams of around seven people per country.

- **Including participants from heterogenous backgrounds:** The country teams with a wide representation from diverse sectors of activity (public sector, start-ups, science) were very active and successful. The challenge from choosing candidates from the same institution or sector of activity became also obvious. It is important to further underscore the critical need for farmer representation and participation within fora like this.

It is recommended to include at least one farmer in each country team.

→ Sustainability of the Academy

- **Planning follow-up activities early:** It is of utmost importance to plan follow-up activities in the concept development phase of the Academy. However, it was challenging due to the context. Planning of follow-up activities would include the way this Academy could be taken up by other institutions, a follow-up to the country transformation initiatives, and plans on how the Academy could be anchored further in the countries.

It is recommended to develop a clear action plan for maximising the sustainability of the Academy about 9 months before its end.

- **Providing clear messages on follow-up to participants:** Messaging by the organisations which organises the Academy on options to anchor and fund the continuation of the transformation initiatives could have started earlier. It could also have been more consistent and proactive, including thinking through options to support follow-up initiatives. The fact that there was no funding for the transformation initiatives was communicated from the beginning but repeatedly led to questions and needs for clarification.

It is recommended to check early on, how networking of participants with potential funders of transformation initiatives can be actively supported. The recommendation for GIZ could be to check for possible networking opportunities (deeper involvement of the GIZ countries).

- **Maximising impact in countries:** Country facilitators mentioned that it would be interesting to think about how to include the line managers of the participants into one session in country.

It is recommended to organise a presentation session for the country initiative in each country.

→ Working in two languages (English and French)

- **Having smooth translation in live and online Events:** Due to the very good interpreters, especially at the two learning events, language barriers were overcome very well. The quality of the interpretation and the technical setup for translation at the online events was clearly a lowlight of the Academy and led to additional work for facilitators, e.g. in repeating sessions.

It is recommended to use software with an easy-to-use translation function (such as Zoom, if the organising entity of the Academy allows the use of this software), and giving participants more intense briefing on how to overcome technical barriers.

- **Giving equal role to both languages:** The bilingual nature of the events led to additional work for the facilitation team. Editing services for translations in production of materials and subtitles were more work-intensive than estimated.

It is recommended to plan with an even representation of primarily French- and English-speaking persons in the facilitation team.

- **Supporting language take-up by participants:** Many of the participants grew in their confidence to speak another language, notably some of the francophone participants spoke English with greater ease during the second international learning event.

It is recommended to continue working with this approach.

→ Communication

- **Including communication as core topic:** Communication activities were foreseen to support the creation of material only (such as videos, factsheet and manual), but ended up being woven into all activities - from application call videos and technical set-up to preparation support of all sessions, facilitation and documentation to contact management with participants. It took a much larger role within the Academy than expected and was integral. As a reaction, the curriculum was adapted by adding two sessions around effective communication and presenting, as well as additional coaching sessions to groups and individuals.

- *It is recommended to include the strong role of communication consistently into future Academies from the onset.*

- **Building media capacities of participants:** Communication learning was supported in an action-orientated way. The media capacities of participants were built by handing in application videos and filming the transformation-initiative.

It is recommended to continue working with this approach.

- **Work with easy-to-use communication channels:** For smooth communication with participants, it is necessary to work with very easy-to-use communication channels which participants know, and which work with limited internet bandwidth. Complicated software packages (e.g. Microsoft SharePoint and Teams) led to challenges in information sharing and storage, took away flexibility and was sometimes frustrating for participants, who were used to different tools and channels. Consequently, more time, energy and resources than expected were used for this.

It is recommended to use software packages that are easy-to-use and familiar to participants (such as Dropbox and Zoom, if the organising entity of the Academy allows the use of this software).



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