

# Policy dialogue pushes for agroecology integration

Integrating agroecology into extension services is no longer optional. It is essential for building a farming system that can withstand climate stress, sustain the environment, and deliver economic value.

BY TREVOR LUTALO

**A**gricultural productivity in Uganda is increasingly being tied to the strength, relevance, and reach of extension and advisory services. This was the central message at a high-level policy dialogue convened by the Participatory Ecological Land Use Management (PELUM) Uganda in Kampala last week.

The meeting drew a broad spectrum of stakeholders - government officials, extension workers, researchers, and farmer representatives - who gathered to examine how agroecology can be meaningfully integrated into Uganda's national agricultural extension system.

Beneath the technical discussions lay a pressing question: how can Uganda equip its farmers to cope with climate change while also improving productivity, incomes, livelihoods and market access?

Agroecology emerged as a compelling answer.

Defined as an approach that applies ecological principles to agricultural systems, it promotes biodiversity, soil health, and sustainable land use while reducing reliance on external inputs.

Participants argued that it offers a practical pathway for building resilience in Uganda's largely smallholder farming sector.

Officials from the Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Industry and Fisheries acknowledged the urgency of

aligning agricultural growth with environmental sustainability.

Commissioner John Lodongkol noted that as Uganda pushes forward with industrialization and value addition, agriculture must evolve alongside it.

"As government advances towards value addition and industrialization, agriculture cannot be left behind," Lodongkol said.

"Practices such as agroforestry are being promoted, alongside the responsible use of fertilisers, to ensure sufficient food for both domestic consumption and export. We cannot forget the environment."

He highlighted ongoing efforts to reform the extension system, including the rollout of the single-spine extension model, improved coordination across departments, and logistical support such as motorcycles to facilitate field outreach.

These interventions, he said, are intended to bridge the gap between research and practice, ensuring that farmers receive timely and practical guidance.

Yet, even as progress is made, the dialogue exposed persistent structural challenges.

Joseph Okee, an extension work coordinator at the ministry, pointed to the long shadow of colonial-era agricultural systems, particularly the emphasis on monocropping. He argued that dependence on single crops has left farmers vulnerable to climate shocks, pest outbreaks, changing prices and volatile markets.

Mr Jude Ssebuliba, Head of Programme at PELUM during the meeting. PHOTO/ COURTESY



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"Farmers who relied on a single crop like cocoa or tea were easily trapped when disaster struck," Okee observed. "What is encouraging now is the shift towards diversification. Areas that traditionally did not grow crops like coffee, bananas or rice are beginning to adopt them, and the results are promising."

At the grassroots level, farmers voiced a mixture of optimism and frustration.

Sandra Akiror, a farmer representative from Teso, said many rural communities are already practicing forms of agroecology rooted in indigenous knowledge. However, these efforts often remain small-scale due to limited access to extension support and markets.

"Farmers have knowledge that has been passed down through generations," she said. "What they need now is support to commercialize these practices so that they can improve their livelihoods."

She also highlighted communication barriers that continue to limit the effectiveness of extension services. Many farmers, she noted, lack access to mobile phones or reliable Internet, making it difficult to benefit from digital advisory platforms. She called for greater use of local languages and more consistent field presence by extension workers, who are often over-



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Beyond agronomy and technology, the dialogue turned to the cultural perception of agriculture itself.

Dr Roseline Nyamutare emphasized the need to reframe farming as a viable and rewarding career, particularly for young people. She urged policymakers to integrate agriculture into the education system at an early stage, linking it to innovation, science, and entrepreneurship.

"Agriculture must be rebranded," she said. "If we introduce it early in schools and connect it to opportunity, we can inspire a new genera-

tion to take it up seriously."

Her remarks resonated with a wider concern that Uganda's agricultural future depends not only on policy reforms, but also on changing mindsets. With a youthful population and rising unemployment, agriculture could offer a pathway to inclusive growth - if it is made attractive, profitable, and resilient.

By the close of the dialogue, there was broad consensus among participants: integrating agroecology into extension services is no longer optional. It is essential for building a farming system that can withstand climate stress, sustain the environment, and deliver economic value.

The challenge now lies in translating these discussions into action.

That will require sustained investment in extension services, stronger coordination among stakeholders, and a deliberate effort to empower farmers with both knowledge and resources.

As participants departed, one message stood out clearly - Uganda's agricultural transformation will not be driven by policy alone, but by the ability to connect those policies to the realities of farmers in the field.

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