

Sustainable land use

Pioneering community-centred agroecology

In the Chimanimani district of Eastern Zimbabwe, the Participatory Organic Research & Extension Training Trust (PORET) serves as an educational facility for community farming. In conversation, PORET's director Julious Piti shares his holistic visions on land use and advocates for localised bottom-up approaches to sustainability.

PORET came into existence on 14 hectares of very dry land, but you managed to make this land very fertile and green within just two years. What is the magic behind agroecology?

The magic behind agroecology is that it is very interesting to work with the land and to communicate with the organic matters and microorganisms. As much as you get excited, the land also responds with your excitement as you add the appropriate nutrients. We make bio fertilizers using available resources and we make sure we plant a lot of legumes like beans that help to fix nitrogen and to create green ground cover. So we maintain the forest and use it to create organic ground cover so that the forest becomes awakened. If there is no water that makes the bacteria and organic material work, then the land becomes sterile. By making the microorganisms active, by protecting them, giving them a little bit of water and food, then they will just work on the land on their own.

At the end of the day, you see that there is magic in nature, it can actually recycle itself and empower itself. At the same time the principle of permaculture actually leads a human being not to exploit the land without thinking of the cycle of these nutrients and how you can build up the sustainability and the growth of the plants. Because when we do farming, we should not only focus on ourselves as an individual who wants to eat, but also think about wild animals, birds, microorganisms, water cycles and so on, because the land is not depending on one thing alone.

You want to empower people from the communities that you work with to participate in communal decisions, maybe even politics. What does this participation entail and why do you think it's important?

That is one of the backbones of our methodology, because we think we should use a bottom-up approach. If we are working with the farmers, we want the farmer to decide what they want to do on their farm. And once they do so, they tell us how we can support the ecological activities and adopt their plans to best help them. So we want every person to decide on the fate of their own actions and results. Being a director doesn't mean that I know a lot, no, it's just by chance that I'm the director. But there are other people who have got even better ideas. So our approach is to make sure that we consult the people who are around us, who see us doing some work, and then let them comment to us, so that at the end of the day we can see what is best for the people. Learning is never ending. We will die learning, because whatever we are doing is like an experiment, it's all a process. Our approach is that even PORET is a learning organization, whereby we are adopting the learnings from others. But at the same time, we also want to question those said-to-be best practices. Sometimes organizations give a lot of load to the communities because they come with their own principles and guidelines, policies that don't feed the community. Even in the university, people read books that were written for specific places, but they are trying to translate that

specific to Zimbabwe, which doesn't often work. So we are saying, as much as we learn from outside, let's also make our own sense of things.

As you said, there should be localized solutions to local problems. There might not be a fix all, a best practice for everything. Many Indigenous Knowledges are overlooked whilst centering local, bottom-up solutions. At PORET, how do you source knowledge from the ground and from people's experience?

When we do water harvesting, for example, we talk to the community and the elders will tell us about their norms and the sacred places that should not be disturbed. We try to support their values by asking them: "What should we do?". Another indigenous concept is to build houses using soil mud as for example the Zulu Beehive Design suggests. We've got 15 of our huts here that we built with mud, and we asked the local people to come and do the job. Our whole area is very beautiful with all these local materials and local people working to build it. So we are actually trying to inspire the people and say, we have all these things. We can do it. You see, the biggest problem for our African communities is that the message has been said too often that you are poor... until the whole nation believes it. I don't buy that. We as Africans, we've got the land, we've got the money. No one is going to stop us from doing something good.

More and more young people have been leaving their communities for socioeconomic reasons. The rate of unemployed 15 to 25 year-olds in Zimbabwe was at around 16% in 2023. What does PORET do to help secure young people's futures in the rural areas?

In reality, many grants give too little money to start anything for the youth. They might give them a two hour visit or a training somewhere, but no one has got good funding that follows up with these kids to actually implement projects. So we have been trying to talk to the embassies and those who offer funding. Also, as PORET we have designed what we call the Permaculture Design Course (PDC): we train youth for around 10 days, and then take them back home and implement exactly what they have been learning here, and we follow up with them. The PDC is a very important course that talks about the political as well as the economic context, and how somebody can really change the narrative of what is happening at that moment. We want to translate our economic development from just book reading. We want to make sure that the PDC explains and details on how to translate these ways of creating sustainable projects into the practical by accompanying the youth. So in 2023 we trained 200 local youth in the Permaculture Design Course. The idea is to breed green fingered leaders into the youth. In another program called the shadow, we have active youth working behind our officers, so that as we do our job, we are actually transferring the knowledge to the youth, so that they become the future leaders.

One of the problems that makes the youth inactive is the kind of syllabi that they study at school. They are told that they are learning to become an employee of somebody else. Yet, they could have started their initiatives from a young age to actually create opportunities along with them, with that growth in their own communities. To help as PORET, we are creating these livelihood projects by facilitating planning workshops into the different villages. So we see a mushrooming of water projects, gardens, nurseries. Some grow lots of trees for sale and for replanting in their own forest. People are doing food processing, preserving their own mangoes and other fresh seasonal fruits. And they can sell the surplus, but they can also improve the food security at home. Because we teach life skills and permaculture design, we see people starting their own consultancy work or their own NGOs. Lastly we also do intercultural exchanges, where we invite different universities to come and

do attachments here. We can learn from other nations and their potential, but they also learn a lot when they join us.

What about new technologies for agriculture that might help to improve food security? Are they accessible for the Chimanimani communities? Can you merge them together with your localised approaches?

We can merge them so easily. What we need to do is to understand the principle of soil conservation and how we can look after our natural resources. So that when we design this equipment, it is promoting our vision. We also need education so that when you have got all of these industrial agricultural equipment, you can use them in a way that promotes sustainability, promotes the health of your soil, of your people, rather than kill things on your farm.

But no, this equipment is not accessible. We do a project ourselves, improving or supporting traditional methods of farming small grains that we know are drought resistant because there is less water down here. But when it comes to processing these small grains, we don't even have a crusher or something that makes them affordable to process. We are lobbying and advocating to the government and engineering industries to make matching machinery that will support the agroecology approach to farming. They could even fund to teach our children to do the engineering... I think what we need to do is to include agroecology into the curriculum of our universities and schools. They can practice agroecology and intensify the teaching by demonstrating methods that help the community, which then joins the mode of production and the economic cycle.

The accessibility of agricultural equipment but also of economic markets brings in questions of equality and fairness for farmers. How can agriculture become more just and sustainable, whilst securing food needs?

We just need to understand that we have to be ourselves, and then work from there, in bottom-up approach. And the whole world should accept that as an approach. We have the opportunity to take some youngsters or brilliant people in Africa to be educated in a bottom-up approach. We can embrace our own culture by building universities and schools that actually teach the syllabus of the chiefs in Africa. We should not say it's a primitive way of living, but we must promote that in a good way. Different stakeholders should see this light and see that we need to implement our own approaches in order to empower Africa as a whole. Donor communities need to actually embrace and understand the needs of the farmers on the grounds so that they can adjust their funding to fit the needs of the people they are intending to support. We want funding that is specifically designed for us. An agro ecology project is not a six months or one year or three years project, which most grants are designed for. We should not just put money into people, but we must make sure that this money is accompanied by a specific training that actually strengthens and empowers these people to be able to handle these resources and use them to advance their own community.

We also need to have promotional activities, conferences and so on, to promote our work in agroecology and spread it to show how it can be replicated elsewhere. In our own African models, let's balance the needs and vulnerability of the rich and the poor. Let's use our knowledge to advance our own communities and preserve our own natural resources.

Interview conducted by Hannah Page