Photo: Faanati Mamea

Cultivating health and healing

Amid intersecting crises, agroecology reminds us that we have power and agency to choose health – for both people and planet, as this second issue of Rooted Magazine demonstrates. Current trends show disease rates increasing across the board and hunger and malnutrition on the rise, and mental health statistics indicate the negative effects of cumulative stress and suffering. Climate change, war, political turmoil and biodiversity loss are causing uncertainty and instability, which in turn lead to spiritual and existential anxiety. And yet – despite the overwhelming odds – pockets of health and wellbeing persist and are growing.

By linking human, plant, animal and planetary health, agroecology offers holistic and collective responses. This issue of Rooted explores the variety of ways in which this happens, sharing the insights offered from experiences around the world.

Agroecology for health and wellbeing

In a world that encourages disconnection from each other, from nature and from our cultural roots, we are witnessing the medicalisation of human experiences as a 'normal' part of everyday life. Relationships between communities and ecosystems that were previously connected to past and future generations have been replaced by exploitative agricultural transactions that yield profits for the few but destroy our social fabric and the planet's soils and biodiversity. The food that results is homogenous and nutritionally deficient. It is detached from the farmer's care, the peasant's ancestral wisdom, the indigenous cosmovision of balance, and the community's culture of food based on meals shared with family and friends.

If this issue of Rooted makes one thing clear, it is the power of agroecology to heal. Communities around the world are pursuing localised, collective systems organised around diversified, seasonal and nourishing food, centering spiritual connections with each other and their territories. The principles that ground these agroecological initiatives are rooted in food sovereignty, the right to healthy food, equity, and social and gender justice. They are shaped around

Helen Tibandebage Nguya in the gardens she created for people living with HIV/AIDS in Tanzania.

diverse cultures, identities, traditions and knowledge.

This magazine presents powerful and hopeful experiences, poems and perspectives from the (often women) peasants, farmers, Indigenous peoples, communities and movements that are taking health back into their own hands. They do this by reviving traditional seeds, food and practices, and by facilitating healing and wellbeing, reconnecting people to the land and to each other.

It was heartwarming to receive over 100 submissions following our Call for Contributions, including creative expressions such as art, poetry and photography. It is with gratitude that we include two poems about community, soil and seeds: 'Tincture' by Zena Edwards and 'We can plant a seed' by Nnimmo Bassey.

In addition to longer grounded stories, interviews, perspectives and poems, this issue offers a series of shorter stories, which allows us to share a wider range of insights and initiatives that are alive in the global agroecology movement. They all acknowledge the role of agroecology in fostering spiritual health, food as medicine, urban wellbeing and systemic transformation.

Spiritual health

The agroecological approach is as much about spiritual healing as it is about physical and mental healing. Many of the authors offer insights from their experiences in reviving ancient traditions and practices that have been eroded since the onset of colonialism and continued during the era of agribusiness, but that are now proving vital to people's connections to place, culture and spirit.

In Benin, Chief Atawé Akôyi is leading the restoration of sacred natural sites – rich in medicinal plants, nutritional crops and spiritual connections: "This revival has become our story of holistic healing". Another revival, of the indigenous horse in Kyrgyzstan, teaches us that animals can also play an important role today in promoting ecological and spiritual health, and that this requires a holistic approach to agricultural development. Other examples from the US, the UK and the Pacific Islands show how traditional foods and practices enable people to strengthen their cultural and spiritual wellbeing.

Food as medicine

Trauma is often at the root of poor health, and this in turn can be caused by violence, displacement, alienation from one's culture, poverty, racism or sexism. Many articles in this issue illustrate how agroecology offers a path for healing. Its focus on producing healthy, culturally appropriate, poison-free food is one critical path, but just as important is the connection (or re-connection) of people with the land, the forest and its animals, plants, seeds and soil – and with each other.

For example, in Guatemala, the armed conflict not only left scars on the land and in people's memories, but also weakened nutrition in communities. Doña Aniceta works with a network of seed savers to ensure that amaranth, which she buried during wartime in a form of agricultural resistance, is regaining its place in local markets. In Kenya, the Ogiek forest people lost access to their nutritious ancestral diet – and their role as 'caretakers of life' – when

Photo: Reguli Damas

they were displaced from their hunting and gathering grounds. They are countering this by cultivating indigenous vegetables and revitalising their beekeeping traditions. In the Eastern Cape province of South Africa, with its legacy of colonial agriculture, two nurses-turned-farmers dialogue about the nexus between agroecological farming, human wellbeing and care. Experiences in Tanzania, the Netherlands, the US and India also demonstrate how agroecology can be a cure for physical and mental illness.

Urban wellbeing

In cities, with their physical and spiritual estrangement from nature and its cycles, there is an emergence of grassroots transformations that connect people with each other and the land through food and farming. In Brazil, the mapping of 2345 urban agriculture initiatives concluded that they are a force for cultural renewal and the emancipation of marginalised communities. Women in Sao Paulo, for example, are creating spaces that promote health, social connection and environmental care through the cultivation of medicinal plants. A trilogy of short stories from Quito, Ecuador illuminates the political importance of urban agroecology and a photo story celebrates the regenerative, nourishing and healing community gardens in London, UK that bring together people from the African diaspora to seed grassroots solutions for racial equality, land reparations and food sovereignty.

Systemic transformation

Agroecology has the potential to challenge the various systems of oppression that contribute to today's health crises, including capitalism, coloniality, patriarchy, racism, classism and heteronormativity. Articles in this issue highlight some of the work being done to dismantle these pernicious structures through, and in support of, agroecology. In her interview with Rooted, radical dietitian Lucy Aphramor concludes: "If health is the thing that emerges at the confluence of words like love, vitality, liberation, abolition, then agroecology is a powerful potentiator."

In Kenya, an important victory was announced in March 2025 following a lawsuit co-filed by the Kenyan Peasant's League that warned about the dangers that GMO and hybrid seeds pose to the mental and physical health of farmers – and particularly women farmers. Brazil's 'Zero Hunger' programme has improved the lives of women, but also reminds us that complementary measures are needed for new health challenges such as increased consumption of ultra-processed food and the burning of more waste.

At the level of cultural transformation, agroecological practices in Colombia are generating spaces where people's "capacities, talents, anxieties and fears" come to the surface, and where they often develop a "social sensitivity" for all forms of life. 'Social Pickle', a fermentation initiative that bubbled up in the United Kingdom during the COVID pandemic, shows how caring for healthy 'micro' communities of microbes can generate healthy 'macro' communities.

What emerges most strongly from this issue of Rooted is that agroecology can foster a holistic notion of health that is grounded in reciprocal connections and relations. As we learn from the Bagobo Tagabawa people in the Philippines, health is not only physical or individual: it is interconnected with the wellbeing of the community, the relationship to life, the work with the land, social connections, spirituality and culture. 'Being healthy', for the Bagobo Tagabawa and perhaps for all of us, is when these elements are all in alignment. ■

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