



■■■ HEINRICH BÖLL STIFTUNG
WARSAW
Poland



POLISH SCHOOL OF AGROECOLOGY

**Summarising the experience after two editions,
2023-2024**

Assumptions, methodology and reflections





„Who wants to be great when you can be good?
The more rulers there are who want to rule,
the more we need courageous people who want to build a just and
sustainable world together, breathe clean air instead of stock exchange
rates,
nurture seeds and fertile soil, everything that is alive.
Welcome aboard, the ecological recovery requires everyone's input”.

*Osuuskunta Oma Maa – a community-supported agriculture group,
Finland*

I invite you to read more!
Wioletta Olejarczyk



INTRODUCTION

The Polish School of Agroecology grew out of the need to co-create an agri-food system that cares for the well-being of people and nature. The School of Agroecology is a school without walls or hierarchy. The aim was to network, educate and empower individuals and grassroots organisations and initiatives involved in shaping food policies and working towards the transformation of the food system into one that is agroecological.

It enabled the exchange of knowledge and experience, the building of dialogue and a deepening of the methodology among agroecology schools. It strives to develop agroecology in Poland and reach new communities previously unrelated to this subject.

The main element of the school were 4-day meetings at the Ecological Folk High School (EFHS) in Grzybów, located on an organic farm. This place is the cradle of various agroecological movements in Poland and is surrounded by several agroecological farms. It offers accommodation and food, and is a good place to present the practical dimension of agroecology and encounter many interesting people and initiatives.

In the autumn of 2019, the EFHS hosted a 10-day training of agroecology leaders in the food sovereignty movement, which is a reference point for the Polish School of Agroecology.

So far, two editions of the Polish School of Agroecology have been held: in the autumns of 2023 and 2024. Both were organised by a team of several women from the Heinrich Böll Foundation in Warsaw and the Agro-Perma-Lab Foundation.



Polish School of Agroecology 2023

WHO IS IT FOR?

The Polish School of Agroecology was addressed to adults interested in changing the food system, in particular: rural and urban farmers, people working in agricultural consultancy, researchers, educators, people associated with local governments, journalists, activists, artists, and people working in non-governmental organisations.

The number of places offered is about 15-17 for one edition. We wanted an intimate group that would have the opportunity to get to know each other and establish relationships.



METHODS

The school included interactive elements, enabling participants to discover their motivations, values, practice team communication skills, learn from others and be inspired by nature.

The school assumed that at least 50% of the classes were practical or active – engaging participants in specific tasks, group work, presentations, dialogue, group exercises, energisers, and walks around the farm.

Trainers gave presentations and facilitated dialogue and reflection.

The presence of local experts who participated by sharing their knowledge was important. We visited other nearby farms for demonstration purposes. Participants were invited to actively share their knowledge, experience and reflections.

Diverse knowledge and ways of thinking are the foundations of the school – developing ways of thinking through dialogue (diálogo de saberes). Our learning processes were horizontal and based on the direct exchange of knowledge (peer-to-peer).

Teaching methods:

- presentations, lectures
- group exercises
- circle work
- dialogue
- energisers
- a “genius loci” walk around the farm
- pair work

The course was based on the developed good practices of other schools of agroecology and adapted to Polish conditions – the methodologies of agroecology schools vary depending on the region and the needs of local communities.

More about education in agroecology: [Toolkit for Agroecology Educators](#) [in Polish].



PROGRAMME

The principles of agroecology (11 pillars of agroecology from the Declaration of the International Forum for Agroecology, Nyéléni, 2015) were part of the programme and were introduced daily through different ways of learning: empirical, conceptual and reflective, as well as through interaction with the farm and through dialogue throughout the course.

The school's programme and topics were consulted with experts operating in Poland and internationally in the field of agroecology and education; these included Ecological Folk High School, Schola Campesina, the BILIM community and Nyeleni Polska.

The programme includes the following topics: agroecology, food sovereignty and the most important challenges related to current agricultural policy; short supply chains and food communities; the use of environmental and climate resources in agriculture; social issues related to agri-food policy, including the unequal distribution of resources and the loss of opportunities for agroecological farmers to cultivate the land; and ways of involvement in the shaping of food policies at local and European level.

An important element of each day were study visits to farms of various profiles –organic and conventional, livestock and horticultural. The farms differed in how long they had been operating on the market as well as in the ways they sold their products.

The programme was embedded in a local context, so that it referred to tradition and considered local resources and needs. Territories are a fundamental pillar of agroecology. Communities have the right to preserve their own relationships with the lands they inhabit.

Classes in deep ecology and the inclusion of crafts (wicker weaving) and culture (poetry readings, dancing to traditional live music) into our daily schedule were important elements of the programme.

We invited a dozen or so trainers to each edition. They also participated in team-building activities and meals, which facilitated the establishment of relationships and made asking additional questions possible.

An example of a good practice from the second edition of the school was the allocation of time for participants to share agroecological inspiration. People shared their knowledge and experience of interesting practices.

AN EXAMPLE TIMETABLE FROM A MEETING IN GRZYBÓW:

TIME	Day 3 22 September- Sunday
7.30 - 8.30	Breakfast
8.30 - 9.00	Plan for the day, summary of the previous day and reflective dialogue
9.00 - 12.00	“Biodiversity hotspots in the agricultural landscape – conservation and reconstruction” with Joanna Sucholas
12.00 - 12.30	Break
12.30 - 14.00	11 Pillars of Agroecology, with Wioletta Olejarczyk
14.00 - 14.30	Inspirations of School participants
14.30 - 15.30	Lunch
15.30 - 17.30	Feminism in agroecology, with Sylwia Urbańska
17.30 - 17.45	A walk to Monika and Grzegorz Ambroziak’s farm
17.45 - 19.15	Genius Loci - visit to Monika and Grzegorz Ambroziak’s farm
19.15 - 19.30	Walk back
19.30 - 21.00	Dinner
20.30 - 22.00	Dancing to traditional music, with Dominika Oczepa and Witold Zalewski





ENROLMENT

We opened enrolment to the school a few months before the on-site meetings.

It was announced on the websites of our organisations and through SM. Information was sent to persons, collectives and institutions that we thought might be interested in the subject.

We also asked the initiatives we work with for support in publicising the process.

In the enrolment form, we asked about motivation and experience in social activities, ideas for how new knowledge and experience would be used by potential participants, as well as their expectations.

In both editions, there were several times as many applications as available places.

Some of the applications were from people who understood agroecology as a technique for growing food, and who were expecting a gardening course – this isn't something the school provides.

Among the applicants there were also a well-networked individuals with advanced agroecological knowledge and experience – and the course was addressed more to people at a different stage of involvement.

We came to the conclusion that the recruitment announcement needed to be reformulated – the school's programme needed to be described, the term 'agroecology' defined, and the expected audience specified.

After closing the window for applications and reading them all, we started the process of creating a group. In our choice, we were guided by wanting to maintain a balance between the number of people from villages and cities, and well as a diversity of professions. We wanted to gather people of all ages, from all over Poland, with the most diverse experience and knowledge. After choosing the group, we held telephone conversations with all the selected participants to let us get to know each other better and discuss the questions deemed most important.

A back-up list was also created in case of unforeseen events. Several people agreed to be put on that list. This was very useful.

Before the on-site meetings, we shared a document to enable participants to organise their journey.

We kept in touch with all participants by e-mail and phone.

After the gatherings, the participants initiated new channels on various messaging applications.

FIRST EDITION

The 2023 edition began with the participation of a 3-person team of project coordinators from the I BILIM Forum in Turkey.

The BILIM Forum is convention for the development and networking of agroecology in Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

The BILIM Community is a coalition uniting grassroots movements and organisations from Eastern Europe and Central Asia that work for the advancement of agroecology. These include farmers, people running small agricultural farms, indigenous peoples, NGOs, scientists, women and young people.

The community was named after the Turkish word bilim, which means “science”, or “wisdom”.

During the July trip, we established many relationships and encountered an enormous number of inspiring solutions for cooperation between a municipality and institutions for the development of agroecology.

You can find more interesting information here:

[Report BILIM Forum](#)

The 4-day meeting in Grzybów took place in the autumn.

SECOND EDITION

The 2024 edition consisted of a 4-day meeting in Grzybów and a 2-day networking session in Warsaw, which was attended by participants from both editions. We invited trainers from the Italian Schola Campesina (International School of Agroecology in Italy) and the European Coordination Via Campesina (ECVC) to bring us closer to the global agroecological context.

On the day of their classes, we invited interpreters to ensure good communication between participants.

FOOD

We sent out questionnaires about diet restrictions before the on-site meetings began.

The most popular diet at the meetings was a vegetarian diet, based on organic, local and seasonal products as much as possible.

In Grzybów, meals were prepared for us by women from the Social Cooperative “Cor et manus. Jak u Eli”, and – in Warsaw – by social cooperatives run by people with experience of migration.



ONLINE MEETINGS

The on-site meetings in Grzybów were preceded by online meetings. Their role was to let participants to get to know each other, to discuss the programme, explain basic concepts and respond to any questions or suggestions.

As well as this, each meeting was followed by a webinar. In 2023, the topic was chosen by the participants and concerned community creation, using the example of Ptasia Dolina. In 2024, the webinar focused on feminism in agroecology.

LIBRARY

Online materials for self-study and materials from trainers were made available to participants.

Everyone was able to add interesting materials and photos.

BUDGET

We had about 70-90 thousand zlotys for the implementation of a single edition.

DESCRIPTION OF THE GROUPS:

15-17 people from all over Poland aged between 25 and 55, mostly women. These people were involved in many fields, including rural and urban agriculture, beekeeping, winemaking, climate education, scientific work, journalism, activism.

The main motivation for participating was the desire of the participants to deepen their knowledge and meet new people with similar values.

EVALUATION

Everyone participating in the meetings of the Polish School of Agroecology completed a written evaluation.

We included the following questions:

- Has your knowledge of agroecology increased?
- Has the course changed your thinking about the subject matter? How?
- What parts of the course were most valuable to you? Why?
- What did you think was missing from the course? What would you add?
- What will not be useful to you? Why?
- How do you evaluate the work of the people conducting the classes?
- How do you rate the organisation of the course, meeting places and food?
- How will you use the knowledge, experience, and new contacts you have gained?

The vast majority described an increase in the level of their knowledge, or in how this knowledge was now organised after the course.



This is best reflected in the words of the participants themselves:

„Oh yes, massively! In no way could reading about agroecology give me what I gained from meeting people who practice and educate about it – everyone invited to join in the dialogue and share their knowledge and experience, both leaders and participants. We all learned from each other. We were also taught by the places, plants and beings we visited, the land and landscape of EFHS and its surrounding areas, the deepest quality of knowledge through being together”.

„The course changed my thinking on many levels: knowledge, experience, practice, contacts. Through the classes in Grzybów and meeting local farmers I was able to better understand their situation and certain systemic conditions. All the instructors presented a very high level of expertise, and the selection of topics was well thought-through – this helped the participants move through the subject matter in an easy-to-understand way”.

„The course was so rich and abundant, beyond all my imagination, that it is difficult for me to imagine that anything else could be added. It is extraordinary that we managed to do so much in such a short time and without feeling rushed and overloaded”.

„Everything will be useful – this course is part of my inner transformation and grounding in what is important to me, but also inspiration for work”.

„I rate the people conducting the classes very highly, they were professional, had practical knowledge, they were committed and very attentive to the needs of the group”.

„Best organisation ever! The way the entire course was run, from the recruitment stage all the way through to the last meeting was perfect. Even the way participants were selected to help provide a full spectrum of experiences was brilliant. The meeting place was beautiful and interesting. The food was excellent”.

For the participants, the most important aspects were visits to farms, learning from each other and from practitioners, as well as the right balance between different types of classes – a good combination of theory and practice.

Many people became more established in what they are doing or what they are planning to do. Some of them encountered some topics for the first time. The work of the trainers was very well evaluated, with emphasis on expertise, approach, openness and creating a good atmosphere.

We ran out of time and weren't able to go deeper into some topics, to get to know each other better, and to define our common goals.



Polish School of Agroecology 2023

A participant of the 2023 edition shared these encouraging thoughts during the 2024 recruitment.

„My dears, if you need wind in your sails, the girls will tenderly provide it. Every initiative that’s guided by a support for the Earth will find a comfortable place there and the girls will inspire, bring awe, and energise your ideas. And then there’s networking with amazing people... and the delicious food made by everyone in the Grzybów kitchen... we even got to go to a traditional dance party with mazurkas. There will be many more oohs and aahs. In a nutshell, I highly recommend it”.

People participating in both editions now form a living network of relationships and cooperation. As they describe themselves, they are now an agroecological family, a mycelium.

Many people were alone in their daily agroecological activities. Thanks to these meetings and relationships, they know that they are not alone any longer.

One of the participants read us this excerpt that well describes our work at the Polish School of Agroecology:

“The difficulty lies not in reaching for what seems impossible, but in defining this thing. (...) I am a supporter of the unthinkable, because the unthinkable has come to fruition many times before. We just need to understand what unthinkable thing our goal is, and go with it the best we can. The new paradigm is the unthinkable”.

“Ñamérica”, Martin Caparros

We see a great need for these types of meetings and training events.

We share our experience with the hope that other initiatives will also undertake the organisation of this type of community.

We wish you all the agroecological best!

The Heinrich Böll Foundation in Warsaw and the Agro-Perma-Lab Foundation team



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