




# Agroecology in Southern Africa: Financing the transition

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# Executive summary

African countries are increasingly adopting agroecology in national agricultural frameworks as a holistic approach to transforming their agricultural and food systems to improve food security, wealth creation, poverty reduction and to more effectively meet their continental and global commitments. Agroecology offers an integrated approach to key priorities at national and regional levels, including climate change adaptation and resilience, stemming biodiversity loss, improving food and nutrition security, and raising gender equality.

Increasing investment in agriculture to 10% of national budgets is a priority in key continental agricultural agreements. These agreements include the African Union (AU)'s Malabo Declaration and the Comprehensive African Agricultural Development Programme (CAADP), as well as the Regional Agricultural Investment Plan (RAIP) of the Southern African Development Community (SADC), all of which are up for review in 2024. The proportion of agricultural investment directed towards supporting agroecology, however, has remained unclear. It is estimated, for example, that less than half of the total funding from contributions by Member States for RAIP programmes under the Food, Agriculture and Natural Resources (FANR) Directorate of the SADC Secretariat, contribute to agroecology. With many countries in Southern Africa still reeling from El Niño-related drought-induced disasters, the need to prioritise investment in agroecology at national, regional, and continental levels to adapt to climate change has taken on new prominence as a critical approach to ensuring long-term agricultural development, food security, and poverty reduction.

This briefing assesses the extent to which national agricultural policies, and budgeted programmes and projects in four SADC countries—Malawi, Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe—support agroecology, using the Agroecology Financing Analysis Tool (AFAT). The AFAT was developed and piloted by the Partnership for Social Accountability (PSA) Alliance and is based on 13 agroecology principles as defined by the High-Level Panel of Experts on Food and Nutrition Security (HLPE) of the Committee on World Food Security (CFS), under the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO).

The findings indicate that while existing national policies across sectors are somewhat synchronised with the elements of agroecology, they are situated within an overall framing that still primarily promotes export orientation, commercialisation (especially irrigation infrastructure and farm blocks), and the provision of conventional farm inputs as a core support strategy. Additionally, programme content and budgets in the fiscal year 2023-2024 show uneven correlation with agroecology. Generally, less than 50% of agricultural budgets in the four countries are supportive of agroecological practices. This support tends to promote participation, co-creation of knowledge, and economic diversification (referring to extension of economic activity beyond primary agricultural production, to include ecological input production and distribution, ecotourism and other related economic activities). It is weakest in reducing farmers' reliance on external inputs, promoting recycling, and improving animal health.

**Malawi** allocated 12% of the national budget to agriculture in 2023/24. The majority of this was allocated through the Affordable Input Programme (AIP) and the Shire Valley Transformation Project (irrigation and block farms). Despite the high investment in synthetic fertiliser in particular, yields have not been sustained. The estimated budget share compatible with agroecology was 44%.

**Tanzania** allocated 9% of the national budget to agriculture in 2023/24. There was significant underspending, with unfunded mandates.<sup>1</sup> The largest allocation (76%) was to irrigation. The estimated budget share compatible with agroecology was 27%.

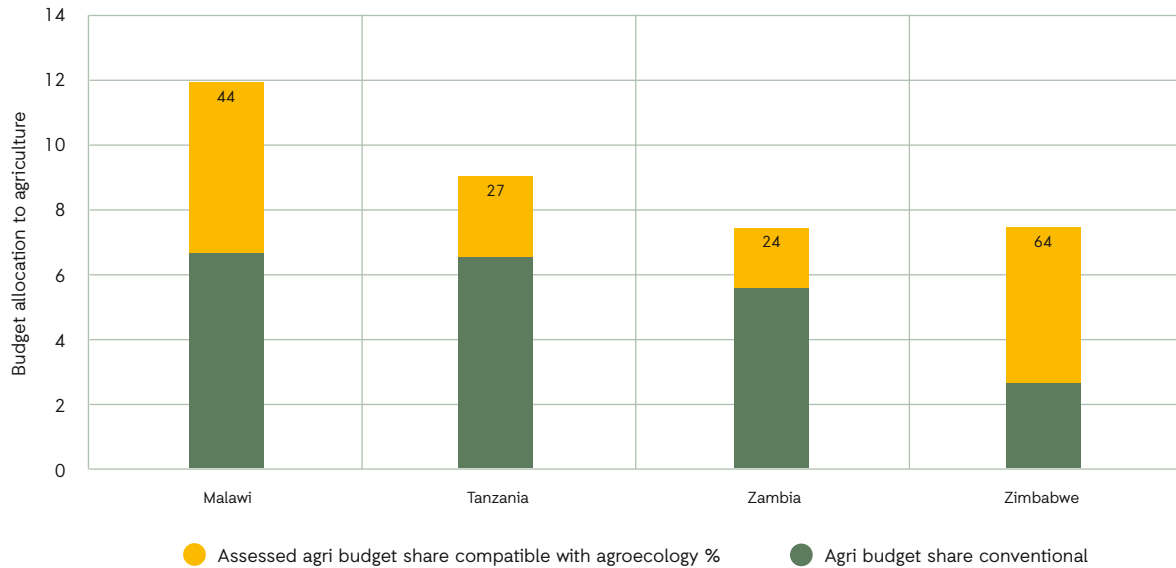
**Zambia** allocated 7.4% of the national budget to agriculture in 2023/24, with instances of significant under- and over-spending in the past few years. Fully 80% of the agriculture budget was allocated to the input supply programme. The programme adopts a conservation agriculture framing, but still provides mainly synthetic fertilisers and commercial seeds. The estimated budget share compatible with agroecology was 24%.

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1. Unfunded mandates are national government regulations issued on provincial and local levels without financial assistance.

**Zimbabwe** allocated 7.4% of the national budget to agriculture in 2023/24. Input supply programmes (including the Pfumvudza and Command Agriculture programmes) were allocated up to an estimated 50% of the agriculture budget. The estimated budget share compatible with agroecology was 64%, signifying Zimbabwe’s moves towards embracing agroecology.

Budget allocations to agriculture 2023/24, and assessed share compatible with agroecology



In all four countries, there is a gap between policy support for elements of agroecology and budgetary support for these elements. Policy “hierarchies” exist in all countries, with environmental concerns tending to be downplayed and dominant financial and economic issues taking precedence. Selected elements of policies are implemented, while others are ignored.

Input subsidy programmes dominate agricultural budgets, with provision of synthetic fertiliser and hybrid maize remaining dominant. These harmful subsidies reduce allocations to public goods such as investment in research and development (R&D), education and training, and extension services.



Smallholder women farmers at their agroecology project in Zambia.  
PHOTO: ACTIONAID

# Recommendations

## National governments

- Prioritise food sovereignty and agroecology over “business as usual” in policy and financial investments.
- Develop national agroecology strategies to integrate actions across numerous sectors.
- Balance budget allocations between seasonal input support and public goods such as R&D, extension services, and bulk infrastructure.
- Ensure greater transparency in budgeting and expenditure reviews to enable civil society and parliamentarians to conduct deeper analysis and prioritisation.
- Differentiate support to smallholder farmers according to context-specific need, rather than a “one size fits all” model.
- Diversify input subsidy programmes to enable and support the production and distribution of farmer-led ecological inputs, in line with national, regional, and global commitments.
- Tap into related funding sources including global biodiversity and climate funds and contribute toward the establishment of the SADC Agricultural Development Fund to support agroecological food systems transitions.

## SADC

- Develop regional agroecology support programmes, including research, guidelines, learning exchanges, and cross-country projects.
- Integrate fuller support for agroecology into the CAADP Post-Malabo agenda and the SADC RAIP 2025-2030.
- Operationalise and fund the SADC Agricultural Development Fund, including through accessing regional and international funding sources, such as global biodiversity and climate funds, to support agroecological food systems transitions.

Farmers conducting a scorecard exercise in Mchinji, Malawi.  
PHOTO: ACTIONAID



# Introduction

African countries are increasingly adopting agroecology in national agricultural frameworks as a holistic approach to transforming their agricultural and food systems to improve food security, wealth creation, poverty reduction and to more effectively meet the commitments of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the African Union's Agenda 2063.

The High-Level Panel of Experts on Food and Nutrition Security (HLPE) of the Committee on World Food Security (CFS), under the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), defines agroecology as an approach "that favours the use of natural processes, limits the use of external inputs, promotes closed cycles with minimal negative externalities and stresses the importance of local knowledge and participatory processes that develop knowledge and practice through experience, as well as scientific methods, and the need to address social inequalities". The principles (Figure 1) embrace a systems perspective that considers the food system as a whole, as well as the ecosystems within which agricultural production is embedded.

**Figure 1:** HLPE 13 agroecology principles



Source: <https://www.adaptationcommunity.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/topic-agroecology-en.jpg>

Currently 17 African countries including Democratic Republic of Congo, Madagascar, Malawi, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe from the Southern African Development Community (SADC), plus the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union have joined the Agroecology Coalition, which emerged from the 2021 UN Food Systems Summit to promote agroecology as a response to food system sustainability priorities. The Agroecology Coalition has adopted the HLPE principles as a guiding framework.

Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe are among countries in SADC that either have already developed, or are working to develop, national organic or agroecology strategies or policies. Effective introduction of agroecology, however, requires substantive investment (both in mindset changes and financial terms) and redirecting investment to promote agroecological approaches throughout the whole food system.

International research<sup>2</sup> has found that agroecological approaches remain marginalised in existing funding streams. FAO and others<sup>3</sup> have acknowledged that current agricultural support “is biased towards measures that are harmful and unsustainable for nature, climate, nutrition and health, while disadvantaging women and other smallholder farmers in the sector.” But budgetary commitments and allocations of human and natural capital are insufficient to effectively implement agroecological practices on a broad scale. The Malabo Declaration commits AU member states to invest 10% of their national budgets into agriculture. However, no SADC country has reached this target consistently.<sup>4</sup> It is unclear, however, what percentage of agricultural budgets is allocated to agroecology.

The ongoing reviews of the African Union’s Comprehensive African Agricultural Development Programme (CAADP) and the related SADC Regional Agricultural Investment Plan (RAIP) present an opportune time to further advance investment in agroecology through future programming.



2. CIDSE / CAWR 2021. “Making money move for agroecology: Transforming development aid to support agroecology”, <https://www.cidse.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/EN-Making-money-move-for-agroecology.pdf>
3. FAO, UNDP and UNEP. 2021. “A multi-billion-dollar opportunity – Repurposing agricultural support to transform food systems”, <https://doi.org/10.4060/cb6562en>
4. African Union. 2023. “4th CAADP biennial review report, 2015-2023”, [https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/43556-doc-EN\\_4th\\_CAADP\\_Biennial\\_Review\\_Report\\_COMPLETE.pdf](https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/43556-doc-EN_4th_CAADP_Biennial_Review_Report_COMPLETE.pdf)

## Methodology

The methodology for the research that informs this briefing builds on earlier annual budget analyses conducted by the Partnership for Social Accountability (PSA) Alliance. In 2022, the PSA Alliance developed and piloted the Agroecology Financing Analysis Tool (AFAT)<sup>5</sup> for Africa to assist its members in assessing public financing for agriculture, with a focus on identifying current levels of support, investment and commitment to agroecological transitions and climate resilient and gender-responsive agricultural practices which benefit smallholder farmers. Following the lead of a global community of practice<sup>6</sup> on developing indicators for the agroecology principles, AFAT uses the HLPE principles as its framing, with an open-ended list of indicators and examples of good practices that can be adapted to context.

To assess agroecological support, annual budget analyses for 2023/24 were complemented by a policy<sup>7</sup> analyses on alignment with agroecology principles in Malawi, Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. This was followed by an assessment of specific budgets, programmes, and plans to estimate allocations to agroecology. A budget allocation was then estimated based on the content of programmes and plans. These are only estimates because of limited detailed information on expenditure. Information in this briefing is drawn primarily from PSA Alliance country studies unless otherwise indicated.<sup>8</sup>

## Agriculture in the economy

Agriculture continues to play a significant role in the economies of Malawi, Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe, contributing an important share of gross domestic product (GDP), formal employment, and as a base for livelihoods for most of the population in the four countries. Table 1 provides a snapshot of the role of agriculture in the national economies.

**Table 1:** Agricultural statistics in the four countries

	Share of GDP %	Employment share %		% of population relying on agriculture for their livelihoods
		1991	2022	2022 (€m)
Malawi	18-37	75	62	80
Tanzania	23-29	85	66	80
Zambia	3-19	73	57	70
Zimbabwe	7-21	65	53	67

Source: World Bank, PSA Alliance country reports

- PSA Alliance 2023. "Agroecology Financing Analysis Tool", <https://psa.copsam.com/2022/11/25/new-analysis-tool-shows-low-support-for-agroecology-in-international-and-national-agricultural-funding-in-africa/>.
- Led by Coopération Internationale pour le Développement et la Solidarité (CIDSE)- and the Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience (CAWR) at Coventry University.
- "Policies" is used as shorthand for various official texts that set out government strategic orientation, planning and implementation, including laws, policies, strategies, programmes, and plans.
- ActionAid Malawi 2023. "A 2023/24 national budget analysis with focus on the agriculture sector", Action Aid, Lilongwe; ActionAid Zambia 2024. "2023/24 agriculture sector budget analysis", ActionAid, Lusaka; ActionAid Zimbabwe 2024. "2024 national budget analysis of the agricultural sector", ActionAid Zimbabwe, Harare; PSA/ESAFF 2024. "Analysis of public financing for agroecology in Tanzania", ESAFF/AAI, Morogoro.

Agriculture's share of GDP<sup>9</sup> tends to fluctuate from year to year, depending on multiple factors (e.g. climatic conditions, commodity prices, global instability). However, in the past two decades, it has shown a declining trend in each of the four countries, despite continued reliance on agriculture by the majority of the population. A decline in agriculture's share of formal employment accompanied this.

This indicates a number of issues: displacement of agriculture by other economic sectors (especially government services), economic crises and contraction, and the continuation of "informal" farming activities mainly for homestead and local food supply, which is not always included in GDP calculations.

Per capita GDP has grown in all four countries over the past two decades.<sup>10</sup> After 2011, however, growth rates declined towards zero, with contraction at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, especially in Zimbabwe and Zambia. Persistently high inflation has also undercut some of the gains.

Inflation shocks experienced in the early 1990s were generally brought under control through structural adjustment programmes, but at the cost of higher debt and reducing available funds for public goods and services, including support to strengthen climate resilience.<sup>11</sup> In the decade from 2013 to 2022, the four countries confronted a continued rise in their external debt. Zambia faces the biggest challenge here, with external debt expanding more than three times in the past decade, leading to a default in 2020. A comparison of net equity inflows (primarily foreign direct investment) to debt repayments shows Tanzania and Zambia had outflows greater than inflows. In Zambia, inflows were only 36% of the value of outflows in 2022. Nearly a quarter of Malawi's annual budget goes to public debt repayments, in the context of a negative and growing trade imbalance and strong import dependence.

The populations of these countries are also absorbing some of the costs of adjustment. Of the four, Tanzania is the only clear case of poverty declining over the past two decades.<sup>12</sup> In Zimbabwe, the percentage of people living in poverty almost doubled from 2010 to 2019, although the percentage of the population living in poverty is still the lowest of these four countries.

Women in the agricultural sector are particularly vulnerable. While constituting 59% (Zimbabwe), 62% (Zambia), and 67% (Malawi, Tanzania) of the agricultural workforce,<sup>13</sup> women (alone or jointly) own less than 2.5% of the land in these four countries.<sup>14</sup>

The majority who rely on agriculture for their livelihoods depend on rain-fed smallholder production. Climate change impacts pose a serious threat to smallholder production across the region with the rise of extreme weather events such as droughts, floods, cyclones and tropical storms. These disruptive events are set to intensify in the coming years.

Low agricultural productivity and persistence of high levels of extreme poverty characterise these four countries. They have been impacted by persistent external shocks and stresses, such as rising global commodity prices for agricultural inputs and outputs, and supply chain delays, especially since the Covid-19 pandemic and the Ukraine-Russia war. Their reliance on imports of commercial fertiliser and seed has strained their fiscs, especially when fertiliser and seed subsidies constitute a notable share of budget, and particularly during the rapid rise in fertiliser prices over the past five years.

## Relevance of agroecology to country and regional priorities

There is general recognition in the region of the ecological damage caused by industrial and conventional agriculture, and of the negative impacts of climate change and biodiversity loss. Country policies and plans aim to respond to these challenges while also strengthening economic growth and participation to improve food security and reduce poverty. Agroecology offers an integrative approach to all of these issues.

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9. World Bank 2024. "Agriculture, forestry and fishing, value added (% of GDP)", <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator>

10. World Bank 2024. "GDP growth (annual %)", <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?locations=MW-TZ-ZM-ZW>

11. ActionAid International 2023. "The vicious cycle: Connections between the debt crisis and climate crisis", [https://actionaid.org/sites/default/files/publications/The\\_vicious\\_cycle.pdf](https://actionaid.org/sites/default/files/publications/The_vicious_cycle.pdf)

12. World Bank 2024. "Poverty headcount ratio at \$2.15 a day (2017 PPP) (% of population)", <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.POV.DDAY?locations=MW-TZ-ZM-ZW>

13. World Bank Data Bank, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.AGR.EMPL.FE.ZS?locations=TZ-MW-ZM-ZW>

14. World Bank Gender Data Portal, <https://genderdata.worldbank.org/en/indicator/sg-own-ld?ownership=Own+both+alone+and+jointly>



Resilience of agricultural production in the face of **climate** shocks is a key policy feature in all four countries. Agroecology offers a strong approach to resilience across all the 13 HLPE principles, incorporating soil and water conservation techniques, adapted and diverse animal and plant varieties, participatory approaches, and integration of indigenous knowledge. Anecdotal evidence from Malawi and Zimbabwe, that agroecology fields fared much better in 2024 (during the El Niño-related drought) than those using conventional agriculture, reinforces other reports on the benefits of agroecology for climate adaptation.<sup>15</sup> On mitigation, agroecology reduces fossil fuel carbon dioxide and soil carbon degradation by avoiding the production and application of synthetic nitrogen fertilisers. Soils are converted from carbon sources to sinks. Trees and multiple crop layers in agroforestry act as additional carbon sinks.<sup>16</sup>

**Biodiversity** is another policy area where agroecology offers a potentially effective integrative response. Countries in the region have signed on to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)'s Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF)<sup>17</sup> and are required to integrate the targets into National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (NBSAPs). Many of the GBF's targets are related to agroecology, including an explicit target on agroecology, a strong emphasis on ecosystem-based approaches, a rights-based orientation, and targets on genetic diversity, reducing pesticide and synthetic fertiliser use, climate resilience, fair and equitable benefit sharing from genetic resources, reducing food waste, reducing or eliminating harmful subsidies, and scaling up positive incentives for conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity, gender equality, and active participation.

**Food and nutrition insecurity** is regarded as serious in all the four countries according to the Global Hunger Index.<sup>18</sup> Undernourishment in 2023 ranged from 17.8% of the population in Malawi to 38.4% in Zimbabwe, and child stunting ranged from 23.5% in Zimbabwe to 35.2% in Malawi. Loss of dietary diversity resulting from an emphasis on a few commodity crops leads to health risks such as diabetes, obesity and malnutrition. The food security challenge is well recognised by national governments in policies and plans and is one of the top priorities for food and agricultural policy. Agroecology offers a response, including through emphasising food production to meet local needs first. This can assist with reducing food imports and food aid and can also lead to reduced food prices. Agroecology also promotes the production of healthy food through increasing dietary diversity, balancing diets, and eliminating toxic chemical residues in food.

**Gender equality** is another stated policy priority for all the countries. Women are primary food producers across the region, making a huge contribution to food security across millions of households; however, gender roles often restrict women's participation. Generally, women's tasks include food provisioning and non-commercial food production, with men having control over commercial production and greater decision-making power. Women's labour is undervalued, through unpaid and unacknowledged family work including reproductive labour. Women have fewer rights to ownership and access to land, property and other resources. Commercial agriculture requires high investments in external inputs, biasing towards men farmers. Pesticides pose a threat to women's reproductive health, and corporate control over seed displaces women's knowledge on seed. In contrast, agroecology promotes women's agency and rights. With its explicit dedication to gender equality, health, and welfare, agroecology promotes women's participation in economic activity and ownership of enterprises and secure land access, while recognising women's embedded knowledge on production and natural resources.

## Current levels of policy commitment to agroecology

Policy assessments in Malawi, Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe were based on key policy documents including long-term vision documents and development plans, and policies and plans across agriculture, livestock, fisheries, climate, land, water, environment, and natural resource management.

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15. See, for example, Monjane, B. 2018. "Zimbabwe: Farmers practice agroecology to overcome the adversities of climate change", [https://viacampesina.org/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2018/05/report\\_zimbabwe\\_english\\_print.pdf](https://viacampesina.org/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2018/05/report_zimbabwe_english_print.pdf); Snapp, S., Kebede, Y., Wollenberg, E., Dittmer, K.M., Brickman, S., Egler, C. and Shelton, S. 2021. "Agroecology and climate change rapid evidence review: Performance of agroecological approaches in low- and middle- income countries", CGIAR Research Program on Climate Change, Agriculture and Food Security (CCAFS), Wageningen, <https://cgspace.cgiar.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/fa6033ce-1b75-4efd-a090-060ffcfa795e/content>

16. ActionAid 2023. "How the Finance Flows: The banks fuelling the climate crisis", <https://actionaid.org/publications/2023/how-finance-flows-banks-fuelling-climate-crisis>

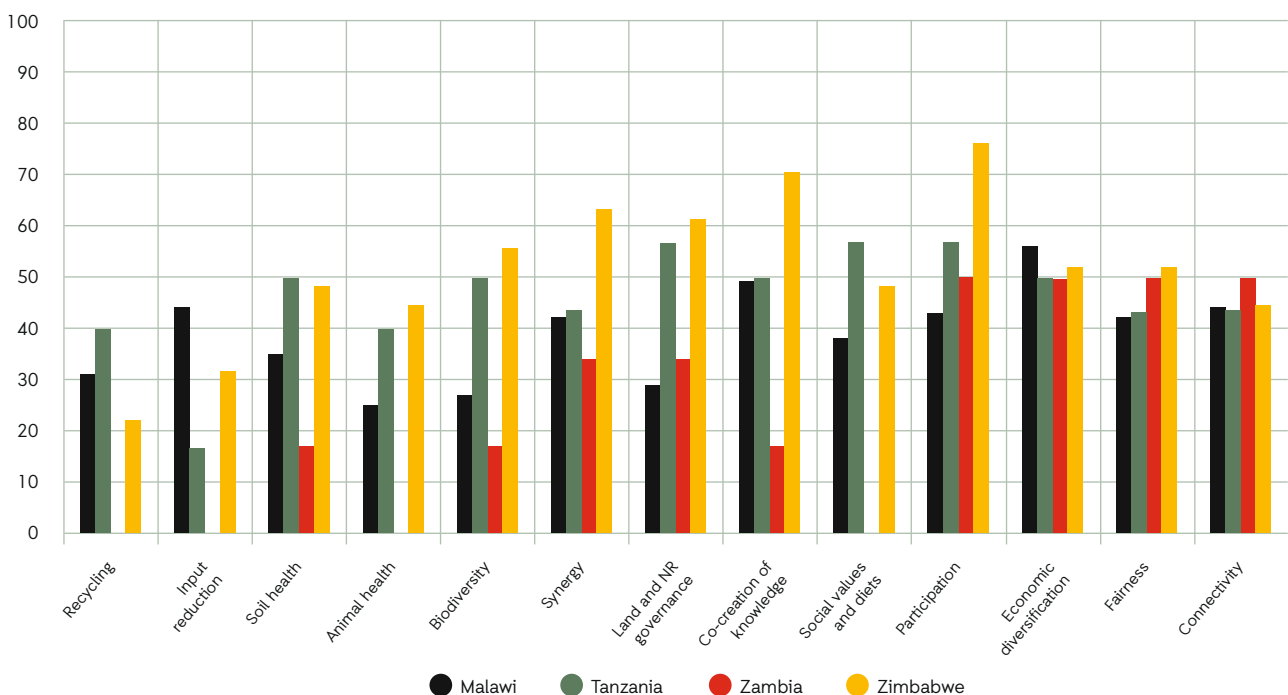
17. <https://www.cbd.int/gbf>

18. <https://www.globalhungerindex.org/>

While there have been recent multi-actor discussions to develop agroecology strategies in Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe, all the countries of focus (including Malawi) have a contradictory mix of policies. Mostly these promote a generic form of “sustainable agriculture” which incorporates some elements of agroecology, especially aspects of environmentally friendly practices and promotion of participation and recognition of local knowledge. Policies acknowledge, however, biodiversity loss, climate change impacts, and the need to build resilience. For agriculture this is mostly framed in terms of climate smart or conservation agriculture. The base practices of these approaches (minimum or no till, permanent ground cover, crop rotation/ intercropping) align with agroecology, but are insufficient on their own. They exclude other dimensions of ecological production (e.g. recycling, animal health, land and natural resource governance, biodiversity, reduction of external inputs) and are neutral regarding principles of social and economic justice and democratisation. In SADC, the guiding regional frameworks for the agriculture sector, the Regional Agricultural Policy (RAP) and Regional Agricultural Investment Plan (RAIP) also show elements of agroecology. However, these frameworks remain largely unfunded; while international donors have invested in certain aspects, they have tended to bypass the agroecological elements.<sup>19</sup>

Although aspects of the policy suites do align with agroecology (see Figure 2), policies are formulated in such a way that they are simultaneously compatible with commercialisation, privatisation and export orientation, with a current emphasis on irrigation for commercial production, a commodity focus with value chain development for prioritised crops including for export, and farm blocks which open the way for larger production units and contract farming models (e.g. the Mega Farms programme in Malawi, the Build Better Tomorrow programme in Tanzania, and the Comprehensive Agriculture Transformation Support Programme in Zambia). The policies and plans generally support intensified use of conventional inputs (synthetic fertiliser, hybrid seeds, toxic agrochemicals), and input supply programmes dominate the agricultural budgets in some of the countries. These programmes mainly offer subsidised or free conventional inputs, with some diversification on the edges in some countries, and some commitment also to sustaining strategic grain reserves through public sector purchases. The country level analyses noted a lack of legislation to operationalise policies, and weak implementation of key aspects.

**Figure 2:** Assessment of alignment between selected programmes and the HLPE principles in Malawi, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe



19. Muchero, M. 2022. “Financing for agroecology at the SADC regional level”, Action Aid International, Johannesburg.

## Agroecology assessment of key programmes and budget allocations

### Malawi

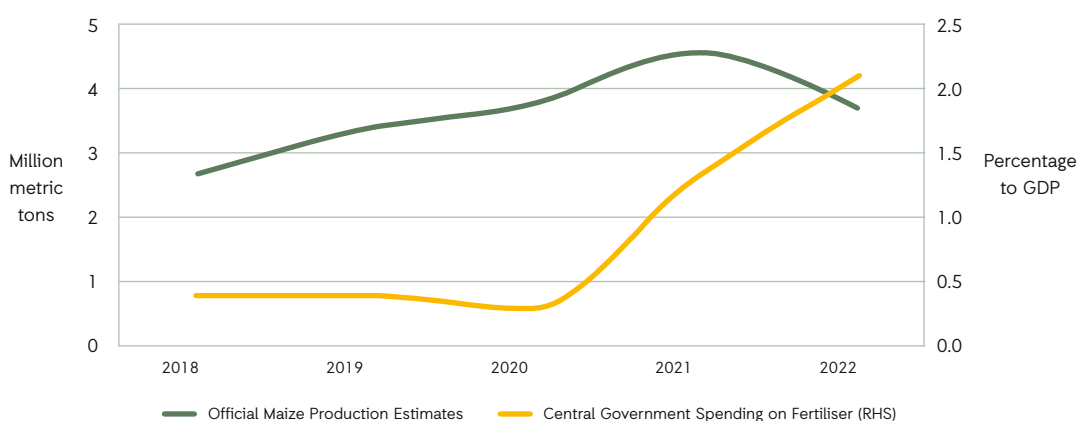
Overall, Malawi has notable deviations from planned budgets from year to year, with budget overruns in the agriculture sector including in the Affordable Input Programme (AIP), fertiliser payments, and logistics and maize purchases. The Ministry has not reached projected revenues, resulting in persistently high budget deficits. For example, only 53.4% of the National Agricultural Investment Plan (NAIP) estimated expenditure requirements were included in the 2023/24 agriculture budget. This resulted in entire intervention areas being excluded or with very low allocations (disaster risk reduction, innovation systems, pest and disease management, overall coordination and M&E). On the other hand, there is also reported underspending in other branches, mainly in the development budget and in foreign-financed projects, where timely disbursements are also a concern.

In 2023/24, agriculture was allocated 12% of the total budget, and was above the Malabo Declaration target of 10% over the past five years at least. Sixty percent of financing of the agriculture budget comes from external loans, with 29% in the form of grants from development partners. The biggest allocations were to irrigation development (43%) and production inputs (32%). Two-thirds of the development budget was allocated to the Shire Valley Transformation Project<sup>20</sup> in Chikwawa and Nsanje Districts. The project emphasises irrigation estates, with smallholder commercial value chain integration and one-third of land allocated to large-scale commercial farming.

The AIP occupies a large share of the agricultural budget. Six percent of the total national budget is allocated to the AIP and additional fertiliser purchases and maize seed subsidies. In 2023/24, 94% of the AIP allocation went to fertilisers, with most of the remainder to maize seed. The programme essentially supports conventional agricultural practices.

This strategy has produced poor returns on investment (continuing low yields) despite the investment in fertiliser purchases (Figure 3). The applied fertiliser was ineffective, especially in flood-hit areas, and there are procurement, payment, and implementation challenges with the AIP.

**Figure 3:** Fertiliser spending and maize yields in Malawi, 2017-22

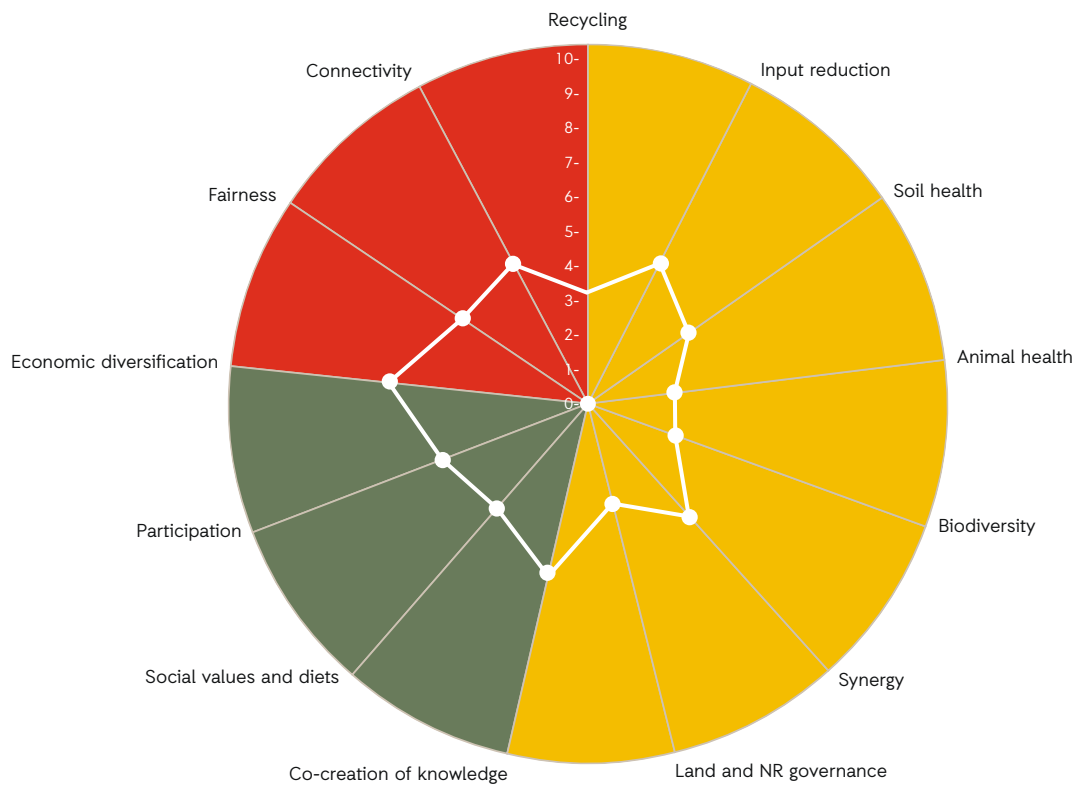


Source: AAI Malawi report, 2023

Excessive allocations to inputs and irrigation have resulted in low investments in research and development (R&D), extension, other crops beyond maize, and in aquaculture/fisheries and livestock. There is a limited focus on gender, especially in the budgets. An assessment based on budgets from Mchinji and Nsanje Districts shows very limited allocations and expenditure on agriculture at local government level.

20. Shire Valley Transformation Programme (SVTP). <https://svtp.gov.mw/>

**Figure 4:** Assessment of support for agroecology principles in Malawi's 2023/24 budget



A farmer surveys his field in Mutoko, Zimbabwe.  
PHOTO: ACTIONAID

**Tanzania**

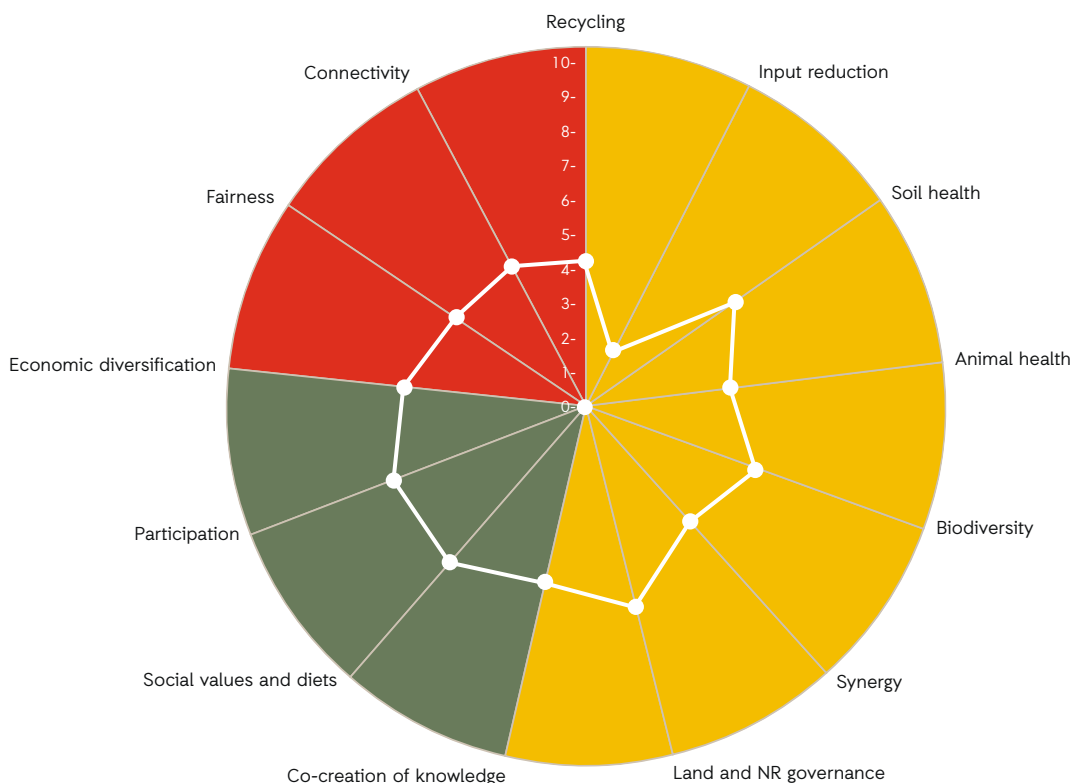
In Tanzania, agriculture was allocated a 9% share of the national budget in 2023/24. Delayed disbursements led to significant under-expenditure, at between 22% and 63% in the past five years. This results in unfunded mandates and staff shortages (including critical extension services). By far the largest allocation in the agriculture budget was to irrigation (76% of the assessed budgets) (see Figure 5).

An assessment of 14 programmes under agriculture, forestry, fisheries, livestock, and natural resources indicated that, like the other countries, budgeted programmes are generally less aligned with agroecology principles than national policies. The assessment is that just 27% of the budgets for the reviewed programmes was going to agroecology compatible interventions. Alignment is low on all principles except participation, with co-creation of knowledge as the only other principle scoring above 30% (Figure 5).

An assessment of ten overseas development assistance (ODA) programmes/projects revealed a similar value to the reviewed departmental programmes, indicating an estimated 26% of the budget supporting agroecological principles. ODA programmes tend to promote productivity and growth through conventional practices. Biodiversity and synergy are the strongest principles, and animal health is the weakest. Generally, ODA projects are slightly stronger on environmental principles than on social and economic justice issues.

There appears to be stronger alignment at local government level in Tanzania, based on analysis of budgets for Kilosa, Singida, Mvomero, and Songwe Districts. In Tanzania, local authorities generally spend 10-15% of the national budget. An estimated 45% of the total district agriculture budgets were allocated to agroecology compatible interventions. Co-creation of knowledge, soil health, and social values and diets were the strongest principles, and fairness was the weakest. However, despite the better assessment for local government, there are still low total allocations and underfunded mandates for agriculture.

**Figure 5:** Assessment of support for agroecology principles in Tanzania’s 2023/24 budget



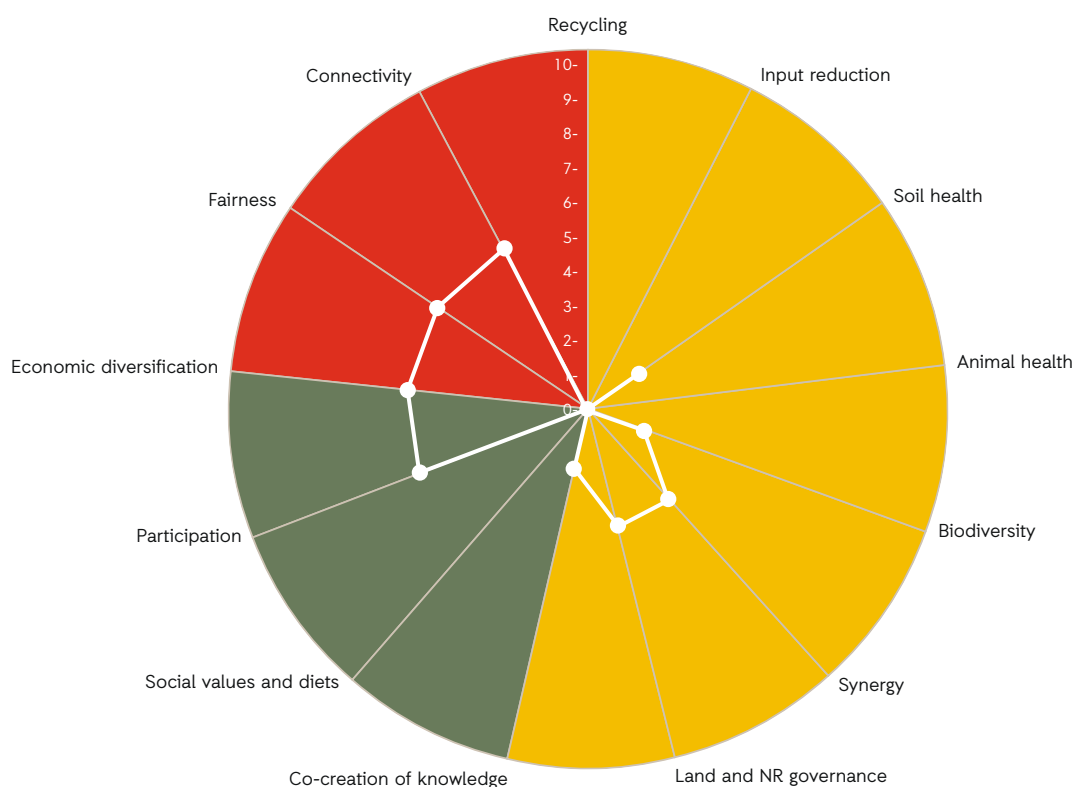
## Zambia

In Zambia, 7.4% of the national budget was allocated to agriculture in 2023. This share has grown as a proportion in the past few years but remains below the Malabo Declaration target of 10%. Fully 80% of the agriculture budget is allocated to the input supply programme. The programme adopts a conservation agriculture framing, but still provides mainly synthetic fertilisers and commercial seeds. More recently there was a small shift in budgetary allocations towards farm blocks and irrigation schemes (bulk infrastructure) as in other countries in the region. There was some increase in expenditure to extension services in the latest budget, although this is still a comparatively small share. Both under- and over-expenditure were reported in the past few years. This could indicate challenges with accurate budgeting. There is a lack of transparency in budget and expenditure reporting.

An estimated 24.5% of the agricultural budget supported agroecology compatible interventions (but only considering the Agricultural Development and Productivity Programme in the Ministry of Agriculture). None of the principles are very strong in the programme, with the strongest being participation, economic diversification, fairness and connectivity (all only moderately supported). Recycling, input reduction, animal health, and social values and diets do not feature at all in the programme. An assessment of nine selected ODA projects on agriculture, irrigation, water, and climate indicated around 42% of these budgets could be considered supportive of agroecological interventions. Participation, co-creation of knowledge, and connectivity are the strongest principles across the ODA projects, while animal health, input reduction, soil health, and recycling are not well covered.

There is a lack of explicit gender support and approaches in agriculture programmes, and a lack of gender disaggregated data to inform decision making. Efforts were made to review budget allocations and expenditure in Chipata, Nalolo, Lusaka, and Mongu Districts but, with limited public access to detailed budget information, this had to be shelved.

**Figure 6:** Assessment of agroecology principles in the Agricultural and Development Productivity Programme in Zambia



## Zimbabwe

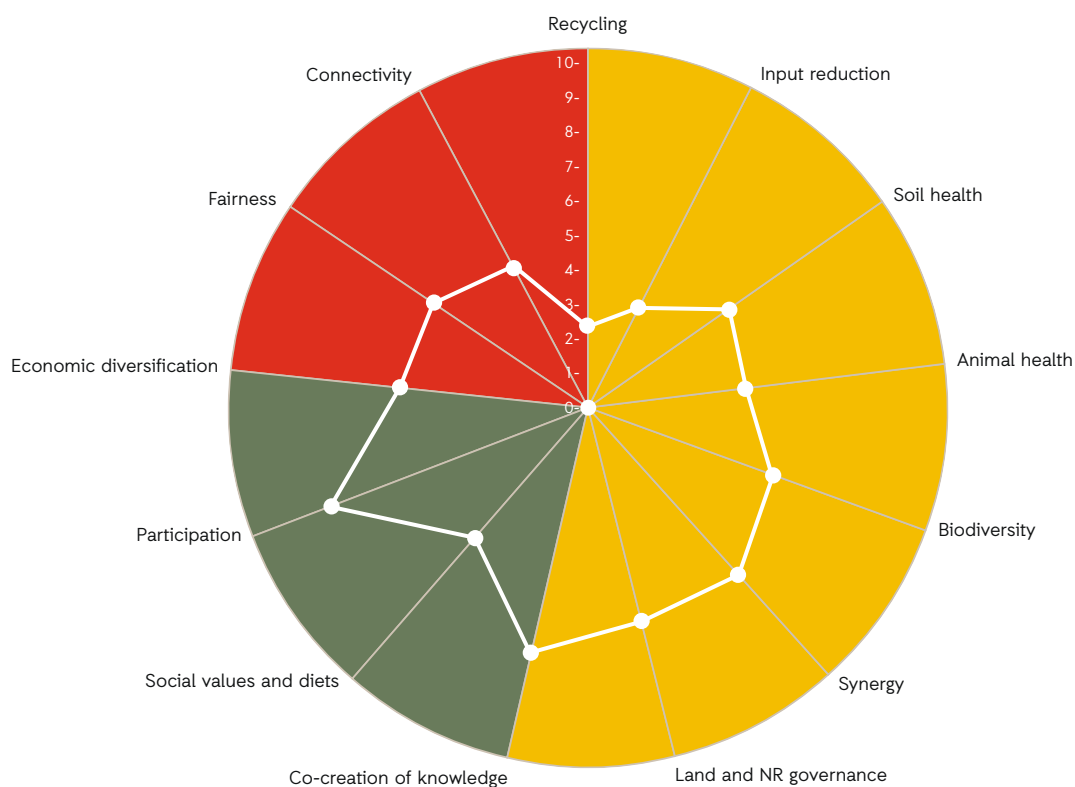
The assessment of allocations in Zimbabwe was based on a review of budget statements and the bluebooks 2020-24, with a focus on Ministry of Agriculture programmes. Budget analysis of Binga and Mutoko Districts was not possible due to lack of district level information.

Agriculture's share of the national budget has fluctuated over the past 10 years, with a low of 3.7% in 2016 and a high of 18.1% in 2020, and currently standing at 7.4% in 2024. There appears to be little correlation between budgetary allocations and performance of agriculture, with other factors such as climate change impacts and commodity prices being greater determinants.

Input supply programmes (including the Pfumvudza and Command Agriculture programmes) were allocated up to an estimated 50% of the agriculture budget, although a detailed breakdown is not available for the past few years. A decision was made to shift to a loan format with repayments expected after harvest. However, low repayment rates signify problems with financing in the form of loans to resource poor producers. As in the other countries, some level of policy support for agroecology has not yet translated into budgetary support.

The consultants estimated 64% of the budget going to agroecology-compatible activities in 2024. This may need more interrogation especially regarding the types of inputs in the input supply programmes. However, there have been policy efforts to embrace agroecology in recent times. The strongest principles in the reviewed documents were participation and co-creation of knowledge, both assessed at 70% or above, followed by synergy and land and natural resource governance in the low 60%. The principles assessed as weakest were recycling and input reduction (Figure 7).

**Figure 7:** Assessment of support for agroecology principles in Zimbabwe's 2023/24 budget



## Comparison and trends across the principles

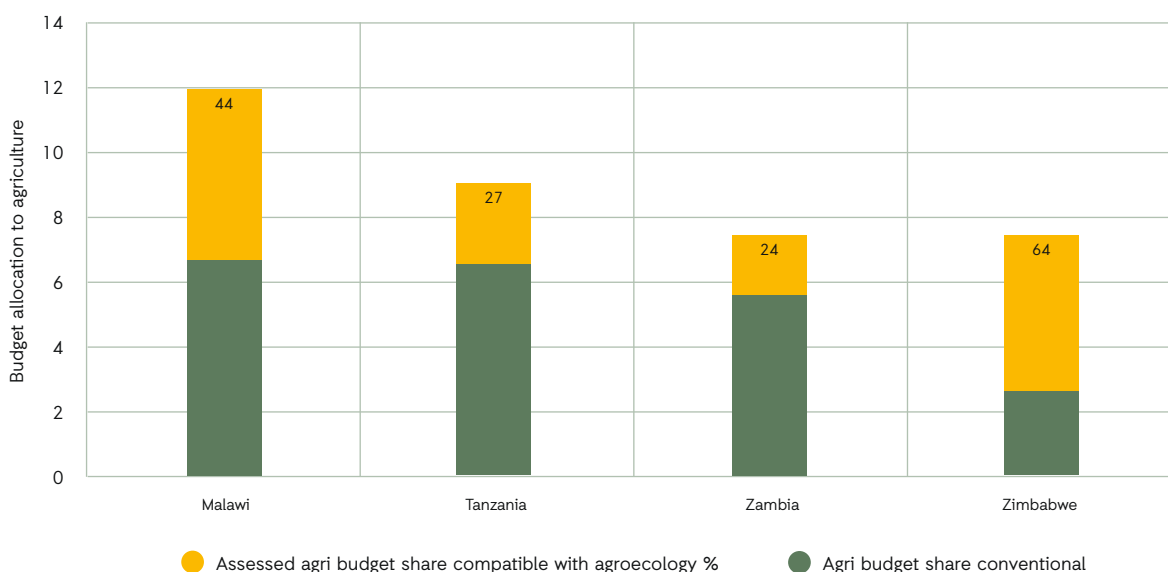
In all the countries, there is a gap between policy support for elements of agroecology and budgetary support for these elements. Generally, less than 50% of agricultural budgets in the four countries are supportive of agroecological practices (see Figure 8). There is a need to consolidate the principles, and to align budgets with policy statements.

Policy “hierarchies” exist in all countries, with environmental concerns tending to be downplayed and dominant financial and economic issues taking precedence. Selected elements of policies are implemented, while others are ignored. Allocations are thus strongly dependent on who has resources and what they want to promote (e.g. multinational corporations with strong lobbies, finance ministries with policy objectives that may diverge from sustainable agriculture and environmental objectives).

Farm input subsidy programmes (FISPs) dominate agricultural budgets, with provision of synthetic fertiliser and hybrid maize remaining dominant. These harmful subsidies reduce allocations to public goods such as investment in R&D, education and training, and extension services. They also effectively subsidise multinational chemical, seed and trading corporations, thereby reorienting public spending to corporate pockets.<sup>21</sup>

There is strong recent emphasis on irrigation and farm blocks, signifying a capital-intensive pathway, linked to commercialisation and increasing scale of production. This runs counter to agroecology which is based on inclusion, diversity, territorial markets, and context-appropriate scale.

**Figure 8:** Budget allocations to agriculture 2023/24, and assessed share compatible with agroecology



## Recommendations on financing for agroecology

### National governments

Prioritise food sovereignty and agroecology, moving from an extractive focus on producing commodities for export, and the overuse of agrochemicals, to an approach that centres and builds upon the resource-conserving practices of smallholder farmers, particularly women smallholders.

21. ActionAid 2023. “How the Finance Flows”, as above.



Countries can benefit from developing national agroecology strategies integrating interventions across agriculture, biodiversity, climate, water, natural resource management, and other environmental issues. Agroecology can also contribute to the rural transformation agenda. The HLPE principles are available for use as a monitoring framework to ensure comprehensive coverage of environmental, social and economic dimensions. Resources should primarily be allocated to public goods benefiting collectives e.g. R&D, education and training, and extension, rather than to seasonal production inputs to individuals. A balanced approach is needed. Investment in public goods still requires consideration of the agroecological content of research, training, and extension advice.

There are difficulties in accessing detailed information on allocations and expenditure at national and district levels alike. Transparency in budget allocations and expenditure is required to enable civil society and parliamentarians and farmers' organisations to assist with analysis, contribute to prioritisation, and suggest improvements.

Differentiated support to farmers based on context-specific and expressed need should replace a one-size-fits-all model, especially regarding input supply. Some farmers may want and need other kinds of inputs or forms of support.

The FISPs could be diversified and redesigned to enable and support the production and distribution of farmer-led ecological inputs from within the subsidy programmes. This includes on-farm and bulk production of seed and seedlings, and ecological soil fertility and pest and disease management solutions. This can also align with GBF targets on eliminating harmful subsidies and promoting biodiversity-friendly subsidies, reducing excess nutrients (primarily nitrogen and phosphorous), and reducing toxic pesticide use.

## **SADC**

A regional agroecology support strategy could provide support to national level. This could take place through the inclusion of agroecology in the Regional Agricultural Investment Plan (RAIP) and the post-Malabo Comprehensive African Agricultural Development Programme (CAADP). It can include research, multi-country projects, cross-learning exchanges, and guidelines for national agroecology strategies (such as a SADC agroecology model law), amongst other elements.

Tap into other available funding sources, for example biodiversity and climate funds and the soon-to-be operationalised SADC Agricultural Development Fund, to support agroecological food systems transitions in responding to multiple ecological, social and economic challenges facing countries in Southern Africa.




**The Partnership for Social Accountability (PSA) Alliance** is a consortium of organisations working to strengthen social accountability in health and agriculture across Southern Africa. The consortium consists of ActionAid; PSAM – Public Service Accountability Monitor of Rhodes University; SAfAIDS; and ESAFF – Eastern and Southern Africa Small Scale Farmers’ Forum. The PSA Alliance is supported by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC). For more information visit <http://copsam.com/psa/>, or email [psaalliance@actionaid.org](mailto:psaalliance@actionaid.org). To follow the PSA Alliance on Twitter or Facebook – see @PSAAlliance.

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Cover Photo: Smallholder women farmers at their farm in Kilosa district, Tanzania. CREDIT: ACTIONAID

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