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The Library for Food Sovereignty: A Field Report

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A Growing Culture (AGC), a US-based organization focused on advancing a culture of farmer autonomy and agro-ecological innovation, is managing the development of a community-led initiative to centralize local farming knowledge and innovations from around the world. Growing out of East Africa, the Library for Food Sovereignty (LFS) is being driven by a diverse group of local knowledge stewards, farmer-led organizations, and regional networks. The participatory, informal, and celebratory nature of the initiative sets it apart from other platforms. Organized directly around the communities themselves, the platform supports open frameworks for sharing, scaling out, and improving innovations across geographies. Farmer innovations are increasingly valued as site-specific and locally sourced solutions that contribute to community and environmental resilience. LFS promotes and celebrates the dynamics of local knowledge, bringing awareness of its potential to address some of the world's biggest challenges.

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The Library for Food Sovereignty and the Dynamics of Local Knowledge

In 2015, after nearly five years of facilitating knowledge exchange between food producers (smallholder family farmers, peasants, landless, forest keepers, women farmers, indigenous people, fisherfolk, pastoralists, migrants, and other agrarians hereafter referred to as farmers), AGC founded an initiative to centralize local knowledge in a platform using a combination of appropriate and advanced technologies. The purpose of this platform is to allow farmers to build off of each other's innovations so that they can be improved, locally adapted, and shared freely and openly across geographies. Ultimately, some innovations can be integrated with modern science as researchers begin to see their value and role in strengthening knowledge systems. Many communities have started to contribute knowledge and are proud to share their wisdom. Some farmers, however, choose not to share online for a variety of reasons. AGC is acutely sensitive to these motives and continues to work with these communities on the ground in ways that are appropriate to them. To summarize, the Library for Food Sovereignty is both an online and offline community of people who believe in the potential of local knowledge. This field report outlines some of the digital efforts to bring together and leverage local knowledge and stories.

AGC is an organization working to advance a culture of farmer autonomy and agro-ecological innovation. The primary way we forward this mission is by facilitating knowledge exchange between farmers. This work is increasingly challenging as industrial agribusinesses stronghold farmers all the world over are passing down transfer technologies, information, and proprietary (often toxic) products that perpetuate systems of interdependence and social stratification. Furthermore, international development is majoritively top down and charity is the prevailing solution to poverty. Communities are routinely treated as passive beneficiaries—not active participants that have a role in building their own future. Industrial agriculture production is one of the largest contributors to climate change, now generating around one-third of all greenhouse gas emissions (CGIAR 2012). Hunger prevails despite the fact that the world produces one and a half times enough food to feed the planet's population as a result of waste management, systemic distribution flaws, and the fact that the bulk of industrially produced crops are used for biofuel and in animal feedlots rather than for human consumption (Shattuck et al. 2012). It is within this context that AGC works to support the capacities of farmers to shape their own food and agricultural systems—work the movement now calls “food sovereignty.” Self-reliant farming is essential to a farmer's ability to bounce back in the face of environmental or economic change and is something that is now a constant. Local knowledge plays an integral part in food sovereignty in that it is locally sourced (autonomous) and can ignite an entrepreneurial spirit in farmers. Its dynamics have also been shown to provide system-oriented solutions to complex problems. While the history of agriculture is one of exploitation, farming has the potential to regenerate both communities and the land.

The truth is that smallholder farmers—forty-three percent of whom are women—feed the world on less than three hectares of land (FAO 2012). These peasant farmers are also members of some of the poorest communities on earth and, because of market pressures, often face great food insecurity despite their efforts in food production. It is from these communities that some of the most ingenious and resilient innovations are born. Innovations—that is, locally initiated new or improved ways of doing things (often inspired or reshaped from indigenous knowledge)—have been at work since time immemorial as farmers informally experiment and improve the natural environment around them. Innovators tend to be creative leaders that are willing to take risks and test their ideas over time, and sometimes even generations. In fact, innovations have been seen time and again to be more resilient than transfer technologies or other externally derived methods because they are developed with a deep rooted understanding of a place and are woven into its cultural fabric (Wettasinha et al. 2008).

Smallholder farmers feed the world, against great odds, and mainly using traditional methods passed down openly over generations. Traditional agriculture is the foundation of agroecology, now considered to be one of the best alternatives to industrial production because it melds the gravity of social and cultural impacts within a productive model of environmental sustainability. Agro-ecological methods are being increasingly measured and have shown to increase yields, regenerate biodiversity, reduce rural poverty, and be resilient to changing environmental conditions (Roark 2016). In contrast to industrial, one-size-fits-all methods, agroecology is knowledge diversified and rooted in local innovation. It does not champion any one method of farming. Local innovation development relies greatly on the ability of smallholders to pass information between farmer-to-farmer networks and scale out ideas to fit local conditions. Knowledge exchange is the heartbeat of innovation.

The bedrock of LFS is a community of farmers and other allies that are passionate about harnessing the knowledge of the grassroots movement and creating a participatory space for sharing and celebrating its diversity. More than an information platform, this effort focuses on the dynamics of agriculture including the socio-cultural dimensions of natural resource management and what it means to be a farmer. The ultimate vision is not only to inform and accelerate innovation and knowledge exchange, but to inspire it and bring farmers together around common experiences and stories.

The platform is being developed alongside the on-the-ground movements, not as an alternative. While sharing local knowledge across geographies remains central, it is ultimately the farmers themselves that decide what to share and how. A Growing Culture is focused on facilitating knowledge exchange via a variety of analog and digital approaches and technologies. On the ground, knowledge facilitation includes gatherings, innovation fairs, farmer-led workshops, and community-led documentation (participatory video, radio, and documentation). The design of the online platform has also been a participatory process at every step. Stakeholders have been part of in-field design prototyping and mapping out information pathways; they also attended live feedback sessions while AGC developed the prototype.

Development researchers have long noted that incorporating farmers in the research process leads to more sustainable outcomes and grounds scientific progress in real-world conditions (Mendez, Bacon, and Cohen 2013). As the platform develops, there is an incredible potential to blend local knowledge and scientific research in order to reinforce information systems. As noted before, open access, a cornerstone of this initiative, is not experienced as positive across all communities. A Growing Culture is receptive to these critical perspectives and therefore prioritizes the community-led identity of the commons. Not all communities will share their knowledge online, but those that do are brought into the decision making process and play a part in setting boundaries.

Innovations naturally lend themselves to being built off of and shared openly. These innovators often find that another farmer in a neighboring county or region has developed a similar technique or is experimenting with the same resources. Innovation development therefore greatly relies on the ability of farmers to pass information freely through networks so that techniques can be scaled up and improved to meet local conditions. Centralizing this knowledge potentially nurtures the conditions for disruptive innovations, innovations that disrupt an existing market or value network. In this scenario local innovations could even displace industrial products and practices all the while being safeguarded in the library under the watch of the community. The possibilities of working together to strengthen local knowledge are many. The Library for Food Sovereignty sets up a framework for those exchanges to happen in ways that allow communities to be in control.

The Stakeholder Gathering

In September of 2016, forty-five delegates from seven countries convened in a rural farming village in Kasejjere, Uganda to discuss how we might build a community-led resource for sharing farmer innovations and local knowledge. More than twenty smallholders attended, including indigenous farmers from Uganda, Kenya, and Burundi. The stakeholders discussed how to best create a resource that supports the socio-environmental realities of farming communities in East Africa and around the world. The meeting took place on a hillside surrounded by communities actively experimenting and taking charge of their own future. What emerged was an enthusiasm for leveraging grassroots knowledge and a willingness to work together to build the Library for Food Sovereignty.

A fully participatory process was designed with input from key stakeholders. While AGC facilitated the meeting, three other facilitators from among the attendees were relied upon to advance several important sections of the agenda. Clarification on the key practices, approaches, and challenges to documenting, sharing, and accessing farmer knowledge were of the utmost importance. At that juncture, one of AGC's technology partners, CauseLabs, created a pivotal interaction by bringing all participants together to further refine the granularity of the information pathways involved in making the library a locally accessible, culturally relevant, and community-led tool to both stimulate and leverage local knowledge. As the participants saw their own collective intent being absorbed and taking preliminary shape, a final step involved careful consideration of how each participant could conceivably play a role in piloting the first prototype of the library.

AGC outlined some key takeaways from the gathering in a report detailing the event. These included that hosting an international event in a farming village was deemed quite powerful by all who attended. Having a forum to share their stories, concerns, and ideas with such a cross-cultural audience was an eye-opening experience for many. Even before they began to work on framing the parameters of the library, everyone recognized the need to scale up farmer-to-farmer knowledge sharing and the great potential of a community-led "living" resource for collecting and making accessible innovations for current and future generations in the fight for food sovereignty. What emerged was a demonstrated willingness to collaborate with each other and with AGC in supporting an initial pilot of the platform offering their ideas, strengths, efforts, and resources as they deemed appropriate. Participants engaged and role played in direct conversation concerning the crucial role that farmer-led organizations and other support systems play in assisting farmers both in accessing and contributing to the library. They understood the need to continually refine the pathways of information sharing into and out of the library and recognized that the pilot was designed to help test and improve the human interaction dimensions of the concept. They also recognized that the skills required to oversee the complexities of an agro-ecological and farmer-driven commons include, but are not at all limited to, those possessed by farmers alone. The strengths of select academics, technologists, and other professionals will also be needed. It was also agreed that in order for the library to be successful it must add value to farmers' lives. Beyond the inestimable value of having a resource such as the library for innovations, the participants felt strongly that it was important to capture and maintain the wealth of innovation-related knowledge and experience that remains within the minds of older members of their farming communities before it is lost. Cultural and economic barriers are the biggest obstacles farmer organizations foresee hindering farmer openness, and farmers agreed that support should be provided in safeguarding intellectual property rights. The actual name of the digital platform remained "The Library for Food Sovereignty" for discussion purposes, but no consensus on a name was sought or reached. As the library advances through the next phases of development, AGC will send updates to keep stakeholders informed on its progress. There will be many opportunities for feedback sessions, open conference calls, and policy design making that farmers will take part in. The collaborative development of the initiative will remain a centralizing priority.

Participants at the gathering included twenty farmers and twenty-five delegates from farmer organizations in Uganda, Kenya, Ethiopia, Burundi, Italy, the UK, and the United States. Participating organizations included Pelum Africa, Prolinnova, The Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa, Insight Share, The Rules, Arid Land Information Network, Environmental Alert, and Teens Uganda, among others.

The stakeholder gathering set the groundwork for developing the blueprint, roadmap, and clickable prototype of the library. Most importantly it was fundamental in bringing together a community of farmers and other allies committed to playing a part in its development, design, and governance of the initiative. For the full report on the gathering please visit the [A Growing Culture](#) website (A Growing Culture 2016).

The Blueprint and Prototype

A Growing Culture began to solicit feedback on the library concept before the stakeholder gathering by reaching out to stakeholders via Skype, conducting interviews and participating in dialogues. These conversations helped AGC design a participatory agenda for the stakeholder gathering and incorporate community priorities before the group convened.

During the gathering, information was recorded using video, flip charts, meticulous note taking, audio interviews, and photography. All of this went into designing the prototype and blueprint, and is reflected in the current plans. Stakeholders remained central to the design process by participating in feedback stages via a variety of communication approaches. During this process A Growing Culture set up several live feedback sessions where participants weighed in on design decisions and other strategies. Gathering attendees continue to stay connected via email, Skype, Zoom conference calls, and private phone conversations. AGC set up a Google Group where participants share resources and send updates to each other.

The blueprint, roadmap, and prototype were developed with A Growing Culture's US-based technology partner, CauseLabs. The design principles that guide the development of the library (and specifically the library prototype) are that it must be open access, farmer driven, and built with appropriate and participatory technologies and approaches. These principles continue to propel the initiative forward. In its current form, the blueprint is an extensive slide deck that outlines the scope and features, architecture, formats and content, library front-end designs, administration, analytics, reporting, and project roadmap of the library. There is also a section on what we are interested in exploring further. The blueprint summarizes the in-field research and prototyping that went on during the stakeholder gathering and brings it to life in a digital representation. The blueprint asks the following questions: How will access to the library help farmers?; How will it help farmer organizations and other allies help farmers?; How will they contribute to it?; How will its design support the complex dynamics of local knowledge?; How, ultimately, can the content be organized to support its interoperability with other digital knowledge systems? (A Growing Culture 2016).

The blueprint outlines areas for further exploration. These include investigating motives and incentives that farmers and other groups might have for using the platform, branding and marketing, non-technical components (such as peer-review and curation of content), group-organizing and social features, back-end metadata integration, gamification, donations, functionality features, and "institutionalizing" farmer knowledge by bringing it into other knowledge systems via interoperability. The roadmap outlines the goals of the pilot, which orbit around content creation, content access, and content interaction. Scope and cost recommendations are also included in this five-year growth strategy, pilot design, and development timeline (A Growing Culture 2016).

The pilot of the platform is set to launch at the end of the summer of 2017. It will be built and piloted with a focus on innovations and local knowledge in East Africa and North America before expanding globally—although participation from all regions is welcome. If readers are interested in participating in this initiative or viewing the complete blueprint, roadmap, or prototype, they can contact [A Growing Culture](#) to see the plans.

The Importance of Farmer Stories

Over the past several years, AGC began to see the relevance of the socio-cultural dynamics of farming, often expressed in storytelling, that are central to farmers' lives. In fact, one of the most compelling dimensions of local innovations is that they often include a solution that addresses the human element of farming. For example, innovations recurrently diversify natural resource management, creating new opportunities for women farmers who are marginalized in many communities around the world.

There is research that shows the importance of time in a community's ability to be resilient—that is, bounce back or recover quickly from some environmental, economic, or socio-cultural disruption or upheaval. Innovations, often derived from or inspired by local knowledge and collectively shaped over generations, have the birthmark of time. They are also beset with an inveterate ability to take into account the often overlooked depths of a place with the dimensions and nuance that only come with experiencing a land over time (Davies and Moore 2016).

Stories are an entry point into those dimensions of agriculture and should grow alongside the technical or environmental achievements of farmers. A Growing Culture is developing open frameworks for supporting innovations and storytelling to animate this socio-environmental melding and path it provides towards continued resilience.

Closing

AGC would like to thank the hundreds of farmers who have mobilized around the Library for Food Sovereignty initiative. We would also like to express our gratitude for the guidance of key members from the Prolinnova network, Pelum Kenya, Pelum Uganda, Carbon Underground, Farmer-led Innovators Association of Kenya, Insight Share, Teens Uganda, Arid Lands Information Network, Kikandwa Environmental Association, and The Rules. The ingenuity of farmers and the work of these groups inspired this project and continues to drive it forward.

You can follow the development of the commons on A Growing Culture's website at www.agrowingculture.org.

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