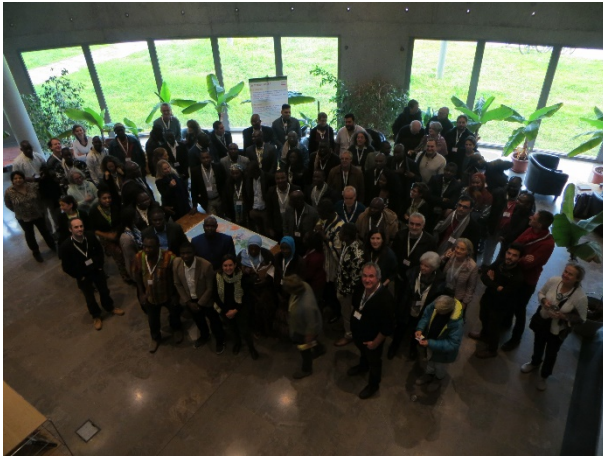


West Africa Community of Practice 2020 Annual Meeting



Participants gathered in Agropolis Campus First Floor Hall (Photo courtesy of Zobinou Mawusi)

The 2020 Annual meeting of the CCRP's [West Africa Community of Practice](#) (Waf CoP) was held February 24 -28 in Montpellier, France. Its host was the agroecology-centered [Agropolis Foundation](#) , whose campus offered participants the chance to mingle with some of the Montpellier science community's 2,900 researchers and 900 doctoral students as well as researchers from the Agricultural Research Center for Center for International Development ([CIRAD](#)) and the Institute of Research in Development ([IRD](#)).

The General Objective

The overarching goal of the meeting was to leverage local and global agroecology (AE) and agroecological intensification (AEI) knowledge as well synergy opportunities for our CoP to determine key changes and conditions for a successful move to agroecological farming systems in West Africa. More specifically, the meeting aimed to:

- Foster joint learning about pathways to AEI, assess AEI, align AE frameworks with CCRP's practices, and leverage synergy opportunities within our CoP and with the French research community based at Montpellier.
- Hone ownership of [CCR principles](#) and share project highlights to pinpoint the CCRP's contextualized relevance and to improve visibility of achievements and learnings in the Waf.
- Understand climate risks in West Africa and explore farmers' climate risk management, mitigation, and adaptation options in AEI-focused research.
- Build on the leadership and governance capacity of Waf CoP members and advance aspects of diversity, equity, and inclusion within projects, the CoP, and the broader community.

The meeting consisted of two sessions: internal and external. The internal round gathered West Africa CoP members, including the principle investigators of 17 projects, the RMS team, the CCRP co-directors, and the FRN exchange coordinator. The second, external round broadened the participant base to include an average of 20 participants from the Montpellier research community (Agropolis, CIRAD, IRD), representatives of the [Andes](#) and [East & Southern Africa CoP](#), the [IMEP](#) team lead, and grantees from projects on Agroecology Support, [Soils](#) Support, [FRN](#) Learning System, and videos. The meeting benefited from a notable presence of foundation staff, including CCRP program staff, finance staff, the McKnight Foundation director of learning, the vice president of programs, and one board member.

First Session

The initial session included an internal round of presentations of project highlights, addressing and including climate risks for/with small-scale farmers, including the Participatory Integrated Climate Services Approach (PICSA), a students' seminar, and a session on diversity, equity, inclusion (DEI), and governance.

Sharing project highlights gave participants context for understanding each others' work. Attendees valued the climate sessions and PICSAs approach, suggesting that the differences between climate risk and climate variability be clarified. They also wondered about next steps. The students' seminar gave the floor to six doctoral students (three female and three male) to present their research, receive feedback, and interact with the scientific community and CoP members. Finally, the DEI session stressed the need for awareness of the obstacles to diversity and equity, and strategies to include DEI in a culturally friendly manner that fosters sound governance and effective leadership. During this first leg, the newly funded exploratory project on recycling organic waste generated traction, with at least six existing projects joining the principal investigator for a roundtable discussion about further steps. Agropolis interviewed three participants (a researcher, a farmer representative, and a NGO leader) and posted videos of the interviews on its website. Click to view the [English](#) version, or the [French](#) version. The field visit that also served as a bridge between both segments.

Field Trip in Rural Montpellier

Participants were registered to visit one of three field sites: Chemin Cueillant, Semeurs du Lodévois, or Le Domaine de Restinclières. Each site practices agroecology or organic farming. Visitors to each location observed and learned about French farmers' experience practicing agroecology and agroforestry. The sites included vegetable farmers and seed producers, organic sheep and goat farmers who integrate livestock production with organic vegetable and cheese production, and organic fodder and feed.



Some WAF CoP members visiting the integrated organic goat and vegetable Bouquets Farm in the Minervois area of Montpellier (Photo courtesy of Bourgou Tsuamba).

One site included a farmers' market that sells locally grown and processed products. Discussions between visitors and hosts highlighted farmers' shared challenges, particularly regarding policy limitations, despite being in the southern or northern regions.

Visitors to the agroforestry site were thrilled to see the tree-crop-livestock integration and hear about 200 plant species. They appreciated seeing the experiments, including a water stress simulation device for understanding the general cereal decrease in Europe.

Second Session

The meeting's second segment kicked off with remarkable participation by the Montpellier research community, which seemed excited to learn more about the CCRP's approach to agroecology through the WAF CoP. CIRAD and Agropolis directors joined CCRP directors in sharing exciting opening remarks in which they underscored the need for synergy in using agroecology to address the food and nutrition security challenge.

The CCRP and WAF CoP members made presentations that provided background for non-CCRP members, who then shared their research results and interests. The diversity and richness of the communications and interactions through elevator speeches, interactive poster activities, and formal presentations convinced participants of their similarities amidst their differences. This was also the space where voice was given to most of the cross-cutting projects. The ESAf and Andes CoP gave

snapshots of their portfolios, pointing to strengths and areas to reinforce. West Africa CoP members greatly valued these contributions and hope the collaboration will be maintained and strengthened.

The FRN session that gathered a panel of farmers from Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, and France was arguably the meeting's most captivating highlight. Asked to share their experience working with researchers, participants spoke openly about the good experiences they have had and the less than positive ones. They presented the developmental stages of their farmer-researcher collaboration. Initially, in most cases, farmers were perceived as recipients and beneficiaries, which resulted in a certain mistrust. As relations developed, they were increasingly included as partners and research contributors, inspiring increased trust. Still, they cautioned not lowering their guard so as to continue building equitable partnerships.

This farmer-centered session revealed the usefulness of and need for researchers to reorient their approaches to better contribute to family farmer development through the FRNs. The collaboration between farmers and research has broken new ground, helping to integrate farmers' needs into the research agenda and throughout the project cycle.



Participants gathered in Agropolis Campus First Floor Hall (Photo courtesy of Zobinou Mawusi)

Panelists believed that one way to build AE leadership in research is through immersion students, tomorrow's research leaders.

Continued capacity strengthening for farmers' organizations is seen to be central. A weak point is the tendency to include only the few farmer-experimenters when evaluating results. Finding ways to document the perceptions and experiences of the thousands of farmer organization members was emphasized: "It is time to start thinking about farmer-friendly assessment tools, especially as farmers in the Waf grant portfolio," said one farmer.

The wrap-up session was highly rated by those participants tasked with assessing how well meeting objectives had been met. They grounded their assessments on the below [FAO agroecology](#) elements, based on their knowledge of the Waf portfolio and the meeting's conversations, activities, and presentations.

Diversity: Much appreciated were the diversity of the participating institutions; the presentation contents, formats, and themes (PowerPoint, poster, elevator speech, field trip); and the presenters' and participants' geographical origins.

Co-creation: There was true co-creation during the exchanges, which manifested again during the field trips/excursions in Montpellier on the third day. When you visit the field with co-creation, everything is dynamic and improvable.

Synergy: The CoP is an excellent example of the manifestation of synergy, not only among projects but among people. FUMA and AMSP are examples of synergy champions. It emerged from the conversations that, despite strong synergy in collaboration, it is lacking when communicating and sharing research results. Synergy needs to be rethought in a way that highlights complementary activities between projects that have quite different objectives rather than focusing on commonalities for the sake of efficiency. Special focus could be placed on monitoring.

Efficiency: The meeting's efficiency was good in terms of making the presentations in the allotted time. However, people felt changes need to be made because many presenters were unable to get to the end of their thinking. "It's not a 100-meter sprint; we need to come out of it happy, so this is something to consider in the future," said one panel member.

Recycling: The CoP added a new project on recycling organic waste, which is good proof of the need to address the issue. This adds to the recycling work by some of the CoP's existing portfolio projects. Additionally, the exchange with the Montpellier scientific community was fruitful.

Resilience: Throughout the meeting, several presentations and activities raised the need to take climate risk and people's livelihoods more seriously. But resilience in the WAF CoP is not just about populations or natural resources; it is also about the strategies to keep a climate that favors sustainable food production. Those working in plant breeding also approach resilience in terms of plant material. More importantly, the WAF CoP displayed tremendous resilience regarding time and the challenges of terrorist attacks the past years.

Human and social values: The CoP's focus on human values centers mainly on the value of equity, as all project stakeholders and members are treated equitably. A two-hour session was devoted to diversity, equity, inclusion, and governance, which participants found useful. It suggested ways for enforcing such values within projects and communities. Gender is also a strong human and social value in the CoP.

Culture and traditions: Nutrition is a living example. Women and men choose their foods and meals per their culture and needs within their respective WAF geography. Our food experience during the Montpellier meeting exemplified that value. The Agropolis catering service offered food not just on plates but with their hearts, food that reminded us of our West Africa origin. We also visited French restaurants and enjoyed delicious local cuisine.

Policy: The farmer organizations in WAF are powerful and gaining traction, making formal contracts with partners. The message now needs to be conveyed to policymakers (national and local states, regional and continental organizations).

Circular economy and solidarity: Projects working on seeds have showcased circular economy aspects. We heard in the debates that researchers and farmers need to be careful and maintain a tight relationship so their practices are not kidnapped by multinationals that use the term "agroecology" but do not honor its true meaning.

Session leaders concluded that the meeting objective was largely attained, despite some areas needing improvement. At the end of the wrap-up, session leaders opened the floor to participants for input related to the meeting and the WAF CoP. Uninterrupted and unmetered, speakers shared freely. Many internal and external participants took the floor, sharing valid inputs and propositions. This also revealed the willingness of participants to speak without pressure.

Takeaways:

- Many of the challenges facing Andes and ESAf farmers are not so different from the ones facing WAF farmers, which is fertile ground for cross-cutting projects to help regions in their work.
- We need to talk about limitations. [When you take time to applaud, you also need to take time to think] We need to take steps back in order rethink our methodological approach because these need further boosting.

- Some external participants insisted that the CoP make further efforts to communicate its best-practices approach to agroecology.
- Consider inviting non-CCRP members to meetings.
- Beyond the quality of research and practice of agroecology observed at the meeting, many non-WAf CoP members witnessed and highlighted an incredible fountain of human warmth that fertilizes the need to collaborate.