

2026 | Koffi N'zuako Franck-Evrard et al. | Issue 4 Youth leading the way in agroecology

Agroecology Bootcamp: Ivorian youth cultivating farm resilience



Young organisers sharing their experience with peasant agroecology. Photo: JVE Côte d'Ivoire

vibrant and engaging. This initiative is not just about teaching farming techniques; it is about immersing thousands of young people in the rich tapestry of their environment, fostering deep connections with the land that sustains them.

Given the growing disinterest from younger generations in a profession so crucial to their communities, it has become urgent to demonstrate that farming transcends mere livelihoods: it can be a way of life and a catalyst for sustainable progress. Reconnecting the youth of Ivory Coast with agriculture means envisaging a future where agricultural roots are honoured and nurtured rather than severed. This belief lies at the heart of the Yalitia Bootcamp.

A new dawn for farming

Each edition of the Bootcamp brings together energetic young participants from various villages in Ivory Coast and neighbouring countries, all eager to learn in this refreshing manner. Established by the NGO *Jeunes Volontaires pour l'Environnement* (JVE, or Young Volunteers for the Environment) in 2019, the Yalitia ('seed' in Senufo language) Bootcamp is now in its seventh edition.

It is this total immersion during the Bootcamp that gives participants a better understanding of rural life

Through the practical workshops focused on agroecology and social entrepreneurship offered at the Bootcamp, over 2,000 young individuals from West and Central Africa have learned not just about sustainable agriculture, but about living in harmony with the land and the value of community in facing agricultural challenges.

The immersive nature of the Bootcamp quickly becomes apparent. Farming merges with daily life, creating a rich tapestry of experiences that redefine what it means to learn. By half past five in the morning, the farm is already up and running. Even before formal learning begins, participants take part in a physical exercise session, set to music, to prepare their bodies for the day's work. Later, after a refreshing shower, lunch is eaten in the shade of a mango tree, alongside the trainers and the host family. It is this total immersion – in the work, the downtime, the meals and the informal discussions – that gives participants a better understanding of rural life than anything that could be discussed in a classroom.



Seventh edition of the Yalitia Bootcamp. Photo: JVE Côte d'Ivoire

Learning together, growing together

The principles guiding the Yalitia Bootcamp represent a clear departure from conventional agricultural training, particularly through its emphasis on horizontality in teaching methods. Traditional training structures, often marked by a top-down approach where an expert disseminates knowledge, are replaced with participatory learning. Workshops and demonstrations exist as collaborative spaces where everyone shares their own experiences, providing a rich dialogue where ideas flourish.

The trainers at Yalitia are not just purveyors of knowledge; they are facilitators of a collective educational journey. Each participant brings their own experiences to this vibrant learning environment, creating a rich atmosphere of exchange and growth. The very essence of the Bootcamp lies within this collaborative ethos, wherein learning becomes a collective endeavour rooted in each individual's reality.

For instance, one of us, Francis Ano, a dedicated trainer at Yalitia, embodies this spirit of shared learning. After pursuing his university studies, his love for the environment and smallholder agroecology drew him to the JVE team. His journey took him to Burkina Faso, Mali, Togo, Cameroon, Thailand and Brazil, where he collected invaluable local knowledge before returning to share it within the Bootcamp.

A movement beyond the Bootcamp

Yalitia's trajectory reflects a significant shift from a mere training programme to a dynamic movement. By recognising the limitations of short-term initiatives, early encounters revealed that initial excitement often ebbed away without long-term commitment. The Bootcamp has adapted to navigate these complexities, inviting former participants to return every two years to share their journeys.



Participants share their practices at the Yalitia Bootcamp. Photo: JVE Côte d'Ivoire

This has evolved into communal gatherings that become learning forums, where successes and failures alike are shared openly. The National Youth Forums on Peasant Agroecology emerged from this need for continuous engagement. These gatherings provide spaces for discussion circles, practical workshops, and the training of trainers. Participants transform their individual experiences into collective knowledge, something far more potent than the one-off exchanges of the past.

The response to these forums is compelling, showcasing transformed agricultural practices and inspiring stories. Many arrive to share experiences of revitalised fields, while others recount struggles. It is this honest sharing of journeys that composes the rich narrative of an evolving agroecological community.

Emphasising the vital role of women

A critical emphasis for the Yalitia Bootcamp is the role of women in agriculture and the barriers they face. Historically marginalised in discussions around farming and agroecology, women farmers are both crucial to food security and essential agents of change in their communities. Recognising this, the Bootcamp has sought to create pathways where female participants can voice their challenges and identify the gender-based disparities present in agriculture.

These Forums empower young women to recognise their potential value in agriculture

potential value in agriculture.

As participation in the Bootcamp approaches gender parity, specific spaces are crafted to ensure that women's experiences are not just acknowledged but celebrated. By facilitating discussions on limited access to land, balancing workloads and navigating societal resistance, these forums empower young women to recognise their

The empowerment of women extends beyond individual narratives; it has shifted the balance within collectives, enabling women to emerge as regional leaders in agroecology. Many now develop tailored approaches that resonate within their contexts and inspire other young women to engage with agriculture as both a profession and a means for social change.

Transitions in learning: From knowledge to empowerment

However, the journey hasn't been without its obstacles. Initial follow-ups from the Bootcamp revealed a common but critical misstep: the belief that simply imparting knowledge would automatically translate to real-world change. Once the training concluded, many graduates returned to their communities only to be met with scepticism and resistance. The hope and momentum cultivated during the Bootcamp often dwindled in the face of isolation, limited resources and societal pushback.



Learning how to make Bokashi compost during the third edition of the Yalitia Bootcamp. Photo: JVE Côte d'Ivoire

This gap between enthusiasm and tangible transformation illustrates the need for sustained support beyond the Bootcamp's end. As such, Yalitia adjusted its approach, incorporating tailored support that matches individual needs and paces while fostering communal events such as the National Youth Forums described above.

Through this evolution, there has also been a profound shift in evaluation methods. Early tools focused on quantitative metrics like attendance rates and the number of trainees, often masking deeper qualitative changes. Later, Yalitia began to prioritise 'stories of change', capturing the grassroots impact of the initiative and revealing profound shifts in community trust and engagement.

of all generations are not simply keepers of tradition; they are dynamic researchers engaging in a perpetual cycle of experimentation. For instance, they are reclaiming their agricultural heritage by establishing seed banks to ensure that the primary link in the food chain stays within their communities' grasp.

The proactive mindset fostered by Yalitia embodies a broader vision: an Africa where agriculture is a vibrant vehicle for social and economic transformation, rooted in sovereignty, justice and resilience. Peasant agroecology has become a living, breathing approach to farming, freeing people from the constraints imposed by multinational corporations.

Creating future generations of agroecologists

In recent editions, Yalitia has also fostered the emergence of new initiatives like 'Agroecology for Kids'. This programme targets younger audiences, raising awareness about the challenges of food sovereignty and preparing future generations to advocate for sustainable farming practices built on indigenous knowledge.

Opportunities for further exchange at events like the West African Social Forum in June 2025 culminated in the emergence of the KILIMO EKOLOJIA movement. Today, KILIMO EKOLOJIA embraces a community of young people, activists, farmers and researchers across sub-Saharan Africa, forming a robust network dedicated to mutual learning and the promotion of food sovereignty. This framework positions peasant agroecology as a transformative lever capable of instigating significant social and economic shifts across the continent.

Here, participants share their stories and passions. Djibril Niang, who joined during the third edition of the Bootcamp, emphasised a collective drive: "We started out as participants, but very quickly felt the need to share our experiences and support others. Smallholder agroecology should not remain local; it must evolve into a collective force capable of influencing agricultural policies regionally."

From the perspective of systemic change, the Yalitia Bootcamp has journeyed from an intervention-focused model to one of incubation. Initially crafted to convey skills to young people, it has become an ecosystem where youth train one another. They share experiences and work collaboratively to develop new strategies that reshape their work and lives.



Press conference at the launch of "KILIMO EKOLOJIA. Photo: JVE Côte d'Ivoire

Continuous learning and growing

The journey of the Yalitia Bootcamp highlights not just challenges, but the incredible resilience of its participants. While the early editions failed to foresee that for many, completion of the training marked the beginning of a tough battle, it has evolved into a space of connection and community resilience.

By bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and tangible practice, the initiative embraces the reality that community support needs to be dynamic, adaptable and attuned to the ever-evolving context of agriculture. Through the continuous reflection and evolution of the programme, young farmers restore their confidence and fundamental belief in peasant agroecology as a transformative force.

As Yalitia continues to navigate the changing agricultural landscape of Ivory Coast and beyond, it illuminates a path wherein agriculture ceases to be a vestige of dependence and emerges as a powerful force for empowerment and sustainable growth. By fostering local knowledge, community ties and shared experience, the Yalitia Bootcamp ensures that young individuals become active agents of change in crafting a resilient agricultural future for Africa – a future that honours their roots while dynamically evolving with the world.

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