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# Analyzing policy discourse for agroecological possibilities: a theoretical and methodological contribution

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**Abstract**
With more organizations committing their policies to sustainable and inclusive agricultural development, it becomes important to understand the underlying meaning, politics, and intentions that underpin these policy goals. Agroecology offers a comprehensive agenda for transforming the food system toward more equitable, sustainable, and self-reliant communities. Food system development discourse appears to mediate agroecological possibilities, yet we lack methodological and theoretical approaches through which to evaluate this. With this research, we combined Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) with a typology of agroecological discourse to analyze the United States Agency for International Development's (USAID) policy on self-reliance. We tested this approach on the self-reliance policy framework because, depending on how self-reliance is discursively positioned, it can align with agroecological transformation. Findings reveal how the United States' emphasis on inclusivity, locally driven agendas, and environmental concerns could be entry points for agroecology. However, through careful reading using CDA and the agroecological typology, our analysis reveals how USAID's discourse suggests a highly problematic environment for supporting agroecology that forecloses on agroecology's multifunctional outcomes by prioritizing market-led and technocratic development approaches. Our research contributes theoretically and methodologically by revealing how our unique approach could be extended to identify agroecological possibilities in seemingly aligned texts and to evaluate agroecological alignment in policy discourse that explicitly prioritizes agroecology.

**Keywords** Agroecology · International development · Self-reliance · Framing

## Introduction

In recent years, calls for food system transformation have gained increasing attention across policy, research, and practice. Food systems are at the heart of today's overlapping global crises, shaping and being shaped by patterns of environmental degradation, climate disruption, declining public health, and widespread food insecurity. Over recent decades, the dominant development model, rooted in intensification, global trade, and continual growth, has reshaped food systems. However, it has become increasingly evident that this model has turned food systems into major drivers of both ecological breakdown and social inequality. The latest EAT Lancet report underscores the scale of the problem: food systems are now the primary cause of transgressing five planetary boundaries that are critical for human well-being and planetary health, consequently accounting for over one-third of global greenhouse gas emissions (Rockström et al. 2025). Food systems are also a key driver of the alarming decline in biodiversity (Benton et al. 2021). Meanwhile, more than 2.3 billion people face moderate or severe food insecurity (FAO et al. 2025). The Food and Agriculture Organization's (2023) State of Food and Agriculture report quantifies that food system damages from diet-related illness, environmental destruction, deepening poverty, and growing food and nutrition insecurity amount to USD

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12.7 trillion. Staying on the current path threatens progress toward multiple Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including those related to zero hunger, health, inequality, gender equity, sustainable production and consumption, and climate action. Given the magnitude of the planetary emergency, and the central role of food systems within it, calls for transformation are intensifying (e.g. Ingram and Thornton 2022; Zurek et al. 2022; HLPE 2025).

Amid these increasing concerns, practitioners, scholars, and grassroots organizers are reimagining development pathways that reconcile human and ecological well-being. It is in this context that agroecology has been proposed as an alternative paradigm for food systems' transformation and participatory development (Wezel et al. 2020). As a holistic approach to food systems, agroecology applies ecological and social principles to the design and function of agriculture and food systems (Anderson 2025). Agroecology is simultaneously a science, a set of practices, a social movement, and a discourse (Anderson et al. 2021; Wezel et al. 2009, 2020). As a discourse, it overlaps with related concepts such as nature-based solutions, organic agriculture, regenerative agriculture, and food sovereignty (Anderson et al. 2025). Agroecology is unique in its "uncompromising commitment to each of the ecological, social, political, and cultural dimensions of sustainability, addressing power imbalances and centering the agency, voice, and knowledge of local people, peasant farmers, and Indigenous communities" (Anderson et al. 2025, p. 10). In fact, there is not one agroecology but rather several agroecologies that acquire contextual meaning over time (Méndez et al. 2013; Rivera-Ferré 2018). With this work, we employ a comprehensive approach, captured through the term *transformative agroecology* (herein referred to as agroecology), which engages with political, sociocultural, environmental, and economic transformation to address the combined crises caused by the current food system (Bellamy and Ioris 2017).

Building on decades of practice and research, agroecology offers not only a critique of industrialized global food systems but a practical framework for transformation. As a result, policymakers and actors in agricultural development organizations are increasingly recognizing that agroecology is a comprehensive agenda to transform food systems and address unsustainable and inequitable outcomes of the current food system (Barrios et al. 2020; Giraldo and McCune 2019; Wezel and David 2020; Ajates Gonzalez, Thomas, and Chang 2018). A growing body of evidence demonstrates the multifunctional benefits of agroecology (Bezner Kerr et al. 2022; Dittmer, 2023; Madsen, 2025; Mouratiadou, 2024). Recent scholarship highlights how agroecology advances multiple Sustainable Development Goals by addressing interconnected ecological, social, and economic challenges (Gupta 2025; Gliessman 2025; Si et al. 2024). Studies show that, with proper support, agroecology can match or surpass conventional yields while offering greater social and environmental benefits (Ponisio et al. 2015; Pretty et al. 2003). Additional agroecological impacts include strengthening rural economies by supporting small and medium enterprises, territorial markets, and regional food systems (D'Annolfo et al. 2017; Fiore et al. 2024; IPES-Food 2024), as well as creating jobs, improving farmer incomes, and reducing reliance on costly external inputs (D'Annolfo et al. 2017; Mishra 2024). Despite this growing evidence, agroecology receives only a small fraction of development aid funding as it challenges existing development power structures (Pavageau et al. 2020). Meanwhile, the industrial food model continues to receive immense public subsidies, totaling roughly USD 670 billion annually (Damania et al. 2023).

Agroecological scholars and advocates alike urge a fundamental rethinking of "business as usual," challenging entrenched assumptions and calling for bold new approaches. This includes a critical reassessment of the top-down modernization logic that underpins food system development and aid frameworks. Since the 1970s, development aid has viewed participation and the incorporation of local knowledge as essential to challenge inequitable power dynamics embedded within top-down development models (Cooke and Kothari 2001; Rahnema 2019). Top-down development has been widely decried for perpetuating power inequalities by promoting a Western view of development that overly emphasizes modernization (Stiefel and Wolfe 2011). Despite these efforts to create more bottom-up forms of participatory development that center the agency of people and communities to move toward self-reliance, the overall thrust of development globally remains top-down, market-led, and technocratic within a primarily Western modernization paradigm (Cooke and Kothari 2001; Escobar 1995; Rahnema 2019). As an alternative to modernization efforts, agroecological food system development emphasizes participatory co-creation that shifts power from outside development entities toward the self-determination of communities, thereby advancing a goal of increased self-reliance (Altieri and Nicholls 2017).

Self-reliance as a development goal has multiple meanings (Spijker et al. 2020). It can reflect neoliberal arrangements, challenge the status quo by promoting alternatives, or combine elements from both logics (Hébert and Mincyte 2014; Galtung 2019; Kelinsky-Jones, Stephenson, & Niewolny; 2025; Neill et al. 2022). In its neoliberal form, self-reliance discourse emphasizes the ability of individuals, communities, or nations to provide for themselves without reliance on national or external support (Halvorsen 1998; Marsland 1995). In place of national support systems, national or otherwise, the neoliberal self-reliant argument

is that the private market can serve as the provider of all basic needs regardless of the situations in which people find themselves (Duffield 2007). An alternative conception of self-reliance frames the concept as a collective, community-based, and ecologically attuned form of autonomy (Gonzalez de Molina, 2026). This vision situates self-reliance as a political project of self-determination grounded in participatory principles and ecological stewardship (Duffield 2007; Galtung 2019; Hébert and Mincyte 2014; McCarthy 2019). Across global contexts, from Kenya's *Harambee* movement (Mbithi and Rasmusson 1977) to U.S. black food justice organizing (Bledsoe et al. 2019; Reese 2018), alternative self-reliance has served as a community-based strategy to resist systemic inequities. Much like alternative self-reliance, the agroecological movement seeks a self-reliant reality through coordinated resistance to inequities, neoliberalism, and modernization through the promotion of a community-led, participatory development that honors social, economic, and political equity (Altieri and Nicholls 2017; Wezel et al. 2009; Wezel et al. 2020).

It is under this backdrop, where agroecology represents great potential but is nonetheless systematically underfunded, that we investigated how The United States Agency for International Development's (USAID) policy discourse on self-reliance afforded or foreclosed possibilities of agroecology. We sought to use USAID's policy framework as a test case to explore how our unique combination of *Critical Discourse Analysis* and a *discursive typology of agroecology* could offer methodological and theoretical insights to evaluate the degree to which seemingly aligned discourse, such as self-reliance, may provide an entry-point for agroecology within a major development program. We suggest that such work is increasingly important given the scant direct support agroecology receives. In so doing, we contribute to a growing body of critical research on the pathways to support agroecology in policies, institutions and funding streams (Giraldo and McCune 2019; Petersen et al. 2013; Montenegro de Wit and Iles, 2016; Walthall et al. 2024). We analyzed USAID's policy because of its focus on participatory development as a vehicle toward self-reliance (Kelinsky-Jones and Niewolny 2021). Given the alignment between participatory self-reliance and agroecology, we sought to examine how the policy discourse on self-reliance opened up agroecological possibilities. In the following sections, we outline the conceptual framework guiding our understanding of agroecology as a discourse, we then describe our approach through which we combined the agroecology typology with Critical Discourse Analysis and present our findings to illustrate how this approach can reveal agroecological possibilities or limitations within a policy framework.

## Conceptual framework: the discourse of agroecology

To analyze how USAID's policy discourse constructs or constrains agroecological possibilities, we conceptually situate our approach within theories of discourse and framing. Discourse is a site of control as the language and ideas therein convey what is desirable, feasible, and even permissible (Fairclough 2003). In so doing, the language that policy actors use reflects the way they see the world and gives shape to how agricultural development materializes in policy and practice (Pimbert 2022). Discourse plays an important role in mediating agroecology transitions, including through its influence on policy (Anderson et al. 2021). Thus, in this article, we engage with the importance of discerning the relationship between agricultural realities and discourse. We used a typology in this paper that was developed by Anderson and colleagues (2021) to codify how agroecology may be advanced or hindered by discourse across seven distinct frames (Table 1). We employed this discursive typology as a conceptual framework because the dynamics of political, socio-economic, and discursive power are key to understanding agroecology and advancing transformations towards food and agriculture systems that support human and environmental health (Pimbert 2022). The meaning of agroecology is differentiated, evolving, and contested. Several commentators have described agroecology as a concept with multiple meanings, with multiple and plural 'agroecologies' (Méndez et al. 2013). The analysis of agroecology from a discursive or linguistic perspective has explained how it is being continually re-signified (Rivera-Ferre 2018) and co-produced (Loconto and Fouilleux 2019). Consequently, agroecology is a socially constructed term shaped through dynamic, uneven, and complex sets of discursive processes. This points to the importance of understanding and confronting the role of discourse in shaping social and political arrangements that support or hinder transforming food systems.

Our conceptual framework builds on theories of framing, which helpfully explain how discourses are constructed to support various positions or worldviews (Steinberg 1998). Frames are expressions of broader discourses; in this case, the seven frames of the agroecological typology represent recurring ways agroecology is discursively constructed. A frame is an interpretation that simplifies and condenses "the world out there" (Snow and Benford 1992, p. 137). In this case, frames offer a conception of a particularly positioned meaning of agroecology. Entman (1993) argues that "to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment

**Table 1** Conceptual constructs from the agroecological typology

| Frame | Supporting Agroecology | Challenging Agroecology |
|---|---|---|
| Food Sovereignty | Rights-based framework, food system transformation or justice, and community agency. | National or regional self-sufficiency & individual rights to choose products. |
| Participation | Democratically decided food systems, multi-stakeholder engagement, & inclusive governance. | Manipulated or fake participation & inclusion into markets for private sector access to smallholders. |
| Cultural Resonance | Culturally appropriate agriculture, local and place specific food systems, & inclusion of multiple forms of knowledge. | Exclusion and marginalization of specific identity groups, & articulation of local solutions without true ability to inform agenda. |
| Holism | Systems lens recognizing food system's cross-cutting connections including sociocultural, political, and economic aspects. | Acknowledgement of systems without addressing intersections with social, cultural, economic progress, & privileging of economic system. |
| Livelihoods | Smallholder agency and autonomy, farming as way of life, & people, planet, and profit. | Livelihoods as only economics or profits, & farming as exclusively enterprise-driven or market-based. |
| Ecological Modernization | Economic de-growth & restructuring of political economy. | Environmental or food sustainability only, green economies, green market-driven growth, & technological advancement. |
| Feed the World | Support to smallholder farmers as essential to food systems. | Global trade relations, increasing industrialized productivity for growing population, & failure to acknowledge inequality of global food system. |

Note: The analytical constructs in this table derive from Anderson and colleagues (2021) publication

recommendation" (p. 52). Thus, framing is a deliberative, communicative process through which actors seek to mobilize consensus and particular forms of collective action around a given issue (Benford and Snow 2000; Steinberg 1998). As such, actors interested in agroecology, engage in framing in the discursive arena to advance a particular agenda based on, "particular ways in which [discourse] should develop or transform to bring about a particular set of outcomes" (Hermwille 2016, p. 9). Therefore, frames are important as define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments, and suggest remedies (i.e. propose action) (Entman 1993).

As a contested discourse, there are multiple potential framings of agricultural development that inform agroecological possibilities. These potential frames are being advanced by different actors with various positions and power in a broadly conceived discursive arena. This arena involves contestation and negotiation between these actors who have different readings of reality, different interests and therefore advance different framings (Benford and Snow 2000; Geels and Verhees 2011). We combined *Critical Discourse Analysis* with Anderson and collaborators' (2021) seven frames to understand how the discursive representation in a broad policy framework can either challenge or support agroecological possibilities. Each of the seven agroecological frames reproduces certain logics, imagery, and ideologies that communicate how food systems could and should look and can help illuminate the connection between discourse and action.

## Methodology

In this article, we employed Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) alongside the agroecological typology to examine how agroecology is reflected in USAID's "Journey to Self-Reliance" program. CDA is both a theory and methodology used to analyze power relations that are intertwined with discourse (Fairclough 2012). In Critical Discourse Analysis, discourse refers to a way of constructing and representing reality through language. CDA examines why social realities are the way they are, what their effects are in different contexts, and the social mechanisms by which actors reproduce discourse. It provides tools through which to understand how language is used to create and maintain power relation it is not just words on a page but a broader system of meaning-making that shapes social interactions and perceptions. The theory operationalizes relations of power at three interacting levels: linguistics, discursive practice, and social practice (Fairclough 1992). CDA allows for scholars to trace how power moves from the language that policy actors use in speech and text, to how actors consume, modify, and reproduce language and ideas, and finally to how the texts influence everyday praxis (Fairclough 1992, 2012).

At the linguistic level, CDA scholars investigate word and verb choices. Word choice includes vocabulary; positive or negative descriptors; agentic language which positions stakeholders as passive or active; verb and adverb choices; and word pairings. At the discursive practice level, the interest attends to how texts are interpreted, how they relate to other texts, and how other discourses are incorporated such as imagery, ideas, metaphors, and ideologies. Finally, social practice investigates how the actions taken by actors are influenced by discourse, including how the

discourse is accepted or contested (Fairclough 1992, 2003). In this way, CDA considers discursive practice as a process through which discourse is, "given power as a result of how it is used, who uses it, and the context in which it is used" (Wodak and Meyer 2001, p. 10). CDA examines the subject that produces discourse, the institutional context where discourse is produced, and the practices through which discourse are shaped and reshaped.

## Corpus selection

To address the above questions, we[1] analyzed a systematically sampled collection, or corpus, of USAID's "Journey to Self-Reliance" (J2SR) policy texts (Table 2). We chose the J2SR because at the time of this study, it was the guiding framework for all of USAID's work across all programs and 60+ countries and regions and was celebrated for creating consistency across USAID's expansive portfolio (Runde et al. 2021). We established the corpus systematically by reviewing all nine paragraphs on the J2SR website and every document and resource linked. We employed four inclusion criteria: 1) textual, 2) topical, 3) time-bound, 4) comprehensive across the program, and 5) genre diversity. First, we limited our selection to only textual artifacts. One paragraph only included one link to a non-textual map dashboard and thus we excluded it. Second, we only included documents addressing the J2SR. A second paragraph referenced a separate program which we deemed outside the J2SR policy parameters. Third, all documents needed to be published between 2018 and 2020 to allow us to sample documents from a common time, or what is known as a synchronic corpus (Baker 2010). The J2SR website comprised documents across the USAID program and project lifecycle moving from overall guidance, project design, project solicitation, project evaluation, to when self-reliance is achieved. Thus, our fourth criteria sought to ensure sampling comprised at least one document from each of the lifecycle stages. Fifth and final, we sought to ensure diversity across textual genres (types of texts with differing audiences and purposes) available. Our sample comprised six genres including high-level policies such as the full-length policy and an executive summary, fact sheets, an FAQ document, marketing materials such as a blog post, and requests for application (RFA).

**Table 2** Corpus analyzed

| USAID Document Title | Genre (Type of Text) | Text Year | # Of Words in the Text | # Of Pages |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| How the Journey to Self-Reliance is Changing the way USAID works | Blog Post | 2020 | 720 | 6 |
| Integrating the Journey to Self-Reliance into Project Design | Fact Sheet | 2019 | 613 | 2 |
| Strategic Transitions | Fact Sheet | 2020 | 501 | 2 |
| Transforming our Programs: Redefining our Relationship with Partner Governments | Fact Sheet | 2020 | 502 | 2 |
| Self-Reliance Learning Agenda Evidence to Support to Journey to Self-Reliance | Fact Sheet & FAQ | 2020 | 1,709 | 7 |
| USAID Policy Framework: Ending the Need for Foreign Assistance | Policy | 2019 | 25,406 | 64 |
| Private Sector Engagement Policy Executive Summary | Executive Summary | 2018 | 1,920 | 4 |
| Request for Application: Feed the Future Innovation Lab for Food Security Policy Research, Capacity, and Influence (PRCI RFA) | Request for Application | 2018 | 26,007 | 78 |
| Request for Application: Feed the Future Innovation Lab for Markets, Risk, and Resilience (MRR RFA) | Request for Application | 2019 | 21,780 | 58 |

There were no project solicitation documents on the J2SR website since these are listed separately on the federal government's grants website. Thus, to fill this gap, we identified RFAs separately. Of note, is that this paper is derived from a broader dissertation research project that sought to understand how the self-reliance program influenced agroecological possibilities for land grant universities' research and development praxis. Reflecting the emphasis on land grant universities praxis in the overall study, we selected RFAs from the Feed the Future Innovation Lab (IL) program, a USAID initiative that funds U.S. university agricultural development and research. We chose the IL program because at the time of this study, all but one of the 13 ILs were held by land grant universities. We selected the RFAs according to three criteria. The first criteria was that the project be held by a land grant of which we had 12 to examine. The second was that the RFAs were published between 2018 and 2020 yielding seven possibilities. The third was that the RFA focus needed to broad enough to attend to the food system. This narrowed our selection to two land grant universities and their respective RFAs.

## Theoretical and methodological merging: CDA and the agroecological typology

To analyze the above corpus, we employed Fairclough's (2003) CDA. As mentioned, CDA is both a methodology and a theory that allows for inquiry into how policy discourse, as a form of power, influences the social world. CDA conceptualizes the relationship between power and

[1] The analysis presented in this paper was carried out solely by the first author, however we utilize the pronoun "we" throughout the text for consistency and clarity.

discourse across three interacting levels: textual, discursive, and the social world. These three levels (Fig. 1) are dialectical because according to Fairclough (1992) language and discourse are forms of social practice. As such, he argues discourse analysis must go beyond the text itself to look at the underlying meanings for how they communicate power in the social world.

Three dialectical levels of Critical Discourse Analysis and the attributes investigated within this study (Fairclough 1992). *Note* this paper addresses the textual and discursive levels specifically.

The first textual level investigates word and syntax choices including how constructs are described, word pairings, verb tenses (known as modality), agency attributed to actors, and positive and negative adjectives. In so doing, CDA can help reveal meaning construction and what is desired, feasible, or truthful (Fairclough 1992). For this study at the textual level, we investigated verb tenses, adjective use, and agency attributed to development actors (e.g., country partners). Verb tenses, known as modality, manifest in two forms. The first is deontic modality which are verbs used to communicate expectations or accountability in varying strengths. The second form of modality is epistemic, and this allows policy architects to convey what is considered truthful, real, or likely to happen at varying degrees. For example, the use of the term "must" reveals high deontic modality (expectations) because it suggests an imperative. In the policy framework we analyzed USAID authors indicated "… our assistance must ultimately be ending the need for it to exist" (United States Agency for International Development 2019, p. 8). As for epistemic modality (truth), policy writers articulated high certainty such as "USAID's vision for a more free, more peaceful, and more prosperous world is built around the compelling yet simple notion that the purpose of our assistance must ultimately be ending the need for it to exist" (United States Agency for International Development 2019, p. 8). High certainty is communicated by asserting that freedom, peace, and prosperity will come with self-reliance. A CDA analysis of adjectives used reveals inherent values communicated in the text indicated by positive or negative attributes which thereby enable an analysis to identify various development approaches or actions that may be viewed acceptable or desired. Finally, an investigation of agency can reveal which actors are acting upon others and who is being acted upon which can reveal degrees of power afforded to different identity groups (Fairclough 2003).

The second discursive level investigates how the sampled texts include or exclude various other discourses including what is or is not referenced. The discursive level of analysis can reveal which knowledge types (for example, disciplines) and various approaches, practices, or behaviors are valued by the policy architects (Fairclough 1992, 2003). For this level, as mentioned previously, we employed the agroecological discourse typology (Anderson et al. 2021). Finally, the social level addresses how the text and discourses within a policy text communicate about and influence relations of power in the social world. This includes an investigation into which ideologies the discourse uplifts and supports as well as how actors in their reading and interpretation of the discourse replicate, modify, or resist the messages and underlying ideological premises in their everyday praxis (Fairclough 1992). To address the social level, interviews or similar are often incorporated (Fairclough 2003).

As mentioned, this research was part of a larger research study that proceeded in multiple iterative stages. The first stage, which has been published (Kelinsky-Jones et al. 2025) addressed how USAID conceptualized self-reliance

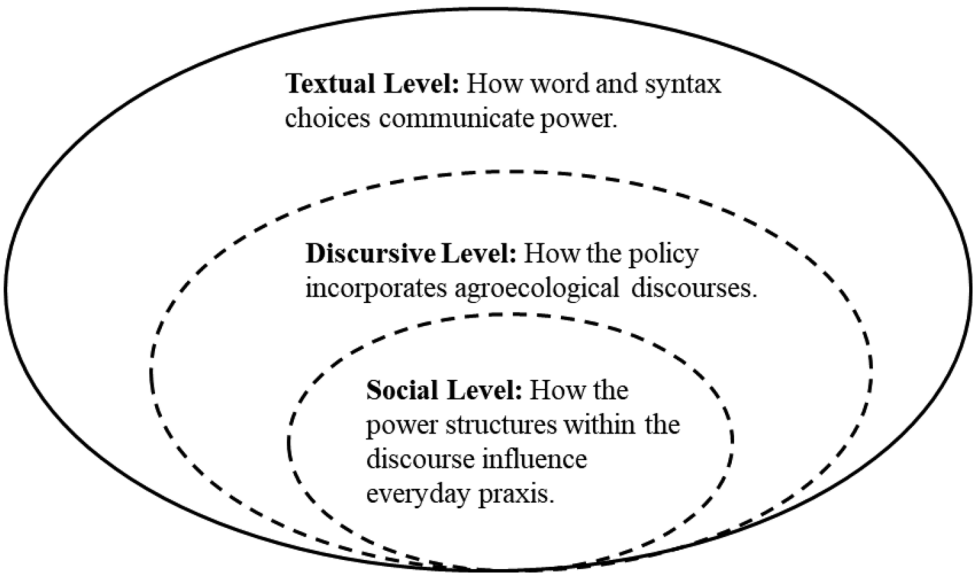


**Fig. 1** Three interacting levels of critical discourse analysis

**Table 3** Critical discourse analysis linguistic constructs

| CDA Construct | Analytical Approach |
|---|---|
| Vocabulary | Identified in vivo themes among vocabulary attributed to self-reliance and stakeholder groups |
| Modality – Deontic High | Must, must not, ought to, shall, shall not, has to, have to, required, need |
| Modality – Deontic Medium | Will, will not, should not, can, cannot, supposed |
| Modality – Deontic Low | May, might, might not, could, could not, would, would not, allowed |
| Modality – Epistemic High | Certainly true; must be true |
| Modality – Epistemic Medium | Probably true; will be true |
| Modality – Epistemic Low | Possibly true; may be true |
| Evaluation: Desirable/Positive | Positive words or associations. |
| Evaluation: Undesirable/Negative | Negative words or associations. Can also be something situated in opposition to a positive value |
| Agency: Activated | Active voice vs passive voice. Who is acting on others? |
| Agency: Passivated | Passive voice vs. active voice. Who is being acted upon? |

*Note:* This table comprises analytical elements of CDA from Fairclough (2003)

In the final and third stage, we engaged development practitioners in focus groups by presenting these findings to unpack how they interpreted, modified, or replicated relations of power embedded within the USAID policy text (Kelinsky-Jones et al. 2023). This paper addresses the second stage of the larger study to investigate agroecological discourse.

and the partners with whom self-reliance was advanced. As part of that stage, all statements attributes to self-reliance and partners in the journey to self-reliance were coded thematically and supported using corpus linguistics, a quantitative methodology. In the second stage, we coded the identified statements according to the CDA attributes (Table 3) and the agroecological typology (Table 1).

## Findings

The following sections present our findings, organized according to the seven discursive frames introduced within our conceptual framework section. We begin with food sovereignty and end with feed the world. For each frame, we identify how USAID's language supports or constrains agroecological possibilities.

First, it is important to note that across the 79,000 words and 223 pages analyzed, the policy texts do not mention agroecology directly. In the Markets, Risk, and Resilience RFA, USAID articulated "under this new award … [the Innovation Lab] will be expected to continue the focus on … 4) designing and testing the scale up of insurance products to broader areas … for example, by utilizing agro-ecological mapping and crop modeling" (MRR, p. 12). Here, "agro-ecological" refers to a technical approach to inform insurance products rather than food system reform. Later in the same RFA, USAID described their interest in agroforestry, a sub-approach of agroecology.

### Food sovereignty: omission of a rights-based and community agentic discourse

We begin with the food sovereignty frame, which provides a critical foundation for understanding whether USAID's discourse recognizes rights-based or systemic transformations of the food system, which the agroecological typology identifies as essential for agroecological futures. The presence of the food sovereignty frame would be indicated by an emphasis on community-agency to transform the food system across sociopolitical, economic, and cultural aspects and rights-based language around food. Instead, we observed language that reflected a food sovereignty that focused on production only for national self-sufficiency, as in the policy framework, "relatively few countries have achieved the self-sufficiency to no longer need foreign assistance" (p. 18). National self-sufficiency in of itself isn't problematic, but without paying attention to how self-sufficiency is achieved (e.g. by environmentally destructive or beneficial practices) and by whom (e.g. small farmers or large plantations), such discourses generally promote large-scale agricultural productivism. Additionally, when problems associated with the current food system were noted, rather than indicating a need to address systemic issues, USAID's discourse reinforced reducing risk within the current market-driven framework. This was exemplified, for example, in the Market's, Risk, and Resilience RFA:

> The 2007–2008 food price crisis was a significant catalyst for establishing *Feed the Future* [a government initiative to end hunger]. Volatile prices provide a disincentive for investment among risk averse smallholders. USAID encourages research that explores institutional innovations and other creative solutions that offer some protection from price risk, and/or enhance price stability using market-friendly mechanism (p. 12–13).

In the same RFA, USAID discussed how price volatility "undermines investment and technology adoption, while higher prices erode household food security" (p. 8). In this example, as stated, USAID exhibits high epistemic certainty, which strongly links household food security with the need for both economic investment and the adoption of new technologies. Taken together, these two excerpts reveal how this policy framing neglects to address the conditions that led to the food crisis, such as issues of inequality related to technological adoption and ownership. It also does not value endogenous, grassroots solutions within communities (and valorized in an agroecology approach) that are outside market. This often leads to a focus on technology-and market- driven development approaches at the compromise of multifunctional outcomes. While agroecology is not anti-technology, it focuses on community- and nature- centered development, which is often undermined by these narrow framings of development.

## Participation and cultural resonance: locally led development and inclusion

In this section, we tackle the participation and cultural resonance frames in tandem because the data on each overlap given USAID's focus on the participation and inclusion of multi-stakeholders toward self-reliance. A prominent theme within the corpus addressed the importance of USAID to support country and locally led development. In the policy framework, USAID indicated "self-reliance will also reinforce people's dignity and countries' autonomy and enable greater ownership of their development agendas" (p. 17). In the PRCI RFA, USAID reaffirmed the importance of local leadership, "the activity should develop and implement a global research agenda that largely reflects key priorities emerging from the needs of country-specific policymakers and local research institutions" (p. 18). In the project design fact sheet, USAID indicated that "when developing a "J2SR Project Purpose", USAID missions will consider questions such as … what are the priorities of the national or subnational government, civil society, and other stakeholders in this sector?" (p. 1). Finally, in the fact sheet on redefining partnerships, USAID articulated that "it is critical [partner governments] remain committed to and capable of delivering citizen-centered accountable governance and enterprise-driven development" (p. 1). In these examples, USAID employed strong modality indicating high expectations around participation revealed by the usage of "will" and "should". In the final example, the pairing of "critical" and "remain" regarding citizen-centered governance serves a similar purpose. The strength of USAID's assertions around the need for participation could contribute toward the emergence of agroecological possibilities should country agendas be truly allowed to guide the process.

Related to participation, USAID emphasized inclusivity which could also support the participatory aim of multi-actor engagement and cultural resonance's emphasis on inclusive representation. For example, MRR RFA indicated that the IL "will focus on inclusion throughout its work … USAID takes a broad view to inclusion … including the extreme poor, women, youth, people with disabilities, ethnic and religious minorities, indigenous peoples, LGBTQI persons, widows and orphans, and other marginalized groups" (p. 10). The policy framework also asserted:

> a commitment to inclusivity and countering social exclusion … Countries in which entire populations are excluded from the benefits of growth, however rapid, cannot be considered self-reliant … this requires investing widely in human capital, protecting human rights, and ensuring people have equitable access to economic opportunities, infrastructure, natural resources, civic participation, and other public foods and services (p. 30).

Here USAID strongly disparages social exclusion using high epistemic modality exhibited by the surety in when "entire populations are excluded". This is subsequently paired with positive evaluation by identifying how social exclusion and self-reliance, which USAID values, cannot coexist.

Despite USAID's emphasis on participation and inclusion, the possibilities of agroecological emergence are complicated by the simultaneous focus on locally led development alongside private sector led development and a growth-focused development paradigm. This is not to say these two are in opposition, but there is no guidance on how to address conflicting values or agendas, or on the power imbalances that small farmers face in markets dominated by large corporate actors. Moreover, the policy architects described private local sector actors using activated language, while they described local governments using passivated language. This contrast reveals the implicit privileging of business and the private sector, over local priorities in driving development priorities (Kelinsky-Jones et al. 2025). Although this inclusive rhetoric echoes agroecology's participatory ethos, USAID's framing risks privileging market-led agendas over a balanced approach that blends community-based food system efforts with market development.

## Holism: a systems lens without changing the system

The following frame, holism, examines whether USAID's discourse takes a system-oriented view that integrates the

core agroecological elements to address ecological, social, economic, and political dimensions together. Across the policy corpus, USAID mentioned food systems four times in three of the nine documents[2]. In the policy framework, USAID indicated, "we must work each day to deliver enduring development outcomes … from sustainably managed environments and food systems" (p. 21). In the Food Security Policy Research, Capacity, and Influence (PRCI) RFA, there was a priority to "identify and describe gendered roles and access to institutions in agriculture and food systems" (p. 31). The other two references were identical text sampled from the policy that established the Feed the Future program, "Title XII university-led Feed the Future Innovation Lab programs …. [that] jointly pursue research to overcome critical agricultural constraints facing today's global food systems" (PRCI RFA, p. 31 and MRR RFA, p. 39). As we indicated in our review of CDA, representation within discourse illustrates certain priorities and power. Thus, the presence of food systems four times in a corpus of almost 80,000 words, and only in a third of the texts indicates that relative to other concepts, it is not as central of a concern. Moreover, food systems were not defined nor critiqued for their current issues.

However, USAID did often refer to the importance of development addressing systems-thinking and systems concerns. For example, in the policy framework referencing a "middle-income trap", USAID asserted "countries can fall into this trap if they do not invest in commensurate economic, social, and political transformation, or fail to manage sustainably the natural resources on which they depend" (p. 19). Later in the same policy document, systems lens addressed social inclusion:

> We should apply a "systems lens" to our country strategies and project designs. Programs should always consider the larger context in which they operate. Each program should first understand the constellation of actors and institutions relevant to achieving meaningful and lasting results, their interrelations, and the incentives that guide them. A systems lens is also an inclusive one, meaning we must engage under-represented voices in strategic planning and designing our projects, such as women, youth, and other marginalized groups (p. 42).

The MRR RFA echoed a systems approach, too:

> There is increasing recognition that rural individuals, households, and communities live and work in a context of complex, interacting systems. Examples of these systems include the political, social, health and healthcare, economic/market, ecological, and broader environmental systems. Fragile contexts and conflicts can also be understood as systems (p. 14).

As holism is a mediating frame, the emphasis on working across the system, and in some cases the need for transformation could positively support agroecological development. However, holism may be undermined when it focuses solely on the economic dimensions of systems, obscuring the social, cultural and political aspects.

## Livelihoods: economics and market-led development as foundational

The livelihoods frame further illuminates how USAID's discourse tends to center economic growth as the sole indicator of livelihoods rather than embracing a more expansive view of wellbeing as found within agroecology. USAID's use of the livelihood frame emphasizes a neoliberal approach that prioritizes private sector led and market-based interventions. Market rationalities are advanced over other values related to livelihoods within development. Looking beyond textual representation alone, USAID repeatedly emphasized private sector and enterprise or market-led development:

> The confluence of these trends provides a watershed opportunity for USAID, our partner governments, and civil society to increase collaboration with the private sector to support countries on their Journey to Self-Reliance. In embracing enterprise-driven development, USAID recognizes the value of engaging the private sector in development and humanitarian assistance … (p. 1).

The use of the word "watershed" attributes positive connotations to collaboration with the private sector and a sense of urgency and excitement. Moreover, the statement by USAID is made with high levels of epistemic confidence indicating there is little questioning that private sector engagement is the best way forward.

In the private sector engagement executive summary, USAID indicated that other partners embrace this logic:

> USAID recognizes that supporting countries in achieving their development goals requires the unique contributions of all sectors: governments, civil society, philanthropy, faith-based organizations, academia and the private sector. In fact, many philanthropic and development-focused organizations have been front-runners in embracing market-based approaches … for this reason, USAID believes that all sectors have

[2] This frequency excludes one incidence where "food system" appeared in the title of a journal article title in the references list.

> a vital role to play in implementing this policy and engaging the private sector (p. 3).

This expectation was reaffirmed in the fact sheet on redefining governments where USAID indicated strongly, "as partner governments (PGs) work to foster and sustain their country's Journey to Self-Reliance, it is critical they remain committed to and capable of delivering citizen-centered, accountable governance and enterprise-driven development" (p. 1). Underscoring this, the executive summary indicated confidently that "the private sector [has the] ability to deliver what host-country governments seek to achieve" (p. 3).

Looking further to USAID's specific articulation of livelihoods, the policy framework connected livelihoods to opportunities, safety, and democracy:

> In many countries, ending the need for foreign assistance is possible. Overall, people's lives and livelihoods are getting better … and workers have greater access to opportunity … for most people in most countries, the world is far safer than in the past … more people today – more than 4 billion – live in democracies" (p. 18–19).

Shortly thereafter, the policy framework critiqued existing inequality by linking it to minimized country's growth, "in extreme cases, inequality can dampen a country's growth" (p. 19). Here using negative evaluation, USAID disparaged inequality not for its social and political damage, but for its damage to a country's economic prosperity.

The policy did emphasize inclusive development but through a market-lens. For example, the MRR RFA prioritized "making agricultural markets work for all … many rural households and vulnerable, marginalized populations are poorly integrated into larger agricultural markets … limiting livelihood options" (p. 10). Meanwhile PRCI RFA equally echoed the priority area of "inclusive and sustainable agriculture-led economic growth" alongside "how governments improve the conditions for greater private sector investments" (p. 7). Such a dominating focus on economic livelihoods limits agroecological futures that seek to mitigate inequality across social, cultural, political, and economic contexts.

## Environmental modernization: sustainable economic growth and technological innovation

The environmental modernization frame occurs when discourse promotes environmental sustainability alongside technological innovation and adoption. USAID attributed value to sustainability across the corpus. In the policy framework, USAID linked self-reliance and sustainable economic growth, "countries that have increased self-reliance have shown a commitment to effective solutions that lead to sustainable economic growth" (p. 9). In the same policy, USAID also prioritized "the sustainable use of natural resources" (p. 22). Moreover, in a subsection of the same document, the agency discussed the importance of sustainable economic growth and natural resources. It argued that economic growth and technological innovation and adoption are key to self-reliance:

> A key component of building self-reliance is enterprise-driven economic transformation, often enabled by a concerted program of investment and reform. In some countries, this transformation begins on farms, driven by the spread of tools and technologies that increase agricultural productivity (p. 28).

Reinforcing the technical focus, in the PRCI RFA, USAID suggested in a gentle tone the need for climate resilience via improved technology and inputs as indicated by the use of the verb may: "this Innovation Lab Applicant may have the opportunity to promote climate resilience by analyzing possibilities for government policies to promote climate-sensitive inputs, technologies, and practices through its policies and programs" (p. 19). In this example, USAID's emphasis is on the promotion of technologies and inputs without acknowledging how technologies and inputs can foster a treadmill of dependency for smallholder farmers that negatively contributes to their inequality (Montenegro de Wit & Iles, 2016). In the MRR RFA, USAID shared a similar sentiment suggesting that the project look to influence broader development discourse around these ideas, "this innovation lab will contribute to USAID's strategic objectives … by achieving impact through the development, testing, and adoption of innovation approaches; and through the shaping of development discourse" (p. 7). This version of sustainability, anchored in economic growth through technology, limits agroecology's emphasis on shifting relations of power. The next frame, feed the world, extends this logic by focusing on increasing smallholder power to participate in global trade.

## Feed the world and productivism

While the feed the world frame often presents a hindrance to agroecological progress, when the discourse supports small-scale farming as essential, it can allow for some agroecological possibilities. We identified smallholder farming four times across the policy corpus. For example, the MRR RFA noted that "agricultural SMEs" otherwise known as small and medium-sized enterprises, are "critical conduits that can

transform agriculture from a survival strategy into a viable, enterprising livelihood" (p. 14). The use of the word "critical" underscores their importance via positive evaluation. However, elsewhere the PRCI RFA suggested the project's research will work on issues related to "stagnant productivity … displacement of income and livelihoods of small farms and off-farm enterprises by technology, and global trade and markets where scale economies predominate, among others" (p. 14). Here, USAID's focus addresses global trade. We also observed this framing elsewhere in the corpus. The policy framework mentioned smallholder farmers once by providing an example of a model project where, "smallholder farmer irrigation schemes [increased] production and productivity of high-value crops like this one: bananas" (p. 6). This example emphasizes increasing the productivity of a single high-value crop, reproducing a productivist emphasis on monocrop commodities that undermines the agricultural biodiversity that is central to the agroecological approach. Elsewhere, the strategic transitions fact sheets argued for "further mobilizing private capital, deepening trade relationships and access to international markets" (p. 2). These examples indicate that while smallholder farmers are important, their value is linked to the commodities they produce at scale for trade on the global market. As a result, the policy discourse confined smallholder farmers, and development projects seeking to support them, to the current system representing values of increased productivism for global distribution; this thereby prevents agroecological transformation.

## Discussion

In this paper, we sought to understand how the pairing of Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough 1992, 2003) and a typology of agroecology discourse (Anderson et al. 2021) could contribute theoretically and methodologically to how concerned scholars could uncover how discourse supports or forecloses agroecological possibilities. Overarchingly, we found that the discourse in the analyzed policy texts provides some framing that supports agroecology via the promotion of inclusivity and participation while advocating for sustainability. On the surface, such a finding could indicate that agroecology could reasonably emerge through participatory mechanisms. Indeed, as part of the larger study, in response to a presentation on these findings in a focus group with USAID-funded development scholar-practitioners, one respondent noted that the emphasis on inclusion may provide opportunities for agroecology (Kelinsky-Jones et al. 2023). Despite the possibilities of this seeming participatory and inclusivity alignment, the pairing of CDA and the agroecology typology allowed for a deeper analysis to reveal how the framework fails to create epistemic and material space for transformative agroecology. Given this emphasis, the joint emphasis on sustainable and inclusive agriculture reinforces the current food system rather than support transformative aims. Briefly, we will review our key findings before turning to implications.

The critical aspects of rights and community agency to advancing food sovereignty were completely absent from the discourse. Where food sovereignty was mentioned, USAID discourse depoliticized the agenda using national self-sufficiency framing alone that tends to reinforce an emphasis on production. One consideration to note is that among food sovereignty scholars, the essentialism of a rights-based framework is contested (Canfield 2022). Beyond the presence of food sovereignty, we observed strong emphasis on local participation and locally led development across actors which could be discursively supportive to agroecology under the participation and cultural resonance frames. Moreover, USAID repeatedly affirmed the importance of inclusivity. While these elements could afford some scope to agroecological agendas, USAID largely emphasized market-led development which positions markets in primacy of place over the multifunctional agroecological outcomes food system transformation. Agroecology is not anti-market, instead it focuses on territorial markets that simultaneously pursue ecological, social, cultural, and political principles, in addition to the importance of economics for securing livelihoods (IPES-Food, 2024). USAID's self-reliance discourse makes it challenging to pursue these additional aims alongside market development given the priority afforded to enterprise. This finding also reduces agroecological possibilities under the holism frame. Despite repeated emphasis on systems thinking, an economic lens is predominantly promoted subsequently limiting the feasibility of proposing systems-based work pursuing multiple food system outcomes.

USAID's self-reliance framework referred to a commitment to sustainable natural resources. While an ecological focus is imperative to an agroecological food system, it cannot be advanced alone (Alonso-Fradejas et al. 2020). Across the corpus, the blending of inclusivity and sustainability may appease this concern, however the ecological language used was often paired with technological adoption and the discourse failed to address issues of power related to ownership and who benefits and profits from their use. Without addressing these concerns, this approach is likely to advance a technocratic agenda that is considered damaging to agroecology (Anderson et al. 2021; Pimbert 2018; Bellamy and Ioris 2017; Montenegro de Wit, 2022). Finally, while support to smallholder farmers can position feed the world logic as supportive to agroecology, USAID positioned the smallholder farmers as valued players within global trade emphasizing the need for increased production.

This position thereby limits agroecological possibilities as productionism is promoted over other concerns related to continued agricultural growth globally (Anderson et al. 2021) or to the development of territorial markets (IPES-Food, 2024).

With this work, we sought to understand where agroecological possibilities may be situated discursively within a seemingly aligned policy framework. Self-reliance and agroecology share similar threads when advancing participatory development aims, and in its announcement of the framework, Former USAID Administrator Green emphasized participatory processes. Our analysis reveals that while an emphasis on participation and locally led efforts may allow agroecology to emerge, other discursive forces are likely to limit its possibilities. Taken together, the primacy of market-led development, technocratic sustainability efforts, and increasing production for global trade are discursive logics that prevent agroecological transformation, as they tend to reinforce the current global food system. In this way, the self-reliance discourse adopted by USAID might allow for incremental change in the food system which will likely be insufficient to advance food system transformation.

## Conclusion

This research offered a combined theoretical and methodological approach that appears to support the endeavor of revealing where agroecology is conceptually feasible within policy discourse. Our combination of Critical Discourse Analysis with the agroecological typology provides a deep level of texture to analyze how policy text impacts agroecological possibilities. To our knowledge, we are also the first to employ Anderson et al.'s (2021) typology analytically thereby contributing theoretically to the broader landscape on agroecological scholarship. We believe we are also the first to pair the typology with CDA. Our findings illustrate how scholars can employ the agroecological typology alongside CDA to analyze, and in some cases, evaluate how policy framing influences food system transformation materially. As we finish this piece (2025), USAID has been dismantled by the new U.S. administration, marking a global rupture in the international development system. This has been significantly damaging with tragic consequences, and it has brought attention to the problematics of the neoliberal development model represented by USAID (Belay 2023). To this end, the need for agroecological approaches to development are more salient than ever given their emphasis on autonomy, endogenous development, and an approach that works against dependence on aid or on extractive economies. The approach adopted in this paper can offer theoretical and methodological insights into how to shine a light on how development agencies could frame, or re-frame, their policy to align with agroecology. In so doing, we suggest that concerned researchers may be able to investigate the degree to which organizational policy aligns with principles of agroecology and to provide key insights for those working with those organizations to work toward better alignment. From an external vantage point, applying this approach broadly could yield insights into potential agroecology partnerships by revealing entities supporting agroecological transformation and those to be avoided. Finally, within policy text that explicitly supports agroecology, we suggest that this approach could be useful for identifying sites of co-optation within agricultural development and research activities. Future research could also be used as comparative analysis between multiple organizational cases or country-level policies.

Our analysis provides insight into how the discursive arena of mainstream funders provides a constrained environment within which agroecology can grow or wither. Looking forward, we encourage others to employ and develop the use of discourse analysis with agroecology frames to unearth the power upholding policy discourse and the commitments laid within. Such analyses can help continue to hold powerful actors and organizations accountable for the ways their policy efforts prevent transformation. Future research could examine organizations and policy documents that are more actively promoting agroecology. How does this approach hold up when agroecology is prioritized? How might it be used to improve agroecological praxis internally, and how might it be useful to external entities to determine with whom to partner? Moreover, we see value in such analyses continuing beyond the policy texts to materially evaluate how this work may variously make manifest agroecological possibilities. How does discourse move through agroecological praxis into the social world when agroecology is prioritized? How does "supportive" policy and "supportive" praxis interact for agroecological transformation? These questions of the institutional uptake and application of public and institutional resources to the development of agroecology are fundamental to understanding how we can transition towards a more just agroecological future.

### Abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| CDA | Critical Discourse Analysis |
| USAID | United States Agency for International Development |
| J2SR | Journey to Self-Reliance |
| SDGs | Sustainable Development Goals |
| RFA | Request for Application |
| IL | Innovation Lab |
| PRCI | Policy Research, Capacity and Influence |
| MRR | Markets, Risk, and Resilience |

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## Declarations

**Competing interests** The authors have no competing interests to declare.



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