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Politicisation as a Pathway to Emancipatory Agricultural Transformation in Uganda

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Toward the Promised Land

Politicisation as a Pathway to Emancipatory Agricultural Transformation in Uganda

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Toward the Promised Land

Toward the Promised Land

Politicisation as a Pathway to Emancipatory Agricultural Transformation in Uganda

Ronald Byaruhanga



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Abstract

Amid escalating ecological crises, widening socio-economic inequalities, and intensifying climate change, the imperative to transform agricultural systems towards sustainability and equity has become increasingly urgent. Yet such transformation is often hindered by entrenched institutional and structural arrangements that privilege narrowly defined notions of productivity and market efficiency, thereby sidelining holistic approaches that emphasise resilience, equity, and human and ecological flourishing. Consequently, although pathways such as agroecology are gaining traction as viable alternatives, their adoption and expansion remain constrained. Against this backdrop, this thesis proceeds from the premise that realising such transformative alternatives requires confronting and disrupting the institutional, structural, and political obstacles that impede change.

In this thesis, I explore the potential of politicisation as a process through which dominant agricultural development practices and ideologies are reframed and contested in Uganda. Specifically, I investigate how politicisation unfolds and how it shapes the possibilities for advancing transformative agricultural alternatives, including efforts to reconfigure the institutional arrangements that structure agricultural systems. Grounded in critical realism, emancipatory social science, and social movement theory, the analysis seeks to uncover the underlying mechanisms and structural conditions that shape how social actors mobilise, exercise agency, and generate transformative social power. I examine how these actors challenge and reconfigure dominant agrarian models while navigating and negotiating political constraints, thereby illuminating the dynamic processes through which collective action and emancipatory transformation become possible.

The thesis comprises three interlinked articles that collectively demonstrate how, despite entrenched institutional and political barriers, change agents carve out spaces and leverage existing openings to prefigure and advocate for alternative practices and visions. These strategies are anchored in adaptive, often non-confrontational practices that balance resistance with collaboration, illustrating how change agents navigate tensions between transformative aspirations and structural constraints without relinquishing their critical stance.

With these findings, the thesis offers both theoretical and empirical contributions. Theoretically, it conceptualises politicisation as a mechanism that not only challenges and reframes agricultural transformation but also enables change agents to create the conditions necessary to navigate constraints while insulating themselves against co-optation and repression. Empirically, it demonstrates how political mobilisation materialises in contexts where open confrontation is restricted, showing how actors cultivate collective agency and expand the possibilities for transformative change. Overall, the thesis argues that politicisation involves both material and discursive practices through which emancipatory agricultural transformation can emerge across diverse contexts and conditions.

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Politicisation as a Pathway to Emancipatory
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Ronald Byaruhanga



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*Dedicated to the cherished memory of my late brother,
Douglas Wawuyo, my late baby sister, Agatha Atukwatse,
and my beloved late grandmother, Mrs. Eseza Kahwa.*

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Abstract

Amid escalating ecological crises, widening socio-economic inequalities, and intensifying climate change, the imperative to transform agricultural systems towards sustainability and equity has become increasingly urgent. Yet such transformation is often hindered by entrenched institutional and structural arrangements that privilege narrowly defined notions of productivity and market efficiency, thereby sidelining holistic approaches that emphasise resilience, equity, and human and ecological flourishing. Consequently, although pathways such as agroecology are gaining traction as viable alternatives, their adoption and expansion remain constrained. Against this backdrop, this thesis proceeds from the premise that realising such transformative alternatives requires confronting and disrupting the institutional, structural, and political obstacles that impede change.

In this thesis, I explore the potential of politicisation as a process through which dominant agricultural development practices and ideologies are reframed and contested in Uganda. Specifically, I investigate how politicisation unfolds and how it shapes the possibilities for advancing transformative agricultural alternatives, including efforts to reconfigure the institutional arrangements that structure agricultural systems. Grounded in critical realism, emancipatory social science, and social movement theory, the analysis seeks to uncover the underlying mechanisms and structural conditions that shape how social actors mobilise, exercise agency, and generate transformative social power. I examine how these actors challenge and reconfigure dominant agrarian models while navigating and negotiating political constraints, thereby illuminating the dynamic processes through which collective action and emancipatory transformation become possible.

The thesis comprises three interlinked articles that collectively demonstrate how, despite entrenched institutional and political barriers, change agents carve out spaces and leverage existing openings to prefigure and advocate for alternative practices and visions. These strategies are anchored in adaptive, often non-confrontational practices that balance resistance with collaboration, illustrating how change agents navigate tensions between transformative aspirations and structural constraints without relinquishing their critical stance.

With these findings, the thesis offers both theoretical and empirical contributions. Theoretically, it conceptualises politicisation as a mechanism that not only challenges and reframes agricultural transformation but also enables change agents to create the conditions necessary to navigate constraints while insulating themselves against co-optation and repression. Empirically, it demonstrates how political mobilisation materialises in contexts where open confrontation is restricted, showing how actors cultivate collective agency and expand the possibilities for transformative change. Overall, the thesis argues that politicisation involves both material and discursive practices through which emancipatory agricultural transformation can emerge across diverse contexts and conditions.

Sammanfattning

Mot bakgrund av tilltagande ekologiska kriser, växande socioekonomiska ojämlikheter och ett klimat i förändring har behovet av att omvandla jordbrukssystem mot hållbarhet och rättvisa blivit alltmer akut. En sådan omvandling hindras emellertid ofta av djuprotade strukturer och institutionella arrangemang som gynnar snävt definierade föreställningar om produktivitet och marknadseffektivitet. Därigenom marginaliseras helhetliga angreppssätt som betonar resiliens, jämlikhet samt mänskligt och ekologiskt välbefinnande. Trots att alternativa vägar, såsom agroekologi, i allt högre utsträckning anses som hållbara och gångbara alternativ förblir deras tillämpning och spridning begränsad. Denna avhandling utgår därför från antagandet att förverkligandet av sådana transformativa alternativ kräver att de institutionella, strukturella och politiska hinder som motverkar förändring konfronteras och utmanas.

Avhandlingens övergripande syfte är att undersöka politiseringens potential som en process genom vilken dominerande praktiker och ideologier inom jordbruksutveckling omformuleras och ifrågasätts i Uganda. Särskilt fokus ligger på hur politisering tar form och hur den påverkar möjligheterna att främja transformativa jordbruksalternativ, inklusive insatser för att omstrukturera de institutioner som formar jordbrukssystem. Teoretiskt vilar analysen på kritisk realism, emancipatorisk samhällsvetenskap och sociala rörelser-teori, och syftar till att synliggöra underliggande mekanismer och strukturella villkor som påverkar hur samhällsaktörer mobiliserar, utövar handlingskraft och skapar transformativ social makt. Studien analyserar hur dessa aktörer utmanar och omformar dominerande agrara modeller, samtidigt som de navigerar politiska begränsningar. Därmed belyser studien de dynamiska processer som möjliggör kollektivt handlande och emancipatorisk omvandling.

Avhandlingen består av tre sammanlänkade artiklar som tillsammans visar hur förändringsaktörer – trots djupt rotade institutionella och politiska hinder, skapar handlingsutrymme och utnyttjar befintliga öppningar för att förespråka och förverkliga alternativa praktiker och visioner. Deras strategier är ofta adaptiva och icke-konfrontativa, och balanserar motstånd med samarbete. Därigenom illustreras hur förändringsaktörer hanterar spänningar mellan transformativa ambitioner och strukturella begränsningar utan att förlora sin kritiska hållning.

Avhandlingens bidrag är både teoretiska och empiriska. Teoretiskt konceptualiseras politisering som en mekanism som inte enbart utmanar och omformulerar jordbruksomvandling, utan också möjliggör för förändringsaktörer att skapa de villkor som krävs för att navigera begränsningar och samtidigt skydda sig mot kooptering och förtryck. Empiriskt visar studien hur politisk mobilisering tar sig uttryck när utrymmet för öppen konfrontation är begränsat, och hur aktörer utvecklar kollektiv handlingsförmåga och utvidgar möjligheterna till transformativ förändring. Sammantaget argumenterar avhandlingen för att politisering inbegriper både materiella och diskursiva praktiker, genom vilka en emancipatorisk jordbruksomvandling kan växa fram i olika sammanhang och under skiftande förutsättningar.

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It is 4 a.m., and the world is quiet. I cannot sleep, so I sit down to write these acknowledgements, reminded that a PhD, much like farming, moves through seasons. There are moments of sowing ideas and waiting for growth, dry spells marked by doubt, and those rare but rewarding harvests when clarity finally emerges. This thesis, like this hour before dawn, feels like a threshold between night and day, uncertainty and renewal, struggle and possibility. And, just like farming, it has never been a solitary journey. It exists only because of the care, generosity, and encouragement of mentors, colleagues, friends, family, and research partners.

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List of Papers

Paper I

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Paper II

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Paper III

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Other relevant papers

Byaruhanga, R., & Ellinor Isgren (2023). Rethinking the alternatives: Food sovereignty as a prerequisite for sustainable food security, *Journal of Food Ethics*, 8(2),16, DOI: 10.1007/s41055-023-00126-6

Boda, C. S., Akorsu, A. D., Armah, F. A., Atwiine, A., **Byaruhanga, R.**, Chambati, W., ... & Sibanda, M. (2024). Visions of sustainable development and the future of smallholder farmers in sub-Saharan Africa (and beyond). *Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems*, 8, 1357574.

Authors' contribution to the papers

Paper I and III single authored.

Paper II

I led the conceptualisation of the paper, conducted the data collection and analysis, and wrote the major part of the paper. EI and SK contributed to writing and revising the manuscript.

Abbreviations

ASSP	Agriculture Sector Strategic Plan
CR	Critical Realism
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
ESS	Emancipatory Social Science
ESAFF	Eastern and Southern Africa Small Scale Farmers Forum
FBO	Farmer-Based Organisation
FS	Food Sovereignty
GMO	Genetically Modified Organism
IPES	International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems
LUCSUS	Lund University Centre for Sustainability Studies
NAEP	National Agricultural Extension Policy
NAES	National Agricultural Extension Strategy
NAP	National Agricultural Policy
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
SMT	Social Movement Theory
SMO	Social Movement Organisation
UN	United Nations
WFP	World Food Programme

Prologue

At dawn in rural Uganda, the fields awaken with the sound of hoes striking the earth, birds threading melodies across the sky, and the quiet hum of women and men preparing for another day's labour. For centuries, farming has been more than a livelihood here; it has been a rhythm of life, a foundation of culture, and a source of resilience in the face of shifting political, economic, and environmental landscapes. Yet, in these same fields, struggles over seeds, soil, and sovereignty unfold quietly, shaping the destinies of farmers, families, and communities. The story of Ugandan agriculture is one of both continuity and contestation. It carries the weight of colonial legacies, structural adjustment programs, and global market pressures,



but also the promise of collective innovation, grassroots resistance, and visions of justice. In the furrows of cassava, maize, millet, matooke and beans lies a contested terrain where power, knowledge, and survival intersect. This thesis emerges from that terrain. It is not only an inquiry into agricultural alternatives, but also an exploration of the struggles, contradictions, and possibilities that animate them. It asks how farmers and their organisations navigate structural barriers, forge solidarities, and reimagine agricultural futures in ways that challenge dominant paradigms. The pages that follow are guided by the conviction that agriculture is more than production. It is political, cultural, and ecological. It is about who decides, who benefits, and who bears the costs. In this sense, the thesis is a reflection on the process of transformation itself: how it begins, how it falters, and how it might endure. Like the journey to 'the promised land', it evokes the passage from bondage toward freedom, from domination toward emancipation, from despair toward the hope of renewal. This metaphor captures not only the spirit of struggle and resistance that animates Uganda's agrarian transformations, but also the hope and imagination that sustain them.

This prologue, then, is an invitation—to journey through the fields and meeting halls of Uganda's farmer groups and civil society organisations, to listen to their practices and struggles, and to consider what they reveal about the wider quest for equitable and sustainable agricultural futures.

1 Introduction



Figure 1. Hills of Kabale

Source: (Andy crump/science photo library)

In the hills of Kabale in Uganda, Mama Grace once grew potatoes (emondi), using indigenous practices passed down through generations. When the government introduced modernisation programs promising higher yields through commercially improved seed varieties and synthetic fertilisers, she reluctantly joined. At first, her output increased, and officials praised her ‘success’, but soon, the soil hardened, pests intensified, and the cost of inputs outpaced her returns.

She watched her neighbours sink deeper into debt, their autonomy withering as seed suppliers dictated not only what to grow but when to plant and harvest. Community meetings that once pulsed with shared decision-making grew scarce, displaced by the prescriptive visits of distant agribusiness agents, often appearing in the guise of government extension workers. The promised prosperity came with hidden costs

such as increased indebtedness, disappearing indigenous crops, and rising food and livelihood insecurity.

One day, she attended a local agroecology workshop hosted by a local NGO. There, she learned of seed-saving and composting, and was told that she could become food sovereign through practicing agroecology. Reviving old practices with new knowledge, she began to resist agribusiness, not with pitchforks or protests, but through the tools of everyday practice: saving seeds, diversifying crops, and questioning the prescriptions of agribusiness agents. Mama Grace's farm became a gathering place for those seeking alternatives. Together, they challenged the narrative that only industrial models could feed the future. Their resistance was not loud, but it was growing, seed by seed, plot by plot, reclaiming the right to define agriculture on their own terms.

The story of Mama Grace illustrates the lived contradictions of agricultural modernisation in Uganda. While modernisation is often promoted as a pathway to increased productivity and economic prosperity, it often comes at the expense of local autonomy, ecological sustainability, and social justice. Her experience reflects a broader reality across Sub-Saharan Africa, where conventional, market-driven approaches rooted in green revolution logics (Bergius & Buseth, 2019) have led to unintended consequences such as dependency on external inputs, environmental degradation, and growing inequalities (Stone, 2022). Yet, Mama Grace's shift toward agroecology reveals a growing, though often marginalised, form of politicisation characterised by everyday forms of resistance, contestation, and the prefiguring of alternative visions. Her decision to embrace alternative practices was not merely about survival in the face of economic or ecological pressures; it was deeply political in that it challenged dominant input-intensive models, asserted autonomy over her farming choices, and aligned her with broader struggles for food sovereignty and agrarian justice.

Nonetheless, the ways in which such efforts contest problematic modernisation trajectories and mobilise and prefigure new agrarian futures remain largely underexplored in scholarship. Thus, grounded in a critical realist and emancipatory social science perspective, this thesis contends that achieving sustainable and inclusive agricultural alternatives requires confronting the structural and institutional barriers that reproduce dominant paradigms while marginalising alternatives. In this regard, I argue for a politicised struggle over agricultural transformation (Anderl, 2024, see also George, 1989), as such struggles create arenas where dominant narratives and policy regimes can be challenged, reframed, or resisted (Palonen et al., 2019; Wiesner et al., 2017). Globally, agrarian politicisation has intensified in recent decades through the rise of peasant movements and civil society advocating for agroecology and food sovereignty (Akram-Lodhi, 2015; Borras Jr et al., 2008; Van der Ploeg, 2018).

Yet much of this scholarship has centred on Latin America and Southeast Asia, with comparatively limited attention to how these dynamics unfold in Sub-Saharan Africa. In Uganda, where forms of resistance remain fragmented and relatively emergent (Martiniello, 2017, 2018), important questions persist about how contestation and mobilisation around agrarian alternatives are shaped, constrained, and enabled by local political economies, institutional landscapes, and social configurations. This thesis seeks to address these gaps by examining the actors, strategies, obstacles, and possibilities for politicisation of agricultural development in Uganda, and by exploring how such efforts shape the emergence and mobilisation of viable alternatives.

While the study foregrounds the politicisation of agrarian alternatives in Uganda, such dynamics cannot be understood in isolation. They are shaped by, and respond to, wider debates about the role and trajectory of agricultural development across the Global South. In mainstream development discourse, agriculture is frequently celebrated as a cornerstone of socio-economic progress and human flourishing (Abioye et al., 2020; Diao et al., 2010). In Uganda, where the sector provides the principal livelihood source for most of the population, it is often framed as the key vehicle for poverty reduction, food security, and the attainment of middle-income status (Isgren, 2018a; Rafael, 2023). This vision has underpinned extensive financial, technical, and policy interventions that promote agricultural modernisation through productivity enhancement, technological upgrading, and market integration at regional and global scales (Akram-Lodhi, 2013; Bergius & Buseeth, 2019; McMichael, 2012b; Stone, 2022; Tacoli, 2013).

This modernisation model has in some cases delivered short-term gains in yields and incomes. However, critics highlight its long-term socio-ecological costs such as soil degradation, biodiversity loss, rising dependency on external inputs, deepening rural inequality, and the erosion of smallholder autonomy (Altieri, 2009; Crews et al., 2018; Houser & Stuart, 2020; Isgren et al., 2020; Stone, 2022; Weis, 2010). Moreover, in spite of successes elsewhere, their viability and resilience are questioned in resource-constrained settings (McMichael, 2014; Stone, 2022), raise questions about their viability and resilience in resource-constrained settings such as Uganda.

It is within this tension between dominant modernisation pathways and the often-overlooked contestations that this thesis is situated. It starts from the premise that agricultural transformation is neither a linear nor a purely technocratic endeavour, but rather a deeply contested and uneven process shaped by historical legacies, systemic and institutional lock-ins (Giraldo & Rosset, 2018; Lang, 1998; McKay et al., 2025; Rohne Till et al., 2024; Wald, 2015; Williams et al., 2024). By foregrounding the concept of politicisation, therefore, the thesis seeks to create knowledge on how collective actors mobilise social power to contest unfavourable policies and practices, while also navigating and reshaping the contextual, institutional, and structural dynamics that shape the articulation and viability of

alternative agrarian models. Politicisation here is understood as a dynamic process that exposes contradictions, unsettles taken-for-granted assumptions, and expands the boundaries of what is considered politically possible (Kauppi et al., 2016; Palonen et al., 2019). I align with Kauppi, Palonen, and Wiesner (2016, 12) who note that politicisation “creates times, spaces and issues for political action as well as alternative power resources, and aims to transform so far uncontested assumptions, identities and principles into objects of political controversies.”

1.1 Agricultural development in contemporary Uganda

Agricultural development in contemporary Uganda is profoundly shaped by layered historical legacies (Mwanika et al., 2021). In the precolonial era, mixed-cropping systems, communal land tenure, and kinship-based governance underpinned sustenance and social cohesion. These arrangements were fundamentally restructured under colonial rule through cash-crop orientation, exploitative land tenure policies, and centralised authority, which entrenched social inequalities (Mamdani; Reid, 2002; Tosh, 1978). Colonial agricultural policies further established the ideological and institutional foundations of Uganda’s agrarian structure by serving metropolitan extraction, privileging export-oriented production, enforcing racialised labour hierarchies, and marginalising subsistence practices (De Haas, 2017, 2020; Mamdani, 1987; Mwanika et al., 2021). Rather than dismantling these legacies, postcolonial reforms and the neoliberal Structural Adjustment Programs of the 1990s reinforced them by liberalising markets, withdrawing state support, and opening pathways for global agribusiness interests (De Haas, 2017, 2022; Makokha, 2001; McCann, 1991).

Despite these challenges, agriculture remains a cornerstone of Uganda’s economy, contributing nearly a quarter of GDP (24 percent in FY 2022/23 and 26.2 percent in FY 2024/25), about 42 percent of export earnings, and employing approximately 70 percent of the working population, making it the principal source of rural livelihoods (Bahigwa et al., 2005; FAO, 2025; Kwizera et al., 2023; MoFPED, 2023; UBOS, 2024). At the heart of this agrarian economy are smallholder farmers, who constitute its backbone, with more than 70 percent of the population depending on agriculture for survival (FAO, 2023). Uganda has over 3.5 million family farms, the majority of which are smallholder operations managing fragmented plots of less than two hectares (FAO, 2023). Yet, despite their centrality to food production and rural well-being, smallholders remain constrained by limited access to productive inputs, credit, extension services, and reliable markets, leaving them vulnerable to persistent poverty and food insecurity (Anderson et al., 2016). Climate variability, land degradation, and the lack of affordable credit exacerbate these vulnerabilities, reinforcing cycles of marginalisation. In addition, the increasing use of agricultural chemicals has introduced new risks: research highlights that smallholders are

frequently exposed to pesticides without adequate protective measures, resulting in health impacts such as higher prevalence of sleep disturbances (Fuhrimann et al., 2022; Isgren & Andersson, 2021). These dynamics highlight a central tension in Uganda's agrarian transformation: while smallholders are indispensable to sustaining rural livelihoods and national development, they remain the most disadvantaged within agricultural modernisation agendas.

Nonetheless, the Ugandan government continues to advance the modernisation agenda as the principal pathway to rural prosperity and national progress, despite these persistent structural vulnerabilities (Isgren, 2018a; Mugagga et al., 2018; Byekwaso, 2019). Deeply grounded in developmentalist and neoliberal frameworks, this agenda emphasises industrialisation, commercialisation, and mechanisation, with flagship policies designed to integrate smallholders into market-oriented, input-intensive production systems (Isgren, 2018a; Kiiza, 2012; Mugagga et al., 2018; Nambassa & Purnomo, 2024; Uganda Investment Authority, 2022). Such policy orientations reproduce historical patterns of exclusion by positioning smallholders as subjects to be 'modernised' rather than as agents with valuable knowledge and practices (Birner & Resnick, 2010; Isgren, 2018a). In practice, this has meant that state-led interventions frequently privilege technical fixes such as commercialised hybrid seeds, synthetic fertilisers, and mechanisation, while sidelining farmer-driven innovations and ecologically grounded practices (Mugagga et al. 2018; Byekwaso 2019). As a result, many smallholders are integrated into value chains under adverse terms, often facing new dependencies on external inputs and volatile markets, while those unable to comply with commercialisation requirements are marginalised altogether (Boda et al., 2024; Ekumah, 2024; Nambassa & Purnomo, 2024). The emphasis on market rationality and large-scale production thus risks deepening socio-economic inequalities and eroding smallholder autonomy, even as it is promoted as the primary pathway to rural prosperity (Hickey, 2013; Wiegratz et al., 2018).

Table 1: Key agricultural development policies in Uganda

Policy	Summary
National Agricultural Policy (NAP)	Promotes commercialisation of smallholder agriculture through access to financial services such as loans.
Agriculture Sector Strategic Plan (ASSP) 2015/16–2019/20	The five-year strategy focuses on transforming smallholders into commercial farmers by improving access to critical inputs and markets.
National Agricultural Extension Policy (NAEP) 2016	Aims to shift smallholders from subsistence to market-oriented production through strengthened extension services.
National Agricultural Extension Strategy (NAES) 2016/17–2020/21	Aims to enhance smallholder competitiveness by integrating them into value chains and improving research linkages.
National Fertiliser Policy (2016)	Ensures availability and accessibility of quality fertiliser to smallholders, promoting sustainable intensification.
National Seed Policy (2018)	Seeks to improve smallholders' access to quality seed (mostly commercial seeds), promoting productivity and conservation of high-value crop varieties.
National Irrigation Policy (2017) and National Irrigation Master Plan (2011-2035)	Aims to transform agriculture from subsistence to commercial farming through expanded irrigation

Source: Summaries of key policies produced by the author

1.2 Limitations of neoliberal agricultural modernisation in Uganda

As indicated above, the neoliberal trajectory of agricultural modernisation in Uganda has been promoted as a pathway to increased efficiency, market integration, and rural development. It has often been credited with expanding export-oriented production, attracting private investment, and stimulating growth in sectors such as coffee, flowers, and fish (Kjær & Joughin, 2012). Framed as strategies to modernise agriculture, improve productivity, and connect farmers to global value chains, these initiatives reflect the broader developmentalist and market-oriented vision underpinning Uganda's agricultural policies. However, despite such promises, the trajectory has been marked by profound limitations that have deepened inequalities, undermined smallholder resilience, and eroded local food systems (Byekwaso, 2019).

In Uganda, the neoliberal turn was concretised through the Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) of the late 1980s, which fundamentally reoriented the agrarian sector toward market-led reforms through liberalisation, privatisation, and the scaling back of state responsibilities. This process entailed dismantling state marketing boards such as the Coffee Marketing Board and the Lint Marketing Board, which had previously stabilised producer prices and provided an institutional buffer for smallholders (Makokha, 2001; Ssemogerere et al., 2003). The withdrawal of public support for extension services and input subsidies further eroded state capacity, leaving farmers vulnerable to fluctuating world prices and increasingly

dependent on costly private services (Kwapong & Korugyendo, 2010). Privatisation simultaneously facilitated the entry of multinational agribusiness actors, particularly in coffee value chains, where control over processing and export channels shifted from cooperatives to foreign-owned firms, deepening farmer dependence and reducing their bargaining power (Joughin & Kjær, 2010). Liberalisation also opened Uganda's markets to the dumping of subsidised commodities such as powdered milk, poultry, and grain from Europe and North America, undercutting local producers and contributing to the erosion of domestic food systems (Ssozi, 2018). These dynamics entrenched processes of capitalist accumulation while undermining smallholder resilience and reinforcing rural inequality.

Moreover, some scholars have described Uganda's trajectory as an ideological one, aiming to reshape agrarian subjectivities, reconfigure social norms, and promote a neoliberal moral economy (Wiegratz et al., 2018). In practice, this involves cultivating farmers who see themselves primarily as entrepreneurial market actors, valuing efficiency, competition, and integration into global value chains, rather than as custodians of land, community, and ecological sustainability (Van der Ploeg, 2018). Thus, under this moral economy, values of market rationality such as, entrepreneurial individualism and competition are elevated into universal principles, while poverty and inequality are framed as the result of individual failure rather than systemic exclusion or historical dispossession (Wiegratz et al., 2018). In this framing, the burden of transformation is placed on the shoulders of the rural poor, while the role of the state is minimised and the structural drivers of inequality are obscured (Wiegratz, 2010; Wiegratz et al., 2018). This ideological shift has helped justify a development model that, although couched in the language of modernity and efficiency, often entrenches injustice and reproduces entrenched social and economic inequalities (Isgren, 2018a).

Therefore, while Uganda's neoliberal reforms have been credited with fostering GDP growth and facilitating integration into global markets, a growing body of critical scholarship views these developments as a form of pseudo-development. As Wiegratz (2010) note, the discourse of growth often conceals a political economy marked by deepening inequality, dispossession, and systemic malpractice. For example, liberalisation of the coffee sector increased export revenues in Uganda, yet many smallholders faced volatile prices, loss of cooperative protections, and declining real incomes (Akoyi & Maertens, 2018). Similarly, the expansion of large-scale monocultures, land commodification, and the promotion of genetically modified organisms carry a greater risk of undermining seed sovereignty, degrading ecological systems, and weakening customary tenure arrangements (Ashukem, 2020; Martiniello, 2015, 2017). For instance, the government's move to push toward formalised land tenure has been associated with increased land grabbing and elite capture (Murphy et al., 2017).

Thus, while presented as empowering, these reforms often displace communal practices and intensify processes of accumulation by dispossession (Carmody &

Taylor, 2016; Harvey, 2017; Murphy et al., 2017). In practice, it is precisely through the selective integration of smallholders into global agro-food value chains that marginalisation occurs: many are incorporated on adverse terms, excluded from meaningful decision-making spaces such as price-setting and standard-setting bodies, and left vulnerable to market shocks, contract farming dependencies, and the volatility of global competition (Araghi, 2012; Araghi, 1995; McMichael, 2012b, 2018). A study conducted in Uganda indicated, for example, that contract farming schemes, portrayed by global development agencies as a solution to ‘land grabs, often entrench exploitative labour relations, reduce farmers’ bargaining power, and lock them into cycles of dependency and debt (Martiniello, 2021). Hence, smallholders are not simply being left behind; they are being systematically disempowered.

In this way, although state-led and technocratic modernisation initiatives such as Operation Wealth Creation (OWC) have contributed to poverty reduction in some parts of the country (Mpangwire et al., 2023), they have simultaneously reinforced exclusion by privileging technical solutions and marginalising alternative agrarian knowledge (Byekwaso, 2016; Byekwaso, 2019). For instance, OWC has focused heavily on distributing hybrid maize and coffee seedlings, chemical fertilisers, and pesticides, often without adequate follow-up or adaptation to local conditions (Byekwaso, 2019). Such interventions sideline agroecological practices—like intercropping, mulching, and soil fertility management with organic inputs—that many smallholders have long relied upon.

Similarly, the promotion of improved dairy breeds and imported poultry under extension programs has marginalised indigenous livestock systems, which are better adapted to local climates and disease ecologies (Byekwaso, 2019; Isgren, 2018a; Lwiza et al., 2024). Customary tenure arrangements have also been weakened by land titling and registration drives that are framed as ‘modernisation,’ which tend to privilege investors and elites at the expense of communal access and smallholder security. As a result, the state’s agricultural vision is increasingly shaped by a narrow techno-economic rationality aligned with donor and market interests, leaving little room for locally grounded, ecologically sensitive, or socially just alternatives. This narrowing of the development imagination not only limits the scope of transformation but actively undermines the very human-environmental systems that sustain rural life.

Hence, the most fundamental contradiction is not merely a gap between policy ambition and agrarian reality, but rather the persistent project of attempting to reshape that reality in line with modernisation ideals. The state’s vision of agricultural transformation assumes that progress means large-scale, commercial, and standardised farming, and policy instruments are repeatedly mobilised to remake smallholder agriculture in this image (Busingye, 2017; Martiniello, 2018). But in privileging such a vision, policymakers often underestimate or misrecognise the productivity, resilience, and socio-ecological value of existing smallholder systems (Busingye, 2017; Djurfeldt & Djurfeldt, 2013; Hickey, 2013; Martiniello,

2018). This generates contradictory outcomes, where programs intended to transform agriculture instead displace local practices, marginalise farmers unable to comply with commercialisation requirements, and deepen inequality within rural communities (Joughin & Kjær, 2010). Such deep-rooted limitations do not simply persist in silence; they generate friction, dissent, and contestations. It is in this politically charged terrain that politicisation becomes not only relevant but inevitable, as it provides a lens to examine how these tensions are made visible, framed, and acted upon. It provides a channel through which mobilisation efforts confront dominant agricultural models that entrench inequality, suppress alternatives, and close off transformative possibilities (Isgren, 2018b; Wiesner, 2021b). As Duncan and Claeys (2018, 1421) note:

politicisation ... [is] fundamental to re-building food systems as it makes counter-hegemonic positions both visible and possible while re-invigorating policy processes through meaningful participation and engagement with contentious issues.

It is against this backdrop that I use the term here not only to denote the exposure of contradictions within the prevailing system, but also as a critical lens for analysing how such contradictions are contested and potentially transformed through acts of resistance, discursive reframing, and collective mobilisation across multiple scales and arenas.

1.3 Problem formulation

Amid growing concerns discussed above, some critics and scientists increasingly argue that the current neoliberal, market-driven and industrial model of agricultural modernisation fail to correspond with the everyday realities of smallholders (Boda et al., 2024; Busingye, 2017; Van Rooyen et al., 2021). It is also ill-equipped to respond to interlinked crises of climate change, biodiversity loss, food insecurity, and unsustainable use of natural resources (Rosati et al., 2021, 805). They, hence, point to the urgent need for a paradigm shift towards alternative agrarian development models, built on ecological stewardship, social justice, and democratic participation (Akram-Lodhi, 2018; Crews et al., 2018; Fairbairn, 2012; IPES, 2022; Nyéléni, 2007; Ofosu et al., 2020).

However, existing efforts to transform agriculture towards viable alternatives are often undermined by powerful structural, institutional, and political barriers which block their expansion and/or relegate them to the margins (de Molina, 2020; Nicol, 2020). Moreover, even when alternatives such as agroecology are formally recognised and incorporated into policy frameworks, they are frequently reduced to a neutral set of technical practices, stripped of their transformative vision and political substance (Giraldo & Rosset, 2023; IPES, 2022). Such depoliticisation not

only stripes these alternatives of their emancipatory potential but also obscures critical questions of power, justice, and rights, thereby reinforcing existing hierarchies and foreclosing pathways toward systemic transformation (Rosset & Barbosa, 2021; Wood, 2016). In Uganda, for example, state-led agricultural reforms continue to prioritise export-oriented growth, foreign investment, and input-intensive models (Mugagga et al., 2018), leaving little space for smallholder-centred and context-specific agroecological pathways. These dynamics consolidate the dominance of external market and corporate interests, while marginalising viable practices with potential to strengthen long-term socio-ecological resilience (Anderson et al., 2019).

Amid such systemic barriers, political obstacles, and tensions shaping Uganda's agricultural development trajectory, this thesis departs from the premise that achieving sustainable and inclusive agricultural transformation requires deliberate efforts to disrupt entrenched systemic, structural, institutional, and political mechanisms that sustain dominant agricultural models and reproduce inequality and unsustainability (Scoones et al., 2015; Scoones et al., 2020). Accordingly, I orient this thesis in line with the call from Lahsen and Turnhout (2021) for sustainability researchers and activists to confront the socio-political barriers that entrench the status quo and reinforce power structures, interests, and norms that inhibit reform and obstruct alternative ways of thinking and organising society. By foregrounding politicisation, this thesis, therefore, seeks not only to reveal how dominant models are sustained, but also to illuminate the struggles, strategies, and possibilities through which alternative agrarian pathways emerge.

1.4 Aim and research questions

The overarching aim of this thesis is to explore how politicisation of agricultural transformation unfolds in Uganda and how it shapes the prospects for advancing agricultural alternatives. Politicisation here is conceived as a set of processes rooted in social action (Wiesner et al., 2017), while transformation is understood as contingent on the presence of capable change agents (Wright, 2019). Accordingly, the analysis examines how these agents emerge, the strategies they use, and how they exploit existing and new openings to push for change amid persistent obstacles. I draw on critical realism as a meta-theory and emancipatory social science as an organising framework, enabling an exploration not only of the mechanisms that sustain problematic trajectories and constrain the realisation of alternatives but also of those through which obstacles are resisted and potentially reshaped. In this process, politicisation functions as a mechanism for uncovering problematic trajectories and enables creation of conditions for advancing new possibilities of change (Kauppi et al., 2016; Palonen et al., 2019). The study is guided by three inter-linked research questions outlined below:

Table 2 Research questions and contribution to empirical articles

Research questions	Contribute to articles
1 In what ways can alternative practices and framings such as agroecology and food sovereignty serve as foundations for rethinking agricultural development and envisioning transformative agricultural pathways in Uganda?	Articles I and II
2 What structural, institutional, and political obstacles hinder the realisation of such alternatives, and why so?	Articles I & III
3 How is the politicisation of agriculture unfolding in the context of shrinking civic space and NGOisation, and who are the change agents?	Articles I, II and III

Table 3 below summarises and presents an overview of the three articles that comprise this thesis, showing how they are interrelated and collectively contribute to a deeper understanding of agrarian transformation in Uganda from complementary perspectives and how politicisation is brought to life through these initiatives.

Table 3: Overview of the research articles

Article	Theory and concepts	Main Contribution
PAPER I	NGOisation and Food Sovereignty	Examines how CSOs and Farmer Organisations promote food sovereignty in Uganda through farmer mobilisation, advocating for alternative practices like agroecology. Reveals both potentials and limitations of NGO-driven food sovereignty, stressing need for stronger coordination, more assertive strategies, and alliances between producers and consumers.
PAPER II	Everyday Politics	Demonstrates how smallholder farmer groups, through practices like community seed banks, VSLAs, and farmer field schools, knowledge sharing cultivate subtle yet politically significant forms of resistance. Positions everyday collective practices as latent politicising forces shaping agrarian transformation from below.
PAPER III	Social Movement Theory (Tactics, Strategies, opportunities and threats, and strategic adaptation)	Shows how CSOs and farmer organisations in Uganda strategically adopt non-confrontational advocacy to navigate repression and shrinking civic space, balancing survival, legitimacy, and incremental reforms. Highlights strategic adaptation as key to agrarian transformation under authoritarian constraints.

1.5 Scope of analysis

This research is situated within the interdisciplinary field of sustainability science, which seeks to generate knowledge that responds to the complex and urgent challenges at the intersection of society and the environment (Clark & Dickson 2003; Jerneck et al. 2011; Kates et al. 2001). It is motivated by the intensification of sustainability crises, including climate change, ecological degradation, agrarian distress, and widening socio-economic inequalities. Agricultural transformation provides a critical lens for engaging these issues because of its deep interconnections with land use, food systems, biodiversity, and climate change. At the same time, it is a domain where inequalities are both produced and reproduced through unequal access to land, resources, and opportunities. Yet, it also offers a potential site for advancing more just and sustainable alternatives. This is summarised in Figure 2 below:

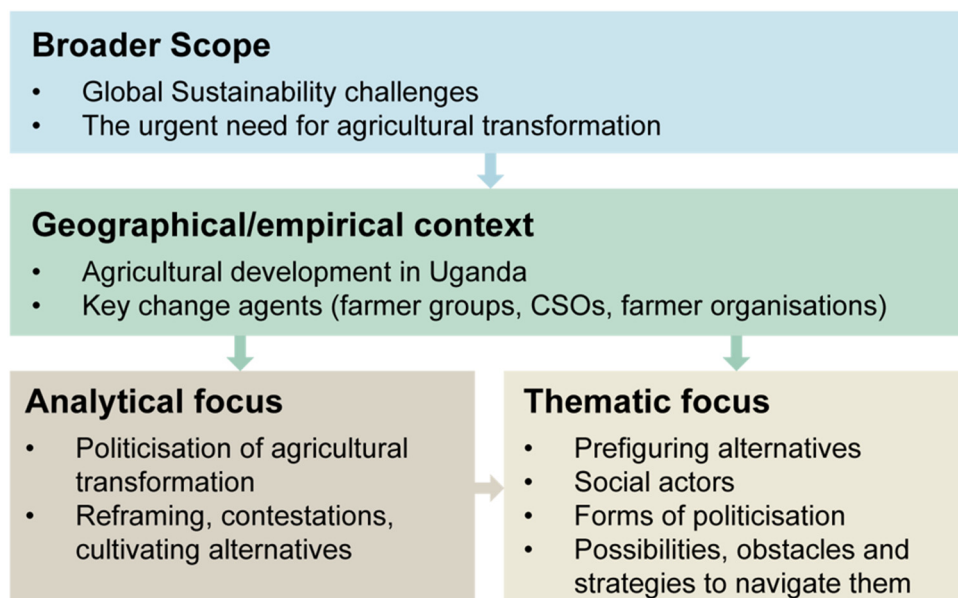


Figure 2: Summary of the scope of study

This thesis focuses empirically on Uganda, examining how alternative visions of agricultural development are mobilised through processes of political engagement and contestation. Particular attention is given to the ways in which Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), farmer organisations, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), and smallholder farmer groups promote socially inclusive and ecologically grounded agricultural alternatives. The study is grounded in a critical realist

approach, which provides a philosophical basis for uncovering the deeper structures and generative mechanisms that enable or constrain transformative change. Complementing this, I employ emancipatory social science as the overarching normative and analytical framework. This perspective emphasises the need to diagnose oppressive structures, envision viable alternatives, and identify the strategic conditions under which transformation becomes possible (Wright, 2010).

Conceptually, the analysis employs the lens of politicisation to explore how agricultural development is rendered a political issue and reframed through everyday practices, prefiguration, and strategic engagement with policymakers. Politicisation, in this sense, is understood as a process that mobilises social power to challenge dominant paradigms and advance alternative pathways, transforming what might otherwise appear as technical or apolitical issues into arenas of contestation over values, authority, and the direction of societal change. It involves reasserting agency among actors who are often marginalised in decision-making spaces, enabling them to redefine agricultural priorities, question the legitimacy of prevailing models of modernisation, and articulate visions rooted in social justice, ecological integrity, and collective autonomy. Hence, the thesis does not evaluate politicisation in terms of discrete policy outcomes but foregrounds the processes of mobilisation, examining how social power is enacted, contested, and sustained within structural constraints. By delimiting the analysis in this way, the study seeks to provide a nuanced account of the dynamics through which actors imagine and pursue alternative agricultural practices in Uganda, whilst recognising that these struggles are embedded within broader systemic transformations that extend beyond the immediate empirical cases.

1.6 Thesis outline

In this kappa, I adopt an integrative structure that deliberately weaves together theoretical and empirical elements in sustained dialogue. Rather than treating theory and empirics as separate domains, the analysis continuously interlaces conceptual framing with field-based insights. Except for Chapters 1 and 2, each empirical chapter begins by situating its focus within relevant theoretical debates and revisits those in light of my findings. This recursive design deepens analytical engagement while generating original contributions to both conceptual understanding and practical insight into how politicisation shapes pathways toward sustainable agricultural futures in Uganda. In this way, the integrative structure not only advances theoretical debates but also grounds them in lived agrarian realities, ensuring that the analysis remains both conceptually rigorous and empirically meaningful.

In Chapter 1, I introduce the central research problem and situate it within the broader context of Uganda's agricultural development trajectory. I outline the contradictions of dominant agricultural modernisation models and present the overarching aim, research questions, and analytical focus of the study. In Chapter 2, I lay out the theoretical and methodological foundations of the thesis. I discuss my meta-theoretical commitment to critical realism and the normative orientation provided by emancipatory social science. I introduce social movement theory as the primary analytical framework for understanding collective agency and strategic action, alongside the concept of politicisation as the central lens through which I conceptualise mobilisation and contestation in Uganda's agricultural transformation. I conclude the chapter by outlining my methodological approach, research context, data sources, and ethical considerations. From Chapter 3 onward, I turn to more empirical analysis. In Chapter 3, I discuss how existing agricultural development alternatives are envisioned as *real utopias* as understood by (Wright, 2010) and political practices. I analyse how frameworks such as agroecology and food sovereignty are articulated as viable alternatives to neoliberal modernisation in Uganda. I show how actors work within the cracks and contradictions of the dominant model to advance these visions, and how food sovereignty, in particular, functions as a mobilising ideology for transformation. In Chapter 4, I examine the obstacles that hinder emancipatory agricultural alternatives. I analyse the barriers to their emergence, uptake, and scaling, and situate these obstacles within Uganda's political landscape. Here, I explore the role of civil society organisations, their interactions with the state, and the implications of NGOisation for transformative potential. In Chapter 5, I focus on the contours of politicisation within a closing civic space and NGOised terrain. Specifically, I examine how collective actors navigate restrictions through non-confrontational and collaborative strategies, coalition-building, and grassroots farmer-led advocacy. I show how politicisation unfolds amidst repression, shrinking civic space, and structural constraints, while also creating openings for farmer-centred advocacy and coalition politics. In the final Chapter 6, I synthesise the core arguments of the thesis, reflect on my theoretical and empirical contributions, and discuss the broader implications for sustainability science, agrarian transformation, and political mobilisation. I also identify key insights for future research and practice, highlighting how my findings might inform both academic debates and practical strategies for advancing sustainable agricultural alternatives.

2 Theory and Methodology

In this chapter, I outline the theoretical approach guiding the study. Critical realism provides the philosophical foundation, enabling me to probe beneath observable events to identify the underlying structures, mechanisms, and causal dynamics that shape the challenges facing agricultural development in Uganda. Building on this foundation, I adopt emancipatory social science as the overarching framework for organising the analysis of existing alternatives, the barriers to their scaling and adoption, and the opportunities for transformative change. Within this framework, I employ social movement theory as the primary analytical lens for examining how collective actors mobilise and create social power to advance viable alternatives, while also confronting the political and structural obstacles that limit their agency. To further deepen the analysis, I introduce the concept of politicisation, clarifying how I conceptualise and operationalise it as a dynamic process through which actors frame, contest, and transform power relations. While this chapter establishes the broader conceptual foundations of the thesis, I also engage with additional theoretical perspectives in the respective articles and empirical chapters where appropriate. The chapter concludes with a discussion of key methodological considerations that connect these theoretical commitments to my research design.

2.1 Critical realism

Sustainability science is driven by a commitment to engage with the complex socio-ecological problems that arise from the dynamic interactions between nature and society (Clark, 2007; Jerneck et al., 2011; Kates et al., 2001). Writing a thesis within this field therefore requires an approach that not only explains real-world problems but also mobilises theoretical and methodological tools to identify pathways for addressing and tackling them. In contrast to disciplines constrained by rigid theoretical and methodological boundaries, sustainability science is described as use-inspired, shaped by the problems it seeks to solve rather than by the disciplinary tools it employs (Clark, 2007; Jerneck et al., 2011; Kates et al., 2001). This orientation necessitates a philosophical foundation capable of grappling with complexity, fostering interdisciplinarity, and remaining attentive to contextual specificity. In this regard, Critical Realism (CR) emerges as a compelling meta-theoretical stance, whose realist ontological position, relativist epistemological

orientation, and methodological flexibility aligns closely with the aims of sustainability research (Fletcher, 2017; Isaksen, 2012; Nastar, 2023).

CR's stratified conception of reality, comprising the empirical (the domain of human experience and observation), the actual (the domain of events that occur regardless of whether they are observed), and the real (the domain of deeper causal mechanisms that generate those events), provides a powerful framework for engaging with the complexity of socio-political systems and uncovering the structural roots and drivers of sustainability challenges (Bhaskar, 1975; Sayer, 2004). Applied to agricultural transformation, CR highlights distinct but interconnected layers that help explain how problematic agricultural trajectories and practices persist. At the empirical and mostly observable level, one may encounter farmers' experiences such as land degradation, low incomes, unequal access to resources. At the actual level, these experiences are conditioned by broader events and institutional arrangements, such as state policies prioritising export-oriented monocultures, donor-driven NGO programmes, or the organisation of farmer groups that mediate knowledge and resources. At the real level, deeper causal mechanisms are at work, including entrenched power asymmetries within global agri-food systems, epistemic injustices that marginalise indigenous knowledge systems, and political-economic dynamics that sustain dependence on external inputs.

By distinguishing among these layers, CR reveals why surface-level interventions often fall short in addressing the root causes of unsustainability and inequality in agricultural development. Transformative alternatives such as agroecology, by contrast, aim to confront both the visible constraints and the underlying structural forces that perpetuate them. From a critical realist perspective, the purpose of research is to uncover the causal mechanisms that reproduce and sustain undesirable social conditions (Fletcher, 2017), often operating through systems of social reproduction (Wright, 2010) in order to generate insights for fostering more equitable and sustainable pathways of agricultural development. From this perspective, one can start from the premise that, in the Ugandan context, problematic agricultural policies and practices are sustained not only by the prevalent neoliberal modernisation logic that underpins them but also by political repression, which constrains efforts to contest and transform these arrangements (as further affirmed in Article III of this thesis). The core ambition of this study is therefore to produce knowledge that illuminates these dynamics and demonstrates how processes of politicisation can foster social power and open possibilities for challenging them.

To pursue this aim, CR's pluralist epistemological orientation provides space for drawing on multiple theoretical and methodological approaches to investigate the complex, politically charged, and multi-scalar processes that shape agricultural transformation (Fletcher, 2017; Jerneck et al., 2011; Sayer, 2004). As Fletcher (2017, 182) reminds us, "the world is theory-laden but not theory-determined." In other words, our understanding of reality is always mediated through fallible

theories and methodological choices: how we define problems, identify their causes, and imagine possible solutions depends on interpretive frameworks that are necessarily partial and provisional. CR accommodates this by advancing a form of epistemological relativism, recognising that knowledge is socially influenced and contingent. Applying CR therefore requires a high degree of reflexivity, especially in selecting and applying theoretical and methodological frameworks, since these choices shape the very questions posed and the explanations produced. Such reflexivity also entails recognising that some lenses may offer more powerful explanations or closer approximations to reality than others (Fletcher, 2017; Nastar, 2023), while remaining attentive to the political and contextual conditions that influence both the production and application of knowledge.

In the study of agricultural transformation, this means not only comparing or even triangulating perspectives, from farmers' lived experiences to structural analyses of policy and power, but also situating knowledge claims within the contested political terrain in which they are generated and mobilised. This reflexive orientation informs both my methodological approach and interpretive stance. I remain critically attuned to how my positionality and theoretical commitments shape the research process, and I continuously evaluate the alignment between my methodological choices and the complexity of the phenomena under investigation. This ensures that my analysis is both theoretically robust and responsive to the nuanced dynamics of the politicisation process in Uganda. Such epistemological openness is also consistent with my study research design, which drew on in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and document reviews to investigate the experiences and practices of civil society actors and the collective practices of smallholder farmers. Moreover, the philosophical foundations of CR support the integration of diverse theoretical perspectives, such as social movement theory, which enrich the analysis of how structural forces intersect with collective agency in shaping agricultural transformation in Uganda.

However, while CR provides a layered ontology and methodological orientation for identifying how and why oppressive structures persist, and for revealing the hidden drivers behind observable challenges, its primary strength lies in diagnosis rather than transformation. It explains why problems endure but does not, on its own, provide a normative or strategic framework for envisioning how they might be overcome. To address this limitation, and to fulfil sustainability science's dual commitment to explanation and action, I turn to Erik Olin Wright's (2010) emancipatory social science (ESS) which complements CR in two crucial ways. First, it provides a *normative compass*, orienting inquiry toward the pursuit of human emancipation by clarifying what it means to move beyond domination, exploitation, and exclusion. Second, it introduces a *strategic dimension*, emphasising the tasks of diagnosing constraints, envisioning viable alternatives, and identifying the pathways through which transformation might be pursued. Methodologically, CR equips my research with the tools to link my observations to

the deeper causal mechanisms, such as neoliberal policy frameworks, global agri-food dependencies, and political repression, that reproduce unsustainable and unjust agricultural systems in Uganda. ESS, in turn, provides conceptual resources to assess how these constraints might be contested through collective action, how alternative agrarian futures can be promoted, and what strategies of transformation—symbiotic, interstitial, or ruptural—actors employ in practice.

2.2 Emancipatory social science

Whereas CR enables us to trace the mechanisms through which undesirable conditions are produced and reproduced, ESS extends the analysis by directly engaging with the challenge of transformation. Its dual orientation, both analytical and normative, enables research to move beyond explanation toward a normative inquiry into the possibilities of social empowerment and systemic change. In this way, ESS directly links scientific analysis with normative concerns, thereby directing social inquiry toward the goal of overcoming oppression and enabling human flourishing (Wright 2010). As Wright (2010, 7) notes, ESS aims to produce “scientific knowledge relevant to the collective project of challenging various forms of human oppression.” Central to this approach are three interrelated tasks:

1. *Diagnosing and critiquing existing social structures*: involving a systematic analysis of the institutions, power relations, and material conditions that sustain inequality and domination. This task uncovers the underlying mechanisms and historical processes through which problematic structures and practices are maintained and reproduced.
2. *Envisioning viable alternatives*: entailing the articulation of concrete and feasible models of social organisation that promote justice, equity, and democratic participation. Rather than abstract utopianism, this draws on empirical evidence and normative reasoning to formulate credible alternatives grounded in real-world possibilities.
3. *Analysing the obstacles, possibilities, and dilemmas of transformation*: examining the conditions under which emancipatory change can occur, including the socio-political forces that resist or enable change, the strategic choices facing agents of transformation, and the tensions and trade-offs involved in pursuing radical social change.

While all three tasks are essential, their relative weight depends on the specific context. In this study, I place particular emphasis on the third task, the theory of transformation, which directs my focus toward examining the obstacles, possibilities, and dilemmas embedded [in efforts to politicise agricultural transformation], while remaining attentive to how these are linked to the other two tasks. Central to this theory is the insight that meaningful transformation requires

not only the construction of viable alternatives but also active disruption of the institutional logics that reproduce oppressive systems. This is where his reflections on social reproduction become particularly relevant. As Wright argues, “oppression and exploitation are not sustained by inertia alone; they require active mechanisms of social reproduction” (2010, p. 193). These mechanisms operate both subtly and overtly, ranging from the “dull compulsion of everyday life” to deliberate strategies of coercion, ideology, and institutional design (pp. 192–194). My emphasis is on the latter—in which social reproduction is not a passive backdrop but an active process that continually sustains dominant arrangements. As has been documented in previous research (Byekwaso, 2019; Isgren, 2018a; Martiniello, 2018), in Uganda, agricultural policies, donor agendas, and livelihood pressures reinforce the primacy of commercialised, input-intensive models and make it difficult for alternatives such as agroecology to gain traction. This implies that activists and practitioners promoting alternatives need to navigate not only material constraints but also the ideologies and institutional practices that normalise the prevailing order.

Wright captures this dual challenge in his identification of three strategic modes of transformation: ruptural, which seeks a radical break with existing systems, often through revolution or mass mobilisation (e.g., revolutionary land reform); interstitial, which builds alternatives in the “cracks” of the system, such as cooperatives, agroecology networks, or grassroots innovations; and symbiotic, which pursues reforms through negotiation, aligning elite and popular interests (e.g., welfare reforms, state recognition of agroecology) (Wright, 2010, pp. 215–240). These modes offer distinct pathways for contesting and reshaping dominant structures, but the choice among them depends on the diagnostic insights of collective actors and the institutional barriers or openings they face. Within Wright’s broader framework, which includes a theory of social reproduction, an analysis of contradictions, and a theory of transformative agency, these strategies provide a comprehensive lens for understanding how processes of change unfold.

From this perspective, transformation unfolds through the dynamic interplay between prevailing social structures and institutional arrangements, on the one hand, and the capacity of collective actors to exercise agency, on the other (Wright 2010, Ch. 8). While structures constrain action, they also create spaces and opportunities that can be strategically exploited. Collective actors such as farmer groups, civil society organisations, and coalitions seek to identify and leverage these openings to advance alternatives (Wright, 2010, see also Callinicos, 2004). As Wright (2010, 203) notes, emancipatory change often emerges through “cracks and openings” in dominant systems—moments or spaces where structural rigidity is weakened and resistance can take root. The possibility of transformation therefore hinges on the presence of actors capable of discerning, mobilising around, and amplifying these cracks, thereby advancing emancipatory alternatives that challenge and reconfigure existing arrangements (Wright 2010, 202).

On this basis, I approach politicisation as a process that brings into focus not only the institutional mechanisms sustaining oppressive arrangements but also generates the means of contestation. It provides both the empirical and theoretical tools for analysing how collective actors in Uganda navigate the mechanisms of social reproduction, mobilise alternatives, and create spaces for transforming the institutional and structural conditions under which agriculture and rural livelihoods are organised. To understand how collective actors mobilise to contest dominant structures and pursue emancipatory alternatives, I draw on insights from social movement theory. While Wright's framework highlights the structural conditions and strategic dilemmas of transformation, social movement theory complements it by foregrounding the agency, organisational forms, and political dynamics through which contestation is enacted. It shows how social actors articulate grievances, forge collective identities, and build alliances that sustain resistance and advance alternatives. Situating struggles for sustainable agriculture within these dynamics highlights how transformation is pursued from below, often through contentious engagements with state institutions, markets, and civil society.

2.3 Social movement theory

As noted by Wright (2010), transformative change does not occur spontaneously but depends on the "conscious actions of people acting collectively" (268). He, thus, contends that "a theory of transformation needs to include a theory of conscious agency and strategy," one that illuminates how obstacles can be negotiated and opportunities leveraged toward emancipatory transformation (Wright, 2010, 19). Building on this understanding, I draw on Social Movement Theory (SMT) to analyse how collective actors mobilise and create social power to challenge dominant agrarian structures while envisioning and constructing alternative futures. Here, SMT provides an analytical lens for understanding how organised collective action emerges, evolves, and interacts with political and cultural structures (Buechler, 1995; McCarthy & Zald, 1977).

Within SMT, I specifically draw on the synthesis approach, which integrates insights from structural, cultural, and agency-oriented perspectives to explain how movements mobilise, sustain themselves, and influence broader transformations. Earlier paradigms, such as resource mobilisation, political process, and new social movement theories, tended to focus on single explanatory dimensions, whether organisational resources, political opportunities, or cultural identities (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). In contrast, the synthesis approach, as advanced by McAdam et al. (1996), offers a relational and processual framework that captures how these dimensions interact. It emphasises that collective action is not determined by structure or will alone but emerges through the dynamic interplay of political opportunities and threats, mobilising structures, and framing processes. This

integrated view resonates with Wright's emphasis on conscious strategic action, acknowledging that social actors operate within constraints while simultaneously imagining and experimenting with emancipatory alternatives. Below I elaborate on the main components of this approach:

Political opportunities and threats refer to the perceived openings and risks within a political environment that shape prospects for collective action (McAdam, 2017; Tarrow, 2022; Tilly & Tarrow, 2015). They include changes in institutional access, alliances, state capacity, or repression that may encourage or constrain mobilisation. Yet these conditions are never entirely objective; they are interpreted and acted upon by social actors. Politicisation, in this sense, hinges on how actors read and respond to their political context, discerning when cracks in dominant structures can be turned into openings and when threats require caution or adaptation. The synthesis approach thus encourages attention not only to the presence of opportunities but to the interpretive and strategic work through which actors recognise and engage them, an orientation that aligns with Wright's (2010) interest in how transformative strategies are conceived and pursued within limits.

Mobilising structures constitute organisational vehicles, formal and informal, through which collective actors coordinate and sustain action (McAdam et al. 1996). These include networks, associations, coalitions, and community-based groups that provide the institutional and relational infrastructure of movements. Mobilising structures are significant because they mediate between individual motivation and collective capacity: they connect dispersed actors, distribute resources, and facilitate sustained engagement. In the context of this study, they may also serve as spaces where alternative social relations and practices are rehearsed, prefiguring the kinds of social arrangements that actors seek to bring into being. From ESS perspective, such spaces embody the dual orientation of transformation: they are at once interstitial, developing alternatives within existing systems, and symbiotic, negotiating with dominant institutions to protect or expand transformative possibilities.

Framing processes denote the ways in which social actors construct shared meanings around grievances, goals, and strategies (McAdam et al., 1996). Through diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational framing, movements articulate what is at stake, why change is necessary, and how it can be achieved. Frames are central to the construction of collective identities and to the generation of legitimacy and commitment. They are also strategic, in that, actors often adapt or recalibrate frames to resonate with specific audiences or to navigate politically sensitive environments such as in Uganda. The synthesis approach highlights framing as the cultural and discursive dimension that links collective action to the wider field of social meaning, making it possible to understand how movements define transformation and position themselves within it.

Put together, these three dimensions provide a comprehensive and flexible framework for examining collective action. They connect the analysis of political context, organisational capacity, and cultural meaning in ways that reveal the interplay between structure and agency at the heart of social transformation. For this study, the synthesis approach offers conceptual tools to analyse how collective actors in Uganda interpret their environments, build organisational forms, and construct transformative narratives. In doing so, it supports an understanding of politicisation not as a fixed state, but as an ongoing process of meaning-making, coordination, and strategic engagement through which emancipatory possibilities are imagined and pursued within, against, and beyond existing structures.

To summarise, my theoretical framework integrates three complementary perspectives. CR enables the identification of the underlying causal mechanisms that generate agricultural challenges and sustain structural impediments to their transformation. ESS provides a normative and strategic orientation by envisioning alternative social arrangements and pathways for transformative change. SMT, in turn, elucidates how collective actors mobilise social power to contest dominant state and economic structures. These perspectives converge in the concept of politicisation, which serves as a mediating process through which structural problems are reframed as arenas of political struggle and collective action—an interrelation illustrated in Figure 3 below.

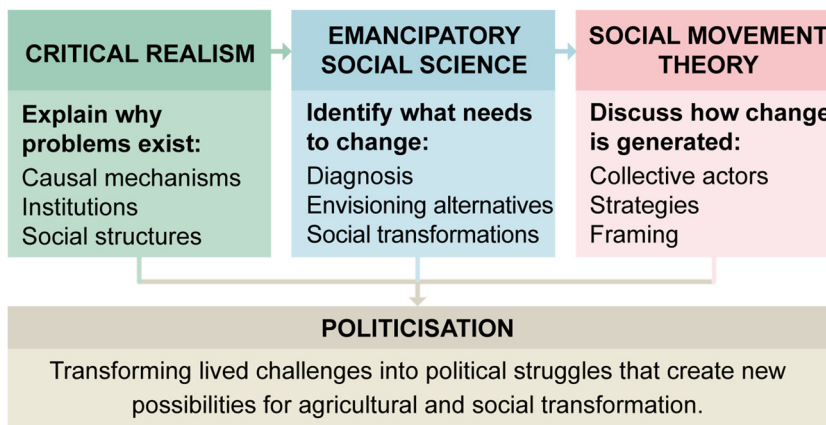


Figure 3. Theoretical Framework Interactions

2.4 Conceptualising politicisation

Politicisation is a complex and contested concept, shaped by multiple intellectual traditions and empirical applications, whose meaning varies across scholarly debates and contexts (Wiesner, 2021b). To situate my analysis, I draw on Wiesner (2021b, 49)’s synthesis of three central theoretical strands of politicisation within political theory.

The first strand, the *republican* thought¹, understands politicisation as arising from discord over the common good, which compels its renegotiation and thereby reaffirms civic identity and public spirit (Wiesner, 2021b, 51). This conception is primarily grounded in political philosophy and normative democratic theory, with an emphasis on collective self-government, civic virtue, and the vitality of the public sphere. The second strand develops out of the deliberative tradition, most closely associated with Habermasian critical theory and political sociology. In this perspective, politicisation is understood less as the eruption of discord than as a functional response to integration problems between subsystems and the lifeworld². When systemic dynamics overreach, through bureaucratisation, technocracy, or “intrusive legalism,” politicisation emerges as a corrective, seeking to recalibrate imbalances by means of communicative rationality and reasoned dialogue (Wiesner, 2021b, 51). Unlike the republican conception, which treats conflict as constitutive of civic life, the deliberative approach frames politicisation primarily as a pathway to consensus, reflecting its philosophical commitment to dialogue, mutual justification, and rational deliberation as the normative foundation of democratic politics. The third is the *agonistic* perspective, rooted in post-structuralist and radical democratic thought it emphasises contingency, conflict, and power. Associated with theorists such as Chantal Mouffe and Jacques Rancière, this strand rejects the notion that any domain is inherently unpolitical. Instead, politicisation is conceived as a performative process through which issues, identities, and institutions are rendered contestable and open to decision, without recourse to external normative criteria (Wiesner, 2021b, 56). From this vantage point, politicisation is not about resolving conflict through consensus, but about recognising antagonism, exposing exclusions, and sustaining democratic contestation³. I summarise these main distinctions in Table 4 below.

¹ For instance, republican theorists highlight the conflict between *grandi* (aristocratic elites) and *popolo* (common people) over the *bonum commune* (common good) as a paradigmatic example of politicisation through civic discord, where struggles between social groups compel renegotiations of collective identity and purpose (Wiesner 2021b, 52).

² An example is public forums and stakeholder dialogues organised to deliberate on fair distribution and sustainability, aiming to reach consensus between state programs and farmers’ needs

³ For instance, agrarian activists may frame hybrid seeds and chemical fertilisers as political choices that marginalise smallholders; in the process, render the very model of agricultural modernisation contestable, keeping open struggles over whose knowledge and practices count in development.

Table 4 Strands of Politicisation

Tradition	Cause of Politicisation	Purpose, Function, or Meaning of Politicisation	Normative Criterion in Judging Politicisation
Republican	Discord between citizens	Demarcation between private and public	Collective self-government and the common good
Deliberative	Integration problem	Recalibration of subsystems and lifeworld	Communicative rationality
Agonistic	Decidability	Performing contingency	—

Source: Wiesner (2021b)

These traditions diverge not only in how they conceptualise the causes and functions of politicisation, but also in the criteria they use to evaluate it. For instance, as shown above, republican and deliberative approaches employ teleological standards such as collective self-government or communicative rationality, while agonistic and action-oriented perspectives treat politicisation as an irreducible political practice that resists evaluation by supposedly neutral benchmarks (Wiesner, 2021b). In other words, as Wiesner suggests (Wiesner, 2021b, 57):

the agonist notion of politicisation suggests that politicisation neither fulfils a pre-political aim nor has a meaning that could be uncovered without partaking in political action.

In this thesis, I align with the latter view, where politicisation is understood as a generative force—in that it is likely to emerge:

when subject matters are deemed both problematic, becoming a cause for conflict, and contingent, that is, changeable by deliberate political action (Wiesner, 2021b, 56).

By doing so, my concern becomes less with the preservation of civic unity or systemic equilibrium than with how social actors (social) mobilise power, expose contradictions, and contest dominant agrarian paradigms in Uganda. Associated with the action-oriented orientation of politics (Palonen, 2006), the agonistic tradition provides the most suitable conceptual tools here because it enables research to trace how politicisation unfolds in practice rather than simply what it does. It directs attention to the processes through which (social) power is mobilised, dominant assumptions are contested, and new political possibilities emerge. In this way, this approach allows for an analysis of politicisation not as a fixed outcome but as a dynamic process that generates openings for contestation and possibilities of change. Here, politicisation functions as a catalyst of democratic vitality, as it

disrupts closure, amplifies marginalised voices, and makes previously taken-for-granted assumptions contestable (Beveridge & Featherstone, 2021; Palonen et al., 2019). In other words, rather than signalling dysfunction, politicisation here is read as the very condition through which democracy is renewed, and political horizons reimagined (Wiesner, 2021a, 2021b; Wiesner et al., 2017). In this sense, conflict is rendered productive, generating opportunities for participation, solidarities, and alternative visions of social order.

Politicisation as a multi-level concept

Recognising its generative potential, it becomes necessary to adopt an analytical framework capable of capturing politicisation levels. Thus, I follow the view that politicisation is best understood as a multi-level concept (Wiesner, 2021a; Wood, 2016) which can and needs to be operationalised (Wiesner, 2021a). As defined by Wood (2016, 527):

A ‘multilevel concept’ is one that can be applied in multiple contexts and can have both a deep critical theoretical and even philosophical meaning but also refers quite legitimately to concrete acts that can be usefully measured in empirical research.

As such, politicisation spans three analytically distinct but interrelated levels: the macro-theoretical level, where the concept of the political is theorised; the meso-conceptual level, which focuses on identifying actors, processes, and mediating structures; the micro-empirical level, where politicisation materialises through situated practices and everyday engagements (Wiesner, 2021a; Wiesner et al., 2017; Wood, 2016). Hence, as Wiesner (2021a) emphasises, researchers must clarify their level of analysis and remain attentive to interconnections across these analytical strata. While this thesis primarily engages with the meso- and micro-levels, it also attends macro-theoretical debates to situate the broader political strand in which the research is embedded.

Theorising the Political

At the macro level, a foundational task involves clarifying the theorisation of politics that underpins the conceptualisation of politicisation. This is a critical step since divergent understandings of politics yield distinct interpretations of what constitutes politicisation (Palonen et al., 2019; Wood, 2016). The concept of politics is itself nebulous and multi-faceted, hence here I briefly describe the two theoretical traditions that have been utilised most in contemporary scholarship on politicisation (Palonen et al., 2019; Wiesner et al., 2017). These include: the system-oriented conception that views politics as a bounded, spatial/system/sphere or institutionalised field (Easton, 1955; Schattschneider, 1957; Wiesner, 2023; Zürn, 2016) and an action-oriented conception that sees politics as something enacted through struggle, contestation, and engagement (Palonen, 2003, 2006; Wiesner, 2023; Wiesner et al., 2017). The system-oriented perspective, developed by Easton

(1955); Schattschneider (1957) and extended by Zürn (2016) frames politics as a distinct arena governed by formal rules, procedures, and actors. Within this framework, politicisation denotes a process by which issues become part of the political agenda, marked by increasing public attention, actor mobilisation, ideological polarisation, and intensifying conflict (De Wilde et al., 2018; Hoeglinger, 2016; Hutter et al., 2016; Zürn, 2016). This approach has proven especially useful in analysing formal institutional dynamics such as party politics and EU governance (Hutter et al., 2016; Statham & Trenz, 2012). However, its bounded and institutionalised nature often sidelines informal or pre-institutionalised expressions of politics—especially those emerging from subaltern groups or outside dominant political arenas.

In contrast, this thesis draws on the action-based approach (politics as an activity), originally formulated by Palonen (2003, see also Palonen, 2006) and subsequently developed by Wiesner and colleagues (Wiesner, 2021a, 2021b; Wiesner et al., 2017). This perspective rejects the notion of politics as a pre-given field and instead conceptualises it as constituted through performative acts of *politicisation*. According to this view, any issue may become political when it is framed, contested, or rendered visible as such (Kauppi et al., 2016; Palonen, 2003; Wiesner, 2021b, 2023; Wiesner et al., 2017). As Wiesner (2021b, 21) aptly states, ‘politics relates to what actors do and not to the field in which they act.’ In this sense, politicisation precedes and produces politics, rather than being a secondary process within a bounded domain (Palonen, 2003; Wiesner, 2021a; Wiesner et al., 2017). Politicisation, then, is not merely a movement into formal institutions, but an active, contingent, and generative process through which actors identify, name, and contest issues as political (Kauppi et al., 2016), thereby subjecting them to deliberation, dispute, and intervention (Palonen et al., 2019, 257). Hence, politicisation emerges from the mobilisation of contingency thus rendering the taken-for-granted visible, negotiable, and open to challenge (Wiesner, 2021b, 21). From this standpoint, agricultural development in Uganda becomes politicised when its ideological foundations are unmasked as instruments of control and inequality, and when struggles erupt through actors’ everyday practices, the prefiguration of alternatives, and the use of diverse forms of advocacy.

Operationalising Politicisation

At the meso level, politicisation is understood as the first stage of operationalisation, concerned with identifying the actors, issues, arenas, and processes through which political contestation takes shape; that is, the “who, what, and where” through which politicisation unfolds (Wiesner 2021b). From this perspective, politicisation in this thesis is approached as an ongoing, contingent process rather than a fixed outcome (Wiesner 2021a; Wood 2016). This captures the Palonen (2003) and Wiesner (2019b) assertion that politicisation is constituted through performative acts of naming, framing, contestation, and mobilisation that render taken-for-granted

arrangements visible, disputable, and open to negotiation. I conceptualise politicisation as a *sequence of acts* rather than a fixed condition. Building on this processual understanding, Wiesner (2021a, 2021b) distinguishes three interrelated moments of politicisation: first, an issue is marked as political; second, it gains resonance in public or semi-public arenas such as civil society, media, or advocacy networks; and third, it may be taken up by formal institutions. These stages are not linear, as issues can stall, be co-opted, or re-emerge in alternative arenas (Palonen et al. 2019; Wiesner 2021b). Operationalising politicisation in this study therefore involves analysing how agricultural development in Uganda is made political through everyday practices, discursive interventions, and organisational strategies. Particular attention is paid to how farmer groups, civil society actors, and policy advocates expose the ideological underpinnings of dominant agricultural models, contest their distributional effects, and prefigure alternatives. This allows politicisation to be captured as a contingent and generative process that unfolds both within formal institutions and across diffuse, informal, and pre-institutionalised arenas (Anderl 2024; Wiesner 2021b).

Researching Politicisation

At the micro level, the focus shifts to empirically observable acts through which politicisation unfolds, including speech acts, mobilisation, protest, resistance, and everyday political performances (Wiesner 2021b). This requires specifying the issue being politicised (in this case, agricultural modernisation) and tracing how different actors render it political. Following Anderl (2024), I make a distinction between politicisation of agriculture “from above” and “from below.” Politicisation (of agriculture) from above often refers to processes initiated by elites, institutions, or technocratic actors—such as governments framing agricultural modernisation through policy reforms, subsidy regimes, or international trade agreements. These usually frame agricultural transformation in the language of food security, humanitarianism, market efficiency and poverty reduction. A typical example of this in Uganda is the National Agricultural Advisory Services (NAADS) programme, which several scholars have described as highly politicised (Kjær & Joughin, 2012; Titeca & Onyango, 2012; Turolla, 2019). NAAD’s politicisation manifests in its commitment to a reform agenda shaped by international donors and agencies that prioritised market-oriented values and practices (Kjær & Joughin, 2012, see also Nystrand et al., (2025) on politicisation of cash transfers). Moreover, Anderl (2024) notes that such politicisation favours technocratic models and that it can constrain public debate and privilege elite interests.

By contrast, politicisation from below emerges through contestation and mobilisation by social actors, for instance when farmer organisations, civil society groups, or local communities challenge dominant models of agricultural development and put forward alternative visions such as agroecology or food sovereignty. In the agricultural domain, these dynamics interact: state-driven

initiatives to promote input-intensive agriculture may trigger grassroots resistance, while bottom-up struggles can themselves reshape policy agendas, demonstrating how politicisation unfolds through tensions between elite projects and everyday collective practices. A typical example of this is George (1984)'s seminal study of agricultural workers in Kuttanad, India, which illustrates how historically marginalised Dalit labourers became political subjects through sustained collective action, thereby reframing their socio-economic marginality as a matter of public concern and democratic contestation. Emergence of similar dynamics are observable in Uganda, where civil society organisations and rural farmers engage in acts of resisting land dispossession, challenging corporate seed regimes, and mobilising around agroecological alternatives (Isgren, 2018a; Martiniello, 2017, 2018). This demonstrates how politicisation can open possibilities for alternative visions and trajectories of transformation by cultivating counter-hegemonic discourses, opening up issues for public debate, and enabling resistance and collective action (Kauppi et al., 2016; Moragues-Faus, 2017; Mouffe, 2011; Wiesner et al., 2017). Politicisation here is not limited to formal protest or policy advocacy but extends to cultural expressions, local mobilisation, and prefigurative practices that cultivate counter-hegemonic discourses (George 1984; Moragues-Faus 2017; Mouffe 2011).

This thesis foregrounds bottom-up politicisation as a central mechanism for forging new political possibilities and advancing alternatives that act as a countervailing force to politicisation from above. It emphasises politicisation not only as resistance but as agency that fosters contestation, civic engagement, and critical awareness, reframing agricultural transformation as an inherently political process (Kauppi et al. 2016; George 1984). Methodologically, this requires attentiveness to diffuse and early-stage forms that often elude conventional political datasets. As Wiesner (2021b) cautions, politicisation often unfolds through everyday discourses, embodied performances, and informal practices that challenge the boundaries of the political. Consequently, this study adopts an open-ended and interpretive methodological orientation, attuned to early stage, semi-public, and vernacular manifestations of politicisation, and capable of tracing its emergence across both formal and informal arenas (Palonen et al., 2019, 258).

In summary, at the *macro level*, politicisation is situated within broader theories of politics as action. At the *meso level*, it is operationalised through stages, arenas, and practices that render issues political. At the *micro level*, it is traced empirically through observable acts, speech, resistance, and everyday contestation. This layered framework ensures that politicisation is not treated as a single outcome but as a *dynamic and generative process* unfolding across different scales and sites of agricultural transformation. I illustrate the levels described above and their operationalisation in Figure 4 below.

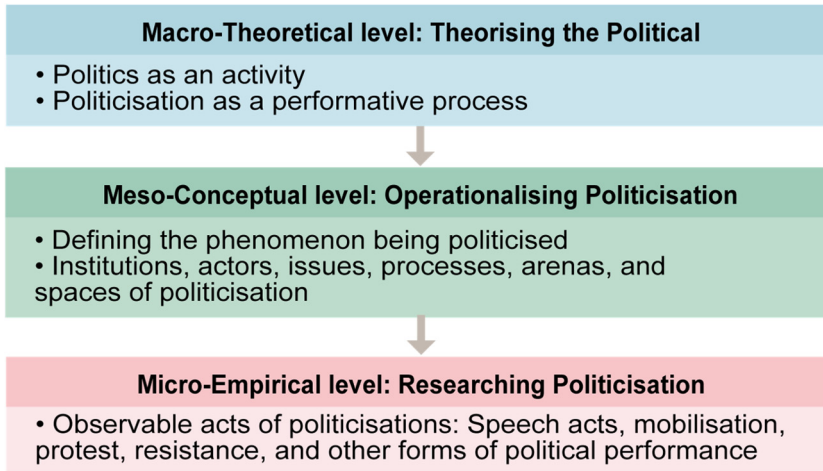


Figure 4: Politicisation as a multi-level concept

Source: Author's own design

Application

Drawing from an action-oriented tradition of politics, I approach politicisation as a performative process through which social actors create room for contestation, renewal, and new political possibilities. My concern lies with meso and micro-level dynamics, attending to how agricultural development is framed, disputed, and potentially transformed. Emphasis is placed on bottom-up forms of politicisation that arise from everyday struggles, vernacular resistances, protests and alternative ideologies. In this reading, politicisation does not merely manifest through overt resistance but is also shaped by practices of agency, collective action, discursive reframing, and the cultivation of counter-hegemonic imaginaries of transformation.

Bringing these insights into dialogue with Social Movement Theory and Emancipatory Social Science positions politicisation as more than an object of empirical description. It becomes a strategic and value-driven practice oriented toward the expansion of democratic (collective) agency/social power and the pursuit of social justice. The interplay of opportunities, structures, and frames reveals how collective actors enact agency within, against, and beyond structural constraints, sometimes seizing openings in the dominant order, sometimes constructing semi-autonomous spaces of resistance, and sometimes prefiguring alternative futures. In this way, CR grounds the inquiry into the underlying generative mechanisms that produce and sustain existing problems, ESS orients the discussion of politicisation by foregrounding possibilities, obstacles, and strategies through which transformation can emerge, and SMT provides the conceptual architecture for mapping these politicisation processes.

2.5 Methodology

This thesis adopts a qualitative approach to examine how politicisation unfolds in the Ugandan context. Following Wiesner's (2021b) call to conceptualise politicisation as a multilevel phenomenon spanning theoretical, operational, and empirical dimensions, I ground my methodology in the recognition that politicisation is not a fixed category but a contested process whose meaning shifts across contexts. By clarifying my conceptual lens before turning to data, I align with Wiesner's argument that theoretical reflection must precede empirical analysis. This framework enables me to trace politicisation beyond formal institutions, attending also to the everyday practices, discourses, and struggles through which Ugandan actors negotiate power and make issues political. Through an in-depth analysis of collective actors such as farmer groups, civil society coalitions, and advocacy networks, I seek to explicate practices through which these actors politicise agriculture, assert agency, and build counter-hegemonic narratives.

Research design

I employ a research design that allows for an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon within the specific real-world context of Uganda (Bryman, 2016; Yin, 2014). Case studies are particularly valuable in social sciences as they enable detailed examinations of phenomena through diverse methods and rich data collection (Yin, 2014). Rather than producing statistically representative results, case studies aim to offer comprehensive theoretical explanations relevant to similar contexts beyond the specific instances studied (Lund, 2014; Ridder, 2017). In line with this design, I adopt a qualitative research strategy, employing triangulation of multiple data collection methods. This approach allows for the synthesis of diverse material and enhances the credibility, authenticity, and trustworthiness of empirical findings (Bryman, 2016; Lund, 2014; Noble & Heale, 2019; Tracy & Hinrichs, 2017; Yin, 2009). The primary data collection methods included semi-structured in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, augmented by field observations and document reviews. Triangulation is particularly appropriate for this research as it fosters a deeper understanding of the complex interrelations among actors, institutions, and discourses shaping the phenomenon under study (Lund, 2014).

When conducting a study like this, it is crucial to reflect on the question: *of what is this a case?* (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Lund, 2014). For Lund (2014), the value of case studies lies not in their representativeness per se but in their ability to illuminate broader processes, categories, or mechanisms through conceptual abstraction. Hence, through theorising the broader characteristics of empirical material, it becomes possible to move beyond particularistic description and generate insights that resonate across comparable contexts. In this way, theory is central not merely to interpret particular phenomena but to derive explanations that resonate beyond the studied context (Ridder, 2017). This theorisation entails moving from empirical

data through conceptual abstraction to identifying underlying qualities and mechanisms (Lund 2014). From this perspective, the empirical material of this thesis—*agricultural transformation in Uganda*—should not be read only as a study of a national sectoral trajectory, but as a case of the *politicisation of agricultural transformation*, where technically oriented development models are contested and alternative practices asserted. My analysis therefore develops through an iterative engagement between empirical data and theoretical constructs such as politicisation, social movements, collective action, and the prefiguration of alternatives. In line with a critical realist orientation, conceiving the Ugandan case in this way enables the identification of deeper causal mechanisms and structural dynamics that shape why and how politicisation unfolds, thereby allowing the study to speak beyond the immediate case to broader processes of sustainability transformation.

Broader case framing

My thesis is written in the context of a bigger project titled Mobilising farmer organisations for sustainable agriculture in sub-Saharan Africa: Collaborative comparative analysis of rural social movement building and outcomes in Ghana, Uganda and Zimbabwe. The project is aimed at advancing sustainable agriculture in sub-Saharan Africa by understanding and highlighting the political agency of farmer organisations. This collaborative effort involves three academic institutions and three farmer organisations operating in Uganda, Ghana, and Zimbabwe. By analysing the conditions, processes, and outcomes of farmer-led political mobilisation across the three countries, the project addresses how political barriers to sustainable and inclusive agricultural development can be overcome (Isgren et al., 2023). It is designed as a transdisciplinary research—as a mode of knowledge production that integrates academic, practitioner, and local perspectives to address complex societal challenges (Jahn et al., 2012; Lang et al., 2012). In this way, the project emphasises deep collaboration between academic institutions and civil society actors. Such collaboration is essential for driving use-inspired sustainability research, either through the co-production of knowledge (Turnhout et al., 2020) or by using science to contribute to informed agitation and broader efforts to promote social change (Clark & Harley, 2020; Isgren et al., 2019). As Isgren et al. (2023, 33) note, these partnerships help to “ensure scientific integrity in the process of making science 'useful'.” In this way, the approach reflects a broader recognition that activists are not merely passive recipients of scientific knowledge but are also capable of engaging in theoretical reflections about their practices, strategies, and failures, thereby advancing theory relevant to their future activism (Bevington & Dixon, 2005; Isgren et al., 2023).

Within this broader project, my study contributes by foregrounding the concept of politicisation as a lens through which to understand how farmer organisations in Uganda contest dominant agricultural development trajectories and articulate alternatives. By examining the practices through which politicisation takes shape,

whether through everyday struggles, coalition-building, or the reframing of agricultural debates, this thesis provides insights into how political agency is asserted under conditions of uneven power relations and contested ideological systems. In doing so, the study not only enriches the Ugandan case but also adds a conceptual and analytical dimension to the comparative project: it highlights politicisation as a crucial mechanism through which farmer-led mobilisation can overcome barriers to sustainability and inequalities, assert counter-hegemonic narratives, and contribute to broader processes of agrarian and sustainability transformation across sub-Saharan Africa.

Since my research specifically focuses on the case of Uganda, I have worked closely with Eastern and Southern Africa Small Scale Farmers' Forum (ESAFF) Uganda, our partner organisation in the country, which provided an important institutional anchor within the broader comparative project. ESAFF Uganda is a national-level farmer organisation that has been at the forefront of promoting food sovereignty and agroecology in Uganda, and its long-standing engagement with both grassroots farmer groups and national advocacy networks made it an invaluable partner. However, my research was not restricted to ESAFF's membership alone but was open to the broader field of organisations involved in promoting sustainable and inclusive agriculture in Uganda.

In this context, ESAFF Uganda played a dual role: it served as my primary gatekeeper to the field, linking me to farmer groups and, in some cases, to other like-minded organisations, while also constituting a respondent in its own right. I also included grassroots farmer groups in the study which was essential for understanding the local contexts and constituents that most CSOs claim to represent in national policy arenas, as well as how smallholder farmers themselves contribute to these interfaces and broader policy narratives. As my liaison to the field, all 19 farmer groups that participated in the study were affiliated with ESAFF Uganda. However, these groups also maintained active linkages with other organisations involved in the study, which provided opportunities to trace inter-organisational dynamics and overlapping networks of mobilisation. While ESAFF Uganda engages farmer groups across the country, as illustrated in Figure 4, my research predominantly concentrated on groups located in the northern region. This focus was due to the high concentration of ESAFF-supported groups in the area. Northern Uganda offered a particularly significant context for examining agricultural development, given its history of a protracted civil war (1986–2006) that severely disrupted agricultural systems. In the post-conflict period, numerous organisations and government initiatives have specifically targeted the region in efforts to reconstruct and revitalize its agricultural sector, making it a key site for studying how farmer groups and CSOs participate in processes of agricultural transformation in contexts shaped by both structural legacies and new opportunities.

Although my research was embedded within broader collaboration with ESAFF, I deliberately maintained a critical distance from the organisation. Recognising the

potential ethical dilemmas embedded in “research on, and with, social activists” (Gillan & Pickerill, 2012), this distanced approach was crucial for maintaining analytical rigour and mitigating potential bias arising from my internal knowledge of the organisation. Accordingly, I refrained from interviewing individuals directly involved in our collaborative work. Instead, I engaged with staff members whose roles aligned with my (PhD) research interests, particularly those involved in food sovereignty, agroecology and advocacy.

Empirical material

My empirical material was gathered across four rounds of field visits in Uganda. My fieldwork was designed around the core topics of the three empirical articles. The first phase took place at the project level between August and September 2022. The second phase occurred between May and August 2023. The third phase spanned July to August 2024, and the final wrap-up visit was conducted in March 2025. The 2023 fieldwork primarily contributed to articles I and II, while the 2024 fieldwork focused on paper III. During the wrap up visit, I spoke with two additional organisations about the general overview of my research but most concerning political advocacy. Although the insights gained largely echoed those from previous cohorts, these interactions served to further clarify certain issues. More details on methodological discussion are laid out in specific empirical papers.

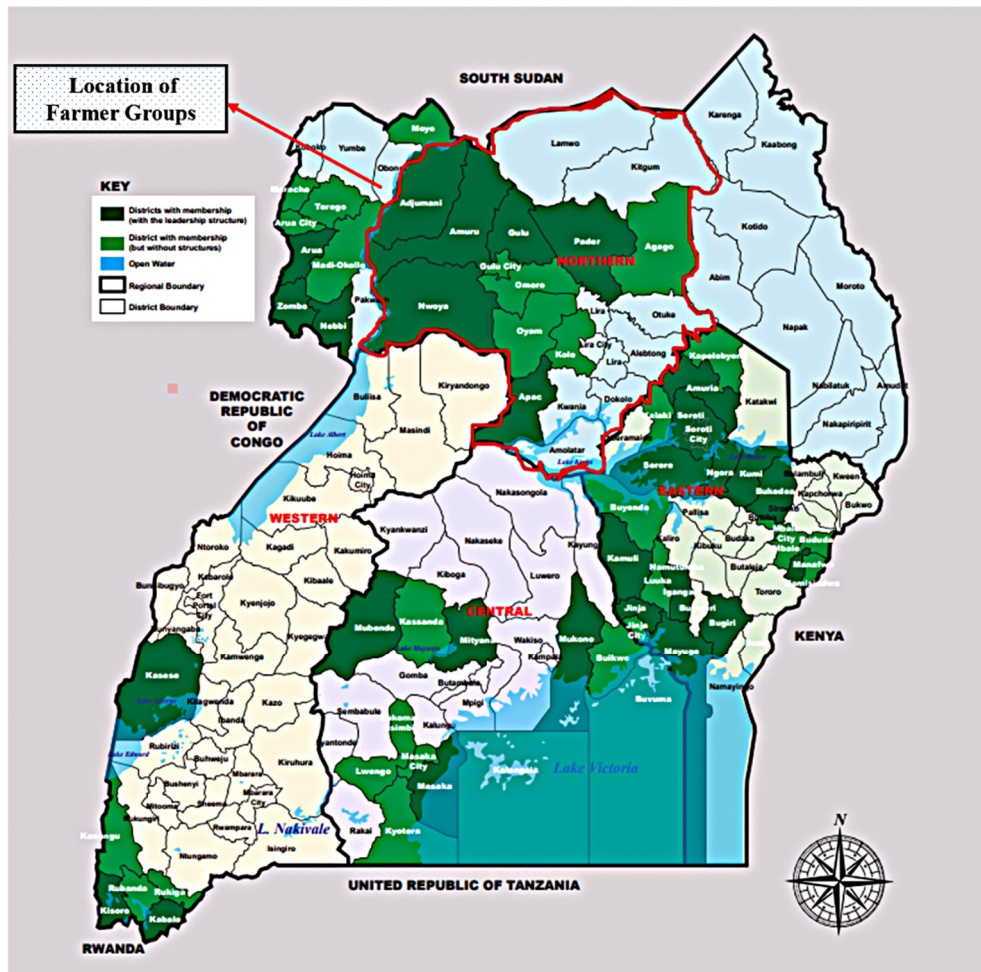


Figure 5: Districts with ESAFF Uganda farmer groups (green) and study area boundary (red line)
Source: ESAFF Uganda (2025).

Table 5: Fieldwork and contribution to research articles

Phases	Time Period	Weeks	Paper contribution
1	August-September 2022	6	Project-level data collection
2	May and August 2023	9	Primarily for papers I and III
3	July – August 2024	6	Primarily for paper II
4	March 2025	3	Final data verification, wrap up workshop

Source: Author

Fieldwork

The field visits served as crucial moments for grounding research into the everyday realities of smallholder farmers and grassroots organisations. These visits offered opportunities to observe and engage with community-driven initiatives such as community seed banks, farmer field schools, and agroecological training sessions. They also included focus group discussions and informal interactions that provided deeper insight into how farmers collectively organise, build knowledge, and engage with broader political processes. The images below exemplify some of these grassroots engagements across the Northern and Eastern regions of Uganda.



Figure 6: Field photos

Source: Author

Note on data analysis

Given that the empirical foundation of this thesis is drawn from the three articles included in this kappa, I do not repeat the detailed accounts of the data analysis processes here. Instead, I refer the reader to each respective article, where the specific analytical strategies, methodological choices, and empirical insights are presented in detail, mainly drawing on qualitative material. This approach avoids

redundancy while allowing for a more focused engagement with the overarching analytical synthesis presented in this kappa.

Ethics

The broader project, described above, received ethical approval from the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (reference number 2022-01451-01) which also covers my research. To uphold research ethics throughout the data collection process, I ensured voluntary participation from all interviewees, maintained confidentiality, and obtained informed consent. Participants were fully briefed verbally on the study's objectives and assured that their responses would be anonymised where it was deemed necessary. Ethical considerations also encompassed proper data handling to prevent harm to participants or their organisations. This was particularly necessary as the data collected involved politically sensitive remarks. I personally processed all data and ensured that no third party had access to it. The data was securely stored in a password-protected folder on my computer. Given the political sensitivity of some of the gathered data, I anonymised organisations to protect the identity of participants who made sensitive remarks, as encouraged by Flick (2019). To ensure the authenticity and integrity of participant contributions, I do present verbatim quotations in the articles and empirical chapters of the kappa, sourced from extensive field notes and transcriptions of recorded interviews.

Positionality

My positionality is rooted in experience from rural livelihoods in Uganda, academic training, and conscious methodological and theoretical choices that shape not only what I see, but also how I interpret and engage with my findings. I grew up in a smallholder farming family in rural western Uganda, where I actively participated in farming from a young age and witnessed first-hand the deep-rooted challenges confronting rural farmers. Many of these challenges, such as limited local and government support, are often misunderstood, or at best oversimplified, in policy and academic spaces. One striking observation from my lived experience was the absence, and at times inadequacy, of agricultural extension services. When these services were available, they frequently promoted market-driven solutions, most notably the distribution of so-called improved seeds donated by commercial actors. Far from empowering farmers, these interventions often eroded indigenous seed systems and fostered dependence on the market for inputs. Extension services largely functioned as vehicles for promoting and distributing external inputs such as seeds, fertilisers, and pesticides, which were presented as quick-fix solutions but offered little regard for the long-term sustainability, autonomy, or resilience of smallholder farmers. On other occasions, we were introduced to organic farming practices, not as locally driven innovations but as demands shaped by external markets, particularly in Europe, where consumers were said to prefer 'chemical-free' food. This raised complex questions about whose values and needs were being prioritised.

My academic journey in sustainability began with a background in social work, human rights, and global studies. These fields instilled in me a strong commitment to social justice, equity, and the advancement of human dignity. As a result, issues of power, voice, and representation continually reverberate in my thinking, especially when examining rural development narratives and practices. I acknowledge that these lived experiences shape how I view the broader discourse on agricultural development in Uganda and my own research process.

To minimise the risk of my prior experiences and values unduly shaping the research, I deliberately designed my methodology to foreground reflexivity and minimise bias. First, I conducted my fieldwork in Northern Uganda, a region culturally, historically, and socially distinct from my own upbringing in Western Uganda. This choice created a necessary distance, compelling me to approach the field with greater attentiveness and fewer taken-for-granted assumptions. Second, I employed qualitative methods such as semi-structured interviews and focus groups that allowed participants to frame issues in their own words rather than being constrained by my preconceptions. These interviews were conducted and translated by native speakers of the local language who had no personal connections to the communities or the topic of study. This arrangement not only minimised potential bias but also enhanced the authenticity and integrity of participants' voices in the research. Third, I complemented this with triangulation across data sources (farmers, civil society actors, policy documents) to ensure that findings did not reflect any single perspective, including my own. Fourth, I kept a reflexive research diary throughout the fieldwork and analysis stages, documenting moments where my own standpoint might have influenced interpretation and revisiting those instances during coding. In addition, I regularly discussed my reflections, emerging interpretations, and potential assumptions with colleagues and supervisors, which provided critical feedback and helped me to identify blind spots and refine my analytical lens.

My coding process itself was iterative and collaborative. For instance, I maintained ongoing interactions with some participants from whom I sought clarification whenever something was not clear. In this way, although my positionality inevitably shaped the questions, I found meaningful, the research design and reflexive strategies, including the use of independent native speakers for data collection and translation, were deliberately constructed to minimise personal bias and to ground the findings primarily in participants' perspectives and the empirical material. Rather than distorting the research, my positionality functioned as a sensitising lens that guided me to ask critical questions, while the methodological safeguards ensured rigour, balance, and credibility

Transition to empirical chapters

The empirical chapters of this thesis are organised following the Emancipatory social science approach—which Wright (2010, 17) analogically conceptualises as a

framework for navigating the journey from the present [unequal and unsustainable agricultural models] toward a more desirable [just and sustainable agricultural] future. This journey involves three interconnected tasks: diagnosing and critiquing existing social structures [to justify why we must depart from the status quo]; envisioning alternatives [to define our desired destination]; and theorising transformation [to show how to get from here to there]. In short: “diagnosis and critique of society tells us why we want to leave the world in which we live; the theory of alternatives tells us where we want to go; and the theory of transformation tells us how to get from here to there or how to make viable alternatives achievable” (Wright, 2010, 17).

Building on this metaphor of a journey, my research primarily foregrounds the third dimension of the framework, where I analyse the possibilities and dilemmas of agricultural transformation in Uganda. While the broader structure of this thesis follows Wright’s tripartite schema described above, I do not focus extensively on the first task, diagnosing and critiquing existing social structures, as this has already been thoroughly addressed in prior research on agricultural modernisation in Uganda. Chapter one, particularly section 1.2, therefore provides only a brief snapshot of the contradictions and critiques of Uganda’s agricultural development model, as a full critique lies beyond the scope of this thesis and has been carefully undertaken elsewhere (e.g., Isgren 2018a). Drawing on immanent critique—an internal mode of critique that assesses systems against their own claims and limitations (Boda, 2021; Boda & Faran, 2018; Harnesk & Isgren, 2022; Stahl, 2013), Isgren explored both the developmental promises and structural limitations inherent in the dominant neoliberal modernisation model favoured by the Ugandan government (Isgren, 2018a, see also Byekwaso, 2019 and Boda et al., 2024 on the criticisms of the modernisation theory). Isgren’s research showed that while the neoliberal trajectory promises growth and development, it, in practice, exacerbates socio-economic inequalities and ecological degradation. At the same time, pathways to more just and sustainable alternatives are constrained by entrenched political, institutional, and systemic barriers (Isgren, 2016). Hence, what we see is a dilemma: the urgent need to rethink prevailing agricultural modernisation strategies in Uganda amid persistent constraints on transformative change.

3 Rethinking agricultural development: Cultivating alternative visions

In this chapter, I engage with the notion of alternatives through the lens of emancipatory social science and the framework of real utopias. This enables me to discuss how alternatives can be theorised as both critiques of existing systems and experiments in imagining more just and sustainable futures. I then turn to the question of evaluation, considering how their desirability, viability, and achievability can be assessed within specific political and institutional contexts. Drawing on empirical insights from Uganda, I analyse how initiatives such as agroecology and food sovereignty emerge simultaneously as emancipatory alternatives and as arenas of political struggle. The chapter concludes by connecting these experiences to Erik Olin Wright's concept of real utopias, highlighting their practical and political potential to function as pathways of transformation capable of prefiguring and advancing systemic change.

3.1 From viability to achievability

At the core of this chapter lies a concern central to Wright's (2010, 2013, 2019) project of *real utopias*: how to envision alternatives that are not only normatively desirable but also practically viable and politically achievable within existing constraints. My research enters this space by asking how agricultural transformation in Uganda can be pursued under structural and political limitations. I interrogate how viable alternatives might be realised and how the struggles around their viability and achievability reveal both opportunities and obstacles.

Although the central concern of this thesis is understanding how transformation can occur, it is essential to begin by revisiting the 'actually existing' alternatives currently promoted in Uganda. These include both practical initiatives rooted in agroecological practices, and framings like food sovereignty⁴ (see paper I of this

⁴ I distinguish agroecology and food sovereignty in this study primarily for analytical clarity.

Agroecology is treated as a set of practice-based initiatives oriented toward sustainable farming

thesis). By examining such grounded alternative visions, the aim is to move beyond abstract discussions of desirability and ask what conditions make them viable and achievable in practice. This step is crucial because achievability is inseparable from transformation (Wright, 2013); for any alternative to translate into a ‘real utopia’ and contribute meaningfully to broader social transformation, it must be viable in its internal logic and, most importantly, achievable within prevailing structures of power (Wright, 2010, 2013, 2019). To frame this inquiry, the discussion draws on Wright’s (2010) three interrelated dimensions for evaluating alternatives: desirability (are they ethically justifiable and socially preferable?), viability (can they function sustainably without generating internal contradictions or unintended consequences?), and achievability (can they realistically be advanced?), with particular emphasis on the achievability dimension. These dimensions prevent alternatives from being dismissed as utopian in the pejorative sense, while also avoiding the trap of technocratic pragmatism that reduces transformation to incremental changes. The figure below shows how these dimensions are interconnected.

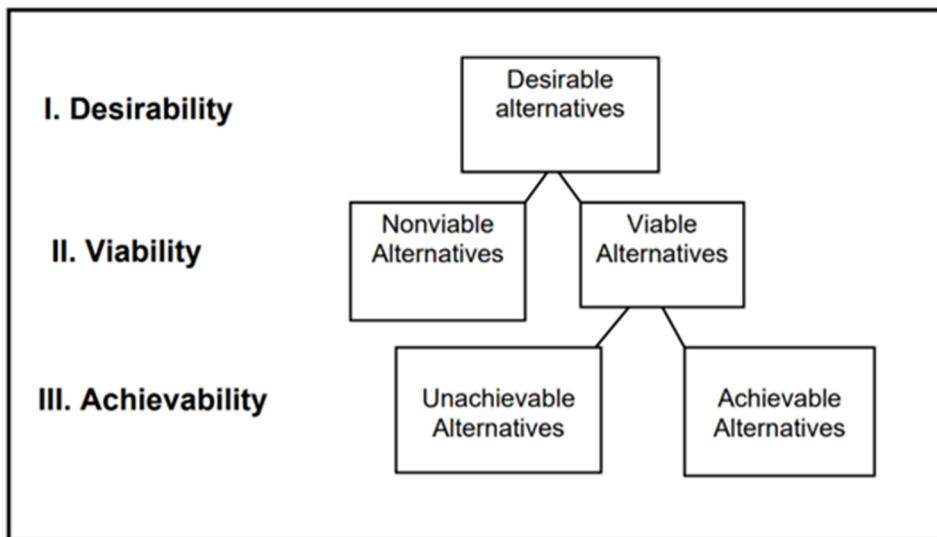


Figure 7: Three Criteria for Evaluating Sustainability Alternatives.

Source: Erik Olin Wright 2010

As illustrated in the figure above, these dimensions are interrelated. The task of this thesis, however, is not to assess them in detail but to shift attention from whether

systems, while food sovereignty is understood as a framing and ideological project that politicises these practices by situating them within struggles over power, autonomy, and rights in food systems (e.g., Patel 2009; Edelman et al. 2014; Rosset & Altieri 2017).

alternatives exist or are viable to how they might be realised and under what conditions they can foster transformative change. This perspective also underscores that viability cannot be reduced to technical soundness or ecological performance alone. Rather, it must be understood in relation to broader socio-political dynamics, since the capacity of any initiative to endure depends on its ability to withstand, adapt to, or reshape external constraints (Wright, 2010). In the Ugandan context, this means that existing alternatives must be assessed not only in terms of their ecological or local utility but also in relation to the institutional and political environment that conditions their prospects for expansion. For instance, initiatives such as farmer groups or community seed banks may demonstrate practical effectiveness, but their long-term sustainability depends on how they interact with national policy frameworks, market structures, and donor priorities.

Achievability, therefore, as Wright (2010, 17–18) notes, rests on two interrelated conditions: first, the capacity of actors to formulate coherent strategies and mobilise power in support of these alternatives; and second, navigating and (possibly) transforming the broader social and structural conditions that determine the likelihood of success. The first condition underscores the role of (collective) agency, since it is only through the coordination of collective actors, building of alliances, and mobilisation of social power that alternatives can move beyond scattered or symbolic practices. Without such deliberate and organised strategies, even the most promising and desirable alternatives risk being sidelined. The second condition draws attention to the wider systemic environment, including institutional arrangements, political opportunities, and economic structures, all of which can either enable or constrain transformative projects. Thus, even when actors are well-organised, the realisation of alternatives ultimately depends on navigating and possibly transforming these broader structural forces to create conditions for achieving alternatives that are currently impeded by such barriers.

This dual perspective, focusing simultaneously on agency and structure, underscores that achieving alternatives is not simply a matter of good design or socio-ecological soundness, but also of how effectively initiatives are situated within, contest, and gradually reshape political and institutional landscapes. Here, the distinction between viability and achievability becomes crucial. Whereas viability demonstrates that an alternative can function in principle, achievability concerns the conditions under which it can become politically, institutionally, and socially possible. This involves not only mobilising resources and alliances but also engaging in strategic work to expand the boundaries of the ‘possible’ itself, challenging dominant framings of what is considered feasible or realistic.

In Uganda, initiatives such as alliance building and farmer-led advocacy are central in this regard, as they seek to carve out pathways for transforming the very structural impediments that otherwise hinder the achievability of alternatives. Examples of how such dynamics unfold are discussed in Papers II and III of this thesis, which focus on everyday practices of resistance and strategic adaptation to fit the

prevailing political environment, respectively. These experiences reveal that farmer organisations recognise the limits of demonstrating viability through innovative practices such as farmer field schools in isolation. Without sustained advocacy, institutional embedding, and coalition-building, such efforts remain fragile. Yet, when connected to broader political projects, they can expand prevailing horizons of possibility, transforming scattered experiments into systemic forces for change.

Building on this, researching alternatives requires nuanced and rigorous engagement with several foundational questions: What strategies are employed to mobilise support for these alternatives? And under what conditions can they be successfully realised? How can viable alternatives be translated into *real utopias*? These questions situate alternatives within a struggle-oriented perspective, where their realisation depends as much on contesting entrenched power relations as on demonstrating technical or economic efficiency. This is particularly crucial in Uganda, where the dynamics of the agrarian political economy, and the broader authoritarian political environment profoundly influence what can be achievable. Alternatives are shaped not only by state development strategies but also by restrictive NGO regulations, shrinking civic space, and political patronage systems that limit collective action (as elaborated in article III). Under such conditions, even highly viable initiatives face systemic marginalisation unless they mobilise coalitions, strategically frame their demands, and exploit contradictions within the dominant order. As such, evaluating the achievability of alternatives transcends socio-technical feasibility to also pay close attention to the socio-political dynamics that determine whether, how, and by whom transformative change can occur within entrenched power structures and historical legacies. As Wald aptly puts it:

if we are to envision, advocate and enact food utopias, or any other utopia for that matter, we must begin by asking questions regarding social organisation and relations, such as who is to rule, how decisions are to be made and by whom? The discussion must go beyond a particular matter (food in this instance) to address the more fundamental underlying pillars of the social structures we wish to destroy and build a new (Wald, 2015, 110).

Transformation, in this sense, is not simply about technical alternatives but about reconfiguring the power relations that underpin them. In Uganda, struggles over land, seeds, and markets are therefore simultaneously struggles over democracy, equity, and ecological justice (Martiniello, 2017). Such struggles reveal the *politicisation of agricultural alternatives*: they are not neutral innovations but arenas of contestation that challenge dominant models and assert different values. This politicisation is central to the notion of real utopias in Wright's sense, because it is precisely through conflict, negotiation, and the re-imagining of power relations that emancipatory alternatives move from abstract ideals to feasible pathways of transformation.

3.2 Turning agricultural alternatives into real utopias

In an era when dominant models of agricultural transformation often reproduce inequality, ecological degradation, and dependency, the challenge is not merely to critique what exists but to envision and enact credible alternatives. Yet, many transformative aspirations falter between the poles of idealism and pragmatism; either dismissed as utopian fantasies or reduced to technocratic reform. To navigate this tension, it becomes necessary to approach agricultural alternatives as “real utopias”: visions of a better world that are both normatively compelling and practically grounded.

From this perspective, I approach the study of agricultural alternatives through the lens of Wright’s “real utopias”—not as abstract blueprints for a perfect society, but as practical, viable, and desirable institutional innovations capable of advancing a more just, democratic, and sustainable future (Levitas, 2010; Wright, 2010, 2016). As Wright (2010); (Wright, 2013) highlights, real utopias embody a dual character: they are visionary in aspiring to emancipatory change, yet grounded in existing possibilities, attentive to what is materially and politically achievable. Their “reality” lies in their capacity to foster emancipatory social innovations in the present, creating spaces for transformation that contest injustices and open pathways to alternative futures. Utopian ideals therefore function not only as critique but also as motivational resources, inspiring people to imagine otherwise and act differently (Wald, 2015, 109).

Applied to agriculture, turning alternatives into real utopias involves re-imagining and supporting transformative practices that challenge dominant agrarian systems while remaining rooted in everyday socio-political relations. In this context, alternatives are understood as practices, systems, structures, policies, technologies, and frameworks advanced by individuals, communities, enterprises, or social movements that disrupt or bypass the capitalist mainstream (Temper et al., 2018, 754). They manifest through diverse exchange relations, networks of solidarity, and forms of collective action that reflect situated experiences across different places and regions. These are not marginal supplements to the mainstream but efforts with the capacity to subvert, reconfigure, and democratise existing systems of power, authority, and production. The significance of alternatives lies less in their separation from the mainstream than in their potential to reshape its underlying logics, confronting inequalities, exclusions, and ecological degradation (Wright, 2013).

Agricultural alternatives illustrate this potential clearly. Approaches such as agroecology, food sovereignty, organic farming, and permaculture are more than technical fixes; they embody systemic critiques of industrial agriculture by advancing principles of sustainability, solidarity, and equity (Gliessman, 2015; Shennan et al., 2017; Sumberg & Giller, 2022). In Uganda, as elsewhere, these “actually existing alternatives” aim to regenerate ecosystems, empower local

communities, and democratise food system governance. They rest on both scientific and political aspirations, often aligned with food sovereignty frameworks that emphasise farmers' rights, autonomy, and participation. Importantly, they do not seek to optimise dominant agri-food models but to transform them, orienting food systems around holistic, territorially grounded, and just principles (Holt-Giménez & Altieri, 2013).

This transformative orientation underscores why agricultural alternatives can be understood as real utopias. They are grounded in grassroots practices, collective agency, and everyday innovations that embody values such as equity, democracy, autonomy, and care. At the same time, they express broader visions of systemic change, contesting hegemonic structures of industrial agriculture and envisioning fundamentally different ways of organising social and ecological relations. Such alternatives represent not only different models of development but also a re-imagining of food systems in line with societal values of justice and resilience (Ioris, 2020; Michel-Villarreal et al., 2018; von Braun et al., 2023). In Wright (2013)'s exploration of post-capitalist futures, these initiatives exemplify the dual orientation of real utopias: directed toward immediate institutional reform while simultaneously pushing the boundaries of possibility for deeper societal transformation.

Crucially, alternatives are not neutral. They are shaped by normative commitments and moral judgements about what is wrong in existing systems and what directions should be pursued (Goetz et al., 2020, 337). Transformation, in this sense, entails building institutions and social structures that can consolidate these innovations into durable arrangements promoting sustainability and equity in democratic ways (Wright, 2010). The challenge is not only to foster alternatives but also to strengthen their capacity to reconfigure governance structures, scaling up their emancipatory potential and embedding them in wider political and institutional frameworks (Byaruhanga & Isgren, 2023).

In this view, agricultural alternatives become more than scattered experiments. They represent emancipatory pathways for addressing the intertwined crises of ecology, inequality, and democracy. By contesting hegemonic agrarian systems, cultivating spaces of solidarity and autonomy, and embodying visions of a more just society, they illustrate how real utopias can be built from within the cracks of existing structures. Their power lies in showing that alternatives are not distant ideals but already emerging practices, rooted in collective struggles, that can prefigure systemic transformation.

3.3 From vision to reality: Agroecology as a ‘real utopia’ in Uganda

Turning from the conceptual framing of *real utopias* to a concrete arena of practice, this section explores how agroecology embodies the pursuit of emancipatory transformation within Uganda’s agrarian landscape. Amidst a crowded landscape of proposed alternatives to industrial agriculture, agroecology has emerged as one of the most compelling and widely recognised pathways for transforming agri-food systems (Gliessman, 2015; IPES, 2022). While some critics question its economic viability in lifting farmers out of poverty, a growing body of scholarship and activism in Uganda underscores its relevance and transformative potential (Adem, 2024; Gambart et al., 2020; Isgren, 2018a; Tibasiima et al., 2022). More than a set of farming techniques, agroecology represents a socio-political and epistemic project (Adriaenssens et al., 2025; Giraldo & Rosset, 2018); an alternative ideology rooted in practices that regenerate soils, conserve biodiversity, and strengthen smallholder autonomy through reliance on locally available resources, indigenous seed systems, composting, intercropping, and farmer-led experimentation grounded in traditional knowledge and ecological principles (Wezel et al., 2009; Wezel et al., 2020).

In Uganda, agroecology is emerging primarily through farmer organisations and civil society networks, often facilitated by donor interventions (Isgren, 2016, 2018b). My study reveals that network organisations such as PELUM Uganda, ESAFF Uganda, and the Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa (AFSA), alongside organisations including AFIRD, CEGGI, and GRAIN, play pivotal roles in advancing and scaling agroecology. They do so through capacity-building programmes, participatory research, seed fairs, and farmer-led demonstration farms, all fostering collective learning and policy advocacy (see Article I). One interviewee from GRAIN Uganda explained:

We are advocating for agroecology as a holistic approach to agricultural development that recognises and values local knowledge. Unlike the industrial food system, which often strips farmers of their agency and disconnects people from decisions about their food, agroecology seeks to restore that power. It also reclaims the cultural and medicinal significance of food and seed systems... Agroecology helps rebuild these lost connections by centering farmers’ and communities’ knowledge in how we grow, choose, and value food (GRAIN Uganda, 2022).

Similarly, PELUM Uganda, often working with NGOs and grassroots farmer groups, frames agroecology as a transformative system that enhances ecological sustainability while restoring farmer autonomy—enabling farmers “to be seed secure and sovereign.” Farmer-led practices such as *community-managed seed systems* (CMSS), composting, intercropping, and the use of bio-fertilisers—including *bokashi*, *plant tea*, and *vermi tea*—are central to this vision, collectively

contributing to the revival of agroecological knowledge. As one staff member explained:

We have trained farmers to make bio-fertilisers—the likes of plant tea, compost, vermi tea, bokashi. All these are good at enhancing soil fertility... Healthy soils will give you healthy crops, and healthy crops will make healthy people (PELUM Uganda, 2023).

Some of these agroecological initiatives are illustrated in the figure below. The pictures were taken at an agroecological farm I visited in Nairobi in 2022 that is supported by both PELUM, Kenya and Bio vision Africa.



Figure 8: Bio-fertiliser as a way of conserving the environment and promoting social resilience. Many initiatives focus on training and knowledge dissemination, targeting smallholder farmers engaged in seed multiplication, selection, and storage. They signal a shift toward revalorising local knowledge systems and repositioning farmers as active innovators. As a participant from CEGGI noted:

We go through community dialogue... elders with deep knowledge on indigenous farming systems start sharing how they used to do these things previously... intercropping, crop rotation, mixed farming, seed selection, food storage, spraying using organic materials... mixing plants with chilli to make sprays (CEGGI, 2023).

This knowledge is being practiced in improving agricultural practices in rural Uganda as demonstrated in the photos below.



Figure 9: Farmer field school and demonstration of biofertilizer in Amuria District.

Such practices challenge dominant, top-down, input-intensive agricultural models, advancing a paradigm grounded in participation, contextual adaptation, and ecological embeddedness. This approach does more than valorise farmer knowledge, it represents a democratisation of agricultural innovation itself. Agroecology in Uganda is thus spreading through horizontal scaling—farmer-to-farmer learning, peer exchange, and grassroots experimentation (Mier y Terán Giménez Cacho et al., 2018). Yet, as the literature cautions, focusing solely on technical practices risks depoliticising agroecology, obscuring the structural struggles essential for its vertical scaling and institutional transformation (Nicol, 2020; Wezel et al., 2009).

In the Ugandan context, however, these practices cannot be seen as merely technical or apolitical. As elaborated in Article II and Section 5.2.1 of this thesis, they constitute forms of everyday resistance and prefigurative politics—grounded acts through which farmers reimagine and enact alternative agrarian futures. In doing so, they challenge the neoliberal rationalities underpinning the government’s modernisation agenda, advancing visions of autonomy, equity, and social justice. The integration of policy advocacy within grassroots practice further highlights that agricultural transformation in Uganda is not simply technical reform but a profoundly political process.

Erik Olin Wright’s (2010) framework illuminates this dynamic. His typology of transformative strategies distinguishes between ruptural (revolutionary breaks), interstitial (building alternatives within or alongside dominant systems), and symbiotic (reforms that improve and gradually destabilise the system). In Uganda, ruptural strategies are difficult to envisage, but interstitial and symbiotic strategies are visible and attainable—laying cumulative foundations for deeper transformation (Wright, 2010, 215-240).

Seen through this lens, farmer-led experimentation, indigenous knowledge revival, and grassroots organising exemplify interstitial strategies, carving out alternative

spaces within the cracks of the dominant system. Simultaneously, their policy engagement represents symbiotic transformation, seeking to reform governance from within. These practices reveal the multidimensional politicisation of agricultural transformation in Uganda—resistant yet constructive, locally grounded yet systemically oriented. They demonstrate that reimagining Uganda’s agricultural future is not a technocratic exercise but a democratic project of collective agency and renewal, emerging from the ground up through everyday struggles and solidarities.

3.4 Filling cracks and gaps in neoliberal agricultural modernisation

If agroecology embodies a *real utopian* attempt to reimagine agrarian futures from below, its emergence must be situated within the structural contradictions of Uganda’s neoliberal agricultural modernisation project. Over the past decades, this model has promised growth, commercialisation, and global competitiveness, yet has persistently reproduced inequality, dependency, and ecological vulnerability. The persistent under-prioritisation of agriculture in Uganda’s budgets and development planning, combined with investments that favour global markets and agro-industrial elites over smallholder farmers, has created deep cracks within the neoliberal modernisation model. Agriculture has long been deprioritised relative to other sectors, leaving crucial spaces ungoverned or weakly supported (ESAFF-Uganda, 2021).

Moreover, when state support is provided, it is channelled mainly toward large-scale, input-intensive, and export-oriented production (Byekwaso, 2016; Byekwaso, 2019). Uganda’s policy commitments and fiscal realities make this neglect particularly visible. Under the Malabo Declaration of 2014, African Union member states pledged to allocate at least ten percent of their national budgets to agriculture and sustain annual agricultural growth of six percent (AU, 2014; JICA, 2024). Uganda has consistently fallen short of this target. In the financial year 2020/21, agriculture accounted for only 3.7 percent of the national budget (ESAFF-Uganda, 2021). By 2024/25, the allocation had fallen further to 1.6 trillion shillings, roughly 2.4 percent, down from 2.2 trillion in 2023/24 (Grant-Thornton-Uganda, 2024). Even the flagship Agro-Industrialisation Programme saw its share decline from 2.9 percent in 2024/25 to 2.4 percent in 2025/26 (Owiny, 2025). Such chronic underinvestment exposes a persistent contradiction: the state rhetorically promotes agricultural transformation while materially deprioritising the sector. This pattern of selective investment reproduces the inequalities it claims to resolve, consolidating agro-industrial interests while eroding local capacities for self-reliant production. At the same time, it creates unintended openings—what can be

understood as cracks and gaps—through which alternative, locally grounded practices can take root and begin to contest the dominant model

Indeed, civil society and farmer organisations have sought to respond to these cracks by advancing initiatives rooted in local knowledge, ecological sustainability, and social justice. Although these alternatives have gained visibility, they remain peripheral to policy frameworks that continue to privilege agro-industrialisation as the central pathway to growth. This dynamic reveals a paradox, where structural neglect creates openings for experimentation, but calls for increased state investment, although necessary, risk reinforcing the very modernisation agendas that marginalise alternatives unless accompanied by a deliberate reorientation of government priorities toward transformative models. There have been some policy openings, including the adoption of the National Organic Agriculture Policy in 2019 and the ongoing drafting of a national agroecology strategy—where such reorientation can begin to be cultivated. However, these remain overshadowed by dominant frameworks such as Vision 2040, the National Development Plan III (NDPIII), and the National Agricultural Policy of 2013, which all frame agricultural transformation through the logic of agro-industrialisation. As the National Planning Authority asserts:

Agro industrialisation (AGI) offers a great opportunity for Uganda to embark on its long-term aspiration of increasing household incomes and improving the quality of life. This is an opportunity for Uganda to exploit its agro-industrialisation agenda in order to feed the global value chain... [Therefore], the goal is to increase commercialisation and competitiveness of agricultural production and agro-processing (NPA, 2020, 61-62).

From this perspective, even when civil society and farmer organisations participate in policy processes, their engagement often serves instrumental purposes, lending legitimacy to state-led agendas rather than reimagining development trajectories (Muhumuza, 2010). Moreover, Uganda's policy environment is characterised by ambitious frameworks that are weakly implemented (Khisa, 2014). Hence, dissenting voices may be formally included but rarely translate into meaningful policy change. The outcome is a constrained civic space in which transformative agendas are often domesticated into technocratic programmes aligned with state and donor priorities (Khisa, 2019b).

The central question, therefore, is how agroecological alternatives can move beyond marginality to form a coordinated and politically grounded project of transformation. Although civil society organisations are formally recognised in policy, their roles are often limited. For example, the National Organic Agriculture Policy (2019, 28) commits government to “*work with NGOs and CSOs promoting Organic Agriculture especially in the rural areas... [to] ensure uniformity in communication,*” while the National Agricultural Policy (2013) assigns civil society the tasks of farmer mobilisation, policy advocacy, and programme monitoring. Such

roles largely position CSOs as gap fillers that extend state programmes rather than autonomous agents of transformation (Banks & Hulme, 2012; Banks et al., 2015; Mati, 2020). In the context of this study, this implies that CSOs are often mobilised to compensate for the state's retreat from its developmental and regulatory responsibilities under neoliberal reforms. Instead of confronting structural inequities or reimagining agrarian futures, many are expected operate within state-defined priorities, addressing immediate deficiencies in service delivery, extension support, or farmer mobilisation (Mitlin, 2008; Mitlin et al., 2007). In this sense, they fill gaps created by state neglect while leaving the deeper political and economic structures largely intact.

This gap-filling role, however, can itself become an opening for transformation. Operating within the interstices of state and donor frameworks provides CSOs with proximity to grassroots realities and space for innovation. What begins as a technical or service-oriented intervention can evolve into a space for political engagement and experimentation. Through these engagements, CSOs can expand the boundaries of what is politically imaginable, integrating discourses of food sovereignty, farmer autonomy, and ecological justice into development practice. Through their efforts to address gaps left by the state, CSOs not only provide services but also foster conditions for transformative change, bridging everyday practice wider struggles for agrarian justice and democratic control over food systems.

Agroecological practices can, therefore, be situated within what Wright (2010) calls interstitial spaces, arenas that exist in the cracks of dominant systems where alternative social relations can take root. Initiatives such as community seed banks, village savings groups, and farmer-led demonstration sites emerge through these openings, offering tangible examples of locally grounded innovation. While often isolated from mainstream policy frameworks (Hussénus et al., 2016), such initiatives demonstrate that transformation can begin from within the margins, through everyday practices that enact alternative visions of agrarian life. As Wright (2010) reminds us, interstitial strategies alone are seldom sufficient for systemic transformation. Without supportive policies, enabling funding, and inclusive market infrastructures, these alternatives risk remaining fragmented, vulnerable to co-optation, or unable to achieve sustained structural impact (Williams & Satgar, 2021). However, viewed through the lens of prefigurative politics, these practices gain renewed analytical and political significance. As Yates (2015, 2021, 2022) explains, prefiguration entails the enactment of alternative social relations and material practices that embody desired futures within the present. In this sense, agroecological initiatives do more than defy the neoliberal logic; they model and rehearse more just and sustainable agrarian systems. By performing the future in the present, they illustrate how interstitial spaces can evolve into transformative ones, bridging the gap between Wright's interstitial and symbiotic strategies. Prefigurative politics therefore provides a conceptual lens for understanding how

small-scale, everyday practices can cumulatively contribute to broader structural transformation.

Thus, dismissing these efforts as merely reformist overlooks their more radical dimensions. The growing adoption of food sovereignty discourse by Ugandan CSOs exemplifies this orientation. Food sovereignty functions not only as an ideological stance but also as a political compass that redefines agricultural transformation around justice, autonomy, and ecological care (Wald, 2015). Considered utopian not as unreality but as a horizon beyond current systems, food sovereignty embodies what Wright (2016) calls a “real utopia.” Rooted in agroecological practices such as indigenous seed saving, communal credit systems, and grassroots knowledge exchanges, these efforts challenge the logic of industrial agriculture by promoting solidarity-based, justice-oriented alternatives in the present. They chip away at dominant narratives and carve out spaces for counter-hegemonic praxis.

Although fragmented and locally situated, these initiatives represent more than technical interventions. They articulate a broader political project oriented toward systemic transformation in which food sovereignty operates as both ideological commitment and strategic tool. Unlike historical food regimes that reflected particular conjunctures, food sovereignty is explicitly future-oriented (Friedmann, 2005; McMichael, 2009). It envisions democratic control, agroecology, and social equity as the foundations of a transformed agrarian order. Rather than prescribing a fixed blueprint, it serves as an ethical and practical compass that orients present action toward a more just and sustainable future without reducing that horizon to a predetermined endpoint (Byaruhanga & Isgren, 2023; Wald, 2015).

3.5 Food sovereignty as political framing of alternatives

As agroecological practices and civil society initiatives take root within the cracks of neoliberal agricultural modernisation, their transformative potential increasingly depends on the political frames that give them coherence and direction. Transforming agrifood systems requires more than implementing viable practices or identifying political change agents (Harnesk & Isgren, 2022; Wright, 2010, 2019). It also depends on the strategic framing of grievances in ways that resonate with people’s lived realities, identities, and aspirations (Fairbairn, 2012; McAdam et al., 1996). In this regard, food sovereignty has emerged as one of the most powerful and unifying frameworks for articulating alternative visions of agrarian transformation. It foregrounds the rights and aspirations of small-scale farmers, indigenous peoples, artisanal producers, and food consumers (Claeys, 2015; Iles & Montenegro de Wit, 2015; Iles & Montenegro, 2013; LvC, 2003; Nyéléni, 2007). More than a call for sustainable practices, it places emphasis on environmental justice and community self-determination (Barkin, 2016; Van der Ploeg, 2014). As an inherently political

project (Calvário, 2017; Wittman, 2011; Wittman et al., 2010), food sovereignty is embedded in struggles for autonomy, resistance to neoliberalism, and the reconfiguration of power within food systems (Patel, 2009; Shattuck et al., 2015). It reframes food not as a commodity, but as a right, advancing collective control over land, seeds, and production processes, thereby directly contesting the dominant global food regime (Claeys, 2015; Edelman, 2014).

Through this reframing, food sovereignty has increasingly been associated with the politicisation of agri-food systems' transformation. As Duncan and Claeys (2018, 397) note:

Food sovereignty's politicisation of agri-food policy includes demands for a democratic resolution to the question of food security, anticipating a broader political alliance focusing on ecological and public health with respect to food systems.

Such a perspective expands food sovereignty beyond alternative farming methods, positioning it as a political project that contests the institutional, economic, and ideological constraints sustaining injustices and inequalities in agrifood system development. This makes it a central site of democratic struggle (Calvário, 2017; Duncan & Claeys, 2018; McMichael, 2014; Moragues-Faus, 2017; Mouffe, 2011; Williams & Satgar, 2021). By recasting agrifood transformation as inherently political, food sovereignty provides a dual intellectual and activist framework for directly or indirectly confronting structural forces and reframing agriculture as a terrain of contestation over power, justice, and the future of food systems (Anderl, 2024; Carlile et al., 2021; McMichael, 2012a, 2014; Palonen, 2006). It scrutinises power relations in food governance and access (Martínez-Torres & Rosset, 2017) while aligning with anti-capitalist movements that challenge elite control through protest, advocacy, and grassroots organising (LvC, 2003; Wittman et al., 2010). In this way, food sovereignty resonates with emancipatory social science by exposing contradictions in dominant models, imagining alternatives, and articulating strategies for systemic change, particularly in contexts like Uganda where neoliberal agricultural policies prevail.

Food sovereignty as a mobilising ideology

The discursive power of food sovereignty lies not only in its critique of dominant agrarian models but also in its capacity to mobilise collective action around an alternative social project (Carlile et al., 2021). It functions as what Gramsci might describe as a counter-hegemonic ideology: a unifying narrative that challenges the cultural, political, and economic dominance of trade liberalisation, corporate consolidation, and industrial agriculture, forces that perpetuate dispossession and intensify ecological and social crises (McMichael, 2014, 2018; Satgar & Cherry, 2019). As a mobilising ideology, food sovereignty provides movements with both a language of resistance and a vision of transformation, enabling disparate struggles

to converge around the principle that those who produce, distribute, and consume food must hold the power to shape food systems (Nyéléni, 2007).

As a mobilising ideology, food sovereignty operates simultaneously as critique and praxis, exposing the structural injustices of global food systems while articulating concrete alternatives. In this sense, it resonates with the project of emancipatory social science by not only challenging the status quo but also envisioning pathways toward transformation. La Vía Campesina and allied grassroots movements place autonomy, dignity, and justice at the center of their vision, positioning these values against the imperatives of profit and scale. Across Latin America, peasant movements have established agroecological schools that go beyond disseminating ecological farming techniques to nurture youth leadership, safeguard ancestral knowledge, and cultivate a generation of “militant agroecologists” who view farming as a form of resistance (Snipstal, 2015). In the Basque Country, the farmers’ union EHNE-Bizkaia advances this vision by supporting new peasants through training and local food networks. Such initiatives demonstrate that food sovereignty transcends questions of production to become a cultural and political strategy for reimagining rural life (Wezel et al., 2009; Wezel et al., 2020).

Far from isolated practices, these initiatives embody a counter-hegemonic project that contests not only dominant agronomic models but also the governance structures that reproduce global food injustice. At the UN Committee on World Food Security, grassroots movements have disrupted consensus-driven forms of participation by insisting that those most affected by food insecurity must define policy agendas. These interventions have infused global food governance with a politics of accountability, underscoring that justice requires confrontation as well as dialogue (Duncan & Claeys, 2018). Through such strategies, food sovereignty emerges not as a static demand but as a dynamic process of reshaping institutions, discourses and power relations within and beyond food systems. In Wright’s (2010) terms, food sovereignty embodies both interstitial strategies, such as building alternatives within spaces outside dominant logics through agroecological schools and local food networks, and symbiotic strategies, such as forcing openings within formal institutions, as seen in struggles at the UN Committee on World Food Security. This dual character underscores its role as a mobilising ideology that not only resists dispossession but also constructs emancipatory alternatives in practice.

It is against this broader backdrop that emerging practices in Uganda can be situated. Ugandan farmer groups, CSOs and social movements similarly draw on food sovereignty discourses to contest the encroachment of industrial agriculture and to defend local autonomy in food systems. Their initiatives, which include agroecological experimentation, farmer-led knowledge exchanges and advocacy for inclusive food policies, mirror global struggles while being shaped by the specific political economy of Uganda. In this way, they embody food sovereignty’s dual role as critique and praxis, situating local struggles within a transnational counter-

hegemonic movement that seeks to transform both agrarian models and the governance structures that sustain them.

Emerging food sovereignty efforts in Uganda

The framing of food sovereignty is gradually gaining traction in Uganda (Busingye, 2017; Martiniello, 2018; Yap, 2013), in part because many of its core principles resonate with the socio-cultural and ecological practices of Ugandan peasant communities (Busingye, 2017; Martiniello, 2018). Yet unlike contexts where food sovereignty has been institutionalised in law, such as Bolivia and Venezuela (Araujo, 2010; Bini, 2018; McKay et al., 2017; Trauger, 2014), or where mobilisation is driven primarily by strong grassroots peasant movements (Borras Jr et al., 2008; Edelman, 2009; Edelman & Boras Jr, 2016), Uganda's landscape is shaped by a fragmented and NGOised civil society (Martiniello, 2018). This makes Uganda a particularly compelling site to examine how food sovereignty is practiced and politicised in everyday life (see articles I and II of this thesis).

My fieldwork confirms that food sovereignty efforts in Uganda are most visible within agroecological initiatives that emphasise community resilience, seed sovereignty, and ecologically sound farming practices. These efforts often appear as practical development interventions, but they also carry implicit political weight by reclaiming control over food systems. Seed saving, for example, is not only an agronomic practice but also a symbolic assertion of autonomy and knowledge sovereignty (Sibanda, 2025). As shown in Figure 11, community seed banks I visited in 2022 represent living repositories of both genetic resources and cultural preservation, linking food sovereignty directly to the preservation of knowledge, heritage, and identity.



Figure 10: Seed sovereignty as preservation of knowledge, heritage, and identity

Source: Field photos

Such everyday actions: saving seeds, using organic methods, and passing on indigenous knowledge quietly become acts of resistance. These choices allow communities to reclaim control over their food systems and push back against external forces of dispossession. In doing so, they nurture a vision of food sovereignty where autonomy and tradition guide the path forward. As one CEGGI representative explained:

We are believing that by restoring agroecological practices again among the communities we are trying to be food sovereign... by restoring indigenous knowledge systems, the farmers will go back [to] organic farming, and the communities will be food sovereign at some point (CEGGI, 2022).

For instance, the Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa (AFSA) stresses that sovereignty is inseparable from control over seeds, knowledge, and inputs:

Food sovereignty to us is, number one, accessing that real food... Number two is accessing the seed. So, our food sovereignty is so much ensured in seed sovereignty... We are supporting farmers to also start being sovereign in terms of knowledge (AFSA, 2022).

Beyond these examples, networks such as PELUM Uganda (Participatory Ecological Land Use Management) and ESAFF Uganda (Eastern and Southern Africa Small-scale Farmers' Forum) have been instrumental in advancing food sovereignty principles, albeit often framed in the language of agroecology, resilience, and farmer rights. These initiatives show that seemingly technical interventions, seed saving, agroecological training, and even “fertiliser sovereignty”, are embedded in deeper struggles over autonomy, justice, and independence. This reflects wider scholarship that frames food sovereignty not only as access to food but as control over the means of production and social reproduction (Patel, 2009; Shattuck et al., 2015). Everyday actions in Uganda thus become meaningful sites of grassroots resistance, building interstitial alternatives that prefigure more just food systems.

Yet despite this vitality from below, institutional traction for food sovereignty in Uganda remains limited. While civil society organisations contributed to the drafting of the National Organic Agriculture Policy (2019), the policy avoids explicit reference to food sovereignty and instead frames agroecology within a technocratic development paradigm. This underscores a persistent tension: grassroots practices cultivate meaningful forms of sovereignty, but state frameworks risk diluting them into depoliticised technical fixes. Hence, despite having such policies, smallholder farmers remain exposed to pressures from global value chain integration and contract farming schemes that historically undermine autonomy by binding producers to predetermined inputs, prices, and markets, often shifting risks onto them while consolidating power in the hands of agribusiness

firms (Bellemare, 2015; McMichael, 2018). For example, Martiniello's study of Kakira Sugar Works in Uganda shows how contract farming led to the adverse incorporation of smallholders, locking them into debt, dependency, and declining food security while marginalising less competitive farmers from sugar agro-poles (Martiniello, 2021). Such dynamics reveal the fragility of interstitial strategies that seek to build alternatives without confronting the broader political economy and governance structures that shape agricultural transformation.

From this perspective, Uganda exemplifies the double-edged nature of institutionalisation. On the one hand, policy recognition of agroecology signals openings for civil society engagement; on the other, it risks functioning as a process of co-optation that neutralises food sovereignty's radical potential (Giraldo & Rosset, 2018; Giraldo & Rosset, 2023). The Ugandan case thus demonstrates that the achievability of food sovereignty cannot be evaluated solely at the level of grassroots practice. Rather, it must be situated within the wider terrain of political contestation, where advancing food sovereignty requires building countervailing social power, reshaping dominant narratives, and confronting the institutional and structural constraints that delimit the space for just and sustainable food futures. The next chapters take up this challenge by tracing how such contestations unfold, showing how the politicisation of agricultural alternatives in Uganda illuminates the broader processes through which agrarian transformation is imagined, negotiated, and struggled over.

3.6 Summary

This chapter examined how agroecology and food sovereignty in Uganda can be understood as real utopias—grounded, viable, and desirable alternatives that seek to reconfigure agrifood systems toward justice and sustainability. I have shown how these initiatives emerge through interstitial strategies that carve out spaces for change, while also engaging in symbiotic reforms to influence institutions. Practices such as community seed systems, farmer-led experimentation, and grassroots knowledge exchange demonstrate how local actors in collaboration with CSOs reclaim agency and embed ecological principles, even within dominant neoliberal models.

However, these alternatives face structural and institutional constraints that risk co-optation or depoliticisation, underscoring that their viability depends as much on enabling political conditions as on technical soundness. In Wright's terms, this points to the fragility of interstitial strategies when they are not supported by broader symbiotic reforms or by confrontations with entrenched power. This sets the stage for the next chapters (4 and 5), where I apply Wright's (2010) theory of transformation to discuss the obstacles that constrain transformation and explore the

possibilities for change. The theory provides a conceptual map for understanding how dominant social systems are reproduced, challenged, and potentially reconfigured. The framework comprises four interlinked components: social reproduction, contradictions, trajectories, and strategies. First, social reproduction comprises mechanisms—institutional, ideological, and material—through which dominant systems reproduce themselves over time. In the Ugandan context, this allows me to explore how neoliberal agricultural paradigms embedded in state policy, extension systems, and development discourses stand in the way of adopting alternatives. Second, contradictions, gaps and limitations highlight the tensions and dysfunctions that emerge within these systems, which may produce discontent or instability and eventually create openings for contestations. In Uganda's context, these contradictions manifest in the disconnect between the promises of modernisation and the lived realities of rural farmers—such as food insecurity, ecological degradation, and dispossession. Finally, transformative strategies capture intentional actions undertaken by social actors to enact social power and to challenge dominant systems and advance alternatives.

4 Envisioning transformation: Barriers, opportunities and actors

Agricultural transformation in Uganda unfolds within a deeply entrenched system that simultaneously sustains livelihoods and reproduces structural inequalities. Efforts to promote alternatives such as agroecology thus confront a landscape shaped by the enduring power of neoliberal modernisation, donor dependency, and the material interests of political and economic elites. Understanding how transformation occurs—or fails to occur—requires looking beyond surface-level reforms to the deeper mechanisms that maintain the status quo. In this chapter, I discuss how efforts to transform Uganda’s agricultural system unfold within structures that continually reproduce the status quo. Drawing on Wright’s theory of social reproduction, and the theory of contradictions and gaps, I highlight three dynamics: how rules, ideologies, material interests, and coercion sustain existing systems; how contradictions such as ecological degradation and rural precarity expose gaps and openings for change; and how civil society organisations identify and leverage these openings to advance transformative alternatives.

4.1 Social reproduction and Barriers to transformative alternatives

Understanding why emancipatory agricultural transformation in Uganda remains elusive requires examining the deeper processes that continually reproduce existing structures. Wright’s (2010) theory of social reproduction provides a useful framework for analysing these dynamics, showing how systems of power sustain themselves through everyday practices, institutions, and ideologies. From this vantage point, one may argue that Uganda’s agrarian order endures not as a vestige of the past or as passive institutional inertia, but as an actively reproduced system maintained through four interlocking mechanisms: rules, ideologies, material interests, and, at times, coercion (Wright, 2010, 195). These mechanisms regenerate entrenched power relations, stabilise neoliberal logics, and systematically constrain the conditions under which transformative agricultural alternatives might emerge. Social reproduction, in this sense, operates as an active process that embeds

neoliberal development imaginaries into the institutional, ideological, and material fabric of rural life, even when these logics exacerbate inequality and precarity. Recognising these mechanisms is therefore crucial to understanding why transformative alternatives such as agroecology or food sovereignty struggle to scale up or gain political traction in Uganda's current development regime.

As demonstrated in section 1.2 of this kappa, Uganda's agricultural development remains firmly tethered to a modernisation paradigm underpinned by neoliberal principles. This paradigm privileges commercial, high-input, market-integrated models that align with global political-economic logics (Byekwaso, 2019; Mugagga et al., 2018). The trajectory is sustained by a dense constellation of state policies, institutional architectures, and knowledge systems that elevate productivity, export orientation, and private-sector investment as unquestioned goals, while marginalising values of ecological sustainability, farmer autonomy, and social justice (Byekwaso, 2019). Barriers arise not only through material exclusions but also through ideological and political dynamics that devalue or delegitimise alternatives. To capture these dynamics, I distinguish three interrelated categories of barriers: emergence (those that prevent new ideas, practices, or movements from taking root), uptake (those that limit their recognition or adoption within broader policy or societal frameworks), and scaling (those that obstruct their institutionalisation, expansion, or mainstreaming). Across each stage, Uganda's neoliberal agrarian order is reproduced through the interplay of rules, ideologies, material interests, and coercion.

Barriers to emergence

The first barrier to the emergence of emancipatory alternatives lies in the pervasive coercive repression that restricts civic space and curtails the political agency of actors advocating systemic change. Wright (2010, 201) conceptualises this as despotic social reproduction, where coercion is a central mechanism of order maintenance: coercion and repression are mobilised not only to defend the status quo but to foreclose the possibility of alternative projects. Uganda exemplifies this despotic dynamic where CSOs and farmer organisations that critique state-led promotion of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) or challenge industrial models encounter restrictive NGO regulations, administrative surveillance, and bureaucratic hurdles. These coercive measures cultivate a climate of fear and self-censorship, discouraging mobilisation and advocacy. One respondent reported as follows:

...people fear touching political issues, and yet they might be the most important issues. But, you know, because you are touching somebody's power...you have to be careful. You might end up disappearing, so people are very protective and mindful of the consequences of touching political advocacy areas that are paralysed because you can't touch them (CSO representative, 2024).

Moreover, such cautiousness does not come out a vacuum as Uganda's recent political history is marked by cycles of authoritarianism and violence, where opposition figures, activists, and ordinary citizens have been subject to intimidation, imprisonment, and enforced disappearances due to their involvement in politics. Such legacies of repression continue to shape civic engagement and political organising today (Branch, 2011; Kasfir, 2021).

By constraining collective action, repression undermines the organisational capacities necessary for alternatives like agroecology to germinate as viable alternatives (see subsection 5.1 and Article II). In this way, coercion does not merely maintain the status quo; it strategically narrows the political space in which transformative visions can be articulated.

Alongside coercion, the emergence of alternatives is constrained by entrenched epistemic hierarchies—an ideological mechanism of reproduction. Uganda's agricultural research institutions, extension services, and curricula remain largely locked into conventional, technocratic models that valorise synthetic inputs, monocultures, and globally standardised technology packages (Isgren, 2016; Isgren & Ness, 2017). For instance, Isgren (2016, 436) found that attempts to promote agroecology as an alternative to industrial agriculture were often thwarted by a dominant knowledge regime in which "agricultural research conducted at Ugandan research institutions is narrowly focused on yield maximisation, single crops rather than farming systems, and takes for granted conventional inputs and monoculture systems." This epistemic orientation is institutionalised in the strategic vision of the National Agricultural Research Organisation (NARO), Uganda's leading state-funded agricultural research body, whose current strategic plan (2018/19–2027/28)⁵ is themed "*Market-Oriented Research Spurring Agro-Industrialisation*." Such framings are not neutral but exemplify what Pimbert (2017) describes as "knowledge hierarchies," which systematically delegitimise and marginalise farmer-led experimentation and innovation. This epistemic injustice (Byskov, 2021) manifests in everyday practices where extension officers trained in conventional agronomy frequently dismiss agroecology as "backward." As one respondent elaborated:

Most extension services are trained in conventional agriculture... they don't understand agroecology, and some even discourage it, calling it backward (AFIRD 2024).

By privileging scientific reductionism over experiential knowledge, state institutions reproduce neoliberal ideologies and delegitimise grassroots innovations such as farmer field schools, seed banks, and cooperatives. In this way, coercion

⁵ <https://naro.go.ug/research/research-agenda/>

and ideology combine to foreclose the socio-political and cognitive spaces in which alternatives might otherwise take root.

Barriers to uptake

Even when strides are attained in making alternatives visions like agroecology recognised and institutionalised, their wider uptake is constrained by rules and material interests that structurally privilege the dominant agricultural regime. For instance, incremental gains, such as the Organic Agriculture Policy (2019) and discussions around a national agroecology strategy, may represent what Feola (2025) calls “partial political settlements.” Yet these remain overshadowed by broader frameworks, the National Development Plan (NDPIII), Vision 2040, and sectoral policies such as the National Agricultural Policy (2013) and National Seed Policy (2018), that systematically prioritise commercialisation, hybrid seed expansion, and private-sector-led models. These arrangements exemplify Wright’s (2010, 197) idea of institutional advantage, where the “rules of the game” systematically channel resources and legitimacy toward dominant systems. In Uganda, the institutional rules underpinning agricultural development frameworks equate progress with productivity, competitiveness, and global market integration, thereby marginalising agroecological goals such as biodiversity, farmer autonomy, and food sovereignty. As a representative from AFSA observed:

...the government puts more resources in modern agricultural practices that push GMOs, monocultures and chemical inputs, and these completely exclude the indigenous and alternative approaches (AFSA 2023).

Alongside regulatory frameworks, ideological reproduction entrenches barriers to agroecology’s uptake. Neoliberal imaginaries of efficiency and growth continue to dominate agricultural discourse, legitimising input-intensive farming while relegating agroecology to the status of a niche or ‘unscientific’ practice. This ideological dominance configures the discursive environment in which agricultural policies are designed and implemented, thereby constraining agroecology’s recognition even where robust evidence of its benefits exists. In practice, government extension agents overwhelmingly promote synthetic inputs and hybrid seeds, while NGOs and farmer organisations advancing agroecology are relegated to peripheral roles, often confined to awareness-raising or small-scale training. As one PELUM Uganda staff member observed:

We clash with the government extension agents because you find that most of the government-aided projects in the communities are promoting chemicals... our role is basically to create awareness because we have no control (PELUM 2023).

Agroecological initiatives, therefore, remain structurally marginalised, gaining traction at the grassroots yet lacking institutional legitimacy within dominant policy and knowledge regimes.

Barriers to scaling

Scaling alternatives such as agroecology requires enabling conditions, including supportive policies, sustained investment, institutional reform, and shifts in dominant discourses (de Molina, 2020) as known as vertical scaling (Nicol, 2020). In Uganda, however, the structural terrain is skewed by the material interests of agribusiness actors, entrenched through state policy and resource allocation. Flagship programs like Operation Wealth Creation (OWC) distribute hybrid seeds, fertilisers, and improved livestock breeds, thereby entrenching the presumption that agricultural productivity is contingent upon external inputs. Subsidies and credit schemes disproportionately favour commercial seed companies and export-oriented crops such as coffee and maize, consolidating a structural environment in which industrial agriculture is naturalised as the singular and unquestioned path to development. By contrast, agroecology remains donor-dependent, fragmented, and largely excluded from national budgetary frameworks. As one PELUM Uganda representative observed:

We have community seed banks, but they are largely donor-driven... the government doesn't put any money into that (PELUM Uganda 2023).

At the discursive level, policymakers frequently characterise agroecology as “low-tech,” “subsistence-oriented,” or “unscalable.” Such framings legitimise resource allocations that privilege industrial models while rendering agroecology politically invisible. Within parliamentary debates, Members of Parliament often demand profitability evidence before entertaining agroecology initiatives, in stark contrast to the uncritical endorsement of fertiliser subsidies. As one AFIRD respondent recalled:

In most cases, when we talk about agroecology, they ask... ‘show us where these things have worked.’ One time, the president asked, ‘Give us the economics. Give us examples of where they have worked’ (AFIRD 2024).

Governmental routines further institutionalise these exclusions. District agricultural officers are mandated to promote hybrid seeds and chemical inputs, while research institutions such as NARO channel resources toward breeding programs for industrial crops rather than participatory agroecological research. These practices exemplify the mutually reinforcing interplay of rules, ideologies, and material interests that sustain industrial agriculture as ‘common sense’ while relegating agroecology to the margins. The cumulative effect is a fragile and fragmented terrain for agroecological transformation—innovations emerge but remain

vulnerable to dilution, invisibility, and the absence of coordinated strategies for scaling.

Yet, as Wright (2010, 18) reminds us, social reproduction is never seamless. The very mechanisms that reproduce dominant systems also engender systemic contradictions that destabilise them and open spaces for contestation. Uganda's industrial agricultural trajectory generates profound contradictions: ecological degradation, rural precarity, and social exclusion. These dynamics align with Tarrow (2022) who argues that threats and opportunities alike can catalyse mobilisation, and in Uganda these contradictions hold the potential to energise collective struggles around alternatives. Thus, even as social reproduction constrains the emergence, uptake, and scaling of agroecology, it simultaneously generates the fissures through which transformative alternatives may take root, as the subsequent discussion explores.

4.2 Unearthing contradictions and transformative possibilities

If social reproduction explains how dominant agrarian structures are maintained, contradictions reveal how they begin to unravel. Grounded in Erik Olin Wright's theory of contradictions, here I show how systemic failures within processes of social reproduction simultaneously generate openings for transformative change. Wright (2010, 18–19; 2013) argues that contradictions reveal the tensions, dysfunctions, and breakdowns within dominant systems, creating fractures through which resistance, alternatives, and possibilities for transformation can emerge. These contradictions are not merely signs of crisis but potential catalysts for transformation, revealing where existing arrangements can no longer contain their own consequences.

In Uganda, such contradictions are increasingly visible in the ecological degradation and socio-economic exclusion produced by decades of neoliberal agricultural modernisation. One of the most striking lies in the coexistence of persistent rural poverty, food insecurity, and land dispossession despite sustained investment in productivity-driven development strategies (Byekwaso, 2019; Martiniello, 2018). As Byekwaso (2019, 278) notes, Uganda's neoliberal agricultural model has made it “too difficult for peasants to gainfully practice farming,” forcing many to abandon self-provisioning and deepening their dependency on volatile markets. At the same time, structural unemployment remains acute: more than 400,000 youth enter the labour market each year, yet opportunities in industry and services are scarce (FAO, 2017). Many finance rural–urban migration by selling land or household assets, only to encounter precarious informal economies such as *boda boda* transport (Davis, 2019; Doherty, 2017).

These contradictions not only highlight the system's failure to deliver inclusive development but also embody what Wright (2010) calls the 'cracks' through which transformation becomes thinkable and contestable. Such fissures are evident in Uganda's agricultural policy landscape. While the state promotes input subsidies, certified seeds, and agrochemical use, civil society and farmer organisations mobilise agroecological alternatives, seed sovereignty, and localised food systems. These contestations become especially sharp in moments of systemic disruption, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. As one PELUM representative explained:

For us, COVID was a plus... when borders closed, farmers couldn't get fertilisers. That's when we trained them to make compost, bio-pesticides, and bio-fertilisers. They realised they could survive without imported chemicals—even food (PELUM, 2023).

Such moments expose deep-rooted dependencies, revalorise indigenous knowledge systems, and create spaces for politicised learning and reflection. However, these openings rarely translate into sustained structural transformation. My analysis, supported by previous scholarship, shows that in Uganda acts of resistance are often fragmented and sporadic, leaving them vulnerable to co-optation and depoliticisation (Branch & Mampilly, 2015; Dicklitch & Lwanga, 2003; Martiniello, 2018). Nevertheless, they present opportunities that civil society actors and farmer groups can strategically occupy to construct counter-narratives grounded in agroecology and food sovereignty. By simultaneously exposing failures of prevailing models and advancing contextually rooted, socially just alternatives, such actors challenge hegemonic paradigms and plant the seeds of systemic change. Recognising and leveraging these contradictions is therefore essential, not only for diagnosing the forces that constrain transformation but also for identifying the very conditions that enable strategic, collective action. As I demonstrate in the next section, it is precisely within these cracks, where systemic contradictions are laid bare, that politicisation takes root, as grassroots actors mobilise counter-hegemonic strategies to confront entrenched structures and envision emancipatory agrarian futures (Wright, 2010; 2019). At the same time, the discussion will show how such acts of politicisation can function as a mechanism to overcome obstacles such as fragmentation, co-optation, and state repression.

4.3 Room for manoeuvre: Possibilities and agents of change

The contradictions outlined in the previous section do not, on their own, generate transformation; they merely expose the fault lines of existing systems. Real change depends on how these fractures are recognised, politicised, and acted upon by social agents. Transformation, in other words, arises not from contradictions themselves

but from the strategic interventions of actors who can convert structural tensions into spaces of manoeuvre and possibility.

Building on Wright (2019, 56)’s reminder that “for alternatives to actually be achievable, there must be political agents of transformation capable of bringing them about.” Transformation, therefore, is not reducible to abstract critique; it depends on organised actors with the capacity to mobilise, strategise, and intervene. Accordingly, my analysis shows that the politicisation of agricultural transformation in Uganda hinges precisely on such actors—civil society organisations, farmer organisations, and grassroots collectives—who are both willing and able to seize cracks in the system. These actors confront systemic barriers while also identifying and exploiting openings to advance alternative agricultural futures grounded in agroecology and food sovereignty (see article I of this thesis).

To analyse these dynamics, I draw on Wright’s theory of transformative strategies, which maps pathways for social change even amid obstacles. From this perspective, social transformation is neither linear nor predictable; it unfolds through the interplay of institutional inertia, political contention, and strategic intervention (Wright, 2010, p. 191). What matters, then, is less the exposure of systemic contradictions than the *strategic capacity of collective actors* to navigate them, reconfigure opportunities, and forge pathways toward emancipatory change. Understanding politicisation in practice therefore requires situating these collective struggles within Uganda’s broader political landscape, where governance structures simultaneously constrain and enable how actors mobilise, contest power, and pursue transformative alternatives.

Uganda’s political landscape

The political landscape constitutes a decisive force in shaping the contours of social mobilisation, determining not only whether movements emerge but also how they strategize, adapt, and develop (Gamson, 1989; McAdam, 1983; Piven & Cloward, 2012; Tarrow, 2022). The strategies of challengers are rarely formed in a vacuum; rather, they are calibrated in direct response to the perceived openness, closure, or volatility of the political environment (Larson, 2013; McAdam et al., 2005). As Meyer and Tarrow (1998) suggest, challengers constantly adjust their approaches to align with prevailing political dynamics, underscoring the importance of context in shaping agency. This resonates with Tilly and Tarrow (2015)’s observation that political actors operate simultaneously as both the targets of mobilisation and the regulators of collective claims-making, with the state occupying a central role in either enabling or suppressing dissent (McPhail & McCarthy, 2005; Tilly, 1978; Zeller, 2020).

Uganda’s trajectory illustrates this dual role of the state with striking clarity. Since independence in 1962, the country has wrestled with the legacies of colonialism, marked by weak institutions and entrenched social cleavages (Lwanga-Lunyiigo,

1987). These structural conditions created a politics defined by instability, authoritarianism, and recurring repression. The rise of the National Resistance Movement (NRM) in 1986 promised a break with the past, delivering relative stability (Hickey, 2013b). Yet this stability came at the price of entrenching patronage politics, electoral manipulation, and the systematic narrowing of political competition (Child, 2009; Moriarty, 2023). In this landscape, civil society actors often face increased risk of co-optation into regime structures or rendered ineffective by restrictive legislation (Khisa, 2019a; Martiniello, 2018; Sjögren, 2022). These restrictions are characterised by increased harassment, arrests, and restrictions on assembly (Kagoro, 2024; Kakuba, 2021; Mwanja, 2019; Nabukeera, 2018), while the state's dominance over media narratives further contracts civic space (Moriarty, 2023). Nevertheless, even within this restrictive environment, “islands of resistance” emerge as crucial expressions of politicisation from below (Child, 2009; Guma, 2017). Campaigns such as the Save Mabira Forest protests, the Black Monday Movement against corruption, the Walk to Work protests in response to rising living costs, and community struggles like the Amuru land protests, exemplify the capacity of social actors to challenge land dispossession, extractivism, and environmental degradation (Guma, 2017; Martiniello, 2017; Martiniello et al., 2022). These struggles foreground not only demands for accountability and justice but also articulate visions of ecological sustainability (Sjgren, 2018a). They reveal the persistence and resilience of politicisation even in contexts where repression is pervasive and civic freedoms are constrained.

As the findings of this thesis (Articles I and III) demonstrate, however, such struggles unfold within a civil society that is heavily NGOised and fragmented, shaped profoundly by donor dependency and a progressively shrinking civic space. This duality underscores the ambivalent nature of Uganda's political landscape: it constrains mobilisation through repression, and sometimes, co-optation yet simultaneously generates openings for resistance and experimentation through which politicisation is enacted and re-enacted. Against this backdrop, the next section turns to civil society, examining its role as a crucial agent of change in Uganda's agrarian transformation.

Civil society organisations as (political) agents of change

Civil society remains a nebulous and contested concept (Chandhoke, 2007; Edwards, 2013), variably employed in academic literature, with enduring debates about its roles, functions, and modes of operation (Mati, 2020). Despite its conceptual fluidity, the term is widely adopted to denote “the space outside the family, market, and state” (Bernauer et al., 2016; Chandhoke, 2007; Cooper, 2018; Edwards, 2013; Thornton, 1999). The functions attributed to civil society are multiple, often overlapping and even contradictory. Nonetheless, literature tends to summarise its contributions into three broad domains: social, developmental, and political (Chambers & Kopstein, 2006; Clayton et al., 2000; Iversen et al., 2024;

Mati, 2020). Within the political and developmental realm, which is the primary focus of this research, civil society is understood as a vital actor engaged in advocacy, serving as watchdogs, fostering active citizenship, and participating in global governance processes (Cooper, 2018). It is also instrumental in mobilising people for social and solidarity initiatives (Edwards, 2013; Mati, 2020), as well as in service delivery (Clayton et al., 2000; Iversen et al., 2024), particularly in contexts where state capacity is weak or absent (Chandhoke, 2007).

Crucially, while civil society is frequently conceptualised as an autonomous sphere distinct from and sometimes opposed to the state (Carothers & Barndt, 1999; Chambers & Kopstein, 2006; Chandhoke, 2007), the relationship between the two is neither fixed nor linear but rather fluid, contingent, and at times paradoxical. Their interactions can oscillate between antagonism and cooperation, and may take stable or volatile forms (Aho, 2017). Chandhoke (2007, 609) illustrates this by observing that civil society can simultaneously serve to limit the state, function as a precursor to its formation, constitute the very source of state power, or alternatively provide the arena where the state forges its hegemony in alliance with dominant classes. This dialectical interdependence implies that state and civil society are mutually constitutive: the existence of one reinforces and defines the other (Chandhoke, 2007). This implies that the relationship between the state and civil society is not predetermined, but instead is shaped by how closely their goals (ends) and methods (means) align or diverge (Najam, 2000). Hence, as noted by Najam (2000), state-civil society interaction often emerges within the dynamics of cooperation, complementarity, co-optation, and confrontation. For instance, he argues that cooperation is likely to prevail when both share similar objectives and strategies, while confrontation occurs when their aims and approaches are in direct opposition. When the latter is the case, states may resort to coercive measures to suppress civil society actors (Najam, 2000, also see Mati, 2020).

Viewed from a Gramscian lens, civil society becomes not simply a neutral buffer zone located between the state and the economy but a deeply political and dynamic terrain of struggle, a site where hegemony is not only constructed and maintained but also potentially contested and transformed (Mati, 2020). This perspective underscores the political agency of civil society as an arena of hegemonic contestation (Chandhoke, 2007; Mati, 2020), enabling forms of participation, mobilisation, and public action that can disrupt dominant ideologies and practices (Guma, 2017). Katz (2010) reinforces this interpretation by emphasising that civil society is “an arena of creativity where counter-hegemonic forces develop alternatives to hegemonic ideologies and practices, and from where, under specific conditions, reformist processes can emerge.” Such an understanding highlights its transformative potential while simultaneously acknowledging the tensions it faces. Indeed, the contemporary context is marked by growing pressures on civil society across political regimes, from established democracies to authoritarian states, where it confronts threats of demobilisation, increased repression, and the erosion of civic

space (Banerjee, 2023; Buyse, 2018; Omona & Romaniuk, 2021; Wanyama, 2017). The civil society–state nexus in Uganda epitomises this global trend. In the subsequent sections, I delve into this interaction, situating it within the broader theoretical framework outlined above, while interrogating how Ugandan civil society navigates its role as a political agent of change amid the contradictions, constraints, and possibilities that define its relationship with the state.

Emergence and development of civil society in Uganda

The emergence of civil society in Uganda is closely linked to the political-economic restructuring ushered in by the Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs), which significantly curtailed the role of the state in service delivery (Guma, 2017). As in many other countries, these neoliberal reforms created a governance vacuum that was increasingly occupied by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and other civil society actors, whose interventions were largely developmental and service-oriented in nature (Kansiime, 2019; Whaites, 2000). With the state retreating from its previous responsibilities, NGOs and community-based organisations became central in complementing public provision, stepping in to fill the gaps left by the retrenching state (Bukonya & Hickey, 2013; Fisseha, 2024). In the agricultural sector, this shift was particularly visible in the proliferation of NGO-led initiatives such as Sasakawa Global 2000's farmer training and extension programmes⁶, World Vision's input support and food security projects⁷, and PELUM Uganda's promotion of agroecology and sustainable land management. Faith-based organisations, including Caritas, have similarly assumed functions once performed by public extension services, ranging from seed provision to cooperative development and rural livelihood support. The expansion of civil society was further propelled by donor and development partners' preferences for channeling resources through non-state actors, who were widely regarded as more transparent, efficient, and less susceptible to corruption than government agencies (Muhumuza 2010).

As a result, available records show that between 1986 and 2011, the number of registered NGOs in Uganda grew dramatically from around 200 to approximately 9,500. Although the category of 'civil society' in Uganda and Africa more broadly encompasses a diverse range of actors, including community-based organisations, labour unions, professional associations, faith-based groups, segments of academia, and the media (Muhumuza, 2010), NGOs have come to dominate the civil society landscape in Uganda (Bukonya & Hickey, 2013; Isgren, 2018a). This phenomenon can be linked to formalisation and legal requirements demanded by the authorities to allow civil society organisations to operate in the country, making it difficult for informal networks or associations to obtain operating licenses. While the relationship between the state and civil society in Uganda has historically revolved

⁶ <https://saa-safe.org/www/>

⁷ <https://www.worldvision.org/our-work/hunger-food-security>

around complementary roles in service delivery, agricultural-oriented NGOs and CSOs have over time broadened their mandates to include democracy promotion, policy advocacy, and human rights activism (Isgren, 2018a, 2018b; Kansiime, 2019). Yet, despite this diversification, service provision—particularly in agricultural extension and rural development—remains the dominant sphere of engagement, with relatively fewer organisations venturing into the more politically sensitive realm of advocacy (Kiiza, 2010). My research further illustrates this complexity: even among CSOs mobilising around transformative agrarian agendas such as food sovereignty, engagement remains predominantly practical and technocratic. As detailed in Article I of this thesis, these organisations prioritise knowledge dissemination, capacity building in agroecological practices, and efforts toward seed sovereignty. While such activities carry implicit political critiques, their political undertones are often understated, subtle, and carefully navigated, as elaborated in Article III. This tendency, I argue, is shaped in part by the shrinking political freedoms that structure the state–civil society relationship in Uganda.

The Ugandan dynamics of state-civil society interaction

The relationship between the Ugandan state and civil society is neither static nor uniform but is characterised by fluid and dynamic configurations of alignment, negotiation, and contention (Kansiime, 2019). CSOs are frequently differentiated according to their perceived political positioning vis-à-vis the state, with some adopting pro-government orientations while others remain critical or oppositional. This differentiation profoundly conditions the modalities of engagement available to them and delineates the scope of their political agency. Scholarship suggests that NGOs and farmer organisations whose mandates centre primarily on service delivery often cultivate closer and more collaborative ties with state actors, insofar as their interventions are framed as complementary to government priorities. In Uganda, such arrangements are most clearly visible in partnerships forged under the National Agricultural Advisory Services (NAADS) programme, which channels CSO capacity into extension and input distribution, or in collaborations with international NGOs such as World Vision and Heifer International in livestock development and farmer training (Bukonya & Hickey, 2013; Ekou & Alungat, 2015).

By contrast, advocacy-oriented organisations—particularly those that contest state policies or development models—are typically positioned in adversarial relation to the state and are consequently marginalised or excluded from meaningful decision-making arenas (Kansiime, 2019; Muhumuza, 2010). In this sense, the interaction between the Ugandan state and civil society is not defined by an abstract principle of partnership, but rather by the degree to which CSOs align their objectives and practices with prevailing state agendas. Where alignment is evident, collaboration and access are often facilitated; where divergence occurs, exclusion and repression are more likely to follow. These collaborations underscore the predominance of

service provision as a legitimising modality through which CSOs secure access to the state while simultaneously circumscribing their capacity for more contentious or transformative forms of engagement. As I further elaborate in article III most CSOs report making deliberate efforts to align their operations with government regulations and requirements in order to cultivate and maintain a cooperative relationship with the state. As one CSO representative explained:

Our strong relationship with the government is based on our full compliance with all national and regulatory requirements. In contrast, organisations that fail to meet these obligations—such as by not filing annual returns or renewing their permits—face serious consequences, including suspension or closure. Some have had their accounts frozen, while others have been restricted to operating only in specific regions (ACSA, 2024).

This selective engagement by government reflects what Njoku (2022) terms the state's strategies of “strategic exclusion, co-option, and containment” aimed at managing dissent within civil society. Thus, the interaction between the Ugandan state and civil society exemplifies Najam (2000)’s four-Cs framework—cooperation, complementarity, co-optation, and confrontation—illustrating a fluid but often asymmetrical relationship, where collaboration and conflict coexist depending on the political positioning and activities of civil society actors. Thus, state–civil society relations in Uganda are characterised by a dynamic interplay of complementarity, cautious contestation, and strategic accommodation (Khisa, 2019a, 2019b). My analysis links this modality of state-civil society interactions to both the highly NGO-ised nature of civil society and the constraints imposed on civic space. One consequence of these restricted relationships is that CSOs often limit their demands to reformative demands that may not directly jeopardise their survival and access to policy arenas. This tendency is reflected in the following remark:

...it's not easy to change the government's position, but over time, with persistence and by breaking issues down into smaller pieces, progress can be made...if we can strengthen the government's institutions, it won't matter who is in power. If I go to a health center and find the medicine I need, I won't care who the president is (CSAB, 2024).

This remark provides evidence that the aim of the change agents is to improve the situation rather than oppose the entire system. Another added:

We do not entirely oppose these initiatives; rather, our focus is on whether they are genuinely aligned with farmers' needs. If they are not, could you consider refining them? (ACSA, 2024)

This further exemplifies how CSOs engage with state initiatives through pushing for reforms rather than pursuing deeper ruptural transformations, thereby

reinforcing the prevailing patterns of state–civil society engagement. This further aligns with Wright (2010; 253)’s assertion that:

Social actors [...] do not have real fixed interests; rather, interests are always something constructed in the specific context of problem-solving interactions. “Win-win solutions” to problems should therefore be generally possible as long as the actors engage in good-faith experimental, collaborative interactions.

Thus, the prevailing state–civil society dynamics in Uganda reveal an ongoing tension between pragmatic engagement aimed at incremental improvements and the broader challenge of pursuing transformative change within an increasingly constrained political environment. Building on this understanding of the complex interplay between state and civil society, the following section further interrogates how the professionalisation of civil society, captured by the concept of NGOisation, influences politicisation of agriculture and broader social transformation in Uganda. Specifically, it explores the paradoxical nature of NGOisation, examining how it simultaneously creates opportunities for structured mobilisation and policy engagement, yet poses significant threats through potential depoliticisation, elite dominance, and strategic self-censorship.

NGOised Civil Society: An opportunity or a threat?

Contestations around agricultural transformation in Uganda is described as driven by NGOised civil society (Isgren, 2018b, see also article I of this thesis). This NGOisation is characterised by transformation of grassroots mobilisation and farmer organising into professionalised, hierarchical, and donor-aligned non-governmental organisations (Ana, 2024; Choudry & Kapoor, 2013; Gonzalez, 2021; Paternotte, 2016; Ungsuchaval, 2016). My findings reveal that even organisations that self-identify as farmer-based, such as ESAFF Uganda, operate primarily through NGO secretariats with formalised structures, salaried staff, and donor contracts. While such organisations describe themselves as building a “movement,” in practice this is framed as a movement of numbers that legitimises representational claims and demonstrates grassroots presence, rather than as a vehicle for sustained or confrontational mobilisation. This reflects the broader dynamics of NGOisation identified in the literature as a shift from loosely structured, participatory, and horizontally dispersed social movements—what Dana (2013: 5–6) terms “indigenous forms of civil society”—towards professionalised, hierarchical, and institutionally embedded NGOs (Lang, 2012, 63), often accompanied by depoliticisation and demobilisation (Choudry & Kapoor, 2013; Gianni et al., 2021b). Compared to other contexts such as Latin America or Southeast Asia, where politicisation of agriculture has emerged through sustained social movements’ mobilisation (Anderl, 2024), Uganda’s trajectory of social mobilisation is highly NGOised (see article I of this thesis). In the context of Uganda, however,

NGOisation presents a paradox: it functions simultaneously as an opportunity and a threat to the politicisation of agriculture and broader social transformation.

NGOisation as an opportunity

Despite valid concerns, NGOisation can offer critical opportunities for collective action, particularly in resource-scarce and politically restricted environments like Uganda. My research highlighted that NGOisation, through enabling formal structures, affords enhanced organisational capacity through institutional strengthening and resource mobilisation. This is in line with other studies which have indicated that formalised NGOs often possess the administrative structures, technical expertise, and donor relationships needed to sustain long-term advocacy (Lang, 2012; Ungsuchaval, 2016). Ungsuchaval (2016, 8) observes, “professionalisation is a common strategy that invites more technocratic control of the organisation and expertise to deal with uncertainty.” Unlike informal grassroots movements, NGOised CSOs can thus access funding, engage in policy dialogue, and maintain stable operations more consistently (Ungsuchaval, 2016).

This is especially relevant in the context of agricultural advocacy in Uganda, where political restrictions, resource limitations, and logistical challenges often impede informal mobilisation. As I have demonstrated in Articles I and II, formal NGOs usually foster alliances with grassroots farmer groups whom they support in various ways including conducting research, and participating in government consultations, thereby embedding agricultural concerns into national development frameworks. Moreover, NGOisation not only provides individual organisations with capacity but also enables coalition building. Respondents pointed to platforms such as the Food Rights Alliance, PELUM Uganda, ACSA and AFSA, where organisations pool resources, coordinate campaigns, and present a unified position to policymakers. As one interviewee explained, “On our own we are too small to be heard, but together in the Alliance we can speak with one voice and government has to listen” (AFIRD, 2024). Such coalitions help to share scarce resources, avoid duplication of efforts, and strengthen their bargaining power in a fragmented political environment. Additionally, it was reported that holding NGO status can open doors to policy engagement and participation in international forums. As one respondent explained:

We have built strong relationships with local districts and governments where we operate. We are invited to participate in district engagements because we are the ones who provide information. We even sit on different committees, from the district to the national level. That is the power of advocacy (ACSA, 2024).

This aligns with other studies which suggest that NGOisation not only facilitates access to policy spaces but can also enhance the perceived legitimacy of civil society actors (Ana, 2019; Ungsuchaval, 2016). In Uganda’s agrarian sector, NGOised CSOs leverage their structures to gain representation in multi-stakeholder platforms, engage policymakers, and shape agricultural agendas. For instance, ESAFF Uganda,

while identifying as a farmer movement, derives much of its representational legitimacy from its NGOised secretariat, which anchors its grassroots presence in institutional visibility. This case demonstrates how NGOisation can create bridges between grassroots actors and national, and sometimes global policy systems, thereby strengthening farmer voices otherwise excluded from formal politics. NGOisation can also serve as a pragmatic shield against state repression. By framing inherently political initiatives such as agroecology, food sovereignty, and farmer organising in technical or development-oriented terms like “sustainability,” “autonomy,” and “participation” (see Article III), CSOs can pursue transformative agendas without triggering direct confrontation. Such discursive strategies allow organisations to circumvent co-optation and repression, maintain manoeuvrability, and nurture forms of quiet resistance within a restrictive governance regime. Far from signalling depoliticisation alone, these practices illustrate a strategic politics of survival that sustains collective organising in adverse contexts.

NGOisation as a threat

While NGOisation affords organisational stability and access to financial and political resources, it simultaneously carries profound risks that may undermine the prospects for making transformative demands. These risks become especially acute within Uganda’s increasingly restricted civic space—where the government obligates all NGOs to align their activities with government initiatives, especially the National Development Plan (Andrews, 2013; Kasirye & Lakal, 2019). The government expects NGOs to be “mutually constitutive, rather than separate autonomous entities” (Mitlin et al., 2007, 1702). Hence, foremost among these is the danger of depoliticisation and donor capture (Jad, 2007). By aligning their agendas, language, and strategies with the priorities of external actors like government and donors, NGOs risk shifting away from grassroots demands and contentious politics toward technocratic service delivery and project-based interventions. To this point, this research shows that many Ugandan NGOs engaging in agricultural advocacy tend to frame their interventions in technical-administrative or service-oriented terms (see article I of this thesis). This is not surprising as depoliticisation of collective action is one of the most widely cited critiques of NGOisation (Dana, 2013; Gianni et al., 2021a). Several studies indicate that even when political advocacy is pursued within NGOised organisations, it is frequently steered more by donor priorities than by grassroots demands (Grebe, 2014; Isgren, 2018b). This dynamic engenders a drift from politicised mobilisation toward institutional self-preservation, in which the dominant imperative is not transformative change but the fulfilment of grant requirements, cultivation of donor relations, and protection of organisational continuity (Dana, 2013; Gianni et al., 2021a; Jad, 2007; Lang, 2012).

Additionally, NGOisation may foster elite dominance and a form of representational politics that distances organisations from their grassroots bases. Scholars note that

this process often reinforces elite capture, privileging educated, urban professionals who are fluent in the technocratic language of policy, projects, and funding cycles (Ana, 2019; Ungsuchaval, 2016). As Jad (2007, 627) cautions, the *projectivisation* of struggle tends to push CSOs “towards upward vertical participation and not downward horizontal participation and can lead to further concentration of power in the hands of administrators or technocrats.” In Uganda, this dynamic is evident: while ESAFF Uganda seeks to foreground farmer voices, most organisations operate through top-down channels with limited grassroots input into decision-making. In such contexts, representation risks becoming largely symbolic, reinforcing hierarchical relations and undermining the prospects for substantive, participatory mobilisation.

Finally, my analysis shows that NGO-led advocacy in Uganda is increasingly characterised by strategic self-censorship, a response to the contraction of political space for civil society. Numerous studies confirm that over the past decade, Uganda’s legal and political environment has become progressively restrictive (Omona & Romaniuk, 2021; Turyasingura, 2023). This has entailed heightened surveillance and bureaucratic control: NGOs are now required to submit annual work plans, sign memoranda of understanding with government authorities to operate in particular regions, and register with multiple regulatory bodies—under threat of suspension, financial sanction, or outright closure (Kasirye & Lakal, 2019). Some NGO representatives explained:

The space for dialogue is shrinking in subtle but significant ways... These seemingly small actions are steadily contributing to the shrinking space for civil society (ACSA 2024).

Another noted the atmosphere of suspicion

There is so much distrust that we are branded as saboteurs or foreign agents. Regardless of how valuable our work is, [just] mentioning civil society triggers backlash from the state (NGO representative, 2024).

The result is a pervasive culture of preventive compliance, in which actors deliberately frame their advocacy in technocratic or euphemistic terms to avoid confrontation. As one NGO representative lamented:

The moment you mention civil society, the state responds with hostility. As a result, we’ve begun to self-censor. You can’t simply say, ‘The government is corrupt.’ Instead, you have to frame it in more acceptable terms, something like, ‘There are leakages in the system.’ But the average person doesn’t know what ‘leakages’ mean. And yet, this is the kind of language we’re forced to use in our work (NGO representative, 2024).

This illustrates how repression operates less through overt suppression than through the cultivation of discursive caution, compelling NGOs to package dissent in institutionalised, donor-friendly, and ostensibly non-political forms (Ana, 2024; Lang, 2012).

In this environment, overt politicisation becomes not only difficult but actively avoided. Even organisations with explicitly radical agendas, such as food sovereignty or social justice, often adopt reformist and non-confrontational strategies for fear of retaliation. This reflects what Banerjee (2023) terms the logic of “inclusion by exclusion,” where adversarial organisations are simultaneously permitted limited access yet systematically disciplined to moderate their claims. The outcome is a strategic dilemma: NGOs must advocate for change while carefully avoiding the appearance of dissent. Thus, NGOisation in Uganda emerges as a double-edged phenomenon. On one hand, it provides resources, organisational stability, and policy access that enable mobilisation within a restrictive political landscape. On the other, it risks entrenching elite representation, depoliticising movements, and foreclosing the radical, grassroots-led transformations needed for systemic agrarian change. The challenge, therefore, is not simply to critique NGOisation as depoliticising, but to strategise within and beyond it, reimagining civil society simultaneously as a space of institutional survival and a platform for subversion. Meeting this challenge requires renewed commitment to bottom-up mobilisation, critical reflexivity among NGO actors, and solidarities that cut across institutional boundaries. Only through such practices can civil society reclaim its political potency under conditions of constraint.

4.4 Summary

This chapter has traced how Uganda’s agrarian order is reproduced and contested through the interlocking dynamics of structure, contradiction, and agency. Drawing on Wright’s theory of transformation, I have highlighted how rules, ideologies, and material interests anchor neoliberal agricultural models, embedding them in research agendas, policy frameworks, and extension practices that marginalise alternatives. At the same time, systemic contradictions such as rising precarity, ecological breakdown, and dependency on external inputs reveal the limits of this model and open spaces for contestation. Within these openings, civil society organisations and farmer collectives mobilise around agroecology and food sovereignty, though their efforts are shaped by the ambivalent effects of NGOisation, which provides organisational resources and political access while risking fragmentation and depoliticisation. The analysis shows that agrarian transformation in Uganda hinges not only on technical shifts but on struggles over power, knowledge, and political space. The next chapter turns to politicisation strategies through which actors navigate these contested terrains and advance alternative futures.

5 Contours of politicisation in a closing civic space and NGOised terrain.

In this chapter, I discuss how the politicisation of agricultural transformation unfolds within Uganda's shrinking civic space and increasingly NGOised landscape. Technocratic framings, donor dependency, and state repression constrain the scope of collective action, yet social actors continue to contest dominant paradigms, navigate institutional barriers, and prefigure alternative agrarian futures. To analyse these dynamics, I draw on Erik Olin Wright's (2010) theory of transformative strategies, which centres on the question, "*What is to be done?*", a question that, in this context, is inseparable from the constraints under which change agents operate. Wright's framework illuminates how actors, even within restrictive political and institutional environments, identify openings, adapt their strategies, and orient their struggles toward long-term transformation. His three logics of transformation—ruptural, interstitial, and symbiotic—provide a useful lens for understanding how Ugandan actors imagine, contest, and construct alternative agricultural futures under conditions of constraint.

Given these conditions, politicisation in Uganda unfolds primarily through a hybrid of interstitial and symbiotic strategies. The interstitial dimension centres on constructing alternatives within semi-autonomous spaces that exist beyond dominant institutions, while the symbiotic dimension focuses on engaging existing structures to gradually reconfigure power relations and secure incremental gains. In a political environment that forecloses ruptural or revolutionary routes, transformative efforts therefore emerge through strategic adaptation, as social actors carve out niches of autonomy, cultivate alternative practices, and forge alliances that sustain politicisation amid surveillance, donor conditionalities, and a shrinking civic space. These practices are not merely reactive or defensive; they function as prefigurative strategies that enact the principles of inclusion, sustainability, and justice which underpin the agrarian futures they seek to realise.

This chapter situates these findings within the broader context of Uganda's closing civic space and examines how farmer groups, NGOs, and coalitions combine interstitial, symbiotic, and prefigurative strategies to enact political agency under constraint.

5.1 Closing civic space

The recent global trends point to shrinking civic spaces, where governments, even in consolidated democracies, suppress critical civil society (Banerjee, 2023; Buyse, 2018). Hence, closing civil space is characterised by “adversarial relationships and attendant policy environment that disfavors politically oriented civil society” (Mati, 2020, 674). In many places, shrinking civic space manifests in increased surveillance, violence, media restrictions, restricted funding, legal restrictions, and crackdowns against dissenting civil society organisations (Banerjee, 2023; Cooper, 2018). These restrictions are imposed to delegitimise advocacy-focused organisations while favouring apolitical service provision (Banerjee, 2023; Omona & Romaniuk, 2021; Wanyama, 2017). Therefore, the main goal of imposing tough restrictions is depoliticisation of the civil society space (Hammett & Jackson, 2018).

Uganda is one of the countries where all these acts are at play (Khisra, 2019b; Omona & Romaniuk, 2021). Over the past decade, Uganda has seen increasing restrictions on freedom of expression, association, and assembly (Höglund & Schaffer, 2021). Laws such as the Public Order Management Act (POMA) (Turyasingura, 2023), the NGO Act, and the Computer Misuse Act have been used to stifle dissent, regulate NGO operations, and suppress political activism (Bigira, 2021; Omona & Romaniuk, 2021). To increase surveillance, NGOs in Uganda are required to register with multiple government bodies, submit intrusive audits, and refrain from activities deemed ‘political’ (Omona & Romaniuk, 2021). My findings show that the shrinking of civic space is further evidenced by the arrest and detention of dissenting voices, the closure of critical NGOs, heightened surveillance, and the freezing of NGO accounts. CSOs also pointed to the government’s recent decision to restructure the NGO Bureau as a department within the Ministry of Internal Affairs, headed by a secretary reporting directly to the permanent secretary. Widely interpreted as an attempt to tighten state control, this restructuring adds another layer of scrutiny to existing requirements that all NGOs submit annual work plans and sign memoranda of understanding before carrying out activities (Andrews, 2013; Kasirye & Lakal, 2019). This crackdown has not spared organisations working in agrarian advocacy, where restrictive measures have already had tangible impacts—particularly on NGOs promoting sustainable agricultural alternatives. As one NGO representative explained:

The space for dialogue is shrinking in subtle but significant ways. For instance, some NGOs have been closed in this country, their accounts are often frozen. These disruptions may seem minor, but they have a considerable impact. It is these seemingly small actions that are steadily contributing to the shrinking space for civil society (ACSA, 2024).

In Uganda, shrinking civic space has therefore become a decisive factor shaping how collective actors can organise, mobilise, and push for agricultural

transformation. This reflects Wright's (2010, 203) caution that the scope for transformation is always historically contingent and structurally constrained:

There is... no a priori guarantee in any time and place that spaces [in the predominant systems] are large enough to allow for significant movement in the direction of fundamental transformations of structures of domination, oppression, and exploitation. But even when the spaces are limited, they can allow transformations that matter.

In other words, 'room for manoeuvre' is never unlimited; it is shaped by the size and openness of political and institutional spaces. Yet even modest openings can enable meaningful forms of contestation and change, particularly when seized by organised actors. Hence, social actors in Uganda do not simply adapt to these structural constraints; they also actively carve out new openings and construct alternative arenas through which to advance their struggles. By leveraging informal networks, mobilising local knowledge, and experimenting with hybrid organisational forms, they generate new spaces for contestation and collaboration that challenge the boundaries of the shrinking civic sphere. This dynamic illustrates how agency and structure are intertwined: while repression narrows the room for manoeuvre, collective actors simultaneously reconfigure the very conditions under which transformative practices can take root and endure. Therefore, the central task of the political change agents involved in politicising agricultural transformation in Uganda involves *strategic navigation of structural barriers* that constrain their politicising efforts. In other words, the contraction of civic space illustrates these structural limits, yet it is precisely through negotiating such restrictions that collective actors craft subversive and strategic forms of politicisation.

5.2 Closing doors, opening windows: Politicisation amidst restrictions

Intensifying repression and a narrowing civic space have not halted collective action in Uganda; they have reshaped it. Rather than retreating, actors recalibrate in response to immediate threats while seizing available and emergent openings (see Article III of this thesis). This adaptive politics reflects the interplay of political opportunity structures, mobilising structures, and tactical repertoires (Larson, 2013; Tilly & Tarrow, 2015). It also resonates with Erik Olin Wright's observation that the gaps and contradictions within dominant institutions can themselves generate openings, enabling actors even amidst constraints to pursue social changes with emancipatory intent. In Uganda's restrictive political context, such strategies allow social actors to navigate the delicate balance between survival and transformation, sustaining the possibility of more radical futures. They are neither straightforwardly

confrontational nor merely submissive; rather, their tactics embody a politics of adaptation where actors recalibrate, negotiate, and innovate under pressure. This adaptive repertoire takes diverse but interconnected forms.

Non-confrontational and collaborative strategies encompass a wide spectrum, ranging from formal advocacy and insider lobbying to more subtle practices rooted in everyday life. In the latter sphere, actors enact prefigurative politics and quiet resistance, experimenting with community seed banks, farmer field schools, or cooperative marketing, agroecological schools that both contest dominant paradigms and embody alternative agrarian futures in the present. Alongside these, actors turn to coalition-building, which amplifies advocacy through alliances and provides protection against repression, and to grassroots mobilisation, which recentres smallholder farmers as political actors in shaping agrarian futures. These repertoires illustrate how Ugandan collective actors transform narrow and fragile openings into sites of politicisation. They show how political struggle continues even when doors are closed, and how, by navigating gaps, contradictions, and constraints, social actors sustain the horizon of contestation. The sections below elaborate these forms in turn, beginning with non-confrontational and collaborative strategies.

Non-confrontational and collaborative strategies

Within Uganda's tightening political landscape, overt confrontation has become a perilous undertaking. In response, many civil society and farmer organisations adopt *non-confrontational and collaborative strategies* that privilege engagement, negotiation, and persuasion over protest (as elaborated in Article III). To an outside observer, such strategies might appear to be signs of depoliticisation, self-censorship or even outright co-optation (Tarrow, 2022). However, when situated within the analytical frames of SMT and Erik Olin Wright's theory of social transformation, a more nuanced picture emerges. What emerges is not a withdrawal from politics but a strategic recalibration, in which political agency takes shape through tactical adjustment, grounded forms of action and cautious experimentation. SMT, particularly in its articulation of contentious politics, emphasises how social actors constantly weigh threats against opportunities, readjusting tactics according to shifting political dynamics (Amenta et al., 1996; McAdam et al., 2005; Meyer & Tarrow, 1998; Staggenborg, 1988; Tilly, 2017).

In Uganda, this dynamic translates into a politics of calibration, characterised by the delicate negotiation between advancing change and ensuring organisational survival, between asserting voice and maintaining legitimacy in the eyes of the state. Such tuning is critical for challengers, since the state simultaneously functions as the target of their demands and as the regulator of the very conditions under which contestation occurs (Banks et al., 2015; Tilly & Tarrow, 2015). The emphasis on non-confrontational engagement anchors this form of politicisation, reflecting a strategic wager that even within a repressive system, gaps and contradictions can be

leveraged to preserve space for action and, at times, secure meaningful reforms. These strategies take three main forms: advocacy and lobbying, prefigurative politics and everyday resistance, as summarised in table 6 below.

Table 6 Forms of non-confrontational politicisation in Uganda's agricultural transformation

Strategy	Nature of politicisation	Manifestation	Actors
Advocacy and lobbying	Collaborative	Political access mechanisms (lobbying, dialogues, insider persuasion)	Farmer groups; national & transnational CSOs
Prefigurative politics	Cultivating alternatives	Seed saving, composting, cooperative marketing, seed banks, FFS, demo plots, agroecology schools	Farmer groups (with CSO support)
Everyday resistance/politics	Subtle/diffuse	Collective purchasing, VSLAs, routine quiet practices of autonomy & knowledge assertion	Farmer Groups

Source: Author

Advocacy and lobbying

A central feature of non-confrontational repertoires in Uganda is the growing reliance on advocacy and lobbying as collaborative modes of engagement (elaborated in article III). Rather than relying on protest or overt confrontation, many CSOs and farmer organisations turn to what Kolb (2007, 81) terms political access mechanisms—the process by which social movements seek to gain entry into formal policy-making arenas and work *within* the system to effect change rather than remaining outside the political process. In Uganda, advocacy characterise the ways in which challengers participate in policy dialogues and engage in multi-stakeholder platforms using insider strategies that privilege persuasion over protest. This represents a strategic recalibration in contexts where direct confrontation is fraught with risk. One practitioner explained this shift:

Advocates should be dynamic in their tactics; for instance, for me, a cup of tea with the minister in Serena [hotel] can be enough to change the game. I tell him, ‘Can’t we include this one in the government budgeting process? Because if you see, this is an issue that is lacking, and we think if you added this in there, we could have a very big change.’ And it will happen the next day (AFIRD, 2024).

This illustrates how influence is often secured not through public demonstrations but through personalised, quiet negotiations that can yield swift yet under-recognised changes. Such practices resonate with Wright’s (2010) notion of symbiotic strategies of transformation, which rest on mutually beneficial cooperation between opposing forces. Rather than assuming that interests are fixed and antagonistic, Wright suggests they can be reconstructed in the course of problem-solving interactions. As he argues, “[m]ost conflict situations should be

viewed as failures of the participants to discover the positive-sum possibilities of their situation,” noting that interests are always “constructed in the specific context of problem-solving interactions... leading to ‘win-win solutions’” (Wright, 2010, 253). From the vantage point of social movement theory, this reflects a strategic awareness of political opportunity structures: civil society actors selectively engage the state when windows for insider persuasion open, while deliberately avoiding confrontational tactics that could trigger repression or foreclose future access (Amenta et al., 1996; McAdam et al., 2005). My findings therefore suggest that collaboration is not accidental but a deliberate and calculated move. Social actors display a nuanced reading of the political environment, weighing the risks of contention against the potential gains of engagement (as elaborated in Article III of this thesis). One participant put it succinctly:

sometimes, if you feel that your efforts are likely to fail, it’s better to change your strategy and try lobbying instead (ACSA 2024).

Another echoed this pragmatism:

Civil society must learn to collaborate constructively with the government. Directly accusing them can create hostility. But if you come up with a call for improvement, they ask: what kind of improvement? (AFIRD 2024).

These reflections underscore how collaborative advocacy functions as a politics of strategic adaptation, in which actors negotiate how much to push, when to concede, and how to frame their demands so that they remain legible to power without abandoning transformative intent. In some instances, this hinges on cultivating *elite allies* within state institutions, who can amplify civil society demands from within the system. The limitation, of course, is that such allies are not always available, leaving actors to recalibrate strategies in the absence of insider champions.

Prefigurative politics

Unlike advocacy and lobbying which involve engage the state from within its institutional boundaries, *prefigurative politics* unfolds in spaces that exist alongside or beyond them. Here, transformation is pursued through the creation of alternative social practices that embody the desired futures actors wish to realise (Dinerstein, 2015; Maeckelbergh, 2011). As conceptualised by Yates (2015), prefigurative politics are characterised by creating experimental or alternative social formations that embody visions of justice, sustainability, and democracy. In other words, prefiguration is not simply about articulating demands; it is about living them here and now. This understanding is echoed by Maeckelbergh (2011), who stresses that prefiguration combines experimentation with power relations in ways that enact political alternatives in everyday practices. Others highlights that prefiguration blurs

the boundary between means and ends, insisting that the form of struggle must embody the desired social order (Boggs, 1977; Dinerstein, 2015).

More broadly, Graeber (2002) and others have emphasised that prefigurative practices serve as crucial experiments in sustaining alternatives within and against dominant logics. In Uganda's agrarian context, these dynamics are woven into the daily practices of farmer groups supported by CSOs. Although practices such as seed saving, agroecological farming, composting, and collective marketing are often seen as technical responses to challenges like food insecurity, environmental degradation, or market exclusion, through the lens of prefiguration they become acts of resistance. For example, by preserving indigenous seed varieties, farmers challenge corporate seed monopolies; by relying on compost and organic inputs, they weaken the grip of global agrochemical industries; and through collective marketing, they resist the extractive dynamics of liberalised markets. In doing so, farmers reassert local knowledge systems and ecological stewardship, subtly but significantly contesting the epistemic and material dominance of agribusiness and the state (Temper et al., 2018). This concurs with the notion that prefiguration is "a practice through which movements actors create a conflation of their ends with their means" (Maeckelbergh, 2012, 2) and "an ideal strategy for the construction of an alternative world without engaging with the state or the capitalist powers" (Maeckelbergh, 2009, 95).

More so, these practices reflect the five processes that Yates (2015, 1) identifies in prefigurative politics, including collective experimentation; the imagining and circulation of political meanings; the creation of new social norms; consolidation in movement infrastructures; and the diffusion of ideas into wider networks. In Uganda, farmer-managed seed systems exemplify collective experimentation, building resilience to climatic variability and market dependency; agroecological methods articulate new norms of farming that prioritise ecological health over chemical intensification; collective marketing builds infrastructures of solidarity; and farmer-to-farmer exchanges diffuse these practices and imaginaries across agrarian communities. I show examples of these practices in figure 14 below.



Figure 11: Prefigurative activities among smallholders in Uganda

These photos show a snapshot of prefigurative activities in Uganda, ranging from community seed bank (indigenous seed saving); smallholder farmers sharing knowledge on value addition; smallholder farmers sharing knowledge on value addition to sharing knowledge on public agriculture financing and accountability. **Source:** ESAFF Uganda.

These processes show that prefiguration is both material and symbolic, reshaping farming practices while simultaneously circulating meanings about sovereignty, justice, and sustainability. This perspective also resonates with Erik Olin Wright’s notion of interstitial transformation. Transformation, in this sense, does not occur by overthrowing dominant structures outright but by cultivating semi-autonomous spaces in the margins of the system (Wright, 2010). Practices like community seed banks, agroecological demonstration plots, and farmer field schools are tangible embodiments of this strategy. Farmers and CSOs may present these initiatives as “non-political,” partly to avoid state repression or donor suspicion, but their existence is inherently political, as they embody “the world as it could be” within the limits of “the world as it is,” producing incremental shifts that may accumulate into more substantial systemic change. Nonetheless, prefigurative practices are rarely political ends in themselves. As Yates (2015, 11) observes, “they often function as interim steps toward broader goals”. Ugandan farmer initiatives, modest and localised as they may seem, sustain alternative infrastructures and imaginaries that can be activated when political opportunities arise. They therefore represent a

strategic way of keeping alive possibilities for transformation in contexts awash with political repression. In this sense, strategies of prefiguration in Uganda can be understood not only as survival mechanisms but also as long-term political projects that embed visions of agrarian justice and sustainability in everyday practice. While closely related, prefigurative politics emphasises the intentional creation of alternative social relations that embody desired futures in the present (Ullström, 2024), whereas everyday politics highlights the dispersed, routine practices through which people negotiate, resist, or adapt to power in daily life as I discuss below.

Everyday resistance/politics

Beyond organised advocacy and intentional prefiguration lies a subtler terrain of struggle: the *everyday politics* through which ordinary people negotiate power and sustain autonomy in daily life. Building on Scott (1985)'s "weapons of the weak" and Kerkvliet (2009)'s conception of everyday politics show, this perspective highlights dispersed and often hidden forms of political action through which people accept, comply with, resist, or subtly modify the rules and norms that govern access to resources and opportunities. Although such practices may not be explicitly recognised as political by those involved, they nonetheless shape power relations by challenging, reshaping, or reinforcing existing structures (Bayat, 2013; Falla et al., 2024; Kerkvliet, 2009). In Uganda, the collective practices of farmer groups vividly illustrate these dynamics, even when facilitated by CSOs. Initiatives such as village savings and loan associations (VSLAs), collective input purchasing, community seed banks, and joint marketing schemes function not only as economic strategies but also as political acts of resistance. By lowering production costs, enhancing bargaining power, and improving access to seeds and other inputs, these initiatives simultaneously cultivate trust, solidarity, and forms of autonomy that reduce dependence on state and corporate actors (as I elaborate in Article II of this thesis). As one farmer group member explained: "*We buy seeds and other inputs together, which helps us get better prices and higher-quality products by enhancing our collective bargaining power*" (Ajonai Farmer Group Member). This example illustrates how seemingly practical strategies of collective input purchasing double as everyday political acts, enabling farmers to negotiate market pressures collectively while quietly resisting the extractive dynamics of liberalised agriculture.

These findings concur with Martiniello (2017) who shows that, in rural Uganda, everyday politics becomes visible in decisions over labour mobilisation, farming practices, and collective action. In this sense, what appear as technical or survival-oriented strategies often reflect deeper struggles over whose knowledge matters, which values guide agricultural practices, and how autonomy is exercised within communities. For instance, seed saving or participation in farmer field schools are seemingly mundane choices, but they express political claims over autonomy, identity, and agrarian futures. These reflections resonate with earlier studies in other

contexts such as Tripp (1994) who shows how women in Tanzania used everyday practices of resistance to negotiate space within authoritarian regimes. They are also closely linked to Bayat (1997)'s concept of the quiet encroachment of the ordinary, which emphasises how marginalised groups claim resources and rights through daily acts that avoid direct confrontation. Vinthagen and Johansson (2013) conceptualise everyday resistance as both a practice and an analytic lens, highlighting its significance across different settings while Lilja and Vinthagen (2018) stress the importance of subtle, non-dramatic forms of resistance in shaping long-term social change.

These perspectives resonate with the Ugandan case, showing how dispersed, subtle practices can unsettle dominant power relations while building alternative possibilities from below. This also connects to Erik Olin Wright's (2010) theory of social transformation. Everyday politics in Uganda can be understood as a way of pursuing interstitial transformation, unfolding in the cracks of the dominant system where peasants and farmer groups carve out spaces of autonomy and resilience. These small, routine acts may not overthrow existing structures but can gradually erode dependence on dominant regimes, creating semi-autonomous zones of practice that embody alternative logics of farming, exchange, and community. Over time, such dispersed practices (Lilja & Vinthagen, 2018) may accumulate into broader transformations, especially when linked with wider movements or moments of political opportunity. In this way, everyday politics demonstrates how politicisation does not only occur through protests, lobbying, or open confrontation. It is also enacted through dispersed, routine practices that negotiate and reshape social relations. Far from being marginal or apolitical, these activities represent the building blocks of agrarian transformation, embedding visions of justice, autonomy, and sustainability in the fabric of everyday life.

In a nutshell, while non-confrontational and collaborative strategies sustain agency under repression, they are not without contradictions. Persistent collaboration with state institutions can reinforce existing power asymmetries or contribute to the demobilisation of grassroots struggle (Choudry & Kapoor, 2013; Gonzalez, 2021). For example, professionalised advocacy, while often effective in gaining access to decision-makers, risks blunting radical critique or depoliticising demands originating from below. Nevertheless, dismissing these strategies as mere co-optation overlooks the structural constraints within which Ugandan actors operate and the creative agency they exercise within those limits. What emerges, then, is a politics of strategic ambivalence—characterised by forms of engagement that are neither wholly submissive nor overtly subversive, but instead calculated negotiations shaped by ongoing struggles over power, voice, and possibility. From an ESS perspective, such non-confrontational strategies are necessary, but their adequacy depends on whether they remain normatively grounded and contextually feasible (Harnesk & Isgren, 2022). In Uganda, the interplay of collaborative advocacy, prefigurative alternatives, and everyday resistance demonstrates how

actors sustain voice and preserve spaces of possibility in hostile political environments.

These repertoires embody a pragmatic, adaptive, and prefigurative politics that blends reform with resistance and practice with vision. Still, their ambivalence is clear. As Wright (2010, 253) notes, “because symbiotic transformations involve systematic forms of collaboration and mutually beneficial cooperation between opposing social forces, it might be thought that the strategies in pursuit of such collaboration would also be collaborative and non-confrontational.” Yet, as Maeckelbergh (2009, 95) cautions, such “practices must also incorporate a confrontation with these powers.” This tension reinforces the idea that only when coupled with mobilisation and pursued through collective action can incremental reforms both meet urgent needs and lay the foundation for deeper structural transformation (Wright, 2010; 2016).

It is at this juncture that other modes of politicisation come into view—modes that do not abandon collaboration but seek to overcome the disjointed and localised nature of earlier efforts by fostering coordination, shared strategy, and cross-scale solidarity. *Coalition-building* and *farmer-led advocacy* exemplify such approaches. While not necessarily confrontational in the sense of direct protest, they sharpen the collective edge of dispersed struggles and enable more assertive forms of claim-making. Coalition-building provides the organisational and relational infrastructure through which fragmented initiatives are linked, marginalised voices amplified, and scattered repertoires transformed into coordinated political strategies capable of navigating between accommodation and resistance. Likewise, farmer-led advocacy re-centres grassroots actors in the political process, countering professionalised depoliticisation by advancing claims grounded in lived agrarian realities. Together, these approaches mark a shift from fragmented adaptation toward collective coordination—where dispersed practices of survival and quiet resistance are consolidated into more coherent and potentially transformative forms of politicisation. The following sections examine coalition-building and farmer-led advocacy as key mechanisms through which Uganda’s agrarian actors sustain and scale their political agency within restrictive civic environments.

Coalition-building

Coalition-building represents a crucial mechanism through which fragmented struggles gain coherence and political traction within Uganda’s restrictive civic space. In contexts where isolated actors face repression or resource scarcity, coalitions enable them to pool capacities, coordinate agendas, and amplify collective voice (Tarrow, 2022). They transform individual resilience into organised strength, turning vulnerability into visibility. As Tarrow (2022, 191), defines them, coalitions are “collaborative, means-oriented arrangements that permit distinct organisational entities to pool resources in order to effect change.” In Uganda, change agents rarely operate in isolation; instead, they form coalitions with like-

minded local, national, and transnational organisations. A prominent example is the Advocacy Coalition for Sustainable Agriculture (ACSA), a national network of 29 CSOs across 46 districts that promotes sustainable agriculture, market development, environmental conservation, research, and advocacy. Transnationally, actors engage through the Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa (AFSA) and PELUM Africa (see article III of this thesis). In resource-limited and politically adverse environments such as Uganda, where CSOs depend heavily on donor funding, alliances and networks become essential for resource mobilisation (Diani & McAdam, 2003; Staggenborg, 1986). These coalitions provide durable mobilising structures (McAdam et al., 1996), allowing social actors to expand initiatives, coordinate campaigns, and sustain political visibility.

Aligning with Tarrow (2022), my research shows that in Uganda, coalitions also serve as critical platforms for pooling resources such as funding, expertise, and human capital, while enhancing organisational credibility in donor engagements. They amplify grassroots voices in national policy debates by promoting unified counter-narratives, for example around food sovereignty, agroecology, and seed autonomy. As one ACSA representative noted, “as civil society, we gather to create a position paper or a statement... then, we present together.” Moreover, by aligning with transnational actors such as AFSA and La Via Campesina, Ugandan coalitions rescale their struggles, linking local claims to broader movements and discourses. This is critical for the context of Uganda as previous research has indicated that mobilising transnational solidarities provides discursive leverage, institutional legitimacy, and political insulation often unavailable to individual organisations (Gawerc, 2020; Hathaway & Meyer, 1997; Keck & Sikkink, 1998).

Moreover, this multilevel anchoring enables grassroots actors to assert agency more effectively while embedding their claims within global conversations on ecological justice and democratic food systems (Harnesk & O’Byrne, 2024). In this sense, coalition-building addresses structural disarticulation, a condition where grievances exist without organisational infrastructure to sustain coordinated action (McAdam et al., 1996). Coalitions counteract this by fostering trust, cultivating shared identities, and creating relational infrastructures for ongoing mobilisation (Gawerc, 2020). They also act as framing sites, where movements forge common narratives that resonate across diverse constituencies and render claims intelligible to the public and policymakers (Hathaway & Meyer, 1997; Polletta & Jasper, 2001). Coalitions further strengthen political influence and protection, as they allow CSOs to withstand state hostility by presenting a unified front (McCammon & Campbell, 2002; Tilly, 2005). As one coalition member explained:

We believe that if we, ESAFF, ACSA, ActionAid, PELUM, and other organisations, stand together in opposing a certain government programme, it will be much harder for the government to single out one organisation unless they choose to crack down on all NGOs in the country. When we come together, it shows policymakers that we

represent a larger, collective voice, and they take our concerns more seriously (NGO representative, 2024).

Beyond visibility and protection, coalitions serve as prefigurative spaces where actors experiment with and enact alternative models of governance, production, and social relations. They are not simply vehicles for engagement with the state or for securing external support; they are arenas for cultivating plural visions of justice and sustainability grounded in lived experiences (Harnesk & O’Byrne, 2024). Coalition-building thus functions as constructive resistance: it operates within existing institutional frameworks while challenging and transcending them (Wright, 2010; Temper et al., 2018). Coalitions also act as knowledge commons, enabling diverse actors to co-produce counter-hegemonic narratives, practices, and epistemologies (Polletta & Jasper, 2001; Gawerc, 2020). My research shows that it is through similar processes that market-driven models of agricultural development are contested, while alternatives such as food sovereignty, seed autonomy, and agroecological transitions are advanced in Uganda. This epistemic function of coalitions politicises otherwise technical domains, making hidden injustices visible and rendering alternative futures imaginable. Nonetheless, coalition-building is not without tensions. Differences in power, professionalisation, and donor influence can reproduce hierarchies that sideline grassroots voices, as one respondent observed:

External funders often dictate agendas, steering coalitions toward activities that may not align with local needs. For instance, in land governance, a funder might propose testing seed varieties, favouring enhanced corporate seeds over traditional landraces. This imposes an external narrative that does not reflect the realities of small-scale farmers (ESAFF Uganda, 2024).

Symbolic unity may also conceal substantive disagreements, while shared framing may reflect compromise rather than radical consensus (Polletta & Jasper, 2001). Yet despite these challenges, coalition-building remains a vital strategy, it enables CSOs to manoeuvre within and against dominant institutions while constructing semi-autonomous spaces where alternative futures can be imagined and enacted. In line with Wright’s (2010) emphasis on collective capacity and social power, coalitions should be understood not only as instruments of organisational survival but as engines of systemic transformation. Their effectiveness increasingly depends on how well they engage and activate grassroots actors, particularly smallholder farmers, as co-producers of knowledge, strategy, and vision. This participatory orientation reflects a growing recognition that sustainable transformation is not merely a matter of scale or coordination, but of cultivating grounded, collective agency (Martiniello, 2018; Harnesk & O’Byrne, 2024). Against this backdrop, coalition-building emerges as a strategic response that strengthens collective agency under repression while embedding reform efforts within broader mobilising structures capable of sustaining long-term agrarian transformation. While coalitions amplify voices and secure protection, their representational nature can at times

distance advocacy from the lived realities of smallholder farmers. Addressing this limitation requires not only building collective platforms but also ensuring that grassroots actors themselves are directly engaged as advocates. The next section therefore turns to how politicisation is activated from below, through farmer-led advocacy and grassroots mobilisation.

Activating grassroots: Turning to farmer-led advocacy

While coalition-building strengthens collective coordination and amplifies shared agendas, its effectiveness ultimately depends on the extent to which grassroots actors are substantively engaged rather than merely represented. In Uganda, many coalitions and civil society platforms risk reproducing top-down dynamics in which advocacy is professionalised and mediated by NGO secretariats or donor-driven agendas. This representational distance can dilute the transformative intent of mobilisation, rendering farmers visible yet politically muted. To overcome these limits, some organisations have begun shifting from representation to activation—centering farmers themselves as political subjects capable of articulating and advancing their own claims. Farmer-led advocacy embodies this shift. It emerges as a crucial strand of politicisation that unfolds through grassroots mobilisation, positioning smallholders as active agents in shaping agricultural policy and development agendas.

Unlike the representational advocacy and coalitions described above, this approach reframes smallholders not as constituencies to be spoken for, but as active subjects who articulate their own priorities, engage directly with policymakers, and co-produce agendas from the ground up (see Paper III of this thesis). In this model, supporting organisations assume a facilitative rather than representative role. Instead of speaking on behalf of farmers, they create enabling conditions for farmers to speak for themselves, including in formal institutions such as Parliament. As one civil society actor explained: “we accompany farmers to places like Parliament so they can testify directly, sharing how specific issues affect them” (ACSA, 2024). Such practices enhance the authenticity, relevance, and political legitimacy of advocacy, while also building farmers’ capacity to engage confidently with duty-bearers through the fusion of technical training and experiential knowledge. Over time, these engagements have altered perceptions of farmers within policymaking arenas:

Previously, we were asked questions like, ‘Who are you? Who do you represent?’ Today, such questions no longer come up because the farmers are the ones voicing their own stances (ESAFF Uganda, 2024).

Farmer-led advocacy thus represents a strategic reframing of political voice and authority within development processes. By making visible farmers’ lived realities and situated expertise, such initiatives disrupt dominant hierarchies of knowledge and reorient development discourse toward context-specific, grounded

understandings (McWilliam, 2011; Thompson & Scoones, 2009). As Chambers (2017) argues, centering experiential knowledge disrupts technocratic authority and asserts the political relevance of grassroots perspectives. This aligns with social movement theory, which emphasises how mobilising structures and framing processes translate private grievances into collective political claims (Benford & Snow, 2000; Tarrow, 2022)

Moreover, farmer-led advocacy resonates with emancipatory frameworks that confront epistemic injustice—the systematic exclusion of marginalised voices from knowledge production and policy deliberation (Fricker, 2007; Gaventa & Cornwall, 2008). As Gaventa and Cornwall (2008) show, participatory spaces, when genuinely inclusive, have the potential to redistribute power and catalyse structural change. In this sense, farmer-led mobilisation is not simply participatory but profoundly emancipatory: it contests extractive policy practices while cultivating new political subjectivities in which smallholders are recognised not as passive beneficiaries but as rights-bearing citizens and knowledge holders. Informed by Wright's (2010) notion of interstitial transformation, these farmer-led networks carve out semi-autonomous spaces within existing institutions where alternative norms of participation, accountability, and governance can be rehearsed. Such spaces function as laboratories of counter-hegemonic practice, enabling experimentation even within constrained political environments.

Through this mode of engagement, farmer-led advocacy deepens politicisation by linking coordination achieved through coalitions to the embodied and experiential knowledge of those most affected by agrarian change. It challenges the technocratic hierarchies and epistemic injustices that often exclude smallholders from decision-making, while simultaneously cultivating new political subjectivities and capacities for collective voice. In this way, it not only extends the horizons of participation but redefines who counts as a political actor in the struggle for agrarian transformation.

However, this approach is not without contradictions. Scholars such as Agarwal (2001a); (Mohanty, 2005) caution that grassroots spaces are not inherently egalitarian, as class, gender, and geographic inequalities often determine who participates and whose voices are heard. Agarwal (2001b) emphasises that participatory institutions must actively confront internal exclusions, or risk reproducing the very hierarchies they aim to dismantle. To this point, my research found similar patterns: representatives in farmer-led processes were often drawn from those with higher levels of education or fluency in English, sidelining less literate or more remote farmers. The term grassroots, therefore, must be approached analytically rather than romantically.

Nevertheless, farmer-led advocacy constitutes a vital counterweight to elite-driven, top-down governance. It re-politicises agricultural development by foregrounding the everyday realities and aspirations of smallholder farmers, resituating agrarian

transformation as a lived, contested, and collective process. It affirms that sustainable change requires more than institutional reform; it also depends on shifting the foundations of political voice, determining who speaks, who acts, and who decides in the making of agrarian futures. Moreover, beyond the formal visibility of farmer-led advocacy, a subtler dimension of politicisation operates through the everyday practices and prefigurative politics of rural life, practices that may not directly confront the status quo yet remain grounded in an emancipatory ethos.

5.3 Summary

This chapter has examined how politicisation unfolds in Uganda’s agricultural sector within a context of shrinking civic space and deepening NGOisation. It has shown that, even under restrictive conditions, farmer groups, CSOs, and grassroots movements sustain political agency by tactically navigating constraints and prefiguring alternative agrarian futures. Their strategies combine collaborative advocacy, coalition-building, grassroots mobilisation, and everyday practices grounded in local autonomy and ecological values. Figure 12 below summarises the strategies through which politicisation of agricultural transformation takes shape in the context of Uganda, as captured through my analysis of the empirical material.

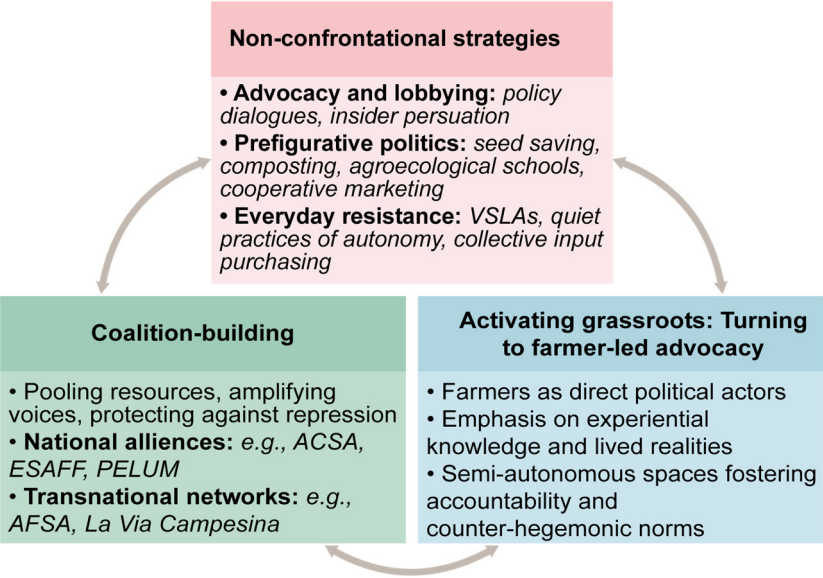


Figure 12: Summary of the strategies for politicisation of agricultural transformation in Uganda

These practices illustrate politicisation as an adaptive and multi-scalar process, forged at the intersection of structural limits and creative agency. Transformation, therefore, cannot be understood solely in terms of formal policy reform; it also hinges on the cultivation of social power, solidarities, and imaginaries that embed alternative agrarian relations in everyday life. In this sense, politicisation emerges both as survival and as projection that keeps emancipatory possibilities alive while laying foundations for broader systemic change. The discussion now turns to how these dispersed forms of collective agency intersect with wider struggles over sustainability transformations.

6 Concluding discussion, contributions, implications, and future research

In this synthesis chapter, I present my concluding reflections by situating the study's findings within broader debates on social transformation, particularly the tensions between reformist and non-reformist approaches to change. I discuss how social actors exercise agency and build social power to advance necessary reforms within and beyond existing structures. The chapter also highlights the thesis's key contributions to understanding how processes of politicisation enable contestations over emancipatory agricultural alternatives, particularly in politically constrained settings, and how these processes advance the goals of emancipatory sustainability science. Finally, it outlines the broader implications of these insights and identifies potential avenues for future research on the dynamics and trajectories of transformative change.

6.1 Concluding and summing up key arguments

This thesis has explored politicisation as a dynamic process through which dominant agricultural development practices and ideologies are contested and reimagined in Uganda. Its central objective was to investigate how politicisation unfolds in practice and how it shapes the possibilities for advancing transformative agricultural alternatives. The overarching argument advanced is that politicisation is indispensable for cultivating pathways toward more sustainable and just agricultural transformation. In this thesis, politicisation is conceptualised not as a fixed domain but as an activity, representing an ongoing process enacted through the practices and strategies of social actors (Kauppi et al., 2016; Palonen, 2006; Wiesner et al., 2017). From this perspective, “acts of resistance, [as well as prefiguration of alternative practices and advocacy] can be read as politicisation” (Anderl, 2024, 50). By tracing these practices empirically, the thesis demonstrates how politicisation enables collective actors to challenge prevailing paradigms, articulate alternative visions, and navigate Uganda's increasingly constrained civic and political spaces.

The findings show that politicisation in Uganda's agricultural sector unfolds primarily through non-confrontational and collaborative strategies. These take three main forms: advocacy and lobbying, prefigurative politics, and everyday resistance, as summarised in Table 6. They are supported by complementary practices such as coalition building and farmer-led advocacy, which enhance their reach and legitimacy by pooling resources, broadening participation, and strengthening credibility. Together, these strategies form a mutually reinforcing repertoire capable of challenging the dominant model of agricultural development. Advocacy and lobbying open institutional footholds and secure incremental gains, prefigurative politics demonstrates the viability of alternatives and nurtures new imaginaries, while everyday resistance sustains agency at the grassroots and grounds broader initiatives in lived realities. Combined, these approaches generate a layered and cumulative process of transformation that exceeds the impact of any single strategy.

The analysis also reveals uneven progress across these strategies. Advocacy and lobbying, often supported by donors and civil society networks, have gained considerable traction, whereas prefigurative politics has advanced through initiatives such as community seed banks and agroecological schools. Everyday resistance remains less recognised and under-supported, despite being the foundation that enables other strategies to endure and scale. Strengthening grassroots practices of resistance and connecting them politically to advocacy and prefigurative initiatives is therefore essential. Without this grounding, reform efforts risk sliding into technocratic or donor-driven agendas. With it, these strategies collectively hold the potential to reorient Ugandan agriculture toward more just, autonomous, and sustainable futures. Overall, the analysis identifies two central anchors of agricultural politicisation in Uganda: the strategic pursuit of transformative reforms and the collective agency of social actors that keeps these reforms politically engaged.

Reformist or non-reformist?

Having shown how politicisation unfolds through both accommodation and resistance, this section explores the broader implications of these dynamics for understanding transformation itself. It revisits a central question in critical theory and political practice: are the changes pursued by grassroots and civil society actors, reformist adjustments that stabilise the system, or can they become non-reformist openings that reconfigure their foundations? As demonstrated in the previous chapter, diverse social actors strategically disrupt Uganda's dominant agricultural development narrative and carve out spaces for more meaningful and potentially transformative action. However, the reforms demanded by grassroots and civil society actors often remain embedded within a reformist logic, stopping short of confronting deeper structural contradictions and the root causes of agrarian inequality.

This tension between reform and revolution has long preoccupied critical political thought. Rosa Luxemburg ([1900] 1970, reprinted 2023) warned that reforms detached from revolutionary aims risk legitimising the status quo, insisting that “the struggle for reforms is the means; the social revolution, its aim.” Her intervention set the stage for ongoing debates over whether reforms merely reproduce domination or whether they can also generate conditions for more radical transformation. Building on this foundation, Gorz (1967) introduced the notion of *non-reformist* reforms animated not by adaptation but by the potential to transform the underlying logic of the system. His work unsettled binary distinctions between reform and revolution, opening up a more generative understanding of reform as a contested terrain of struggle.

Later theorists extended this debate by showing how reformist strategies can both address immediate needs and nurture long-term emancipatory horizons. Fraser (2009) argued that certain justice-oriented reforms can simultaneously relieve urgent injustices while destabilising established norms, thereby creating new political possibilities. Wright (2010, 2013) elaborated on this perspective through his framework of symbiotic and interstitial strategies: the former working *within* dominant institutions to win redistributive concessions, the latter cultivating autonomous practices *alongside* them. Together, these strategies can prefigure “real utopias,” showing how non-reformist reforms may function as building blocks for systemic transformation.

Contemporary contributions have applied these insights to agrarian and sustainability struggles. Bond (2008) highlights the limits of reformist approaches in contexts of global neoliberal restructuring, while Feola (2025) demonstrates how Brazil’s National Policy for Agroecology and Organic Production operated as a partial political settlement that complemented, rather than supplanted, grassroots mobilisation. At the same time, Temper et al. (2018) warn that reforms pursued without a strong emancipatory orientation risk reformist capture, whereby the form of transformation is retained but its radical content hollowed out. These interventions suggest that reform initiatives must be continuously politicised if they are to resist co-optation and maintain their transformative edge.

Building on these insights, I argue that emerging efforts to promote agricultural alternatives in Uganda can be interpreted through the lens of non-reformist reforms—as they hold potential to open possibilities for deeper structural change by challenging the prevailing system (Bond, 2008; Feola, 2025; Gorz, 1967). Practices such as farmer field schools, community seed banks, agroecological farming, and local market cooperatives not only provide immediate relief to marginalised groups but also prefigure alternative social relations. Aligned with prefigurative politics (Yates, 2021), symbiotic transformative strategies (Wright, 2010), and the pursuit of real utopias (Wright, 2013), these initiatives carry the potential to erode the dominant logics of capitalist agriculture by opening space for socialist possibilities grounded in collective, place-based action. Moreover, these initiatives are deeply

embedded in broader efforts to build political consciousness and collective social power needed to counter domination of state and economic power (Wright, 2010). Through alliance-building and coalitions, civil society organisations and farmer groups seek to influence policy. As one coalition representative noted,

We are collaborating with the Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Industry and Fisheries and other actors to develop the national Agroecology strategy, with the aim of encouraging the Ugandan government to invest in this area (ACSA, 2024).

These initiatives thus combine two complementary orientations: on the one hand, engaging the state and other institutions to secure incremental redistributions and embedding sustainability and equity concerns within existing structures; and on the other, cultivating autonomous spaces and practices that operate at the margins of dominant systems, prefiguring alternative socio-ecological relations. At the same time, grassroots practices such as community seed banks, farmer field schools, local market cooperatives, and agroecological farming constitute an emergent repertoire of grounded resistance. These practices not only provide immediate material benefits but also embody forms of collective agency that challenge the commodification of seeds, knowledge, and markets. In this way, they operate as living experiments in non-reformist reform—incrementally reshaping social relations while pointing beyond the dominant paradigm.

Yet these gains remain precarious. As Temper et al. (2018) caution, movements that engage institutional frameworks without maintaining a strong emancipatory orientation risk reformist capture, in which the outward form of transformation is preserved while its radical content is hollowed out. Other scholars likewise warn that perceived access to political space, often presented as facilitation, can instead result in demobilisation or containment (McPhail & McCarthy, 2005; Tilly, 1978; Zeller, 2020). This risk is acute in Uganda, where donor influence, technocratic framings, and the threat of repression shape the contours of engagement, and where seeds of change are emerging within an increasingly NGOised landscape (as discussed in articles I and III of this thesis). The findings suggest that these risks of demobilisation, containment, and co-optation are indeed present, yet they are neither totalising nor determinative. Rather, various forms of politicisation manage to maintain a critical and transformative edge by selectively appropriating donor resources, strategically softening their language to secure space, and building grassroots infrastructures that anchor initiatives beyond external agendas. The lesson here, therefore, is not to reject institutional engagement but to continuously politicise it—sustaining contestation while navigating the pressures that threaten to neutralise it.

Politicised collective action exposes, questions, and resists the ongoing reproduction of harmful power relations (Temper et al., 2018). For reform initiatives to remain aligned with the spirit of non-reformist reforms, they must be treated not as

endpoints but as contested arenas that can be redirected toward emancipatory ends. Luxemburg (2023) reminder that “the struggle for reforms is the means; the social revolution, its aim” remains as relevant as ever. Likewise, Feola (2025) argues that emancipatory reform strategies must sustain efforts across multiple, partial settlements, each opening new possibilities for future change. In this light, politicisation efforts in Uganda function simultaneously as a shield against co-optation and as a generative strategy for building structural alternatives within and at the margins of the dominant system. Such efforts embody what Fraser (2009, 45) describes as the capacity to “problematise and revise the previously taken-for-granted procedures and frames,” demonstrating how even constrained reforms can become sites of struggle, resistance, and prefiguration. In this context, it becomes clear that the durability and transformative potential of these reform efforts cannot rest on institutional footholds alone. What ultimately sustains momentum, resists capture, and expands the horizon of possibility is collective action, anchored in solidarities, alliances, and grassroots organising, which politicises everyday struggles and channels them toward broader social transformation, as discussed below.

Collective struggles as the lifeblood of politicisation

Building on the previous discussion of reformist and non-reformist approaches to transformation, this section turns to the question of agency and collective struggle as the foundation of politicisation. If politicisation is the process through which actors contest and reshape dominant systems, then collective action constitutes its lifeblood, the means through which critique becomes practice and isolated resistance evolves into organised transformation.

Politicisation rests on the cultivation of collective agency, understood as “a process of purposive interactions between different actors” (Matarrita-Cascante et al., 2017, 111), through which organised actors imagine, mobilise, and enact alternatives. Conceived not as a static condition but as a dynamic process rooted in social action (Kauppi et al., 2016; Palonen et al., 2019; Wiesner et al., 2017), politicisation materialises through what actors do (their strategies, practices, and interventions) rather than what they merely represent. It is this activity that transforms contradictions into openings and openings into political projects. In this perspective, politicisation depends on collective struggle to advance emancipatory transformation (Wright, 2019). As Wright (2019, 58) reminds us, human emancipation requires strategic engagement with powerful institutions, which becomes effective only when exercised collectively.

The findings of this thesis demonstrate that farmer groups, farmer organisations, and CSOs in Uganda are not passive recipients of external support but active agents shaping agrarian transformation. Through collective action, they mobilise resources, prefigure alternative practices, and innovate under restrictive conditions, thereby constructing the terrain of struggle itself. In creatively navigating the persistent risks

of demobilisation and co-optation that beset Uganda's civil society, these actors sustain a measure of autonomy that enables continued contestation and adaptation. In line with Wright's (2010) emphasis on the need for collective actors to resist forces of demobilisation so as to sustain transformative agency, they pool resources, secure funding, mobilise labour, and forge alliances that extend their influence beyond the local level. In this process, they function as mobilising structures in the sense elaborated by social movement theory: organisational vehicles that sustain collective action, channel resources, cultivate shared identities, and translate diffuse grievances into coordinated practices of resistance and advocacy (McAdam, McCarthy & Zald, 1996). Politicisation, therefore, is expressed not only through critical discourse but also through the building of organisational infrastructures capable of sustaining collective initiatives within resource-scarce and politically restrictive contexts.

Crucially, the analysis shows that coalition building, and farmer-led mobilisation constitute particularly promising avenues for sustaining such collective politicisation. Both directly address the fragmentation and NGOisation that weaken Uganda's civil society by providing platforms where dispersed struggles can be joined, amplified, and coordinated. Coalition building links diverse repertoires of action, connecting grassroots initiatives with regional networks and advocacy organisations, thereby increasing their visibility and resilience. Farmer-led mobilisation, meanwhile, re-centres agrarian actors themselves, grounding demands in lived realities and strengthening accountability to grassroots constituencies. Together, these strategies sharpen the collective edge of otherwise isolated struggles, expanding their political reach while maintaining rootedness in everyday agrarian practices.

Hence, collective agency is expressed not only in resistance or institutional participation but also in the creation of "real utopias" that embody democratic, egalitarian, and sustainable values (Wright, 2010; 2013). In Uganda, where ruptural change is unlikely given entrenched authoritarian governance, the militarisation of politics, and the systematic repression of dissent, alongside the fragmentation and NGOisation of civil society that limit coordinated mass mobilisation, it is crucial that social actors build formidable collective structures. Such structures allow them to advance interstitial innovations while also engaging institutions in ways that can secure recognition or policy shifts. Indeed, their everyday practices blend confrontation, cooperation, and innovation, incrementally reshaping agrarian relations and pointing beyond capitalist logics of productivity and market integration.

Contrary to portrayals of many social actors as apolitical, the findings highlight CSOs, farmer organisations, and grassroots groups as political agents capable of unsettling dominant policy paradigms while constructing parallel systems of knowledge, solidarity, and practice (see articles II and III). These actors also build trans-local alliances with NGOs, regional networks, and academic institutions to

amplify their voice and mitigate marginalisation or repression. Their practices remain precarious, shaped by donor dependency, state surveillance, policy volatility, and fragmented coalitions. Yet constraints do not erase their transformative potential; they condition the strategies adopted. What emerges is a picture of messy, uneven, and contingent transformation, marked by partial victories, setbacks, and shifting power relations. The significance of these struggles lies not in constant success but in contesting the status quo, reimagining futures, and modelling logics of care and justice. Politicisation, in this light, is a lived practice: contesting power imbalance, resisting erasure, building alliances, and reclaiming voice. Agricultural politicisation in Uganda is unfolding neither as a depoliticised technocratic exercise nor as a revolutionary rupture. Rather, it emerges through collective struggles situated at the intersection of state agendas, donor priorities, and civil society practices.

Importantly, this analysis also draws attention to the wider political-economic context in which such struggles unfold. Neoliberal development, with its emphasis on marketisation, donor-dependence, and fragmented project-based interventions, is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it weakens state capacity and entrenches inequalities; on the other, its cracks and contradictions create interstitial spaces where alternative practices can take root, even if scaling them up remains difficult. Should more state-led development come back into fashion—through renewed investment in public goods such as agricultural extension, these interstitial initiatives could find new opportunities for expansion. But for this to happen, it is crucial that actors are positioned to seize such openings, strategically translating small-scale alternatives into broader transformations.

This brings us back to the question of achievability. Under current conditions, scaling up alternatives like agroecology and food sovereignty may appear unattainable. Yet both intentional strategic action and unintended shifts in political or economic circumstances can reshape what is achievable. As the COVID-19 pandemic revealed, moments of disruption can expose vulnerabilities in dominant systems while opening temporary windows for reimagining food security and resilience (Bodenheimer & Leidenberger, 2020; Richter et al., 2021). Such opportunities, however, do not automatically lead to transformation; they must be anticipated, organised around, and seized by collective actors prepared to act. What is unachievable now may become achievable later—but only if actors sustain the infrastructures, alliances, and repertoires of politicisation that enable them to recognise and capitalise on shifting conditions. Uganda's agrarian future is therefore open, contested, and plural, underscoring that politicisation is not merely disruptive but constitutes the very lifeblood of democratic, equitable, and sustainable transformation.

6.2 Research contributions

Building on the analysis of collective struggles and the dynamics of politicisation, this section outlines the key contributions of the thesis. It highlights both the empirical insights generated from the Ugandan context and the theoretical advances that deepen understanding of politicisation as a relational and transformative process.

This thesis makes both empirical and theoretical contributions. Empirically, it provides a richly contextualised account of how the politicisation of agricultural development unfolds in Uganda and its potential role in catalysing the emergence and promotion of sustainable agricultural alternatives. I show how collective actors navigate structurally constrained political spaces by strategically balancing institutional engagement with contestation. I argue that rather than being confined to rigid binaries of resistance and co-optation, these dynamics are better understood through the lens of strategic hybridity. In this way, the study captures how social actors manoeuvre within and against dominant systems, mobilising formal channels for visibility and resources while also cultivating alternative logics rooted in food sovereignty, ecological stewardship, and communal solidarity.

In doing so, the thesis contributes new insights into the conditions under which politicisation emerges in resource-scarce contexts where donor imperatives shape agendas and political constraints foreclose overt confrontation. In line with (Martiniello, 2017)'s observation that repressive state apparatuses in Uganda often displace struggles into peripheral or hidden arenas, and that agrarian politics tends to materialise through quotidian and less visible practices, this thesis extends the analysis by showing that politicisation is not only confined to invisibility or hidden transcripts Scott, 1990 but, it also manifests in strategic and selective engagements with the state—less confrontational in appearance yet deeply political in their adaptive, pragmatic, and collaborative modalities.

This thesis builds on insights from studies of civil society-led politicisation, such as Isgren (2018) which highlight both the importance of NGO mobilisation and the ways politicisation is constrained by NGOisation, conflict, and state co-optation or repression. My findings extend this by showing how challengers strategically 'crack the ground open' penetrate existing fissures, and manoeuvre across what often appears as impenetrable terrain. These manoeuvres reveal a politics of hybridity in which actors simultaneously contest and collaborate, deploying what Wright (2010) calls symbiotic strategies of transformation. Hybridity here functions not only as a survival mechanism but also as a mode of influence, enabling challengers to sustain spaces of agency within hostile terrains. In Uganda's uneven agrarian landscape, it emerges as a situated political strategy. Here, reformist instruments are tactically repurposed as tools of subversion, while grassroots actors create interstitial spaces of autonomy even as they engage symbiotically with state and donor institutions.

Tracing these practices, the thesis expands prevailing conceptions of political agency by moving beyond formal activism and institutionalised politics to foreground slow, relational, and everyday modalities of struggle. Often overlooked in mainstream accounts, these modalities nonetheless carry transformative potential to reconfigure agrarian relations from within and out.

Theoretically, this thesis advances debates on social transformation by demonstrating how meaningful change can emerge even under politically constrained and resource-scarce conditions in the Global South. Specifically, it foregrounds the pivotal role of civil society as a driver of sustainability transformations, showing how civil society actors navigate structural barriers and restrictive political space through hybrid, adaptive, and contextually situated strategies of agency. Therefore, while the empirical focus of this study is Uganda, the analysis speaks more broadly to scholarship that positions civil society as a central agent in shaping sustainable futures (Smith, 2012). As highlighted in the literature and confirmed by this research, CSOs contribute to societal transformation by mobilising local knowledge, fostering networks of trust, and cultivating experimental spaces that state and market actors often neglect (Frantzeskaki et al., 2016). This role is especially critical in Uganda, where social movements are often weak, fragmented, or actively constrained (Isgren, 2018a). In such contexts, organised civil society emerges as a pragmatic and at times preferable vehicle of change, with the capacity to bridge grassroots initiatives and broader policy arenas, thereby linking everyday practices to struggles over power and transformation (Nordfeldt & Dahlström, 2023).

Contribution to emancipatory sustainability science

This thesis advances *emancipatory sustainability science*: an approach to sustainability research that foregrounds struggles for justice, collective agency, and the politicisation of transformation. Rather than treating sustainability as a technical problem of optimisation or behavioural adjustment, emancipatory sustainability science aims to highlight how change emerges through contested and deeply political processes shaped by power relations, inequality, and collective action (Harnesk & Isgren, 2022; Longo et al., 2025; O'Brien, 2012, 2018; Scoones, 2016).

The thesis particularly contributes to this emerging research agenda by examining strategies for sustainability transformations under conditions of shrinking democratic space and by advancing a pluralistic perspective on how such transformations unfold. In doing so, it foregrounds the politics of “alliance-building and collective action” as central to sustainability and development struggles. Rather than viewing transformation as a process that can be managed or engineered, the thesis approaches it as an “unruly and contested” process shaped by diverse knowledges, competing interests, and uneven power relations. It highlights how political dynamics are articulated through “regimes of truth, rule, and accumulation” (Scoones, 2016, 293) that define whose knowledge, practices, and visions of

sustainability are legitimised or marginalised. Understanding these dynamics, the thesis argues, has profound implications for institutional and governance responses—particularly in contexts where civic space is constrained and where transformative action depends on reconfiguring relations of power, building solidarities, and expanding democratic possibilities. From this perspective, the thesis advances the idea that moves sustainability transformation beyond dichotomies such as reform versus revolution, it emphasises how transformation emerges through the interplay of multiple modes of change. This includes not only gradual and interstitial practices but also what might be described as small and temporary ruptures. While Wright (2010) associates ruptural transformation with revolutionary breaks, the dynamics observed in Uganda suggest that ruptural change can also take the form of more modest disruptions that punctuate dominant trajectories and open space for alternative pathways.

In Uganda, such ruptures are exemplified by farmer-led demonstrations against land grabs, most notably the Amuru protests (Martiniello, 2015), the widespread resistance that stalled the 2017 Constitutional Amendment Bill on compulsory land acquisition (Salaama, 2018), and campaigns that delayed the passage of the 2018 Genetic Engineering Regulatory Bill (Byekwaso, 2016). Although these episodes do not amount to full-scale revolutions, they nonetheless reconfigure trajectories of change by disrupting established power relations and carving out temporary spaces of possibility. Incremental political gains of this kind are particularly significant in constrained contexts such as Uganda, where shrinking civic space narrows the scope for open confrontation. Incremental and strategically politicised advances can function as steppingstones toward deeper systemic transformation provided they are anchored in a clear emancipatory intent. Recognising this highlights the often-overlooked transformative potential of gradual, collective, and situated practices of change which, though modest in scale, can cumulatively unsettle dominant trajectories and sustain possibilities for alternative futures.

This contribution is further grounded in the lived experiences of people like Mama Grace, whose story opens the thesis. Her struggles with precarious livelihoods, dependence on external inputs, and exclusion from decision-making reveal the limits of technocratic framings that promise ‘modernisation’ without addressing inequality. Her everyday strategies of saving seeds, working with neighbours, and engaging selectively with NGOs illustrate how transformation unfolds through a mix of small ruptures, interstitial practices, and negotiated reforms. These grounded practices exemplify what emancipatory sustainability science brings into focus: not abstract models of transition but contested, collective, and deeply political processes of change.

Ultimately, the thesis provides evidence that sustainability transformations cannot be reduced to technical fixes or governance innovations. They are fundamentally political struggles over social reproduction, livelihoods, and ecological futures. By foregrounding this reality through stories such as Mama Grace’s alongside broader

episodes of resistance, the thesis not only strengthens conceptual debates within sustainability science but also offers practical inspiration for scholars and practitioners seeking to align research with emancipatory aims.

6.3 Wider implications

The findings of this study carry wider significance for social actors committed to sustainable and inclusive agricultural development, particularly farmer-led organisations and civil society in Uganda and beyond. They suggest that effectiveness depends on a dual orientation: cultivating internal resilience while forging external alliances. Anchoring initiatives in local knowledge and values, maintaining strong ties with grassroots farmer groups, and fostering collective decision-making enhances accountability and reduce vulnerability to externally imposed agendas or state repression. At the same time, building coalitions with other civil society actors and transnational networks broadens visibility, strengthens political leverage, and generates protective solidarities. These dynamics are especially relevant in politically restrictive contexts, where direct confrontation with state power often entails prohibitive risks. The study highlights that everyday practices, grassroots organising, and cross-scalar coalitions can contribute to shaping policy changes not only through overt political struggle but also through subtle, adaptive, and non-confrontational strategies. Such approaches, expressed in the quiet diffusion of agroecological practices, the cultivation of moral legitimacy, or the strategic use of international platforms, enable actors to advance emancipatory alternatives while reducing exposure to repression.

Finally, the study underscores the broader implications of politicising agriculture under conditions of restricted civic space. Politicisation is not confined to dramatic confrontations or formal policy victories; rather, it unfolds through dispersed practices that make agriculture a political issue and open space for contestation. In Uganda, this is reflected in the ways farmer groups, CSOs and smallholder organisations mobilise around food sovereignty, seed sovereignty and agroecology to challenge dominant agrarian models. These struggles show that politicisation generates new imaginaries of agricultural development and broadens the range of actors and practices that count as political. By demonstrating how civil society navigates repression through cautious, non-confrontational yet strategic forms of engagement, the study highlights that politicisation itself can be a transformative process. Its implications extend beyond Uganda, offering insights into how grassroots and civil society actors in similarly constrained contexts can keep alive alternative agrarian futures by combining resilience, solidarity and adaptive repertoires of action.

6.4 Future research

Building on the insights of this thesis, several promising avenues for further inquiry emerge. While it is not possible to exhaust the full range of possibilities, I highlight those with the greatest potential to deepen understanding of how emancipatory agrarian transformation might be achieved, particularly in resource and politically constrained contexts where both conventional politics and social movements often fail to provide reliable avenues for change.

A central priority lies in the development of longitudinal research designs that follow civil society organisations, farmer movements, and grassroots collectives across time. Existing scholarship remains dominated by cross-sectional studies or fragmented data collection, which capture only momentary snapshots. While valuable, such approaches risk overstating immediate outcomes while obscuring the slower, uneven, and often reversible dynamics through which transformation unfolds. They also miss how emancipatory projects are sustained, adapted, or undermined as political, climatic, and economic conditions shift.

By contrast, longitudinal research would allow scholars to trace the temporal trajectories of transformative agency, illuminating patterns of resilience, adaptation, consolidation, and reversal. Such designs are particularly well suited to evaluate the forms of politicisation discussed in this thesis, whether interstitial strategies that carve out alternatives in the cracks of the system, symbiotic engagements that reconfigure institutions from within, or hybrid practices combining elements of both. Critically, they would permit assessment not merely of the potential of these strategies but of their capacity to generate durable transformation through consolidation, scaling, or dissemination. Engaging in this way would also extend the dialogue with Wright's (2010) notion of dynamic trajectory, which this thesis does not explicitly address. For Wright, trajectories of transformation are never linear or predetermined; they evolve historically through shifting interactions between contradictions, collective struggles, and institutional responses. Longitudinal approaches would make it possible to trace how agrarian alternatives evolve—whether they grow from fragile, local experiments into broader transformations or, alternatively, weaken and decline

Second, future research should examine the intra- and inter-actor dynamics that shape the effectiveness of agrarian transformation efforts and their capacity for politicisation. Internally, leadership practices, decision-making processes, and accountability structures determine whether CSOs and farmer organisations remain participatory and grounded in grassroots priorities or drift toward donor-driven technocracy. Externally, the alliances and coalitions forged among diverse actors influence the degree to which collective action acquires political salience. Cohesive networks can amplify counter-hegemonic narratives, coordinate strategies, and resist co-optation, whereas fragmented or competitive dynamics may dilute

mobilisation and depoliticise agendas. Exploring how these internal and relational dynamics enable or constrain politicisation would clarify why some initiatives sustain transformative momentum while others falter, fragment, or are absorbed into dominant paradigms.

Finally, future inquiry would benefit from robust transdisciplinary collaboration that bridges political ecology, critical agrarian studies, and organisational studies. Much of the existing literature treats ecological knowledge, collective organising, and institutional outcomes in isolation, which risks fragmenting our understanding of how transformation actually unfolds. An integrated perspective would connect traditional ecological knowledge with practices of collective action and the institutional arrangements that structure agroecological initiatives. By weaving these threads together, researchers can better capture the intersections of knowledge systems, power relations, and organisational forms in shaping both opportunities and constraints for change. Such a perspective would advance more context-specific visions of transformation that are politically attuned, socially grounded, and ecologically sustainable.

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The future we need does not come because we wish for it; it comes because we imagine, struggle, and build toward it. This thesis explores Uganda's agrarian transformation, showing how smallholder farmers and civil society actors confront neoliberal trajectories and navigate political barriers while advancing alternative practices and framings such as agroecology and food sovereignty. It demonstrates that although such alternatives remain marginalised within dominant policy frameworks, through everyday practices of resistance, collective action, and strategic engagement agriculture can be transformed toward sustainability and equity.

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