



Agroecology for Sustainable Food Systems in Europe: A Transformative Agenda

Agroecology in Europe: Conforming – or transforming the dominant agro-food regime?

Summary of the conference paper

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Agroecology historically has been defined as the application of ecology to agricultural systems. From a broader perspective, agroecology has three practical forms – a scientific discipline, an agricultural practice and a social movement. Their integration has provided a collective-action mode for contesting the dominant productivist agro-food regime and creating alternatives, especially through linkages with a wider agenda for food sovereignty.

At the same time, agroecology is becoming a new buzzword, perhaps analogous to 'sustainable agriculture' in the 1990s. The term 'agroecology' has been recently adopted by some actors who have promoted conventional agriculture. Therefore it is important to clarify the different potential strategies for upscaling agroecology. It can play different roles – either *conforming* to the dominant regime, or else helping to *transform* it – contingent on specific empowerment strategies.

In the dominant regime, agro-food corporations are the major agents attempting to regulate the conditions of production, consumption and market exchange. Agro-industrial methods generate surpluses undermining productive capacities and less-intensive methods elsewhere, thus pushing farms everywhere to adopt intensification methods. This dominant regime has been accommodated and/or contested in various ways.

Illustrating a 'conform' role, some organic systems have increased reliance on biological inputs to raise productivity for more price-competitive food and to enhance sustainability. Some biological inputs have become commoditized, thus continuing farmers' dependence on input suppliers. Organic farming has been conventionalised in some places, thus conforming to elements of the dominant regime, e.g. long-distance food chains, supermarkets and economic concentration. As a broad ambiguous concept, 'sustainable intensification' has also appropriated some agroecological methods, alongside other options such as GM crops, in efforts to increase yields.

Since around 2000 European civil society and farmers' movements have increasingly discussed prospects for agroecology as an alternative. They have been intervening in political debates on future agriculture, demanding policy changes favourable to agroecology and building support for agroecological experiments. These initiatives were inspired by higher-profile initiatives in the global South, which had already linked agroecology with food sovereignty. European efforts have recently made similar linkages, drawing on experiential knowledge from North-South networks.

Impetus for agroecology also has come from the policy aim to increase agricultural productivity, especially since the 2007-08 food crisis. Within this neoproductivist agenda, some agroecological methods have been selectively appropriated by the dominant agro-food regime (e.g. for conservation agriculture) as means to reconcile higher yields with lower resource burdens. Questioning that agenda, some European farmers' groups and CSOs have emphasised the linkage between agroecology and food sovereignty as a foundation for an alternative agro-food regime. They also emphasise socio-political principles including autonomy, genuine farmers' participation in policies, and valorisation of local knowledge. In an EU policy context emphasising innovation, mainly meaning capital-intensive technology, agroecology has been promoted instead as an innovative practice integrating and enhancing farmers' knowledge.

Likewise intervening in policy debates, official expert studies have promoted agroecology (e.g. IAASTD, SCAR). They highlight farmers' knowledge and innovation which lack official recognition as such, as grounds for research agendas to prioritise agroecology, which holds great potential for a transition towards sustainable agro-food systems. From all those sources and arenas, agroecology has gained prominence as a transformative agenda at the policy level.

A transformative role depends on wider development models for enhancing farmers' livelihoods and strengthening networks involving all relevant actors – farmers, citizens, civil society organisations, experts and local public authorities. A territorial model can enhance synergies between farm-level resource usage, other local activities, agroecosystems and wider food systems, e.g. agro-eco-tourism. Farmers can create mutually interlinked products and services, thus better using the same resource base; for example, mixed farming at sub-regional level can help to close nutrient loops and link biomass with renewable energy systems at different scales. Agroecological practices already have a broad role by helping farmers to overcome dependence on external inputs, especially in the organic sector. Some conventional farmers too have sought to improve environmental sustainability through agroecological methods.

While organic certification gains a price premium, broader agroecological farm-level experiments have relatively weaker protection from the dominant agro-food regime. For agroecology to be economically viable, CSO-farmer alliances have promoted various support measures that can empower collective actors for agroecological practices. Such measures include: *circuits courts* (short food-supply chains), farmers' knowledge-networks, public procurement criteria for food localisation and diversity, 'quality' or certification labels based on territorial identity, etc. CSO-farmer alliances also advocate a reform of the Common Agricultural Policy to empower agroecology. Its supporters have promoted a Participatory Guarantee System, whereby producer-consumer-citizen networks re-appropriate 'quality' as an improvement and empowerment process, rather than as a state or product characteristics.

All those empowerment strategies build collective-action networks and transdisciplinary knowledge. They also potentially reshape agro-food markets, towards transforming the dominant agro-food regime through and for agroecology. Such opportunities have been sought in several policy areas, especially those providing substantial state funds.

Transformative empowerment strategies can be facilitated by various changes in policy frameworks and decision-making processes, in particular (from our detailed case studies):

- CAP rural development measures linking farm-level agroecological methods with resource synergies and urban-rural short food-supply chains for better remunerating those methods;
- local territorial development strategies collectively formulated through stakeholder cooperation, e.g. through the Local Action Groups in the Leader programme, and more recently through the European Innovation Partnership for Agricultural Productivity and Sustainability (EIP-A);
- agrarian reform for more equitable access to fertile land and guaranteed tenure rights for farmers in both rural and urban areas;
- farmers' rights to re-sow saved seeds from the previous year's harvest, to freely exchange and disseminate their seeds and livestock breeds, to access any of their seeds and livestock embryos stored in gene banks, and to protect those varieties from bio-piracy and contamination by GMOs;
- public-procurement criteria favouring local small-scale farmers using agroecological methods and strengthening capacities for short food-supply chains;
- research & innovation agenda-setting through farmer-citizen participatory processes as a basis for addressing practical problems of agroecological practices, for producing transdisciplinary knowledge, for transforming research institutions and for extending collective-action networks;
- new partnerships for multi-actor knowledge-exchange, with new structures remunerating practitioners and researchers for such collaborative efforts, beyond the conventional academic reward systems; eco-functional intensification as an overall strategy for more effectively using natural resources through knowledge of agroecological methods (e.g. recycling nutrients, enhancing biodiversity and the health of soils, crops and livestock – in agroforestry as well as arable farming), while also linking farm-level practices with wider agroecosystems.

Together those proposals highlight and potentially empower agroecological experiments. All those policy areas and practices undergo tensions between agroecology *conforming* versus *transforming* the dominant agro-food regime. By recognising these tensions, collective-action networks can better develop transformative strategies for and through agroecology. This means transforming wider institutions on which farm-level practices depend.

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