



The Meaning of Agroecology from a European Peasant Perspective

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Introduction

Rooted in cultural principles and based on traditional know-how of peasant communities around the world, agroecology contributes to a diversified food and agricultural system which is based on the sustainable use of soil, water, on animal welfare and plant biodiversity. As an opposition to the transnational agribusinesses characterised by mechanization, centralisation, privatization, technological development, simplification and standardization of production, based on neoliberal economy and policies, peasant farming has been built upon short and direct linkages between nature, farmer and consumer respecting the local natural-, ecologic- and social conditions.

Today, in the beginning of the 21st century, we are witnessing the increasing adaptation of agroecological farming practices by rural social movements: Agroecological methods and practices have gained increasing interest among farmers and social movement in recent years, e.g. practices in Venezuela, southern India, Zimbabwe or Cuba. (Rosset and Martinez-Torres, 2012; McCune et al.,

2014; Rosset et al, 2011). La Vía Campesina (LVC), the international organisation of peasants, small and medium-scale farmers, rural women, farm workers and indigenous agrarian communities in Asia, the Americas, Europe and Africa, engaged to redefine the picture and understanding of the contemporary peasantries and to promote the concept of agroecology. At its 6th International Conference, held in Jakarta in April 2013, LVC declared agroecology as one of most promising ways to achieve food sovereignty, as the main objective of the global struggle to reset the way our society is organized around food and agriculture.

Representing the values of peasantries in Europe, the European Coordination Via Campesina (ECVC) strived to define and concretize agroecology in its context. In their Declaration published in Evenstad, Norway, March 2014, the organization presented six essential principles of agroecology, as a tool for 'Transforming society through food production and peasant struggle' (ECVC, 2014). In this article, we seek to provide detailed de-

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La Via Campesina - a march

scription of the six principles of agroecology, ECVC presented in the beginning of this year, in order to gain a better understanding of its relevance and concept in the European context.

Feelings

"Peasant sentiment is an essential part of agroecology. It is based on awareness, and love and respect for the Earth, the commons, nature and all life forms."

Agroecology is based and built upon the strong and inseparable relationship between peasants and nature. Living in harmony with animals and all form of living nature, peasant farmers contribute to a sustainable way of food production. Among the diversity of farming practices and elements defining peasant identity, the respect to nature is, and will always be, the bond and unifying force between peasant farmers. Within a continuous interaction, farming is considered as co-production between farmers and nature, and as an ongoing and dynamic relation to its resources (Van der

Ploeg, 2013).

Diversity and biodiversity

"Agroecology favors biodiversity as harmony and synergy among various systems: natural, social and cultural. Agroecology fosters and safeguards agricultural ecosystems in viewing them above all in terms of local diversity and interacting systems."

Working with agricultural systems that rely on agroecological principles, instead of external inputs, one gets a feeling for living entities, relations within their communities, and those to their environment. All animals, plants, soil-microbes and so on may be in harmony with one another, mutually benefit each other, or one can keep the other under control. Agroecology raises awareness for agricultural ecosystems and the multifaceted linkages and dynamics between them and other systems. Biodiversity, and its meaning for working with nature and all life, is experienced directly by those working in these systems. By studying grazing they observe that overuse does not only lead to re-

duced biodiversity, but also to reduced health and wellbeing of the grazers. By studying natural plant communities they reveal that each plant within the community has its own function, e.g. certain plants are specialized on aerating compacted soil, or on preventing nitrate from leaching and by that keeping the groundwater clean, or on feeding predators needed for biological pest control.

These experiences result in a strong appreciation of all forms of life, especially its diversity, and a high degree of tolerance concerning the unintended and different forms. Not production efficiency, e.g. of a crop, is most important, rather its contribution to the whole system. Harmony within and between systems, if achieved, leads to satisfaction from agricultural work. This paradigm permeates all aspects of life, shapes social and cultural systems by striving for harmonic arrangement of diversity, making use of synergies, and tolerating deviants there as well.

In agricultural systems biodiversity was used all the while to make the system more resilient against climatic events, diseases, or shortages of water or nutrients. Crop rotation represents diversity in time, intercropping, where two or more crops are grown together in the same field represent a form of spatial diversity. Food security for the peasant's families through healthy and resilient agricultural systems and independence from external inputs, such as pesticides, both being based on biodiversity, will stay the primary drivers of peasant's decisions, way ahead of maximizing the yield of a specialized crop in the short run.

Peasant knowledge

"Agroecology protects shares and pools traditional peasant knowledge in its various contexts and realities. It enhances intergenerational transmission and exchanges from farmer to farmer. It fosters innovation through observation, creativity and continuous learning and provides means for overcoming new challenges."

Traditional values, emotions, cultural customs, social principles and standards integrated into the technical knowledge of food production represent

one unit of peasant farming. Based on centuries of cultural and biological evolution, precise accumulations, observations and experiential learning, traditional food production has been adjusted to local conditions within a strong interaction between the peasant and its environment. The detailed knowledge about (e.g.) soil types, the degree of its fertility, vegetation, animals and the local ecosystem along with the maintenance of local myth and folklore, have been preserved from generation to generation through oral or experimental means. It strongly and greatly contributes to the maintenance of the high degree of diversity of plants and animal breeds (Alteri, 2001), and - due its ability of continuous adaptation and innovation- it develops a resilient system for food production, distribution and consumption.

It is important to recognise that these information hold vital elements and practices for the future of world agriculture, therefore the intergenerational succession of these tangible and intangible 'capitals' of farming (in which both young and old generations have their own role and responsibility) is of vital importance.

The knowledge and practice of peasant and family farmers has been widely accepted at different platforms by academics and scientist: In recent years, by the recovering and revalorizing of peasant knowledge academics and researchers declare that peasant know-how is 'complementary to the knowledge available from Western scientific sources' (Via Campesina, 2010). The wide range of international and national publications, meetings, conferences and events show that agroecology and the know-how of peasant farmers is increasingly becoming part of not only scientific investigations but also of the debates of intergovernmental bodies .

Community

"Agroecology fuels trust and cooperation between communities, large and small, rural and urban. Agroecology entails a change in values, from individualism to cooperation, it heightens egalitarian social relations and community spirit. We assert the need for mutual recognition between peasants and society, and for respect for our dignity as workers of the land."

Agroecology illustrates the context of peasant's activities. This context can be experienced by those which work in and with nature day by day, especially when working in assessable and closed cycles. To experience the own position within the whole system, cause and effect of own activities, as well as irreversibility of natural laws, results in a strong appreciation for moral values. In agriculture the irrelevance of the individual compared to the relevance of cooperation is tangible in daily work. Be it the cow that will only be able to defend its calf against predators with support of the herd, or the closed sward giving weeds no room to become troublesome, or be it the single pathogen not being able to germinate in the healthy milieu. All that contributes to a strong feeling for the community,

ers is experienced stronger the shorter the supply chain is. Mutual care for the peasant's and the consumer's needs and achievements is also only taken if they are both embedded in social structures, and don't become standardized, nor anonymized. Not alone for their relevance as producer of food, for their impact on resources human live depends on, namely clear water, clean air, fertile soil, but also because of the positive stimulus on the value system of society and on the structure of the social system, peasants have to become placed onto the appropriate position within the society. From the margin of society into the heart of society, better in the circulatory system that perfuses the whole society, respectively. As much as peasants esteem the ecological and social foundations of society



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Farmers sharing potatoes in the Potato Park, Peru

Source: The International Institute for Environment and Development

that it depends on everyone and everyone has his equal meaning for the functioning of community. These values, originating from working with nature, in agriculture, fertilize societies since ancient times. Today, while a growing part of society lives and works more or less isolated from nature, the diffusion of them into society is more important than ever. Coincidentally peasants realize their position in the social system. Responsibility towards consum-

they deserve respect and dignity themselves.

Peasants' rights

"Our rights as peasants such as the right to seeds, to land, to water and to the commons are among the prerequisites of agroecology. Agroecology is a means to decentralize power and to restore peasant independence. The agroecological model re-

spects local agriculture everywhere in all communities as it is based on solidarity and cooperation between all regions and all peasants. Agroecology cools the planet and contributes to the fight against climate change.”

“We need peasant farming to strengthen our grass-roots and to further our political agenda. Agroecology, along with the peasant struggle is legitimate day to day resistance in our fight for Food Sovereignty.”

Indeed the loss of fundamental rights of the peas- Although agroecology offers a sustainable al-

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A small scale farmer Bosnia and Herzegovina

Source: World Bank.,2011

antry is at the base of an unsustainable model of production. In this sense agroecology can't be separated from the respect of peasant right. Accordingly, peasants, men and women, are equal to all other people and, in the exercise of their rights, and they should be free from any form of discrimination, including discrimination based on race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national (Via Campesina, 2009).

It is not possible to realize agroecology without getting back the control of seeds or without secure access to water or land. In the same sense, it is impossible to fight climate change, or manage water scarcity and soil erosion without peasants who can exercise their rights. Without regaining control on seed, water, land and respect of our own knowledge will be impossible.

Struggles and social transformation

ternative to the corporate-driven industrialised agriculture, the question remains open: why is it still not the dominant model of food production? In order to 'bring agroecology in a larger scale' (Rosset, 2014), peasant and social movements need to actively defend their space in the food and agricultural system by creating stronger and wider alliances all over the planet.

Integrated in the transnational social movements, at European level, ECVF and its supportive allies, gathered all under the umbrella of the Nyéléni Europe Movement for Food Sovereignty understand and believe, that agroecology is complementary and inseparable from food sovereignty, as it is defined in the Declaration of Nyéléni (2007): 'Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy food, in respect of crops produced using sustainable methods and environmentally friendly, and their right

to define their own food and agriculture systems.'

Conclusion

Agroecology is the way to put into practice the principles of food sovereignty. The methods considered to belong to the concept lead to a high contribution to food security and social justice, affecting and transforming all aspects of life.

Acknowledging the development of the concept of agroecology has always been an important part of the discussions among Via Campesina members. In the first place peasants play a crucial role to put agroecology into practice within strong connection to the rest of the society. Moreover, scientific discussions related to agroecology need to be based on the knowledge and experiences of peasants. As a contribution and summary of the ECVC peasants view the six principles presented here aim to inspire further steps to exchange experiences.

The authors practice and support agroecology in their daily life on their farms as well as in policy dialogues and discussion with decision makers and other stakeholders.

Conflict of Interests

The authors hereby declare that there is no conflict of interests.

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