Towards Agroecological Futures

How to Facilitate local Agroecological Transitions

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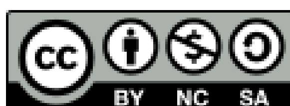

Foreword by Common Ecologies

Transitioning our food system towards agroecology is not a matter of idealism, it's a matter of survival. But how is it to be done? When we're told not to 'bite the hand that feeds us' we're made to think that that hand is corporations, employers, or as the patriarchal and colonial order has it, simply men or white people. But the hands that feed us are not those, and there lies great power in realizing this basic fact. Just as the hands that care for us are not those of CEOs, managers or husbands, the hands that feed us are not those of business or banks, they're those of the workers of the earth. Peasants still feed a most significant part of the world, and their struggle must be ours in as much as the struggles to resist racism and the patriarchy. Our food is not just cooked by people, it's also grown and harvested by people, and those people are at the frontline of earthcare struggles. Whether they fight within and against industrial agriculture (see our translation of Pastora Filigrana's text on feminist and anti-racist social syndicalism), grow food as peasants, or struggle for access to land and ways of transforming agriculture through grassroots networks and experiments: those are the hands that feed us. And we must not bite them, we must take them, stand together, against those who pretend they are the ones sustaining us, who claim to be responsible for us whilst exploiting us and obfuscating who and what actually reproduces life. We will counter their narratives of dependency with our own struggles and infrastructures – of interdependency. Agroecology, as we understand it, is all about that.

This text is a little workbook that allows everyone to envisage what they can concretely do to make agroecological transition happen, what their role can be – in a wider network of processes and initiatives for change. It's a guide for people and groups wanting to advance transformation locally and together with – or as – food producers as well as community actors in their vicinity. Particularly relevant for rural transformation, this text offers all of us – also in the city – to imagine the changes we need to shape and the ways in which we can do that in synergy with others. These are some of the key tools and tactics we need to achieve agroecological transition.

As we prepared our 2023 course on 'Tactics for agroecological transition – (re)claiming land, labour, and livelihoods', we came across this text on Local Agroecological Dynamization, in its original longer and Spanish form, published by Inland-Campo Adentro in 2013. It struck us as extremely relevant not just in its charting out of the stakes for agroecological transformation (part 1 of this text; pages 4-15), but for its presentation of very concrete analytical and organizational tools for facilitating agroecological change (part 2 of this text; pages 16-37). We were very excited when we realized that we could have Maggie Schmitt, who has accompanied us on previous agrofeminist ventures, translate it. We were even more excited and amused when it then turned out that Maggie is a village neighbour of Daniel, one of the authors of this text. What a village it must be! We'd like to give our heartfelt thanks to Daniel for his substantial updating of this text, to Maggie for her translation, and to Inland as

well as Arrán de Terra for their cooperation with our coursework on agroecological facilitation/dynamization[1]. Enjoy this manual and spread it far and wide!

Preamble by Daniel López-García

It has been ten years since the first edition of this text was published by Inland, in Spanish, as a pioneering text on territorialized, agroecological transitions. Many things have changed since then. The Local Agroecological Dynamization approach has grown and spread through a postgraduate course at the Autonomous University of Barcelona (since 2014), many real-world projects, and many publications. The agroecology movement has grown and come to occupy a central role in both policy and research arenas on food systems sustainability worldwide. Agroecology has become an "immaterial territory in dispute" which reflects increasing disputes in material territories[2], as happened with FAO's global symposiums on agroecology since 2014. Food systems themselves have come to occupy a central place in discussion on global sustainability, especially after IPCC's report on "Climate Change and Land" (2019); EAT-Lancet's report on "Food on the Anthropocene", COVID-19 pandemics or the war in Ukraine. Therefore, the present text remains up-to-date, and its aims are even more justified than when it was first published. Thus, as suggested by Common Ecologies, we have updated some ideas, concepts, references, and examples to better frame the text in the present; but we have kept some theoretical approaches which could be currently seen a bit old, but which are the original basis of the proposal of Local Agroecological Dynamization. The final result aims to be a handy proposal, not very sophisticated, but with both perspective and depth, to encourage activists, practitioners, and scholar-activists to promote agroecological transitions. We hope it will be useful. In the current, renewed neoliberal offensive on life, it is more necessary than ever.

PART 1: Why we need Agroecological Transitions

Agroecology in context

Seventy years have passed since farming ceased being the principle economic activity in most of the countries of the global North, as well as a number of other countries. In countries like Spain the agricultural sector has —from a conventional perspective—very little economic importance (about 2.5% of the GDP) or social relevance (about 4% of jobs). It is widely held that the relative weight of the agricultural sector in "developed" countries should be around 2% of both the GDP and employment. What agricultural production there is, should be done

[1] Editor's note: In Spanish social movement contexts, 'dinamización' is used the same way as 'facilitation' is in English, which is how most occurrences are translated in the text. However, for 'Dinamización Agroecológica Local', which refers to the author's precise methodological approach and English publications, we use 'Local Agroecological Dynamization'.

2 The concept is taken from Giraldo, O.F. and P. Rosset (2018). Agroecology as a territory in dispute: between institutionality and social movements, *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 45:3, 545-564.

by a small number of large, highly technologized farms, capable of adapting to the changing demands of global agri-food and financial markets and of constantly increasing their production. Globalized industrial agriculture has been standardized throughout the planet and now many important crops can be grown irrespective of the territory; that is, their production can be 'delocalized'. This kind of agriculture no longer seeks to maximize the use of rural work forces but rather to generate capital like any other form of production in postindustrial or service-sector dominated societies. But in recent decades, especially in the context of the climate emergency and the COVID-19 pandemic, the logic governing this whole agri-food system has become the object of public debate.

Massive famines in the global South, especially in Africa, have taught us that the commercial policies of the North generate hunger, poverty, wars and mass migrations. On the one hand, the North inundates Southern markets with surplus goods highly subsidised and sold for prices below production costs —referred to as 'dumping'— or through misguided food-aid programs. This bankrupts many local producers who cannot produce at the rock-bottom prices created by massive imports, and disincentives others from producing. On the other, it conditions 'development assistance' upon redirecting agricultural products towards export markets, overlooking both traditional local production and the local demand for food. The states of the global South —in Asia, Africa and Latin America— pressured by the states of the North and by international organizations for economic development (the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, World Trade Organization, etc.), have devoted their best lands to produce luxury products for the North (cacao, coffee, sugar, tropical fruit, etc.), oils and ethanol to feed automobiles (corn, soybeans and palm oil) or grains for intensive livestock production and animal protein-based diets (principally corn and soybeans).[3] These countries are also pressured to invest in export infrastructures and to promote the intensification of production and a greater use of technologies and consumables, generating dependency among peasant producers.[4]

Inside the European Union, the first rural development policies were implemented at the beginning of the 1980s. These policies acknowledged that agricultural modernization and the concentration of the population in major cities had led to significant territorial imbalances. Along rural depopulation and depeasantization processes, the European landscapes and natural resources heritage, and the local identities related to them, were put at risk. In the late 1990s at the presentation of the "Agenda 2000", the then-president of the EU (Jacques Delors) affirmed that farmers were the custodians of the countryside and that therefore their task would no longer be producing food but rather maintaining traditional landscapes and populating rural villages.

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[3] See the exhaustive study of the European framework in Fritz, T. (2012). *Globalizar el hambre. Impactos de la PAC y de las políticas comerciales de la UE en la Soberanía Alimentaria y los países el Sur.* Ecologistas en Acción. Available at: http://es.scribd.com/doc/97088804/Globalizar-el-hambre

[4] As one example among many, albeit an especially important one, the AGRA project promotes a "Second Green Revolution" in Africa based on GMO crops, digitalization and other intensive and dependent forms of farming: https://agra.org/

While 20% of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) funds have been oriented since the 1980s to retaining population in rural areas and promoting sustainable forms of production, the lion's share of the European budget has been devoted to agricultural modernization, as it continues to be today. This means it promotes large-scale systems producing low quality, homogenous foods for the global market. These systems are based upon the use of petroleum, agro-toxins and chemical fertilizers. **Thus between 2005 and 2020, 5.3 million farms disappeared (87% of these were under 5 hectares) —a total of 37% of the remaining farms— and with them 4.5 million full-time equivalent annual jobs.** Only the category of farms over 100 hectares grew in number, concentrating the property abandoned by smaller farms.[5] **Our countryside continues to lose population, farm incomes continue to decrease, biodiversity continues to fall, agricultural greenhouse emissions continue to rise, and our soils and aquifers are more and more polluted and overdrawn.**

The intense social unsustainability of this kind of agriculture has led to a situation in which a majority (57.6%) of farm managers (of both sexes) in the EU were at least 55 years of age in 2020; in some countries like Portugal and Spain about half are over 65.[6] This presents a great challenge to food security in the EU, which will see about half its farmers disappear over the next 20 years. Meanwhile, our industrial agriculture continues degrading our ecosystems and sickening our bodies, while exporting poverty, environmental degradation and low-quality food to the rest of the planet.

In 2020, the EU introduced the "Farm to Fork" Strategy as part of the so-called European Green New Deal. The Strategy establishes ambitious objectives for European food and agriculture policies by 2030: 25% of arable agricultural lands in certified organic production, a reduction by 50% in the use of pesticides and synthetic fertilizers as well as antibiotics in industrial stock-farming. These objectives point in the direction of positive change, although they are insufficient to the present context of nested socio-ecological crises and they remain firmly within the framework of market growth, rendering them contradictory. In any case, they are not binding upon the new Common Agricultural Policy (to be implemented 2023-2027) which, while including relevant goals like the incorporation of young farmers, ecological sustainability, and territorial balance, dedicates most of its energy to digitalization, competitiveness, intensification and, in short, to agricultural models which are neither socially nor ecologically sustainable.

The food scandals of the last two decades have exposed the role of the global North and the consequences of the industrialized and globalized agri-foods system, especially industrial animal farming: with mad cow disease (the epidemic of bovine spongiform encephalopathy, 1985-2000) we were forced to ask what kind of abominations were taking place in industrial stables and with animal feed. With dioxin in chickens (1999) we continued questioning the

[5] Eurostat (2022). *Farms and farmland in the European Union-statistics*. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Farms_and_farmland_in_the_European_Union_-_statistics>.
6 Eurostat (2022). *Farmers and the agricultural labour force – statistics*. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Farmers_and_the_agricultural_labour_force_-_statistics>.

animal feed industry and intensive animal farming, but also the security of a food system based on large food-processing factories. Influenza A (2009-2021) led us once again to wonder about the health of intensive animal farms, but also about the good faith of the pharmaceutical industry, so closely implicated in agricultural inputs. The global pandemic of COVID-19 (2019) highlighted the risks of zoonotic illnesses —result of the ongoing expansion of agricultural lands— and the speed with which these can be propagated in a globalized world, as well as the vulnerability and insecurity of global production chains, including agricultural production. One after another all these unresolved scandals have seeded doubts about the security of our agri-food system, generating mistrust and disaffection.

In this context, agroecology and food sovereignty have arisen as two powerful concepts that have inspired ideas, alliances, specific proposals and real transformations in civil society, universities and even in some public administrations. **Agroecology is a holistic approach to food systems sustainability which comprises a set of farming methods, a scientific approach and a social movement, integrating issues such as food sovereignty, food security and agency, and which has been described as "the ecology of the entire food system."**[7]**.** Agroecologists argue for equity, bottom-up governance and multi-actor participatory processes in agroecological transitions, as a way of adjusting for the power imbalances present in agri-food systems; this has been described as 'Political Agroecology.'[8] Closely related, food sovereignty is "the right of peoples, communities, and countries to define their own agricultural, labor, fishing, food and land policies which are ecologically, socially, economically and culturally appropriate to their unique circumstances. It includes the true right to food and to produce food, which means that all people have the right to safe, nutritious and culturally appropriate food and to food-producing resources and the ability to sustain themselves and their societies."[9] It implies new social relations free of oppression and inequality between men and women, peoples, racial groups, social classes and generations. It aims to be equally relevant for people in rural and urban areas, poor and wealthy countries. Food sovereignty is as much a space of resistance to neoliberalism and free market capitalism as it is a space in which to build democratic food and economic systems and just and sustainable futures based on agroecology.[10]

The fact that both of these concepts were developed in the global South has demanded a patient effort to translate the original content to different contexts: cultures, physical environments, resources and the specific power relations within each territory. Day by day we see how these proposals grow and materialize in towns and neighborhoods, among young people and old... They offer a pathway to the shared rebuilding of our lives and our

[7] Mason, R.E., White, A., Bucini, G., Anderzén, J., Méndez, V.E. and Merrill, S.C. 2021. "The evolving landscape of agroecological research," *Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems*.
[8] González de Molina, M., P.F .Petersen, F. Garrido Peña and F.R. Caporal. 2019. *Political Agroecology: Advancing the Transition to Sustainable Food Systems*. Dordrecht: Springer.
[9] NGO Forum for Food Sovereignty Declaration. 2002. *Food Sovereignty: A Right For All. Political Statement of the NGO/CSO Forum for Food Sovereignty. The Failure Since 1996 and the New Official Declaration*. Available at: <https://viacampesina.org/en/declaration-ngo-forum-fao-summit-rome5/>
[10] Nyeleni 2015. *The International Food Sovereignty Movement*. Available at: <https://nyeleni.org/en/international-food-sov-movement/>

territories, putting life and people at the center of our concerns. **Recovering bonds within and between our communities, our work, and the land.**

The elements that propel this movement coalesce to set an agenda that touches both country and city. In rural areas this agenda foregrounds achieving social and economic viability for agroecological production initiatives; the repopulation of rural areas; access to land and other means of agricultural production like water and infrastructures; access to housing in rural areas; the fight for the communal assets of the territory and their use; the incorporation of feminist and decolonial perspectives and the empowerment of women in rural development schemes; respect for the rights and the dignity of people working in agricultural production and throughout the food supply chain; health and hygiene regulations that recognize and permit artisanal food-processing; the integration of crop and animal farming; the recovery of traditional peasant knowledge, etc. In the city, the agenda includes the development of consumer groups and cooperatives; urban and urban-peripheral community gardens; access to fair, healthy, quality food; the protection, conservation and revitalization of agriculture in urban-peripheral farmland; the opening of desirable opportunities to emigrate to living rural areas. In both rural and urban areas more and more people are concerned about food issues, and they resist genetically modified crops; work for the recovery and reproduction of seeds of traditional varieties; and demand a EU Common Agricultural Policy that serves the interests of life (for people in both the North and the South) and not those of the markets and the agri-business corporations.

Agroecology and food sovereignty spread so quickly because they provide an alternative vision of how to live that counters and challenges capitalist and urban ways of inhabiting the planet that are increasingly unviable. **This vision has given rise to numerous alternative and solidarity-based economies, founded in food and farming as well as in small initiatives that research, promote and educate in agroecology. These alternatives are continually growing in number: a large array of disparate but interconnected initiatives, highly creative, each one adapted to its specific context and situation.** At the same time, the conventional agricultural sector has been in crisis for decades; in recent years this has been expressed through mobilizations in various countries throughout Europe. These mobilizations are a battlefield, with different political orientations competing to stamp their own meanings on the unrest. The extreme right is making great efforts to take advantage of agrarian discontent by pushing it towards their own discourses and interests, trying to align the demands of family farmers with the interests of agri-business and the big players in the agri-foods system. They seek to symbolically unite farmers and agri-business against any discourses and practices that argue for sustainability and social justice by representing the latter as notions imposed by institutional and urban actors alien to rural life.[11] This battlefield is a key challenge for agroecology and food sovereignty.

[11] See, for example: Mamonova, N., J. Franquesa & S. Brooks (2020) "'Actually existing' right-wing populism in rural Europe: insights from eastern Germany, Spain, the United Kingdom and Ukraine," *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 47:7, 1497-1525; or Ploeg, J.D. (2020) "Farmers' upheaval, climate crisis and populism," *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 47:3, 589-605.

In recent years we have seen more and more initiatives that respond to social and ecological crises by working to reactivate agriculture at a local scale and from an agroecological perspective, taking advantage of farming's potential to serve as the backbone of social, economic and cultural life in rural, urban and urban-peripheral territories. These proposals find their place within networks of existing agroecological projects (of production, consumption, education, research, advocacy...), but they aspire to go farther. Their aim is to promote processes that generate *strong* or *broadened* sustainability at a local scale based on the endogenous use of local resources —farming, architecture, landscape and nature— from a holistic and integrated perspective, while relying on participatory methodologies to do so. In other words, they intend to initiate processes of 'agroecological transition' at a municipal, county or regional scale to develop what we have called Agroecology-based Local Agri-food Systems.[12] This is the ambitious and exciting task we have named Local Agroecological Dynamization.[13]

Agroecological transition and Agroecology-based Local Agri-food Systems

According to Eduardo Sevilla and Manuel González de Molina, **'agroecological transition' means "The shift from economic, social and political systems that conserve privileges, amplify inequality and plunder nature [...] to systems that are ecologically healthy and sustainable, economically viable and socially just."** To this definition we might add the demand that these systems be "culturally appropriate" to the communities that undertake this transition. Transition is a multi-linear process, that is, it takes place on various parallel planes and along various lines that do not necessarily converge; it is 'open-ended.'[14] Hegemonic forms of production —in this case, industrial and globalized agriculture— can coexist with others. Indeed, sometimes their very existence is premised upon their coexistence with other 'subordinated' forms of production —like peasant farming— upon which they rely.

The tradition of Subaltern Studies[15] views the peasant as a subaltern actor in the colonization of peripheral territories, among which we might include the European countryside prior to agricultural modernization. For these authors, the transition to capitalism through the processes of colonization is a never-fully-finished process that has generated multiple hybridizations between the culture of colonial modernity and the different forms of peasantry in the world. Despite the persistence of notable peasant characteristics within these hybrid forms, the transformation is, according to these authors, irreversible. There is therefore no turning back to seek "ancestral traditions to put before Western modernity," rather **we must "work on the construction of a more complex frame for modernity itself, open to acknowledging a plurality of modernities of different forms, adopted in different**

[12] López-García, D. & M. González de Molina, (2021). "An operational approach to Agroecology-based Local Agri-food Systems." *Sustainability*, 13(15), 8443.
[13] López-García, D., Calvet-Mir, L., Di Masso, M. et al. (2019)Multi-actor networks and innovation niches: university training for Local Agroecological Dynamization. *Agriculture and Human Values* 36, 567–579.
[14] Lamine, C., Magda, D., Rivera-Ferre, M., Marsden, T. (2021). *Agroecological transitions, between determinist and open-ended visions*. Bruxelles, Belgium: Peter Lang Verlag.
[15] Guha, R., and G. Chakravorty (1988). *Selected Subaltern Studies*. Oxford University Press: Reino Unido.

historical and geographical contexts."[16] This is what agroecology attempts to do by weaving an *ecology of knowledges* including both contemporary scientific knowledge —universalist, generalist and simplifying— and traditional peasant knowledge —particular, situated and complex.

Even in old Europe some aspects of peasant realities are still alive in rural areas "as partial societies with partial cultures"[17] that can be very valuable to us in the effort to promote agroecological transition. **Instead of hypotheses that herald the disappearance of the peasantry, we need to theorize its continuity and derive practices from its historical persistence, including in post-industrial Europe.** From an agroecological perspective we propose generating new hybridizations between what is left of the peasantry in European rural areas and the industrial and development-oriented subjectivities promoted first by Agricultural Extension and later by institutional Rural Development initiatives. All this forms part of the pursuit of sustainable alternatives in a context of social and ecological crisis, projects we have come to call 'processes of agroecological transition.'

Agroecological transition can be effected through the participatory design of alternative, agroecological models, relying heavily on local knowledge and the traces of that knowledge on agroecosystems over time. Traditional peasant knowledge constitutes an essential source in designing sustainable agroecosystems, as these forms of knowledge are fruits of a long coevolution between human societies and nature. Agroecological transitions seek to promote the collective development of arrangements and technological solutions that are specific to each place, that is, based on 'endogenous' elements. But the endogenous must not be imagined as something static that rejects external influence: on the contrary, it digests what comes from outside through adaptation to its ethno-ecological way of working. That is to say, it appropriates what comes from outside (the exogenous), making it endogenous by exerting "cultural control" over innovations such that they come to form part of the local socio-cultural matrix.

Sustainable agriculture is not a defined set of practices but rather an evolution of practices, strategies and ways of thinking that depends upon the context in which the system of production takes place. We understand *agroecological potential* to be the set of social and emotional vehicles, forms of knowledge, values, symbols and material resources present in all agroecosystems: possible resources to be mobilized in the undertaking of agroecological transition processes. Agroecological potential is dynamic and open, and therefore is unique to each local agroecological space and each specific historical moment. We do not aspire to *generate* local agroecological potential but rather to identify and characterize those aspects of the local socio-ecosystem that might most contribute to processes of agroecological transition. We then strengthen, complement, and mobilize these aspects through participatory processes.

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[16] Mezzadra, S. (Ed.), (2008). *Estudios postcoloniales. Ensayos fundamentales*. Traficantes de Sueños: Madrid. P. 23

[17] Wolf, Eric R. (2010). *Europe and the People without History.* University of California Press.

In its earliest phases, agroecology and agroecological transition focused on ecological processes at the scale of a single farm. However, in the last decade the emphasis has shifted to the food system as a whole and the social, economic and political processes that take place in relation to food. **If we see agroecology as an "ecology of the entire food system"[18] then the goal of transition would be to create agroecology-based local food systems**. These have been defined as assemblages of alternative food networks, new and emerging types of institutionality, political measures, and appropriate bottom-up institutional governance, together with the symbolic revival of place-based cultural and historical identities. These assemblages are embedded in specific territories with the aim of maximizing social and ecological sustainability, supported by food and nutritional equality and security, the relocation of metabolic flows, and the improvement of the food system's ecological efficiency.

To achieve this, agroecological experiences of production, distribution and consumption must be coordinated among themselves and with other actors, linking rural and urban areas, forming a diverse movement led by farmers and peasants committed to agroecology. The aim of this movement is to develop operative and place-based ways to de-commodify and de-privatize food systems. Its aim is to achieve economic viability, agency and access to decision-making spheres, the development of physical infrastructures, and symbolic contexts, allowing agroecology-based local food systems to emerge as potentially hegemonic food systems as the corporate food regime loses legitimacy ...and becomes increasingly unable to secure the supply of cheap food under the stress of climate change and de-carbonization. Such a social subject is tasked with promoting these transitions, while redefining our underlying economic categories of thought such as *food*, *work,* or *production*, and building economic flows beyond the dualities of nature-society, urban–rural, and productive–reproductive work.[19]

Agroecology as an alternative to processes of deagrarianization in rural and urban-peripheral areas

The agricultural sector in post-industrial societies has a limited demographic, social and political importance, its social and cultural fabric are being aggressively dismantled, hand in hand with processes of deagrarianization in rural and urban-peripheral areas. It is difficult to find appropriate and sufficient channels for the local circulation of products, and hard to get them to destinations where the quality and social importance of local rural production is recognized. For all these reasons, promoting agroecology in the European context must not be limited to the agricultural sector; it should establish local alliances to bring together the critical mass of people required to generate integrated processes of agroecological transition.

The ideal scale for developing the s*ocioeconomic and cultural dimension* of agroecology is in local communities. At this scale we can build the alliances and synergies required to promote agroecological transition in a way that is connected to the subjective context as well as to

[18] Mason, R.E., A. White, G. Bucini, J. Anderzén, V.E. Méndez & S.C. Merrill (2021). "The evolving landscape of agroecological research," *Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems*, 45:4, 551-591.
[19] López-García, D. and M. González de Molina (2021). "An Operational Approach to Agroecology-Based Local Agri-Food Systems." *Sustainability* 13(15): 8443.

economic and social processes related to the local agri-foods system. This dimension is not independent of the other two dimensions.

European farmers have developed a huge number of innovative initiatives in recent decades in an effort to keep their farms going, to the bewilderment of local administrations unable to keep up with the rapid changes in farming. According to this schema by Van der Ploeg *et al.*[20] there are three dimensions to Endogenous Rural Development that are being implemented by the farmers themselves faced with the reorganization of the agrarian sector in the EU:

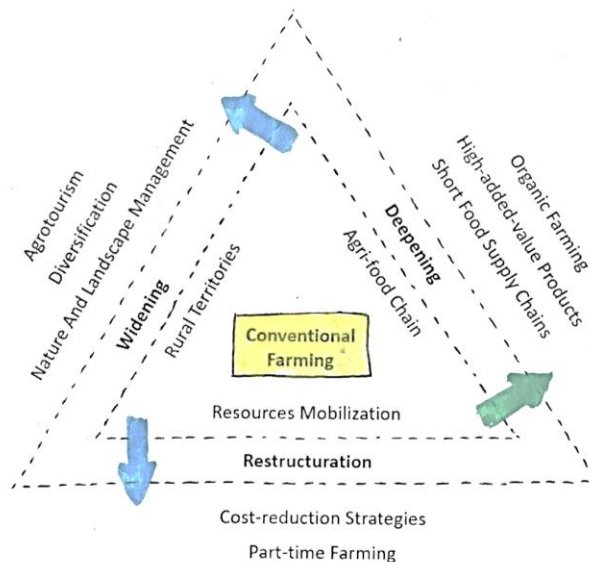

Figure 1: Sustainable Rural Development proposals for the transformation of conventional agriculture. Van der Ploeg *et al*., 2002.

- *Deepening:* Agricultural activities are transformed, expanded and/or interrelated with others, allowing them to accrue greater added value thanks to a closer connection with social demands. Organic farming, products with some certificate of quality, and the use of short or direct distribution channels are a few examples.

- *Broadening:* These activities broaden the functions that farmers serve in rural areas, such that the farmer appears as a service provider and protector of natural heritage. Examples include agro-tourism, land diversification (forestation of farmland), and natural landscape management (agro-environmental measures).

- *Restructuring:* This includes cost reduction strategies in farm production, basing farms' productive strategies on their own resources and resources from the immediate surroundings, reducing the need for external inputs. This also includes part-time farming inasmuch as this redistributes the productive factors (capital and work force), generating more income within the household unit.

[20] Van der Ploeg, J.D., N. Long, and J. Banks (Coords.), (2002). *Living Countrysides. Rural development processes in Europe: the state of art.* Elsevier bedrejsinformatie bv. Doetinchem, Holanda.

Some *restructuring* strategies that align with strategies promoted by the EU's Common Agricultural Policy, like part-time farming, have been seen from an agroecological perspective to weaken the economic and political power of the farming sector at a local level (by putting land out of use and diversifying household incomes) or to contribute to the reduction of farming's importance within rural and family economies. However for Van der Ploeg and other authors, these strategies allow the activity of farming to continue despite all the difficulties of keeping family farms viable. They also see these strategies as ways to keep rural populations in place, which is indispensable for the continuity of communities and rural territories. This is especially relevant in the case of women, who are often relegated to situations of invisibility or dependence in farm work. Agro-tourism and the artisanal processing of food products provide important ways for women to access employment and therefore economic autonomy on their own terrain.

Seen from the perspective of Endogenous Rural Development, notions of multi-functionality and diversification take on a character quite different from what official EU proposals would assign them. Endogenous Rural Development places emphasis on self-controlled and self-dependent processes within communities of producers. These approaches **put agriculture back on the rural development agenda, paired with alternative food distribution networks that generate alliances between city and countryside to support farms, and the renewal of agrarian social fabric through the incorporation of young emigrants from urban areas**.

Agroecological approaches are more focused on ecological processes and collective social action, including at an organizational —and therefore political— level. They are also based on the recovery and recognition of traditional ecological knowledge as an important element in elaborating sustainable solutions for farm management as well as a means of reinforcing collective local identity.

Organic farming and ranching, in connection with other social initiatives, are the most solid agroecological strategies developed by farmers in the EU. Organic farming often reproduces the social and ecological problems characteristic of industrial agriculture: a high degree of dependence upon subsidies, issues of energy sustainability in relation to fossil fuel dependence and, very often, an orientation to global markets. That said, the expansion of organic farming represents a great improvement over conventional agriculture from both social and environmental perspectives. While in general the number of farms in the EU is plummeting, organic farming is generating more income and more employment per hectare through more sustainable forms of land management. It is the main alternative for small farms and for new entrants into farming. The official "organic" certification in its successive reforms has evolved to favor more conventionalized (and therefore less sustainable) forms of organic agriculture. Nevertheless, at the moment it is the only official (not private) certification that allows us to differentiate those farms that opt for production models that prioritize ecological sustainability. It is a first step in the effort to differentiate agricultural models —like agroecology, regenerative agriculture and others— that provide more ambitious responses to global socio-ecological challenges.

Our vision of putting sustainable agriculture at the center of territorial revitalization projects would mean *reagrarianizing* the countryside and *repeasantizing* agriculture. Wary of what 'development' initiatives have entailed, we move away from terms like 'rural development' in favor of, once again, 'agroecological transition.' Part of this vision includes the construction of new rural identities, postmodern hybrids built from the embers of the original peasant cultures of these now postindustrial territories, mixed with agroecological perspectives. This battle in the terrain of the symbolic is key to allowing hidden peasant features to emerge, as well as to highlight the lack of visible alternatives to the official model of rural development —based on commodification and globalization— which is perceived by many rural and farming communities in the EU as something alien and imposed by far-off bureaucrats.

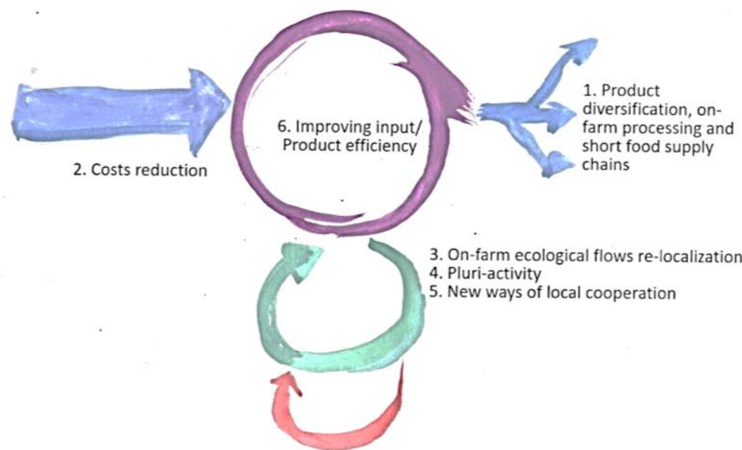

Figure 2. Schema of repeasantization processes. Adapted from Van der Ploeg, 2010.[21]

Jan Douwe Van der Ploeg claims that in recent decades in Europe and other territories of the global North new hybridizations between peasant and post-industrial forms of life have become increasingly common. The notion of 'repeasantization' associates 'peasant modes of agricultural production' with certain values: ways of understanding farming aligned with the moral economy Van der Ploeg attributes to the peasantry, as well as strategies of re-patterning the agroecosystem based on maximizing biodiversity management to improve land use. For this author, characteristics of the peasantry are reflected in present-day farmers' strategies to diversify production, do on-farm food-processing, sell directly or through short distribution channels, reduce costs, improve farm efficiency and develop new forms of local cooperation between farms and farmers.

In the push for agroecological transition we should not restrict ourselves to working with the local farming sector, nor even with those non-farmer social groups with greater social or environmental awareness. Rather we should attempt to involve the entire local community in this new vision of sustainability. The transformations to which we aspire are not limited to material issues: reconstructing local economic flows around sustainable farm use to generate

[21] Van der Ploeg, J.D., (2010). *Nuevos campesinos. Campesinos e imperios alimentarios*. Icaria: Barcelona.

wealth and wellbeing in the territory, in a framework of equity and 'cultural control' exercised by rural communities. They also include symbolic and social aspects of local reality, especially as we must question whether —in a deagrarianized rural environment— agrarian issues are really the most important ones.

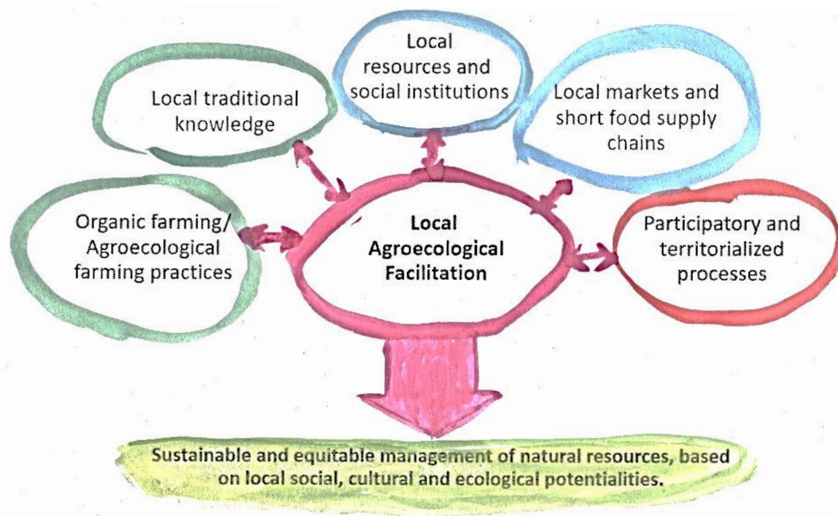

Figure 3. Elements that make up the Local Agroecological Dynamization approach. Source: López (2012).

We should keep in mind that it is both possible and necessary to promote processes of agroecological transition in urban and urban-peripheral areas as well, as various platforms and coalitions of collectives have been doing in the principal metropolitan areas of the EU for decades. In recent years in the context of economic crisis, the blockage of the food system as a result of the COVID pandemic response, high unemployment levels and a growing interest in local and quality agri-food products, more groups are looking to the broad swathes of arable land in the urban peripheries that have been abandoned or underused for years or even decades. At the same time, we see how agricultural land has become an object of interest for investors: it is more lucrative —and notably more secure— than other economic sectors like construction. As a result, land grabbing is spreading throughout Europe as it has in other continents, driven by opaque and anonymous investment funds. In this context, urban and urban-peripheral civil society linked to agroecological movements as well as some local public administrations are promoting urban-peripheral agriculture as an opportunity to generate sustainable jobs. Through agroecology, these jobs can be created while preserving local productive resources through the recuperation of these lands and the inclusion in the primary sector of people —principally young people— from other sectors.

The Local Agroecological Dynamization initiatives undertaken in such territories are driven by platforms made up of people from various groups and entities that promote alternative food systems within cities or their areas of influence. Especially notable are those that have created alternative channels for the circulation of sustainable local food products through Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) arrangements, food coops, farmers' markets and more, as well as the struggles in recent decades to defend traditional garden areas around some major cities. In some cases, these struggles have led to the creation of Agricultural Parks like those of Milan or Barcelona's Baix Llobregat. We should also highlight the ever-

greater number of urban community gardens sprouting up in neighborhoods of cities large and small, often planted in squatted empty lots. Likewise, there is a growing number of community kitchens linked to networks of local farmers. **The value of these initiatives should not be measured only in terms of their production: these are also collectively sustained spaces of community sociability, creation, and resistance.** These experiences broaden the spectrum of ways the city can be inhabited, and ways food can be produced. By putting real alternatives into practice, they challenge the hegemonic agri-food system, the model of the city and of society. Lastly, we should mention the many collectives and organizations based in cities and urban-peripheral areas that work to raise awareness and do research, advocacy, and political action from a food sovereignty perspective.

PART 2: Facilitating local agroecological transitions: a guide

The challenges posed by the unsustainability of the global agri-food system demand major efforts in real contexts in the present time. In the coming pages we will try to translate the above analysis into concrete proposals for reflection and action. This brief manual offers very general ideas and should be adapted to each specific context and to the capacities of groups that undertake Local Agroecological Dynamization processes, whether these groups be professional teams, activist collectives, or local communities.

Where to begin?

To do Local Agroecological Dynamization you need, principally: the desire to do so, ideas, some training and experience, and time. Of course, where you begin depends largely upon what capacities and abilities you have, as well as your goals and where you are situated. It is not the same to work in an environment you know well (your village or neighborhood, for example) to promote a Consumer Group among friends and acquaintances, as it is to do so in a place you've never been. It is also very different to involve people in a recreational garden on municipal land than it is to convince a group of professional farmers to make an agroecological transition.

All of these options, diverse as they are, are forms of Local Agroecological Dynamization. We propose starting with the easy stuff: in contexts you know well, undertaking projects you feel comfortable with, getting together a group of people committed to converging aims. In your community, propose some ideas for which you have the abilities, training, or prior knowledge necessary; that way you can get started with the connections and resources you already have. Propose ideas that —at least at first— do not generate major conflicts within the group of people you hope to work with. Actions that produce conflict with the world outside the group —like squatting an empty lot in your neighborhood to build a garden or cutting down a field of genetically modified corn— might serve to unite or to undermine the group, depending upon the people that make it up, as well as the how the action is done and communicated. *The group rules!*

It is also important that the ideas you propose correspond to the perceived needs of the people you're working with. While something may seem intensely important and interesting to you, if the others do not feel the same way, your proposal will not go far. Ask people what they think of the idea before trying to get them involved, investigate whether anything similar has been done in the area or region, and listen to people when they describe those experiences. **Before trying to apply a universal solution or ideas from outside the territory, it is usually worthwhile to ask ourselves how we can contribute to what already exists in the territory, as well as thinking about where we are coming from and where we are situated.** The best option is to ask others: I have chosen to be here and I want to do things with other people, so... how can I help you?

Sometimes when we believe strongly in something we lose our capacity to observe how others respond to our proposals. There is a lot to do in terms of social transformation, and it can begin from any one of many different starting places. So if what we want is to aggregate forces, energy and inspiration, it is always best to start on pathways where we will have a lot of good company. Keep your eyes and ears wide open for signs of acceptance, interest or rejection from different people. And try to lean into projects that are already underway in the area when you think you might have common interests.

Over time we will be able to build alliances or affinity groups with which we feel more comfortable, with more trusting relationships. We will gradually be able to define more ambitious goals, undertaking activities that may challenge the blockages or power configurations that impede our progress. But at least in the beginning it is best to do things that do not generate uproar or resistance, activities in which the majority of the people interested in our project will feel heard and recognized.

What resources do we need?

When we talk about resources we are talking about a lot of very different things. The resources we will need to carry out our facilitation work largely depend upon what we hope to do.

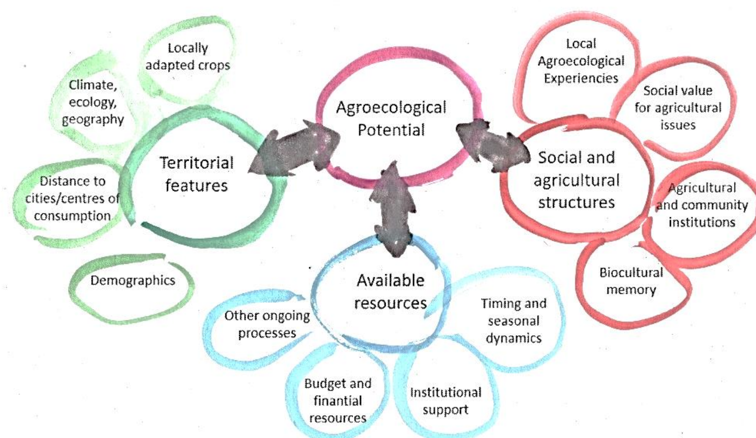

Figure 4. Elements for analysis to identify the agroecological potential of a given socio-ecological context. Based on López-García 2012.

Sometimes we will need to create infrastructures, like a storage area for distribution logistics or an industrial kitchen in which different producers can process food. In these cases, we can request that the public administration provide an appropriate space, but we will need money to set it up and adapt it both to our needs and to the relevant standards. The latter tends to be very pricey.

In other cases, we will need to conduct studies or access information that allows us to refine our project. We may also want to launch promotional or awareness-raising activities: a local food fair, a guide to local seeds and traditional knowledge, etc. In these cases, there are at least two kinds of resources we may need. On the one hand, we need material resources for putting together the fair or publishing the guidebook. These may be provided through some organization (in the case of stands for the fair) or the demand might be avoided by substituting printed material for digital, though it is never the same. On the other hand, we need time for our work.

In general, in local agroecological facilitation processes it is worth starting with a good assessment of the territory: **what projects and what persons exist, who can support us and who might make things difficult, which public and private resources we can rely upon, and which issues interest people enough that they might get involved.** This also requires a lot of work, which may be offered voluntarily if we believe in what we are doing. That said, sometimes we get tired or there is a special period (like a promotional campaign for a cooperative or for local products) that requires a lot of concentrated work. Sometimes we feel this work should be remunerated as a form of self-employment, to ensure the work's quality, or because we just believe it is right.

The cost of this work might be borne by the prices of the products being sold by the persons or organizations that stand to benefit directly from Agroecological Dynamization, although this is usually too much of a burden for prices that tend to already be as low as they can sustainably go. If this approach proves unviable we will have to seek out external funding. We might also make use of personnel from the local administration that are sympathetic to our proposals and willing to lend a hand, or else we might be able to come to some kind of arrangement with Local Development Agents, socio-cultural organizers, members of cooperatives, and others. It should be said that these people tend to already have a lot on their plate.

With whom can we work?

The people present in a given territory will strongly condition what we can do in that territory. But before we even get to that, we may be conditioned by which people we manage to meet, as Chambers (1984) explains in his classic text *Rural Development*.[22] Our condition as 'agroecological promoters' slants our perception of the place. **Depending upon the season of the year in which we begin our project, or upon our physical appearance, or the time of day at which we set meetings, or the contact networks we start from, etc. we will come into**

[22] Chambers, R., 1984. *Rural Development. Putting the Last First*. Harlow: Pearson.

contact with one kind of people or another. To overcome this bias, it is important to carry out a somewhat systematic initial analysis of local realities, such that we are well situated from the start.

In any case it is important that our proposal sit in equilibrium between the demands of those actors that are closer to our own positions (like local organic farmers, environmental groups, etc.) and the demands, concerns and projects of groups that are less closely related to our own positions (like the village agricultural cooperative). Above all, we should seek a balance between the demands of the local population and our own project as agroecological promoters. Striking this balance is one of the principal challenges we face, and requires a lot of listening, negotiation, and creativity.

This negotiation must ultimately respond to the question, "How can I help?" If we do not connect to the demands of local actors, it is going to be difficult to get them to engage in our proposals. It will also be difficult to maintain whatever we have begun over time. **The agroecological vision is not to promote transitions "for the people without the people"; rather it is a maxim of agroecology to adapt our proposals to each socio-ecological and cultural context.**

Different social groups in rural areas

The countryside cannot be reduced to a single category of rurality; indeed, throughout Europe there are a wide variety of rural realities. Despite the heterogeneity of rural situations, we can identify certain major social groups that are present in most territories. Identifying these social groups may prove useful in pursuing agroecological transitions and adapting our actions to the specific conditions of the context. As we have mentioned, territorialized processes of transition are not limited to rural areas; they often rely upon coordinated relations between country and city or urban-periphery.

To identify the most opportune subjects in agroecological transitions, let us first consider mainstream profiles in the agricultural sector, persons who do not include agroecological elements (like organic farming, biodiversity management, on-farm food-processing for added value) in their forms of production or in their forms of distribution and sale (like local markets and short distribution channels). We will likely end up thinking about a farmer, male, with reliable access to land (preferably a landowner) and involved in social entities and movements. This farmer would probably be a man, as men tend to have greater access to the land, and **an enormous majority of the owners of agricultural holdings in the EU are men (68.4%)**. He would probably work in horticulture, as this family of food products tends to be the one that opens up networks of direct distribution between producers and consumers, key to agroecological transition. He would be a non-racialised person and native to the territory, as **migrants face many more obstacles in gaining access to the means of production, for many reasons that are not solely economic.** It would also be important to differentiate between people native to rural areas and urban emigrants or "neo-rurals". The latter often make use of strategies closer to those of agroecology, and often have greater facilities (in

terms of contacts, ways of doing, ease of communication, etc.) when it comes to building alliances with urban consumers.

But the pioneers of agroecological transition processes do not usually correspond to this profile, which represents the majority of farmers in our rural areas.[23] **While transition will only take place at a large scale if majority profiles get involved, in the early phases the greatest support will come from peripheral actors within the agricultural sector and within rural communities.** We can differentiate at least two types of these 'peripheral' actors. On the one hand are those who can take on greater risks while starting agroecological transition processes, whether because they don't have much to lose or because they have other non-agricultural forms of income ('weekend farmers') or else because they are already to some degree marginalized within the rural context and they are not as concerned about social pressure ('neo-rurals' and others). On the other hand are those who occupy subaltern positions in rural communities and who often seek a way out of these positions, or out of the rural community itself. As we will see, while the people in the first of these categories may be the most visible spokespersons for transition, the people in the second category are those who most need it.

Within the first group, neo-rurals and part-time farmers are an important source of support for agroecological transition processes at all scales of analysis. Neo-rurals do not form a majority in the countryside nor in agricultural production, but they do tend to have profiles more closely related to urban populations, and they tend to be highly qualified. These are the people we are most likely to find promoting agroecological processes in our territories. The greater ease we may have working with neo-rural people should not obscure a basic fact: they are not a majority in rural areas, nor do they usually possess land, means of production, or agricultural knowledge. While they may provide important support, we should make sure our goals align with the real social composition of the rural environment in which we are working. It is worth the effort to reach the agricultural sector more broadly.

In the second group, more than specific profiles we may find different features or conditions that determine overlapping lines of discrimination within agricultural communities. The common ground in these different situations is often (though not always) difficulty in accessing the means of production and therefore an income. How far agroecological transitions can scale up depends largely upon whether they can respond to the very diverse needs created by these forms of inequality in the territory.

One feature to take into account is gender. **Women are much more often the owners of agricultural holdings in organic production than in conventional, and they are much more involved in economic activities connected to organic production, local markets, and schemes for achieving high added-value, like on-farm processing of raw materials.**[24] They are often

[23] There is an interesting review of studies on this subject in Padel, S. (2001). "Conversion to Organic Farming: A Typical Example of the Diffusion of an Innovation?" *Sociologia Ruralis*, 41, 1.
[24] Binimelis, Ruth,Verónica Escurriol, Marta G. Rivera-Ferre, (2012). *Soberanía Alimentaria:Transformación Artesanal y Equidad de Género.* Available for free download at:
http://www.derechoshumanosdelcampesinado.org/es/descargas.html?func=fileinfo&id=200

important promoters of organic consumption and weavers of a social fabric that facilitates agroecological transition.[25] Perhaps due to the traditional exclusion and invisibilization of women in agricultural tasks —exacerbated with the modernization of farming— they have found themselves pushed into innovation.[26] For this reason, and because of the double and triple work-load that care in rural areas entails, special efforts may be required to reach out to women in masculinized fields like agriculture.

Another group with particular potential for agricultural transitions are rural youth. They have their whole lives ahead of them, and have the energy and rebellious spirit required to break the mold relative to their social context and to innovate. Many of these **young people will inherit the land, infrastructures and knowledge required for farming, although they may not wish to consider this as their future.** They usually have to wait until their parents retire —or even years after that time— to inherit the farm, and the virtues of the farming life are not the most scintillating to the imagination of 21st Century rural (or urban) youth. But with the skyrocketing rate of unemployment and the implosion of the globalized world, the option of (sustainable) farming (with added-value) remains one of the few economic options in rural areas, especially if we take into account issues of job security and dignity and the increasing difficulty of accessing land.

Another part of the farming sector, one that is subordinate in economic terms, is made up of hired farm hands, who often suffer very precarious living and working conditions. Despite their extensive knowledge of how to produce food and make it pay off economically, their lack of access to the means of production situates them in a difficult and dependent relation within the food supply chain. For this reason they may constitute a collective subject with great potential to generate original new initiatives that emphasize agroecological features as well as a focus on social justice.

Within the hired agricultural work force it is important to highlight the migrant population, often occupying the most precarious positions. Between 800,000 and 1 million seasonal migrant workers are hired annually by the European agricultural sector, under very harsh living and working conditions. Seasonal workers are generally hired for the harvest of fruit and vegetable products in the Mediterranean countries (Spain, Italy, Greece), as well as in Germany and Poland, from the countries of Eastern Europe and North Africa.[27] The number of foreign workers increases greatly if we include non-seasonal foreign workers (in sectors like ranching and others) and those workers hired under the table. The social discrimination

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López García, Rosa Mª, (2001). "Producción y consumo en agricultura ecológica: una aproximación desde la perspectiva de género." Lecture delivered at the Fourth Hispano-Portuguese Colloquium on Rural Studies: The multifunctionality of rural spaces in the Iberian Peninsula. Santiago de Compostela.

[25] Guzmán et al, (2009). "Las mujeres y el desarrollo rural agroecológico." *Revista Documentación Social*, 155.

[26] On the conditions of women farmers in the Basque Country in the 21st Century, see Gonzalo y Urretabizkaia, 2012. "Las mujeres baserritarras: análisis y perspectivas de futuro desde la Soberanía Alimentaria". Bilbao: Baserripress. Available for free download at: http://www.semillerosdepensamientos.org/include/uploads/nodo/Mujeres_Baserritarras.pdf

[27] Augère-Granier, M.L. (2021). *Migrant seasonal workers in the European agricultural sector*. European Parliamentary Research Service. Available at: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/689347/EPRS_BRI(2021)689347_EN.pdf>.

enshrined in agricultural labor laws compounds the discrimination present in migration law, situating the foreign work force within the agricultural sector in a doubly fragile position. The result is a notable increase of marginality in agricultural regions, and extreme economic and social inequality between native and foreign populations.

In many rural territories suffering demographic decline —for example in the interior of the southern European countries— it has been the foreign migrant population that has sustained social reproduction in rural communities over the last decades.[28] The foreign population has generally sought access to the highest possible incomes in the shortest period of time, and therefore often prefers irregular labor arrangements that generate higher net wages. These higher incomes are often not in the farming sector, so agricultural work frequently serves migrants as a temporary activity until they find a better-paying job or manage to regularize their migration status.

The factors that will ultimately determine whether or not women, young people and foreign populations stay in a given territory or not probably do not depend so much on work as they do on social factors, that is, the conditions of social reproduction in rural communities. In the case of women it has to do with discrimination in access to the means of production and in collective professional organizations, as well as the special workload of care for children and the elderly in addition to domestic work, which has heaped a huge burden upon the 'support generation.'[29] In the case of young people, it has to do with the lack of horizons for personal development and opportunities for sociability. In the case of the foreign population, their priorities are shaped by their own life projects, in which their principle goal is often to return to their place of origin. Any agroecological transition project should take into account these elements of social conditioning in order to generate processes with transformative potential that are firmly anchored in local realities.

The processes of deagrarianization that have affected rural areas over the last decades suggest that agroecological transitions do not solely depend upon the agrarian populations of a given territory. We might need to broaden the territorial scope of the transition process to compensate for the minor social and economic importance of the agricultural sector if the area we are working in does not have the critical mass of infrastructures, social networks and economic initiatives that might allow a transition to take effect. Or this lack could be compensated by including non-agricultural local actors who might find synergies with the agricultural sector thanks to the multifunctional character of farming. Here we are referring to hotels, restaurants and tourism as well as local food retail; they could use local production to lend value to the product or service they offer. This is also relevant for local civil society organizations like the local educational community and associations (of neighbors, women,

[28] Camarero, L. (Coord.) (2009): *La población rural en España: de los desequilibrios a la sostenibilidad social*. Barcelona: Fundación La Caixa.

[29] This refers to the generation of middle-aged women in rural areas who care for two different generations of dependent persons (children and the elderly), in addition to domestic work and often also paid work in the precarious rural service sector. See Camarero, L. (Coord.) (2009): *La población rural en España: de los desequilibrios a la sostenibilidad social*. Barcelona: Fundación La Caixa.

youth, cultural groups, etc.) that might use elements of agrarian identity in the construction of their own local development projects. Lastly, we refer to the alliances between urban and rural communities.

Institutional actors in rural areas

The smaller the rural town, the closer the administration is to the population and to other local actors. Rural populations experience their town halls as their own, and therefore make more demands upon them and have higher expectations. There is also a more intense vigilance of what local administrations do. In this regard, any measures taken to promote transitions should consider the impression they will make upon the public authorities. **At a village scale, the local political class may not be as bound to party loyalties as elsewhere.** When it comes to supporting initiatives, family connections, the needs and opinions of the population, or the specific project and its social, economic, and cultural impact upon the community may prove more important.

The political orientation of the local government (here we are talking about a town hall, inter-municipal area, or Local Action Group) may or may not be determinant in its support for an agroecological transition project. Its position will depend, in large part, upon the balance of local forces —especially in the agricultural sector— and the support the project enjoys in the community. It will also depend upon how the proposal connects with the priorities defined by the local government and/or the population, for example, the capacity to connect with the tourism industry in those regions where this is an important part of the economy.

The administrative structure that in theory would be most amenable to an agroecological transition project in EU territories would be the Local Action Group. These are public-private partnerships for the management of European Rural Development funds at a regional scale; they have different names in different places. This institution brings together a range of different social, economic, and political actors from a given territory in order to jointly design and execute a Rural Development Plan for the region. In countries with other kinds of rural development initiatives other similar structures should be sought; the important thing is that they be locally based and bring together different public administrations, social entities and private enterprises present in the territory to coordinate local development policies in the project's area. In some cases, these structures have supported potent processes of agroecological transition; they are potential allies if we wish to seek official support for our proposals.

Organizations and social networks in the food sovereignty movement

In 1996 the international organization La Via Campesina launched the concept of "food sovereignty". At the global Nyèlèni convergence (in Serengué, Mali, 2007)[30] agroecology was linked to food sovereignty, and the proposal was made to create local forums to promote food sovereignty all over the planet. Since then, local forums for food sovereignty have been

[30] https://nyeleni.org/en/final-docs/

created in diverse territories. These bring together people and organizations committed to agroecological transitions, combining political action and the creation of local alternatives. These forums have been replicated throughout Europe (2011) and in Europe and Central Asia (2016), and regional forums have been developed in some countries, including Spain. The Nyeleni forums have managed to bring urban and rural sensibilities together, working especially on issues like building short distribution channels, resisting genetically modified crops, protecting urban-peripheral farmland, cultivating biodiversity, and supporting new self-managed rural and neo-rural initiatives.

From the urban side, especially (though not exclusively) in the global North, local networks promoting food sovereignty have mobilized the growing network of consumer groups and urban gardens together with anti-capitalist environmental organizations and NGOs. From the rural side, they have established **networks that connect agroecological producers, often scattered and isolated, neo-rural political activism and experiments in self-management, and those parts of rural society sympathetic to agroecology**. These flexible, fragile networks are full of potential; they provide essential support to agroecological projects wherever they are present.

How do we design and plan agroecological transitions at a local scale?

Agroecology relies upon methodologies of **Participatory Action Research** as its principal tool.[31] Participatory methodologies take into account the complexity of social relations, especially social inequality, within their approach in order to generate collective solutions to everyday problems in rural areas. In recent decades a current of participatory research has emerged around the world using community-based approaches and oriented to generate action.[32] These participatory initiatives focus on the relations between social actors, as it is easier to transform the relations between subjects than it is to change the subjects themselves.[33]

This shift in emphasis helps overcome situations of social blockage mediated by the power relations present in any given context (as technological change and the management of agroecosystems are greatly affected by the power relations within the agri-food system). Focusing on relationships, bonds and community allows us to move between agroecology's different scales of analysis: from the farm (where research is generally carried out) to broader society (where from a systems perspective solutions are usually generated).

The participatory methodologies applied in agroecology bring together techniques from different disciplines. Among these are techniques from agronomy, like **Farmer Participatory**

[31] See, for example: Méndez, V.E., C.M. Bacon, R. Cohen & S.R. Gliessman, Eds. (2016). *Agroecology: A Transdisciplinary, Participatory and Action-oriented Approach*. Boca Ratón, FL: CRC Press
[32] See, for example: López-García, D., M. Cuéllar-Padilla, A. de Azevedo Olival et al. (2021). "Building agroecology with people. Challenges of participatory methods to deepen on the agroecological transition in different contexts," *Journal of Rural Studies* 83: 257-267.
[33] Villasante, T.R., 2006. *Desbordes Creativos*. La Catarata, Madrid.

Research or Participatory Rural Appraisal.[34] Techniques from research in ecology are also used, like those that assess crop ecology and the redesign of agroecosystems, or provide frameworks for analyzing sustainability like MESMIS.[35] From the social sciences, **socio-praxis** serves as a central organizing principle. Ethnographic techniques are applied for the recovery of traditional peasant knowledge, and social 'facilitation/dynamization' techniques are drawn from the field of applied sociology, including sociocultural organizing or Popular Education as defined by authors like Paolo Freire or Oscar Jara. In this way we provision ourselves with a wide range of tools, all oriented to promote participatory practices and foment transformative perspectives. These allow us to embark upon the process of agroecological transition with adaptability and holistic reach.

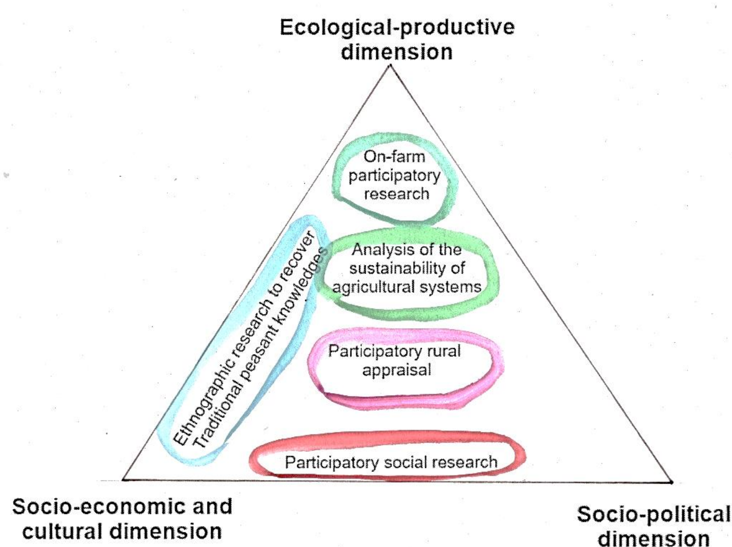

Figure 5. Principal methodologies used in agroecological transition, according to the dimensions of agroecology. Source: López García and Gúzman Casado, 2014.[36]

Participatory methodologies in the European context or the global North have been developed principally in urban contexts. While there are many participatory methodological tools for transitions to sustainability in agricultural contexts (like Participatory Rural Appraisal and others), these have mainly been applied in Latin America, Africa, and Asia. **Agroecology incorporates the local economy (in the broadest sense) and forms of ecosystem management into the participatory process as central elements.** This introduces new difficulties, as it makes the area of intervention much broader and more complex compared to participatory methodologies in urban areas. The intervention is therefore more holistic; participatory methodologies applied to agroecological transition seek to promote economic

[34] Chambers, R. (1994). "The origins and practice of participatory rural appraisal," *World Development* 22 (7): 953-969.

[35] López-Ridaura, S., O. Masera & M. Astier (2002). "Evaluating the sustainability of complex socio-environmental systems: the MESMIS framework." *Ecological Indicators* 2: 135–14

[36] López García, D. y Guzmán Casado, G., 2014. *Metodologías participativas para la transición agroecológica*. SEAE, Catarroja.

change, reaching into the realm of technology as well. The minimal role of subsistence economies and the frailty of traditional peasant social and cultural expressions in rural communities of the present-day global North mark important differences from the Latin American context, in which peasant culture still has great presence and vitality.

Participatory methodologies seek to overcome the barrier between the researcher (subject) and the researched (object of study) in order to involve the local population in the activity of research; participants define the problems to be investigated and determine the lines of work needed to overcome those problems. Further along, they design how to implement those lines of work. In participatory methodologies, the erstwhile object of intervention becomes the acting subject: it is the local population that does the research, or rather, that self-researches. It is the local population that defines *what* should be investigated, *how* to approach it, and most importantly, *what for*. The researcher or technician steps aside, becoming a 'facilitator' of agroecological research, accompanying the local population through the process rather than analyzing the population in order to extract knowledge that will later circulate through social spaces alien to where it was generated.

It is beyond the scope of this text to delve into the development of participatory methodologies for agroecological transition; there are other documents specifically on this topic. We do, however, feel it is necessary to highlight some recent experiences that have accumulated in our territories, as they suggest an incipient issue of some complexity. The methodological approach of agroecological transition should be markedly different from other attempts to propel social transformation in rural areas that are based upon the capitalist market, like classical Agricultural Extension or Rural Development policies. **Our methodology should incorporate —at a structural level— the objectives of horizontality, local empowerment, decommodification and collective construction, aligned with the forms adopted in processes of Local Agroecological Dynamization.** For us, such dynamization "is a practical approach for local areas to construct sustainable agro-food systems through the promotion of food sovereignty, territorial and social cohesion, the social reproduction of local communities, and the conservation of ecosystems."[37]

How and with whom do we appraise the territory?

Before asking ourselves what we can do to promote agroecological transition, **perhaps the first thing we should do is observe** – especially if we are 'tourists' or 'parachutists,' that is, if we have not had prior contact with the area. Our position as we begin the appraisal is going to be very different depending upon who is the promoter, if there is a promoter beyond our own team or not, whether we are from the area or have never set foot in it before, and what prior knowledge we have of the issues. It is important to be aware of the slant these variables impose in order to design the project in such a way as to offset them.

[37] López García, D. L. Calvet-Mir, J. Espluga, M. Di Masso, G. Tendero-Acin, & A. Pomar-León (2015). "La dinamización local agroecológica como estrategia para la construcción de soberanías locales." *Ecología Política* 49: 28-34.

If we are more or less new to the territory, we should carry out our **initial "mapping of social, technical and ecological issues"** before starting a participatory process, such that the participatory phase conducted with the local population can be initiated with a certain focus, grounded in some **prior knowledge of the reality in which we hope to intervene**. For some authors this prior analysis is included within their 'preliminary phase', and is linked to negotiations with the local population about the conditions and extent of the participatory process. If our intervention has been requested or contracted by an organization —public or private— it is with this promoter that we should negotiate these conditions.

To begin, we will seek secondary sources: **prior studies on the area or on other areas with issues similar to those we intend to address**. We will find detailed information on the municipality from the Regional Statistical Institute or the Town Hall. At a regional level we may find prior appraisals in the Local Development Plans of the Local Action Group, or else plans drawn up by the Regional Council or the Inter-Municipal Area. At a provincial level we should look for detailed data in the National Statistics Institute, and for data specific to the agricultural sector in the Agrarian Census or the Farm Survey. Lastly, we can find data in other secondary sources like Masters theses, local publications, and studies by foundations or other charitable organizations.

We also need to generate specific information about the issues to be addressed. We should conduct **interviews**, relying on the 'snow-ball effect'[38] —as we conduct interviews new contacts arise from them— in order both to **obtain information on the problem we face and to complete a sociogram of the locale**. These interviews will also help us define the questions we hope to answer in our process; we will collect a broad **sample of the needs and challenges** expressed by the people we talk to. This information gathering could also be done in a number of other ways, using different approaches.

In conducting a participatory analysis we will try to capture the local reality from a holistic perspective, but particularly from the perspective of the local population or the social groups with which we hope to work. **Obtaining subjective visions or the discourses of the different subjects we will work with is just as important as obtaining objective data.** Similarly important is generating processes of collective reflection on the opinions expressed. If we hope to overstep existing ways of living and doing in order to undertake processes of agroecological transition, the population's opinions of local reality are the subjective raw material with which we must work. It is also relevant to **make a map of social complicities, conflicts, synergies, etc. between the different actors in the territory, and especially how they are positioned relative to our proposals for agroecological transition**. Following the principle of 'optimal ignorance' described by Robert Chambers (1983),[39] we don't need to know everything, we just need to know what is necessary for us to be able to act at each stage of the process, transforming whatever facet of the reality has been selected as the object of our work.

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[38] This basically means letting one interview lead into another thanks to people's recommendations, building relations and a network that way. See Red Cimas, (2009). "Metodologías participativas." Manual. http://www.redcimas.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/manual_2010.pdf

[39] Chambers, R, (1983). *Rural Development: Putting the Last First*. Pearson Education Lmtd. Essex.

For example, we might make use of the Rapid Rural Appraisal to carry out collective assessments of local agricultural activity using simple and rapid techniques to gather data that require few resources to process. Or we might apply the tools provided by Participatory Rural Analysis[40] to analyze **1) the evolution of local farm and land management as well as past and present environmental issues; 2) existing social networks and available socio-economic resources; 3) events that have led to the present situation and 4) to identify the principle unsatisfied demands for social services.** Moreover, we will have at hand a whole spectrum of sociological and anthropological tools with which to apprehend subjective and symbolic features of the local society; these will prove useful in guiding the participatory process. Some of these tools will also help us discern what traditional ecological knowledge is active in the area; this will prove essential in developing proposals for agroecological transition adapted to each specific territory.

The data drawn from the analysis of secondary sources, interviews and other participatory techniques will be shared with the local population in participatory workshops using various facilitation techniques. **Returning this data to its source is a matter of ethics; the information belongs to the people, not to the researcher, so it should be made available to the people through channels accessible to them.** We will also use these workshops to go deeper into collective discussions on the information as well as to integrate new actors into the appraisal process. The principal product of this phase is the discussion itself. Through cycles of action-reflection-action we hope to move beyond the usual local habits of thought and make room for collective learning and social creativity. We do not intend to provide solutions but rather to generate new questions together with the population, offering alternative approaches that allow people to appropriate their own world, name the issues in their own words, and collectively reconfigure their analysis of those issues. Ultimately our hope is that the responses they come to through this process do not reproduce capitalist and patriarchal frameworks.

The final product of the Participatory Analysis phase is turning the appraisal into an Action Plan, with all the local stakeholders involved in its creation**. It is important that the plan remain valid and relevant even after the facilitation team is no longer present in the territory.** To this end, various participatory workshops will be held to share the assessment and begin defining and prioritizing objectives and, on the basis of these objectives, actions. This plan should aim to gain the greatest possible legitimacy in the population; it should reflect the population's most deeply felt needs and include actions in which they are likely to get involved. In this sense, the plan will be more operative than exhaustive, and should be open to continuous transformation.

Ideally, the plan should include collectively defined indicators for evaluation. These will later serve to shape and monitor the process. To determine these indicators we might make use

[40] For example, see Geilfus, F. (2009). *80 Tools for Participatory Development*. Available at: <http://repiica.iica.int/docs/B1013I/B1013I.pdf>.

of methodologies for participatory systematization and evaluation, or other tools for evaluating the sustainability of agroecosystems using dynamic indicators. As this is a participatory process, the indicators should be easily evaluable by the participants and the time and resources required for evaluation should be within their reach.

How do we organize participation in agroecological transition?

Participation can be organized through workshops, meetings, gatherings. and other public events. In addition, there may be bodies that formally structure participation. These should be complementary in terms of who is represented in each, with an operative balance between the different social and interest groups present in the area. We can differentiate three types of formal body: the core group, the follow-up committee, and the working groups (figure 6). These three types need not necessarily exist in all projects, nor are the descriptions we provide here written in stone. This architecture of formal bodies for participation is a guideline that offers some key ideas, as well as a general scheme for how to design participatory processes.

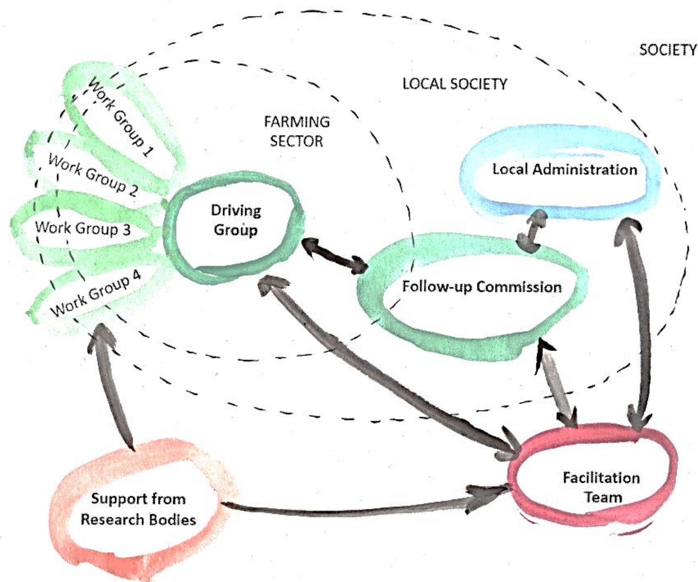

Figure 6. Complementary formal participatory bodies in processes of agroecological transition at a local level.

The ***core group*** is a mixed group made up of researchers or professional facilitators and volunteers from the local population. Its function is to lead the process of action-reflection-action while also activating broader processes of participation. The people in this group should have time and willingness to work. If possible, they should be people familiar with the issues who have extensive social networks; this permits the core group to work as a conduit to local society. It is important that this group bring together, to the extent possible, all the diversity of relevant stakeholders in the local society. In socially polarized contexts it is important that group members not be polemical figures; they should not hold political office or important positions in social organizations as this would distance other local actors from opposing positions.

The ***follow-up committee*** is made up of all the entities in the project territory that might be interested in debating each of the project's phases, as well as representatives from the promoting organization(s) and/or funders, and at least one representative of the core group. The follow-up committee is not meant to *work* on the process so much as supervise it, vouch for it, and ensure its political and social legitimacy through periodic meetings. The committee serves as an intermediary between the grassroots process and the political institutions in which decisions are made that may affect that process (and which in some cases the process aims to influence). Its meetings are less frequent and it does not carry out ongoing everyday tasks, but it is the space in which the first research results are released and in which the attitudes and reactions to these results are measured. The committee is a space of negotiation in which to build positions of consensus between local entities that have the legitimacy to introduce these proposals into the arena of political decision-making, which may be necessary to obtain resources for certain actions. For this reason, the members of the follow-up committee should be representatives of formal entities, including local agricultural organizations, and its overall composition should reflect those organizations with interests in agricultural activity present in the project area.

In rural areas there are many entities that might fulfill these requirements, given their internal structure and their functions. It may prove useful to turn to these entities and request that they take on the functions of the committee in order not to duplicate structures, especially since the most dynamic local actors tend to be overloaded with commitments already. Getting pre-existing entities to take on the functions of the committee may simplify the process and increase both the project's legitimacy and its agility. In many cases, one of the objectives of the participatory process is to put public resources to work for local civil society, and ultimately turn the proposals derived from the participatory process into public policy.

The ***sectoral working groups*** are groups created to carry out specific, short-term actions, or else to develop an ongoing line of work within the participatory process. These are mixed groups, made up of members of the interested entities as well as individual volunteers. Depending upon the objectives of a given working group, it may also include personnel from the local public administration or other persons with public responsibilities related to the issues at hand. The groups' function is to develop, implement and evaluate the sectoral measures drawn from the participatory process, becoming their executive organ. Again, we must take care with the composition of these groups, which may be perceived as partial if we include highly visible individuals or leave out certain interest groups. As these are executive bodies, the most important thing is that they be made up of dedicated persons with the capacity to act, even if their actions are partial and do not necessarily benefit the local society as a whole.

In contexts in which the farming sector has a weak position within local society, it may be of interest to establish trans-sectoral working groups to generate synergies between different social or economic sectors and include different kinds of actors. In this way, the actions

undertaken will serve as *synergic satisfiers*[41] which increase in power as a function of their ability to satisfy more than one need and therefore gain legitimacy with a diverse range of actors. If the local population considers it relevant, we may seek support in existing processes, programs or dynamics, even when these go beyond the territorial scale of our project. This will help integrate new actors and resources into the process through cooperation and the identification of common interests. Essentially, our proposal is a strategy to make farming a transversal question in the public life of the area in which we are working.

PARTICIPATION TOOL	COMPOSITION	OBJECTIVES	ACTIVITIES	PARTICIPANTS' COMMITMENT	PARTICIPATORY TECHNIQUES	FACILITATORS' ROLE
CORE GROUP	"Bridge people" with great communication and mobilization capacities. Mixed group of volunteers. Agricultural Sector in a leadership role. Represents the diversity of local actors.	Lead and activate the process. Process monitoring. Carry out the principal actions.	Provide information. Self-training. Prepare analysis and appraisal. Develop work plan. Amplify calls for participation.	Group created specifically for this process. Members must be committed, responsible, and likely to get involved in actions.	Key informants. PFA analysis techniques (transect, time map, etc.) Mapping (sociogram, flowchart). Nominal group technique.	Facilitation, information, training, conflict resolution.
FOLLOW-UP COMMITTEE	Representatives of relevant administrations and associations. Representatives from Core Group and from promoters.	Supervise process. Provide legitimacy. Facilitate access to public and private resources.	Fixed and infrequent meetings. Initial negotiation. Evaluation of each phase. Negotiation and budgeting for proposals.	Availability to supervise process. Involvement and dissemination of process.	SWOT analysis, audiovisual material, expert roundtables, brainstorming.	Information, negotiation, awareness raising, evaluation.
SECTORAL WORKING GROUP	Mixed group of volunteers and relevant professionals. Public administration. Promoters of the process.	Develop and carry out specific actions defined in the Action Plan.	Sectoral investigations related to the actions to be undertaken. Design, execution, and evaluation of specific actions.	Commitment and responsibility for an action.	Priority-setting techniques, Participatory Rural Appraisal, Mapping (sociogram, flowcharts). Peasant-to-peasant. Agroecological mobilizers. PRA analysis (transect, time mapping, etc.)	Facilitation, information, training, conflict resolution.

Table 1. Description of the Core Group, Follow-up Committee and Sectoral Working Group.

Should the agricultural sector have a leading role in agroecological transition processes?

Farming is at the very center of agroecological proposals for social and ecological sustainability in rural areas. **The agricultural sector should therefore have a leading role in**

[41] En términos de Manfred Max Neef (1991). *Human Scale Development*. New York: Apex Press. Available at: <https://www.wtf.tw/ref/max-neef.pdf>

processes of agroecological transition because it is the sector that holds the means of production and represents this activity most directly. Its rhythms and collective ways of operating are different from those of urban social movements, so in spaces where the two meet the farming sector often is rendered invisible. We do not wish to suggest that the agricultural sector should be the only party with visible leadership roles, but that these roles should be shared with urban actors (especially consumer and other social movements). In designing processes, actions and encounters to promote agroecological transitions, it is important to take into account the different ways in which different social actors tend to participate.

In fact it is difficult to speak of just one 'agricultural sector'; the composition and organizational forms of this sector change enormously from one territory to the next and from one profile of farmer to the next. The sector tends to be well organized, with access to the authorities' attention in those territories where professional farming is still profitable. In those areas where agricultural activity has not maintained its profitability, where it persists as a minor economic activity largely dependent upon subsidies, the sector's political potential weaker as there is less commitment to it. In areas near cities, the pressure of urban growth has generally dismantled the sector's organizational structures. That said, in these areas the greater density of relationships between producers and consumers —and this is especially relevant for organic production— reconfigures social structures, making the producers an important actor. In these situations, however, producers often do not act through mainstream farmers' unions.

The opportunities and the support we find within the farming sector will vary depending upon what elements of agroecological transition already exist in the territory in question. Here we are referring to how organic agriculture has entered the territory, the structure of the farm sector and traditional agricultural institutions (farmers' unions, cooperatives, irrigation boards, local associations, etc.), the strength of the local market and the development of Short Food Supply Chains, the conservation and social appreciation of cultivated biodiversity, and the agricultural sector's negotiating capacity or its alliances with other local economic sectors. The farther the transition process has advanced already, the more ambitious our objectives can be.

If the process has not advanced much —which is the case in most of our rural areas— we should not take anything for granted. It will be harder to talk about agroecology or even about organic agriculture, and the experience of direct sales and short distribution channels may be hard for local producers to imagine. In these cases, our work should begin with very basic tasks of improving farmers' collective self-esteem, visibilizing their existence and constructing collective spaces for getting together. **If we can offer agroecological solutions to real problems present within conventional farming, they will surely listen to us. Interest will grow if we are able to offer innovative sales options for local products.** But we should not expect to see major changes over a short time, nor should we draw lines in the sand between what we think is done correctly and what we don't.[42]

[42] We can find an analysis of how this methodology is applied in a post-graduate training module from

In any case it will be interesting to study previous projects of agricultural development that have taken place in the area and what traces they have left, whether these be positive or negative, more or less aligned with agroecology. **It will also be interesting to observe the imbalances of power in the farm sector (who controls the cooperatives or product sales in the area, how the land is divided, which are the landowning families, what links there are between the primary sector and local agro-industry, etc.) as these will determine who we can work with and how far we can hope to go.** If we are from outside the area it will be difficult —or conflictive— for us to try to directly confront central local problems. **We will have to begin by working on tangential matters in which our proposals generate little resistance.** If we live in the area where we hope to work our starting position will greatly condition with whom we can collaborate and which pathways are open to us.

The vitality of the local agricultural sector may to some degree determine the scale of action for our work. In a very deagrarianized territory made up of small municipalities, it will be difficult to find social groups or individuals with enough energy to generate processes of innovation and collective social action. We will therefore have to broaden the area and seek support from other, more distant entities to bring together a critical mass of people and resources allowing us to construct solutions aligned with agroecology. In densely populated territories in which advances have already been made towards an agroecological transition it will be easier to get results from pilot projects in limited and carefully defined territories.

Where the local agricultural sector is weak and isolated, it may be difficult to get farmers to participate in this body if it is not strictly limited to the sector. In these cases, it may be preferable to have a core group comprised entirely of farmers in order to ensure that the sector have a leading role in the process and that farmers feel secure participating. This should only occur in situations in which we perceive that the agricultural sector has difficulties interacting with other local actors. In any case, the essential idea is that in the core group the agricultural sector should have a clear leadership role, which should not be evaluated in formal terms (who makes up the core group?) but functional ones (does the core group manage to mobilize the local agricultural sector?).

In which sectors can we work?

The agroecology schema based on three dimensions highlights a catalogue of actions that might be taken in the construction of an agroecological transition (figure 7); this can provide a general vision of the kinds of activities and lines of work being done, applied to the everyday reality of our territories. All of this may give us ideas of how to design specific activities that would be best adapted to the context in which we hope to work. Existing experiences provide us with points of reference that will help us refine our proposals.

Catalonia, in Spain: López-García, D., Calvet-Mir, L., Di Masso, M. et al. (2019). "Multi-actor Networks and Innovation Niches: University training for Local Agroecological Dynamization." *Agriculture and Human Values* 36: 567–579.

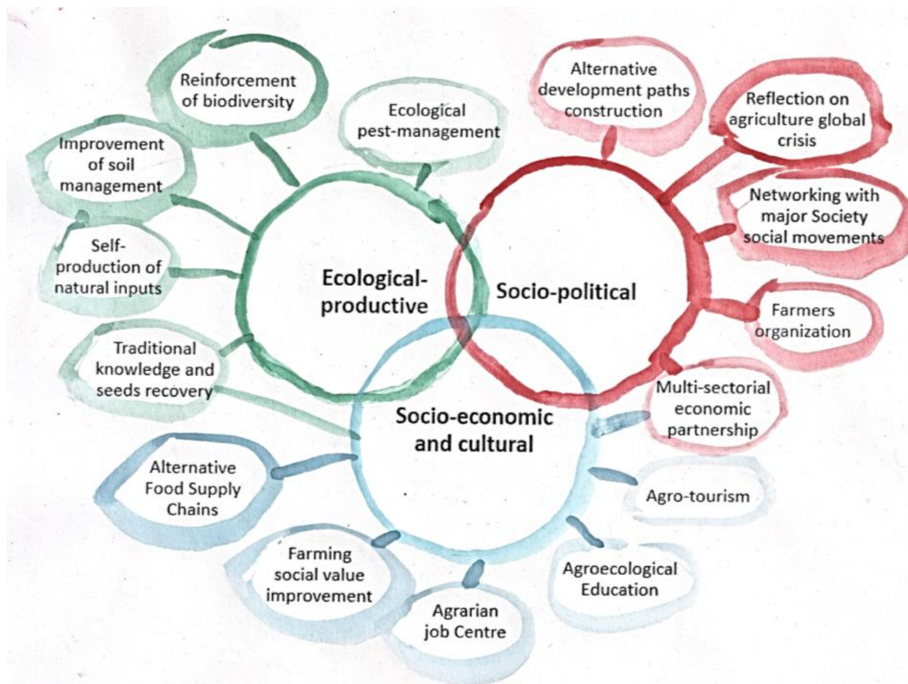

Figure 7. Complementary actions in the three dimensions of agroecology. Source: López-García, D., 2012.

Depending upon the situation, we might begin work in one dimension or another. Our objectives may be limited to very specific and concrete actions, or they may extend to broader and more holistic processes of transition that include all three dimensions. The breadth or narrowness of our objectives will condition the complexity of the design, the workflow and the formal spaces for participation. Certain elements, however, remain constant in all kinds of processes. These are: **the holistic view of transition processes; the need to "walk together asking"[43] and to establish goals and forms of work with the local population based on their own needs; the goal of empowering the local population that should be present in any agroecological intervention; and the commitment to transfer to the local population the tools for self-management and self-organization.**

As long as we are within these parameters, starting with one proposal or another just depends upon the context. **In situations in which the agroecological transition has barely begun, it may be of interest to begin with the *socio-economic and cultural dimension:* activities that address symbolic and subjective issues will prepare the terrain for more exhaustive actions in the medium-term.** These activities might include the recovery of traditional ecological knowledge, celebrations of agricultural work, social and cultural events linked to local culture, etc. This dimension includes actions that might in turn improve the economic returns of local farm initiatives (through short food-supply chains), or complementary sources of income for farmers and other local actors based on the multifunctional character of farming: agrotourism, local agroecological cuisine, agroecological education, etc. In these cases, the improved economic returns will placate the

[43] As suggested by the Zapatista National Liberation Army.

initial doubts we usually find in the agricultural sector and in rural places. These proposals will serve to ensure us a warm reception.

The activities within the *ecological-productive dimension* have had a powerful impact in those places where the agroecological transition is already somewhat advanced. The changes in farm management promoted by agroecology (compared to conventional farming practices) generate a lot of uncertainty among the drivers of transition processes. The activities that accompany and facilitate this process are generally well received by producers, especially if the information is transferred between peers or is generated collectively, as occurs in the 'Peasant to Peasant' movement or Participatory Farm Appraisal. Often the participation of conventional farmers in activities of this type motivates them to undertake transition processes on their own farms. These changes are usually not abrupt; farmers gradually incorporate management techniques that resolve specific problems for which they were not finding solutions in conventional farming. Or they might incorporate cost-reduction strategies, taking better advantage of local resources or the circular use of on-farm materials.

The *socio-political dimension* incorporates actions, ideally pursued at a territorial scale, that allow for a critical mass of persons to engage in the agroecological transition process. This dimension can be more fully explored in those places where a degree of progress has already been made towards agroecological transition. Its actions are closer to political activism, although we can cite cases in which processes of this type have been supported with public funds.

The existence of activist networks and processes in society at large may be a great source of support when starting transition processes in territories which have not had prior experiences of this kind. These networks are much more present in metropolitan areas than in rural ones, but for socio-economic and cultural activities they may provide support even from afar. They can facilitate connections between local producers and short food-supply chains in more or less distant cities or provide support in local environmental justice struggles. In this regard they may facilitate the start of transition processes, especially in peri-urban areas.

In the present context in which significant parts of the urban masses are excluded from paid employment, proposals that have to do with establishing new entrants in farming, rural areas, and agricultural work are more and more important. Projects that accompany and facilitate this kind of settlement are multiplying and are increasingly well received. These initiatives usually provide training, advice, and accompaniment for new settlers, helping them find access to housing and employment. But other projects that promote access to agricultural means of production, like land banks, are also multiplying. Linked to these proposals we are also seeing an important expansion of projects promoting short food-supply chains, facilitating logistical networks and promoting organic and just consumption.

By way of conclusion

In this text we have focused on current alternatives to our food system, to emphasize the actually existing options for building agroecological transitions in our current times. These practices are real, feasible, impactful, and being implemented as we speak. Still, we must acknowledge that, globally, things are looking grim. The intertwined global crises we're facing as we round off this text's new edition – climate emergency, COVID-19, war in Ukraine, etc. – are not shifting us towards commitments to a socially or ecologically sustainable economy, or policies. Quite the opposite: we are observing a strong and fast neoliberal offensive that accelerates extractivism and dismantles environmental policies at all levels, pushes for the transfer of added value from people to big economic actors, and encourages states to transfer public funds to big enterprises and ensure corporate stability.

Within this context of growing pressure on socio-ecological systems due to growing commodification and industrialization, small agroecological experiences fight to survive and stay sustainable, small, and local. Socio-political struggles are needed to confront and contain the neoliberal offensive, and to protect the spaces needed for alternative experiences to develop. This struggle needs to activate wide, territorialized alliances for fighting the neoliberal offensive at the same time as protecting alternative spaces, networks, and forms of life and care. Participatory processes – such as those suggested by the local agroecological facilitation/dynamization approach – can enliven territories and activate the kinds of plural and open social subjects that we need in order to face neoliberal, neocon and far right offensives. But those processes and subjectivities are not enough: activist efforts and organizations are also needed to confront power and deploy effective counter-power through action. Both approaches – broad social alliances and strong grassroots, activist organizations – are key, and we need them to stay coherent, complementary, and articulated.

It is time to come up with new questions for building massive social movements to defend life. It is time to be creative and to find and create joy and social wealth around community and the commons. We hope this text helps us face this colossal and common challenge.

Biographies

Daniel López García currently works as researcher on sustainable food systems and agroecological transitions at the Institute of Economics, Geography and Demography of the Spanish National Research Council. He holds a PhD in Agroecology, and is part of agroecology and food sovereignty movements since more than twenty years. Daniel works to promote agroecology through research, consultancy, training, writing and taking part on grassroots organizations such as Ecologistas en Acción. He has been organic farmer for ten years.

Guillem Tendero Acín is an environmentalist with a Master in Environmental Studies from the Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB). Since 2001 he has been promoting agroecology and food sovereignty through research, training, dissemination and facilitation/dynamization. He has published several articles and books; he is part of the coordinating team of the Postgrau en Dinamitzacio Local Agroecologica (UAB); and currently works as a consultant in the association Arran de terra.

Maggie Schmitt is a translator. She also works in various media—writing, photography, video, food—to explore how everyday life intersects with history, political imaginaries and ecological realities, always with a feminist lens and at the frictive edge of different social worlds. She lives and cultivates (bees, plants, children) in a small village in Segovia.

Common Ecologies is a platform for movement learning. We organize courses and gatherings (online and in person) and make podcasts – for people, groups and organizations that struggle for socio-ecological transformation and justice. Our work is based out of Berlin and Vienna at the moment, linking to an international network of collaborators and advisors (with a focus on Europe but also going beyond). Editorial and layout work on this text has been done by Manuela Zechner and Bue Rübner Hansen.

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