


Special issue editorial: What do we mean by agroecological scaling?


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To cite this article: Bruce G Ferguson, Miriam Aldasoro Maya, Omar Giraldo, Mateo Mier y Terán Giménez Cacho, Helda Morales & Peter Rosset (2019) Special issue editorial: What do we mean by agroecological scaling?, *Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems*, 43:7-8, 722-723, DOI: [10.1080/21683565.2019.1630908](https://doi.org/10.1080/21683565.2019.1630908)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21683565.2019.1630908>


 Published online: 05 Aug 2019.

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EDITORIAL

Special issue editorial: What do we mean by agroecological scaling?

As support for agroecology grows around the world, an urgent question spanning our field's scientific, practical, and movement dimensions is how agroecology can “scale” to include more people in more places in fair, sustainable food systems. Our challenge is to seize this opportunity while pushing back against the tendency to strip agroecology of its transformative potential by reducing it to a set of technical solutions for the resource degradation produced by agribusiness (Giraldo and Rosset 2017). Here, we lay out what we mean (and do not mean) by agroecological scaling and explain the scope of this special issue.

Agroecologists have not settled on a unified vocabulary for the aspiration we describe above. There are many complementary and competing concepts, including amplification, mainstreaming, territorialization, multiplication, irradiation, reconfiguration, transformation, regime change, and revolution. Our own research group (www.ecosur.mx/masificacion-agroecologia/) is called *Masificación de la Agroecología* in Spanish, with the intention of describing both engagement with masses of people and development of a movement that is increasingly dense in terms of the practices and relationships involved in any given territory. However, “massification” in English is rarely used in this way, while the Portuguese *massificação* (like its Spanish cognate) can connote homogenization (Freire 1970), which is far from our meaning. Here, we refer to “scaling” because it seems to be the most commonly used term in English (Rosset and Altieri 2017). However, that word can cause an almost visceral reaction in our colleagues who are familiar with the literature on international development, perhaps because scaling often refers to the imposition of solutions that have worked well elsewhere, and because those transplanted solutions so often fail or have unintended consequences (Hobbes 2014). Furthermore, the concept of scaling is far from straightforward. Changes can scale up and out, horizontally and vertically, through active processes or as an emergent property (Rosset and Altieri 2017; Wigboldus and Leeuwis 2013).

The nuances and pitfalls of scaling are of particular concern for agroecology because agroecological science and practice are rooted in knowledge developed by indigenous and peasant farmers in relation to specific territorial contexts (Brescia 2017; Rosset and Altieri 2017). Although general patterns and principles may emerge from that knowledge, attempts to transplant practices from one place to another are risky. Furthermore, because agroecological movements place a high value on autonomy and food sovereignty, effective agroecological scaling can only occur when local actors – particularly those whose views are often disregarded, including peasants, indigenous people, women, and people of color – are protagonists as well as beneficiaries of scaling (Rosset and Altieri 2017).

What emerges from this unresolved discussion around terminology is a consensus that scaling cannot be performed through the cookie-cutter transfer of agroecological practices from one place to another. Instead, scaling is about relationships, processes, policy, power, and practice that nurture social organization, learning, and adaptation. Agroecological movements and academics will need to continue to address the questions and conflicts that arise from diverse terminology, disciplines, and contexts. However, we argue that agroecology is based on a plural epistemology, and thus we should not waste

too much energy seeking homogeneity, but rather foster horizontal dialog among multiple currents of thought.

Our own initial approach has been to explore cases in which scaling of peasant and family farm agroecology has occurred and to distill from them key drivers of scaling (Mier y Terán Giménez Cacho et al. 2018). This special issue delves more deeply into some of these drivers, particularly teaching/learning processes, effective agroecological practice, crises, and favorable markets and policies. Additionally, several articles emphasize the fundamental role of social movements and collective peasant identity in resilience, expansion, and deepening of agroecological practice. Another emerging theme is the interaction – often mutually reinforcing – among drivers. We expand on one of our initial case studies (Zero Budget Natural Farming in India), and develop several others over a broad range of geographic and organizational scales, from incipient, community-level experiences to the international peasant movement.

Our hope is to document and contribute to change that is pluralistic, transformative, holistic, revolutionary, even spiritual. Such an agroecological worldview takes economies into account without putting them at the center of our interactions. It embraces the role of science while celebrating other ways of knowing. It focuses not on scarcity, but on our collective knowledge and abilities, and on just relationships among ourselves, and with the land.

In theory, and in practice, this means working not toward a single big endeavor, but a multitude of contextualized, articulated agroecologies. We are not talking about small agroecological farms expanding to become latifundios. Rather, we embrace a vision of scaling in which many small farms and many families in many territories produce and eat agroecologically. Thus, scaling means recovery of a sense of solidarity, reciprocity, and healthy proportion in our food systems. This vision of agroecological scaling reinforces autonomy, biocultural diversity, spirituality, and conviviality. It situates agroecology as one key element of broader societal transformations that challenge capitalism, colonialism, standardization, industrialization, patriarchy, and other forms of injustice.

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