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

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Agroecology: three practical forms

- Agroecology has been defined as the application of ecology to agricultural systems.
- Agroecological methods draw on ecological relationships among natural resources for agronomic practices by drawing on scientific and farmers' knowledge.
- From a broader perspective, agroecology has three practical forms – transdisciplinary knowledges, interdisciplinary agricultural practices and social movements.
- Their integration has provided a collective-action mode for contesting the dominant agro-food regime and creating alternatives.

Conform or transform?

- Agroecology is becoming a new buzzword, perhaps analogous to ‘sustainable agriculture’. ‘Agroecology’ has been adopted by some actors who also promote conventional agriculture.
- Important to clarify the different potential strategies for upscaling agroecology.
- It can play different roles – either *conforming* to the dominant regime, or else helping to *transform* it – contingent on specific empowerment strategies.

Dominant regime

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

'Conform' roles

- Some organic systems have increased reliance on biological (rather than chemical) inputs to raise productivity for more price-competitive food and to enhance sustainability.
- Biological inputs have become commoditized, thus continuing farmers' dependence on input suppliers.
- Organic farming has been conventionalised in some places.
- 'Sustainable intensification' has appropriated some agroecological methods in efforts to increase yields.

McDonald's Agro-Ecology Strategy

Le plan EcoProgress pour l'environnement

<http://www.mcdonalds.fr/entreprise/developpement-durable>



Agroecology as an alternative

- Since around 2000 European civil society and farmers' movements have increasingly discussed prospects for agroecology as an alternative to the dominant regime.
- They have been intervening in political debates on future agriculture, demanding policy changes favourable to agroecology and building support for agroecological experiments.
- These initiatives were inspired by higher-profile initiatives in the global South, linking agroecology with food sovereignty.

Brazil combining three forms of agroecology:
agricultural practices, marches (social movements) and
mobile fairs (transdisciplinary knowledge)



Wider impetus for agroecology

- Impetus also from policy aim to increase productivity, especially since the 2007-08 food crisis.
- Within this neoproductivist agenda, some agroecological methods have been selectively appropriated by the dominant agro-food regime.
- Questioning that agenda, some European farmers' groups and CSOs have emphasised linkages between agroecology and food sovereignty.
- Agroecology has been promoted as an innovative practice integrating and enhancing farmers' knowledge.
- Official expert studies have highlighted farmers' knowledge and innovation which lack official recognition.

Transformative role: basis

- Wider development models for enhancing farmers' livelihoods and strengthening networks involving all relevant actors of food systems.
- Territorial model can enhance synergies between farm-level resource usage, agro-ecosystems and wider food systems, e.g. through agro-eco-tourism.
- Farmers can create mutually interlinked products and services, thus better using the same resource base. For example, mixed farming at sub-regional level can help to recycle nutrients and link biomass with renewable energy systems at different scales.
- Farmers can overcome dependence on external inputs, especially in the organic sector, though also in conventional farming.

Support measures

- While organic certification gains a price premium, broader agroecological farm-level experiments have relatively weaker protection.
- CSO-farmer alliances have promoted various support measures that can empower collective actors for agroecological practices.
- These measures potentially reshape agro-food markets, towards transforming the dominant agro-food regime through and for agroecology.
- Such opportunities have been sought in several policy areas, especially those providing substantial state funds.

Changes in policy frameworks

- CAP rural development measures linking farm-level agroecological methods with resource synergies;
- local territorial development strategies collectively formulated through stakeholder cooperation;
- agrarian reform for more equitable access to fertile land and guaranteed tenure rights for farmers in both rural and urban areas;
- farmers' rights to re-sow saved seeds from the previous year's harvest, etc;
- public-procurement criteria favouring local small-scale farmers using agroecological methods;
- research & innovation agenda-setting through farmer-citizen participatory processes;
- new partnerships for multi-actor knowledge-exchange, with new structures remunerating practitioners and researchers for such collaborative efforts;
- eco-functional intensification for more effectively using natural resources through knowledge of agroecological methods.

Empowering agroecological experiments

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