

Workshop 16: Making the transition

Convenor: Paola Migliorini (Agroecology Europe, UNISG, IFOAM AgriBioMediterraneo, Italy)

Impulse talks:

- Jacques Faux (Wasmès-Audemetz-Briffœil, Belgium) - "Feed autonomy enables the transition of mixed farms to agroecology: economic impact and associated ecosystemic services in a Limousin cattle and poultry farm in Belgium"
- Les Levidow (Open University, Milton Keynes) (UK) - "Sustainable Intensification: Agroecological appropriation or contestation?"
- Jens Dauber (Thünen Institute of Biodiversity, Braunschweig, Germany) - "Can combined food/non-food cropping systems facilitate transitions to agroecological systems in Europe?"
- Rose Hogan (Trocaire, Ireland) - "Greater diversity and higher incomes found on study of agroecological farms in Western Guatemala"
- Anshuman Das (Welthungerhilfe, India) - "Involving farmers in measuring impact of agroecological farming systems"

This workshop was a follow-up to Session 4: Making the Transition, which held an array of presenters with varying perspectives on how to make the transition to agroecology. Jacques Faux is a cattle farmer in Belgium who, after changing the feed practices in his operation, inadvertently discovered that he was practicing agroecology. Increasing feed autonomy was not only beneficial to his animals, but also added ecosystem services to his farm. Through this process, he found that it was possible to produce feed ratios that performed both technically and economically well on his farm. Rose Hogan and her team addressed the data gap of agroecological studies by studying the effect of agroecology on nutrition and resilience in western Guatemala. They showed that agroecological farming families consumed less junk food, had yields that were about the same, had better socialization among the community, and allowed for better opportunities for schooling for the children. All in all, this study indicates that agroecology can indeed make rural farms more resilient, and hopefully will inspire more data and research to aid in the transition to agroecology.

On the policy debate end of the spectrum, Les Levidow discussed the tensions between sustainable intensification and agroecology, in particular how this tension plays out in policy agendas in Europe. He spoke of how agroecological methods have often been decoupled from their broader social context subordinated to the different political and economic agendas of sustainable intensification. Because sustainable intensification does not account for ecosystem services the way that agroecology does, it can simply re-legitimize the agroindustrial complex. A truly transformative agroecological agenda will have to distinguish among alternate trajectories in order not to get co-opted into the service of business-as-usual. Jens Dauber spoke on about land-use for food and non-food crops. Different types of land are suitable for different purposes, and these should be taken into account during agroecological transition. Within this framework of land-use, there is room to be strategic in incorporating non-food crops in a way that does not threaten food production. Perhaps these food/non-food cropping systems can increase biodiversity, and create synergies between the two, thus improving food production.

Anshuman Das focused on indicators that can be used to measure an agroecological transition. These measures should not just serve the researcher, but the farmer as well,

in order to foster a participatory approach to evaluation. Examples of indicators are: number of subsystems, the number and type of biodigestors, the diversity of crop and crop sequences, the participation in farmer field schools, the amount of food that must be purchased at the market, the number of external farm inputs, and the income from selling products. While these measures are useful for farmers and researchers alike, he found that the discussion afterwards that these diagrams encouraged was even more important. The question going forward is how can we best bring this paradigm shift into judging, assessing, understanding an agroecological farm?

After the impulse talks, the floor was opened up for a question and answer session. One participant wanted to know why, if agroecology systems work so well, they are not adopted more broadly? The presenters cited that the dominant paradigm holds powerful sway, and is accompanied by advertising being pushed by multinational companies. Anshuman believes there is too much jargon in agroecology already. Some farmers may already be implementing these practices, but they are not using academic language to describe it. There was a lively debate regarding the question of land use for biofuels and livestock that had no place in agroecology, as it reinforces the current commodity-driven paradigm of industrial agriculture. The presenters responded that some land is only suitable for livestock production, and encouraging more agroecological production like Jacques' cattle is beneficial to consumers and producers alike. Others stressed that we should keep our options open and understand how to approach the question strategically. It is clear that it's important to keep asking these questions, and to have a variety of examples of how farms can make the transition to agroecology.