

Agroecology and Food Sovereignty to face COVID-19 crisis

Agroecology Europe Youth Network

As members of Agroecology Europe Youth Network (AEEUYN) we are recently working in a project to make an extensive research of some agroecological practices, highlighting the current situation of practical agroecology implementation across twelve European countries. We look forward to publishing our report in the near future and to share our results with interested people and organizations. Our research has given us the opportunity to observe the existence of numerous agroecological initiatives in the studied area, in such a great number that it would have been impossible to include them all in our report. These initiatives have been developing for decades in different areas, such as academic research, training and education, public policy, or food production and consumption. Step by step, they have overcome difficulties, while building social movements, and generating a very heterogeneous and diverse socio-economic, political and cultural fabric. This interconnected network of organizations, groups, entities and people, is now strongly committed to a single objective: to transform the dominant global agri-food system through a change of paradigm, as well as to build a more sustainable alternative of food production from a social, economic and environmental perspective.

Today, with the current global health crisis caused by the rapid expansion of the COVID-19, political decision-making bodies throughout Europe are unanimously adopting measures of social distancing to avoid - or slow down - the spread of this virus. The consequences of these measures can be observed in many areas of our daily lives (health, economy, education, etc.) and, although food production and distribution is considered a strategic sector that must be kept out from the restrictions of activity and movement, many agrarian organizations are claiming a discriminatory bias weaved through these measures, especially affecting family, agroecological, and / or small and medium-scale peasant production, in favor of the production of the agri-food industry [1]. Moreover, as suggested by the “Joint letter: measures to support farmers in the face of the covid-19 pandemic”, temporary exemptions from greening requirements and the higher flexibility in the implementation of voluntary coupled support of CAP due to COVID-19 pandemia could aggravate biodiversity crisis and climate change [2].

Many experts relate the current emergency and pandemic to the destruction and the global loss of habitats and biodiversity [3], as well as the expansion of intensive agriculture and livestock [4, 5]. The Club of Rome also calls for a directing economic incentives to “Nature-Based Solutions”, including agroforestry, regenerative agriculture and ecosystem restoration [6]. Moreover, some prestigious international organizations defend agroecology as the best way to guarantee the Right to Adequate and Healthy Food and Nutrition [7,8,9,10] (especially for the most vulnerable population), or as the best way to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals that established the 2030 Agenda [11]. Furthermore, FAO is increasing recognizing agroecology, suggesting the numerous benefits it brings to health, local

economies and environment, and supporting the idea that a transition towards sustainable food and agricultural systems is not only desirable but also necessary [12].

Even so, it seems clear that the competent authorities are not taking into account the specific needs of this model of food production, and the human rights of producers and consumers [13], because lots of commercialization channels that had been commonly used from many small and medium scale producers (direct sales markets, food and CSA cooperatives, public and private canteens, etc.) have today been limited and interrupted, without offering a viable alternative. In addition, in some countries, like Spain or Italy, these measures are also causing restraints to agricultural production for self-consumption, both in rural and urban areas [14], while in Austria, there are difficulties in selling seedlings and processed bakery and butcher products that were previously sold in schools or restaurants. In France, farmers have trouble selling fresh products such as fruits and vegetables. Even in Sweden, where such restrictions have not been applied, overall consumption appears to have decreased. Thus, the closure of borders is affecting a large part of the European Primary Sector, which often uses (and abuses) a large amount of foreign labor. Beside restraining local production and markets, these policies are completely neglecting the vulnerability of many landless peasants and day laborers, who work for the agro-industry in deplorable conditions, posing their health at serious risk, and are affecting the local economic and social fabric of rural areas. However, in some countries and regions, COVID-19 crisis is producing an increase of consumer interest in agroecological products, because more people want to be less dependent of supermarkets and big food chains and/or they want to invest in local businesses and help their territory to face COVID-19 crisis. Thus, in this context, agroecology can create wealth and endogenous development.

On the other hand, we must recognize and celebrate those particular cases in which local administrations have been able to show a special sensitivity towards the needs of agroecological production, taking measures to help guarantee the food sovereignty of their territories. However, that is not enough, and we see the need to speak up and demand a drastic change in the orientation of the strategies adopted by the European governments, to underline the risks that this situation poses for the survival of the European peasantry. With our text, not only we want to endorse the demands expressed in the press release issued by the European Coordination Via Campesina (ECVC) [15], but also we want to show our support for those organizations that are claiming the need to apply the principles of Food Sovereignty, and to promote the agroecological production model to advance in a strengthened and more resilient, sustainable, fair, and territorialized agri-food system. As the International Panel of Experts in Sustainable Food Systems (IPES) suggests, “the political and economic systems that grow out of this crisis must be rooted in multi-level governance, in governance with civil society, in social and economic inclusion, in redressing poverty-creating processes, and in the long-term, systemic thinking that would allow us to weather new crises when they arise” [16]. At European level it is now more crucial than ever to endorse a CAP reform which goes in the direction of supporting a different rationale for subsidies and the production of public goods (the sequestration of carbon in agricultural soils, the restoration of rural biodiversity and the development of the ecological network) [17].

This global pandemic is causing an unprecedented systemic crisis and humanitarian tragedy. The fear and uncertainty we face pose an enormous challenge, because it questions our entire value system from the root, and invert the order of our priorities, putting the need to protect life at the center. We need to be more aware than ever of our vulnerability, our interdependence and our ecodpendence. Because no one can save themselves, neither as individuals nor as nations. Because pretending it will only cause more suffering and pain everywhere. For all this, from AEEUYN, we demand our authorities and our governments to assume with courage and determination the great responsibility that corresponds to them, so that they listen, value and meditate carefully, before taking decisions at such a critical moment. We cannot continue forgetting the forgotten, we cannot solve the problem by increasing inequalities. We must protect and guarantee, once and for all, the Rights of Peasants and other people working in rural areas (UNDRIP) [18], as articulated in the United Nations Declaration, approved in 2018.

Among the most urgent tasks, we must redirect our agrarian policies to restore proximity distribution channels and direct sales, ensure fair prices for producers and consumers, facilitate access to the means of production, stop land grabbing and food speculation, cancel free trade agreements, and prevent the appropriation of seeds and knowledge. Now is the time, tomorrow will be late. Our food system is the central piece for the survival of all humanity. Let us protect by all means the health of the peasants who feed us, support the care of biodiversity and agroecosystems, and definitively decide to work on the way for scaling out together Agroecology and achieve Food Sovereignty around the globe.

References

- [1] <https://www.eurovia.org/covid-19-latest-information-and-updates/>
- [2] <https://www.ifoam-eu.org/en/news/2020/04/01/joint-letter-measures-support-farmers-face-covid-19-pandemic>
- [3] https://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/15/sunday-review/the-ecology-of-disease.html?fbclid=IwAR1RzI1gaSBMoHerDtrez0QDJEtVEdK2s9ObTavhIIQ7ORyE0_PB0LoB-vs
- [4] <https://www.grain.org/en/article/6437-new-research-suggests-industrial-livestock-not-wet-markets-might-be-origin-of-covid-19>
- [5] <https://www.marx21.de/coronavirus-gefahren-ursachen-loesungen/>
- [6] <https://clubofrome.org/impact-hubs/climate-emergency/emerging-from-the-emergency-key-policy-recommendations-to-g20-leaders/>
- [7] <https://www.who.int/es/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/healthy-diet>
- [8] <https://www.escri-net.org/es/recursos/observacion-general-no-12-derecho-una-alimentacion-adecuada-articulo-11>

Agroecology and Food Sovereignty to face COVID-19 crisis

[9] <https://www.escri-net.org/rights/food>

[10] <http://www.fao.org/3/ca5602en/ca5602en.pdf>

[11] https://www.aecid.es/Centro-Documentacion/Documentos/Publicaciones%20AECID/AECID_Agroecologia.pdf

[12] <http://www.fao.org/3/I9037EN/I9037en.pdf>

[13] <https://www.righttofoodandnutrition.org/call-members-global-network-right-food-and-nutrition-context-covid-19-crisis>

[14]

1. <https://agronotizie.imagelinenetwork.com/agricoltura-economia-politica/2020/03/31/coltivazione-di-orti-e-vendita-di-piante-e-sementi-tutti-i-divieti-regione-per-regione/66352>

2. <https://www.publico.es/sociedad/covid-19-espana-rural-huerta-mercados-internet-pandemia-golpea-espana-vacia.html>

3. <https://www.soberaniaalimentaria.info/otros-documentos/luchas/722-produccion-campesina>

[15] <https://www.eurovia.org/here-and-ready-the-value-of-peasant-agriculture-in-the-context-of-covid-19/>

[16] http://www.ipes-food.org/_img/upload/files/COVID-19_CommuniqueEN%282%29.pdf

[17] <https://www.agroecology-europe.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/AEEU-Position-paper-CAP-2020-FINAL.pdf>

[18] <https://viacampesina.org/en/united-nations-declaration-on-the-rights-of-peasants-and-other-people-working-in-rural-areas/>