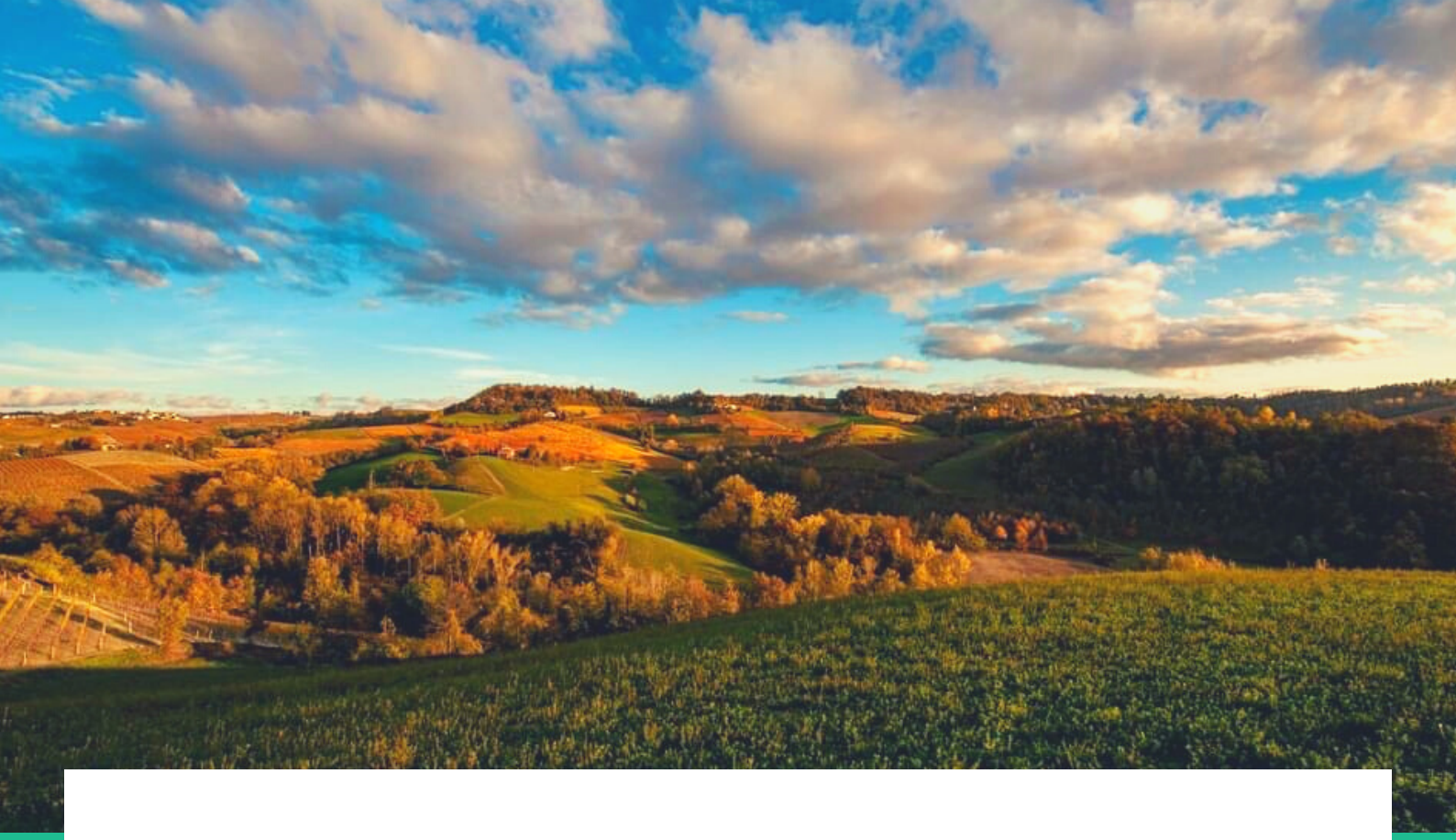

AGROECOLOGY INITIATIVES IN EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

KEY FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS

FIRST REPORT
OCTOBER 2020
BRUSSELS

AGROECOLOGY EUROPE

The report on “Agroecology initiatives in European countries”

The objective of this study was to identify agroecological initiatives in 11 European countries (Albania, Austria, Belgium, Croatia, France, Hungary, Ireland, Serbia, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom) across the three pillars of practice, science and social movements. It was carried out by Agroecology Europe with funding from “Fondation de France” as well as from the LIFE program from the European Union, and realised by the Agroecology Europe Youth Network (AEEUYN) with an innovative, participatory and multiscale methodology using CERAI’s criteria combined with the direct experiences, networks and local contacts of this multidisciplinary group.

A preliminary country framing was developed to understand similarities and differences among diverse contexts and regions by gathering information on: the current situation of agroecology and the analysis of around six relevant initiatives per country.
For each country, these detailed case studies highlight constraints and potential to scale out agroecology as a sustainable European response to the combined goals of increasing climate resilience, maintaining biodiversity, and providing food and economic security for all its citizens.

This study is an overview of how agroecology is understood by different citizens (policy makers, farmers, members civil society, researchers, and consumers) and a rich collection of a variety of existing national agroecology initiatives that are vital, productive, and ready to pave the way for an agroecological transition of agriculture in the European context.

As economic, health, environmental and social crises are urging us to develop innovative solutions, this study can inspire many of us. We can learn that in Europe agroecology already exists everywhere, it employs many farmers and young people, maintains local biodiversity, water and soil resources, and can provide income and enough food of good quality for Europe. Through this study we can therefore understand that transition is possible and if we develop the accompanying actions, together we can design the sustainable Europe of the future.

Some Highlights

1. Europe is based on the core principles of Agroecology

The foundation of Europe is based on the diversity of ecologies, people, and markets, and similarly agroecology is based on diversity of production systems, farmers and social organisations and economies. To articulate and implement the new CAP while maintaining its rich economic, social and environmental diversity, Europe will have to transform deeply its agricultural and food systems. All the countries studied in this report show that agroecology is the natural way forward and stands ready to support the implementation of these transformative processes.

2. European Green Deal can be implemented through Agroecology

The current economy models of agricultural production are still based on the doctrine of increasing the productivity of an area in the form of obtaining higher yields of a single crop per ha per year. Productivity and sustainability of a farm are measured on this narrow concept of efficiency. These measurements are leading many farmers to go out of business and consequently total numbers of farmers per country are declining while farm sizes are increasing. This report shows that in all countries there are agroecological farmers who can remain in business by having access to additional financial resources as their business is diversified and resilient to economic and climatic variations, and have reduced production costs as they have adopted nature based solutions and circular economy principles.

3. Agroecology is centred around people and offers job employment opportunities for young people and women

Many of the national case studies show the importance of agroecology to support the creation of new jobs in the food system and show how women's role in agriculture is essential if more quality food has to be produced while boosting health of environment and innovation. But these young people and women need support in the technologies available to them (e.g. information on how to maintain natural enemies of pests through the lens of ecosystem management, or how to have access to solar equipment, or how to facilitate e-commerce of on- farm produced food). This report provides a rich information and gives many examples of how this is happening, but it also highlights the impellent need to develop regional and national policies and economic mechanisms to bring agroecology at scale and consequently create thousands more job opportunities in Europe.

4. The term Agroecology is not recognised in a similar way in all European countries and often leads to confusion

Agroecology in Hungary is primarily presented in literature as a scientific discipline studying the ecology of ecosystems, in Austria it is very linked to Organic Agriculture, in France it is linked to a national policy the " Loi d'avenir pour l'agriculture ". Despite these differences when analysed through a scientific, a practice and a social angle, agroecology is the model that mostly matches sustainable agriculture across all countries. As a consequence, it is expected to grow exponentially in European, national, and local policies in the coming years. This will also happen as the current agriculture and food systems are revealing all the hidden costs for the environment and the climate, while they are no longer able to provide the economic and social returns expected from the agricultural sector that is so vital for our prosperity.

5. In addition of being based on a solid environmental and economic foundation, Agroecology is also based on solidarity, reciprocity and fairness

Agroecology considers simultaneously the three pillars of sustainability: economic, social and environmental. All the national case studies analyse in an honest and open manner the positive impacts and limitations of individual examples with the perspective that integrating these three aspects is more important than maximising just one of them. If we will be able to collectively analyse consequences and trades off of our collective choices, we will be able to design an agricultural model that responds simultaneously to the economic, environmental and social challenges of the next 20 years.

Some Recommendations

There is an urgent need to support an agricultural transition if we have to respond to the pressing challenges of health, environment, economic and food security for which the prevailing agricultural systems are no longer able to provide innovative and multifunctional responses. Europe is responding to this need with a variety of policies and actions, but better coordination and long term bottom up country response should also be developed. Agroecology is already active with many specific elements of response but to display its full potential it will need more participation and engagement by all sectors of the society.

From the analysis made by this report, the following recommendations were selected:

1. If farming practices have to evolve, there is a need to increase the number of education and agroecology training opportunities for young people, farmers, consumers.

While France, Italy, UK, already have some universities and higher level education programmes, Spain has developed strong training opportunities, and Croatia, Albania and Ireland are lacking Agroecology education programmes.

2. Similarly agroecological research programmes have to be developed in order to facilitate transdisciplinary knowledge, environmental and soil dynamics knowledge and co-creation of knowledge with farmers and scientists working hand in hand. Some good research is already on-going in the UK, Belgium, Spain and France but the total proportion of budget assigned to agroecology is a very limited part of total budget assigned to the agricultural sector.

3. Agroecology has embraced social and solidarity economy approach in agriculture but it is still in its infancy and will need political vision and consumers' engagement:

3.1. Markets: In Sweden, Italy, Belgium, Spain, France, Austria the creation of innovative forms of local markets, e-markets, solidarity markets is boosting but in Albania, Hungary, Croatia, Serbia this is almost exclusively linked to the request of traditional food and in Ireland there are very few of them. The growth potential of these forms of promotion of good and fair food is huge, and could have many positive consequences on the economies and the environment of the countries. But as reported, there is a need to accompany this transition through large information campaigns to inform the consumers, and in order to raise their commitment it is suggested to call them "food eaters".

3.2. Inputs: A second component of agroecological solidarity economy is the reduced use of inputs, especially chemicals, water and energy. Agroecology moves from very specialised monocropping to integrated crop/livestock/trees systems and beyond by transforming production or producing ecosystem services which benefit the entire community. For this to happen Ireland has developed a project to support farmers in the transition process which is often difficult and requires important changes in the farming systems. Belgium is building a strong network of agroecological advisors to support the transition. France has developed an agroecology law to initiate transformation and is supporting transfer of innovation and knowledge. Other countries such as Serbia, Sweden, Austria are relying on the alliances with organic associations.

3.3. Technologies: A third component of a solidarity economy is the development of appropriate technologies. Agroecology is investing in climate change and hydraulic processes in the UK, in the use and maintenance of traditional seed for climate resilience in Albania and Croatia, and in developing soil management practices to manage pest control in Belgium. But as the green technologies adapted to the different social and ecological conditions of Europe are still very few, a huge potential to create them building on the real needs of farmers is waiting to receive appropriate support.

4. Specific agroecology policies need to be developed at European level and articulated according to specific environmental and social conditions in each country with a more integrated and holistic approach.

The development of an Agroecology Law the "Loi d'avenir pour l'agriculture" has created the foundation in France for the agroecological transition but this transition is a long process that requires accompanying actions to support farmers in their new production systems, learning processes and commercialisation opportunities. But without the commitment by the entire society to consume food of good quality produced in a sustainable manner this will not be possible. On the other hand Sweden, Austria, and other countries still do not have specific policies but some of its elements are included in organic agriculture policies and environmental policies. This report provides elements to build the blocks of an integrated policy for agriculture to support transition to sustainability across different sectors including ministries of agriculture, environment, health, education, labour, innovation.

All country examples also report the important role of the farmers and their associations in the production of services that are the fundamental element of sustainability in agriculture. The innovative role of Agroecological laws will be to respond to the request of the "food eaters" to have good quality food produced through a decent work on a healthy environment maintained by innovative farmers.

With the financial support from the LIFE Program of the European Union and the Fondation de France

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