



Agroecological transition in practice: How are citizens' initiatives driving food system change in the Berlin-Brandenburg region (Germany)

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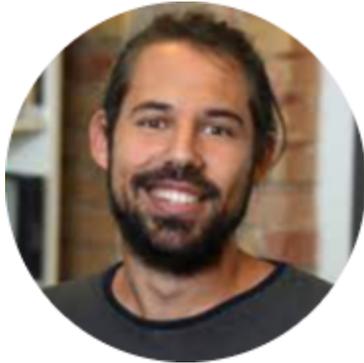
Interview: Agroecology Europe

The [Month of Agroecology 2022](#) organised by *Agroecology Europe*, aims to give visibility to initiatives and projects that intend to foster the agroecological transition throughout Europe and worldwide.

Agroecology Europe conducted an interview with José Luis Vicente Vicente and Beatrice Walthall from the Foodshift 2030 project, to learn more about the regional dynamics in the peri-urban area of Berlin, in the Brandenburg region.

What are the challenges of transitions in this area? How can we encourage citizen food initiatives and implement coherent public policies that support them?

Could you present yourself and your research? What led you to this research focus?



José Luis Vicente Vicente

I am an environmental scientist with a PhD in soil science. Currently, I am focused on assessing the environmental impacts from initiatives aiming at transforming the food system under the framework of agroecology.

I am researching on agroecology because while I developed my PhD, I realized that **soils cannot be detached from the whole agroecosystem and, even more, their management should be linked to the question on how we want to feed people while preserving our planet.**



Beatrice Walthall

I am a Sociologist and Human Geographer with a curious mind. I am a nature-loving person dedicated to fostering food system change on many levels – as a CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) member, co-founder of the Food Policy Council Berlin and researcher.

Within my research, I am particularly interested in the formation processes of collective action and food system governance aiming at a food system transformation. While researching food system dynamics 10 years, I mainly worked with the framework of Food Sovereignty (FS). However, within the last two years, I am more inspired by the agroecology framework (although FS and agroecology are not contradictory, but closely linked to each other), **as I find it to be the most complete and appropriate framework to address the complex issue of system transformation.**

We both work for an EU project called [FoodSHIFT2030](#), where nine different food initiatives are assessed with the overall goal of accelerating the transition to sustainable city-region food systems.

In Berlin, which is one of them, we propose the food hubs (LebensMittelPunkte in German). The food hub is a multifunctional space, integrating diverse activities such as food distribution from Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) farms, collective cooking, food sharing, improving food literacy, and community building in the neighbourhood.

Our role is to study the impact of the food hub, as a socio-ecological system, and its activities under the framework of the elements of agroecology. The food hub provides a space for experimentation and learning in which the participants (farmers and community members) support the care and organization of a regionalized food system. In short, the food hub is a meeting point for and a place of emergence of social-ecological networks.

What are the main challenges and obstacles that you identify in your region to transition toward agroecology?

Well, when we talk about agroecology there are two different scales: agroecosystem and food system, which of course are intrinsically interlinked. Brandenburg, which is Berlin's foodshed, is a very flat area, whose soils are very sandy and, therefore, of low fertility, low water holding capacity and, in consequence, very vulnerable to climate change impacts. Together with the specific socio-economic factors (e.g. the area belongs to the former East Germany) they have shaped the structure of the land. We see that the vast majority of the land is covered by large monocrops, with an average size of 300ha/plot, mainly cereals or maize for animal feed or export.

However, in the CSA farms we study we found that all of them could be placed in the transition to an agroecological management, and even some of them have already transitioned, where the farmers see the farm as a landscape, a habitat. If you go there you could see a highly heterogeneous landscape, with multi-cropping, flower strips, combination of planted and wild species, agroforestry, cover crops, complex rotations, as well as the total absence of agrochemicals.

Another challenge is linked to sharing knowledge and network building. At this point, there is no larger agroecology network coordinating knowledge sharing and co-creation. While we found many agroecological practices already taking place in the region, they are often taking place in isolation from each other, which takes a lot of time to acquire new knowledge.

Finally, there are many institutional barriers to up-scale agroecology. On the one hand, Berlin and Brandenburg are one geographic region, but managed as two separate administrative entities. The political-administrative separation makes it difficult to develop a common strategy for regionalizing the food system and promoting agroecology with a common narrative. On the other hand, current institutional frameworks favour change-hindering logics, such as "protecting the status quo", competition and control, supporting larger business instead of small-scale alternatives. In short, the lacking institutionalization of agroecological values and practices is a major obstacle for achieving a deep transformation.



Example of products delivered from the CSA farms in the region to the food hub in Berlin (left) and example of a collective dinner menu prepared at the food hub (right).

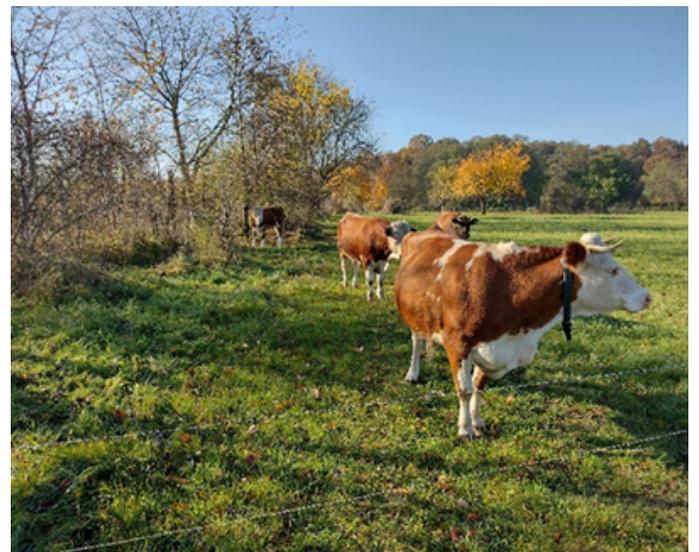


Citizen's engagement and citizen driven initiatives are key to foster the agroecological transition: Would you like to share with us inspiring examples from Berlin-Brandenburg region?

Yes, exactly, we really think that citizen-driven initiatives can be the pillar of an agroecological transition. In our particular case, both, the food hub in Berlin and the CSA farms in Brandenburg are examples of community-led food initiatives that are driving the transformation. We have found that they actually form an agroecology-based regional food network. The goal of the initiatives is to improve access to good quality & regional food, sharing knowledge and strengthen the sense of a community.

Additionally, the Food Policy Council Berlin and FoodSHIFT partner, is a citizen-led initiative addressing a food system transformation on several levels. For instance, through lobbying, demanding political change and influencing policy agenda setting (e.g. participating in demonstrations, events, co-creating a local food strategy) or implementing community projects (e.g. collective lunch for refugees).

Taken together, the Food Hub, CSA farms and the Food Policy Council offer a platform for food citizens to become an active participants in political and public life and play a crucial role in transforming the food system through co-developing food strategies, bringing in a new value-system, setting up local-supply chains among other actions.



Two of the CSA farms studied in the region under the project FoodSHIFT2030. (top)

Food Policy Council Berlin: Providing public space for political deliberation and knowledge sharing (down).

When addressing the sustainability of our agri-food system, one key question in the spotlight is the meat consumption that should be transformed following the motto "less-and-better". Are there any inspiring experiences in your region that you would like to share with us in this regard?

We have seen that the people going to the food hub are in general aware of this. Also, the Food Policy Council Berlin has been promoting a plant-based diet and shaping the public awareness since 2015. People involved in the initiatives are very conscious about the high land footprint of animal products and the negative impacts its consumption has in other countries (e.g. deforestation). In fact, more than 90% of the products delivered by the CSA farms to the food hub are plant-based.

In order to test what dietary patterns different stakeholders (incl. farmers, caterer, politicians and government representatives, citizens) in the region propose, we have developed a scenario co-development exercise that finished in a participatory mapping with them, which took place on October 18th, 2022.

There we saw that there were two main diets proposed: a fully vegetarian and a flexitarian diet, in both cases with a reduction of 50% of animal-products compared to the current diet. We saw, for instance, that some stakeholders are aware of the potential positive impacts of a limited extensive livestock farming - mainly with sheep and goats - in the area.

We tested with them the areas they would propose for the extensive animal farming, and the ones proposing the flexitarian diets realized that even by reducing 50% the consumption of meat the land footprint in the area is still relatively high and, therefore, a further decrease might be needed. In parallel, we saw a general agreement on proposing a significant increase in the consumption of legumes, nuts and vegetables. Legumes are key, since they can be produced regionally, are protein-rich crops, and their consumption in Germany is extremely low.

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Food Policy Council Berlin: Providing public space for political deliberation and knowledge sharing .

Let's discuss about policies. What key policy changes are required at the local, regional and/or EU-level to improve the sustainability of our food system?

Regardless of the specific policy level, within FoodSHIFT we have formulated 4 general policy recommendations to improve the governance of food systems.

These include:

Integration & Connectedness

Urgent adoption of systemic, multi-level and integrative food policies supporting transition to a low-carbon and circular food system.

Collaboration

Promotion of interdepartmental and multi-stakeholder governance arrangements to increase effectiveness of food system governance and address cross-cutting themes (e.g. public health, poverty, environment).

Participation

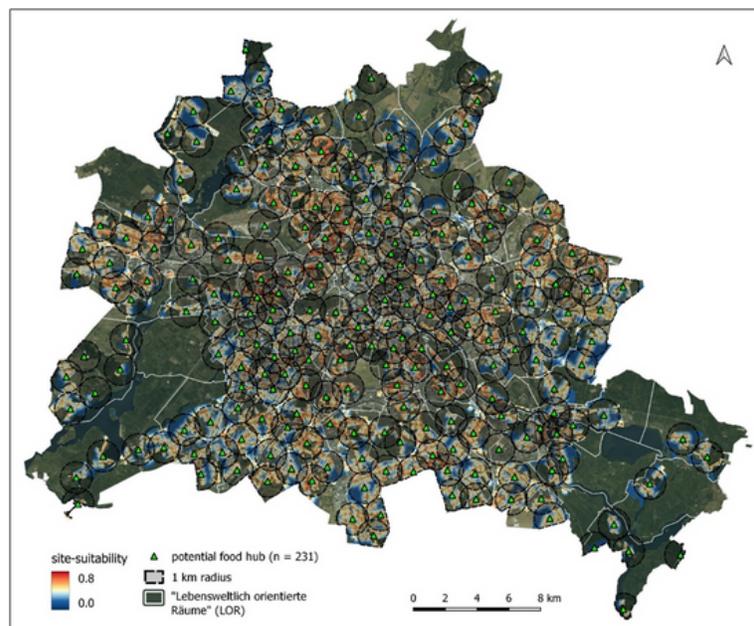
Adoption of inclusive and participatory governance tools during decision making processes for policy.

Empowerment

Empowerment of governments, communities, businesses, and citizens to engage with policy frameworks to strengthen the position of food as a public good.

These principles can be applied to different levels, which specific potentials for policy interventions for a food system transformation.

At the urban/metropolitan scale, we have investigated how the city of Berlin would look like if all the neighbourhoods would have an agroecology-based regional food hub within a radius of 15-min walking, within the idea of having a 15-min city. However, we saw that this would require an integrated strategy comprising many different policies (e.g. food, environment, urban planning, and transport). We see this as an important first step, since food is not just consumption, but has implications in many other aspects.



Map of the potential distribution of the food hubs in Berlin based on the 15-min city. The map shows also the most suitable areas based on socio-spatial variables.

At the regional scale, we think that a much stronger permeability and connectedness between the states of Berlin and Brandenburg are needed, where the latter is the one surrounding completely the state of Berlin. This means that the states have different policies and regulations and, furthermore, they have very different socio-economic and demographic situations, making this question an urban-rural issue, which is also a common problem with other countries.

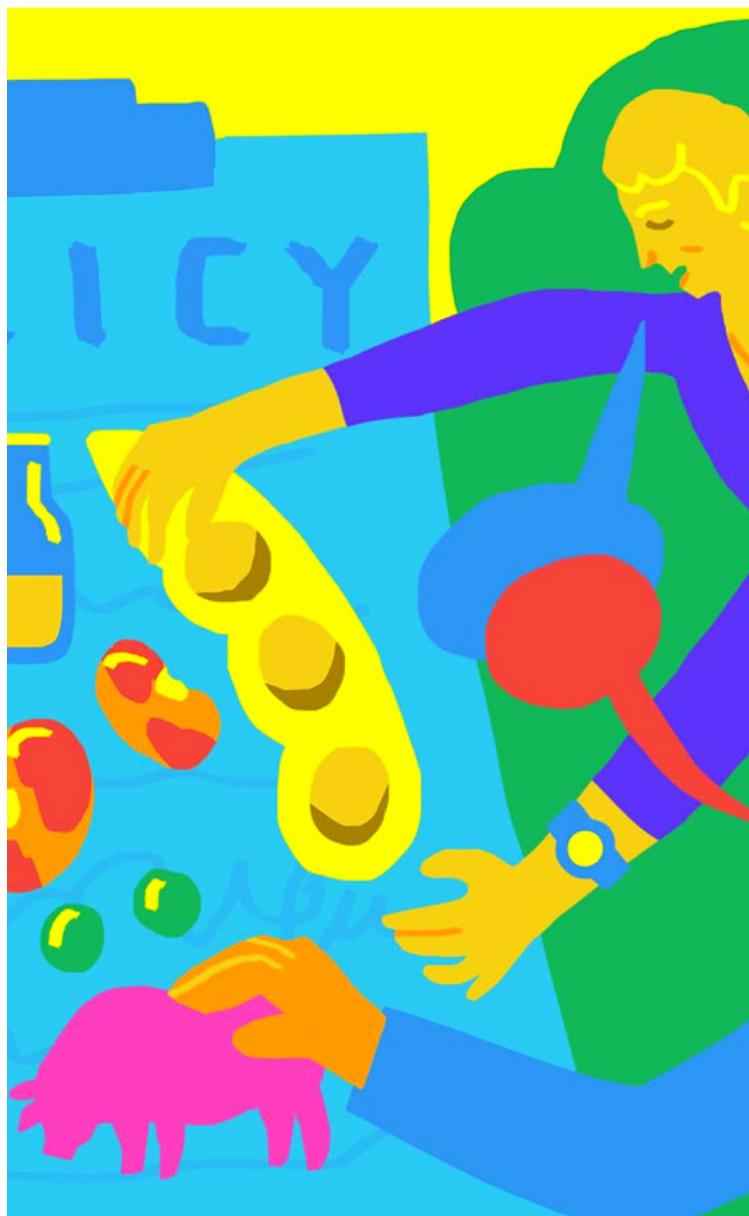
While Berlin is a very urban state and young, with very little agricultural available area, Brandenburg's population is aged and with a low density. This makes that sometimes people from Brandenburg can see Berlin as a "black hole", where their high quality food is delivered. In this regard it is very shocking to see how some villages have farmers producing agroecologically, but the products are delivered to Berlin, since they are typically more expensive, whereas in the village there is total absence of the small groceries and only big supermarket chains can be found.

This latter issue is related to the country and EU policies and regulations. On the one hand, the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) has been a clear barrier to foster affordable sustainably-produced food, since it has mainly benefited large monocropping systems. Even though there have been new relevant EU strategies, such as the Farm to Fork or Biodiversity, so far they are completely disconnected from the CAP. And, to be honest, we don't see that the new CAP, and particularly the Eco-schemes, could solve this situation.

We think, in the best case, they are aimed at reforming the system, but we do think that a transformative transition is needed, and we do not see any transformative policies currently at the country or EU level. If you ask us about how these policies should be, we would say that they have to be radically transformative. For instance, the new Eco-schemes of the CAP - currently voluntary for farmers and far from being transformative - should be mandatory, and the voluntary schemes should be the ones we know that can transform the system.

On the other hand, the CAP looks only at the agroecosystem level, leaving out, the rest of the food supply chain (we prefer to call it food network). We do think that integrating the Farm to Fork philosophy into the CAP would be a good step in order to develop policies that foster the agroecological transition.

However, having said this, our experience is that so far in the region the transformative initiatives have been developed by self-organized networks based on solidarity principles. That leads us to the question whether these solidarity-based self-organized initiatives cannot be scaled within the extractive capitalist system and, therefore, a change in the paradigm to a system based on sufficiency, regeneration, distribution, commons and care, is necessary.



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Recipe for classic Spreewald Gherkins

A regional, but well known, specialty are Spreewald gherkins (Spreewaldgurken in German). Spreewaldgurken are pickled cucumber from Southern Brandenburg, which are protected by the EU as a Protected Geographical Indication (PGI). In contrast to many poorer soils in Brandenburg, the Spreewald has very good, moist and humus-rich soils. The geomorphology and climate in the Spreewald provide ideal conditions for growing cucumbers. The gherkin is a good example of the close connections between nature, region, food traditions and culture.

The particular taste is achieved by fermentation processes and a mixture of spices. Depending on the processes and spice mixture, different flavours are available. Common flavours include: Classic Gherkin, Salt-Dill Pickle, Pepper Pickles, Garlic Pickles or Chilli Pickles (among others).

Ingredients:

- Canning jars
- 3 kg small, firm cucumbers
- Spices (per jar)
 - 1 to 2 teaspoons of mustard seeds
 - fresh, chopped dill
 - 1 medium onion quartered or sliced
 - 6 peppercorns
 - 2 pimento seeds
 - 1/4 bay leaf



Important for this recipe: use small, firm pickling cucumbers. Small, because small cucumbers are easier to layer in the jar. Firm, so that the gherkins also become nice and crunchy. The amount given is enough for about 5 to 6 preserving jars (1 liter each).

1. Scrub the pickling cucumbers clean with a soft brush in the water and, after washing, layer them tightly in screw jars.
2. Boil spices together with
 - 750 ml vinegar (10% acidity or spirit vinegar)
 - 3 liters of water
 - 5 handfuls of salt (about 120 to 150 gr)
 - 500 to 550 gr sugar
3. Pour cooled brine over it so that the gherkins are completely covered.
4. Boil down for 15 to 20 minutes

You can use a regular saucepan to boil down the jars. Place a grid or a boil-proof cloth on the bottom of the pot. Place the jars in it, one above the other if it fits. Fill the pot with water so that the bottom jars are no more than halfway in the water. Put the lid on. Boil the jars down "bubbling" for 15 - 20 minutes.

