



PARTICIPATORY FIELD WORKSHOP

Sharing experiences for building an agroecological farm project as young farmers

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On the 8th of October 2022, a participatory field workshop was held at **Ortofficina Società Agricola** with the aim of sharing information and practical knowledge related to the establishment and management of a collectively-run agroecological farm and facilitating the replication of this model in other places.

Ortofficina Società Agricola is an agroecological and peri-urban farming project established in **Nova Milanese, Milano province, Italy**. The farm includes 2 hectares of land, obtained through a public tender on social agriculture, for the production of vegetables, honey, herbs, and eggs. As of last year, they acquired additional 1.6 hectares, on which they now grow ancient grains for processing into flour. All products, grown according to organic farming standards, are sold directly at farmgate or through delivery to the local CSA groups. Parallel to the farming activity, the farm is opened up to citizens by implementing job placement paths, educational tours, and events to raise awareness of food production issues.

The members of Ortofficina are four young fellows who, after their studies, in 2019, decided to embark on the not-at-all simple venture of setting up an agroecological and multifunctional farm. The problems they encountered were more than a few: bureaucratic, economic and agronomic. However, they have turned it out quite well, and on the eve of their fourth year of production, they feel satisfied and ready to share their knowledge.

"We don't care to keep it a secret how we got here, rather, we believe it is an important act to share knowledge so that other people don't make the same mistakes we did."

Matteo - farmer and member of Ortofficina

That is why, the members of Ortofficina, organized this workshop and prepared three documents to be distributed to all participants: their crop plan with the division of field plots, all the fertilization data of their crops, and their complete annual economic budget with respect to the year 2021.



Based on this information, the first part of the workshop took place sitting in a circle to concretely discuss together all the steps to be taken to begin a farm and to access European funding for young people.

To introduce and support this first part and emphasize the importance of an agroecological transition, several local actors were invited to speak. First, Davide Zarri, who is in charge of food policies at the City of Bergamo, mentioned the key role of local food policies in facilitating an agroecological transition through several very important aspects, such as equitable access to food, resources and land, food waste reduction, soil loss reduction and urban food system circularity.

Next, Alex Castiglioni of Noha farm shared his experience as a newly established farmer, who, together with a friend, decided to buy a piece of land to grow vegetables naturally, with the aim of protecting eaters' health while preserving land and biodiversity. Mirko Pauletti of Gemma Vino Naturale also shared his experience as a small winemaker producing natural wines, which we were able to taste during lunch.

From these contributions, it emerged that the main obstacles to starting a farm are of financial and bureaucratic nature. Marco Fossati, one of the partners in Ortofficina, shared in detail what are the steps to be taken at the administrative level for the establishment and subsequent management of the Ortofficina farm.

Marco noted that to get started, in addition to knowledge and goodwill, you need start-up capital. For Ortofficina members, this has meant many sacrifices and a first year in which the support of family and friends was essential. The first purchase of materials confirmed the start of the farm, after which the process of applying for funds began. For those who inherit their family business, the process of establishing and applying for funds is highly facilitated, which does not eliminate many other difficulties involved. For example, in order to become a professional agricultural enterprise, one must achieve requirements based on hours of experience and agricultural studies. Besides the legal prerequisites, the members of Ortofficina strongly recommended getting a good amount of experience and knowledge from working on farms before starting your own project.



The administrative management of the farm cannot be tackled on one's own, as it requires too much time and specific knowledge, so specific organizations for the tutelage and representation of agricultural enterprises are engaged. Nevertheless, to safeguard oneself, it is extremely important to know how these operate.

The relationship with local governments, such as the municipality, and involvement in local land management plans are equally important. It is not always easy to find people in these circles who are interested in spreading these kinds of realities, and with incentives to change the current status of things.

The second part of the workshop focused more on the agronomic management part, addressing topics such as crop plans, green manure, mulching, and equipment (tools and machinery). These are closely interrelated to the aspects of choosing, establishing and managing a short supply chain.

There are indeed two initial things to start out with: the available machinery and the desired mode of selling.

"First you choose how you want to sell, from there you can think about how you want to produce."

Marco - farmer and member of Ortofficina



Ortofficina members explained what practices they put in place for an ecological and diversified approach characterized by high agrobiodiversity, reduced external inputs, and low use of large mechanization.

The absence of refrigerated storage and the choice of a short supply chain means that Ortofficina has planned its entire planting, cultivation and harvesting system on obtaining fresh products to be harvested and sold weekly on-site or through delivery to CSA groups. This means, for example, having efficient crop planning with a choice of short-cycle varieties. Meanwhile, product diversification and biodiversity remain at the heart of the farm's objectives, which include also beehives, a chicken coop, an area dedicated to medicinal plants, and recently a field planted with a mixture of ancient grains.

In conclusion, the workshop succeeded in achieving the important goal of knowledge sharing and highlighted multiple key aspects related to the establishment of an agroecological farm. Local, regional, and municipal policies could take inspiration from the story of Ortofficina with the idea of facilitating young people's access to land, and the establishment of similar projects in peri-urban areas or on abandoned or unused land. At the European level, access to funds could be facilitated, especially for those who do not own their own land or have access to the initial capital. The creation of support networks between such projects is very important, as well as the presence of farmer support organizations that understand what are the values of agroecology and of multifunctional agricultural realities.



"Overall, the interest and the participation that emerged during the workshop are very significant for us, demonstrating the need for alternative training to the way conventional farms are run and included in agro-industrial supply chains. There is a strong desire, on the part of young people from a wide variety of backgrounds, in approaching agroecology by directly becoming promoters and producers, in the imagination of a system that represents a valid alternative to the intensive and agroindustrial agriculture."

Matteo - farmer and member of Ortofficina

If you are a young person interested in these issues, want to start an agroecological project, or have recently started your own, please contact us at angelica.marchetti.ae@gmail.com!

We are trying to build an Italian network of young people to facilitate exchange and discussion on these issues.



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