

AGROECOLOGY AS A SOLUTION FOR THE SYSTEM CRISES WE'RE FACING

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On Friday, November 9th, the European Greens are organizing a conference in the EU Parliament on [‘The Potential of Agroecology’](#). The agroecology concept is hot in times of climate, environmental, food and financial crises. It often is seen as the beginning of the solution for these crises, the beginning of a system overhaul. But agroecology has many houses and many different interpretations. How does Vredeseilanden looks at this concept?

Recently, two interesting documents on scaling up agroecology were published: [“Nourishing the world sustainably: scaling up agroecology”](#) and [“the scaling-up of agroecology: spreading the hope for resilience and food sovereignty”](#). Both do rely heavily on the thoughts of one of the co-authors, Miguel Altieri, the scientist who developed agroecology as a science. He defines agroecology as an applied science that uses ecological concepts and principles for the design and management of sustainable agricultural systems in which natural, locally-available resources for soil fertility and biological control are privileged over costly external inputs such as chemical fertilizers and pesticides. As such he sees agroecology as one of the pillars for reaching food security on farmer household level (healthy soils, balance between bad and good insects, high degree of biodiversity...). That’s also the perspective of these two recent documents: the relation between agroecology and food security.

If we look at the agroecology movement today however, it takes the concept beyond farming itself and looks at the whole system from production to consumption, but too often it seems to look at the world through a very narrow lens and monopolizes the concept of agroecology for direct producer-consumer links, economies based upon small and beautiful, and as such it excludes modern markets, big scale distributors, retail, processing companies, economies of scale through well-organized farmer organizations and collective/grouped marketing etc.

How should Vredeseilanden deal with agroecology? In 2050 we will be 9 billion of which 70 % will live in cities. Today 50 to 70 % of worldwide food is produced by smallholder farmers. But at the same time 75 % of

poor people live in rural areas and live from farming. Vredeseilanden states that smallholder farmers can feed the world in 2050, ban rural poverty by doing so while reducing the pressure on the earth through climate and environment friendly production techniques. That means that the institutional and policy environment should be of such a nature that farmers can take up this role, that private companies like processors, traders and retailers should develop and apply business models that are inclusive and supporting to smallholder farmers, and that farmer organizations should be able to create economies of scale through collective marketing and supply the demanded quality and live up to sustainability and food safety requirements of modern food markets. We are aware that not all the current smallholder farmers will be able to adapt to this and to continue as farmers, and the creation of alternative (rural) employment and putting in place social security systems to deal with this are highly necessary. But for viable and entrepreneurial smallholder farmers this challenge to feed the world in 2050 is definitely an opportunity.

Within this, ecological sustainability in production, processing, trading, retailing and consumption is a central issue. But besides agroecological farming techniques and approaches, this also concerns other efforts like for example waste management (post-harvest, at level of retail and even at consumers level) and efficiency in energy use (greenhouse gas emissions...). Local markets where producers directly sell to consumers might be culturally and socially more valuable and sustainable than supermarket schemes but with regard to efficiency they do not perform very well and with a few billion mouths more to feed, the efficiency challenge will grow higher.

So can Vredeseilanden promote a happy and long-lasting marriage between agroecology and chain development? Or is it already too late, has the concept of agroecology become so entwined with food security at farmer household level that it is impossible to reclaim it as a productive strategy, approach and/or philosophy that can be promoted no matter in what kind of food system you are operating?

A few months ago I've had the opportunity to participate in the set-up of a conference on agro-ecology in Brussels by a EU Member of Parliament; a group of like-minded people was to define the title of the conference, the framing of the contents, the messages we wanted people to take home, the program and speakers.

What usually happens in that kind of meetings: a room full of like-minded people, most of them with a warm heart for environmentally

friendly agriculture, seeing direct linkages between farmers and consumers as the starting point of sustainable development and ‘small but beautiful’ as guiding principle. But contrary to what one might think, this is not a guarantee for an easy discussion. Agroecology has a lot of houses, a lot of different meanings, and from these type of exercises - constructing a conference with like-minded people - I get the impression that the use of the concept by individuals is very closely linked to the dreams about the future of that individuals. There’s no straightforward definition of agroecology. And as a consequence, defining what agroecology is (or might be, or what it is about) through discussions isn’t a very easy exercise and it might even be annoying; it might destroy dreams.

‘Agroecology is about access to land, it’s about land grabbing’, says one, ‘I’ve been working in Guatemala and people don’t have access to land, no property rights, do not want to invest in their soils’. ‘It’s about biodiversity’, says another, ‘it’s about the ban on GMO’s’... These are the descriptions used in search for a consensus on the title of the conference. Should the title be ‘the potential of agro-ecology’? ‘No, it should reflect our vision, so we should not use ‘potential of’, but rather ‘the power of.’ ‘That is too strong, it’s not only about power, it’s also about cognition, about learning, why don’t we use revisiting agroecology or reclaiming agro-ecology?’

What is clear: the agroecology concept is different for everybody. For some it’s interchangeable with food sovereignty as concept, for others it’s a set of farming practices that maintain soil fertility and structure, prevent erosion, for some it’s a paradigm that guides their thinking and actions within agriculture, for others it’s a scientific discipline that researches a specific type of ecology (ecology within farming systems), for some it’s interchangeable with organic agriculture, and still for others it’s a political food movement...

Am I a supporter of agroecology? Yes I am, indeed. I am convinced that successful and sustainable agriculture is knowledge intensive agriculture with a clear vision for the long term. I do not believe that we will feed the world in the future with a purely technology driven agriculture, what I call - using a simplicity rationale - a “GMO agriculture”, an agriculture that’s only interested in productivity, an agriculture that lacks a long term vision. We will have less farmers, much less (I do not have any doubt on that), but those who remain should not be the ones who are farmers because of their access to financial means to acquire complex technologies, but rather those farmers who are craftsmen, who demonstrate mastery.

That does mean that Vredeseilanden rather than promoting the narrow definition of agroecology (promoting the well-documented sustainable farming practices like agroforestry, contour plowing, natural hedges, intercropping, green manure etc. to farmers, practices that have proven to enhance sustainability, that have proven to be climate-smart), should invest in promoting long term thinking, vision development, and not only to farmers but also to other actors that one way or another define agriculture or food production through their actions and preferences: researchers, public authorities, private company leaders, civil society actors, consumers... And agroecology for Vredeseilanden then should not limit itself to a set of practices, it is not another concept for organic agriculture, it is not a political anti-corporate movement. It is rather a set of principles that is the basis for a vision on agriculture, food production and rural development, which translates into strategies and actions that enhance the sustainability not only of farming but also of processing, trading, retailing and consuming agriculture products

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