

Action Brief



Facing the inequalities of the agrifood system:

The challenge of food sovereignty

Rita Calvário



This publication has benefited from EC funding under Marie Curie Actions – Initial Training Networks – FP7- PEOPLE 2011 n. 289374
European Network of Political Ecology. ENTITLE

Facing the inequalities of the agrifood system: The challenge of food sovereignty

Type of document: Action Brief.

Project: European Network of Political Ecology. ENTITLE
<http://www.politicaecology.eu/>

Partner responsible: ICTA - Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

Author: Rita Calvário

Reviewer: Christos Zografos

Date of Publication: February 2016

The contents of this report may be reproduced in whole or in part for educational or non-profit services without special permission from the authors, provided acknowledgement of the source is made.

This publication was developed as part of the project European Network of Political Ecology. ENTITLE. (ITN-2010-FP7-289374).

Action Brief

Facing the inequalities of the agrifood system: The challenge of food sovereignty

Rita Calvário

ICTA, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

Summary of the research

The failure of mainstream food security approaches to tackle hunger and access to nutritious food, as well the damaging effects of the corporate-industrial agriculture in local ecologies and on the livelihoods of peasant and small farmers, has led to the rise, in the last two decades, of alternative agrifood movements across the North-South divide. Among them emerged the international peasant movement La Via Campesina and with it the political project of food sovereignty:

“the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. It puts those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations” (Declaration of Nyéléni 2007).

Food sovereignty is based on the proposals of the human right to food, agroecological agriculture, re-localization of trade, de-commodification and access to land, seeds and water.

This research focused on examining why and how small farmers and urban consumers in Southern Europe struggle for regaining the control of agrifood systems from corporate power – i.e. struggle for “food sovereignty”, especially under the context of economic crisis and austerity as a governing strategy. Research examined two case-studies: the small-farmers professional organization Euskal Herriko Nekazarien Elkartasuna – EHNE-Bizkaia in the Basque territory, and the “no-middlemen” solidarity food actions in Greece. Fieldwork consisted in interviews with farmers, activists, and organizations, and in participant observation, from October 2013 to June 2014.

EHNE-Bizkaia was born in 1976 in Biscay (Basque Country, Spain) and is a member of La Via Campesina. Its main objective is to promote food sovereignty in the whole of Euskal Herria (free Basque Country). In the mid-2000s, EHNE-Bizkaia starts consistently supporting agroecological agriculture, the setting-up of young farmers in agroecology, and the development of the community-supported agriculture network *Red Nekasarea*. In 2012, around 80 agroecological farmers directly supplied 700 households with fresh vegetables and fruits, meat, eggs, milk and cheese on a weekly basis. In the last years, the number of people searching for their training to new agroecological farmers has increased, in part benefiting from the effect of the economic crisis over industrial and service workers.

Global economic crisis and austerity policies have hit Greece hard, especially since 2010. Social hardship and anti-austerity mobilizations have led to the rise of a number of grassroots solidarity actions (social clinics, soup-kitchens, free lessons, etc). In 2012 the 'no-middlemen' initiatives were created: outdoor distributions of food organized by local solidarity groups that coordinate with farmers from the Greek countryside to directly sell their products at a pre-agreed price. The first initiative appeared in the town of Katerini, in Central Greece, and rapidly spread across the country, especially in the bigger cities where deprivation is higher. From potatoes, products diversified to cover most households' needs, with products such as flour, vegetables, olive oil and honey. In 2014 there were 45 no-middlemen initiatives, 26 of which in Athens, having distributed more than 5.000 tons of food between 2012 and 2014 (S4A 2015).

Key findings

Both alternative agrifood projects *arose due to the failures of the conventional agrifood systems and neoliberal policies* to respond to the social needs of the many.

- In the Basque territory, decades of agrarian modernization policies oriented to a intensive, competitive and indebted agriculture, followed by the control of corporate retailers on food prices and the rise of input prices, has put small farmers in difficulties. These were aggravated by a model of development favouring the urbanization of agricultural land and price speculation. Something needed to be done more than complain and centre demands on prices, subsidies and agrarian policies reforms. Critically approaching the models of agriculture and territorial development, and setting-up practical alternatives capable of attracting young farmers, was felt as necessary to empower the struggles of small farmers and rural communities. For young farmers, agroecology and alternative food networks are attractive: the former allows them to start gradually, invest little, avoid credits, and reduce market uncertainties; the latter allows them to plan production, share risks of production, and ensure a regular income.
- In Greece, the no-middlemen initiatives arose to face the paradox of farmers who could not sell their products due to low prices paid by traders and the tactics of the latter to reject part of their produce so as to control prices; and of consumers who could not buy food or were forced to buy poor-nutritious food due to high prices and austerity-squeezed incomes. In by-passing the intermediaries, food prices are higher for producers and 20% to 50% lower to consumers, which has contributed to push prices down in supermarkets and increase the negotiation power of farmers with merchants. Farmers are also paid on the spot, which is not the case with traders, allowing them to avoid indebtedness and continue producing. Most no-middlemen groups require farmers to give for free 2-5% of their selling in goods to poor households, involving them in the solidarity spirit of the actions and for them to self-identify more as providers of basic goods satisfying social needs and less as economic agents maximizing profit.

Both alternative food projects *adopt an agrifood system approach, instead of a sectoral one.*

This allows establishing broad alliances in society and interconnecting *parts with the whole*.

- In the Basque territory, for EHNE-Bizkaia, agriculture is no longer about corporatist interests but a social question: what to produce, how, where, and by whom are issues for democratic debate, not technocratic decisions. This way, allying with other sectors of society is crucial. EHNE-Bizkaia adopted the political frame of food sovereignty and related agrifood issues with those of gender, ecology, labor, neoliberal globalization, etc. They also expanded to society their training offer (courses on urban gardening, artisanal food transformation, etc) and communication tools (on-line platform, paper magazine, etc), previously only directed for farmers. They collaborate regularly with other organizations (NGOs, peasant organizations from LVC, etc) to develop specific projects, publications, press releases, policy proposals, etc. Finally, they set-up the *Red Nekasarea*, which also is a space for the self-organization and politicization of consumers and farmers.
- In Greece, for no-middlemen initiatives, food poverty goes beyond austerity cuts and is related with the neoliberalization of agrifood systems and the control of merchants over production, prices and supply-chains. This way, allying with farmers and challenging the power of intermediaries are crucial, not only to respond to social needs, but also to move forward any activist project defying the neoliberal austerity agenda. No-middlemen initiatives are rooted in solidarity across different and distance; that is, they are open as long participants agree embody the principles of mutual-aid, reciprocity and not-for-profit. In doing so, they try to act as “schools” for farmers self-organize and cooperate, cut dependencies from merchants, and produce to feed the population and not maximize profits. Similarly, they try to spread the idea that austerity is not inevitable, inspiring its “victims” to claim rights and re-think what type of society and democracy to claim.

Both alternative food projects *do not aim to merely offer practical alternatives to farmers or consumers, but they struggle for structural change*.

- In the Basque territory, EHNE-Bizkaia followed a strategy of re-peasantization – cut of dependencies from corporate markets through agroecological production, re-localization and alternative supply-chains. For veteran farmers, agroecology is not always an option due to technology dependency paths. Nonetheless, there is no division between conventional and “alternative” peasants within the organization as all share the same political project of food sovereignty. That is why EHNE-Bizkaia only provides training in agroecology. The training, and its discourses and praxis in general, have a strong ideological basis: the point is to raise conscientiousness on the political-economic roots of agrifood problems and create a collective will for building an economic alternative for Euskal Herria. This work has also a strong practical and pedagogical component: for instance, learning-by-doing and making-a-living-by-cooperating-with-others are embodied in the models and activities promoted by the organization. Importantly, EHNE-Bizkaia develops this work as part of its strategy of building a strong social movement for food sovereignty: a movement led by farmers, capable of act as a space of convergence with other sectors of society. This movement arose in 2011 under the name of

- Etxalde. Finally, EHNE-Bizkaia is active in confronting the state, calling for reforms and the democratization of institutions. Land reform is a main issue. EHNE-Bizkaia prioritizes the social function of land (produce food for the population) rather than property-rights: in 2010, a step forward was given with the approval of a public fund of land to distribute vacant land and control of prices.
- In Greece, no-middlemen initiatives do not act as a complement of the neoliberal austerity state neither their ambition is to show the economy can be diverse. These initiatives reject any association with charity or philanthropy, and they assume an anti-austerity politics dynamic through “solidarity”. They try to politicize, empower and connect the “victims” of crisis and austerity by a politics of hope and self-organization, setting the seeds to collective action and also to change society in the long-run. The food events try to be festive, creating a sense of collective and solidarity. In most there are anti-austerity information through leaflets, banners, sound-system, debates, etc. The groups also organize other convivial, solidarity and political actions in the neighbourhood, trying to reach the population beyond merely food issues. Most of them are involved in local struggles such as against electricity cuts, schools or health centres closings, urbanization of public land, etc. Moreover, groups self-organize through open assemblies where all participate on an equal basis and decisions are taken by consensus. The groups also gather together in regional networks and national meetings to reinforce their capacity to act and collectively discuss how to move forward. Their relation with the state is one of confrontation: they demand policy reforms that, on one side, can allow the initiatives to expand and, on the other, push for more structural changes towards the solidarity economy and the democratization of institutions.

Implications

Key-findings are relevant for organizations and grassroots initiatives working on agriculture and food issues in general. Specifically, the case of Biscay may be important for small farmers professional organizations, and the case of Greece for grassroots alternative agrifood projects working on urban contexts. The former illustrates how small farmers strengthen their struggles by developing the political frame of food sovereignty; the latter shows how dealing with the social effects of crisis and austerity matters to advance the transformative prospects of food sovereignty. Both cases, however, work only as examples as any activist strategy is context-dependent.

The conventional agrifood system is increasingly unable to respond to the basic needs of the many, a situation exacerbated by the global economic crisis and by austerity as a governing strategy. The case-studies exemplify how developing alternative economies is important to build practical solutions to the immediate problems of small farmers or to urban consumers, while offering means to work on the short- and long-run on conscientiousness-raising, social mobilization, alliance building, and confronting the neoliberal (austerity) agenda.

In Biscay, small farmers realized that without questioning the models of agriculture and territorial development their struggle was fragile and isolated from the rest of society. In

Greece, urban activists got aware that without addressing the power of intermediary merchants over agriculture and supply-chains it was neither possible to adequately address the issue of food poverty nor to defy the neoliberal austerity agenda. In both cases, adopting an agrifood system approach was crucial to join farmers and consumers and search for broader alliances in society, while envisioning what could be an economic agrifood alternative for the “national” territories.

The development of alternative economies also was fundamental to work on the subjective factor to collective action. This is not automatic though, as it depends on ideological and pedagogical work, on developing tools to reach society and move beyond the private sphere of the economic, and on the adoption of a social movement approach.

Finally, directly confronting mainstream policies and institutions is central in both agrifood projects, which also is sustained by the work of developing alternatives and learning from them. This confrontation is about reforms for improvements and obtain gains, but it goes much further: it embodies a prospect of extending social struggle and a horizon of structural transformation of the agrifood system, the economy in general, and the state itself.