



Addressing food insecurity in times of crisis: lessons from alternative agro-food movements

Findings and recommendations from the PhD ENTITLE research project on food conflicts and alternatives (<http://www.politicalecology.eu/>)

February 2016

INTRODUCTION

**Food security:
new challenges
due to
the economic
crisis**

In recent years, food security has featured high in the policy priorities of the European Commission, European Parliament and many member countries. The UN millennium development goals and the global threats of climate change, unstable food prices and a fast-growing world population have been key themes in them, and much of the focus has been going to the poor countries outside Europe. At the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis and the social hardship of austerity measures, the problems of hunger, poor-nutrition and revenue loss of farmers were exacerbated and hit home for many. The new context has further exposed the increasing failure of the agro-food system to guarantee the human right to food, now also within Europe.

**Agricultural
innovation or
food-banks are
insufficient.
What can we
learn from
alternative
agro-food
movements?**

Policy responses to food insecurity typically focus on either augmenting production through technological innovation or supporting charity-based food banks (e.g. anti-food waste laws in France). However, so far these policies have proven insufficient to tackle the lack of access to adequate food in socially just, environmentally sustainable, and democratic ways. In fact, little attention has been paid up until now to the structural debilities of the agro-food system and to the alternatives emerging from agro-food conflicts and grassroots movements. This research does just that: it assesses the practice and transformative potential of alternative agro-food movements emerging in response to the insufficiencies of the agro-food system under the context of economic crisis and austerity.



Spain and Greece: alternatives on the rise under the context of crisis and austerity

The research project focuses on two alternative agro-food movements in Spain and Greece. These are two of the European countries worst-hit by the social hardship of crisis and austerity, but also where agro-food conflicts and alternative movements have boosted. In Spain, research looks at people that under the crisis “return to the land” and engage in alternative farming models – specifically in agroecological production - both for self-provision and self-employment. The region under study the province of Biscay in the Basque Country where a small-farmers professional organisation supports this move to agriculture. In Greece, attention is given to the “no-middlemen” food distributions that emerged at the aftermath of the crisis, especially in the main cities where the effects of austerity were more severe and the needs for food higher. These are organised by local solidarity groups, and involve markets where farmers sell directly at low prices to consumers. Through these case-studies, research addresses both supply and demand issues.

Address structural debilities and re-design the agro-food system

Research findings are relevant for policy-makers as they highlight some of the structural debilities of the agro-food system and offer glimpses of alternative pathways for building more socially just, environmentally sustainable and democratic agro-food systems. This project calls attention to the need to promote the transition of the agro-food system towards low-input agriculture and solidarity economy networks, as well to develop instruments to control land prices and redistribute land to new farmers.

KEY OBSERVATIONS

Competitive and high-input agriculture harness farmers and constrains new entries

The focus of policies in promoting a competitive and high-input agriculture over the years has harnessed Basque small-farmers just as they have become indebted to finance and more vulnerable to market shocks. This becomes evident in situations of financial and economic crisis, such as the current one. Furthermore, the high level of investment required by these farming models and the rush to ‘innovate or die’ has posed barriers for the entry of new farmers in a sector that is increasingly aged. All of these open questions about the future of agriculture in the Basque Country, but also in Europe more generally.

Agroecology, re-localisation and short supply-chains offer solutions

These constraints explain why Basque farmers, and especially new farmers, are increasingly engaging in low-input farming models such as agroecology, and seeking to re-localise production through schemes like community-supported agriculture. Some of the advantages associated with agroecology, re-localisation, and short-supply chains are low investment requirements and low production risks, thereby avoiding indebtedness and market uncertainties. For these reasons, these alternative models are very attractive to new farmers, who can also start gradually and smoothly adjust their productive projects to their own lifestyle expectations and ideological views. The entry of new farmers in alternative models also show that young people are interested in agriculture insofar they find the right conditions for starting and making a dignified life out of it.

...but need favourable policies to thrive

Nonetheless, new farmers may face economic viability problems in the long-run unless policy-makers pay attention to the relation between agriculture and the broader economic context. For instance, costs associated with land are beyond farmers' reach, and the decline of urban incomes due to crisis and austerity brings new concerns. Farmers may cope with these impacts by increasing their non-paid working-hours, but this adds to the problem of self-exploitation and might worsen their life-work time balance.

Land access: a major problem

For new farmers, land access is a major difficulty. The Basque case illustrates well how development and economic growth models based on extended urbanisation and real estate investment - as followed in many European countries and regions - have endangered the safeguard agricultural land and disregarded the importance of agriculture and its social function of food provision. As a result, Basque farmers frequently have to work poor quality soils, and land access to new farmers is extremely difficult and costly.

Control urbanisation, plan the territory and redistribute land

In order to face land access problems, small-farmers organisations in the Basque Country demand policies for controlling urbanisation, safeguarding agricultural land, and enforcing its proper use. In this, better policy instruments of regional and local planning are crucial. They also support the view that land should be cultivated to feed the population and not to create commodities. Land-uses should thus be planned according to social needs for food, which are priority over other economic goals. In concrete, they defend the Basque territory is planned on the basis of food needs and its agroecological productive potential. Basque farmers also demand instruments to redistribute land, so that its social function of producing to feed the population is ensured. In the last years, they have achieved the creation of a public land fund (in the province of Biscay) to facilitate access to land for new producers. Through this fund, the administration can intervene on private property by buying, controlling prices and enforcing its appropriate use. Operational since 2010, the fund is composed of public land, fallow private land and expropriated land, to be rented at state-controlled prices, with priority given to young farmers. These prices also serve as reference to market prices.

Supply-chains monopolies: another major problem

Another major problem for farmers, but also consumers, is the monopolistic or oligopolistic control of supply-chains by corporate actors. The Greek case illustrates well the problem. There, the social hardship of crisis and austerity created a paradox: in a country rich in agriculture, while local farmers could not sell their products as intermediary traders paid low prices or rejected their produce to control prices, consumers were increasingly struggling to meet their food needs due to austerity-squeezed incomes, growing food prices, and lack of adequate sourcing of nutritious food (i.e. the poor could only access “junk” food). The reason for this was the control of the food-supply chain by intermediary traders and corporate retailers.

Short-supply chains and cooperatives: move towards the solidarity economy

In face of this paradox, solidarity groups self-organised in neighbourhoods or towns to by-pass traders and retailers. The groups organise markets in which farmers sell directly to consumers, with advantages for both of them. Farmers are better paid and receive on the spot, instead of waiting up to six months for being paid by traders (if paid at all). This way, they have cash-flow to face their costs, avoiding financial difficulties and indebtedness. Consumers pay less 20 to 50% than in conventional markets, and they can access to quality food. According to organisers, these initiatives have forced many retailers to reduce prices, besides having lead to increases of production. Notwithstanding, solidarity groups aim to achieve more sustained changes through the constitution of a network of farmers, consumers or mix cooperatives with the support of the state. Their goal is to move the agro-food system towards the solidarity economy.

Beyond safety-nets and 'alternatives': struggling for a different economy

The two cases studied illustrate grassroots responses to the structural debilities of the agro-food system. Nonetheless, both offer more than safety-nets under the context of economic crisis and austerity, and are more than alternative solutions to either market or state failures in guaranteeing food security. Not only these responses expose the debilities and offer ways to tackle them, as they do it by highlighting the necessity of building an alternative agro-food system on the basis of different values and relationships. These are based on cooperation and mutual-aid instead of competition; equality and solidarity instead of difference and distance; and democratic control from the bottom-up instead of corporate rule or technocratic and expert-based approaches. Hence, both cases studies move away from for-profit, charity and philanthropy logics, and offer glimpses of possible pathways towards more socially just, environmentally sustainable, and democratic agro-food systems. However, alternatives can only move from the margins of society if policy-makers are open to learn from them, support their achievements and promote the structural changes in the agro-food system you need to have.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY-MAKERS

Address root causes of food insecurity

This research project highlights that food insecurity is not only about low purchasing power or inadequate production levels: these are simplistic explanations, often driving to unsuccessful policy decisions. Rather, this research emphasises that factors such as high-input farming models, corporate control over supply-chains, and land access problems have influence in food security. Dealing with these structural and complex factors requires deep seated and coordinated measures of policy reform towards the design of more socially just, environmentally sustainable and democratic agro-food systems, instead of partial and disconnected measures only tackling symptoms.

Adopt an agro-food system approach and a territorial perspective

Agriculture and food-related policies usually follow an unproductive sector-based approach. This is especially true with the European Agriculture Common Policy. Research findings suggest that policies should adopt an agro-food system approach that connects issues of production, distribution and consumption. Farmers' problems are directly connected to how the supply-chain works; both have impacts on consumers' access to food. Thereby, policies only focusing on agriculture are ineffective if no measures are taken to control the distribution sector and its power in setting food prices. Similarly, tackling food poverty through food-banks fails to address the inadequacies of sourcing food at affordable prices. As our findings show, these problems are not just (or at all) a problem of insufficient production or low productivity, but are connected (at least in part) with high-input farming models, corporate control over supply-chains, and land access problems. All of these occur in specific territories and are shaped by them; therefore, agro-food system approaches should assume also a territorial perspective.

Up-scale and support grassroots alternative food initiatives

Much of the conflicts around agro-food issues arise from the structural debilities of the agro-food system in addressing basic needs, sustaining farmers' livelihoods, protecting the environment, and ensuring healthy food. These conflicts often catalyse the emergence of alternative agro-food movements that offer local and partial solutions to these problems. In order to move from the margins of society, policy action is needed to up-scale grassroots alternatives tacking into account concerns over food security, social justice, and environmental sustainability. In this regard, agroecology and solidarity economy networks offer a good starting point, and their proposals related with small-scale farming, re-localisation, short-supply chains, and horizontal procedures of decision-making should be actively taken into account in policy design, especially in establishing its priorities and support measures. Policy goals should ambition the transition towards low-input farming models and the solidarity economy.

Integrate policies

However, the transition towards low-input agriculture has to be followed by measures that manage the impacts of the broader economy. Otherwise, there is the risk of increasing farmers' workload. This calls for a better coordination between policies that directly or indirectly impact the production and labour process in agriculture, and the whole agro-food system more generally. For instance, the implementation of austerity measures should also be evaluated for this. In addition, a good integration of policies towards the promotion of labour-intensive models, while lowering the pressures for self-exploitation, can also contribute to create jobs. In a context of growing unemployment, but also of a growing interest of young people in agriculture, this could be relevant.

Develop indicators

Develop a set of sustainability criteria and indicators that can help policy makers in designing new measures and instruments for supporting alternative farming and distribution networks. These criteria and indicators should be flexible as models are context-dependent.

Protect land, control prices and redistribute to new farmers

Avoid the loss of agricultural land, and give primacy to its primary role in food provision for social needs. Promote planning for controlling urbanisation, safeguarding land, and ensuring its adequate use. Additionally, create state-led instruments to control land prices and promote the redistribution of land to new farmers. For instance, state-controlled land funds can be an example of measures put forward, with due account of specific regional and local contexts.

RESEARCH PARAMETERS**Objectives of research**

This research project explores the relation between economic crisis and austerity, and alternative agro-food conflicts and movements. Exploring this link is crucial to address issues of food security, considering that crisis and austerity is increasing food poverty, but also catalysing grassroots alternatives. Specifically, this project aims at understanding how and why alternative agro-food movements emerge and evolve, as well their potential to build more just, sustainable and democratic agro-food systems. In order to address these questions, research focus in Southern Europe countries where the social hardship of crisis is more severe and agro-food alternatives are on the rise.

Scientific approach/ methodology

Research is developed through theoretically-informed, empirical, and qualitative social science research. Two in-dept case-studies are developed, one in Spain (Biscay, Basque Country), and other in Greece.

The main researcher lived in Biscay for two months, between October and December 2013. During this period, she closely followed the daily activities of a small-farmers professional organisation member of the international peasant movement Via Campesina, and she interviewed 26 new farmers who had moved to agriculture after 2008 and engaged in agroecology and community-supported agriculture schemes. Questions concerned their motivations to “return to the land”, challenges, and future perspectives.

After, she lived in Greece for three months, between April and June 2014, where she followed the activities of the “no-middlemen” food distributions in the regions of Athens, Thessaloniki, and Central Greece. She also interviewed 23 core-activists from this network, and asked about organisational issues, challenges, and future ambitions.

This research is part of the ENTITLE project.

Picture of case-studies (Greece and Biscay):



Further reading Douglas H. Constance, Douglas H., Marie-Christine Renard, Marta G. Rivera-Ferre (ed.) (2014). *Alternative Agrifood Movements: Patterns of Convergence and Divergence (Research in Rural Sociology and Development, Volume 21)* Emerald Group Publishing Limited

Morgan, K., Marsden, T., & Murdoch, J. (2006). *Worlds of food: Place, power, and provenance in the food chain*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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Guthman, J. (2011). *Weighing in: Obesity, food justice, and the limits of capitalism*. Berkeley, CA: University of Berkeley Press.

La Via Campesina - <http://viacampesina.org/en/>

International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty - <http://www.foodsovereignty.org>

Elikaherria (Basque Country-) <http://www.elikaherria.eus>

Solidarity for All (Greece) - <http://www.solidarity4all.gr/el/about-solidarity-initiative>



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- University of Chile, Chile (www.fau.uchile.cl)
- Environment and Management, Spain (<http://ent.cat/>)
- Centro di Documentazione sui Conflitti Ambientali, Italy
(www.cdca.it)
- Friends of the Earth Middle East, Israel Jordan Palestinian Territory,
Occupied (foeme.org)

Duration

May 2012 – April 2016

Website

<http://www.politicaecology.eu/>

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