

4B - Agroecology worldwide: a practice, a science and a movement

Theme: Agroecology
Moderator: Janneke Bruil (ILEIA)
Speakers: Heitor Teixeira (student movement for agroecology, Brazil) en Jyoti Fernandez (La Via Campesina)

Report

We first divided the room in three parts: agroecology as a practice, agroecology as a science and agroecology as a movement. The participants went to the corner that represents mostly what they do in their life. We asked them to explain why they were in that corner. Various 'movement'-people worked for an NGO, the 'science' corner had mostly researchers and students, and in the 'practice' corner we had organic farmers. What emerged was that especially those in the middle and in the practice corners, still had many questions about what agroecology actually is. So we made time to go more into the exploration of agroecology.

Heitor explained that agroecological practices and management do not follow strict prescriptions. To build the knowledge towards agroecology there is no protocol or pre-established rules, but there are common processes and principles. One of the most important principles is to involve farmers, scientists, technicians and others in a co-creation process, adapting ideas and possible solutions to a specific social and environmental reality. In the Zona da Mata region, Brazil, the development of Agroforestry Systems with coffee and trees is a great example of how we can find solutions by experimentation and dialogue between scientific and popular socio-technical knowledge. Only together, it was possible to find feasible alternatives for coffee monocrops. The incorporation of trees in the farming systems could not only provide soil, water and biodiversity conservation, but also enhance quality of life for people. Less external inputs were needed in the system, and a greater diversity of food was produced, which means autonomy and food sovereignty for farmers.

In order to strengthen and scale up successful local agroecological practices it's necessary to enable people to share, to connect, to network. By doing so, we can go beyond knowledge sharing but also gain political power to challenge structures that many times block the development of agroecology led by farmers, and are in favor of large scale industrialized agriculture. In Brazil, the agroecology movement is complex, and involves different levels of organization and people from different backgrounds. The 'Articulação Nacional de Agroecologia' (ANA) represents part of this great web in Brazil, gathering more than 70 organizations and institutions to cooperate and work together. One of the last achievements, that was only possible through popular mobilization, was the implementation of a National policy for Agroecology.

Jyoti Fernandes responded to the question 'what makes agroecology different from organic farming'. More than just simply the use of organic practices, agroecology is based on our right to produce and eat our own food and transform our food system to achieve food sovereignty. This makes agroecology a tool to transform society. If we work together we can actually make this happen.

What is of crucial importance for researchers, is that they understand the wealth of knowledge that farmers have gained through their practices. Especially in agroecology, which is so locally based, this knowledge has to be the basis for any further research. Jyoti called upon all researchers inside and outside the room to work closely with farmers in all stages of their research, including at the very beginning during the conceptualization and development of research proposals.

One question from the audience was 'how can we show that the peasant model of agroecology is successful'? This is especially relevant now in the post-conflict situation of Colombia. We explored several

possible indicators such as the productivity of small scale farms, for example looking at how many crops were produced by how many labor unions. Or the ability of the farm system to store carbon. Other values and indicators need to be developed around biodiversity and resilience.

Outcomes

1. Agroecology is a tool to transform society (and this makes it different from e.g. organic agriculture).
2. Agroecology is strongest when practice, science and movement converge.
3. Therefore, scientists should work together with farmers in developing agroecological knowledge.

More information

- Website European Coordination La Via Campesina, <http://www.eurovia.org/?lang=en>
- Website ILEIA, www.ileia.org
- Website Farming Matters magazine, www.farmingmatters.org