

The transformative potential of agroecological farmers: an analysis of food system strategies developed through participatory processes in Nicaragua and the UK

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Abstract

In the current social system which tends to marginalise small scale producers, frame the interests of consumers as antithetical to those of producers, and force producers to compete against one another, there are questions about the extent to which strategies and alliances identified by agroecological farmers would be sufficiently transformative (or 'radical' according to Holt-Giménez and Shattuck, 2011) to address the problems of our existing food systems. In the context of our globalised and unequal food system, there are also questions about the extent to which strategies of farmers in the so-called global south might complement or contradict those of farmers in the so-called global north. Building on a participatory farmer-led research initiative, this paper analyses the strategies developed by small-scale agroecological producers in the global south (Nicaragua) and north (UK), and the extent to which they might be sufficient for transforming food systems to become socially and ecologically regenerative.

Section 1. Introduction

Now more than ever, evidence overwhelmingly concludes that our food systems are failing to adequately nourish our populations and are simultaneously severely degrading the ecosystems on which they depend. While there is widespread agreement that our food systems need to change in order to more adequately feed human populations and to become more ecologically sustainable (or even regenerative), there is a wide range of perspectives about what can and should be done in response to these failures.

Strategies and approaches based on concepts of agroecology and food sovereignty offer potentials for addressing many of the problems in the mainstream food system. Agroecological approaches have been shown to increase dietary diversity, maintain or increase yields and sustain or even enhance ecosystems (Altieri 1987, Gliessman 2007, Pretty et al 2006, Sevilla Guzman and Woodgate 2003, Chappell and La Valle 2009). Whilst some interpretations of agroecology include an explicit focus on redistributing power within food systems, for example, through valuing farmer knowledge and agency (Mendez et al 2013), agroecology as a concept can and in some cases has been reduced to technical agricultural approaches which leave out the social aspects of agriculture and food (Levidow 2015). However, the concept of food sovereignty includes a more explicit aim on reforming the social aspects related to food, such as through localising and democratising control of food systems (Patel 2011).

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Holt-Giménez's and Shattuck's (2011) quadripartite⁷ classification of approaches for reforming the food system indicates that agroecology and food sovereignty concepts include both trends which could be classified as 'progressive' as well as those that would be considered 'radical'. Progressive trends, according to the authors, include alternatives to industrial foods which are 'largely within the economic and political frameworks of existing capitalist food systems' (115). Radical trends include a stronger focus on 'entitlements, structural reforms to markets and property regimes, and class-based, redistributive demands for land, water and resources' (Ibid). The authors argue that progressive trends alone would be insufficient to adequately transform the 'practices, rules and institutions determining the world's food systems' in order to address hunger (132) and call for more alliances between progressive and radical trends. Tilzey (2016) also argues that without 'radical' (or counter-hegemonic) approaches, it will not be possible to adequately redress the problems of our existing food systems.

Drawing on a Marxist analysis, Tilzey details the way in which the social system at present – which conceptualises the 'market' and the 'economy' as separate from society and ecologies – will only be able to mitigate but not resolve the 'disbenefits' of existing food systems in the social (e.g. livelihoods, dignity, agency, health) and ecological (e.g. soil fertility, biodiversity, climate change) realms. In this existing system, consumer interests (e.g. cheap food) are often perceived of as antithetical to producer interests (e.g. high farmgate prices), and producers are driven to compete with one another to maintain their subsistence and social position (Ibid). Without radical action to allow for cooperative use and exchange of resources, services and products, Tilzey argues that food systems will continue to 'externalise' ecological and health effects and will continue to replicate highly unequal distributions of power.

In our current social system which tends to marginalise small scale producers, frame the interests of consumers as antithetical to those of producers, and force producers to compete against one another, would strategies and alliances identified by farmers be sufficiently transformative (or 'radical') to address the problems of our existing food systems? And would strategies of farmers in the so-called global south be similar or contradictory to those of farmers from the so-called global north?

Building on a participatory farmer-led research initiative, this paper seeks to answer the question, **'What types of strategies might be developed by small-scale producers in the global south and north, and are these sufficient for transforming food systems?'** Specifically, it details the framings articulated and approaches identified by farmer panels in the UK and Nicaragua during a two year participatory systemic inquiry process and provides an analysis of the extent to which these strategies might have the potential for transforming markets to result in food systems that produce healthy, nourishing, equitable and ecological outcomes.

The make-up of these farmer panels makes their insights particularly distinctive: rather than being a representative sample of the farming population in each country, panel members are farmers who are involved directly or indirectly in the agroecology and food sovereignty movements of their respective countries, and are also succeeding at present to make ends meet as small-scale agroecological farming businesses in the current capitalist food system. It is anticipated that this particular positioning could yield the tensions and contradictions between farmers' immediate economic survival (which entails working within the existing system) and their other goals and aspirations such as regenerating their land, building communities and equitably nourishing populations, which may require transformation of the systems on which they currently depend.

Section 2. Rationale and overview of research approach

⁷ Their classification includes neoliberal, reformist, progressive and radical approaches

This section provides a brief overview of and rationale for the research methodology used for the project⁸ which has led to this paper. A longer version of the methodology is available in the full length paper.

In order to answer the research question we use a critical case study (Flyvberg 2001), based on a participatory systemic inquiry approach, in partnership between researchers at the Institute of Development Studies (University of Sussex) and farmer and community-led organisations in Nicaragua (Farmer to Farmer Programme⁹, PCAC), the UK (Land Workers Alliance, LWA) and Senegal (Forum for Endogenous Sustainable Development¹⁰, FODDE).

In each country, a panel of 12-15 farmers of diverse ages, farming types and gender who self-identify as practicing agroecology (to varying extents) is at the centre of the research process. The overall question that the panels have sought to answer is, 'What are the potential pathways for realising agroecological food systems?' The conceptualisation of 'agroecological food systems' themselves was determined by each of the farmer panels, who were encouraged to reflect on their own experiences as farmers and consumers, and to explicitly consider the ecological and social (health and nutrition, communities, livelihoods, etc.) domains of food systems.

In order for farmers to answer the overall question of the project, the research approach has included: (i) participatory complex systems mapping to enable farmers to identify the current dynamics in their food systems which maintain them in their current form (Burns and Worsley 2015, Burns 2012); (ii) participatory development of research questions; (iii) collaborative research¹¹, led by local organisations with support from the University of Sussex researchers; (iv) deliberative processes for participatory analysis of research findings (Carpini 2004) drawing on a citizens jury approach¹²; (v) identification of leverage points for change based on systems thinking (Meadows 1997, 2008, Senge 1990); and, (vi) the co-development of strategies with potential allies and agents of change (Wielinga 2012) identified by the farmer panels in each country. The rationale for this combination of approaches is described in detail in the full length version of this paper.

Section 3. Approaches identified by farmers through participatory processes

Throughout the participatory food system analysis detailed above the deliberative farmer panels analysed the dynamics that enhance or constrain agroecological farming in opposition to other models of production. In this section we summarise the different framings that farmers used to depict these dynamics and the strategies identified to transform them towards agroecological or regenerative food systems. As an action research project, the framings and strategies proposed evolved over the course of the project, and significant changes in framings are noted.

Key themes that emerged from the research, deliberation and development of strategies in relation to the research question included approaches to (i) recognise and account for the 'true' costs and values of food, (ii) increase access to land for agroecological farmers; (iii) support alternative distribution and retail that enables local and agroecological production; and, (iv) ensure imports and

⁸ The project is titled 'Transformations towards agroecological food systems' and commenced in January 2016, with two years of initial funding from the Daniel and Nina Carasso Foundation and the New Field Foundation.

⁹ Programa Campesino a Campesino, a part of Unión Nacional de Agricultores y Ganaderos (UNAG)

¹⁰ Forum pour un développement durable endogene

¹¹ In each country, 3-5 primary and secondary 'micro-research' projects were undertaken

¹² See for example, work with 'farmers juries' <http://pubs.iied.org/pdfs/G02530.pdf>

exports are fair to producers and consumers across countries. In this short paper, only one of these four themes is discussed. In the long version, all of these approaches are discussed and analysed.

(i) Approaches to recognise and account for the 'true' costs and values of food

Agroecological farmer panels in Nicaragua and the UK agree on the fact that at present, prices received by farmers and paid by consumers do not adequately respond to the true costs of food production or the wider social and ecological effects of farming approaches. Farmers in the UK explicitly discussed the ways in which they felt that their work was undervalued, particularly in financial terms by both the public and the government. Either framed in terms of externalities or other terms, farmers were frustrated and challenged by the fact that the environmental, social and health values of their farming models were not incorporated into market prices.

In the UK deliberative workshop, farmers embarked on a lengthy discussion of the concept of 'value' itself – who determines it and what it includes and does not include. It was noted that while this could be a bit of a rabbit hole, it was important to take the time to reconsider what 'value' really means. Farmers indicated that there were certain things that simply could not be monetised: one farmer stated, 'the thought occurred to me that land is priceless [and] I really like the idea that seeds are priceless.' Similarly, in the systems mapping workshop, it was noted that farmers make more than an economic investment to the land and that there are also emotional and cultural attachments to land that need to be recognised.

Despite the acknowledgement that not everything could or should be converted into a quantifiable (economic) value, there was a sense that more was still needed to be done to 'account for' the ecological and social contributions (or on the flip side, detriments) of certain farming practices. They indicated a need for market transactions to incorporate the 'true costs' (water pollution, obesity and diabetes, loss of biodiversity and so on) and the 'true benefits' (healthy diets, lively rural communities, healthy soils, etc.) of food production. The panels investigated potentials of various approaches that might take into account social and ecological costs and benefits of food production, including the roles of certifications, consumers and the state. These discussions varied between the two countries, perhaps due in part to the different positionalities and experiences of the farmers in Nicaragua and the UK.

Differentiation of agroecological food and farming: roles of consumers, citizens and the state

Both Nicaraguan and UK farmers discussed the issue of signalling as a potential way to ensure that agroecological farming was compensated appropriately. Nicaraguan farmers focused on signalling to consumers, whereas in the UK, signalling to consumers was emphasized in the beginning but then changed to signalling to government bodies (e.g. planning authorities).

The Nicaraguan farmers indicated that signalling to consumers through certifications could result in price differentiation – the receipt of higher prices for agroecological products from concerned and capable consumers. At present, the only certification schemes that exist are third party certifications which are very costly, based mostly on high-value commodities, and which do not certify all products of the farm but only specific products that are marketed. Voluntary schemes exist, but are not monitored and can be hijacked by conventional farmers. Farmers noted that public certification could be a good option to address the current weaknesses of the existing schemes.

Farmers in both Nicaragua and the UK determined that there was a role of consumers as market actors in acknowledging the benefits to their own health, their ecosystems and their rural communities by virtue of choosing to consume agroecological rather than conventional products. In

the UK, for example, supermarkets are susceptible to mass customer pressure. In Nicaragua, farmers themselves decided to pledge to personally take more responsibility for their purchasing choices.

However, as the project developed, the farmer panels, particularly the UK panel, saw also the limitations of consumers in terms of market actors. Whilst initial framings of the problem towards the beginning of the research initiative focused on consumer willingness to pay (e.g. 'if only consumers were more knowledgeable about what went into their food...'), as the process went on, farmers acknowledged that they themselves often made purchases that did not support local and agroecological production. While Nicaraguan farmers indicated that they could do more to be responsible consumers, UK farmers indicated that their choices were often driven by the budgets they had available to them (which were often cited to be based on relatively low earnings), pressures from their children (e.g. for pack lunches at school where children compare lunches with one another) and availability of products to choose from (i.e. the lack of availability of local, ecological and indigenous foods in their shops). UK farmers also discussed the limitations of consumer knowledge and the complexity of the issues. One participant stated, '...tomatoes from Spain, pasture-fed beef...It is very complicated, what's better? It is bewildering to consumers and farmers.' Farmers concluded that it was important for consumers to have more information but that it is not realistic to allocate all the responsibility to consumers and expect them to understand all the issues and also have the financial and social positioning to consistently purchase 'ethical' products.

Further, while the majority of the UK panel members currently benefit from price differentiation in their business models, farmers noted that the creation of a dual organic / non-organic system or niche (e.g. box scheme) approach was inherently flawed in that the majority of consumers cannot access such products. It was noted that while the agroecological market had grown – for example, with organics now comprising a larger proportion than ever of food markets, it is still the minority (only 1.4% in the UK in financial value¹³) which means that the remaining majority markets of such food markets continue to cause ecological and social damage.

It was discussed at various stages of the UK deliberations that within the current social (or 'economic') system, there is an explicit tension between wanting to spread agroecological production and staying in business. Several UK farmers indicated that they were happy for there to be more agroecological farmers in the UK but that they did not want them to be their close neighbours as this would create competition and crowding within what is currently a limited niche market. Recognising the inherent tensions between their own interests and the wider aim of spreading agroecological production, farmers concluded that the dual economic system based on consumers paying a premium would not resolve the problem of ensuring that agroecological farmers are valued appropriately while also ensuring that food systems adequately nourished the population.

As deliberations continued in the UK, panel members identified a need to 'go bigger' and consider a reframing of agroecological food systems to be in the public interest. For example, low food prices are often seen to be in the public interest but this is against the farmer interest and also often undermines local economies. With a public interest approach, however, health, community, dignified jobs and ecosystem services (e.g. biodiversity, water quality, flood reduction, etc.) could also be taken into account, tipping the balance to favour local and agroecological production. The alignment with the public interest was also raised in discussions about access to land. It was suggested that reframing agroecological food systems in this way could both build alliances with complementary citizens groups as well as creating legal traction among public authorities which are

¹³ Soil Association 2016 Organic Market Report, available from <https://www.soilassociation.org/news/2016/organic-market-report-2016/>

charged with promoting the public interest. Such public authorities might have the ability to support agroecological farming (e.g. through increasing access to land, through supporting cooperative market approaches and through subsidising agroecological farms), and to disincentivise unsustainable and unhealthy farming (e.g. through taxes and penalties).

Overall, while there was still some recognition of the power for consumers to support regenerative food systems, the focus shifted from one that relied on consumers choosing products from more 'sustainable' or 'equitable' food and farming models, to a focus on building alliances between farmers and consumers as citizens. UK farmers stressed the need for a focused effort to collectively define the values that should shape our food systems. In the case of Nicaragua, farmers called for a recognition of the right to live in a healthy environment, free from pollution.

Section 4. Analysis and discussion of strategies¹⁴

Farmer panels propose a diversity of market strategies that illustrate the diversity of their objectives as well as a diversity of ways of understanding how markets function. Farmers individually and collectively balance short and long term priorities, which are reflected in the problems and strategies they identified. Strategies proposed included: (i) individual behaviour change: in which consumers would make better choices by purchasing agroecological products, in part through 'liberal' reforms that make the markets work better e.g. certification in the case of Nicaragua; (ii) working within the current market system to allow for agroecological food systems to flourish, by virtue of creating a level playing field through taxes and subsidies; (iii) actively supporting alternative market models such as Tamar Grow Local, designed to explicitly serve both consumer and producer interests, including ecological aims; (iv) working to structurally transform the food systems, with policies for both redistributing and transforming ownership of the means of production (e.g. land redistribution, communal ownership of resources, etc.); and (v) recognising that there are many elements in food systems which cannot be treated as commodities and must therefore be preserved through an explicit articulation of common values and agreement about collective interests. These different market approaches resonate with the 'reformist', 'progressive' and 'radical' discourses and models that Holt-Giménez and Shattuck describe (2011). As expected, the 'neoliberal' model of production was rejected by the farmers, and whilst some liberal market framings were articulated, they are used within the reformist category: none of the market strategies proposed would be included within the neoliberal category.

Farmers actively recognise the tensions that exist between working within the system and transforming the food systems, with explicit concerns about co-option, and being trapped into a niche market. Yet they also acknowledged concerns about feasibility, political will, and insufficient capabilities and expertise needed enact transformative changes to food systems. Therefore there is an agreement that both progressive and radical approaches were necessary in the short term – none of them were sufficient on their own. However, the coexistence of radical and progressive strategies had one key requirement, that they are combined in ways that powerful actors do not co-opt them and in ways that they do not undermine their long term goals.

The next steps in this research initiative includes a process that will bring farmers from these countries together to further explore and test the framings and solutions that arose from each panel and to enable farmers to learn from and enhance one another's perspectives.

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¹⁴ A more detailed analysis and discussion is presented in the full length paper

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