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Agroecology now - connecting the dots to enable agroecology transformations

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Agroecology now - connecting the dots to enable agroecology transformations

Agroecology is coming into its own as an alternative paradigm to corporate-led industrial food systems. Evidence of the advantages, benefits, impacts, and multiple functions of agroecology abounds (see: HLPE 2019 for a review). For many the evidence is clear: agroecology, together with ‘food sovereignty’, offer a pathway for more just and sustainable food systems and communities. The questions that remain are about how to foster the enabling conditions, and mitigate the disabling ones, so that agroecology can flourish (Anderson et al. 2020).

There has been a good deal of recent debate about agroecology transitions, transformations, massification, amplification, as well as how to “scale up” and “scale out” agroecology as a new paradigm for food and agriculture. This new thinking and research could not be more relevant in the context of deepening ecological and social crises (IPBES (Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services) 2019; IPCC 2018; World Inequality Lab 2018). It is in this context that we have been bringing together allied researchers, activists, food producers and policy-makers in our work at AgroecologyNow (www.agroecologynow.com) at the UK-based *Center for Agroecology, Water and Resilience* (<https://www.coventry.ac.uk/cawr>). As a community of practice, we have been examining the contours of this growing body of work on agroecology transformations and probing its edges and horizons.

This special issue is a part of this collective work to broaden the discussion on agroecological transitions. Some of the articles (Dale 2020; Meek and Anderson 2020; Siegner, Acey, and Sowerwine 2020) were amongst twenty-one papers and panels in a stream of sessions we coordinated on ‘Agroecology Transformations’ at the American Association of Geographers meeting in Washington, DC in April 2019. Meek and Anderson’s article was further developed in a retreat hosted by AgroecologyNow in which we convened a group of twenty-five researchers, activists, farmers and organizers from around the world involved in research and knowledge co-production that aims to advance movements for agroecology and food sovereignty. Other articles (Schiller et al. 2020; Tornaghi and Dehaene 2020) arose in response to a call for papers distributed through our networks.

The five articles in this special issue provide new insights into agroecological transformations. The focus of Siegner, Acey, and Sowerwine (2020) and Tornaghi and Dehaene (2020) on agroecology in an urban context are welcome contributions in a field often dominated by research in rural areas. The role of the State in transitions-transformation features in two articles. Schiller et al.’s (2020) analysis shows how agroecology has been largely co-opted by regime actors in Nicaragua. Similarly, Meek and Anderson (2020) articulate how the visions and processes of scaling deployed by the Sikemese State in the organic transition are predominantly promoting homogeneity, productivism and market-oriented processes of transition. These two papers show how state-centric processes of transition can often undermine the radical potential of agroecology. Finally, Dale’s (2020) article written in the Canadian context argues for the importance of alliances across boundaries (e.g.

environmentalists, food producers, farm workers, Indigenous peoples, etc.) as the basis for a bottom-up process of agroecological scaling.

Here we want to draw attention to the range of collections that have recently been published on agroecological transitions, and acknowledge the influence they have had on our work. The articles contained within each collection examine agroecology in diverse contexts and explore different layers and modes of engagement. When viewed as a coherent body of work, they ask important questions about the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead for the creation of food systems underpinned by social justice, solidarity, reciprocity and trust. The following are just nine such collections and contributions in an ever-burgeoning field of emerging agroecological thinking and action:

- Special issue on, “*Agroecological Scaling*.” (Ferguson et al. 2019)
- Edited book on, “*Agroecological Transitions: From Theory to Practice in Local Participatory Design*.” (Bergez, Audouin, and Therond 2019)
- Special issue on, “*Agroecology for the Transition towards Social-Ecological Sustainability*.” (Oteros-Rozas, Ravera, and García-Llorente 2019)
- Edited book on, “*The Agroecology Transition of Agricultural Systems in the Global South*.” (Côte et al. 2018)
- IPES-Food report on, “*Seven Case Studies of Agroecological Transition*.” (IPES-Food 2018)
- A report on, “*Without feminism there is no agroecology. Towards healthy, sustainable and just food systems*.” (CSM 2019)
- A special issue on, “*New Pathways to Sustainability in Agroecological Systems*.” (Mendez et al. Forthcoming)
- A special issue on, “*Critical Adult Education in Food Movements*.” (Anderson et al. 2019)
- A report on, “*Nourishing Life – Territories of Life and Food Sovereignty*.” (Pimbert and Borrini-Feyerabend 2019).

The flow of ideas and questions raised in these publications are again only a partial reflection of a larger body of work produced by different authors and groups that we are connected to through the work of the AgroecologyNow network. Of course, the majority of the thinking, action and change-making related to agroecology and food sovereignty is taking place in communities and social movements through a vast array of diverse initiatives. Social movement processes are critical in opening deliberative spaces, advancing popular education that re-values diverse knowledge dialogues, and creating enabling conditions for food producers and local communities. The Declaration of the International Forum on Agroecology provides an important reference point for the thinking emerging from social movements (Nyéléni Movement for Food Sovereignty 2015).

This special issue, and the wider work of AgroecologyNow, has been a rich co-generative experience that has allowed and enabled us to articulate not only what we want to work on, but how we want to work. In contributing to agroecology and food sovereignty praxis (Levkoe, Brem-Wilson, and Anderson 2018) as a collective we are keenly aware of our responsibility to be reflexive and self-critical. To this end, we continue to think deeply about our theories of change, our values and principles, and the different roles that we can and do play in enabling agroecology transformations in the food sovereignty movement at large (Duncan et al. 2019). This includes avoiding approaches that co-opt or disable bottom-up and people-driven processes. As a group, we have identified that our most powerful form of intervention is to work in close

collaboration with knowledge mobilizers engaged in social transformation. Much of our work reflects and analyzes participatory processes, methodologies and pedagogies and centers on a critical analysis of political transformation as the basis for change. Some of the ways that we see how our work is contributing to processes of transformational change in collaboration with our networks include:

- Co-designing research and learning processes
- Engaging as critical friends with the social movements
- Collaborating with and directly supporting practice and social movements
- Organizing and systematizing evidence
- Amplifying grassroots voices
- Contributing to shaping discourses and narratives
- Participating in and informing policy processes

Our collective is made up of people with different interests, foci and positionalities but is based on a constellation of shared values and politics. As a part of our own ongoing process of coming together and working reflexively, we have mapped out the unfolding values that underpin our collective (figure 1). These values form the basis of an ongoing journey of connecting with one another and beyond, through reflexive cycles of action-learning. We invite you to engage with us (www.agroecologynow.com) to see where our values and work align, and where these connections can help further our collective project of agroecology transformations toward a more just and sustainable world.



Figure 1. A working representation of the constellation of values that underpins the work of the AgroecologyNow collective.

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