

Agro Ecology: Hypothesis for a Sustainable Local Development

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Abstract

The rational use of natural resources, together with the re valuation of ancient farmer practices, show an alternative development opportunity for rural areas and for de-structured local economics. The case study refers to organic meat production in three rural areas of Catalonia where livestock is a traditional field that has been subjected to deep economic crisis. Due to the continuous crisis of this sector, more than hundreds of farmers decided to move from extensive production to organic farming production and 150 of them are selling their products under the same brand that is certificated by the Catalonian Organic Certification Agency.

KEY WORDS: Social Capital, Integrated Specialties, Sustainable Development, Governance.

INTRODUCTION

At the beginning, the European rural world seemed to suffer the weakness created by new market confrontation, new technologies and new agricultural policy based more on a new concept of “active” labour market policies and “employability” of the agriculture itself, than on the redistribution policies applied during many years. The financial support started to be considered a political mistake, ineffective and inefficient and it has progressively required more support for investment, technological improvement and the development of multilevel governance.

WTO policies increase the physical and psychological distance between products and consumer needs, decreasing the agriculture social visibility, just as the European Union is trying to provide a new role to this sector, considering it a central point in the rural society to guarantee the qualitative needs of the population and the preservation of the cultural and environmental heritage.

The European agricultural policy itself, until 1985, was based on the concept of *food security*, according to the agreements stipulated in Europe in 1950, after the Second World War. However, after 1985, due to important food scandals, the agricultural policy moved to a concept of *food safety*. The consumer concern about the quality of food production drove the implementation of selective support and intervention.

In a global contest where food and climate change are primary points on countries agenda, the discussion about linking agriculture and nature conservancy is becoming essential.

In this panorama a division of the rural world in the organization of the territory has been created between *mass production* and *integrated specialties*. This division shows itself through the contrast between competition for quality and price: both organizational systems need different elements to succeed and different territorial space.

Mass production needs, as determining factor, the land; whereas integrated specialties use the land just as means and the local community as focal point (Beccatini, Omodei Zorini, 2004).

Against the food standardization process, new dynamics linked to biodiversity and nature conservancy answered consumer demand for more safety. This new “need” represents an important advantage for the small producer, creating new economical spaces, new answers for public policies, satisfying a demand towards sustainability and consolidating national and regional identities.

Local actors contribute to building the social and economical network that characterizes the territory *per se*. The interaction between different actors may support or limit the development. Cooperative and association dynamics support the creation of a new economical process based on social elements that determine the mutual help and benefits to all actors. The values shared by the actors and their personal interests mixed together, help the process to survive the external market pressure. The change in the economic system has brought a radical transformation in the production concept, in particular for those small farmers strangled by global market competence. In this global context, public administration holds an essential role to promote bargaining talks and promote participation through representation and social cohesion tools (Moyano, 2005).

However, cooperation between different actors hides social dynamics very difficult to explain. Factors that determine the choice to cooperate depend directly on the perception people have about the possibility to obtain benefits and advantages. If the subject believes the benefit will not compensate the material and personal cost, she/he will not consider the option; nevertheless she/he will not remain on the sideline of the process if other actors are sharing profits and opportunity (Elster, 2007).

The answer for small producers stems from the shared and rational use of local resources. The environmental crisis and climate change are providing new opportunities to develop and increase the social and political attention of organic production that represents a possible way for a sustainable local development.

Organic agriculture and farming production is a social movement born in the second half of the 20th century as an answer to unsustainable productivity logic and to contrast the enormous alimentary-health and socio-environmental crisis generated by intensive farming and use of aggressive pesticide.

ORGANIC AGRICULTURE AND FARMING IN CATALONIA.

From the seventies, organic agriculture and farming started in Spain through independent cooperatives that based their activity on very strict criteria.

The organic farming production saw a dramatic increase of 2567% between 1999 and 2002. Producers normally have small and medium farms and they try to overcome the difficulties generated by external markets by selling products together, creating associations that are able to protect and support small producers and guarantee certain income.

The demand for ecological products intensifies during crises in the conventional production sector (animal diseases or resignation of consumers towards certain categories of food, e.g. dioxin chickens, mad cows, avian flu etc....), but maintains its intensity even though the crises have been overcome. This would demonstrate that the sector is at a time of full development, where consumers will worry to spend more for what they eat and opt for quality.

In 1989 the Agricultural and Environmental policies Ministry created the CRAE (Council of Organic Farming), which applied the Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) model to the organic agricultural certification system.

When in 1994 the decentralization process involved the agriculture and farming matters, the

task and responsibility for control and certification were passed on to the autonomous regions as well. CRAE was progressively disappearing making place for regional organizations. In this context Catalonia founded the CCPAE (Organic Farming Catalan Council), which began to perform its duties effectively in 2001.

The CCPAE is a mixed organization (public and private): it functions as a private enterprise with regards to the management of human resources and management of their budget which is dependent on the annual membership fees; and as a public organization because from a juridical point of view, it depends directly from the Farming Department. CCPAE represents a permanent table for consultation between public, private and trade unions, conducted through its board, a maximum decision-making body that is composed of democratically elected members.

The tasks assigned by legislation to the CCPAE are basically twofold:

1. Control and certification of organic production according to EU and Catalanian legislation
2. Promote the knowledge and application of the organic production system and its products.

The central point for CCPAE's good organizational performance is the fact that CCPAE combines the efficiency of a private organization, independent from public subventions, and a public control system able to guarantee the service quality to all members without differentials based on their contribution or their income.

The total area for Organic farming in Catalonia corresponds to 39.697 hectares. Compared to other areas it occupies third place in organic farming production after Extremadura and Andalusia.

The case study concentrates on three organic production farming counties in particular, Pallars Jussà, Pallars Sobirà y Alta Ribagorça which have an extension of 9,985.8 He, 13,769.6 He and 5,393.6 He, and represents 70% of organic farming production in Catalonia.

THE CASE STUDY

The case study chosen for this analysis is *Ecológica de los Pirineos*, a company based in Pobla de Segur, a small town in the county of Pallars Jussà of 3000 habitants. The company sells organic meat (veal/beef, pork, lamb) from the joint production of a 150 farmers located in the three counties of Pallars Jussà, Pallars Sobirà y Alta Ribagorça. The production counts on 7000 head of cattle and 5000 ovine, which create the basis to develop the local organic farming production.

The difficulties in production but also the change in the parameters of the needs of young people and families leave a minimal percentage of farmers in the area and demonstrate an ever more astonishing condition of depopulation of the mountain regions. For the residents, this entails the impoverishment of the area from a structural and services point of view.

After the year 2000, the intervention to support organic livestock was very incisive due to the subsidies, promoted through strong political will that came about during the "mad cow" crisis and which provided the means to give a possible way-out for a product and a sector that was severely penalized by the situation. Organic farming acted as an "umbrella" that offered an alternative quality product and a certain safety of its production.

The choice to use *Ecológica de los Pirineos* as case study lies in the similarities found between the characteristics of *Ecológica* and the criteria established before starting the investigation.

Ecológica de los Pirineos, together with all its critical elements, represents, according to an initial analysis, a case study that responds in part to the criteria of sustainability, local production, innovation, cooperation between producers and relations between actors at more levels.

For example, some companies analyzed didn't finalize the product in loco, thus the production process halted at local level during the first phase. They limited themselves to the production but didn't include for example the process of packaging.

Other companies or cooperatives imported a great deal of the products from other countries, denaturalizing the idea of investigating a completely local reality that assumed all the production processes at local level. In other cases, cooperation between different actors wasn't a determining factor; in some examples the cooperative was too young to build a case study.

The production is realized locally: raising, seasonal migration of the livestock, slaughter, quartering and packing, which supports the growth of the local economic system.

This investigation is the first step on the PhD research project that will analyze cases of sustainable local development linked to farming and agricultural organic production. Data of this specific case study was collected during 2008, through qualitative method and explorative interviews.

1.1. Ecológica de los Pirineos

When some Pyrenean farmers converted from conventional farming to organic, at first, they were unable market their meat as organic because of the lack of infrastructures at local level. Of the 150, two young farmers funded an ecological meat cutting room: *Ecológica de los Pirineos*. Through technological innovations in the infrastructures and in the production, producers and local administrations have progressively created the conditions to sell the meat in the market as organic. Local administration provided the farmers with a local organic slaughterhouse certified by the CCPAE and the farmers introduced the "fattening" process to their farming practice. Initially farmers commercialized the meat from dairy cows, they slaughtered the animals at the end of their lactation period, between 6 and 8 months, and during which the "fattening process" hadn't developed in their livestock. These progressive innovations in farming production provide a direct product of local origin, which adds value to the productions character.

The producers want to continue working in a sense that preserves their territory, and gives profitability to their land and livestock. The joint production between farmers shows the potentiality of these areas owing to local embeddedness and social networks, as well as highlights new challenges for the governance at different levels.

The unique stamp of *Carne Roia* (the organic meat brand produced by *Ecológica de los Pirineos*) is the only way to the market for organic meat and so producers are in a sense "forced" towards cooperation. Also according to historical facts, the communal pastures and seasonal migration of livestock in the Pyrenees have developed over the years a propensity that could support the current "embryo" of cooperation.

The aim, specifically in the case of *Ecológica de los Pirineos* and its *Carne Roia*, was to occupy a niche in the market that remained untouched and compete through a product independent from pressures and instability of the market of conventional meat.

Ecológica has different elements that could characterize the sustainability of its production:

- Ecological cycle will be presented from a certain "closed" (Iacoponi, 2001) point of

view as the production is tied exclusively to local processes.

- The livestock through seasonal migration moves from the mountain's high land in summer to the farms where the forage stored during the summer is used in winter, favoring the maintenance and recovery of the environmental biodiversity.
- The animals are slaughtered in the communal slaughterhouse, which on one hand doesn't involve long journeys for the animals themselves and on the other reduces carbon emissions from the use of transport for long-distance routes.
- The final production stage of quartering and packaging is always done at local level.
- Because of the type of product, a long conservation period is not allowed in order to guarantee its quality. This implies that the transport to distributors is very short and mainly has local characteristics.

Ecológica de los Pirineos, from product point of view, maintains the tradition of local production, developing an industry that has always been a key element in the territorial economy of the three counties: livestock. Livestock has deep historical roots among the productive sector of the local population, it represents a set of values that mark and typify the territory in analysis. The profound changes in global and local economies, have forced many of the farmers to make livestock a partial job, pushing them to get more guarantees for survival through the safer and more fruitful types of jobs. Social changes also bring the livestock sector in a position of profound crisis, as they are regarded by future generations, a sector that requires too much work and leaves little benefit compared with the total effort put into it. The methods used in extensive livestock require much more effort than modern intensive production techniques, and a need for a daily care of the animals. The maintenance of the processes of pasture and seasonal migration of livestock grants the case study the essential element of analysis: the typical characteristics of local production associated with maintenance of some typical production processes of the area and the association of these with elements of innovation. These latter elements allow the revitalization of the livestock market, when it comes to creating the quartering room, updating the communal slaughterhouse to control standards for organic production, they represent two essential elements that have enabled the development of the activity and have provided a local response to a local industry, creating coordination between private and public demands. *Ecológica de los Pirineos*, inserted in its production process the method of fattening, and producers are beginning to develop, in this way, an element in their production, which allows further subsequent output and opens a possibility of supplying the product to the consumer.

The presence of a quality seal (the seal of organic produce) and, at the same time, the characterization of the product under the same brand, starts to determine a system of local production. The possibility to associate the production of meat to a certain territory had his vehicle in the same brand that brings together various producers on one side and on the other associates the counties with quality production that distinguishes a specific territorial zone.

The element of cooperation continues to provide an important element of investigation, and from a public policy perspective, an important element of evaluation. The relationship between producers and the reasons that have moved them towards cooperation represent a starting point to look into the dynamics of networks in depth. Although we could assume that the farmers are driven by their personal needs and by a lack of alternatives (economic situation; impossibility to sell their product on its own but only together with other producers; the requirement to be associated to *Ecológica de los Pirineos* which has the quartering room; the need to remain underneath the "ecological umbrella" in order for their products to find their way to the market).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Although European policies push and encourage through the pillar of rural development organic production as revaluation of quality production in the EU as well, the lack of meso-level policies is a problem that the people interviewed stressed in different occasions. The lack of promotional policies for the ecological market, is a topic for further investigation. The will expressed in policy and in European rural development projects, doesn't seem to find a concrete realization of the proposals moved by the agro-ecological sector. The will stays at a political level rather than move to local level, highlighting that bottom-up processes stop and do not develop. The lines of development would be, on one side, the will and supportive institutional action, unconditioned by production, to enhance not only the weakest part of the production-sector *per se*, but also support all the intermediate processes up to the sale, in order to develop a market and an economy that takes its strength from its local nature. Also fostering cooperation among producers and between the different production sectors that aims to reach this result, which would be the final sale of a product, produced entirely local.

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