

Policy from Below: Politicising urban agriculture for food sovereignty

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Policy from Below: Politicising urban agriculture for food sovereignty

Colin Anderson

Youth delegation meets at International Forum on Agroecology. Photo by Colin Anderson

Urban agroecology goes beyond urban agriculture, which is often primarily technical or social in focus and has no fundamental political character per se. Agroecology is explicitly political and rooted in radical political thought and action. The case studies presented in this article can contribute to the development of political urban agroecology. They demonstrate mechanisms and platforms that social movements are co-creating as they argue for a transformative vision of agroecology.

Agroecology is being defined and re-defined by different actors, including food producers, policy-makers, social movements and researchers. Some mainstream institutions such as the FAO and the French government are now also engaging with agroecology. While in some ways the adoption of agroecology in the mainstream is welcome, it is also problematic. These institutions often treat agroecology as a technical fix to the existing system and ignore the calls for transformative political and economic change. This puts agroecology at risk of being co-opted, like has been witnessed with sustainable agriculture and organic agriculture. Some social movements, including La Via Campesina, contest the co-optation of agroecology in order to claim a radical political agroecology.

The movements for agroecology are diverse – occurring in different places, amongst diverse peoples, knowledges and worldviews and at different scales. Yet, what holds these in common are their commitment to social transformation, through the combination of material practices that build

alternative food systems and discursive processes that argue for political agroecology. The political work of social movements often occurs in the margins, from the bottom up. It is thus decentralised, heterogeneous, place-based and emergent. Yet in the context of a globalised struggle for food sovereignty, it is necessary to engage in processes that bring dispersed actors together to make and re-make meaning together and advance a common political project across places and at different scales, from the local, national to the international.

In this article, I will share two such recent processes, one at national and another at an international level and I will discuss their relevance for urban agroecology, and for social transformation more generally.

A case study from England

A People's Food Policy (PFP) is both a document and a process undertaken in England and created with the intention to advance the food sovereignty movement in the UK. The intention was to build networks, increase capacity and to generate a document that could provide the basis for strategic campaigns and actions in the coming years.

The process involved 18 months of nation-wide discussion amongst grassroots organisations, NGOs, trade unions, community projects, small businesses and individuals. The resulting document, *A People's Food Policy*, was launched in June 2017 – a manifesto outlining a people's vision of food and farming in England that is supported by over 90 food and farming organisations. It includes a set of policy proposals and a vision for change that is rooted in the lived experiences and needs of people most affected by the failures in the current food system.

In the UK, the publication is an important contribution to the debates on post-Brexit food and farming. Since Brexit, there has been almost twenty other reports marking recommendations for agricultural and food policy change in a volatile political moment. However, many of these reports focus on a narrow selection of issues and none link to the frameworks of rights, food sovereignty or agroecology. *A People's Food Policy* emphasises the interconnectedness between problems such as labour rights, environmental destruction and health, and the need for holistic integrated approaches to achieve food sovereignty. It articulates how these problems arise from a neoliberal and narrow market-led paradigm and it emphasises a shift to a paradigm where the well-being of people, community and the natural world, here and afar, are at the centre of governance.

Now that *A People's Food Policy* has been published, the steering group is bringing people together from different grassroots organisations in the UK to strategise on further mobilisation around it. In the end the document is only a part, albeit an important one, of a longer-term process of building food sovereignty in the UK.

In the global arena

The International Forum on Agroecology, held in February 2015, was the largest international gathering of social movements on agroecology. It was organised by an alliance of small-scale food producers and consumers and held at the Nyeleni Centre, in Selingue, Mali. The forum served to create a space for dialogue and to collectively interpret the meaning of agroecology from the perspective of multiple grassroots constituencies (e.g. fisherfolk, peasants, indigenous peoples, pastoralists, etc.). Agroecology was treated as an emergent and evolving idea, with different meanings for different people coming from different contexts. There is much richness and diversity in the movements working on agroecology and this exchange in the space of the forum was a pivotal step forward to develop a common platform. It advanced the process of linking up and developing common principles of what agroecology means, for example, to a peasant in Indonesia or to fisherfolk from South Africa.

Social movements are very aware of the dangers of mainstreaming agroecology. A key rationale for organising the international meeting was to build collective consciousness and capacity to resist co-option: *"They have tried to redefine it as a narrow set of technologies, to offer some tools that appear to ease the sustainability crisis of industrial food production, while the existing structures of power remain unchallenged. This co-option of agroecology to fine-tune the industrial food system, while paying lip service to the environmental discourse, has various names, including "climate smart agriculture", "sustainable-" or "ecological intensification"- Declaration from the International Forum on Agroecology*

Thus, at the heart of the declaration, was the demand that agroecology must be linked to a process of social transformation. Ibrahim Coulibaly from CNOP in Mali, the host organisation of the international forum, explained (watch video: youtu.be/-KmgKv5UyIU).

"There is no food sovereignty without agroecology. And certainly, agroecology will not last without a food sovereignty policy that backs it up."

Making the links: urban agroecology and food sovereignty

The call for urban agroecology must also be a demand for social transformation and requires engagement in work that is simultaneously practical and political. Agroecology demands not only changes in specific policies and practices, but more fundamentally, the transformation of the very structures, languages and cultures that underpin the injustices of the dominant paradigm. This is why intentional processes and statements that directly link the practical with the political in a broad vision of societal transformation, like the two examples here, are critically important. The links between urban agriculture and the wider agroecology-food sovereignty movement appear nascent, and there is work to do to connect and develop the political dimensions in urban agriculture.

While there are many local-level initiatives that are engaged in urban agriculture, including for example allotment and community gardens, the connection to transformative political thinking and explicit political action is often weak. Without an explicit political narrative, the transformative potential of urban agriculture is marginal. While I have focused here on food sovereignty and agroecology as important political frameworks, it is also important to note that this connection to radical political thinking may not necessarily be under the auspices of food sovereignty or agroecology. Radical politics in urban food growing spaces draw for example from anarchist thinking, the right to the city, food justice, amongst others. Yet still, many of these spaces are devoid of any of these emancipatory ways of locating urban agriculture.

My point is not to write off the diverse initiatives that do not have an explicitly political dimension but rather to say these are the frontiers of social transformation. We need to imagine how to cultivate radical political commitments in context-appropriate ways with people who are drawn to these spaces, many of who come to achieve personal satisfaction and reconnect with nature. The attainment of personal benefit is of course critically important. The satisfaction of growing one's own food, the joy of working together and interacting with people and nature and of course the enjoyment of eating food that you have had a hand in growing yourself are all core to the urban agroecology project. Yet these sites can be much more, and in some cases, are, as they are intentionally constructed as spaces to culture resistance, political dialogues and actions. My argument is that the processes and methodologies of politicisation need more attention.

In this regard, the declarations produced through grassroots processes, such as the UK *A People's Food Policy* and the *Declaration of the International Forum on Agroecology*, are examples of processes and tools that are helpful in locating the practical work in a critical political context and providing



UK Food Sovereignty Gathering at Organiclea in London. Photo by Joanna Bojczewska

ideas for how to take forward actions for change. Even more important are opportunities to bring people in and across communities into dialogue to build critical consciousness around the political and cultural problems that undermine social justice and ecological regeneration. The two examples here facilitated some of these dialogues, and the products of these dialogues will be used to provoke debate going forward. There are many methodologies in the vein of popular education that can be used in any context to make the links between the practical and the political in urban agriculture. The key is to start where people are, with what is important in their lives and together to deepen our political analysis as the basis for collective action.

Urban agroecology and food sovereignty are not only material but also are political and cultural projects – they will require a shift in how we think. This requires us to consider carefully processes of learning and pedagogy and to avoid imposing a pre-defined vision of agroecology onto projects and places but rather to engage in processes of dialogues amongst food producers and citizens to create critical understanding, mutual learning and collective consciousness. The tradition of popular education, rooted in the work and thinking of Paulo Freire, bell hooks, Orlando Falá Borda amongst others, can provide direction, tools and exemplify the commitments required to grow and evolve social movements.

The examples shared in this article unfolded at a national and an international scale respectively. Thus, neither was focused directly on the urban scale. There is a range of processes such as food policy councils that do focus on an urban scale, yet in many cases, these are not (yet) explicitly connected to food sovereignty. Regardless, what is clear is that there are important connections to be made across scales. To what extent are urban initiatives drawing from, connecting with and contributing to the wider food sovereignty movement? Conversely, is “the urban” and urban people being given enough consideration in a movement that is often largely rural in nature? These will be important questions to ask as we work to build movements across the rural-urban, and other, boundaries.

In closing, I want to reiterate that an urban agroecology must affirm the conviction articulated in the food

sovereignty, and other related, movements that social transformation, particularly in the food system, will not be reached through technical innovation alone (e.g. innovations in production practices). We must organise for shifts in power relations through cultural, institutional and political-economic change. This is a long game – one that does not often involve quick wins. Yet, momentum is building as the contradictions of industrial-corporate food reveal themselves and as the ingenuity of people is amplified through their coming together in social movements.

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Working with the European Coordination of Via Campesina, we are currently developing resources on popular education methodologies for agroecology available at www.eurovia.org