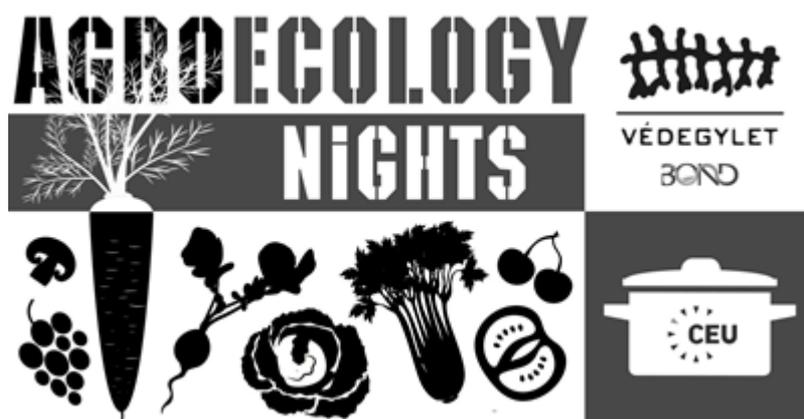


AGROECOLOGY NIGHTS N° 3

Socio-political aspects of Agroecology



The **Agroecology Nights** event series is co-organised by Védegyelet and the Department of Environmental Sciences and Policy at the Central European University. Between November 2018 and March 2019 the four events tackle different fields of agroecology through movie screenings and roundtable discussion with local and international experts. On Thursday, February 14th the third event of the Agroecology Nights event series took place focusing on the social aspects of agroecology with three presentations by guest speakers and a roundtable discussion with the audience.

The first presentation was given by **Carolina Rizzi Star**, an ecologist from Brazil, currently working as the agricultural officer responsible for the implementation of agroecology at the Regional Office of Europe and Central Asia of the **Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO)**. Carolina has participated in the agroecological transition and agrarian reform in Brazil and has experience in advising on biodiversity, ecosystem services and intellectual property rights related to family farmers. In her presentation, she gave an insight into agroecological transformation in general and provided specific examples from Latin- America.

Agroecology is a set of practices, research principles and a social process; and in some cases it can be extremely complex, covering the whole food system, bringing a transformative approach. Agroecological transformation occurs at different levels of the food system, starting with the farming system.

The five levels of transformation were identified by *Gliessman*¹:

- At the farm level
- I) *Increase efficiency of industrial systems*
 - II) *Substitute alternative practices for conventional inputs*
 - III) *Redesign the agroecosystem based on ecological processes*
- but this is not enough, for a transformation that ranges through the whole food system
- IV) *Connections between producers and consumers need to be re-established, networks and alliances need to be formed*
 - V) *Re-design of the food system on the global scale based on equity, participation, democracy; policy also needs to focus on these*
- 2 points (see Gliessman, 2016).



Agroecology has very strong examples from Latin-America for the whole world. The **La Via Campesina** movement started as a reaction to unfair agricultural systems, struggling rural communities and land grabbing. An important milestone was the 1993 TRIPS agreement that generated the first seed patents, criminalising farmers and traditional seed systems. These movements developed parallel in many places, the local and regional initiatives started to come together for stronger lobbying power. Today, La Via Campesina is an umbrella organisation with 180 member organisations from over 100 countries, it is one of the world's largest social movement representing more than 200 million small-scale food producers, agricultural workers and farmers across the world. Their **main goals** today are:

- 1) *Food sovereignty*
- 2) *Land reform*
- 3) *Agroecological transformation*
- 4) *Protecting farmers rights and fighting against the criminalisation of farmers*

The biggest challenge for these movements is gaining access to the mainstream politics and provide a viable alternative for food systems. To mainstream agroecology, a dialogue needs to be established among stakeholders, Carolina provided examples from Brazil of how this can be achieved:

- The **COUNSEA** - Council for Food and Nutritional security has worked for 15 years advising the government on several issues in the food system. Members included civil society organisations and government representatives; with their help many important projects were approved and funded working on a consensus basis - instead of voting.
- The **National Plan for Agroecology and Organic Agriculture** was a government project for 6 years focusing on themes of production, conservation of natural resources, knowledge management and consumption. All government agencies related to food security and nutrition took part in the work, as well as civil society members.

¹ **Gliessman, S.**, 2016. Transforming food systems with agroecology. *Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems* 40, 187–189. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21683565.2015.1130765>

Carolina emphasised that although the **consensus-based decision making** is very time consuming; these projects contributed strongly in the implementation of policies and providing funding for agroecology, combining both a top-down and a bottom-up approach. On the government level, different ministries were responsible for family farming and large-scale, export oriented agricultural production, which resulted in a balance of power for both sectors. With the change in the government, unfortunately these initiatives came to an end, but still provide a very good example for other countries to follow. In a time of national political focus shifting towards industrial agribusiness, some regional governments are adapting policies for continuous support of these initiatives.

The second speaker was **Viktória Bohus**, an agronomist representing the **Autism Foundation of Miskolc** and **Barka Social Farm**. In their housing and daycare facilities, the Foundation provides appropriate support for people living with autism, which includes offering adaptable employment for their clients. At the **Maacraft workshop**, high-professional designed products are prepared by artisans from natural materials, such as wood or willow. Different steps of the production can be performed by different disabled employees, always adapted to their capabilities. In Szakáld, a village based social enterprise, the Barka social farm provides employment in farming tasks. The goods are sold or used in the establishment's kitchen, partly providing for the eco-tourism activities. There is also a **therapeutic garden** for clients, that also provides ingredients for herb mixtures. Barka farm is a founding member of the **Hungarian Social Farming Alliance**, that is working for legal acknowledgement and certification of social farming. At the moment, goods produced at the farm by the Foundation cannot be used or sold legally, and financial support from EU funds do not include social farms.

The third speaker, **Miklós Tóth** introduced the **Gyüttment Festival** and Movement to the audience. "**Gyüttment**" is an expression used for people who are newcomers to the countryside, the so called "incomers". The Festival aims at helping people who already moved or are planning to move to rural areas. Currently in Hungary, these people are mostly fragmented geographically, so it is important to give them a sense of community once a year, where they can meet likeminded people and give them a space to exchange.

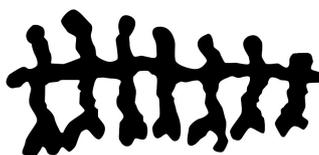
Miklós presented the **transition theory of Deborah Frieze** in order to point out that everyone has a role in changing the current system. Although this **Two-loop theory** is not specifically used for food systems, the theory is based on the assumption that the current system is unsustainable in many aspects, from a social, environmental and economic point of view – therefore it needs reconfiguration. In order to do so, according to Ms. Frieze, a parallel system needs to be developed, where "**trailblazers**" are the first to make a new kind of living; while "**illuminators/influencers**" help transform the information from the new system to the old, where "**sleepers**" need such information. In the old system; "**hospice workers**" are helping people who failed (such as the homeless and the poor); while "**protectors**" are the winners of the old system.

The Gyüttment movement intends at helping the “trailblazers” to find connections and be more successful in building an alternative system.

The festival is only a four-day event once a year, but now they are trying to develop it further for a year-round movement. Each year, it takes place in a different location with the hope to provide assistance and visitors for trailblazer communities - in some cases it can even help people find a new home in these areas. It is the first **zero-waste festival** in Hungary, with compost toilets, no garbage cans, and bring-your-own utensils. Yearly, 200 volunteers help in running the festival for 3000-4000 visitors; where programs include talks, peer-to-peer exchange and cultural events. In 2018 the Gyüttment Club was formed to provide year-long programs and activities for the community in Budapest. The goal is also to create some income for the community by monetising know-how on zero-waste festivals or compost toilets.

As for urban dwellers, Miklós emphasised that it doesn't matter where you live, you can still have a mindset promoting change. The countryside in Hungary is emptying out and the problem is that the rural people want to live an urban lifestyle as well. Gyüttment people can also have an effect on showing new ways for the rural communities, or staying in the city improving urban livelihoods in a sustainable way.

To conclude the discussion, we asked the speakers what is their opinion on *what kind of change is needed in order to make the shift to Agroecology?* Viktória describes Barka Farm as a place where raising awareness is performed since the age of kindergarten. She said the best results can be achieved with this age group, change needs to start as early as possible. Carolina emphasised that consumers have more power than they would know, so the question is really how we can engage those around us to use less plastic, use their car less, buy agroecological products. “Try to change yourself and apply what you are saying and put some easy targets for yourself”- she added. Miklós raised attention to the psychology of changing habits and how hard it is; he pointed out that we need to ease up on feeling guilty all the time, in order any change to happen.



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