**Social dimension of agroecology**

1. **What is “social”?**

In a large definition we can use the word “social” as the expression of the relations between the living beings. Certain non-human animals as most of mammifers for example are called “social species”.

This point helps us to see that social includes a reflection on what happens **between** the living beings. We can call this **interrelational perspective.**

On a more anthropological way the word social is more connected to the **collective** and **community** dimensions:

* How are the groups organized, and how do they work?
* What are the people doing when they act together?
* What is the difference and the complementarity between acting alone and acting together and when is this balanced or not (we can call this the I/C paradox)?

In the common sense the social connects to the word **society**. This connection explains for example the concept of “social security”, a social warranty that a society give to their members. It may also connect to a little society: a group of friends, a club, a group of interests. (social events, social net…). It connects also with **economic, cultural, political, educational, spiritual dimensions of a society.**

We have also the concept of **social work** including several professions working in the social field (working with and for people facing social challenges and social problems).

In the **juridical sense** “social” can have ambiguous sense: it can connect to the relations between employers and employees (social lows, social conflicts …) or connect to relations between associates (social mandates).

1. **Practical examples of bio-agriculture**

Let’s see in our case how this varied social dimension can be connected and give sense to the agro ecological perspective in a degrowth context.

Let’s start our reflexion from **3 concrete cases,** the stories of Marcus, Dorian and Danielle, and Gerard and Annelies.

Those 3 case stories came from a case study presented in a Belgium book “Agroécologie entre pratique et sciences sociales.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The presented persons were interviewed two times with a 10 years interval: one’s around 2001 and one’s around 2011.

**Marcus and the “profitable organization” perspective**

Marcus is born in a farm. He is a 40 years farmer at the first interview in 2001. He is coming from a large farmer’s family and has several brothers also farmers. One on them is working in Bio since several years now and convinced him about the profit he can make with this. So he decided to transform 20% of his vast fields (350 ha) from “conventional” agriculture to bio (that means 70 ha). He is selling his bio- production (meat and vegetables), sometimes to the supermarkets, sometimes to small distributors, local nets and markets. Business considerations are more present in the first interview. Marcus informs us for example that he had to separate his farm in two different societies, one for the bio-production and one for the non-bio-production. This helps him to avoid administrative problems. His choice for continuing to produce partly in conventional is linked to the opportunity of keeping the interesting quotas he has for producing beets. He is also limiting the working time for collaborators to a half time job (except short time jobbers in the high season times of course). He is using machines in a kind of bio-industry-machines compromise. In the second interview he is still speaking about business and industry but brings also more ecological considerations as: quality of food, taste of food, importance that his family can eat with pleasure the farm production. Also the question of food security and social health is present.

**Dorian and Danielle: “interaction between ecological and business principles”**

Dorian is 40 in 2001 and took since 15 years the grand-parents farm (8 Ha). He is first working with a full-time employee in the bio-dynamic perspective. He is producing meat, milk, cereals, producing also bread. He is selling those products in his farm and on several local markets. He speaks a lot about his ecological convictions: his concept of an agriculture working with the nature in place of fighting it… about his choice of paying somebody for doing bread in place of having a bread machine…about keeping a farm with a human dimension, about non growing, about non specializing. I don’t want to do just milk, just bread. The farm is like a living being, it is not only an arm or a leg… He is in favor that the people are coming to buy inside of the farm.

From those convictions he is acting a little bit differently that his colleagues. He thinks it is not useful to calculate too much or to produce mountains of butter. It is enough to do the butter that is needed “here and now” so that the people are happy. He likes to take time for those who are coming to the farm, to show them what he is doing in place of “paying for advertising that will bring very few…

We find in this speaking critical coming from the ecological perspective as well to the industrial one (not calculating too much) that to the business one (advertising).

Ten years later, Dorian met a new companion Danielle. She has developed cheese production. They are now selling all their products inside of the farm where they opened a real little shop… They are also commercializing other bio products that their own ones: grocery, bio production of other farmers, products from Fairtrade. Ecological references are thus going on, with this specificity of linking local selling and fairtrade, of linking local space and fairtrade…

They had in 2008 a governmental food agency control that detected an inacceptable level of PCB (polychlorobiphenyles) in their milk. They were obliged to stop the milk and cheese production during several months. This was a very difficult episode, financially and morally. They could finally go on with the help, gives and loans of friends and family. This was in this time that they putted the little shop on the way.

Even if they are still critical in 2011 concerning the business, trade and industry principals, we also see now some positive references to those principals. This is the case when the Dorian explains that after the control they had to find “researches” to “find solutions” (industrial principal). One of those solutions was to organize concerts and meals in the farm. Another initiative was to welcome classes in the farm. In the more strict agricultural way, they think know how to value the milk or how to keep animals as long as possible and transform them at the end and sell them in their shop in vacuum packing (business and merchant principal).

**Gerard and Annelies: from business to social perspective**

On the first interview in 2003 Gerard is 50. He is sun of farmer. He starts his career as an employee in the railway. A work he sees retrospectively as a routine. He decides than later to install with his new wife Annelies who made before a sociocultural professional career. They are working with two part-time collaborators and work on 2,5 hectares. They have created an informal association with other producers for coordinating the types of vegetables they want to produce, the quantity and the prices. They create together a bio-shop and propose also vegetables baskets to the households of the region.

During the second interview, they have taken distance with this association. They prefer to work more deeply in the social and ecological aspects, with fewer partners. They developed other activities: bed and breakfast in the farm, collaboration with the village school to train children in bio-agriculture, helping of young drug-addicts to help them in social reinsertion. Annelies had a training in life stories techniques and proposes to farmer women individual and collective helping with this method.

We see it: ecological and social principals are very present in this case. Since the first interview, we see it in the option of producing varied vegetables with on little scale, of using workmanship more than buying tools and machines, of selling locally. Social and ecological preoccupations have still won in importance in the second interview in 2011. Distance with the producers association is justified by the desire to go deeper in sustainable, social and educative activities… When Annelies speaks about life stories, she presents them as a way for helping the women in rural area to reflect to their own life-balance: the part of life they use for work and for other activities, the balance between what they give to the others and what they receive from them.

Industrial principles are also present since the first interview. Especially in the first interview, they mentioned the care they had for building an association of producers. Also the care for organizing an “Open door” annual day for 500 persons with leisure activities and a meal. In the second interview, this industrial principle is still clearer. They separated carefully the economic and social parts of the activities creating different juridical structures. They collaborate actively with a farmer who has an independent statute and take in charge all the production side of the farm. More fundamentally they are concerned to find persons who have the good competencies allowing them to work efficiently with their own values and in the reality where they are.

1. **Proposition of an exercise for looking on a project with 7 criteria**

for a better understanding of the social dimension of agro ecological examples: bio-agriculture, shared gardens, distribution nets, community projects etc.

Choose one of the 3 stories above and try to discuss and/or analyse it using the following criterias. If usefull you could add other criterias …

* **Top down** (seeds legislation or sanitaire controls) or **bottom up** (initiative of opening an alternative shop or organizing a participative certification net as Ecovida experience in Brazil) **Institutionalization?**
* **Inclusive or exclusive processes?**
* **The question of localization**: urban or rural area, a countryside where forest and fields are clearly separated or where the two are mixed ….?
* What are the **different actors** involved or to involve in the project?
* What is the **collective and/or community dimension** of the project?
* Looking to the **history of a project** helps to understand the triple relation between territories, institutions and the actors of a project.
* Others …

**The exercise aims to share (in little groups) experiences and observations of agro ecology, questioning the social dimension of them with those 7 criteria…and/or others.**

**You may also question a project you are visiting preparing questions for the inhabitants.**

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1. Denise Van Dam and Jean Nizet In Agroecologie entre pratique et sciences sociales pp 249-264 Ed Educagri [↑](#footnote-ref-1)