



# Local Government in Argentina

## Responses to Urban-Rural Challenges

edited by

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## Structure of Local Government





## 4.4. Local Cooperation for Agroecology

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### Relevance of the Practice

The most emblematic phenomenon of the green revolution in Argentina was the introduction and approval of the transgenic soybean resistant to the herbicide glyphosate (RR soybean) in the 1990s. The genetically modified seed plus the herbicide glyphosate allowed the crop to be profitable as it lowered production costs. This allowed Argentina to develop the so-called 'revolution of the pampas'. Although the effects on the capacity to increase crops were undeniable, so were the socio-environmental damages. Not only in terms of biodiversity loss, but also in terms of human costs: the agricultural frontier was advancing, displacing peasants who became poor in the cities.<sup>85</sup>

Faced with this scenario, a new approach to agriculture began to emerge: agroecology. This new approach began to promote a comprehensive, open, and interdisciplinary paradigm. First, it was considered as an innovation from a technological point of view based on the understanding of ecological dynamics applied to crops and the management of natural resources. But when it arrived to Latin America, it was combined with the appearance of peasant movements and a political vision of farmers' empowerment.

This process is particularly important at the local level of government because the acute effects and problems associated with the dominant agricultural model are most evident at this level. In this sense, it is of fundamental importance to study how municipalities deal with this problem and react to the emergence and diffusion of answers to these problems as alternative production models.

As the capacities of rural governments are relatively small, they face serious problems to access and mobilize resources, as well as to generate the knowledge and tools necessary to build consistent and effective alternative production models.

Particularly, there are eight key drivers in the process of taking agroecology to a larger scale: (i) recognition of a crisis that motivates the search for alternatives, (ii) social organization, (iii) constructivist learning processes, (iv) effective agroecological practices, (v) mobilizing

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<sup>85</sup> Bruno Reichert, 'Discutir el "campo". Una grieta en el suelo latinoamericano' (*Nueva Sociedad*, January 2021) <<https://nuso.org/articulo/soja-campo-america-latina/>>.



discourses, (vi) external allies, (vii) favorable markets, and (viii) favorable political opportunities and policy frameworks.<sup>86</sup>

Local cooperation is a fundamental answer to many of these obstacles. And, in this sense, the federal initiative of the National Network of Municipalities and Communities that promote Agroecology (RENAMA) is a crucial actor in the local and cooperative construction of responses to the negative socio-environmental impacts of the dominant agricultural production model in Argentina.

## Description of the Practice

Faced with the economic, social and environmental impacts of hegemonic agricultural production modes, the alternative paradigm of agroecology began to spread through the country and began to be adapted by producers, mainly those excluded by the other system. According to the latest National Agricultural Census (2018), there are 2,324 farms that do agroecology in Argentina, out of an estimated total of 250,000 farms.<sup>87</sup> If the farms that grow organic crops (they do not use transgenics) or biodynamic crops (a specific method of organic farming) are added in total, there are about 5,277 productive units that work in an 'unconventional' way in the country, which means that one of every 50 agricultural holdings in Argentina work under an alternative productive paradigm.

Nevertheless, the massification and escalation of these alternative production modes requires governmental assistance in ways that are not easy to provide by single local governments.<sup>88</sup>

To overcome this problem of scale, in 2016, a group of agronomists, doctors and socio-environmental referents created the National Network of Agroecological Municipalities (RENAMA). As agroecology is characterized by its multidisciplinary and pluri-epistemological character, its meaning and understanding have varied (evolving) over time. It can be seen simultaneously as a scientific approach, as a movement, or as a series of techniques. In this way, the interest, and its adoption by different actors (farmers, educators, researchers, technicians, and politicians) has reflected these different meanings.<sup>89</sup> Consequently, RENAMA is made up of farmers, agricultural technicians, municipalities, government entities, academic and scientific organizations, and grassroots organizations, with the objective of exchanging experiences and knowledge for the transition towards agroecology of the agri-food system.

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<sup>86</sup> Mateo Mier and others, 'Escalamiento de la agroecología: impulsores clave y casos emblemáticos' (working paper no 1, Grupo en masificación de la agroecología 2019).

<sup>87</sup> National Institute of Statistics and Census of Argentina, 'National Agricultural Census' (*indec*, 2018) <<https://cna2018.indec.gob.ar/>>.

<sup>88</sup> Mier and others, 'Escalamiento de la agroecología'.

<sup>89</sup> Alexander Wezel, and Virginie Soldat, 'A Quantitative and Qualitative Historical Analysis of the Scientific Discipline of Agroecology' (2009) 7 *International Journal of Agricultural Sustainability* 3.



The organization works through a logic of voluntary cooperation between municipalities and other actors in the face of social demand. Currently, RENAMA is a network that includes 34 Argentine towns (plus one in Uruguay and one in Spain) and groups 180 producers who work on about 100,000 hectares under the agroecological paradigm, with the advice of 85 technicians. The network works on the base of cooperation between the different actors and the promotion of the activity. Local governments take information and policy options from the network to apply them in their communities.

An interesting example is the commune of Zavalla. A town of 7,000 inhabitants located in the heart of the agricultural Pampa, in the south of the Province of Santa Fe. Similarly to every rural town in Argentina, barely a street separates the houses from the cultivated fields.

The intense use and close exposure of agrochemicals generated a social claim for a legislation that prohibited applications in a peri-urban strip of 800 meters from the inhabited limit. A measure that generated discomfort among producers and thus was very difficult to implement. Trying an alternative, the commune carried out an agroecology pilot test on a four-hectare site, where lettuce, arugula and zucchini were planted, among other crops. But producers were not used to this new way of working, so the first results were not as expected.

In 2019 the commune became part of RENAMA, and an agroecological plan was designed. Now, through an environmental tax, imposed by the local government, the commune subsidizes a fixed monthly amount equivalent to producers who decide to try an alternative production model.

Today Zavalla has some hectares dedicated to agroecological horticultural production, but in the vast majority of the 150 reconverted hectares they make extensive crops that are common in the area, such as corn or wheat. Last season they produced 50 tons of agroecological wheat in the town. Profits doubled production costs, while with conventional wheat, which they used to grow before agroecology, the costs outweighed the profits.<sup>90</sup> For all the actors involved, having technical assistance is key as it is a new mode of production for everyone.

## Assessment of the Practice

For a country in which the exports of the cereal and oilseed complexes account for around 40 per cent of the total exported volume, the agricultural production model is not easy to discuss and dispute. But at the same time, its scale generates broad impacts whose negative effects are mainly found in rural cities that suffer from unregulated agrochemical application, where small producers are marginalized, and environmental problems appear.

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<sup>90</sup> Jorgelina Hiba, 'Red de municipios expande la agroecología en Argentina' (*Diálogo Chino*, 9 February 2021) <<https://dialogochino.net/es/agricultura-es/39830-red-de-municipios-expande-la-agroecologia-en-argentina/>>.





The construction of alternatives, for now, is an eminently territorial and local process where the articulation first between producers and then between municipalities is crucial. To enable and enhance these cooperation processes, the RENAMA appears to be a fundamental, successful, and growing actor.

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