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Farmers' cooperation and networks, a key driver for the transition to agro-ecological farming systems in Navarra and the Basque Country (Spain)

Photo: GAN Archive

Understanding and Improving the Sustainability of Agro-ecological Farming Systems in the EU

ISSUE BRIEF

Agro-ecological transition needs a basis of cooperation or collaboration. Cooperation among farmers is especially indispensable to ensure the long-term sustainability of the agro-ecological farming systems.

The Spanish case study focuses on a group of small-sized agro-ecological farmers from Navarra and the Basque Country (belonging to EHKO association) that are already in an advanced stage of the agro-ecological transition, as they already implement environmentally friendly agro-ecological practices.

Socio-economic fragility

Despite the good environmental performance of their farms, those farmers face social and economic fragility which is related to several problems, such as: isolation, low social recognition, lack of support in experimentation and knowledge advisory, a fragmented and undeveloped agro-ecological market, weak eco-cooperatives and high workload that prevent farmers from participating in collective actions.

Strengthening farmers' cooperation

Based on our research findings, strengthening farmers' cooperation and networks is a key strategy that would help farmers to reduce their socio-economic fragility, without worsening their good environmental performance. Within this strategy, 3 initiatives stand out: learning communities (AKIS), peer-to-peer mentoring and a measure implemented in France that promotes farmers' participation in collective actions, known as "replacement services".

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Related to UNISECO case study:

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Activities held for members of the farmers' association EHKO



Thanks to these initiatives, small-sized agro-ecological farmers could participate in collective actions, and their connections with other farmers would be strengthened. The empowerment of farmers would benefit the whole agro-ecological system, since the transition should follow a bottom-up approach, that is, being based on the experience and necessities of farmers. Once agro-ecological farmers' associations and cooperatives are strengthened, it is when they must create networks and coordination structures with other actors of the value chain in order to develop the agro-ecological market.

POTENTIAL OUTCOMES

Strengthening farmers' organizations might reduce socio-economic fragility of small-sized agro-ecological farmers, ensuring their long-term sustainability and upscaling the agro-ecological model. As the system strengthens, more farmers would be encouraged to start the conversion and consequently the environmental benefits for the whole of society would increase. In addition, enabling cooperation would also develop the agro-ecological market, offering a growing consumer demand a more complete and varied choice of local and organic foods.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Webpage of farmers association EHKolektiboa: <https://ehkolektiboa.eus>

Agro-ecological farming systems in Navarra and the Basque Country (Story Map): <https://uniseco-project.eu/case-study/spain>

Findings of sustainability performances of 10 farms (with DST tools): <https://www.navarraagraria.com/categories/item/1734-proyecto-uniseco>

ABOUT UNISECO:

UNISECO is a European research project aiming to develop innovative approaches to enhance the understanding of socio-economic and policy drivers and barriers for further development and implementation of agro-ecological practices in EU farming systems.

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<https://ec.europa.eu/eip/agriculture/en/find-connect/projects/understanding-and-improving-sustainability-agro>

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