



Sharing knowledge for a stronger agroecology movement in ECA region

Report of local experiences

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AGROECOLOGY AND INTERCONNECTEDNESS OF THINGS



Rano Jumaeva, the director of the Tajik organization - Cultural Educational Centre TOMIRIS, in an interview with Paulina Jeziorek from Agro-Perma-Lab Foundation, talks on the challenges that her organization meets in different regions of the country while working with youth and promoting education, including the knowledge on the benefits of the agroecological approach.

Paulina Jeziorek: Can you tell more about the organization TOMIRIS? What is the organization's focus and what is your area of influence, where are you based?

Rano Jumaeva: Our organization is focused on working with youth. We work with three rural groups: children, teenagers and young women who became our main focus. We promote education. Sometimes we also work with their parents to explain how important it is for women to be educated. We help them develop soft skills, entrepreneurship skills. When working with women we try to give them some kind of financial education so they can start their own businesses. Recently we began providing environmental education as well, including agroecology. We teach these young women agroecological approaches. We show them what kind of benefits they could get from it.

Our head office is located in the city of Bokhtar, the Khatlon region. It is in the south of the country and Khatlon is the largest region of Tajikistan. We also work in other regions of Tajikistan. When our organization was established in 2011 we started to work on a local level in Tajikistan.

At the beginning we were registered as a regional organization focused on education and we had the right to work in the Bokhtar region only. Later, in 2015, we reregistered as a national organization. It gave us the right to work in different regions of Tajikistan and with other groups like children and teenagers. It was very important for us to start working outside of our region. We saw many possibilities to promote the rights of young women all over the country. At the moment we work in the Bokhtar region, but we have our representatives in different regions and we have our partners.

Why education of young females became your main focus? What is their situation in your region?

We started to work with women in 2011 when we understood in our region there is limited access to education for young women. They usually attend school for 8 years and after that, they usually do not continue education in high school or university. So we wanted to fill the gap. We started to work in that field, building awareness about the importance of education among females. In our region women are the group of the population that is the most



vulnerable to violence, home violence and exploitation in terms of work they do in the field and at home.

Tomiris started to work in the agroecology field as well. Can you say more about that?

Agriculture and Agroecology became important topics that we decided to work with since we became a part of Agroecology Schools[1]. We started to cooperate closely with Aida from Kyrgyzstan and other agroecology organizations from our region including the ones from Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. We visited Poland and Italy where we took part in agroecological training. The knowledge we gained there we use to promote agroecology among our beneficiaries which are rural women. We help them to start and put into practice the UNDROP Declaration. We educate them on the usage of drip irrigation. We provide knowledge about agroecological methods of growing vegetables in mountain regions. Our regional partners run their Agroecology Schools like us. So we are in the same network.

Last year we won a grant for organizing the Youth Summer Camp for agribusiness.

Thanks to the grant we were able to organize 2 summer stays for 2 groups of 40 people. Each stay lasted 5 days. The first group consisted of young people aged 18-24, and the second group of people aged 25-30. All the young people came to study agribusiness, receive field training provided by our organization, including agroecological production. Exchange of experience among local farmers and peasants was an important part of it as well as the degustation of local products.

Also, we organized separate agroecology training sessions for female farmers from 3 different sub-regions of Tajikistan. It was only for rural women. We taught them methods of production, agroecological approaches. But also an important part of our training was teaching them how to sell their products, make them more attractive, and how to explain to consumers the real values of their products. So in general the training included different methods of marketing.

When talking of agroecology, we think about good quality food production, ecological sustainability

and social justice. Which one of the three agroecological fields is the most important one for you? Or which one needs the most attention in your region?

All things you mentioned, including the rights of peasants and farmers and organic production are our focus. However, our groups are more focused on organic production. They also develop methods of labelling their products with organic labels and marketing products. Also, they had a serious problem with local seeds.



[1]Agroecology Schools – a project that aims sharing knowledge for a stronger agroecology movement in the ECA region. In the context of abandon of agricultural activities and rural exodus in the Europe and Central Asia (ECA) Region, the project aims at strengthening local food producers’ organizations and networks by supporting grassroots organizations actions in rural areas and specifically their knowledge-related activities. The project therefore allows agroecology schools facilitators to meet, exchange and be trained on content and methodology, supported by the “Bilim” digital platform. The project is co-led by four organizations: ADI (Kyrgyzstan), Ecoruralis (Romania), Elkana (Giorgia) and Schola Campesina (Italia) Countries of implementation: Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Bosnia Herzegovina, Georgia, Turkey, Moldova , Ukraine, Romania, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan. (info: <https://www.scholacampesina.org/bilim/>)

The quality of local seeds deteriorated due to the usage of chemical fertilizers. We received a lot of questions on how to improve the quality of seeds and how to avoid using chemicals. So I would say that these kind of questions are the most interesting for our audience because the biggest income in our region is from cucumbers, tomatoes, melons and watermelons.

What is your cooperation with other Agroecology Schools and how do you receive the support?

We have WhatsApp groups in all the regions of Tajikistan. We exchange our experience, information on the events that we organize in our region. We work a lot on marketing of the products and they show us how to organize a farmer shop as they have it in Kyrgyzstan. They do a huge amount of work on local seeds and we learn from them a lot.

How an agroecological approach could transform your region?

Agroecological approaches put emphasis on the interconnectedness of systems. All systems in our society are interconnected. I can give you a few examples from the region. Severe storms are often occurring in Tajikistan which we call Afghan storms as they come from Afghanistan. They have a strong impact on the environment and the climate of the region. The dust storms significantly reduce visibility and pose a human health threat.

A lot of people suffer from lung disease. One ecologist that we had a discussion with explained to us that strong storms occur due to the cutting of huge amounts of trees on the border between Tajikistan and Afghanistan. Now there is no barrier to withhold the strong wind and sand storms. So this became a huge problem for us.

In Tajikistan, we have more problems because of the war conflict between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Normally there is a lot of products' exchange in the border zones and border regions. But the production stopped as the people did not have access to the market. Their products did not go anywhere, they lost their produce and income.

Keeping in mind this interconnectedness, we dedicated a part of our training to speak on how women can influence their local environment. In Tajikistan, there are small water channels that flow between villages. People use the channels as a source of drinking water, they use the water on their farms or in their homes. Children can drink the water when outside. Many women thought they can throw trash to the channels and water will take the trash away, they were not aware that the water takes trash to other villages and other people cannot use it. Some women used the water channels to throw the ashes from the oven after they bake their bread. They threw some dust after cleaning their houses.

They washed their dishes or clothes and polluted the water with chemicals. We explained to them they should not do it, so the water can stay clean as for other women the channels are a source of drinkable water.

In our work, we faced a lot of challenges but never gave up. Travelling between regions can be problematic. It happened that we did not have electricity to use a projector or show some materials, videos or documentaries. That is why we developed a lot of alternative methods to deal with the problems. In our work, we used performances to illustrate the issues and challenges that women face or the success they can achieve. We encouraged the audience to think, discuss different subjects and even to come up with alternative endings.



Rano Jumaeva – executive Director at Public association “Cultural-Educational Center for Girls Tomiris” (CEC Tomiris), Bokhtar, Khatlon region, Tajikistan

CEC Tomiris is a non-governmental organization focused on working with children and youth, and empowering young girls. They do this through raising their civic, legal, economic, social and cultural, and ecological awareness as well as building girls' capacity to defend their rights and pursue their interests.



AGRO-PERMA-LAB Foundation



RESTORING PEASANTS DIGNITY

“Our strength is in diversity, taste, flavour, quality, tradition and hospitality. That is why agroecology is so important for Georgia. If we develop an agroecological way, we maintain what is our strength. We will develop a way that will be ecologically sound and will keep us important in the market in terms of quality.” – says Elene Shatberashvili from Elkana Association from Georgia in an interview with Paulina Jeziorek from Agro-Perma-Lab Foundation from Poland.

Paulina Jeziorek: Elkana is a unique organization from Georgia, implementing modern approaches based on past traditions. Could you explain what are Elkana’s main fields of work?

Elene Shatberashvili: Elkana is a Georgian association of smallholder organic farmers and agriculture producers. It was established in 1994 as an agricultural advisory service provider organization to its member farmers. Strengthening of rural population and a development of rural farming are Elkana’s major fields of interest... We cooperate with agronomists from different fields who work with our members helping them to convert to organic farming, improve farming practice, introduce various novelties etc.

We organize trainings, farmers exchanges and other events for our farmers. In the beginning, it was only agricultural advice, later marketing and business development support was added to it. These people worked with farmers helping them to improve their marketing abilities, making connections, developing business plans and brandings of their products.

In 1996 Elkana started working on agricultural biodiversity conservation. Currently it is a very important part of our work. We run small conservation farms, one in the south of Georgia in Tsnisi, Samtskhe-Javakheti region, where we have old varieties of fruit, grapes. We restored old varieties of legumes there as well. A wheat restoration is especially important for us as Georgia is one of the countries of a wheat culture origin. There are five endemic species of wheat in Georgia and it is the only country where you will find so many. Most of the old varieties of wheat were not cultivated during the Soviet Union period[1]. Things were based on different logic then, everything was organized so as to feed the huge country. Georgia was focused mainly on fruit and vegetables production especially wine, tea and citruses, field crops were not the priority. While for example Ukraine had to focus on field crops. Therefore we lost a lot of our agricultural heritage then.

Can you explain what you mean exactly when you talk about agriculture biodiversity conservation in Georgia?

According to Convention on Biodiversity[2] the term refers to conservation of the whole agricultural ecosystem like f.e. wild plants or insects that are beneficial for ecosystem functioning in agriculture. But in a more narrow sense when we speak about an agriculture of biodiversity, it refers to old varieties, species of cultivated plants, their wild relatives, as well as local breeds of animals. This is an agricultural biodiversity. And a conservation of it means to restore, reproduce, cultivate and maintain.

There are two types of conservation: ex-situ conservation and in-situ conservation. Ex-situ conservation means conservation in gene banks in scientific collections. In-situ conservation is conservation in the places of origin. So in terms of agriculture biodiversity it means on-farm conservation. We created a seed depository for these ancient crops. First we established a collection of local varieties of fruits and berries, started to produce their seedlings and sold them to interested farmers for a low affordable price. As for the legumes, wheat varieties and other types of field crops, we took seeds from gene banks as they were not cultivated anymore. They were only preserved ex-situ and the tradition of their cultivation and production was almost lost. We had small amounts of seeds, but we sowed them and multiplied the seeds. We got in touch with a network of farmers and members that were interested in cultivating those old varieties of crops. We gave them seeds for free, but they were obliged to return twice as much at the end of the season. Next year we could give seeds to other farmers and so on. That is what we do on our 4 hectares conservation and demonstration plot in Southern Georgia.

We have an animal conservation farm in eastern Georgia as well. It is based in Zemo Khodasheni in Kakheti region. In the beginning it was a place of conservation of many local breeds which were about to go extinct. I mean especially a local breed of pig called the Kakhetian pig. It is black and it was endangered species after the swine fever epidemic in Georgia. Now our farm's focus is mainly on the pig species restoration. But we raise local chicken and cows as well. We raised goats, but we have learnt that one cannot have everything on a small farm.

Elkana's work is focused on agro-tourism and rural tourism support as well. We have a network of rural houses where guests are received. We developed certain standards and we offer trainings on how to provide good quality services.

Another important part of Elkana's work is advocacy and public relations. When we speak of conservation it always needs legal support and all kinds of public activities. For example the Kakhetian pig has black skin and that is why the price for its meat was lower. Then you have to educate and explain why it is a valuable breed.

Personally I am involved especially in advocacy. We mainly work on a local level, but it was always important for us to be connected internationally. We would like to learn new

concepts. As Georgia was isolated from the rest of the world in the Soviet Union period, we were very much behind what was discussed. Currently agroecology and food sovereignty are approaches we want to explore, develop and share.

I have been working for this association for many years considering myself a part of the community. In my work I am mostly concerned with farmers' problems. I support my colleagues that are farmers as I would like to improve their lives. Improving their lives will improve the lives of others in Georgia and other parts of the world.

How much influence does Elkana have in your country?

Elkana is quite well known, but still our influence is limited. People trust us, our farmers and their products. We are the only organization in Georgia, whose work concerns agroecology, traditional production, and agricultural biodiversity conservation. We do have some influence on policies, sometimes we are asked for a consultancy when the authorities plan to change the law.

How do you consider the position of agroecology in Georgia? What is missing in Georgia so agroecology could flourish there? On the other side, what is hindering the development of this approach?

In terms of agriculture Georgia consists of small farms with diverse production. We have a very diverse landscape so our farms differ from one another very much. Although we have a tradition of cultivating different fruits and vegetables and there is richness due to our climate and our tradition, the size of farms is a hindering factor for economic development. The average size of a farm in Georgia is about 1.2 hectares. Still Georgian farms produce most of the products in the country. Actually, agroecology is quite a new term for Georgia. We know organic farming, but it is something different as it is based on certification and legal rules. While agroecology is rather a way of living. The concept is new and a discussion around it is needed so it can become part of our agricultural community. We need more educational work as well.

Also in rural areas of Georgia we have the problem of the Soviet past and people are very reluctant to cooperate. They are closed inside of their community or village. So our job is to find farmers who are interested in change and work together with them. The best learning tool in my opinion is learning by example. It restores hope as well.

When we speak of UDROP[3] it is about the rights of peasants. But nobody wants to be called "a peasant" in Georgia as peasants are considered to be a second sort of people. So we try to restore the dignity of peasants, focus on the richness and knowledge we have and strengthen the people from our surrounding. I hope one day it will make a bigger change on a national level.

What kind of educational methods do you use? And how do you try to restore the peasant dignity?

I think that exchange visits for farmers worked very well. People are eager to see what others are doing and they want to learn from them. It can be costly to bring people to another place, but you have to realize that some people from one region of Georgia never visited another Georgian region and they do not know how people live and work there. Such exchange visits combined with discussions can make a big change. A crop testing also can be a way of facilitating change. It makes people eager to experiment. There is a big interest in visiting the conservation farms and learning about the old varieties of plants and breeds of animals. I think it is also important to connect people to the market. Consumers and producers learn from each other and recognize each others' needs. It also restores dignity as short chains are personal, people know each other and can build trust. Producers feel much more important

than if they just sold products from farmgate to a middleman. I think that our cooperation with agronomists also works pretty well. They try to renew the knowledge, visit our members every year, discuss what was done and how it could be done otherwise. They tell farmers about good examples from their regions, connect them together according to similar problems.

You mentioned UNDROP, a declaration on the rights of peasants, so I would like to ask you how you perceive this declaration in the light of Georgia? What is hard to change in your opinion and what effect this declaration could bring in the future?

I think UNDROP is a big opportunity. It is a chance for change for politicians and people who are affected but do not realize where the problem lies. It gives voice to rural populations that were historically neglected. Politics were made by people in the cities and their vision, mentality and way of life is different. Even though many of the politicians come from villages, their interest and focus is different now. UNDROP gives the opportunity to understand policies from a rural perspective and give a new perspective on rural area development. Agriculture is not just an industry that you can shut down if it is not efficient. It is a cultural richness, way of life and interaction with nature. It gives an important basis for our identity.

Do you think that UNDROP can help bring a political change in Georgia?

I hope that it can make a change, but we have to put a lot of work into this. Firstly, we have to work on how to translate the declaration into our contexts. There are local and national laws applied to rural areas in Georgia without a clear policy view in which direction these regulations should support rural development UNDROP brings all of the issues together, it helps to see a big picture much better. However, there are so many small things that need to be changed in order to implement this declaration. It needs a lot of focused work on a national level. It is not a short process.

What do you think is blocking UNDROP and agroecology in your local context on the political level or in everyday life?

Speaking of politics, the hardest to deal with is the mindset of officials that is oriented toward economies of scale, business, profits. I mean this conventional approach of bureaucrats who work on agricultural policies. They are oblivious to real agricultural problems. They may agree that organic production is good, but they lack vision. Sometimes they try to do good things, but in the end, they support a development in the wrong direction. I think it is hard and I do not think that Elkana is as influential as I wished it to be in that sense.

And looking from farmers' perspective, what is blocking UNDROP or agroecology development is lack of self-confidence. It has been 30 years past the Soviet Union period, but we still experience a very negative impact the suppressive policies from that period had on the Georgian people. Self-confidence, believing that change is possible is a big challenge here. If they believed in themselves, they could make a big change, but many of them are pessimistic, which is the reason we have huge migration. Many farmers migrate to cities or other European countries like Poland. They end up as farm workers abroad instead of fighting for their future in Georgia.

Elkana has been helping in rural tourism development. Multifunctional farms can sustain themselves much better. But do you think that farms in Georgia cannot be efficient economically otherwise?

I think they can. I do not think all farms in Georgia should convert into tourist farms. Such multifunctional farms also have limitations. Economy of farms depends on their business

plan. You can produce a good quality wine even on a small piece of land in Georgia. Small scale wine makers export to top markets all over the world. They do not need tourism. But some farmers cannot support themselves working on a small plot and they have to diversify their income.

Why can't farmers support themselves working on their plots? What is the reason for that?

In many cases the farms are too small. And if farmers do not produce high quality crops, it is difficult for them to support themselves financially. And often this 1.2 hectares, the average size of a Georgian farm, is divided into small pieces. In the Soviet Union period the land belonged to kolkhozes, but to appease people, the authorities gave each family a small parcel of land to cultivate. In the early 90-ties, after agricultural land reform, ownership was transferred to citizens. So pieces of land are really divided now. It seldom happens that this one hectare is located in one area. Most often the land is divided into smaller plots. That is why farmers have problems and struggle to support themselves, especially if the interest rates are high, there is no proper technology support. There are a lot of problems related to that.

Could it work economically for small farmers in Georgia?

I do believe that for Georgia it is the only way to go. Even if you consolidate small parcels it is still small. We have neighbours like Turkey, Iran, Russia. Their farmers will always have big areas and stronger machinery. Our strength is in diversity, taste, flavour, quality, tradition and hospitality. That is why agroecology is so important for Georgia. If we develop an agroecological way, we maintain what is our strength. We will develop a way that will be ecologically sound and will keep us important in the market in terms of quality. So I believe that Georgia has to focus on quality products. We are blessed with a good climate. Now it can change, but historically we have always had a good climate that helped farmers to produce foods with a special flavour. It is our exceptional quality. We have to be focused on that instead of producing many things.

How can an agroecological approach help in your region in terms of climate change?

Agroecology is a flexible concept, which incorporates a lot of approaches. In terms of climate change, in agriculture one can use multiple approaches like focus on drought resistant crops for example. In case of agroecology, especially it is about traditional varieties, which are adapted to changing climate. Diversified farming is another helpful agroecological tool. If something is not surviving, you still have other crops. So agroecology is more adaptive than traditional monoculture production. In terms of that, agroecology really makes sense.

Do you cooperate and keep in touch with other countries from your regions?

We were one of the first organizations in our region to work on organic farming and therefore we became active in the region. Elkana had joined a project with organizations in the region and Elkana's consultants were organizing organic farming training in Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Armenia, Azerbaijan and other countries. We had a lot of connections in the early 2000s. Now the organizations found their ways, however we still keep in touch and still cooperate although less intensively. But still we work on different issues and projects. Recently we have been working on an agroecology development, but it is quite a complex issue. The concept of organic farming was ready to copy while agroecology is something you have to digest and make it fit your region. So I think the work of exchange is ahead of us.

[1] The Soviet Union Period lasted since 1922 until 1991 for Georgia.

[2] The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) is the international legal instrument for “the conservation of biological diversity, the sustainable use of its components and the fair and equitable sharing of the benefits arising out of the utilization of genetic resources” that has been ratified by 196 nations.

[3] UNDROP - The United Nations declaration on the rights of peasants and other people working in rural areas

Elene Shatberashvili - works for Elkana - Organic Farming & Rural Association in Georgia, she also cooperates with Biological Farming Association and La Via Campesina.

"Seed Library" and its interconnected initiatives by EKODER in Türkiye



Introduction/Context:

The roots of Ecological Life Association (EKODER) dates back to 1996, to the establishment of the Organic Agriculture Unit in the Faculty of Agriculture at Bursa Uludağ University. The Unit worked on regional surveys, projects and field studies to develop organic agriculture. In 2002, EKODER was established as a separate organization. From 2002 EKODER actively engages in educational projects within the realm of organic agriculture, contributing to the development of the "Organic Agriculture Law and Regulation Studies" enacted in Turkey in 2003. With a focus on disseminating ecological knowledge, EKODER conducts training sessions on Ecology, Organic Agriculture, and Organic Foods in various Bursa schools. Emphasizing the right to consume safe food, EKODER is a committed actor in the "No to GMO Platform." The association also publishes informative materials, filling gaps in knowledge on Organic Agriculture and Livestock. EKODER implemented diverse projects, including the Seed Library, Urban Gardens, Ecogardens, and Living Labs — all interconnected and rooted in the foundation of the Seed Library.

Ekoder has voluntarily working 43 active members which 24 of them are women.

Seed Library Project:

The Seed Library project is an initiative undertaken by EKODER in collaboration with Nilüfer Municipality and City Council. This library, established in 2007 within the Agricultural Gardens campus in Nilüfer Municipality, showcases and distributes a diverse collection of plant seeds. These seeds, primarily local varieties, are carefully labeled with name, origin, and date information, stored in glass jars or bags, and made available for free or through exchange. The mission of the Seed Library is to identify, preserve, and propagate local seeds adapted to their climate and geography, ensuring their continued existence and passing them on to future generations for biodiversity preservation.

Seed Exchange Fair in 2023:

For the 8 years the Nilüfer Municipality in collaboration with Nilüfer Citizens' Council and EKODER, organized the fair aimed at protecting ancestral seeds. This event involves seed volunteers, groups, associations, farmers, and citizens across Turkey. In 2023 approximately 55,000 seed packages, comprising around 120 varieties, were distributed or exchanged during the fair. Citizens who came to the event first marked the seeds they wanted on the forms, and then received their seeds from the tables. Farmers and gardeners from different Turkish municipalities also shared their local seeds. This seed exchange contributed to the dissemination and conservation of local seeds and the development of seed diversity in the Nilüfer Seed Library.

The mission of the projects and Inspiration for Bilim Community Members:

It is recognized that local seeds develop a protective mechanism against prevailing plant diseases and pests through the resistance acquired in their adapted geography and climate. Bringing the seeds distributed/exchanged at the Seed Exchange events into the soil, producing one's own seeds, and sharing surplus seeds are crucial steps. The plants grown from these seeds consistently yield the same fruits, distinguishing them from one-time, disposable, and hybrid seeds. During harvest, it's simple to set aside a few crops and harvest their seeds. EKODER's mission is to ensure that these seeds multiply and reach more people in the coming years, safeguarding and multiplying ancestral seeds in different parts of the country.

The Seed Library served as a source of inspiration and an example to follow for various Bilim organizations, who visited the Bilim Forum in Turkey. It stands as a testament to the collaborative efforts of an NGO, citizens, and local municipality in undertaking long-term work on seeds, setting an example for others to follow.

Text from Maria Anisimova (Schola Campesina)

Capacity building of Seed Savers and development of Farmers' Seed System in Moldova

Introduction/Context:

Founded in 2015 by Mariana Seremet and her husband started from a plot of land, Gradina Moldovei has evolved into an organisation with the team of 12 members and a national community of seed saver farmers passionate about agroecology and permaculture.

Gradina Moldovei focuses on addressing challenges related to agrobiodiversity, seeds, and agroecological practices. The organization emphasizes issues such as access to seeds, seed banks, seed multiplication skills, the right to seeds, but also systemic approach to agriculture and food systems, where farms are organically integrated in their ecological and socio-economic landscapes.

Work done in 2023:

In 2023, Gradina Moldovei aimed to strengthen cooperation among farmers and other stakeholders by building more trust among stakeholders. The other focuses were on mapping and listing farmers' seeds and resilient seeds, developing the methodology for describing seeds, consolidating them into seeds bank, developing seed production, and also on raising consumer awareness. Strengthening farmers' knowledge of wild biodiversity as part of healthy agroecosystems was another important part of the work.

Building Trust and Cooperation:

Recognizing Moldova's agrarian roots, Gradina Moldovei initiated grassroots efforts to rebuild trust and cooperation. They organized joint meetings and conducted individual visits to farms, actively engaging with farmers to understand their needs. Providing consultancy and fostering relationships became the foundation of this collaborative journey.

Cataloguing of Farmers and Resilient Seeds:

The organization mapped the network, creating a visual representation of farmers and non-farmers with resilient seeds across the country. A participatory approach was employed in the seeds' description methodology, resulting in a map of seeds and a first attempt of catalogue of seed producers.

Raising Consumers Awareness.

To make farmers more visible, Gradina Moldovei participated in a local farmers' market showcasing products made from farmers' seeds, accompanied by food tastings and recipes, linking tastes and traditions, reminding to many "the taste of their childhood."

Policy Advocacy:

Gradina Moldovei extended its impact beyond the fields, actively participating in policy development. Collaboration with public authorities, engagement in consultations, and petitioning the Moldovan Parliament, the organization advocated for a more nuanced seed law.

Joint Seed Banks and seed production.

Agreeing to establish a first in Moldova joint seed bank with farmers and researchers, Gradina Moldovei also focused not just on seeds preservation, but also on seed production to contribute to economic resilience and diversification for farmers.

Seeking to leverage knowledge and expertise, Gradina Moldovei participated in international forums and meetings like the Bursa Forum, expanding their impact and serving as an inspiring model for communities of Bilim network and worldwide. One of the aims is to participate in working group and process on biodiversity and seeds with other Bilim organisations and create a regional map of farmers' seeds.

Links

<https://gradinamd.com/>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P9nj9OpzBAs>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1wIFOkleY2U&t=1223s>

Text from Maria Anisimova (Schola Campesina)
and Anya Benoliel Countinho (Gradina Moldovei)

Barbara Kurek, Agro-Perma-Lab Foundation: When the Gradina Moldovei was founded and who was the founder?

Ana Benoliel Coutinho, Gradina Moldovei: Our organisation was founded in 2015 by Mariana Seremet and her husband. Back then they ran the association with a few more people. Today it has already over 10 people.

B: What was the purpose of this association?

A: It had more than one purpose. The founders' idea was not only to share but also to develop their knowledge about agroecology together with others. They wanted to create a source of information about agroecological and permaculture practices in everyday life and garden with easy access for everybody. At the same time, they were starting their family garden. It's not a classic farm, but rather a family farm - 2.200 square metres of subsistence garden. Their harvest is mainly for them. So this garden became also a demonstration plot, where Mariana was experimenting and then sharing her experience with others.

Going back to the question, the purpose of the association at that time was three-fold. Firstly, the demonstration plot with practices which they tried and learnt, whether they were successful or not. Secondly, creating a green library as a source of knowledge. Thirdly, creating a seed bank.

B: Could you tell us something more about the green library? The idea sounds nice.

A: It is good to have things documented. For example, our first big thing was the allopathy guide (it means plant combination). Mariana did a large research and searched everywhere for all possible combinations. After this, she tried to put all this information into our allopathy guide. We also translated 10 elements of agroecology together with the FAO Moldova. Recently we updated and made a kind of agroecology guide, not only about combining plants but also about other things in connection with other principles of agroecology. Currently, these materials are available for free on our website. We also write articles within the framework of the projects we implement. These are available both in English and Romanian. We would like to make them available in Russian too.

So people search for these materials in our library, but now we are trying something else - more interactive.

B: Does this demonstration garden engage people?

A: Yes, it does, but also we are trying something different because we cannot rely on one pillar of knowledge development. It isn't effective enough. And again one producer cannot receive everybody on their farm all the time. Our idea is that everybody has some knowledge which can be helpful for others.

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It is not training in the classical sense. Our idea is that everybody has the knowledge and lots of agriculture and permaculture knowledge is very intuitive. So, our purpose is to create favourable conditions or an environment, where everybody can hone and develop their skills. The idea is to make education horizontal.

Moldova's Seeds of Change

*Interview with
Ana Benoliel Coutinho*



The question here is to create a platform and facilitate the exchange, helping this knowledge to come to the surface. Lots of agriculture and permaculture knowledge is very intuitive so far. People used to live in a permaculture way. Everything was connected, local and natural, and it worked. The knowledge and communication about it, however, seem not to be as structured as it is for the conventional model. So, giving form to agroecology knowledge appears of great importance both for farmers and the rest of us. With the horizontal perspective, people feel free to share and discuss, and there we develop a process of collaborative learning and horizontal education.

B: Could you share with us how would you like to do it? How will you make education more horizontal?

A: For example, we are planning to organise a meeting of an ecologist with organic farmers. The first goal of this meeting is to start a dialogue, which later can develop into an exchange of knowledge and experience useful for both. Our organisation is more a facilitator of the learning process than an educational centre. It is about collaborative learning which empowers and helps to build trust.

B: Do you have any idea how to conduct this process? From my experience, quite often when people with theoretical and practical perspectives, meet, their discussion is difficult, (leading to frustrations).

A: They don't have expectations and that's the thing. Both are curious and willing to give it a try. That is enough for a start, and we take it from there.



PHOTO GRADINA MOLDOVEI

B: Maybe it's crucial to highlight that the purpose of this meeting is to find out how we can be useful to others.

A: I didn't emphasise anything. The concept that we offered to both sides is a talk, not a teaching lesson. A talk to get to know each other and to see how we can be helpful to each other. That's it. We may find out how now, or later. It does not matter. What is important is to start.

B: I'd also like to ask you a question about the Tool for Agroecology Performance Evaluation (TAPE) in Moldova. I am pretty familiar with this research because I was a part of its implementation in Poland. Could you tell us what was TAPE for Moldovan farmers? What did you know about agroecology in Moldova after this research?

A: I did not take part in the TAPE testing, my colleague Mariana did. She did it with farmers from EcoVillage who she had known from the beginning of the EcoVillage.

It seems it wasn't easy - too many questions, and not everything was clear. People didn't understand some terms. To sum up, it wasn't simple, but Mariana highlighted one positive thing and I agree with her-the reflection and the discussion that developed during this survey were fruitful. It seems to have helped them to become more aware about things they do, the diversity and what they have. And some of them were curious to try something new and improve. We collaborate all the time and TAPE was a good opportunity to strengthen this collaboration, raising farmers' awareness and making them interested in something new. And there is another interesting story behind TAPE. Even for us, this research was quite complicated, but it looks useful for officials. For example, our current minister of agriculture (back then the Member of Moldovan Parliament), found that TAPE could be a great audit tool for farmers, helping to identify the reasons behind the unprofitable farming.

B: I'd like to ask you about the community seed bank which your organisation is running. How did it start?

A: Our founder Mariana wanted to create a seed bank because she discovered there weren't organic vegetable seeds. It was a problem. She began through grants, donations and every possible way of finding seeds from different collections and banks to test them. She checked if seeds were good and adaptable to our climate and soil, then tried other ones and made this selection on-farm. She said it was like a seed bank. But here it is important to explain what exactly a seed bank is. Well, a bank never gives you something for nothing. If a bank gives you money, you have to give at least the same amount back. At least! But banks cannot function on that, so you need to pay back a little more. And the seed bank normally should be the same. You receive some seeds but after a season, you should bring back some seeds, so that the bank can break even and better, make seeds available for more people. In practice, we are working now on the concept of the Seed Bank which we will try to create with our partners in 2023. It is not easy but it is possible and people are ready for it because we all want more free local and natural seeds.

B: Did it work like this in your organisation?

A: Our founder was able to create a rich collection of seeds not only of vegetables but also flowers, herbs, fruit trees, and berries. Altogether she has a collection of about one thousand species! She attracted a few people to do what the bank normally would do, where she gave seeds and then they returned back more. Unfortunately, there weren't enough people to carry on this seed bank. The problem is that it's forbidden to produce and sell seeds without special permission. It is, however, a lot of work to produce seeds. We are finding some ways of supporting the producers in different ways but it is still complicated. Now we work on two projects. One is with seed libraries - we are going to create seed libraries in several places for small gardeners and subsistence farmers. They will have the opportunity to get seeds to grow food for themselves. But again if they don't bring anything back to the library then seeds will finish. Nobody will refill it. We are going to explain to the communities that if they want to keep the seeds library, they need to put some effort into it. Even if it's not in producing all the crops but at least one or two. The second project is about creating a seed-savers' network and a joint seed

bank. It is more strict than with the library because we have to ensure the quality of the seeds. We are developing the concept of it - where the seed come from, how we ensure quality and pack them, and where to store them. We are going to work with farmers experienced in preserving seeds and an agronomist. The purpose is to develop a collective seed bank. So this is a bigger project gathering Gradina Moldovei, farmers, and agronomists and we will see who else.

B: It sounds like a lot of work, so I keep my fingers crossed for your success in all these projects. Thank you Ana for your time and all these amazing stories about your organisation. ♦



Ana Benoliel Coutinho has been the Executive Director of Gradina Moldovei since February 2022. She is also the author of articles and materials from areas of the environment, agriculture, food systems, and rural development.

PHOTO ANASTASIA GURSCHI

Women's Association STINA from Kosovo - member of BILIM Agroecology CoP

Women association "*Stina*" was launched in February 2016, and it is registered in Ministry of Public Administration as non-governmental organization (NGO). Its activity was extended to the villages of the municipality of Kaçanik, which is located in the southeast of the Republic of Kosovo. Kosovo is the youngest country in Europe and is located in southeastern Europe, which claims to soon be a member of the European Union.

The activity of the organization is agriculture and rural development including aromatic plants, handicraft activities, traditional foods as well as activities related to cultural and spiritual heritage. "Stina" association, since its establishment, has carried out a multitude of activities in support of women to express their talents.



Continuously has organized trainings for increasing the capacities of women in different sectors. Main activities are: Training for increasing the capacity and and rural women's awareness of their role in society; Trainings in the field of agriculture and rural development, with a focus on horticulture, artisanal products, as well as medicinal-aromatic plants in particular; Trainings for traditional foods and preservation of agricultural products etc. The soul of the organization is Mrs. Zarie Malsiu, - successful farmer and president of the association, as well as the unreserved support of Mimoza Krasniqi.

From 2021 with the support of Mr. Tahir Halitaj as a reference contact of the Schola Campesina agro-ecological school. Organization in this way trys to show that a productive farming sector can provide environmental benefits and services while creating rural employment and sustaining livelihoods. So these

last two years the members of the association are making efforts to implement the principles of Agroecology and we have become part of the network of agroecology schools with the support of the agroecology school "Campesina".

Tahir Halitaj

The challenges of a cooperative in North Macedonia

The cooperative Eco Ilinden is in the village of Mustafino in the central part of North Macedonia. Until a few years ago, it was a village exclusively engaged in agriculture.

Today's average of land per farmer is 10 hectares, but this means that a large number of farmers have given up and now agriculture is an additional business for them.

The village is located in a very dry region with a very dry climate. Although in the past a lot of vegetables were produced, now the main products are fodder and cereals. Each family still plants vegetables for themselves and some for the green markets.

Our cooperative produces fodder and alfalfa pellets (in larger quantities), vegetables such as beans, peppers and tomatoes in (smaller quantities).

We are facing problems in production, irrigation, and the storage of raw materials is a big problem too.

Because our customers are farmers or companies who buy when they sell their finished product, for example cheese.

Our goal is to convert the village into a successful example of a sustainable way of living in the rural environment through our activities of organic production and care for biodiversity, use of old varieties of seeds, etc. But due to the lack of storage facilities, farmers sell raw materials very cheaply and many of them decide to remain in conventional production and use artificial fertilizers, etc. for higher yields.

Education for a sustainable way of production is inevitable and also practical training on the farm, but the Cooperative does not have the opportunity for that because more and more farmers lose interest in working together because they sell their small production on the Macedonian market and lose interest in organic food production.

At the same time, since the price of the raw material is very low and for processing they have to invest more and more, they give up farming.

Text from Suzana Dimitrievska (cooperative Eco Ilinden)

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The power of seeds and landraces for adaptation and increasing resilience are known to farmers.

Maedeh, could you say more about your organisation? As far as I know, you have been in the Bilim community for a short time, so I think this is an excellent opportunity to get to know you better. Especially, CENESTA is an experienced and professional organisation.

CENESTA is Iran's first environmental-oriented NGO, founded more than 4 decades ago. Unfortunately, 4 years ago we lost its founder. I've been working with CENESTA for 18 years. CENESTA is the Centre for Sustainable Development and Environment, a non-governmental, non-profit organization dedicated to promoting Sustainable community- and culture-based development that advocates for re-empowering the indigenous peoples and local communities (IPLCs) at national and international levels. We work with indigenous peoples and local communities including. We deal with two different main subjects, one is working on Indigenous Peoples' and Community Conserved Territories and Areas (ICCAs), as we are a member of the ICCA consortium. In this area, we work with IPLCs of Iran and we try to identify and recognize the territories of life of these peoples and communities. We promote the appropriate recognition of IPLCs and facilitate the relationship between the

indigenous and nomadic peoples with policymakers - so that they play roles in the process of co-management of nature and natural resources and regulating and law-making. We attempt to make connections between the government, as the main stakeholder, and these peoples, while trying to make unions consisting of IPLCs; for instance, Cenesta works with these communities and facilitates the establishment of the UNINOMAD in Iran. It is a union of the indigenous nomadic tribes of Iran. During this process, we try to increase the capacity of IPLCs so that they can work on advocacy. We work as technical consultants to support them in submitting proposals and to implement the projects. Also, Cenesta works with women in some communities on capacity-building and re-empowering on sustainable livelihood such as making handicrafts and improving their access to new markets. We also work on ecotourism, as well.

As the second area, we work on agroecology, participatory agricultural research, democratizing agroecological research, and food/seed sovereignty. In this area, we have implemented several projects including Participatory Plant breeding (PPB), Evolutionary-Participatory Plant Breeding (EPPB), in-situ conservation, revival of crop genetic diversity, and agricultural heritage systems. We also work on public awareness raising on GMOs. In addition, we advocate for farmers' rights to impact and facilitate the communication and collaboration between different stakeholders, especially small-scale and family farmers, policymakers and experts of Iran's Ministry of Agriculture.



The power of diversity in Iran

Interview with
Maedeh Salimi, CENESTA

How do you connect small-scale farmers with policymakers?

Cenesta advocates and facilitates collaboration and communication between policymakers, agricultural experts, and farmers through field works, field visits, and other events such as workshops, meetings, and conferences. During these processes, all stakeholders, especially small-scale farmers discuss their challenges and needs so that genuine cooperation may be formed between them. This process also helps policymakers and agricultural experts to understand small-scale farmers' problems and limitations and consider them when making decisions.

You mentioned Evolutionary Plant Breeding, what is this project?

Iran generally has a dry and hot climate with many microclimates. Yearly precipitation amounts are 250 mm or less on average, and the amount of its distribution varies in different years. Also, Iran has a wide variety of climates and environments and meets non-uniform environmental conditions. In this situation, farmers do not have access to proper genetic resources. Many farmers, especially under a rainfed system, use one or two landraces that do not have the potential to adapt to climate change and biotic and abiotic stresses, and in some cases, the last or available landraces don't yield good results. The combination of these factors has caused production, especially in rainfed farming system, to be low. For example, out of 6 million hectares of wheat cultivation area, 70% is cultivated under rainfed conditions, while this sector produces only 32% of the country's wheat production. Also, about 70% of barley in Iran is grown under rainfed conditions, while only 34% of barley is produced this way. So these statistics show that in Iran, we are facing a significant yield gap in rainfed agriculture.

Unfortunately, the process of formal plant breeding takes too long, and the varieties that are released after 8 to 13 years cannot be suitable for all farmers in all microclimates of Iran. I can say quality varieties are released in the formal seed system but are not enough to address farmers' needs. About 70% of rainfed wheat seeds in Iran are exchanged among farmers under the farm-saved seed system and this informal system has an important place in Iran's farming system and the government support this system too. However, this support needs to be strengthened. This informal seed system, especially in some crops like wheat and barley, is really important and Cenesta's efforts are also focused on strengthening this system; we are trying to increase the genetic diversity in farmer's fields and conserve this genetic diversity on the farm. We believe that in addition to in-situ conservation, we also need in-situ conservation of crop genetic resources. In this way, we facilitate the connection between farmers and farmers' communities with international (ICARDA, IRRI) and national gene banks to exchange

seeds and enrich crop genetic resources, and we have tried to establish the first community seed banks in Iran.

Therefore, to solve the problems of small-scale farmers, Cenesta has focused on increasing farmer's access to genetic diversity through evolutionary plant breeding (EPB). Cenesta has started the EPB program in 2008 which includes several different projects. In this methodology, farmers' access to crop genetic diversity is increased and mixtures of mega diversity in the form of evolutionary populations and mixtures (EPs) bring back to the farmers' fields. Evolutionary populations and mixtures evolve differently under different conditions. With evolutionary populations, the farmer plants and harvest continuously and due to the natural crosses that will occur within this population the seed that is harvested is never genetically identical to the seed that was before planting. In other words, the population evolves with each harvest and slowly adapts to the environment around it and copes with climate changes. In the case of evolutionary plant breeding, we use the fundamental theorem of natural selection for its advantages.

Back in 2006, Cenesta started a participatory plant breeding program in Iran. Farmers participating in PPB did not like to remove the different genetic material from their experiments, and they began to create different mixtures with the seeds from PPB trials. When asked why they did this, they told us that if these genetic materials didn't have a good yield in one year, but perhaps in other years would yield good results. They explained that in their traditional knowledge, the mixtures are more resistant to different stresses. Because of that, we tried to introduce the mixtures of mega diversity to the farmers' fields, so the program on evolutionary plant breeding with the mixture of 1600 F2 barley started in 2008. A farmer in one province planted the first evolutionary population of barley in a small portion of his field. The International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA) made the first barley population and then the Dryland Agricultural Research Institute (DARSI) made the first wheat population in 2009. Our first goal was to establish a live gen bank near that farmer's field, so we planted and harvested these populations for consecutive years. Our idea was to plant these populations continuously to expose them to climate change so that they could slowly adapt. We don't know how much the temperature will increase, so it is impossible to make a goal for our breeding programs. So this process that contains adaptation, natural selection and farmer management is called Evolutionary Plant Breeding.

After 15 years, 11 evolutionary mixtures of wheat, 3 evolutionary populations and mixtures of barley, 4 evolutionary mixtures of rice and one evolutionary mixture of naked barley are being planted throughout the country under rainfed conditions or in irrigated areas facing water scarcity and all populations and mixtures have been evolving slowly under diverse climate and

environmental conditions, and different types of agronomic management. Different stakeholders, such as farmers, farming networks, CSOs, research stations, researchers, and others, have a leading role in distributing the populations throughout Iran. Farmers are essential in sharing their EPs with other farmers at the local, regional and national levels.

What did the farmer himself say about this project?

Evolutionary plant breeding program has gained wide acceptance among farmers. After the first year, farmers were happy with the results and decided to cultivate these populations as main crops. Also, the other farmers' demands for these populations, especially under rainfed conditions, increased, and farmers started to exchange seeds under the farm-saved seed system. In fact, during this program, we have received supportive reports and comments from farmers and nomadic peoples, that plant these populations, on specific traits like increasing yield and yield stability, resistance to biotic and abiotic stresses such as drought, salinity, diseases and pests, and more nutritious feed and food. These traits satisfy beneficiaries, encouraging them to multiply EPs and exchange them with each other. Also, some farmers have established their bakeries in Iran and tried to make local bread with these populations. The bread is delicious, smells wonderful and does not cause digestion problems. This process was also facilitated by Cenesta. This is the story of Participatory Plant Breeding and Evolutionary Plant Breeding in Iran.

In the first year, a farmer in one province planted the first evolutionary barley population in a small part of his field in 2008. Due to heavy rainfall of that year, yellow rust hit the region and affected most varieties and landraces. However, in this EP, only a few plants were affected by this disease. The farmer removed them by hand from the main population, thus making this evolutionary population resistant to yellow rust disease. After that, he decided to multiply this EP and turn it into a main crop. This is an example of the way farmers thought about these evolutionary populations and mixtures.

I am interested in how the seed regulations look in Iran. You said that you have a kind of formal and informal system. In Europe, we have big seed companies and access to seeds is a problem. On a small scale, our farmers exchange their seeds between them but they can't sell them and it is restricted law.

In Iran, the national Seed and Plant Certification and Registration law mentions that new plants will be registered if they are new, distinctive, uniform, stable and have the possibility of commercialization and trade. However, due to the importance of the informal seed system, some national laws and regulations make an exception for farm-saved seed and recognize this informal system and recommend the government to support it.

In the informal system, traditionally farmers can exchange seeds legally. The government recognizes two systems and there have been declarations that both systems should be supported to improve the quality of the seeds exchanged within the two systems. In the informal one, farmers can exchange or trade their seeds, but they can not commercialize and label them. We are working on this issue to develop new regulations under which farmers will also be able to label their seeds. We have set up a farmer seed bank in Kermanshah and these farmers are actually working on in-situ conservation and exchanging different crop genetic materials and genetic diversity. We should improve this informal system and increase the quality of seeds, especially wheat. As Cenesta we are working to address the need of farmers to improve the technologies they use.

Great, you are probably on the right track to change the regulations to be more favourable to farmers. I would like to talk about agroecology in Iran, from what you have already told me, I know your farmers are aware of the value of seeds, especially local varieties, which I believe have a certain intelligence and memory. Your farmers are very aware of this and use this power of seeds. And what does agroecology look like in Iran? Is it a popular idea? Do Iranians know agroecology?

This is a very interesting question, but also a very difficult one. The term agroecology is not widely known in Iran, however, I can say that agroecological practices and elements are used by many farmers and farming communities. In Iran, we need to find the local definition for agroecology and what agroecology is, because we live in a dry country and water scarcity is our main limitation. We can find many examples of agroecological farming



practices, traditional knowledge of water harvesting and irrigation management and sustainable use of water, soil and agrobiodiversity. Many farmers are aware of the value of agrobiodiversity and genetic materials. The power of seeds and landraces for adaptation and increasing resilience are known to farmers. Polyculture or integrated farming systems can be seen in the farms. Species diversity and genetic diversity in the fields of Iranian farmers, especially small-scale farmers, are almost high. I can say that more than 80% of farmers in Iran are small-scale farmers and family farmers. So we can see different elements of agroecology in the fields or in some agricultural landscape. However high-input conventional agriculture and monoculture are widely used by farmers and we don't see any policies and programs at the national level to support agroecology. This poses a serious threat to local agroecological systems. In this situation, Cenesta works on agroecology and tries to promote this concept with the cooperation of other stakeholders. Some organizations, such as Cenesta and many university experts, try to include agroecology in national action plans.

You mentioned that at the government level agroecology is not a major focus, but do you have any politicians who are involved in agroecology or is it impossible to find someone like that?

Yes, we have some politicians who work on agroecology and promote this approach. Of course, the number of these people is not large, so they cannot make a big impact on national action plans, but their presence and also their efforts along with other stakeholders have raised public awareness about this concept little by little.

This is good news, because without politicians it is difficult to make a big change, it is better to be in contact with them. And of course, it is much easier to do advocacy work when some politicians support you and understand what you are talking about. Going back to the small farmers, you mentioned that they make up 80% of the farmers in Iran. It seems to me that Iranians mainly eat food from small and family farmers. Is this true?

Yes, mainly small-scale or family farmers feed the Iranian people. Of course, the amount of food produced by these farmers varies in different years with good rainfall amount or drought, but mostly small-



scale farmers produce the food needed by Iranians. Therefore, in some cases or in some years, the government is forced to import some food products, but in general, food is produced inside Iran by Iranian farmers.

Great, that's really agroecological. I'm curious about how farmers can sell their produce. Are there any food co-ops or community-supported agriculture? How about markets and bazaars? Or are there lots of big supermarkets?

All of these options are available to farmers. However, the market situation is different depending on the type of product. For example, for some strategic products, such as wheat and oilseeds, the government controls and manages the market and buys their products at a yearly formal fixed price. Some local vegetables and fruits usually are sold in the local market due to limited production and high demand at the local level. In the case of rice, market processes are quite different, the farmers sell it to local threshing workshops that clean the rice and these workshops send the rice to markets like grocery stores, and supermarkets or export it to international markets. At the national level, a significant share of the market of fruit and vegetables is managed by the Fruit and Vegetable Organization. In fact, this organization managed by municipalities, buys agricultural products from farmers and distributes them in the national market network. In recent years, some digital platforms and apps have developed connections between farmers and consumers, allowing them to buy some products, such as saffron, olive oil, etc., directly from farmers. Also, some products such as pistachio, saffron, watermelon, etc. are also exported in addition to domestic consumption. So, the food market in Iran based on the type of products is completely diverse.

Which way is best for farmers?

Farmers do not try only one way to sell their products, but they benefit from the multiple markets. For example, if they grow wheat, they prefer to sell it to the government, and if the yearly formal fixed price is not satisfying, they sell it in other markets. The important issue is that farmers have the right to choose different local, regional, national and international markets, however, their access to these markets requires different procedures. Therefore, they prefer to choose a market that they may have control over in which they would take the minimum risk.

Thank you Maedeh for the interview and your time. You are doing an amazing job at CENESTA. I wish you continued success and interesting projects.

Maedeh Salimi is a board member, program manager and community facilitator in CENESTA. She is a Ph.D. student in agroecology.



"We have four traditional activities in our region that provide us food: hunting, reindeer breeding, fishing, wild fruits collecting like berries, but also mushrooms and herbs. Traditionally agriculture was not our thing. But with the influence of Russian population we started to plant potatoes, carrots, also we plant blackberries, raspberries and even strawberries." - says Valentina Sovkina, the representative of the Coalition on Indigenous Peoples Food Systems and the head of the Russian department of The Saami Women Forum in an interview with Paulina Jeziorek from Agro-Perma-Lab Foundation.

Paulina Jeziorek: Valentina, you represent the Saami, the indigenous population of Russia who constitute the smallest national minority in Russia and are concentrated around the settlement of Lovozero.

Valentina Sovkina: Yes, according to the last census, there are only a little more than 1.5 thousand of us. But the Saami people live in the neighboring northern countries, such as Finland, Norway, Sweden. I think there are many of us around the world. You can find the Saami in countries such as Poland or America, they are in Alaska and in southern countries, even in Asia and India.

The Saami of Russia live in difficult political, economical and social conditions. You try to support and help the community. Why did you decide to work in the context of food sovereignty of the Saami?

The reason why I represent the indigenous people of Saami and why I try to protect their rights, culture and food tradition is because I am Saami myself. I grew up in this context, I know the Saami language and got to know their traditions. Our family always ate traditional local products. I often went fishing at the nearby lake or wild fruit picking. The Saami culture and tradition including food was always very close to me.

How about the other contexts of food like climate change, people's food sovereignty and preserving your culture traditions?

The answer implies all the three dimensions you mentioned: climate change, preservation of traditional culture, way of life and food. As for myself I would like my people to stay in the area where they lived for generations. I would like them to restore the traditional way of eating and eat more reindeer meat and fish that is more common than chicken and pork. In recent years a lot of traditional products have been substituted with products from around the world. When I was in a boarding school and they tried to feed us with food they called civilized products like chicken and pork that is very common, but it is not common for us, the Saami people. For us the reindeer meat. I also thought a lot about the traditional products during Covid-19 pandemic and I think that people who ate traditional products had lighter forms of covid. They did not suffer so much. This is my thought. I experienced it myself.

I think a lot about climate change as well. We see the problem looking at our reindeer. They eat bushes and herbs. Recently they cannot find the food they used to eat due to climate change, so they slowly go north. But in the north there is not so much food for them. So in a while they will have nowhere to go. There is less and less territory remaining for reindeer each year.

Also, our food tradition and culture preservation is a very important thing. I think that if you eat the food from your area, not only you maintain your tradition, but at the same time it is a healthy way of life.

Can you say more about traditional food of the Saami? How do you collect and produce food in your region?

We have four traditional activities in our region that provide us food: hunting, reindeer breeding, fishing, wild fruits collecting like berries, but also mushrooms





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and herbs. Traditionally agriculture was not our thing. But with the arrival of the Russian population, we began to plant potatoes, carrots as well as black currants, raspberries and even strawberries. Nowadays people have greenhouses where they plant cucumbers, cabbages, and many other vegetables which they need at the beginning of spring when they lack vitamins. I have a small greenhouse myself. Actually, most products I eat are traditional products: reindeer meat, fish and wild berries. I eat green onion and a bit of carrot and potatoes. Usually I use no spices. Reindeer meat is very tasty and does not require spices.

You were discouraged from eating traditional food in the past, you mentioned that the kind of food was called “uncivilized”. What activities do you take to promote this food and give people access to this kind of food?

For me it is a kind of genetic memory. I remember traditional recipes or meals my grandparents prepared. Traditional products are still available to people. If you do not hunt, you can easily get reindeer meat. You can easily get fish as well. You can either buy it or go fishing as we have a lot of lakes. Also, berries are accessible. You can either buy them or go and collect them yourself. Many people I know, including myself, make fruit jams or we freeze collected berries. We dry or smoke meat. When I travel, I always take with me dried meat. I do not eat apples, bananas or pineapples as I am aware that I can deliver much more microelements for my organism eating local berries.

I also started to collect medical herbs in my area. I dry herbs as well as blueberries or cranberries. I am a part of a project called: SUGREV “Treasures of the Far North” It is a unique tea and ethnographic project. It is a set of different kinds of teas called “Treasures of the North” {1}.

{1} more on the project SUGREV “Treasures of the Far North”: <https://sugreff.ru/>





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It is dedicated to and created by the indigenous peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East of Russia. The indigenous people of Russia make an invaluable contribution to the ethnic and cultural diversity of Russia. Different kinds of teas that you find in this set are made of plants, herbs or even mushrooms that one can find on their ancestral lands. I talked about my traditional Saami tea, which includes lingonberry leaf {2}, angelica root {3} and chaga {4}. I call it Women's Tea because all herbs keep women young and strong.

I know that you were a part of agriculture cooperatives in your region. Can you say what kind of cooperatives they were?

Cooperative farms were not created by the Saami. During the years of Soviet power, collective farms were organized, they were called Kolkhozes. It was a difficult period for those who kept private deer. Many reindeer breeders were dispossessed, their reindeer were taken away, and their families were sent into exile, for example, to Siberia. It's a long sad story that happened 90 years ago. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, in order not to lose the reindeer herds and all the work experience, agricultural cooperatives, SKhPK, were created.

In the Murmansk region, two SHPKs, "Tundra" and "Olenevod", are the only ones in our region that produce reindeer products. They breed reindeer, produce meat and various products that are sold directly.

{2} lingonberry (*Vaccinium vitis-idaea*), is a small evergreen shrub that bears edible fruit. It is native to boreal forest and Arctic tundra throughout the Northern Hemisphere, from Europe and Asia to North America

{3} angelica is a genus of about 90 species of tall biennial and perennial herbs in the family Apiaceae, native to temperate and subarctic regions of the Northern Hemisphere, reaching as far north as Iceland, Lapland, and Greenland.

{4} chaga (*Inonotus obliquus*, Russian word чaгa) is a fungus. It is parasitic on birch and other trees. The inhabitants of Russia and Siberia use the infusion of the mushroom in folk medicine as a remedy for many common ailments.

The SHPK "Tundra" has an EU certificate, which they received even before Covid, but they cannot sell dietary products. Now they sell their products in the region and send them to different regions of Russia.

Women play a strong role in Saami culture, there is a matriarchal element there. You are a head of The Saami Womens Forum supporting Saami women. Can you say more about this organization? What is its main goal?

Yes, traditionally the role of women was important in Saami culture, but I would call it soft. When men went hunting everything could happen to them, they could die. Women were responsible for their families. They had to be strong. They discussed everything and the final decision was taken by women. My grandmother was a real manager, my grandfather was soft and kind. In Saami culture the role of decision taker belongs to an older woman like a grandmother. When she dies, then the role is passed to a mother or a sisters and so on.

The Saami Women Forum {5} is an international organization that brings together the Saami women from Sweden, Norway, Finland and Russia. Usually we organize live meetings. Unfortunately, since the emidemy of Covid-19 and the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, we only meet virtually. In Russia we created a department of the Saami Woman Forum where I am an activist. We try to work more with our local women.

What do you do to strengthen the Saami women in your region?

Initially, the goal was to strengthen their political presence, but we understood that women face many other problems. We started to help women in many aspects like psychology or business. Every two years we draft and discuss a strategy. Recently the most important topic is alcohol addiction among women. For Saaami people, men and women, it is an important problem. Many women who use alcohol do it quietly, in their houses. Society may not notice it, but still, they continue to ruin themselves. Not only we talk about this in various forums, but also conduct training on sustainability and a healthy lifestyle.

The other topic is supporting women entrepreneurship, teaching them how to create small businesses, and providing training for them. We have a small business ourselves that includes a group of people. We produce local products. The name of our company is Take With You. We produce and deliver products you can take with you when you travel like dry meat, smoked fish and products made of wild berries, all produced by women. We sell locally, to people we know.

Do you think that the agroecology movement or UNDROP (the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas) can be understood or implemented among the Saami and helpful for them somehow?

{5} more on the organization: <https://indigenouswomen.ru/>



Yes, for sure. For example UNDROP is linked to local territories. There is an article 23.2 which talks about herbs and medicinal herbs. The herbs belong to local population and the local population has the right to collect it and use it. Article 26 of UNDROP talks about traditional knowledge. Traditional knowledge is generated by local people and belongs to the local people. These things should be considered and used. Also I often use the terms of agroecology. Thanks to agroecology I understood the importance of local products. It is not only healthy but also a very economic way to live. You save money and you save resources. I try to spread the knowledge around to our women. We hold seminars and webinars, meetings using only traditional food.

Also I am a representative of Russian Indigenous People in the Coalition on Indigenous Peoples Food Systems created by FAO. Recently we gathered in Genova and we talked a lot about our traditional food. One session was devoted to traditional literature describing traditional products and ways of eating. I brought with me interesting books. One of my family members, my aunt, Svetlana Egorovna Zaborshchikova, wrote a book about the traditional medicinal herbs of the Sami people, written in the Sami language. The book is called "Plants in the Life of the Saami of the Kola Peninsula". I try to mention it in articles, other books, and I produce videos for it to stay.

“ **What is your biggest concern in a few words? What do you worry the most about in terms of your region?**

Preservation of land. There are a lot of industrial companies and manufacturers trying to grab our land.



Valentina Sovkina - currently director of LLC "Kola Saami Radio". Educational teacher. She worked as an educator at the Lovozero secondary boarding school, deputy director of the Vocational School No. 26 in the village. Lovozero, Indigenous Peoples Specialist at Tundra Agricultural Cooperative and Indigenous Peoples Specialist at the Barents Office. Member of the Sami Women's Forum. Since 2008 - Chairman of the elected body of the Saami people - Kuelnegk Nyoark Saam Sobbar. In 2023, she assumed the duties of a Member of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Peoples.



The Ukrainian way of understanding agroecology

“A good thing is that Ukrainian farmers became more visible, they are recognized and became heroes together with our soldiers. (...) No matter what, pandemia, war, nuclear attack or the end of the world - farmers need to work in the fields.” – says Anna Danyliak, a sustainable agriculture expert from Ecoaction in Ukraine during an interview with Paulina Jeziorek.

Paulina Jeziorek: You work in an ecological organization called Ecoaction. Before the Russian invasion in Ukraine your organizations’ activities were focused on environmental problems. However, since the beginning of the war your organizations focus is more on food security and food supply chains?

Anna Danyliuk: Yes. As an ecological organisation we were from the start concerned about Ukrainian agriculture willing to make it greener and more sustainable. Environmental issues are often connected with social issues on a local and national level and we have to deal with them as well. When the war broke out the environmental dimension seemed less important, our team started to shift toward food security issues and the Ukrainian population’s survival. Soon we started to imagine a post-war reconstruction of Ukraine. We came up with sustainability principles and agriculture. We focus now on why and how we need to change. Some things are happening now and other things will be done in the future. Big changes in land use in Ukraine are coming because the territory is not accessible or was damaged by the war. There is a high probability that part of our land will be dangerous for cultivation of food. So there is a discussion. Around 25-30% of arable land was impacted by the war. Before the war, a bigger half of the Ukrainian territory was farmland. On average it was 57%, with pastures up to 70%. In some regions it was like 90% of the territory. In the south the percentage was the highest and now, due to the war, a big part of the land is distorted and polluted, as we can assume. We still need analysis and soil samples to really see how bad the impact is. Anyway, the chances that we will lose a big part of our arable land are very high. So in other regions to compensate for the losses, there will be big changes in our land structures. Pastures and semi-natural land might be turned into arable lands. This is something we are not very happy about from the environmental perspective.



I have heard that big farms were often military targets. Do you think it is possible that it is the land around big farms that is polluted mostly and they suffered mostly?

It is a valid point. However, we will have to study this, as there's not enough data on the war impacts on soil and environment in general. At the same time there is information on destruction of infrastructure and facilities, often associated with big producers, who are very convenient targets due to their size. Nevertheless, it would be right after these dramatic times another, more sustainable model of production would be developed. The big farms for some years were super important for the national economy but they were unsustainable. This intensive agricultural production, agroholdings, mostly oriented for export, was important for our national income, it was bringing 40% of all the revenues from the export. Many countries were or still are dependent on Ukrainian export. This is one side of the story. From another perspective, there are so many downsides of the mega farms. We know many communities that were unfortunate to live close to the megafarms, poultry and pig industrial production farms with millions of chickens and hundred thousand pigs. We have the saying that with the types of production, people seem to be spare, unnecessary in rural Ukraine. Pollution of water and air complicates the lives of people. Big Ukrainian agroholdings produce for export. Small farmers produce for our local market. They produce half of the agricultural products in Ukraine. They are very important for national food security.

Ukraine got financial support for strengthening production of small local farms from FAO and other European sources. Can you tell what is happening on a national level since the war started? Is the importance of small farmers recognized and supported as well?

International institutions were providing help from the very beginning. There were lots of complaints that Ukrainian farmers don't receive any support from the state but from international institutions. Definitely, farmers' importance is recognized on a social level. They became super important, there is a social feeling of solidarity with local farmers. When the war broke out many people moved from big cities to their friends and family in villages. It was an immediate reaction. Probably because villages seem to be more peaceful, in big cities you can become a target. The farther you are from industrial logistical centres the higher chances you are safe. Another thing is that in a small village you have better access to food. There was an apocalyptic vibe in the air, so the logic behind it was that, if you are close to land you will be able to grow food. However, I am not sure if farmers were recognized so much on a political level. The pressure of agroholdings was strong before the war and it is now. Our Ministry of Agriculture is often called - The Ministry of Agroholdings. It is a joke, but shows a bit of truth. Some policies were formed in favour of the biggest producers. Because of the promise of faster revenues for the national economy, megafarms have a big influence on national policy. Even with the disrupted logistics and broken food chains the desired changes might not come and our hopes that we will move to a better and more sustainable mode of production can be futile. We continue our struggle. A good thing though is that the Ukrainian local farmers became more visible, they were recognized and they became heroes, together with our soldiers.



What is the image of a local farmer now?

They became heroes of internet mems:) I will show you some pictures. No matter what - pandemia, war, risk of a nuclear attack or the end of the world, farmers need to work in the fields. And literally, they really are. It is not just a figure of speech.



Meanwhile in a village...

Regular spring | Quarantine

Nuclear threat | The end of the world

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Do you think that UNDROP[1] has got any chance to be assimilated, understood and implemented on a social and political level in Ukraine?

It should be the declaration that is in action. Ukraine is a part of the international community, therefore the declaration should be implemented here. Our colleagues dedicated several events to push it forward. But I do not see a sufficient response from our government. But it is definitely the tool that should be implemented and promoted for the transformation of food production and for the benefit of rural communities.

And what do you think about the concept of agroecology in Ukraine? Is it understood and can be implemented in the Ukrainian agriculture approach and politics?

That is a good question. Agroecology is environmentally healthy agriculture. But it is also about social justice, traditions and culture. I think that promotion of the terminology is really needed so

[1]United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas : resolution / adopted by the Human Rights Council on 28 September 2018



people can understand the whole complexity of it. A while ago our colleague was sharing her experience and we found out that in the Soviet Union agroecology was understood as a method for polluted land conservation. So it was known in the region in the past and was used as a method for recultivation of land that was polluted after the catastrophe in Chernobyl. But I must say that the term can be abused as well. Every agroholding has its own expert on ecology issues so there is an anecdote that these experts have their own association of agroecology.

What is happening on the national level in terms of more sustainable agriculture in Ukraine?

It is very tricky. The government seems to look for an opportunity to restore export production, as that business as usual was a major driver for international trade, and thus important for the Ukrainian economy. I also noticed that decision-makers and business associations start adding green labels in their communication and they often mention the European Green Deal, sustainability, agroecology. So some of these previously avoided words are now appearing. Maybe they are looking for external funds where the green agenda is implied. I also think that our wish to be in the European Union is a big game changer. It is known that EU agriculture is neither a perfect example of sustainability, with strong criticism around this subject. But many Ukrainians perceive the EU as an example. So buzzing around environmental terms became important even for big agroholdings. Also some big producers have the image of progressive and environmental, but it looks different when you see it and talk to the people living next to their production sites.

What other problems and obstacles do you encounter on the way to healthier agriculture?

Access to land was and still is very problematic. Problems with the land market are our never-ending story. For a long time we had a moratorium on the purchase of land. It was allowed to rent land, but not to buy it. Firstly it was seen as a tool to keep land for peasants and not to sell it to foreign businesses. But as it was possible to rent land for a long period of time f.e. 50 years, in the end it helped agroholdings to grow fast and for less money. Technically the land does not belong to them, but it is under their operation. In 2021 the land market became open so it was possible to purchase and own land. One of the measures was to help smallholders, they have priority to purchase land. First a farmer, then a company and after some time a foreigner can take it. And I think it is till 2024 that the priority to purchase is given to a farmer. But it is very unlikely that such a measure creates actual favourable conditions for people to buy land during the uncertain war times. Resources are already scarce. There is some discussion if the government could extend this period of farmers' priority for land purchasing. So it is the issue with the land - who owns it, who controls it. It is super complicated and so far it's not clear.

So despite all the problems and obstacles you mentioned, are you still optimistic in terms of transformations of agriculture in Ukraine?

I have to be. I would like to see my country in the EU. I want better environmental practices on farms and an even deeper transformation of agriculture. This is something we cannot do on our own. We are a part of a bigger picture of a food sovereignty. A big change is coming, we are losing farmland, some land will be dangerous for food production. Because of that we may face land



redistribution in the country. How will it happen and will it be environmentally and socially just? But also I have to mention climate change that is like an elephant in a room, so big that you cannot see it. Before the war, I thought that climate change was the biggest threat to Ukrainian agriculture. And it is one of the factors that is shaping the future of agriculture. Especially in the south of Ukraine where the temperature is higher, with less water and less moisture, making it harder for farmers to work. That is why we have to change.

The Ukrainian-based campaign called Victory Gardens has become very popular in your country since the war started. Are the gardens helpful for the Ukrainian population in crisis?

The inspiration for this movement came from the UK and USA and the historical Victory Gardens. The movement started just after the full-scale war broke out, in the spring. It was a response to the threat of poor harvest. The project was supported by an international charity and involved many urban citizens and rural communities. I am in love with the idea and this approach where anyone can participate. My only concern, though, was - they were calling to use every possible land plot, which is not necessary and even can be harmful from an environmentalist point of view. The project initiators were targeting displaced people as well. You can receive guides on how to grow food, how to calculate the amount you or your community need, etc. They collaborated with communities and social institutions, showing how it works. They are also cooperating with business, e.g. providing seeds among their followers.



Anna Danyliak - her academic background is in the natural science field (geography and ecology), and sustainability science. She was involved in the youth climate movement, sustainable consumption & urban gardening initiatives, which later brought her to the agriculture & environment topic. For the last five years, she has been working together with the Ecoaction team on the environmental and social issues related to agricultural development in Ukraine.

Yazidi community with Ekoloji Derneği organization created a productive oasis in a refugee camp



Conflicts, difficult socio-economic situations and climate change are displacing people who seek asylum, a better future, more robust food systems, as well as safer places with more stable access to resources. Bişar's story with Ekoloji Derneği's – a Turkish organization- highlights the immense capacity agroecology has to provide a space for healing and for traditional agricultural practices to be maintained, shared and passed on.

In August 2014, thousands of Yazidis had crossed the border from Iraq to Turkey. With the organisation of regional municipalities and people around the town of Diyarbakir, the first welcome was given to the Yazidis crossing the border and they were transferred to provinces and districts in the region. The Şengal Camp was established, and a Yazidi assembly helped organise camp coordination as well as the welcoming of incoming delegations, press statements, demonstrations, commemorations and festivals. **Initially, the food was distributed from the food factory, but due to the differences in the food culture of the Yazidis, upon their own request -and thanks to this assembly-, the food distribution system was changed.**

Since most of the people -especially women- suffered psychosocial traumas both before and during migration; and were facing difficult living conditions in the camps, including obstacles arising from cultural differences, and feelings of guilt due to their socio-economic inactivity; many studies and activities took place to see how these issues could be minimised in line with the views of the Yazidi people in the camp. As a result of the interviews, it has been determined that most of the Yazidis living in the camp, especially women, were engaged in agricultural activities in their own lands, albeit on a small scale. For this reason, Ekoloji Derneği began to encourage and support small-scale agroecological production throughout the camp.





Firstly, seeds obtained using traditional methods were collected from the villages. Small-scale orchards were established in suitable places with fertile soil behind and around the tents in the camp. Later, these gardens were expanded by obtaining animal manure and seeds were produced and production areas were created wherever possible, even in pots. Pests and diseases were prevented from areas where agriculture was carried out with traditional, natural medicines. Seedlings were grown from the seeds and offered for free distribution and exchange.



These activities were expanded when positive results were obtained in terms of the adaptation of the Yazidi people. 125 gardens were created in the camp. Tomatoes, peppers, melons and greens were grown. Hundreds of small poultry were bought and poultry houses were built in the camp. An adobe house was built together with the youth in the camp and used as a seed distribution centre. Active involvement in these activities -especially women and young people- was seen as an important field of activity as it would enable them not to think about what they were going through.

It has been observed that the socio-economic dimension, which has become the biggest problem of migration and refugee, can be overcome by ensuring their active participation in agriculture. Reducing the feeling of being away from their own land and contributing to the country where they are seeking asylum, while transferring their knowledge and experience; enabled psychologically positive developments of displaced women farmers.

Text from Bişar İçli, Ekoloji Derneği Diyarbakır

Translated by Lucas Sebastián Worsdell (Schola Campesina)