



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 mega farms, 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 at the 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 the social level. They became super important, the social solidarity with local farmers arises. 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?

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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 campaign called the Ukrainian 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.