

Institutionalising Agroecology? Reflections on municipal pastoralism in Spain

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Municipal goats' barn. Photo by Flora Sonkin

The municipality of El Boalo, 60 km north of Spain's largest city, Madrid, is developing policies and projects that aim to support environmental sustainability and attract young people to work with the land. Using the concept of agroecology, one such project is El Boalo's municipal goatherd, which is being promoted by the local government as a means to revitalise pastoralist traditions, offer environmental education, promote tourism and foster entrepreneurship. The goal is to boost the local food system and turn the municipality into an example of innovation in environmental sustainability. The initiative is part of the municipality's local development strategy and new waste management plan. This type of municipal initiative provides valuable insight into the role municipal policy and projects can have in shaping local food systems. But the implementation of this project by a public institution raises several questions, such as: Who is actively involved? Whose interests and needs is the project responding to? And what are the opportunities and challenges of institutionalising agroecology? Through this article, we evaluate this case of institution-led agroecology.

The municipal goatherd project started in October 2016, turning the 7,200 inhabitants of El Boalo into official owners of 75 "public" goats. The herd was presented to the community on the main square of the town, with the ceremony becoming especially memorable when one of the goats gave birth unexpectedly. This event marked the start of a new role for the municipality. It is promoting innovative natural resource management through initiatives especially attractive to people moving out of Madrid looking to be more engaged with their natural environment and local food system.

The changing role of municipal politics

The roots of El Boalo's goatherd project can be linked to a broader global trend, occurring over the past decade, of municipalities becoming a space for new forms of social and political change. Conceptually defined as *municipalism*, this movement identifies decentralisation of political power and direct democracy as two core elements. Increasingly, municipally-led initiatives aimed at developing more sustainable food systems are also seen as part of this emerging political current. This is evidenced by inter-municipal commitments at different levels. At the global level, there is the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact. At national level examples from Spain are the Red de Ciudades por la Agroecología and Red Terrae. At local level there are initiatives to integrate food and agriculture into municipal agendas of large cities as Barcelona, Zaragoza, Valencia, and Madrid, as well as smaller Spanish municipalities such as El Boalo (see also previous article). In emphasising the importance of food and agriculture on the municipal agenda, these initiatives offer important perspectives on the future of agroecology in urban and peri-urban areas.

In the case of Spain, municipalist practices gained strength and political support during the *indignados* movement (also known as the 15-M movement or #spanishrevolution), which gained widespread recognition in 2011. In attempting to resist austerity measures taken by the national government, Spanish social movements proposed new governance arrangements. These focused initially on the local level, and ran counter to Spain's two establishment political parties. The success of the 15-M and related social movements contributed to citizen-led platforms being elected and forming municipal governments in 2015. This brought issues of participatory governance and sustainable food systems to the forefront of political agendas in municipalities across the country. Now, two years later, it is possible to see some of the first signs of municipal policy change, at least on paper. The municipal coalition governing El Boalo was also formed by similar citizen-led platforms, and has recently started integrating agroecology into some of its municipal projects, such as the goatherd.

Linking to agroecology

Agroecology is increasingly being recognised at high-level policy forums, in academia, and by farmer movements, as a transformative process for improving the sustainability and resilience of agricultural systems. Gaining strength in the 1980s as a holistic framework, today agroecology is commonly referred to as a science, a set of practices, and a movement. It promotes low-input and small-scale agriculture that resembles natural ecological systems. More recently, international peasant movements like La Via Campesina, as well as global policy makers like the former Special Rapporteur for the Right to Food, have emphasised the links between the more technical practices of agroecology and the socio-political environment in which this food production occurs. That is to say there is now widespread agreement that the sustainability of the field cannot be dissociated from the livelihood of the farmer, both in rural and urban contexts. Agroecological practices have been broadly defined around five key principles:

- Conservation of agrobiodiversity
- Nutrient cycling
- Energy efficiency
- Water efficiency
- Conservation of local and traditionally-used genetic resources

In addition to these ecologically-based principles, a number of socio-political goals related to the context in which agroecology is practiced are identified as critical for transforming agriculture systems in a socially just way. These goals therefore emphasise that agroecology should be practised supporting:

- Equitable land access
- Territorially-based food systems
- Peasant and indigenous knowledge
- Food sovereignty

These were some of these principles and concepts that inspired the El Boalo municipal goatherd project.

The goats first emerged in El Boalo's municipality as part of the town's municipal waste management plan, which aims to repurpose the organic waste from tree- and shrub-pruning in public green spaces. Previously-discarded bio-waste therefore became fibrous feed for the goats. They receive weekly prunings as part of their diet, and the rest of the wood is chopped and used as mulch for the community's chicken compost and community gardens.

These projects in El Boalo do not stand alone, but are part of a broader trend of using municipal level politics as platforms for spreading practices of sustainable food production and consumption, while using the concepts of agroecology and/or food sovereignty. One of the key facilitators of this trend in Spain is *Red Terrae* (Network of Agroecological Reserve Territories). It is a network of municipalities working towards an agroecological transition through rural municipalism, of which El Boalo is a member.

Institutionalising agroecology

For the municipalities in the Red Terrae network, institutionalising agroecology through public policies is part of a process of re-municipalisation, aimed toward increasing local autonomy of public services. In the case of El Boalo, after finishing a contract with a private waste management company, the municipal council decided to take back providing the service itself. Benefiting from partial funding from the European Union, the municipal goatherd is one of several components of the new municipal zero-waste plan. The plan also includes a community composting system with door-to-door organic waste collection and use of chicken compost at local schools. Due to these efforts, El Boalo was recently named the 'first zero waste municipality' in the Madrid region by Zero Waste Europe in recognition of the town's innovative waste strategy.

El Boalo's municipal activism offers some important insights into the advantages of an institutional approach to supporting agroecology. Public institutions can be pillars of stability in communities, and in some cases institutions have the capacity (and also sometimes the mandate) to extend services and opportunities to marginalised populations that may otherwise be ignored.

For the municipal goatherd case, two institutional advantages are clear. First, the project is formulated as part of an institutional service. None of the activities related to the goatherd are therefore profit-oriented, unlike most farming activities in the region. Through this socio-environmental project, the municipality is able to promote agroecology practices that otherwise may not be economically feasible for farmers, and in turn build new local markets, social networks, and education opportunities. For example, local schools have been eager to integrate the project into a number of curricula, allowing school children to go on herding excursions for physical education class and learning about nutrition by testing goat milk in chemistry class. Secondly, the municipality was able to access non-local resources and political platforms, such as European funds, that otherwise would be out-of-reach for individual farmers and traditional producer organisations.



Municipal goatherd being presented in the town square. Photo by Ayuntamiento de El Boalo-Cerceda-Mataelpino

In this way the institution's administrative capacity and political status enabled the promotion of agroecology practices in innovative ways.

Despite the municipality's political enthusiasm for leading this project, its institutional nature also raises challenges for its long-term sustainability and for the integrity of the agroecology principles it strives to follow. For example, so far, the project has been implemented in a fairly top-down manner. The mayor and his staff take on many of the animal husbandry responsibilities such as feeding, herding and birthing, as well as promotional initiatives in the media and regional events. This has meant that local farmers have had little involvement in the project, both in terms of the project's formulation and the care of the animals themselves. Farmer-to-farmer exchange of local and indigenous agricultural knowledge is a key component of an agroecological approach, but given the institutional management of the goatherd, this component of farmer-to-farmer engagement is lacking. Furthermore this limited local farmer participation has negatively impacted their feelings of community 'ownership' of the initiative.

A second drawback to institutionalising agroecology is that these initiatives become dependent on the political agenda of elected politicians. As mentioned, the goatherd is currently mainly managed by local councillors, and it is not clear how, or if, the project will be continued beyond the next municipal elections. Furthermore, there is the concern that by politicising the concept of agroecology its principles will be appropriated and diluted for political gain, and in turn lose their legitimacy.

Food for thought

As new urban and peri-urban spaces become fertile ground for emerging agroecological food systems, it is clear that public institutions - from local municipalities to national ministries - can play an important role in facilitating innovative projects to foster ecological sustainability and social justice. But these openings also bring to light struggles over how agroecology is used and practised, adhering to all of its social, ecological, and political dimensions. Agroecology

as a concept and set of agricultural practices is now a "territory in dispute" between public institutions and social movements.

While it is important for research and advocacy to highlight innovative initiatives and public policies that push forward agroecology as a concrete pathway for more sustainable food systems and resilient communities, it is necessary to maintain a critical perspective. The co-option of the concept for political and economic interests is a risk. Therefore agroecology as a movement must actively engage in reclaiming participatory spaces in public administrations as a means for upholding its principles and co-producing real food system change.

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For more examples on institutionalising agroecology in Spain, see: www.ecologistasenaccion.org/tienda/editorial/1809-libro-arraigar-las-instituciones.html

For more information on Spanish municipalism, see: www.tni.org/en/publication/the-open-source-city-as-the-transnational-democratic-future