



Revaluing the Marginal: An agroecological approach to waste in food production and consumption in Spain

Flora Sonkin

Photo by Flora Sonkin

Waste management and agricultural production are not often dealt with under the same policy umbrella, yet recent social innovations implemented by actors from the agroecology movement in Madrid have shown it is possible to make this connection. *Madrid Agrocomposta* is the name of the pilot project repurposing organic waste and creating new partnerships between food producers and consumers, rural and urban dwellers, and policy makers in and around the city. Bringing together principles of agroecology and circular economy, the concept is already seeing success in municipalities beyond the Spanish capital.

The project emerged as an initiative of the citizen platform Madrid Agroecológico, and the pilot programme was included in the General Plan of Urban Waste Management 2016 of the City of Madrid. In a few words, Madrid Agrocomposta consists of the repurposing of organic waste generated in the city of Madrid, by donating it to agroecological farmers in the area for composting and utilisation as on-farm fertiliser.

Reworking the socio-ecological metabolism

A system of organic waste collection, short-distance transport, composting in local agriculture (replacing synthetic fertilisers) and sale of local food, characterises the cyclical and agroecological approach of the project. The organic waste is collected by urban consumers, especially

school canteens, who donate their waste to peri-urban farmers, these farmers then transform the waste into valuable compost to be used as fertiliser on their farms. In the case of Madrid, the collection, sorting and transporting of waste is performed by an association working towards the socio-economic inclusion of young people, El Olivar. Meanwhile, the food producers sell their products in agroecological markets in Madrid city centre, where people who donated their organic matter can buy and taste the results of their collaboration. This full circle helps strengthen the connections between the urban consumers and peri-urban producers in many ways: through revaluing and giving a different meaning to organic waste, and through food, knowledge and economic exchanges.

The first cycle was implemented from March to July 2016 in four peri-urban farms in Madrid. At the end of that year, almost 40 tonnes of bio-waste had been processed by the participating farmers, and in several schools that composted on site. The organic matter was donated by more than 200 families, seven schools and two municipal markets. The simplicity of the model and its environmental advantages, paired with drive from the community, led to high-quality compost, in addition to the learning generated between the participating actors. More so, it has proven to be a small but very effective alternative to large waste disposal facilities. Sending waste to landfills or incinerators is more expensive to the municipal government in economic terms, but more importantly, it generates significant negative environmental impacts that are hard to quantify. Meanwhile, research has shown that on-farm composting and utilisation of organic fertiliser can contribute to carbon sequestration, and in the case of *Madrid Agrocomposta*, it is also beneficial to the city's budget.

Agroecology & citizenship

The initiative was designed by the *Bioresiduos* (bio-waste) commission of Madrid Agroecológico (a social movement and advocacy platform), together with the food producers of the AUPA (Association of United Agroecological Producers). The project aimed to change how organic waste is managed in the city while supporting local farmers both in cash and in kind.

The idea was put into practice with the support of the Madrid City Council, who provided a new source of income to the peri-urban food producers involved. That is, the municipality paid farmers per ton of waste composted *in situ*, while they accessed high-quality and low-cost organic fertiliser. Promoting both agroecological practices and innovative waste management, the project was fuelled by citizen engagement which enhanced the support for local small-scale food producers. The next step is to implement an alternative currency. Called MOLA (*materia organica liberada*, in English, liberated organic matter), it would be given in exchange per kg of organic waste donated. The currency could then be used to purchase the agroecological products sold at weekly farmers' markets organised by AUPA in several squares around Madrid. The campaign started under the banner "Tua Verdura Vale Basura", translating, "Your Food is Worth Waste". Franco Llobera, active member of Madrid Agroecológico and co-founder of Red Terrae (Inter-municipal Network for Agroecological Territories), is one of the many people behind this idea. During an interview, he explained the concept of the project; he recognises how hard it is to make such a currency work, since it depends on a largely conscious citizenry to get it off the ground.

Public policies for agroecology

This initiative can be seen as part of a global turn towards thinking about food policy at the municipal level. The Milan Urban Food Policy Pact and the AgroEco Cities European Network are supranational examples of these new spaces of commitment and collaboration. In Spain, initiatives which reclaim autonomy through more sustainable natural resource management and often include local support for agroecological practices at the municipal level are a part of a rapidly expanding movement (e.g. Madrid Agroecológico, Red Terrae, Red de Ciudades por la Agroecología, Llaurent Barcelona).

Madrid Agroecológico evolved from the Iniciativa por la Soberanía Alimentaria de Madrid (ISAm), as a group of social movements and associations working toward food sovereignty. The platform consists of six different commissions: Agrocomposting and Organic Waste, School Feeding, Food Producers, Training, Milan Urban Food Policy Pact and Social Mobilisation. In 2015, the citizen organisation presented food policy recommendations for municipal and regional governments to inform an agroecological transition. Since then it has become an advisory group to Madrid's municipal council on participatory processes for the creation of a Local and Sustainable Food Strategy for the city.

The experience of Madrid Agrocomposta represents a light of hope and encouragement to continue working along this

path. Following the first year of operation, the Madrid Agrocomposta model was extended, and different agro-composting experiences have been implemented in other municipalities of the region. One example is the Henares Agrocomposta or Alcalá Agrocomposta project - which Ecologistas en Acción is developing in collaboration with the Alcalá City Council. Another is the collaboration between Zarzalejo city council, *Zarzalejo in Transition* and the *Germinando* Collective, to provide agro-composting courses and implement another pilot project in the city.

The case of Madrid Agrocomposta offers a grounded example of how agroecological principles, such as enhancing recycling of biomass and closing nutrient cycles, can be practised while bridging the rural-urban and producer-consumer divides. This is done by bringing together diverse actors, including: food producers, waste managers, fertiliser and agricultural input enterprises, local food markets, consumers, and those concerned with health and nutrition as well as climate change. This project also highlights how working together with local governments can be an opportunity to push forward ideas and strategies from social movements and local communities. In conclusion, agro-composting can be seen here as an innovative strategy for constructing a holistic local food policy - one that integrates urban and peri-urban spaces, different sectors and their diverse actors.

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Flora Sonkin

MSc International Development Studies, Rural Sociology Chair
Group – Wageningen University

flora.sonkin@wur.nl

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