

LEARNING from new peasants



In rural Valencia, Spain, youth unemployment exceeds 50 percent. However, young people are not waiting for outsiders to come and solve their problems. An excursion to local initiatives in the region proved to be a wonderful opportunity to learn from new, young peasants about self-organised development.

Vincent Delobel

In June 2013, our group of students visited the Mediterranean village of Benidoleig, located in Alicante, Valencia. In search of inspiring locally led experiences, we came across José Manuel Bisetto. He is the leader of a grassroots initiative for healthier living, entitled “Agricultología”. José Manuel (33) has a PhD, but decided to follow his childhood dream and become a peasant.

Uniting a farmer community On the land that belonged to his grandfather, whose son was not interested in farming, José Manuel coordinates shared organic vegetable gardens. Since 2006, once abandoned plots are once again being cultivated, using locally available ecological resources and generating high quality products. These activities connect neighbours to each other and to their

environment and provide healthy food. Each of the fifty plots on this new farm feeds one family. One hundred boxes of organic vegetables are sold every week at a price between 5-10 Euro, which is affordable for consumers and fair for the farmers. This income makes the farm self-sustaining and allows for further developments.

The people who work these plots also exchange knowledge, tips and seeds and help each other. Trust and reciprocity are cornerstones of this new way of farming, which increases people's feelings of responsibility for their own food and community. "*Agricultoría primarily offers an opportunity to farm, to create a centre where people can experiment with organic gardening,*" José Manuel explains. "*We provide a different and innovative way of engaging in agriculture, that brings people in touch with nature. We have found that it is very motivating for people to get access to healthy and affordable food.*"

Alongside food production, José Manuel's multi-functional farm also offers educational facilities to help children to reconnect with soil, plants and animals. José Manuel invests in relationships with other like-minded people: colleagues, officials at the municipality, as well as scientists at the Polytechnic University of Valencia. He continuously tries to develop the initiative, integrating aspects such as food forests, bioconstruction and medicinal plants. *Agricultoría* has become a centre for experimentation and training in organic farming and the environment through visits, adult training and extracurricular activities. It is now a reference and pollinator for various other projects in the area.

Re-peasantisation in Spain José Manuel's initiative is part of an emerging trend of the "re-peasantisation" of rural Spain, something that is happening amidst a context of economic crisis but also the continued general decline of agricultural activities. In Valencia, only four percent of the economically active population is employed in the agricultural sector, and 90% of this group are older than 40.

Since the end of Franco's dictatorship in 1975, the country has been striving for citizen-led democracy. Although the state invested heavily in technology transfer programmes that provided pesticides, fertilizers and mechanisation services for over half a century, they generally did not meet the needs of rural families. As a result, farming was not regarded as attractive anymore.

Spain is one of Europe's major organic food producers, but most of the produce is exported. In recent years, a number of small organic initiatives have started to spring up various places, usually initiated by small groups of people going back to rural areas in search of a better quality of life and an income. This

phenomenon of re-peasantisation can be seen throughout Europe.

Learning from positive examples Local initiatives, such as José Manuel's, are potential seedbeds for change. Interdependence around healthy food, based on trust and reciprocity, give way to new networks and new patterns of food production and local markets. This contributes to local employment, health and sustainability. We also see that it creates bridges between all the people involved, including farmers, businessmen, universities, NGOs and the government.

What can we learn from José Manuel's experience about such *self-organised change*, or change that is borne from practice? First, it responds to a need and a local context. The initiative in Benidoleig makes use of three elements of the local context: it was built on one of the many available pieces of abandoned land, it

José Manuel Bisetto and the agro-ecological gardens offer a space for learning Photo: Ximo Vidal



responded to a situation of youth unemployment, and it used existing local knowledge about vegetable production.

Secondly, it helps us understand that change often happens unplanned and “in the social wild”. It is unpredictable and may happen in a creative way, outside the conventions of research and policy centres. Who would have thought that José Manuel and his community would take up vegetable gardening collectively? His initiative generated various novelties. By creating new markets, creative agro-ecological food production systems, collective working spaces and shorter food supply chains. People got involved in all of these activities with different intentions, and not necessarily with the aim to go exactly in the same direction. As

such, we learn that self-organised change cannot be guided, monitored or planned: it may even be incoherent.

While planning for these initiatives might be impossible, it is important to acknowledge their merits. Each of them emerges out of real needs, intentions and perspectives. Having demonstrated that they can provide a basis for social cohesion and positive change, they deserve greater public attention and support.

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The story of Agricología

“After finishing my PhD, I lived and worked abroad for a while. But I missed life in my childhood village. When I returned, I started looking for a way to innovate in agriculture. I wanted to practice a type of agriculture that provided leisure and entertainment – a social and cultural kind of farming where people can share enthusiasm, effort and fellowship. So in 2006 I created Agricología, where we seek a balance between ecology, environment, social participation, culture and tradition.

Recently, we have started to work in other municipalities that are interested in the Agricología approach. For example, I am working on the revival of Moscatel grapes in a nearby ecological village. In co-operation with the Polytechnic University of Valencia we are looking for ways to sell the grapes locally, reducing food kilometres and CO₂ emissions. Also, in primary schools I teach children about organic gardening, animals, the environment and various other aspects of food production.

During the start-up phase, other people in the village regarded me as a weirdo. Why would a person with a PhD on innovation go back to the field? Most families in the region try to send their children to school so they can engage in other professions than agriculture. But I was very interested in returning to the land and starting a farm. Even though I have not formally studied agriculture, my grandfather taught me about vegetable farming since I was a child.

My goal was to give life to this land that was so heavily mistreated by all kinds of pesticides and herbicides; that had become unproductive, lifeless. And look at it now. All kinds of living animals, micro-organisms and trees live on this land, which at the same time is a social and

educational space for the community. Now, after seven years, I am starting to receive appreciation and support from the local community.

There were other difficult moments. As Agricología is different and innovative, local bureaucrats did not have anything to compare it to and created many administrative hurdles. Rules that are developed for large companies make it difficult for local, sustainable projects like Agricología, even though it has clearly given the village a boost through increased tourism and trade.

To others who want to undertake a similar initiative, I would recommend to first develop a good plan that includes your goals and vision of the project, as well as the technical, economic and political viability. Along the way you will find both barriers and support. When you bump against these barriers and you fall, get up and continue. Proof that this strategy works, is the flourishing of Agricología and the various awards that it has won.

I feel a strong need to share experiences like mine across Europe, knowing that in different places there are young people with initiatives that, without although they may not speak the same language, are united in the wish to keep the villages and rural communities that our ancestors passed on to us alive. We have to come together to train people to keep our culture and traditions alive, because if they are gone, much of our heritage will also be lost.”

José Manuel Bisetto is the founder of Agricología. In 2009, he won the Spanish National Award as best business project, in 2010 he won the award for best business idea in rural tourism in the province of Alicante and in 2012 he received the award for best innovative project in the district of Marina Alta. For more information: info@agricologia.es or visit <http://www.agricologia.es>