

Unlocking the Transformative Potential of Agroecological Networks

Short Workshop Summary

BioAgora is a collaborative European project funded by the Horizon Europe programme. It aims to connect research results on biodiversity to the needs of decision-making in a targeted dialogue between scientists, other knowledge holders and policy actors.

As part of BioAgora's ongoing process of co-creating knowledge with practitioners, an interactive workshop on the transformative potential of agro-ecological networks was organised. About 30 participants participated in this two-hour workshop. They were recruited from agro-ecological networks in Europe and through the BioAgora social media. The discussions were inspired by a conversation between two agro-ecological scientists reflecting on the transformative potential of their work, as well as a presentation on strategies for system transformation, i.e. collaborating, challenging and disrupting.

INDIVIDUAL PERCEPTIONS ON AGRO-ECOLOGICAL TRANSFORMATION

Drivers – Participants demonstrated a deep concern for long-term wellbeing that transcends immediate economic interests and recognised humans' interdependence with nature. All were convinced of the importance of connecting across different knowledge systems and communities.

Constraints- Participants reported resistance of power structures to transformative change, leading to unfavourable policies. Transformative change requires addressing root economic structures. Integrating different forms of knowledge is often difficult.

Hopes - Participants called for reimagining economic and policy frameworks. They emphasized that technical solutions alone are insufficient without accompanying shifts in mindsets. Concrete hopes focused on practices that rebuild rather than deplete.

ASSESSING THE TRANSFORMATIVE POTENTIAL OF NETWORKS

Collaborating – Measuring and reporting have limited transformative potential. Empowerment and knowledge exchange across boundaries and a focus on the process of collaboration rather than the output are considered highly transformative, particularly where capacity and agency among marginalized actors increase. Transformative approaches need to be deeply embedded in specific contexts, while connecting to broader networks.

Challenging - Activities with higher transformative potential focus on concrete action, underlying economic structures and shifting power dynamics rather than awareness, surface-level symptoms and persuasion.

Disrupting - Individual actions are less transformative than collective ones, in particular where they create lasting institutional change that operates outside conventional paradigms. Transformative activities create viable alternatives, while simultaneously challenging problematic systems.

Cross-cutting success factors: direct farmer involvement, addressing root causes, creating new connections, long term commitment, balanced network composition, clear structures and adequate resources, strategic agility and attention to power and trust dynamics.

ACTIVATING THE TRANSFORMATIVE POTENTIAL OF NETWORKS

Network structure and composition - Successful networks maintain clear frameworks for decision-making while remaining adaptable enough to incorporate diverse perspectives. They avoid siloes by inviting other perspectives. External crises often catalyse this outward orientation. It is useful to draw inspiration from networks outside the food system.

Internal network functioning - Inclusivity requires resources, both financial and temporal. Networks need to give back to their members rather than extracting value. Specific mechanisms are needed to address power imbalances, to prevent appropriation by powerful actors. Effective communication and trust may well be the most fundamental enabler of transformative work.

Strategic approaches and system engagement - The most effective networks demonstrate versatility in their strategic approach, combining collaboration, challenge & disruption as appropriate to the context. Aspirational dreaming needs to be combined with practical action, always involving practitioners. When engaging with status quo players, working through intermediaries rather than direct confrontation often proves effective. Simple relational practices are crucial for transformation, like having a drink together, although building trust takes time.

Impact and change mechanisms - Compelling narratives and robust evidence need to be combined. It is important to address economic dimensions alongside ecological and social concerns. Networks need to validate the knowledge and experience of practitioners consistently.

Main challenges for transformative networks – Small projects can lack impact, while larger projects involving conventional organizations may risk losing their transformative edge. Vested interests exercise strong resistance to fundamental change. Funding calls focus on good practices rather than addressing barriers and offer little space for co-

creation. There is a disconnect between academic outputs and practical, farmer-focused tools (particularly socio-ecological tools) that support change on the ground.

Cross-cutting patterns: including practitioners, balancing between formal structures and informal relationships, addressing power imbalances rather than ignoring them, moving fluidly between collaborative, challenging, and disruptive approaches and integrating the economic dimension.

NEXT STEPS

This workshop was a first try out. Based on this experience, the workshop approach will be refined and applied in other areas to empower networks and find common patterns. The approach will be shared online for further use. As for the food system networks, further activities will be developed building upon the results of this first workshop, in particular reaching out beyond the agro-ecology networks.