

Transforming our food system: Let's enable the back-to-land movement in Greece

The back-to-land trend in Greece – whereby urban people turn to farming – is a highly mediatized yet poorly understood phenomenon. Examples include the New York Times article¹ by Rachel Donadio or the documentary Little Island by Nikos Dagiadas that chronicles the experiences of a young Athenian couple moving to the remote island of Ikaria to live off the land. I call it the allure of the 'Do-It-Yourself' movement meeting the Greek great depression. Joking aside, small-scale farming in developed areas is experiencing a resurgence as educated young people seek to revitalize a agricultural sector plagued by ecological, economic and social challenges (e.g., ageing farmers, low food prices, farmland ecological degradation, erosion of agricultural communities' social fabric and loss of traditional farming knowledge and practices) to invest into sustainable local food systems. New food producers in Greece, in contrast to other countries, are blessed by the fact that many have access to a small piece of family land that can be utilized. Having land however does not always equate with having good land or knowing what to do with said land, and thus challenges abound amidst opportunity.

The difficulty for scientific research on the topic is that there are no reliable comprehensive statistics documenting the back-to-land trend in Greece, and part of the issue lies in the fact that there are multiple ways to understand and define what back-to-the-land means. There are diverse motives and multiple ways to reconnect with land-based livelihoods. Some people do it to increase their food security, some seek to obtain another source of income in order to diversify, while others strive to integrate the agricultural sector to officially become new farmers. To complicate things, these initiatives occur everywhere from urban and periurban areas to remote rural areas. These different strategies are by no means mutually exclusive, and we do see different strategies being employed at various stages and sometimes in different geographic locations along someone's journey. The fact remains that there is strong interest towards food systems' transformation in Greece, and the economic crisis opens up opportunities to reassess our farming practices, from farm to fork. Most of

¹ http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/09/world/europe/amid-economic-strife-greeks-look-to-farming-past.html?_r=3

these transformations are driven by civil society, and yield the potential for greater transformation if collaborations within and outside the movement are furthered.

During my research, I had the chance to talk with at least a hundred people that sought to produce their own food, often for the first time. I also benefited from the insights of people and organizations that facilitate such a move by providing access to land, knowledge, inputs (e.g. seeds, capital) or markets. What emerged as a key finding is that while most of the newspaper articles focus on the direct experiences of individual people in particular places, these experiences are only the tip of the iceberg. Indeed, growing food – whether for subsistence or market – is linked to a plethora of collective issues ranging from the dearth of green spaces in urban areas to the challenges of making a living as an inexperienced small-scale producer confronted with unfavorable policies and practices. One advantage that these new food producers have is that they remain intrinsically connected to urban areas while getting to gradually understand rural dynamics; they thus have a foot in two worlds. As a result of these strengthened urban-rural connections, we observe new ways of getting food to people through the creation of CSAs, social groceries, new types of cooperatives. We also see new niche markets emerging for previously untapped natural wealth (i.e. aromatic plants, medicinal plants, wild herbs etc.), a trend not without its ecological risks. Lastly, new experimental spaces are emerging as illustrated for instance by the growth of urban collective gardens throughout Greece or the multiplication of local seed saving groups. The oikosxoleio² – a Sunday school organized by the organic farmers’ association that provides theoretical and practical knowledge about organic farming – provides a good example of such an experimentation space. The importance of experimental spaces cannot be overstated given that these are ways for people to safely learn and network before plunging into a new activity. They also provide spaces to collective debate about important societal issues, given that “growing food is political. Having practical (political) projects is very important” as noted by one of my interviewees.

To allow these initiatives to scale up, we need to develop enabling policies and social innovations that support local small-scale food systems and their producers. From an urban food security standpoint, examples of enabling policies include allowing mixed uses in residential areas for food production and small-scale animal husbandry (i.e. chickens, bees, small goats), supporting the creation of additional productive green spaces, and protecting agricultural areas in periurban areas confronted with strong land conversion pressures. For new farmers, enabling policies and innovations are required along the entire food chain. At the farm level, practices and tools designed specifically for small-scale farming need to be made readily available. Several new farmers told me about the prohibitive costs of machinery and the fact that these were designed for large farms. Yet Greece is not Iowa or Germany. We have a different topography, different farmlands and different farmers. As such, we need different practices and machinery, especially in the context of fragmented and sloped small-scale plots. We also need to reinvest and retransform social organizations such as

² <https://oikosxoleio.wordpress.com/%CF%80%CF%81%CE%BF%CE%B3%CF%81%CE%B1%CE%BC%CE%BC%CE%B1/>

agricultural cooperatives or supermarkets in order to achieve (collective) economies of scale that are beneficial to producers and consumers. Lastly, we need to societally further support organic and natural farming; that is farming practices that do not degrade our natural system while also producing healthy foods. One way of doing it would be radically changing our subsidy system to support organic farming rather than conventional agriculture. Or if one does not support the idea of subsidies, reinstate the concept of polluter pays, especially since as citizen we do 'pay' for the price of cheap foods in terms of ecological and health impacts.

In terms of aggregation, distribution and processing, investing into collective food hubs³ would greatly support small-scale producers, old and new alike, while also potentially lowering costs for cash strapped consumers interested in supporting local food systems. Indeed, small-scale farmers are often challenged by the fact that not only do they need to produce food (i.e. be a farmer) but they also need to figure out how to distribute and sell it along different channels, and sometimes also learn to process their products to add value. Indeed, given the low prices for raw agricultural products, direct sales and/or value adding are important means for small-scale producers to increase their income. However, processing often includes high transactional costs to comply with institutional regulations; costs that are often prohibitive to small-scale farmers, especially in the context of the economic recession. We need to create regulations that take into account small-scale food transformation, and simplify transactional costs (i.e., reduce the number and cost of permits, relax a bit the level of institutional regulations for smaller scale operations, create favorable taxation regimes).

All these enabling policies will require the active involvement from theory to practice of civil society organizations that are already at the forefront of these social innovations: dreaming, testing, and experimenting with new food systems.

Author

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³ Food hubs represent infrastructure that facilitate the distribution and processing process. For instance, instead of each farmer separately creating a client list, driving to the consumers, obtaining warehouses etc. these are collectively pooled. In the case of processing, that means having collective processing units for instance and thus share the costs of complying with health, building, fire and other regulations. See for instance, this very interesting article in the Grist regarding food hubs in the US <http://grist.org/locavore/food-hubs-how-small-farmers-get-to-market/>.



the back-to-land movement in Greece. Her dissertation not only gave the opportunity to explore a fascinating emergent topic but also allows her to spend more time in her native Greece. In addition to her academic work, Karina is collaborating on an interactive documentary project entitled Heterotopies⁴ that explores alternative sustainability initiatives in Southern Europe.

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⁴ <http://www.heterotopies.net/>