

An independent review of the AgriCultures Network

Kaia Ambrose, Jacqueline Chenier, Pierre Kadet, Stephen Sherwood

2014

A summary

The AgriCultures Network

The AgriCultures Network (AN) aims “to support the systematization of practical experiences and do advocacy to promote family farming and agroecology”. The AN is composed of actors involved in autonomous, but thematically linked knowledge building processes on critical issues, consolidated in the production of six regional magazines. The content is produced in diverse media, but chiefly digital and print in Brazil, China, India, Netherlands, Peru, and Senegal. Each member of the AgriCultures Network operates in highly different, but largely complementary contexts of institutional support to sustainable family farming and are part of diverse social networks situated in professional and practitioner environments. These relationships are generated through their individual and collective activity, influencing for example, the Network’s ability to influence policy.

In producing its magazines, the AgriCultures Network defines themes, and then each regional partner recruits experiences and invests considerable time into helping pioneers to organize, reflect on, and precipitate their experience in text. As a matter of principle, articles in the different magazines are chiefly authored by non- staff. Systematization is rooted in ILEIA’s long-standing tradition of working with others to help them think about and write down their experiences. This is done in a way that allows them to reflect and move beyond being passive contributors to knowledge brokers. AN members do not see the purpose of systematisation as solely to produce an article, but rather to distil actions, reactions, reflections, proposals and results. Additionally, the results of the process aren’t necessarily for written material, but also for advocacy. The methodology is now translated and used by all member organizations.

AN members are actively engaged in finding pathways for healthier, more productive and socially just food – not just in terms of addressing many pressing social-environmental concerns but also in addressing who benefits from the production, circulation and consumption of food. In this last sense, ILEIA and the AN are part of a growing global effort to enable institutional change towards more democratic food.

Unique contributions

Transition in less formalized spaces

The AN’s comparative advantage may lie in influencing the emergence of ‘good practice’ in less formalized spaces. The review team found the AN as highly relevant for addressing a major gap in institutional transition in agriculture and food, especially as activated in the spaces of family level practice, both in regional localities and in the interaction of those localities as broader social networks of influence. It did not find this space being reached by other agencies in such a direct

way and over a relatively long period of time – beginning with the ILEIA magazine network in the 1990s and continuing into the new phase of the AgriCultures Network into the second decade of the 2000s.

Convening social networks

The magazines are used to convene otherwise disparate individuals and groups (people in homes, producer groups, NGOs, universities, private businesses and government agencies) involved in agroecology, family farming and food. The AN member organizations play a *filtering* and *amplifying* role. In their own contexts, they synthesize ideas and evidence from diverse sources, turning what otherwise might be highly specialized information into accessible content for a wider readership. The review team came to appreciate that the magazines, as a collective enterprise and when at their best, serve as a unique, regionally situated and globally linked communicative device for generating meaning, constructing identity and organization through discourse, narrative and practice. In other words, the magazines are not just a bundle of paper. They also represent a means of building social networks involved in localized organization, agenda-setting and politics in agriculture and food.

Behavioural change

In addition to generating content for the purpose of sharing experience among communities, systematization by the AgriCultures Network contributes to a myriad of invaluable behavioural and social developments that can spark promising action, such as changes in self-esteem, confidence, and identity, as well as changes in empathy, trust, and the ability to collaborate and organize with others.

Learning and education

The magazines center on learning and innovation, and in each country visited the review team found specific examples of universities that used the magazine in teaching. NGOs regularly use articles for informal learning, and there are ample experiences of materials used with farmer groups, and even urban-based gardening, in places such as the Netherlands. Important academic leaders contribute articles in each of the magazines, which effectively represents a voice for them to reach development professionals and other readers.

Challenging dominant regimes

As part of a broader agenda of systematization, the AN and collaborators have diversely utilized the magazine as an influential vehicle for challenging dominant regimes in agriculture and food. The magazines and other in-depth processes of systematization of grounded experiences and perspectives have been a chief means of internal network learning and interaction as well as external organizing and influencing. The continual (re)production of reflective content generation produces tangible objects that are immensely valuable as means to ‘social networking’ – i.e., the generation of historical artefacts around which the members and their networks of allies build collective identities and exercise influence. The continual strengthening and utilization of systematization, the magazine, and other technical processes and products as a social vehicle should not be overlooked as means of influencing and, in effect, policy-making.

Contributing to innovation and change

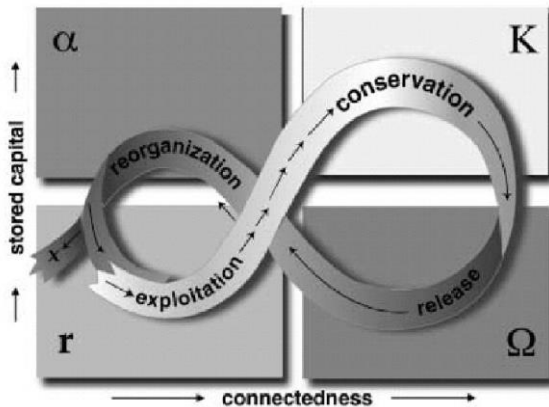


Figure: Phases of institutional transition in the 'Lazy Eight', originally proposed by C.S. Holling as a stylized description of renewal in ecosystems.

Looking at the Lazy Eight as a stylized model for describing the inter-connected resilience that he finds common to healthy ecosystems, the unique contributions of the Network appear to fall into the regions of innovation and change (i.e., the quadrants of release (Ω) and reorganization (α)), rather than the phases of institutional growth (r) and conservation or institutionalisation (K).

For example, in Peru ETC-Andes contributed messaging to call attention to the contradictions of the industry's proposals for genetically modified organisms. Meanwhile, in Brazil, AS-PTA has utilized multi-stakeholder 'caravans' to call attention to the viability of family farming and alternative marketing as existing, opportunities to support municipal school food programmes. In the Netherlands, ILEIA helped to bring together a diverse group of influential actors to legitimize alternative perspectives and make claims for new public investments in agroecology and fair and just food.

Recommendations for the future

Provided resource and time constraints, in addition to the pressures of the endless technical rendering of social change and development that is common to agricultural modernization, the AN is faced with the continual challenge of how to sustain a learning-based approach to systematization and documentation and not just become a primary producer of technical content. More immediate challenges include: creating space for more direct participation of youth in the AN and renewal of leadership and experimentation; protecting the symbols of agroecology and family farming as these terms become further institutionalized in state and multi-state bureaucracies; growing through both the intensification of experience (i.e., the deepening of relationships and collaboration with like-minded practitioner agencies) as well as the continual expansion and diversification of agenda (e.g., by creating further space for more strategic investment of urban-based consumer wealth and restaurateurs in agroecology); and establishing a more effective business model (not just for the AN but also for its membership), especially with regard to stabilizing and diversifying funding for five legally autonomous magazines.

This less formal approach to enabling policy reform through discourse and practice is clearly activated by the processes embedded in generating and re-generating the different magazines, and is worthy of placing on the radar screen of the Network's thinking on policy intervention. When entering the public sphere, the AN needs to fully draw on its wealth of experience and relationships in its areas of expertise, such as pesticide legislation and defence of genetic resources and seeds, in order to understand how to effectively defend the network's agenda and to garner public support for its proposals in ways that contribute to meaningful policy reform.

The social processes tied to the different magazines and the Network's members' unique ability to penetrate organizational, cultural, and social boundaries merit nurturing and strategic attention. In so doing, the AN can advance its objective of becoming an influential force for institutional transition towards more healthy, sustainable and democratic agriculture and food.