



Tropentag, September 17-19, 2018, Ghent

“Global food security and food safety:
The role of universities”

“We Wear Many Hats”: The Multiple Roles of the National Agrarian University in Supporting Nicaragua’s Agroecological Transition

KATHARINA SCHILLER

International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT), CGIAR Research Program on Roots, Tubers and Bananas, Nicaragua

Abstract

Agroecology has recently been recognised by FAO as an integral part of national transitions to more sustainable modes of production and consumption (referred to as the agroecological transition). Agroecological farming involves the creation of a holistic farm management system based on ecological practices, aiming to maximise ecosystem services to increase agricultural production, and including elements of environmental and social justice. Although agroecology is widely considered to be a knowledge-intensive, as opposed to a capital-intensive, mode of agricultural production, little scientific attention has been paid to the role of universities in agroecological transitions. Agroecological literature tends to focus on farmers as knowledge creators and disseminators; few authors have researched the role(s) universities may play — not just in gathering, creating, and disseminating agroecological knowledge in an institutionalized form, but also concerning other roles they may play to support the agroecological transition.

We address this gap by exploring the functions filled by one specific actor in Nicaragua’s agroecological transition: The National Agrarian University (UNA). This case study is based on fieldwork undertaken in Nicaragua in 2018 using qualitative methods, particularly key stake holder interviews and document analysis. We use elements from socio-technical systems theory to examine the roles the UNA plays, and the functions it fills, to support the agroecological transition. Our results show that beyond creating formal agroecological study programs for students from technical to doctorate degrees, UNA uses the theme of climate change mitigation and adaptation to introduce agroecology in a wide variety of courses. Further, UNA plays a key networking role between national organisations, works with government institutions, and links to international organisations. It partners with national organisations to provide scientific evidence on e.g. the role of local seed banks to improve food security. Currently, it is pondering possibilities for interventions to build consumer demand for agroecological products, including policy-based options. Our study shows that beyond being a traditional knowledge broker, UNA fills multiple functions, plays multiple roles, and helps to create ‘thick legitimacy’ for agroecology in Nicaragua. These results may be transferrable to other universities looking to support agroecological transitions, particularly in emerging economies.

Keywords: Agroecology, knowledge broker, multi-level perspective, sustainability transition, technological innovation systems

Contact Address: Katharina Schiller, International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT), CGIAR Research Program on Roots, Tubers and Bananas
current address: Bruno-Stuermer Str. 1, Frankfurt, Germany, e-mail: katharina.schiller@wur.nl