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Farmers’ and academia’s views”

Social innovation for agroecological transitions: changing roles in multi-stakeholder collaborations for improved local food system development

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Abstract

The concept of social innovation (SI) is recently gaining attention in agroecological transition research. SI comprises change of multi-stakeholders’ relationships and social practices in agroecological transition initiatives, such as Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS). PGS are group-based local certification approaches to ecological production, aiming at changes in system operators’ relationships (producers, consumers, facilitators) through new ways of organising, framing, and doing. First retrospective studies showed that established PGS encourage reconfigurations of social relations to implement alternative farming and food practices. However, the analysis of how SI evolves through changes in relationships requires perspectives ‘from within’ and ‘in the making’. The concept of roles is suggested to assess required changes of individual roles (tasks, responsibilities, rights) and role constellations to provide new opportunities for multi-stakeholder collaborations. Since 2019, we address the above issues in an ongoing case study (Northern Patagonia, Argentina) on the transdisciplinary development of a PGS from a SI perspective. Based on a qualitative actor- and activity-oriented approach, the objectives of the study are to assess ‘from within’ and ‘in the making’ i) how the PGS development process facilitates SI; and ii) how changes of understandings and enactment of individual roles and role constellations between participating stakeholder groups shape the collaboration and potential success of SI. Preliminary results show that the PGS development facilitates SI, by addressing social needs and by implementing new social practices, such as developing agroecological process and product quality standards, control mechanisms, and multi-stakeholder governance structures. Participants are encouraged to question their own and others’ roles and to enact role changes. Expected role changes of producers and consumers (become active and responsible managers and promoters of the PGS) were shared among all stakeholder groups in the dialogue phases (framing). However, in the implementation phases (doing), it turned out challenging to meet expectations of enacting modified roles. We found joint (re-) definition of roles and evaluation of limitations for enactment of modified roles critical to improve SI in PGS. Only then, conditions can be adapted for multi-stakeholder groups to enact roles differently, increasing the groups’ room to manoeuvre to better meet SI aims in agroecological transition trajectories.

Keywords: Consumer-producer proximity, participatory Guarantee Systems, short food supply chains, transdisciplinary research