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Caring, learning, doing, relating- role of training on dynamic agroforestry in reshaping relational patterns in smallholder systems in Bolivia

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Abstract

Dynamic agroforestry is recognised as a promising alternative to unsustainable land use practices for its potential to restore ecosystems while increasing the resilience of production systems and livelihoods. The importance of training in fostering the uptake of more sustainable production methods like dynamic agroforestry is regularly emphasised but remains poorly understood. Existing research predominantly focuses on economic outcomes, often obscuring processes of learning, changes in practices, perceptions, values, attitudes, and the interrelatedness of the change process with its wider socioecological context. In the Alto Beni region in Bolivia, dynamic agroforestry has been promoted for almost two decades, conducting regular one-year training programmes. Our objective was to explore the effect of this training on former participants in a holistic manner. Drawing on relational ontologies and socioecological systems research we conceptualise socioecological systems as an intertwined, dynamic, relational web in which the training is embedded. Using this understanding as a heuristic, we identified relations to human and non-human entities within the relational web of former participants and assessed how these relations were influenced by participation in the training. Data was obtained through semi-structured interviews, narrative walks, a mapping exercise, and a discussion and reflection workshop with 21 farmers and technicians. Content analysis was done using ATLAS.ti. We identified four emerging key relational patterns: I) care and socioecological stewardship practices, II) changed relation to oneself, III) increased resilience through new ways of doing and relating, and IV) ongoing relational learning. We find that participation in training reshaped both the quantity and quality of the relations. Participants from the Alto Beni region maintained more and stronger relations with training providers and other participants beyond the training compared to those from other regions. We further find that the training has different implications for its participants, highlighting that complex processes of change need to be understood within its wider social, cultural and political context. Our results show that beyond the transfer of technical knowledge, the training strengthened social and socio-ecological relations of participants, thereby achieving a more sustained practice change. Continuous support and proximity to training providers were crucial in maintaining these changes.

Keywords: Bolivia, change processes, dynamic agroforestry, relationality