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A conceptual framework for agency and behaviour change in agri-food systems transformation

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Abstract

Agri-food systems reforms such as agroecology are receiving increased attention. However, adoption and scaling of agroecology has been limited despite growing investment, raising questions about effective behaviour change pathways for agri-food systems transformation. We argue that agroecological transition must be understood as a process of systems transformation, and propose a conceptual framework on agency and behaviour change for transforming agri-food systems (ACT). The ACT framework explores how agri-food system components beyond producer attitudes interact to shape actors' opportunity spaces, which create conditions for behaviour change. We identify economic, governance, resource, and social and relational subsystems as key structural elements shaping behavioural outcomes. The latter of these not only affects behaviour directly, but also mediates how other structural factors influence individual and collective power and agency, and therefore opportunity spaces, on the basis of actors' intersectional identities. We applied the ACT framework to analyse case studies of past agroecological initiatives developed through desk reviews, key informant interviews, and document analysis in India, Kenya, Peru, Tunisia, and Zimbabwe. Specifically, we investigated the common entry points that initiatives used to support agroecological transformation (i.e., target actors, behaviours, and behaviour change strategies) and the rationale for the chosen entry points as explained by initiative designers and/or understood by implementers. We found that historically, agroecology-related initiatives have had a heavy focus on producers' behaviour and sought to spur behaviour change by increasing producer knowledge. Attention to wider agri-food system actors has been limited, as well as engagement with economic, resource, governance, and social and relational subsystems. Better understanding the enabling and impeding factors in agroecological transformation requires attention to how the enabling environment creates opportunity for behaviour change and agency, and how diverse actors' experiences differ. We therefore find that the ACT framework can support clearer identification of target actors, behaviours, assumptions about those behaviours, and what role structural system elements play — and through that, the design of more effective, inclusive, locally driven agri-food initiatives.

Keywords: Agency, agroecology, behaviour change, conceptual framework, opportunity space, social inclusion