



## **National School of Agroecology: popular education for the formation of agroecological referents**

By: Cogo, Gabriela; Sotiru, Martin Nicolas; Monguzzi, Facundo Nicolás; Jurado Rocabado, Arnoldo; Almazan Cardoso, Juana

National School of Agroecology (ENA in its Spanish abbreviation) is a pedagogical tool built by the Rural Federation for Production and Rooting (Argentina), whose objective focuses on the “Training of Trainers” in agroecology, in other words, agricultural producers who can teach and extend agroecology in their territories. The experience arises from a demand from farmers to learn and train in agroecology. After carrying out three courses, ENA has contributed to training in agroecology, food sovereignty, popular organization, feminism, horizontal methodologies, among others, under a framework of popular education. We share here the conclusions arising from the courses, and a reflection on the contribution that the ENA makes in the construction of a collective socio-historical and political subject that we call “peasant and indigenous agroecological family agriculture.”



One of the cohorts from the National School of Agroecology receiving their certificates. Photo: Rural Federation

### **Emergence and development of the School: a need for the territories**

The National School of Agroecology (ENA) is a proposal that was born with the objective of strengthening and expanding agroecology in various territories of Argentina, based on the needs expressed by small agricultural producers from different localities and regions of the country, united in the Rural Federation for Production and Rooting (FRPA). The FRPA is a national Argentine organization that brings together more than 35 thousand agricultural producers distributed in 19 provinces. It is presented as a union tool for farmers and peasants, but it is also committed to a new national agrarian model: with social justice and political sovereignty, which favors rural roots, for the supply of food to the people without intermediaries through the creation of marketing cooperatives and for the construction of sustainable and alternative forms of production, with special emphasis on agroecology [1].

The ENA is concretized as the organization's strategy based on the experience accumulated during previous years through courses and workshops on agroecology in different regions (La Plata, Córdoba, Río Colorado); Baldini et al. give us an example of those experiences [2]. Agroecology emerges in the organization as an economic, social and environmental alternative [3] compared to the “conventional production model that strips peasants of the land on which they work, makes their ancestral knowledge invisible and prioritizes profits for a few before work in decent conditions.” [4]

We understand that agroecology promotes various types of strategies so that producers reduce their dependence on external and polluting inputs, promote the production, marketing and consumption of healthy foods, preserve ancestral and community practices of farmers and respect both nature as well as the work done by families.

The ENA appears as a response to the organization's demand in the face of the challenges of carrying out an agroecological transition by farmers, and the lack of sufficient technicians and/or facilitators in agroecology. Based on the good results of the practice of agroecology in some regions [2], the idea arose of creating a space to carry out training of trainers and referents in agroecology, who could promote and accompany the agroecological transition in their territories, addressing to the particularity of each region.

Based on the above, the objectives of the ENA are:

- build and share ancestral, technical, political and pedagogical knowledge for the agroecological transition
- systematize productive and training experiences in agroecology of the organization
- form a team of trainers and referents, who replicate the training process and promote agroecological transition in each region
- develop pedagogical materials based on these experiences

The School is founded on August 1, 2021, with the start of the first national Training of Trainers course. The formation of the cohorts seeks to respect a federalization criterion, achieving the participation of farmers from all over the country, and a gender criterion, seeking equal participation of men and

women. The main recipients of the training are small farmers, farmers who are members of agricultural cooperatives, belonging to family, peasant and indigenous agriculture.

The contents of the course include technical (theoretical and practical) and political aspects of the productive model and the proposal of agroecology. The program includes: problems of the conventional system; principles of agroecology; systems approach; agroecosystems and biodiversity; concept of soil as a living system; insect management; production and use of fertilizers, bioinputs and broths; conservation and defense of seeds; management of mixed systems with animals; agroecology on an extensive scale; among other topics. Debates were also included on food sovereignty, peasant and family farming rights, popular organization, agrarian reform, rural feminism, cooperativism, learning pedagogical tools, methodologies and dynamics for teaching, under a framework of popular education.

Peasants with experience in agroecology participate in the teaching team, promoting the peasant-to-peasant methodology. These are joined by technicians and professionals from different universities and institutions, prioritizing profiles that have experience in popular education, extension and/or participatory action-research. In this way, the aim is to form a diverse teaching team and strengthen the link between the institutions and the needs of organized farmers.

Finally, the School is a space in continuous construction: each cohort that goes through the courses contributes its militant work to the construction of the school, this being one of its pedagogical dimensions. In this way, throughout the courses, spaces such as the agroecological garden and the lumbricario were built.

### **ENA courses: progress and results**

The School is built in constant evaluation, through joint balances between the students and the coordination team. We review the conclusions drawn after each course.

In the first course, held in 2021, it was possible to fine-tune the School's methodology and consolidate a teaching team that had the capacity to convene

other technicians and professionals to accompany the educational process. In addition, a first group of trainers was formed, which allowed us to strengthen the work in each region and expand agroecology in the organization.

In the second course, carried out in 2022, the aim was to increase the face-to-face load to encourage greater exchange between students and carry out more practical sessions, focusing especially on the preparation of fertilizers and bioinputs. In addition, the design and construction of a productive system was incorporated, an agroecological orchard, which served as an experimental unit to apply the contents of the course and as a demonstrative example that agroecology “does work”, one of the great doubts that the farmers to the course. The latter fits with the pedagogy of example and experience [5], where students exchange knowledge with agroecological producers, and incorporate agroecology through their own work.

In 2023, the third course was held, and based on the results of the previous courses, it was considered necessary to reinforce the character of “Training of Trainers”, exploring modalities that imply a more active role for students. In this way, a moment of “pedagogical work” was incorporated into each day's schedule, in which the students, divided into Base Groups, had to plan an activity resuming the contents already worked on, taking on the role of teachers for a moment. Accompanied by the teaching team to think about objectives, methodology and times, this work allowed us to develop skills such as planning and coordinating a workshop, group work, division of roles, systematization of content, as well as strengthening confidence when be thought of as references in agroecology in their territories. We consider that this change meant a qualitative leap in the development of Training of Trainers methodologies, and it is an experience to be resumed in future courses. In the words of a student from the third cohort, “I thought I couldn't coordinate workshops, but the course taught me that we can.”

In this way, the main objective of the ENA is reinforced: to expand agroecology throughout the organization, starting from farmers who, in each region of the country, fulfill the role of teaching what agroecology is and who can build the pedagogical tools to it. This idea is based on farmer-to-farmer methodologies, which have allowed the scaling of agroecology throughout Latin America [5].

## **ENA as a tool for the massification of agroecology**

In line with movement pedagogy, where Rosset et al. [5] point out the necessary interweaving of agroecological training processes with the struggles of organizations in all their dimensions (access to land, health, education, women's struggle, marketing, production, rights of childhood, etc.), in the three courses, special emphasis was placed on the fact that it is not only a school that focuses on productive issues or problems, but that the contents of the School include political, pedagogical and motivational aspects. Added to this is a collective form of work regarding the entire organization of the school, which consists of the division of all students into Base Groups that rotate the various tasks necessary for the operation of the school.

As a result, the content and the transit of people through the School imply addressing agroecology in its productive dimension, but also in its historical, organizational, environmental, political, commercial, etc. dimension. At the same time, the various struggles that cross peasant and indigenous family agriculture (and also agroecology): access to land and agrarian reform, gender inequalities, food sovereignty, the dispute with agribusiness, the importance of organization, among others, and all under a collective and horizontal work method.

The combination of all these issues and methods is directly related to one of the main objectives of the School, which seeks to influence and contribute towards the construction of a collective socio-historical and political subject in particular, which we call agroecological peasant and indigenous family agriculture (from of the definition of “agroecological peasantry” proposed by Rosset et al. [5]). This is in line with the idea of an education of and for the peasantry, as it is considered that their active and leading participation is fundamental for the scaling of agroecology, and if the construction of this collective political subject does not exist, the challenge of massifying agroecology throughout the territory would be difficult to achieve.

## **Challenges for the future**

To conclude, we detail some challenges for the future on which we consider it necessary to make progress. On the one hand, the aim is to strengthen the participation of women farmers, which, although close to 50% of the cohort, is

uneven depending on the region. We understand that this problem is the result of a more complex inequality that affects women's participation in the organisations' training, discussion and reference spaces. On the other hand, the participation of women farmers is often limited by the tasks of caring for their children. In order to address this, it is planned to deepen these debates in the territories, articulating feminist demands with agroecology; and to advance in the construction of a space for children in the ENA, which addresses not only care but also the inclusion of children in the courses.

The other challenge is related to the accompaniment of trainers who have graduated from the school, in order to guarantee the continuity of the process in the territories. To address this issue, we believe it is essential to look for local actors (technicians, institutions) that are committed to and articulate with the ENA and the different training experiences in the territory, in order to strengthen the training and agroecological transition processes.

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