



Why working conditions are a key issue of sustainability in agriculture? A comparison between agroecological, organic and conventional vegetable systems



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ABSTRACT

This study investigates whether 'green jobs' in agriculture could contribute to better working conditions. We examine a sample of 41 conventional, organic and agroecological vegetable producers who provide fresh produce for markets exploring their working conditions and the employment conditions of their workers, in Wallonia (Belgium). Drawing on the sociological, economic and agricultural literature, we identify nine dimensions that determine working conditions: leeway and control level; income and social benefits; work (in)security; political experience at work; time at work; intrinsic benefits of work; work-related discomfort; occupational health; and competence. We also assess the employment contracts of workers and the way producers manage their workers. Overall we identify four key issues. First, working conditions were not necessarily better for producers in systems that put more emphasis on ecological values. The socio-economic viability of three production systems, including agroecological market gardening on small areas of land, is insufficient. Second, workers in all systems, except in one agroecological system, experience poor employment conditions. Third, each group of producers has to make trade-offs between the ecological, societal and economic dimensions of their business. Finally, we note that socio-economic and political context, history, work orientation and socio-cultural heritage have more influence on producers' working conditions than their degree of mechanization.

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1. Introduction

Since the financial crisis of 2008, Europe has been confronted by major socio-economic and environmental challenges. The issue of whether 'green jobs' can help to develop better working conditions has become an important one for European governments. In agriculture, some scientists and associations claim that organic and/or agroecological agriculture can offer better working conditions and be less environmentally damaging than conventional agriculture (Gliessman, 2007; Maynard and Green, 2006; Ollivier and Guyomard, 2013; Timmermann and Félix, 2015).

The working conditions in agroecological systems, however, remain almost unexplored. In Europe and North America, in

vegetable production, empirical studies on working conditions usually focus on producers' situations in alternative food networks (e.g., in short food chains or community-supported agriculture (Bon et al., 2012; Dufour and Herault-Fournier, 2010; Galt, 2013; Hinrichs, 2000; Mundler and Laughrea, 2015; Perez, 2004)) or workers' situations in conventional and organic systems (Barndt, 2008; Gray, 2014; Guthman, 2004a; Morice and Michalon, 2008; Shreck et al., 2006). There are few studies on the working conditions of producers in conventional systems or of farm workers in alternative systems (Allen et al., 2003; DuPuis and Goodman, 2005; Tregear, 2011; Weiler et al., 2016). The few papers focusing specifically on agroecology are based on a normative approach rather than on empirical studies (Gliessman, 2007; Timmermann and Félix, 2015). In order to improve working conditions in alternative systems, such as agroecological systems, we need a better understanding of the advantages and difficulties of working in these systems in the present context. This study was carried on with this objective in mind. It aims to build bridges between normative and empirical studies in agroecology.

We conducted our study with a comparative approach. We

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identified four main technical orientations of vegetable production for fresh food markets in the Walloon region in Belgium, from market gardening on a few hectares to cereal farming where the crop rotation system included some vegetable production. The technical orientations were: market gardening on small areas (MGS); market gardening on medium areas (MGM); market gardening on large areas (MGL); and growing vegetables in combination with field crops (VFC). These four technical orientations were studied in organic and conventional agriculture. In addition, organic MGS and MGM systems could be considered as agroecological based on a definition of agroecology integrating 13 socio-economic principles (Dumont et al., 2016). This gave us a total of eight production systems: organic and agroecological (referred to as agroecological) MGS and MGM systems; organic and non-agroecological MGL and VFC systems; and conventional MGS, MGM, MGL and VFC systems.

The specific goal of this study was to answer two questions regarding mainly the producers: (1) To what extent do the production systems differ in terms of working conditions? (2) To what extent do agroecological production systems offer better working conditions than other systems?

In order to address our research questions, we consulted the sociological, economic and agronomic literature. No definition on working conditions has yet been unanimously accepted (Méda and Vendramin, 2013). We built a theoretical framework in which work was considered as multidimensional, affected by work orientation and work expectation, as well as by political issues (Section 2). We then conducted 60 comprehensive interviews with different vegetable producers, experts and farm advisors. Most of the producers were seen three times (Section 3). Our sample and the vegetable systems are presented at Section 4. We respond to the research questions and discuss our results in Section 5.

2. A theoretical framework linking sociology, economy and agronomy

2.1. Nine dimensions of working conditions

In the literature we identified nine dimensions that determine working conditions and related variables (Table 1). This theoretical framework is based on:

- contemporary sociological literature (Cultiaux and Vendramin, 2008; Ferreras, 2007; Méda and Vendramin, 2013);
- publications on specific features of self-employed workers (Baudelot and Gollac, 2003; Bessièrè and Gollac, 2015; Gollac and Volkoff, 2000);
- studies summarizing current approaches (including sociological and economic ones) used to measure work quality (Dahl et al., 2009; Muñoz de Bustillo et al., 2009);
- agronomic, and rural sociological and economic literature related to working conditions in Europe and North America (38 papers and three books by Béguin et al. (2011), Guthman (2004a) and Morice and Michalon (2008)).

So far as we know, there have been no studies on working conditions in the agricultural sector. The nine dimensions in our framework sometimes relate only to the workers or only to the farmers, and many of them are interwoven, with some variables being related to more than one dimension. We have tried to disentangle the dimensions as far as possible in order to facilitate comparisons.

The dimension of leeway and control level relates to the economic and technical flexibility that producers have to practice agriculture as they want to.

For self-employed workers, income refers to salaries or amounts they pay themselves. These payments are not always correlated with the financial situation of the farm and depend on the policy of each producer. Not all producers have the same juridical status (natural person or legal person). In order to compare their situations, we constructed a proxy indicator of income: the profit before tax for a natural person, and the profit before tax, plus the salary paid by the company to the associates, for a legal person. These amounts are comparable and have the advantage of usually being known by the producers.³ Social benefits are diverse, including premiums, personal and health insurance and even productive capital.

Work (in)security refers to the risk of losing a job.

Occupational health refers to physical and mental suffering due to work. Intrinsic benefits of work and work-related discomfort focus more broadly on (un)pleasant tasks at work, on the (dis)interest producers have in their work and on the (dis)advantages of work. Together, these dimensions determine producer well-being (i.e., the state of being comfortable, healthy and happy).

Political experience at work refers to (1) the extent to which producers feel they are equal to other individuals met for work purposes (authorities, customers, neighbours, inspectors, etc.) and (2) the extent to which producers feel able to express their point of view and collectively mobilize themselves in order to influence decisions that affect them (e.g., make customers more aware of producers' situation with regard to vegetable prices). This dimension is based on the work of Ferreras (2007), who found that people often have to arbitrate between different conceptions of justice in their workplace and that they expect democratic justice to take precedence over other norms, such as the subordination norm.

The time at work dimension refers to all working hours (production, marketing and sales, and administrative tasks).

The last dimension, competence, refers to the extent to which producers feel they have access to knowledge and advice in order to master the skill, competence and know-how necessary for the conception and completion of required tasks.

Qualitative variables were evaluated through the perception of the producer on its own situation. We paid attention to evaluate the gap between the expectations of the producer and the reality experienced. Each qualitative variable were studied through comprehensive interviews starting with the producer history (see section 3).

2.2. Work orientation and history

In addition to the nine dimensions of working conditions, we looked at producers' history and work orientation in order to better understand their work experience. Their history was addressed through a study of their education, professional career, the evolution of their work expectations, inheritance and origin (agricultural family or not). For work orientation, we distinguished expressive orientation to work (strong interest and pleasure in work) from instrumental orientation to work (work chosen for financial reasons and social status) (Cultiaux and Vendramin, 2008). In order to better understand the concept of expressive orientation, we added a second distinction proposed by Ferreras (2007, 70-79) between

³ We identified and adapted the variables related to the income and social benefits dimension based on the advice of accountancy experts and the local social secretariat (exponent FS in Table 1). There is almost no financial accounting obligation for producers with the status of 'natural person'. Few of them have any idea of their accounts, even sometimes of basic aspects such as their income. We sought to find a compromise between having representative and reliable data on income and a farm's financial situation.

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