

Landscape, Agriculture and Women Symposium

La Cartoixa d'Escaladei, Priorat, 9 and 10 May 2019

In a globalised world, in which the survival of group identities and the necessary connection and exchange strive to exist in harmony, there are resilient agricultural models which, based on tradition and innovation, show the feasibility of systems that adapt to the idiosyncrasy of the territories and provide the people living in them and building them, day by day, with a dignified living. They are models in which the direct relation between people and their environment is ancestral, present and alive, and in which the role of women is of great importance, both in everyday practice as well as in transmitting knowledge.

Over two days, La Cartoixa d'Escaladei hosted around two hundred people who participated in the first International Landscape, Agriculture and Women Symposium and who were able to hear some fifteen speeches linked to the values of agricultural landscapes respecting the idiosyncrasy of the territory; agricultural models for resilient, profitable landscapes; co-operative agricultural projects that empower women; the idea of governance that suggests new relations with the political and institutional powers in these places.

The Symposium aimed to create links between landscapes, initiatives and projects from all over the world that work towards the recognition of these agricultural models, their feasibility, and the safeguarding of the irreplaceable biocultural capital that they represent.

Some of the main subjects that the symposium dealt with and that were notable, as well as mainstream ideas and projects to reform values and models for the future, were the following:

1. The values of a landscape. Small-scale agriculture.

The Symposium focused on the small-scale agricultural model, which involves an ongoing, traditional, meticulous, coherent and faithful relationship with the land. Small-scale agriculture is highly relevant to the world, although the larger economic powers consider it to be marginal and not profitable. However, two considerations explained need to be taken into account: rural agricultural landscapes (the result of the interaction between people and nature) are the most extensive ones on the earth, and at the same time continue to be humanity's larder, meaning that today they are essential for survival, health and well-being.

Joan Reguant, the coordinator of the Priorat-Montsant-Siurana landscape candidacy and the president of the Andorran National Committee of ICOMOS, highlighted the fundamental importance of small-scale agriculture, underlining the intrinsic values that make it up, in which the attitude, commitment and scale of values that define the relationship between the land and the communities that work it are determining. In other words, although they may share a determined cultural context, agricultural

landscapes are diverse according to the relationship established with the land, to the point of generating completely contradictory agricultural models.

2. The landscape values of Priorat

In the case of Priorat, the twelve years of work on the UNESCO World Heritage candidacy have promoted self-esteem and have enabled possible problems to be anticipated: the people of Priorat have defined the future they wish to have and have identified the threats being planned on their landscape. Today, the landscape is the centre of the debate, in projects, in planning and also in schools. And this is important, because agriculture is the region's main activity.

Priorat has a genuine, credible, coherent agricultural landscape model inasmuch as it is a model that does not tell lies: what you see is what there is. It is a model with continuity: from Neolithic times through to today, the main activity has been agriculture. A mosaic of mixed cultivation. It is a clean landscape that can be perfectly well interpreted and that explains its history. A landscape that has managed to harmonise tradition with innovation and to preserve environmental, social and landscape values.

Its exceptional landscape quality means it can face the challenges of the future. It is a land that does not have severe conditions, because it has preserved its fundamental values and small-scale agriculture and traditional production, which is still thriving. Today, the challenge is to continue introducing a management model that ensures that these values do not get harmed. Small-scale agricultural landscape must continue to be the landscape of the future for Priorat, after there has been an awakening of awareness of what “we” are.

3. A new management model and new ways of governance

A mainstream management model, in which all the stakeholders are represented and in a horizontal way, involves a new concept of governance. But it also involves learning a new distribution of roles. Classic politics must learn to do away with the hierarchy and to grant power to the citizens.

In the case of Priorat, managing a diverse, large territory, as is the case—in comparison with other assets already registered on the World Heritage list or that aspire to recognition from UNESCO— requires the greatest participation of the residents of the territory, with the aim of dividing up the efforts and distributing the commitments. This involves combining intelligence, at the same time as human and material resources. There needs to be involvement at all levels, and a complex management needs to be introduced, at a level of the complexity of the territory to be managed. Its complexity should not be seen as a handicap, but as a virtue. The speakers made the need to construct a stable, solid, diverse body clear, in which a far-reaching network of administrations and civil society fit in, which is essential as a driving force behind the continued governance of a complex system.

These new forms of governance which the new times require were also mentioned by Wendy Cruz, the representative of the Via Campesina in Honduras. Cruz vindicated inclusive governance processes, with genuine social involvement, the participation of women, suitable information for the general public and public policies for rural development, food sovereignty and gender equality.

At Priorat, Ferran Mestres, a motivator at the Agricultural Forum, spoke about this newly created organisation, which is part of the management tools for the agricultural landscape. The Agricultural Forum is conceived as a new governance tool, which proposes objectives and challenges such as the lack of generational continuity, participation, making the most of and optimising existing infrastructures, synergy between initiatives already under way and promoting the collaborative economy.

Still in the governance area, Mirene Beguiristain, a doctor in economy from the University of the Basque Country, highlighted the need for decision-making to be democratic, for public participation and for rebalancing power relations. Among the imminent challenges she proposed, there is that of creating a feeding system in the local space with real participation structures. In view of the need to deconstruct power relations and to construct new alliances, she warned about the difficulty of incorporating the various stakeholders that live in a determined space and the need to redefine the roles with the aim of generating models and quality decisions (not taking for granted that the role of the institutions is inflexible). Beguiristain defined good governance today as being reflective, adaptive and effective at many levels.

Marina Vilaseca, a founding member of the L'Arada, Creativitat Social co-operative highlighted the importance of networking with a great variety of local stakeholders, as "the basis for constructing initiatives with sustainable social transformation repercussions". The real (or implied) participation and the collective, shared approach of projects are key to effective governance.

4. Agroecology

The concept of agroecology was mentioned a great deal during the symposium, starting with the current agricultural problems in Europe: the excessive use of insecticides and pesticides, insufficient budgets destined to agriculture or agricultural crops, a population with serious problems of being overweight and obesity, etc.

To this end, Georges Felix, of Agroecology Europe, pointed out that, today, alimentation and agriculture are dependent on the markets of basic products, chemical and petroleum products, single crops and specialisation, global financing and cheap raw materials. In this context of crisis, there are alternatives that appear in the food area (from the farmer to the chef), that promote values of dignity, solidarity, autonomy and justice. It is on these values that the principles of agroecology and food sovereignty are based.

Agroecology deals with the ecologic, socio-economic and political perspective in an integrated way. It includes concepts such as biodiversity, recycling nutrients, resilience

against climate change, diversity and synergies. It proposes redesigning the landscape so that there is no need to import products from abroad, promoting public policies and horizontal governance processes. Agroecology involves a movement of farmworkers and citizens who fight for more sustainable food systems and establish networks to learn and grow. Agroecology is also a means to achieve food sovereignty.

From this perspective, the wine grower Sara Pérez stated that “agroecology must be understood as a way of living that places environmental and social responsibility at the same level, so that we must consider the needs and the local markets as priority from every point of view, whether productive, occupational or commercial.”

5. Empowering women in the agricultural world

The symposium aimed to give visibility and a voice to a series of experiences from around the world in which women are the central hub of the agricultural world. It highlighted the empowerment of women based on agricultural activity, their task in transmitting knowledge, the management and economic independence it offers them, the family health they get from it, the environmental respect with which they work, etc.

Isabelle Anatole-Gabriel, Chief of the Europe and North America Unit at the World Heritage Centre, UNESCO, talked about the new values that little by little are influencing the valuation of cultural and agricultural landscapes: sustainability on the one hand and, gender equality on the other hand. Several studies show that women from the agricultural world are part of the collective of poorest people in the world: 66% are poor and almost 20% are found in extreme poverty. It was also shown that women invest the profits they make from their work in health and education for the family.

Sara Pérez also highlighted the gender perspective, by stating that this integral vision of agroecology must consider the role of women. Bearing in mind that, traditionally, in the rural world, the patrimony and the land were for male heirs, the “emergence of women can also represent new ways of doing things, without bonds, from the absolute freedom of stakeholders from whom nothing is expected.”

From Cuba, Nidia Cabrera Huerta, the administrator of the Valle de Viñales Cultural Landscape, reminded participants that in this territory, work is carried out to incorporate gender equality in co-operatives (where the male dominance of positions is maintained) through training. At the same time, she reminded us that women in the rural area still have a double responsibility: family and their work. She also highlighted another increasingly common aspect in the rural world (particularly in Europe): the ageing process of the rural woman and the difficulty of agricultural activities being taken over, which started happening as women with qualifications tend to give up on farm work.

From Morocco, Amal el Hantati, the president of the Argan Oil women's co-operative defended the importance of organising and making women's work visible. In her case,

this was possible thanks to the co-operative work. Along with the visibility of this work, she added that there are increasingly more women who can earn a living from it and who, above all, do so by capitalising on traditional knowledge. Many of the women who work on the project have qualifications but were unable to find work. The co-operative was the formula that gave them the possibility of having a job and improving the socio-economic status of their families and their rural environment.

Altogether, she pointed out that empowering rural women could enable the quality of life of their families and of the entire community to be improved, as well as the social recognition of women and the obtaining of basic rights which now, in many countries, are not guaranteed to them as they are women. They are local action projects that seek a different way of doing things, from the values of sustainability, respect for the environment, social commitment, solidarity and so on.

To this end, in 2005, 25 Moroccan women created the Argan Oil women's co-operative, which is in a village 17 km from Essaouira, the best-known city in the area. It was not easy for them, as the men opposed the fact that women were working outside the home, but they persevered, promoting social, cultural and ecological values and based on good governance and equal distribution of the profits. Today, there are 70 women that make up the co-operative, that enables a socioeconomic improvement of the co-operative members, who take on a new social role as well as being empowered. It also prevents women from giving up on the rural world. There is no rural exodus in this area, the speakers told us.

The Vía Campesina Association (Via Pagesa in Catalonia) is an international movement that coordinates organisations of farm labourers, small and medium producers, rural women, indigenous communities and so on. Wendy Cruz, from Vía Campesina in Honduras, defended the role of women as guarantees to feed their families and cultivate the land, as well as carrying out domestic tasks. However, the work of these rural women is not visible, despite the fact that women in Honduras represent 70% of field labour; 90% of the supply of foodstuffs to the home; between 70% and 80% of women are responsible for the family production and sale: 80% of women participate in the storing and transporting of agricultural products and 90% do work to prepare the land. Despite these data, they are not taken into account.

The Bi-Songo co-operatives in Burkina Faso are co-operatives of women which have the aim of conserving and preserving the land, the transmission of biocultural knowledge, respect for the environment, schooling children, health and training young people in agricultural work. They cultivate shea butter and other products. There are 1,500 women linked to the project. Their products have the Organic stamp and they work using agroecology values. They work 37 ha of woodland, hectares which are currently threatened by aggressive, unsustainable practices (dispossession of land, single crops, intensive chemical treatments, etc.).

“L’Arada, Creativitat Social”, with its headquarters and centre of operations in the Catalan region of Solsonès, is a work co-operative of a social initiative that specialises in the local and community promotion of rural areas and underprivileged districts, from an integral point of view or from specific areas (cultural, social, economic,

ecological). Based on the need for intervention and from participative methodologies, projects are developed that are constructed from social diversity and through the creation of local collaboration networks. Some examples are to promote the employment of women in the offer of services to people, the collective tourist-cultural promotion of a territory, or the recovery of the popular memory as a tool for social intervention and cultural and economic promotion. This means that projects are always developed adapted to the territory, its identity, reality and the wishes of its people.

6. The land banks

Depopulation, abandoning the land and the lack of younger generations taking over in the fields are common problems in the rural world. To combat these dynamics, land banks have become an experience that has taken form in several places in Catalonia as well as in Spain.

This is why the symposium counted on the presence of a couple of experiences of this kind: O Banco de Terras de Galicia, founded in 2007 and fully consolidated, and the Banc de Terres del Priorat, which is just starting up. The essential difference between the two lies, initially, in their promotion and management. While the Banco de Terras de Galicia land bank is a tool of a national scope created by the Galician government and is dependent on the Galician Ministry of Rural Environment, in the case of Priorat, it is a project with a regional scope, which from an organisational point of view belongs to Priorat County Council.

Currently, the Banco de Terras de Galicia has some 12,000 properties, of which about 3,000 are rented out or in the process of being rented out. The great majority of these plots are publicly owned. The main function of the land bank is to encourage and mediate between owners and those looking for land, as well as to offer guarantees, confidence and security in the management and the use of the plots.

In the case of Priorat, the land bank has been created with the aim of becoming a service to encourage and support the management of agricultural space. A database of land suitable to be used is being created, and of people that wish to recover it and accompaniment tools are being designed for the agricultural sector. This is an initiative that is considered to be fundamental in a rural, ageing region, in which the continuity of agricultural exploitation is essential. The land bank has become yet another tool in the regional management system which, in the agricultural area, works in a coordinated way with the Agricultural Forum.

7. Tourism, also sustainable

The subject of managing mass tourism also came up in the symposium.

The concern about it was clearly stated in the intervention of the Cuban speaker Nidia Cabrera Huerta, who explained that before it was declared World Heritage agricultural cultural landscape, the Valle de Viñales was

visited by some 30,000 tourists. Once it was declared World Heritage, it started to receive 600,000 visitors a year.

The need to manage these flows and to analyse the “tourism carrying capacity” of the various territories was a constant cause for concern in the symposium. The messages were aimed at the fact that we need to work to avoid the pressure that tourism generates. We need to be committed to sustainability in the territories with a view to cultural tourism as well, meaning that local participation and awareness are determining factors in the governance of tourism.

Roser Vernet, the coordinator of Priorat, insisted on shared participation both in the identification and diagnosis of the problem as well as in the shared decision making derived from it. To this end, in Catalonia, the Laws on Agricultural Spaces processed by Parliament could be an important tool. The key background question would be how to ensure that the territory is not bought and sold but that the values of the territory are shared with those who come from outside.

Mercè Folch. Journalist

Toni Orensanz. Journalist

Montse Serra. Journalist