VEGA
ANDALUSIA
SPAIN

Sustaining transition through changing political winds

La Comarca de La Vega, Grenada

Organic produce at the ecomercado

Photo: Gloria Guzmán Casado
The comarca of the Vega\(^{53}\) is located in the southeast of Spain, around the city of Granada. The agrarian modernization of the Vega occurred as early as the beginning of the 20th century, through the establishment of crop commodity monocultures (primarily sugar beet) and the accompanying use of commercial seeds and mineral fertilizers (Guzmán Casado and González de Molina, 2009). The process sped up from the 1960s onwards with the implementation of Green Revolution technologies, and further accelerated when Spain joined the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1986.

By the end of the 20th century, the limits of this model were starting to show in Andalusia, and particularly in the Vega district. Rural populations were abandoning agriculture, and natural resources – soil, water, biodiversity – were showing signs of depletion and degradation (Chica et al., 2004; Guzmán Casado and González de Molina, 2006; Menor Toribio, 1997). As the farming population declined, so too did agrarian institutions and infrastructures, and the organizational capacity of the agricultural sector. Local processing industries and regional resource flows (e.g. manure availability) were lost.

Nonetheless, Save the Vega and other local social movements continued to defend landscape conservation, and alongside local farmers, managed to sustain an organizational and knowledge base that would allow transition to occur. A new research and training centre, CIFAED\(^{54}\) or the ‘Granada Organic Farming and Rural Development Research and Training Centre’, was founded in 2002 following an agreement between a new political coalition and the provision of funding from regional and provincial councils. A wide-ranging research project was initiated to evaluate the sustainability of agriculture in the Vega and to develop agroecological transition strategies, building on the existing social movements.

This culminated in the Vega de Granada Organic Farming Plan – an ambitious agenda for agroecological redesign of the district’s production and marketing systems. The plan was based on local provisioning of all inputs, the development of direct sales initiatives (biофairs, shops of producers’ associations, etc.) and organic public procurement – referred to as ‘social consumption’ schemes. Educational programmes were also developed to build awareness of sustainability in the district with the support of local farmers.

However, the political coalition in support of transition broke down in 2009, paving the way for withdrawal of regional government support. The CIFAED closed soon afterwards, alongside the newly formed Directorate General of Organic Farming and the Andalusia-wide organic public procurement programme. Yet the revival of sustainable agriculture in the Vega and the social activism underpinning the transition have endured, showcasing the capacity for non-institutional actors to sustain transition even when formal support has dissolved.

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53. A comarca is a Spanish administrative district consisting of several towns, with common territorial features and agricultural conditions. The towns in the Vega comarca include: Armilla, Atarfe, Cújar, Cúllar Vega, Chauchina, Churriana de la Vega, Fuente Vaqueros, Gójar, Granada, Huétor Vega, Láchar, Ogíjares, Pinos Puente, La Zubia, Las Gabias, Vegas del Genil, and Santa Fe.

54. Centro de investigación y formación para la agricultura y ganadería ecológicas en la provincia de Granada
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CHANGES IN PRODUCTION PRACTICES

Despite its dry Mediterranean climate, the Vega is one of the most productive Spanish districts, benefiting from flat and fertile land with abundant irrigation. Most of the cropping area in the district had long been dedicated to large-scale crop commodity production, with prices guaranteed by the administration - first the Spanish state (flax, hemp, sugar beet, and tobacco) and then the EU (tobacco).

However, high synthetic input costs and low global market prices presented severe challenges to the economic viability of small-scale farms in the district. Furthermore, farmers struggled to respond to the progressive dismantling of market support policies in recent decades. The situation has been compounded by proximity to the city of Granada, leading to the development of urban, road, and industrial infrastructures, and upward pressures on land markets.

In this context, farmers disappeared at an annual rate of 5-6% between 1989 and 2009, dropping from 8,228 to 2,523 over the two decades (INE, 2009, 1999, 1989). At the outset of the agroecological transition process, only 19 agri-food companies (of which ten were cooperatives) brought their products to market, mainly via long value chains that yielded low returns.

The potential to revive farming was initially held back due to degradation of the natural resource base, including water contamination from urban-industrial waste, nitrates and pesticides, and the loss of key material and energy flows in the Vega (Guzmán Casado and González de Molina, 2009). In particular, farmers struggled to obtain manure given a long-term trend of declining livestock production in the region – stretching back to the 19th century and accelerating when Spain joined the EEC in 1986 (Guzmán Casado and González de Molina, 2009). Spanish agriculture had shifted its production to specialize in products with high demand on EU markets (e.g. olive oil, fruit and vegetables), while dairy cows and other ‘surplus’ sectors declined.

In the early 2000s, CIFAED identified enabling and limiting factors to regional transition using innovative knowledge generation methods (see below). A range of strategies for agroecological transition were developed, based on mutually-reinforcing sustainable practices all along the food chain. These strategies were brought together in the Vega de Granada Organic Farming Plan, developed and adopted by four organizations representing farmers and agroindustry, and three ecological and consumer organizations. In response to the wide-ranging backing it received, the regional government committed to co-financing the Plan for three years (2008-2010). The Plan contained the following components:

1. The local generation of a sufficient quality and quantity of nutrient and water flows required for production
2. The redesign of the agroecosystem and development of management techniques in accordance with the European Law on Organic Production (Council Regulation (EC) No 834/2007, of 28 June 2007)
3. The generation of alternative proximity-based food networks through public procurement and direct sales strategies for organic food products

55 In the Vega, this translated into a 3% annual decline in dairy cow populations between 1986-1999, and a steeper 9% annual decline between 1999-2009, meaning that dairy is now a marginal sector (INE, 2009, 1999; MAPAMA, 2000, 1986).
Steps to implement the Plan were undertaken primarily by CIFAED and the civil society groups signing onto the Plan, working alongside the fruit farmers and extensive irrigation crop farmers (corn, alfalfa) who had shown willingness to shift their practices. The need to move away from industrial practices underpinned all of the steps that followed. Evaluation activities had identified severe nitrate contamination in irrigation water, highlighting the need for protection of water supplies so as to avoid further undermining the agricultural future of the Vega.

Local horticultural varieties were introduced to the farms, drawing on the traditional practices discussed in the preparatory phases of the Plan. Efforts were made to mitigate the lack of organic matter in the Vega by setting up composting plants in bordering districts. Olive oil mills were targeted in particular, given the large amounts of waste they tend to generate, and the associated environmental problems. Attempts were made to redirect nutrient flows in a way that was environmentally and economically beneficial for both districts.

However, the Organic Farming Plan was cancelled before important additional steps could be taken, such as the installation of composting plants. Despite the abrupt rupture of the political pact and the dismantling of the institutions and measures promoting agroecological transition, the strong initial focus on strengthening local knowledge and networks allowed many farmers to continue practicing agroecological farming. Many organizations continue to defend and promote agroecological transition in the Vega, bringing forward the ideas initially developed through CIFAED. From 2010 to 2017, the total organic area (now 521 hectares) and the number of organic farmers (now 37) continued to rise, though at slower rates than during programme implementation.
The CIFAED research centre was founded in 2002, following an agreement between the socialist party (PSOE) and the Greens, and drawing on funding from the Andalusian regional government and provincial councils. CIFAED’s aim was to promote agroecological transition in the province of Granada, especially in the Vega comarca, because of its high agricultural potential and the complex problems it faced. Rather than proposing a generic agroecological management plan to local stakeholders, researchers at CIFAED spent the first two years of the project (2003-2005) conducting a participatory evaluation of the sustainability of agriculture in the Vega. The evaluation was underpinned by an Agrarian Metabolism approach, applied in a historical perspective. This enabled researchers to gain in-depth knowledge of the shift from traditional to industrial agriculture that had taken root in the district. It also allowed researchers to refute certain subjective views that had become entrenched within the agricultural community in the Vega, e.g. the belief in a “miracle crop” that would save the region from decline. The historical analysis showed how crop monocultures were related to specific institutional frameworks, which had led to the destruction of natural resources and loss of autonomy for the agricultural sector over time.

Through this process, CIFAED was able to establish a shared understanding of current challenges with a range of food system actors, including local farmers and store owners, environmentalist groups, and consumers. This paved the way for proposing measures to improve agricultural sustainability later on.

In parallel, unstructured interviews were held with key local actors, and social actors’ discourse regarding the agricultural problems in the district was analyzed via participatory observation. Researchers participated in numerous fora in which it became evident that the vast majority of locals were deeply concerned about the degradation of the Vega. Strengthening civil society organizations clearly emerged as a lever for sparking fundamental changes along the chain.

In the subsequent ‘diagnostic preparation’ phase of the Vega de Granada Organic Farming Plan (2006-2007), CIFAED interviewed 20 representatives from agricultural industries such as input providers and processors, who provided in-depth information about the strategies they were using to overcome the agricultural crisis. In parallel, discussion groups brought some eighty farmers, representing a range of production and marketing models (organic/non-organic, long chain/short chain). The results were discussed during feedback workshops, which debated the different strategies and enabling and limiting factors for agroecological transition. This process ensured local buy-in from a number of community groups that were subsequently mobilized to implement the Plan.

56. Agrarian Metabolism is a way of using energy, material and information flows and balances to understand important elements of farm and food system sustainability. See Guzmán Casado and González de Molina (2017, p. 399).

57. These discussions made reference to ‘Historical analyzers’, i.e. historical events in a territory that contribute to the construction of a subjective vision and discourse by a local population about itself. During participatory processes it may be important to identify these events and subject them to discussion and revision, with a view to developing discourses that allow populations to overcome subjective blockages inhibiting the development of problem-solving strategies.
Two food and farming associations emerged through the CIFAEĐ-led evaluation process, and would later play a crucial role in the agroecological transition: The Andalusian Network of Women Promoters of Responsible Consumption and Organic Food, and the Granada Association for the Defence and Promotion of Organic Farming. Previously, only Save the Vega had existed in this space – and the group was dedicated primarily to legal corruption claims in regard to urban developers and politicians.

The increasing number of associations and the growing prominence of agricultural issues allowed a social fabric to develop around transition. The upsurge in associative activity also provided a basis for closer linkages between producers and consumers. The Organic Farming Plan included steps to relocalize markets, not only by putting farmers and consumers in direct contact (bio-fairs, shops of producers’ associations, etc.), but also via public food procurement. One short supply chain initiative saw ten farmers in the Vega and six farmers from nearby districts create an association to sell their products on local markets, including a box scheme for approximately 100 families. Another ten producers grouped together to form the Association of Organic Producers of the Province of Granada and open their own shop.

One of the most popular initiatives was the ecomercado, an organic market held once a month in the centre of Granada. The open-air market contains 24 stands run by organic farmers, the majority of which are managed by farmers’ associations or cooperatives. Almost all organic farmers in the Vega now sell through this market, alongside farmers from other districts.

Farmers, consumers, and civil society actors have shown strong ability to adapt to new circumstances – namely the withdrawal of political and financial support for the Organic Farming Plan. In addition to continued increases in the number of organic farmers, producers have shown growing organizational capacity in terms of the continued development of short supply chain initiatives.

The participants of the ecomercado have created the Agroecological Network of Granada (RAG in Spanish), now an important political actor in negotiating with institutions to defend the interests of organic farmers. In 2017, the RAG opened another eco-market in the Vega and continues to support the growth of different organizations within the network. For example, one of the ecomercado sellers, El Vergel, has shifted from association to cooperative status, growing from 10 to 16 farmer families and extending its sales network to include deliveries to some 36 consumer groups, as well as organic shops and restaurants. The continued growth of small organic food shops, stocked with fresh products from local farmers, is another indicator of the sustained logistical and organizational capacity of food and farming actors in the district.

While pre-existing associations have continued to operate, new ones have also appeared, most notably the Association for the Defence of Organic Food in Schools and the organization of Secondary School Teachers in Defence of the Vega. In addition, projects supporting agriculture...
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in the Vega have emerged in the University of Granada, through the PLANPAIS\textsuperscript{58} (Matarán Ruiz, 2013a, 2013b; Torres Rodríguez et al., 2016). Meanwhile, the Andalusian Network of Women Promoters of Responsible Consumption and Organic Food has continued to carry out several projects, with financing from the Women’s Institute of Andalusia.\textsuperscript{59}

FIGURE 15 - A MULTI-ACTOR CHANGE PROCESS IN THE VEGA

59. For more information, see: https://reddinamizadoras.blogspot.com (in Spanish only)
Educational initiatives are proving particularly important in taking on the mantle of change. The VegaEduca project, involving 20,000 students and almost 100 secondary schools, supports agriculture and territorial integrity through various interactive activities without any institutional funding. Farmers (especially older ones) have proven to be important educational resources in regard to natural and social sciences. For example, farmers have helped to describe and interpret the changes that have taken place in the territory in the past 50 years.

These interactions have reminded students that the Vega still has the potential to generate economic resources and employment, in a context of high youth unemployment and out-migration (in 2016, Andalusian unemployment for the under-25s stood at 57.8%). Furthermore, the educational program helps to promote local organic food consumption. VegaEduca has also served to consolidate pre-existing entities such as Save the Vega, by making new actors aware of the agroecological transition, including parents and secondary school students.

**CHANGES IN INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK**

The establishment of CIFAED is a clear example of how institutional conditions may open up a window of opportunity for transition. The research centre had broad-based political buy-in, in the shape of funding received from the Andalusian regional government and provincial councils, and the explicit mandate to foster agroecological transition in the Vega. Commitments were further enshrined in the Vega de Granada Organic Farming Plan, which the regional government committed to co-financing for three years (2008-2010).

Alongside the financial and logistical support for participatory research and learning activities, and the establishment of local market initiatives, the Organic Food for Social Consumption program was established by the Directorate General of Organic Farming (DGAE, in Spanish) of the Andalusian regional government.

The programme sought to i) promote organic consumption among children (as future consumers), parents, and the broader school community; ii) encourage the aggregation of production via groups of local farmers supplying a diversity of produce in line with the demands of public institutions; and iii) provide dedicated opportunities for small and medium-sized producers, thereby securing farm livelihoods through fixed prices and guaranteed payments (González de Molina and Guzmán, 2017).

In 2008-2009, during the operational phase of the Organic Farming Plan, 13 school canteens and one hospital in the province of Granada entered the public procurement program; the local government covered all costs of sourcing from local organic farmers for the hospital, and split the costs with parent groups for the schools. When the government cancelled the program, the school canteens sourcing local organic food in the Granada province dropped from 13 to one, and the participating hospital also switched back to conventional market sourcing. However, the Association for the Defence of Organic Food in Schools arose in response to cancellation of the programme, leading to the emergence of three new organic school canteens managed by parents’ associations outside the premises of public schools.

Following the closure of CIFAED, another public research and agricultural training institution, IFAPA, continued to provide some advisory services to organic farmers in the
Vega. However, as of 2014 there has been no further delivery of public support for organic farmers. Closure of the Directorate General of Organic Farming (DGAE) has also severed ties between the regional government and organic advocacy groups. Nonetheless, organic farmers' groups and cooperatives have survived and even expanded in size, and now use the Agroecological Network of Granada to lobby cities for direct access to consumers through the establishment of organic farmers’ markets.

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