

## **Some reflections on the Agroecology Knowledge Exchange Workshop: August 2016.**

I was a little nervous as I registered for the Agroecology Knowledge Exchange Workshop that was held in Waterloo and hosted by Wilfrid Laurier University, Centre for Sustainable Food Systems in August this year. The workshop was organised through its FLEdGE (Food: Locally Embedded, Globally Engaged) project, and promised to “bring together leaders in agroecology research and practice from Cuba, Mexico, Honduras and Costa Rica, as well as Ontario”. I’m a European based researcher who is just starting to turn my focus to agroecology, so wasn’t really sure I’d fit in. My plan was to keep my head down, not say too much, and mainly just listen to what the impressive line-up of presenters had to say. If it turned out that there was small group work where a contribution was unavoidable; well, I’d cross that bridge when I came to it. To give some perspective, I work at the Research Institute for Organic Agriculture in Switzerland, which is better known by the German acronym: FiBL. FiBL is quite a large institute with 175 people working on practical problems related to organic agriculture.

My first impression, after crossing the building site that Waterloo has become and arriving at the modern and quiet Balsillie centre, was that there were a lot of people in the room. Not only that, but the participants came from a wide range of backgrounds. With the certainty that I’ll miss somebody (sorry!), participants included academics (who tended to be the more ‘hands on’ sort of researchers) and students, who were well represented. There were agrifood activists, someone from the open food network and a self-financed and motivated community garden\* organiser. A golden rule in Switzerland is to never organise anything for farmers in summer: They’re too busy and can never find the time to attend. Farmers in Ontario work as hard as farmers anywhere else, but there were still quite a few farmers in the room. Their participation is particular testament to the respect for the organisers and presenters; as well as illustrative of their interest in the theme.

Day one was organised as a conference with presentation/discussion format. The first presenter was Angel Leyva Galán from the National Institute of Agricultural Sciences in Cuba. As he was speaking, I couldn’t help thinking that he really should be in contact with the plant science group at FiBL. They’d have

a lot to talk about. Then came Marvin Gómez from [USC Seeds of Survival in Honduras](#), and it was the same thing. I kept thinking that he should also really come into contact with the plant breeding people at FiBL. The third speaker was Laura Gómez Tovar from the University of Chapingo in Mexico, and it wasn't hard to think of people at FiBL who she would be interested in talking to either. The pattern continued with every speaker, and the picture became clear. The people taking part in this workshop work on different continents, in widely different contexts, with different specific problems but fundamentally, we're all working, with a shared philosophy, on the same sorts of problems. That's really what this workshop was about.

The next two days of the workshop were organised as what we sociologists would call 'learning journeys', but normal people would call farm visits. One of the good things about learning journeys is that there are many opportunities to talk with fellow workshop participants, so the days were spent talking and listening among ourselves between visits to the farms on the program. We visited [Everdale](#) farm, which was brilliant. Aabir Dey showed us around with an enthusiasm that made me want to quit my job and come and work at Everdale. This feeling was reinforced by the fabulous food they put on for us: most (if not all) of which was grown on-farm. The information about plant breeding was particularly enthusiastically delivered, so it wasn't hard to see how Everdale has developed their expertise. A local plant breeding expert (Rebecca Ivanoff of Whole Circle Farm) came by to show us how to select breeding stock in root vegetables. I guess I wasn't the only person for whom this was completely new, but she presented it in a really good way so that both experts and lay people could get something from it. To summarise Everdale in a sentence, I'd go with: Nice people in a nice place doing good things. They didn't even mind when, in the afternoon of day two, we used the floor of their presentation room to mix forest litter to make micro-organism cultures.

If we were doing a lot of talking and listening among ourselves on day two, we were in full swing by day three. These informal discussions were a great part of the workshop, so it was good to have time for them. On the organised program though, first stop was to meet the amazing Angie Koch at [Fertile Ground CSA](#) (community supported agriculture) farm. Angie has apparently endless knowledge and could comfortably answer questions on everything, including how to treat pests or care for soil for any of 50 different crops; how to make a

machine to wash vegetables or weed a field; how to coordinate volunteers; and how to make every CSA member feel special. In the midst of the wealth of knowledge she was sharing, she casually and modestly mentioned: “Oh, I’m still learning all the time”! Last stop on the tour, and of the workshop, was [Zócalo Organics](#). At the risk of sounding repetitive, it was also great. A really cool farm, with a really cool philosophy. Last stop on day three is a tough time slot, but Seb Ramirez was captivating enough to have everybody (okay. Everybody else) paying close attention. Personally, I was pretty tired, and it was hot, and without being able to think of any more excuses, I have to admit that I greyed out a little on the details. The good news is that the farm is open, so you can always go there and experience it for yourself.

And with that, the workshop came to an end. Actually, it ended with another delicious dinner, some bluegrass music, and a couple of cold beers, but I’m trying to stay on topic here. The whole vibe of the workshop was one of enthusiasm and a belief that knowledge exchange, cooperation, and collaboration are the best way forward. By the end of the workshop, I’d forgotten that I was ever nervous about signing up, and had started wondering why more of my colleagues from FiBL hadn’t come along as well. I can’t finish without mentioning and thanking Erin Nelson, who kept us all motivated with her own endless enthusiasm and who, with Mimi, organised the whole thing. What is it about these people in Ontario? Are they born enthusiastic or is it something they train for? In any case, enthusiastic people give their enthusiasm to everybody else and are just great to be around. Erin is like that. Anyway, I’ve no doubt missed a lot of important stuff from the three days, but memories are always personal and I can only pass on my own. That’s one of the good things about workshops like this one. Everybody gets to take away their own memories of what was important and to form their own ideas of what they want to do with what they experienced. Myself; I do hope to keep in touch with the people I met at the workshop, and will repeat my invitation to come and visit us in Switzerland sometime.

\*I’m using the European understanding of community garden: That is, a place in which people come together based on the unifying concept of growing food in a city, with collective decisions, work, and outcomes along the ethos of the Incredible Edible movement. It’s about using public spaces for open source food, social capital, and biodiversity.



The workshop kicks off at the Balsillie School of International Affairs (Photo Credit: Laura Gómez Tovar)



The workshop draws to a close in the beautiful Zócalo Organics barn. Dinner was provided by [The Friendly Chef](#) - with greens from the farm - and local band Chesterfield and the Sofa Kings entertained us with some bluegrass tunes.