

7.1 BIODYNAMIC FARMING AND FARMERS' REALITIES

Joke de Jonge, Coen ter Berg and Jos Pelgröm, BD-Union, the Netherlands

Biodynamic farmers are organic farmers who add earth-cosmos relations and spiritual dimensions to their farming activities. The participation of the Dutch Biodynamic Union in Compas focussed on clarifying and documenting the biodynamic cosmivision among farmers, and experimenting with new methods to enhance the vitality, or life forces, on their farms. Central to many biodynamic farmers is the question: How can I develop my spiritual connection to the farm?

The Biodynamic Union is a small organisation with some 2,600 members, including 200 farmers, as well as processors, traders and consumers involved in biodynamic farming in Dutch society. The Netherlands is one of the most densely populated countries in the world, which leads to a permanent pressure on the scarcely available lands. Most farmers work with high input technology, including the use of chemical fertilisers, herbicides and pesticides, though this is decreasing due to environmental regulations. Only a small group works in a more sustainable way. In December 2001, there were 1,510 organic farms (1.64%), working on 1.54% of the total farming area. Biodynamic farmers are organic farmers, thus working without chemical inputs, who go one step further: they include attention to earth-cosmos relations, as well as spiritual beings in their farming activities. In 1999 organic farming in the Netherlands had a market share of € 234 million [Melitta, 2000]. The Dutch Ministry of Agriculture is supporting organic farming through subsidies and fiscal regulations to reach the aim of having 10% of the area under organic farming by 2010.

The origin of biodynamic farming. Biodynamic agriculture developed out of eight lectures on agriculture presented by Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925), an Austrian scientist and philosopher. In 1924 these lectures were published in a book called 'An Agricultural Course - spiritual foundations for the renewal of agriculture'. The lectures were given in response to farmer observations that the health and quality of their soils, crops and livestock had deteriorated after the introduction of chemical fertilisers, around 1900. According to Steiner, the basic principle of biodynamic farming is to conceive the farm as an organism in itself, a self-contained entity. Emphasis is placed on mixed farming: linking crops and livestock, recycling nutrients, improving health and well-being of soils, crops and animals, and the farmer him or herself being part of this whole. Many organic practices such as green manuring, crop rotation, companion planting, cover crops are applied.

Today, the norms in biodynamic farming are more strict than in organic farming: 60% of the manure, 100% of straw for the manure-straw mixture, 80% of the fodder, and 100% of the concentrates should be of organic origin; cows should maintain their horns, chickens their beaks and pigs their tails. In addition, biodynamic farming has elaborate non-obligatory guidelines related to composting, nature development, and the balance between the physical realities and cosmic forces. Farmers work with these forces to enrich their farm, its products, and its inhabitants with life energy or etheric forces. In fact, the regen-

eration of etheric forces that work through the soil to the plant, is the central aim in biodynamic farming. These forces are enhanced in various ways:

- *By using biodynamic preparations*, which are compositions of specific minerals (like silica), cow manure, weeds and weed parts, prepared in animal organs such as intestine, bladder, skull or horns. When crops are harvested, it is not only the substances that are removed, but also the life forces and vitality gained in that year. The preparations are given to the soil, compost and/or crops, to enhance vitality and make them more alert to cosmic forces.
- *By working according to the sowing calendar*, which recognises the influence of celestial forces on plant growth.
- *By acknowledging the existence of spiritual, so-called elemental beings*, which are related to the four elements earth, water, air and fire. Via these elements the spiritual beings are connected to the corresponding parts of the plants: roots, stem and leaves, flowers and fruits. Some farmers are aware of the presence of these beings as a kind of feeling or mood in different parts of the farm and during specific times of the day.

Steiner founded Anthroposophy, or Wisdom of the Human Being: an elaborate cosmology in which human evolution is seen as a long process, originating from divine sources and guided by hierarchies of spiritual beings, to a time in which each human being has the freedom to make individual choices to a spiritual way of life and destiny. In this process, the development of advanced cognitive capacities allows the individual to experience the spiritual forces and beings in humans, nature and the cosmos. Steiner often proclaimed his worldview “*a spiritual science for western people, and not a mixture of western and eastern esoteric wisdom. It is the scientific investigation of the spiritual world, that looks beyond the one-sided approach-*



In contrast to conventional farmers, most biodynamic dairy farmers allow their animals to maintain the horns so as to respect the integrity of cows and enable them to perform their own behaviour.

es of mere science or the usual mysticism". According to Lorand [2001] the essence of Anthroposophy is: "A reunion of science, art and religion, not just a renewal or transformation of science. Central in anthroposophy is the understanding of Christ Event: Christ as a great cosmic being, who through his life, teaching, death and resurrection has affected all of humanity, the entire earth, and the whole universe".

Biodynamic Union

When the Biodynamic Union joined Compas in 1997, a preliminary research showed that many farmers found it difficult to explain the biodynamic cosmivision in words. While there are some biodynamic farmers who doubt the effect of preparations, others are becoming increasingly sensitive to the spiritual aspects of their farm and to nature. However, this seems to be strictly individual and difficult to put into words. The activities within Compas started with the stimulation of farmer-to-farmer approaches, such as the 'coaching project'. Selected farmers were trained to individually coach fellow farmers during farm visits. One of the aims was to improve the farmers' skills to develop more feeling and understanding of the cosmivision aspect of biodynamic agriculture. The coach was expected to withhold his or her own knowledge and judgments, and to stimulate the farmers' creativity. In the end, the assessments of the coached farmers and of the coaches themselves came together. 'Coaching' proved to be a successful concept: many farmers joined and later on they continued as study-groups.

Another activity was to write articles in the Biodynamic Magazine with the experiences of Compas partner organisations in Africa, Asia and Latin America. This helped Dutch farmers to realise that there were similarities and differences of their practices with other cultures. Dutch farmers were surprised to note that in India, Bolivia and Sri Lanka traditional farmers also work with moon phases and other planetary constellations to determine the correct time of sowing. At the same time, in many southern cultures, farmers can rely on spiritual teachers, while in the Netherlands, they have to find their way alone or together with other farmers. Attempts to actively link up with Green Foundation in India on the subject of participatory plant breeding were not sustained, though there was mutual inspiration and reflection.

In the year 2000, a next project activity was to clarify and document the biodynamic cosmivision through interviews and reporting. The need to describe the fundamentals of Dutch biodynamic farming, was one of the outcomes of the coaching project. It states that Dutch biodynamic farmers share a common cosmivision, which unites them and enables them to communicate amongst themselves about the essence of agriculture, including the spiritual dimension. The Agricultural Course of Steiner as well as anthroposophy are the main sources of inspiration, though many farmers are not able to spend a lot of time to deepen its essence. The fierce economic pressures make it hard to develop the physical as well as the spiritual side of their farm.

Experimentation. In 1999, some farmers started to explore 'eco-therapy' as a means to better their skills to sense life forces, and to 'communicate' with their soils, crops and animals. This was continued in 2000. In this approach learning to 'measure' life forces and to

apply 'energy treatments' were central objectives, and farmers became more skilled in receiving subtle information on the growth pattern and development of their crops, soils or animals, through intuition and a pendulum according to six parameters. This information assisted them to decide on the necessary healing practice. According to 'eco-therapy' every living organism has a radiation, which is similar to the 'aura' of human beings. The size of the aura is a measure of the health and vitality of an organism. With the current changes in ecology across the globe, air, soils and water now contain new chemical substances, leading to decreased vitality and blockages in life forces. Healing nature implies diagnosing the energy levels, and then removing these blockages to renew the life forces. This is expected to diminish the need for more physical control measures, such as organic pest control.

In the year 2001, 14 farmers joined to explore the common fungus disease *phytophthora* in potatoes, and find ways of enhancing the life energy of the potato and the field, thereby expecting to delay the infestation of *phytophthora*. The locations for learning were the different farms of the participants. According to Coen ter Berg, who joined the course as a participant, observer and reporter, the effects of the course were positive for most of the farmers, as it enhanced their relation with their potatoes and farm as a whole. The infestation of *phytophthora* was not delayed, however.

Discussion

Participation in Compas proved to be a difficult task for the Biodynamic Union. Though Compas provided an inspiring platform for exchange about cosmovision and agriculture, the difficulty of intercultural dialogue remained. The context and the problems of biodynamic farmers in the Netherlands are fundamentally different from farmers in the South. Dutch farmers were uncertain if healing practices from southern cultures could enrich their own farming, and attempts to sustain bi-lateral links failed. A search for other spiritually inspired agricultural movements in Europe yielded no concrete partnerships. Compas did contribute to a process of further clarification of the spiritual dimension of biodynamic agriculture, however, including the new ways such as 'eco-therapy', which has resulted in a lively discussion in the Dutch biodynamic farming movement.

Through numerous meetings and workshops the farmers try to develop local knowledge based on locally felt needs, such as enhancing the vitality of food and the soil, the spiritual development of farmers, and safeguarding the integrity of animals and plants. Development niches for Dutch biodynamic agriculture include direct marketing, as well as social goals, such as employment for socially derailed persons or mentally handicapped people. The Biodynamic union is actively looking for new ways to interpret and innovate the traditional anthroposophical concepts. On farm coaching, and experimentation on the basis of the biodynamic cosmovision, are valuable but difficult challenges for enhancing endogenous development in a highly modernised country.