



EDUCATION POLICY AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF SUSTAINABLE CITY- REGION FOOD SYSTEMS



Photo: Chiara Cirillo.

INTRODUCTION

At a time when more farmers and small food producers in Europe are retiring every year – “[in 2016, for every farm manager under 40 in the EU there were three farm managers over 65](#)” – academic and vocational education systems are struggling to provide prospective entrants with the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in the demanding environment in which they will operate. The education they receive is still focused on growth and intensification, in a situation where this production model is already reaching its limits. In a traditional agricultural system, children learn to farm from the moment they can walk, following their farmer parents and acquiring the necessary knowledge. For adults who did not grow up on a farm and decide to become a farmer, it can be a challenge to get adequate and sufficient training. Many details of farming are site-specific and based on experience. National governments often have agricultural universities or vocational schools, and state governments are known to support farmers by providing advice on specific farming issues. However, there are still gaps when it comes to bringing potential farmers up to speed quickly enough so that they can be successful and their business model is not hindered.

CHALLENGES FOR SUSTAINABLE CRFS

Challenges exist especially in the area of general agricultural education, but also in the area of vocational training for food crafts and in food technology education. Many university courses are focused on specialisations or research and do not offer practice-oriented programmes. In addition, agriculture is a political business - there are many different opinions on methods and best practices, especially when it comes to “sustainable agriculture”. Agriculture and food trade curricula still focus on scaling up, mechanisation and industrialisation as a path to success, while many aspiring food producers have a very different mindset and aim for small-scale, artisanal, often low-tech production for a local market. It can be difficult to find quality, locally relevant information. In addition, not all students have the same access to the infrastructure or machinery used in their education. Well-educated farmers and food craftspeople are essential for implementing technical, social and environmental innovations.

EXAMPLE OF CHALLENGE

In Germany, most agricultural training courses, both vocational and academic, focus heavily on technological innovations in production, but do not focus on social or economic innovations such as new forms of regional marketing or community-supported business models (CSX), which could actually be a better path to sustainable livelihoods. In Italy, there are many opportunities to create and get funded training courses for professionals and technicians in agriculture, for example under the regional Rural Development Programmes (such as the one from [Campania](#)), but not so many for potential new small farmers and agri-entrepreneurs.

EMERGING INNOVATION

1. Grassroots Initiatives

Grassroot initiatives offer informal advisory services. For the case of community-supported agriculture (CSA) in Germany, the [CSA network](#) offers a structured peer learning programme that enables new and aspiring CSA founders to learn from the collective experience of the more than 350 CSAs in the network. A functioning CSA differs in many ways from a regular farm, so the range of topics extends from highly diversified vegetable production to legal and financial aspects to social processes in prosumer groups.

2. Incubation Programmes

Incubation programmes can be a quick way to learn the best practices needed to start a CRFS project. These programmes often provide training in an informal setting over several weeks or a growing season. They are usually structured as a series of "crash courses" where participants learn best practices in a short period of time on topics such as business model, marketing and sales, farm planning or best practices for season extension. A [course like this](#), as for example offered by [Nabolagshager](#) in Oslo, Norway, can be an excellent opportunity for aspiring farmers to network with each other and share experiences and problems.



CSA field visit, Cáceres, Spain. Photo: URGENCI

3. Innovative vocational training

Innovative vocational trainings can also be organised by cities or municipalities. For example, the City of Paris has been running the School of Horticulture and Landscaping ([École du Breuil](#)) since 1867, which offers a wide range of training courses in the field of urban agriculture and gardening – from full-time trainings such as the *Brevet Professionnel* option [Responsable d'Entreprises Agricoles spécialité "Fermes agroécologiques urbaines et périurbaines"](#) (technical college diploma in agricultural business management with specialisation in agroecological farming in urban and peri-urban areas) to further education modules for professional gardeners and one-day introductory courses for interested citizens.

4. Innovative academic education

Academic institutions are increasingly engaged in new education programmes related to food systems and urban agriculture, which, in addition to traditional knowledge transfer, include the training of professionals with specific skills on: sustainable primary production techniques; sustainable approaches to crop protection; sustainable models and approaches such as the circular economy; sectoral policies, regulations and economic aspects related to innovations aimed at the ecological transition; the sustainability of food and consumption; waste management and energy production from renewable resources; sustainable methods and technologies or in food processing and packaging.

The University of Naples is developing a new degree course focused on Food Systems that will include practical elements such as trainings specifically dedicated to a business case study and a sustainability boot camp, helping students to develop skills that can be immediately useful for integrating sustainability into businesses operating in the agri-food sector, or even for developing new sustainable local food systems. It is not yet online but will be organised along similar lines to the "[Green Management and Corporate Sustainability](#)" course offered at Bocconi University in Milan.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Diversify academic and vocational training programmes to include environmental and social aspects and give students the opportunity to follow the "small-scale" and "up-scaling" pathways.

Offer training courses in local nurseries for interested students to gather and develop hands-on horticultural skills and activities and also to learn about new regional horticultural crafts in the agri-food sector. In addition, this will make it easier for professionals and students to interact.

Create differentiated training pathways in academic institutions for urban agriculture that deal comprehensively with urban agriculture and all its fields, and are not just a subcategory of an already existing training pathway.

Include innovative business models, including solidarity-based approaches, in both agricultural and food craftsmanship training courses.