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Appendix

Proceedings of NJF-seminar no.237

**CONVERTING TO ORGANIC
AGRICULTURE**

St Michel, Finland, 22-24 March 1994



UTREDNINGAR - RAPPORTER

SCANDINAVIAN ASSOCIATION
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St Michel, Finland, 22-24 March 1994

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Farmers approaches to organic farming; motivations, barriers and different strategies

Summary

Conversion to ecological agriculture as a process of social adaptation was qualitatively analyzed by the sociologists Barbro Vartdal and Arild Blekesaune 1990-92. Altogether 33 farmers were analyzed, giving the sociologists interviews or written diaries or reports as material. The farmers participated in the "30 farm-project". The sociologists described three categories of eco-farmers, according to whether the farmer was cosmopolitically or locally orientated: The anthroposopher, the ecosopher and the reformist. Their motivations of farming, conversion and mastering strategies as well as social barriers for conversion were described. It is argued that conversion is a social process as well as a process of agronomy.

Introduction

The objective of the "30 farm-project" (1989-92) was to survey and develop ecological agriculture in Norway. In the whole project period 32 farmers participated, spread all over the country, with different productions and in different stages of conversion. Biodynamic farms as well as other ecological farms were represented. Several people and institutions contributed in various subjects, e.g. agronomy, economy, planning of the conversion, farm landscape and sociology. Vartdal and Blekesaune (1992) and Vartdal (1993) investigated converting to organic farming as a process of social adaptation.

The term "eco-movement" will be used as a short name for the organizations and institutions that work to develop and spread ecological agriculture in Norway, and the social activities due to this work.

Material and methods

Centre for Rural Research worked with the farmers during 1990-92. A qualitative methodology was used, to obtain a close understanding of how the farmers experience reality. The farmers were split in three groups. All groups were representative for the farmers participating in the project. One group was interviewed in 1990 and 1992. Another group wrote a summary diary. The third group wrote a report in 1990 and 1992. All farmers were asked questions with respect to being a farmer in general, conversion, project participation e.g., in the interview and in the diary and report guide.

A combination of interviews, reports and diaries made it possible to collect information on two different stages in the conversion process ("before" and "after") and to follow the conversion process during this time period. Consequently the researchers got a thorough knowledge of the farmers' appraisals and opinions, as well as an impression of how this changed during time. Vartdal and Blekesaune participated in some of the annual five days-meetings for all farmers and collaborators in the project. This was useful to collect information on social processes and to discover latent norms characterizing the culture in the eco-movement. The information collected was analyzed qualitatively, using many quotes. Patterns and processes which were discovered, were described.

Treating ecological agriculture as a process of social adaption is a rather new perspective. An extensive litterature in this field made a good theoretical base to ask the right questions.

Theoretical base

Conventional agriculture is a treadmill of productivity

Norwegian agriculture has experienced a very strong rationalization and structural change since 1945. The continuous process towards higher efficiency involves investments of equipment and machinery to enlarge the production on the farm to maximize the income. This in turn enforces the farmer to purchase more and heavier machinery because all farmers follow the same strategy. This is often described as the agricultural treadmill (Cochrane, 1958).

Greening

Ecological agriculture can be seen as a part of the change of consciousness and society characterized by Buttel (1992) as greening. He describes a change of the main objective of political struggle: Environmental problems have become more important than social justice. Buttel (1992) states that neo-conservatism and greening will grow and become an important base for a future post-materialistic development of society and signs of greening can be found for instance in agriculture. More environmentally sound farming practises are encouraged by the governments, and ecological agriculture is expanding all over the world.

Ecological agriculture can be seen as a reaction against the short-sighted and narrow growth-and-productivity philosophy that still dominates conventional agriculture.

Peasant economy

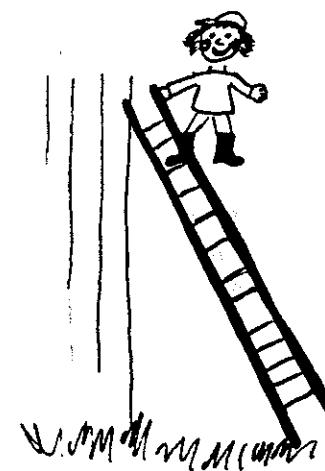
Farming based on the working capacity of family is often called "peasant economy" (Chayanov, 1986). The aim of the family farm is not to maximize the income, but to survive with an acceptable level of labour. Perhaps ecological agriculture is closer to a peasant economy than conventional.

Many farmers have experienced more work and less income as a result of conversion to ecological agriculture (Løes, 1992). One may ask what makes conversion so attractive that farmers are willing to accept less income. Is the fact that conventional agriculture does not fit with the farmers' values and views a reason?

Innovation theory

An innovation is an idea or method that is regarded as new for a person or a group. Ecological agriculture can be seen as an innovation. One complication is that this farming practise is no simple objective or method and it is uncertain whether it is economically profitable. Immaterial reasons contributes to the diffusion of ecological agriculture, in contrast with classical innovation theory, where material reasons dominate.

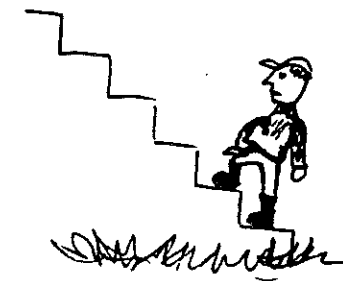
Even though ecological agriculture is not a "classical" innovation, sociological innovation theory was useful to study the diffusion of ecological agriculture in time and space. This theory describes five categories of people, according to how quickly they adopt innovations: Innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority and late-comers (Rogers, 1983) as illustrated on the next page.



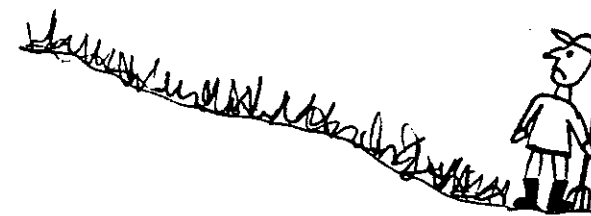
-- a brave innovator --



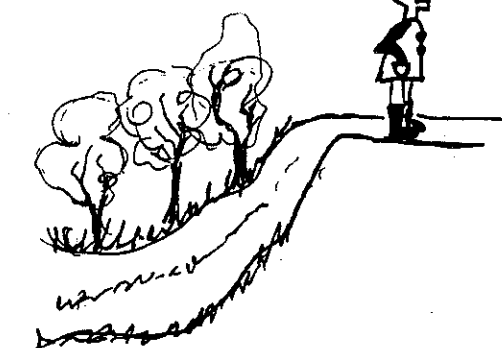
... a respected adopter ...



-- a representant for the hesitating early majority --



-- a representant for the sceptical late majority ...



-- a traditional late-comer --

Five categories of innovators

Cosmopolitical versus local orientation

An important cultural difference can be found between a cosmopolitical and a local orientation (Merton, 1968). Locally oriented eco-farmers identify themselves with the local community. They behave like the other people in the local district and have the same opinions. Cosmopolitically oriented eco-

farmers are wider oriented, and often have opinions and behaviour that make them different from other people in the local community. Cosmopolitical oriented people are often first to try new ideas (innovations), which can be adopted by larger groups of locally oriented people.

Diffusion of new ideas

All diffusion of ideas take place in social systems, which influence the diffusion. For instance, the way farmers interested in conversion communicate and exchange information, will influence on how ecological farming spreads. Rogers (1983) described it as follows: "An individual's network links are important determinants of his or her adoption of innovations. The interconnectedness of an individual in a social system is positively related to the individual's innovativeness."

Granovetter (1973) states "the strenght of weak ties". An extensive network of personal contacts is valuable, because it will give more and faster information.

Rogers (1983) also makes a difference between "The Ups" and "The Downs" in a social system. The early adopters become "The Ups", who have knowledge about most information. This makes it possible for them to control the innovation and to influence the diffusion.

Results and discussion

Motivations for farming, and negative experiences of the farming way of life

Vartdal and Blekesaune (1992) analyzed the motivation of being a farmer in general, and especially the motivation of ecological farming. Describing why they wanted to be farmers, the participators in the "30 farm-project" emphasized:

- The close relation to the nature, plants and animals
- Farming is a very creative work
- Farming is an active work, mainly carried out outdoors
- A farm is a good place for children, and they can participate in the work
- The former rural society had valuable traditions, which it is important to maintain

- The possibility to satisfying (?) income is not the main reason for being a farmer, but the way of living.

However, being a farmer is not only positive. Vartdal and Blekesaune (1992) concluded that the following was unsatisfying in the farmers' way of living:

- It is exhausting to be dependent on natural variations and other risks you can hardly control
- A farmer has very little spare time. Much work has to be done in the late evenings and weekends and it is seldom possible to obtain vacation for one week.
- Being a farmer today is a very lonely work



I am so lonesome in my saddle,
'cause I don't have any horse...

The innovation process of ecological agriculture in Norway

Vartdal (1993) described the diffusion of ecological agriculture in Norway. The oldest bio-dynamic farm in Norway was converted more than 60 years ago. The antroposophs in general can be described as the eco-pioneers, the innovators. Several years later, farmers with a strong engagement to take care of the environment started converting ("The green seventies"). These farmers are the early adopters. The farmers belonging to the early majority started conversion during the last five years.

Analyzing whether the farmers were essentially locally or cosmopolitically oriented, Vartdal and Blekesaune (1992) identified three groups of eco-farmers. However, this does not mean that the farmers were or could be strictly classified, but three ideal categories were described: Two cosmopolitically oriented, the anthroposopher and the ecosopher. The category of the locally oriented farmers was called the reformist.

With respect to the innovation process, the anthroposophers were found to represent the innovators as already mentioned. The early adopters were classified as ecosophers, and the early majority as reformists.

An introduction to the ideal categories

The anthroposopher is characterized by Vartdal and Blekesaune (1992) as a strongly motivated eco-farmer. The anthroposopher says the farmer has an important task as a manager of a part of the nature. They experience bio-dynamic farming as a way of personal development, with a growing intuition of the living organism that the farm constitutes. Human nutrition is especially important to the bio-dynamic farmer. The food is not only a source of energy, but the base of a strong will and force to fulfill the personal tasks. The cosmopolitical orientation often causes the anthroposopher to have many contacts, mostly outside the local community. Many anthroposophers have had a period of practising abroad, and foreigners often come to their farm to practise.

The ecosopher agrees with the anthroposopher that the conventional agriculture is a completely wrong way of farming. Especially the waste of energy and other resources is criticized. They want their farm or the local community to be self-sufficient, and feel ecological farming is a way of practising solidarity with all poor people in the world. The ecosopher has an extended social network outside the local community and often he or she is involved in organizational work. However, the ecosopher often has a social network in the local community as well, consisting of people who sympathize with the ecosophers and their way of living.

Cosmopolitical identification

A characteristic feature of cosmopolitically oriented farmers is identification with the eco-movement, other eco-farmers and small scale farmers ("small is beautiful"). Often the female farmer (eventually the wife on the farm) plays an important role in the ideological characterized by caring and consideration. The eco-farmers often describe ecological agriculture as a good solution for the future development in rural districts because it combines environmentally sound farming practise and working possibilities for both men and women (Vartdal 1993).

Vartdal and Blekesaune (1992) described the reformist as skeptical to agricultural policy and the development of conventional agriculture and inspired by the general greening of the society. Lack of knowledge about conversion and lack of social contact to the eco-movement often delays conversion. When yields are not much reduced after conversion, this makes the reformist eager to continue. But they are not as strongly motivated as the cosmopolitically oriented eco-farmers. They often prefer to present their conversion as "ecologization" (økologisering). They want to survive as farmers and they are not convinced that ecological agriculture will give a satisfying income.



The cosmopolitically orientated eco-farmers and the locally orientated reformists have different conversion strategies.

Local identification

According to the local orientation, the reformist identifies himself/herself with other farmers in the region. They do not want the eco-movement to be dominated by fundamentalistic eco-farmers. But they often emphasize that the inspiration and information from more experienced colleagues was very important in the conversion.

Conversion strategies

Cosmopolites prefer a rapid conversion. Their strategy is "either or not" (enten - eller): Either practising ecological farming or find another way of living (not as a farmer).

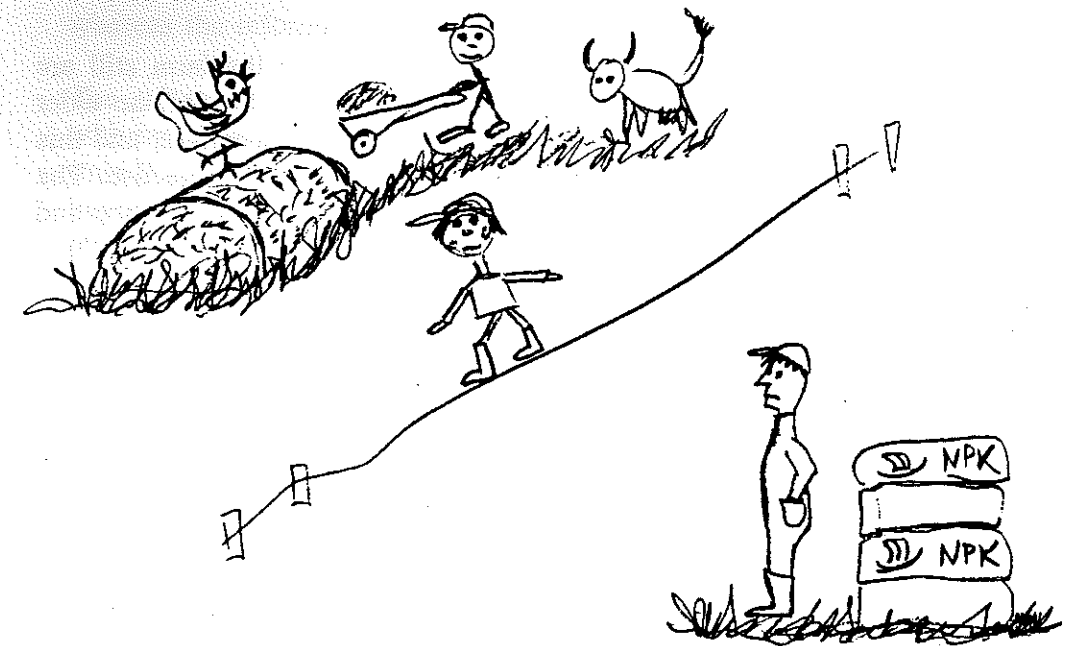
The reformists prefer to convert more stepwise and slowly. Their strategy is "both - and" (både - og). They do not want to advocate a philosophy that differs much from their conventional neighbours' before they are certain that they will make a final conversion. They evaluate the results and often have not yet decided if they are going to convert the whole farm.

Mastering strategies

As described for each category of eco-farmer, people behave different with respect to the change in attitude and practise that is part of the conversion process. It is important how they integrate or do not want to be integrated with the eco-movement. Some fresh converters will integrate with the eco-movement and become a part of that social network. Others will create their own half-way of ecological agriculture because they can not, or do not want to integrate totally and fulfill all the standards of ecological agriculture. They want some inspiration and information, but they do not want to take part in ideological and philosophical discussions. They want practical knowledge about ecological farming and this is often motivated by their local orientation: They want to be respected in their local community.

A post-graduate student of social anthropology studied thoughts and visions of eco-farmers, as well as their ambitions of changing the society (Fostvedt, 1993). She worked with 18 farms altogether, some farms participating in the project and some other ecological farms. Some farms were visited for several days and Fostvedt participated in the farm work (participating observations). Other farmers were interviewed. Fostvedt (1993) also pointed out the professionalism of the eco-farmer in the nineties as an important aspect. Eco-farmers want to be at least as good farmers as their conventional neighbours, in addition to what they have to manage to farm ecologically.

Maintenance of a local social network is fortunate for the well-being of the eco-farmer. On the other hand, it is a danger that the local network and need for local acceptance may prevent the final conversion. Vartdal (1993) described this as the reformist's balance on the borderline of tolerance in the local community.



the reformist's balance on the borderline of tolerance in the local community

Social barriers

An important challenge in the conversion process is to create an identity as eco-farmer and to establish a social network that responds positively to the conversion.

Some converters and eco-farmers do not tell other people why they practise ecological farming unless they ask. The ecosophers are more eager to advocate their way of farming and they often become leaders of the opinion. Organization work often takes a lot of time and conflicts with the farm work. Organizational activities are important and often give higher social status, but are indeed exhausting (Vartdal, 1993).

Challenges within the family

It is necessary that both the wife and husband (when there is a couple on the farm) agree in the conversion and have approximately the same degree of

motivation. Conversion often implies more work and less income at least for some time and represents a challenge to loyalty and companionship. Some eco-farmers experienced problems as parents, when their children differed from other children in some way or another. Vartdal (1993) remarks, feeling different is not a problem exclusively for children on eco-farms. There is a danger that eco-farmers relate all their social problems to the fact that they practise ecological farming.

Social challenges also arise when the elder generation on the farm still are active and do not appreciate the conversion. Often the values of the elder generation are more material than the values of the next generation, and this makes it difficult for the elder farmers to accept the younger's practise. The young generation have to take care of their own motivation and inspiration and in addition they have to motivate the elder (Vartdal and Blekesaune, 1992).

Difficulties to be accepted in the local community

Especially those who started conversion several years ago experienced some local resistance, e.g. that they did not get local bank loans. Other experienced lack of relevant knowledge and support from the local advisory service. Those who started conversion the last few years did not experience so much local resistance. Obviously ecological agriculture is more accepted now and the resistance that the early pioneers overcome has made it easier for new converters to succeed (Vartdal, 1993).

Lack of knowledge and misunderstandings about ecological agriculture is itself a social barrier. Eco-farmers often feel people laugh at them because they know very little about ecological agriculture. Eco-farmers feel it is important to explain and argue. Cosmopolites are often strongly motivated that critical questions and jokes do not make them depressed. More locally oriented farmers may be more sensitive to such criticism (Vartdal, 1993).

However, not all reactions in the local community will be negative when a farmer starts conversion. For example, local newspapers often show a very positive and inspiring interest and all levels in the society the greening has resulted in a more positive attitude towards ecological agriculture.

Latent conflicts within the eco-movement

The different ways of approaching to ecological agriculture may be described as one "fundamentalistic" advocated by the cosmopolites. Shortly this may be defined as "fulfilling all eco-standards is the least thing one should do to call oneself an eco-farmer". On the other hand, some of the reformists are less fundamentalistic and feel it is more important that farming in general changes

to take better care of the environment, than to maintain the definition of eco-farming very strict (Vartdal, 1993).

The cosmopolites emphasize an ideologic or philosophic base for the ecological practise as very important, whereas the locally oriented reformists think what you do is more important than what you speak. Here Vartdal (1993) noted that the cosmopolites defence the ideology in the eco-movement, whereas the reformists refuse to adopt this ideology.

The reformists often feel it difficult to present their opinions in discussions with more fundamentalistic eco-farmers. The cosmopolites on the other hand state that open and interesting discussions of personal opinions is one of the important strengths of the eco-movement. This conflict shows that knowledge of ecological farming can be a powerful force against non-inaugurated people. The knowledge experienced farmers possess, makes it possible to keep social control. Then the discussions in the eco-movement will not be free from ruling, which is an important goal of communication (Habermas 1984). According to Vartdal (1993) this conflict makes it difficult for the eco-movement to create a consensus about what a conversion is or should be.

The difficulties to be accepted by the experienced eco-farmers is an important social barrier for many reformists, who may feel this so difficult that they retire and do not make any further progress in conversion (Vartdal, 1993).

Further diffusion of ecological agriculture

Fulfilling the standards of ecological farming is a base for the official conversion subsidy. This is fortunate because it keeps the eco-movement together. However, if the intention of this subsidy is to stimulate an environmentally sound agriculture, one may ask if more farmers would change their practise if they received the subsidy on a base of less strictly defined standards (Vartdal, 1993).

Vartdal (1993) suggests that the more fundamentalistic eco-farming will spread in a certain social network (the eco-movement), whereas a less strictly defined half-way eco-farming can spread among local oriented farmers without close contact to the eco-movement.

A locally oriented eco-farmer has an important function to show the neighbours that ecological agriculture is not necessarily a weedy lowyielded chaos, or another biased picture the neighbours may have of ecological farming. Hence, reformists become important pioneers as well. The further diffusion of ecological agriculture may be dependent on the reformists as local inspirators for conventional farmers (Vartdal and Blekesaune, 1992).

The cosmopolites contribute efficiently to inform the opinion and the government about ecological agriculture, and hence contribute to the greening of the society (Vartdal, 1993).

Fostvedt (1993) concludes that some of the engagement to change the society very rapidly, which characterized the eco-movement in the "green 70's" has changed. Instead, the eco-farmer in the nineties tries to realize his and her visions of the good way of living on a smaller scale. For instance, they run a farm shop, combine farm and social work etc.

The sociologists conclude that ecological agriculture has a very positive influence on the agriculture in general. The future diffusion of this farming practise will depend on whether the eco-movement is willing to accept conversion as a social process as much as a process of agronomy and to work to overcome the social barriers against conversion found here.

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*Barbro Vartdal has, together with Arild Blekesaune (supervisor), both at Centre for Rural Research at the University of Trondheim, done the first sociological investigation on ecological agriculture in Norway.

Anne-Kristian Løes, one of the leaders of the "30 farm-project" at Norwegian Centre for Ecological Agriculture, presents a summary of the study and conclusions based on Vartdal, B. (1993). *Motivasjon og meistring av omlegging til økologisk jordbruk*", rapport nr 3, Centre for Rural Research.

**In Norway the term ecological agriculture covers both biological and bio-dynamic agriculture.

Illustrations: Ulla Dahl Hansen and Anne-Kristin Løes.