

New entrants in Greece:

Understanding the context and challenges

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Historical background

Greece is a very young country of less than 200 years. Before, during Ottoman times, there was a feudal system. Until today, there is no proper land registry, no cadastre. People own land and the titles for the land date back from the Ottoman Empire days. There are people who own 1000 of hectares with those sorts of titles – we don't know if that's legal or not.

In 1910, there was a farmers and land workers uprising. In 1922, there was a massive population exchange between Greece and Turkey, with huge influx of refugees to whom land was distributed. It was the first time there was a land distribution in Greece; it hasn't happened again. Besides, the Church owns vast pieces of land -many given to them by peasant owners during turbulent times.

Inheritance laws see land fragmented into forever smaller pieces. Often a farmer farms several small pieces or patches, not necessarily close to one another. This makes farming a more costly and time consuming endeavour. It also means that many a time land goes to people who have no intention to use the land for farming or for anything else.

There are very few farmsteads. The idea of a farm comprising of one or more buildings surrounded by land for cultivation is very rare in Greece. The norm is for a farmer to reside in a house or apartment in a village and go to his (scattered) fields to grow plants. This also means it is difficult for a farmer to provide food and board to anyone, and thus the idea of apprenticeships is also next to non-existent, making it even more difficult to create a new generation of farmers.

Land has sentimental and social value for the family – especially since most Greeks have ties to the uprooted people of the population exchange time, land is seen as part of the family history, a link to the family's past, to its roots. Land is a way to secure social reproduction, and it is used to preserve the agricultural identity of the family. Plots pass on through generations and thus land does not always belong to the one farming it. Old folks tend to it for their city-dwelling children; it gets inherited by wives, children, next of keen.

Agroecological methods that were common two generations ago are now gone, so is collectivism and community-culture (non-existent in modern Greece). People used to gather together and help each other out –e.g. it was common for a community to help harvest one's field, and the next day someone else's etc.

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Post WWII we have intensification, mechanisation, ‘modernisation’ of farming. Chemicals, fertilizers, heavy machinery, monocultures begin to develop, while land concentration starts noticeably in the 60s. Peasant life used to be hard and not profit-making enough. Urbanisation starts as a consequence, while farmers are seen as backwards, uneducated, crude, farming is seen as hard and unproductive.

In 1981, Greece entered the European Economic Community (EEC) (which preceded the EU), and thereby started to enter the system of CAP, subsidies and quotas in production. With some production going into landfills, and lack of proper guidance by the then socialist government in the ‘80s, we have ‘fake affluence’ for the starving farmers of the past who are now getting paid - it seems – to produce nothing. Perception of farming changes a bit. Bank loans are introduced into farming. In parallel, individualism rises; we go from equipment collectively used by a whole village to every farmer owning a new tractor. It hastens the end of cooperation between farmers and relying on the community. Land holdings become bigger in size and less in numbers as the system of subsidies favours larger owners as the payments are calculated by hectare. Having said that, Greek average holding is considerably smaller than other EU countries; it is averaging on 5-7 hectares, when in the Netherlands is 26 hectares for example. Today, still, 40% of Greek farmers are considered small -some with areas 0.3 hectare! Big farmers hold 40% of the land.

Greece is a net importer of food which is absurd if you think that we have close to 300 days of sunshine per year, about 20% of the country is under Natura 2000 protection, almost a third is forests. With 5million people living in the greater Athens area and 1 million in Thessaloniki, almost 70-80% of people live in urban centres leaving the countryside empty. There are entire villages that are abandoned!

Out of the agricultural production 4% is organic; take away olives and vines and organic vegetable production is only 1% -which is very low.

CAP subsidies criteria: to fit the bill, men cede land to their wives, or children, creating more holdings on paper, but not in reality. It is also usual that the owner gets the subsidy and the one farming uses the land rent-free. so the real number of holdings can be 14-36% less. Feminisation, is also mostly on paper as usually farm-heads are male, old pensioners.

Present-absent farmers: those whose income comes from other sources.

Age breakdown:

Farmers age	% of the farming population
under 35	02%
35-44	14.7%
45-54	23.9%
55-64	24.9%
over 65	31.3%

CAP favours cash crops like cotton, and it also leads to abandoned land and wasted crops, as farmers get paid whether they use the land properly or not. A whole generation of farmers distanced themselves from the knowledge of the past and do not have the skills to care for the land or a real understanding about crops. There is growing resentment towards farmers who are now seen as lazy, rich and demanding. Areas with very intensive farming in monocultures are now suffering from big levels of pollution and contamination even of the waterbeds.

Current situation:

Recorded unemployment (real figures are higher) is around 27-30%; youth unemployment is 60%. Greece lost 25% of its GDP in just five years of crisis. People living under poverty line – i.e. with a yearly income of less than 4000 Euro - are over 50%.

In 2012, we gave away (I refuse to say we sold it because it was a giveaway) the Agricultural bank. Most farmers had loans and mortgages that will soon start being asked back. In parallel, old school cooperatives failed in a big way -sandal, embezzlements etc.

The same goes for union representation. Union reps often end up becoming politician - another type of 'revolving doors' effect. There are Associations of New/Young Farmers in most prefectures (ANF) and a National ANF, but it does not represent all ANFs. And of course it is not the voice of small farmers! To give an example of how dodgy things might be with ANfs and NANF : in 2015 NANF held their national conference in an area where the local ANF is NOT their member, an area devastated by gold mining practices -the same Canadian company as in Rosia Montana in Romania, destroying livelihoods of countless farmers in the area, and their main sponsor was the said Canadian company...

Tax raids on everyone and since summer of 2015 -post referendum - on farmers as well. VAT in Greece is 13 and 24% -for raw and processed materials respectively. Farming petrol tax was €60 per ton now it goes to €330. All small business owners, freelancers, etc. have to PREpay 100% of the NEXT year's taxation, farmers 55%.

Allotment culture in urban areas was ever in existence. City people would always receive some veggies from family in the village. There are no agroecological training opportunities -no such schools or apprenticeship types of learning. Organic farming started around 20 years ago, by demand of the consumers. Still, until today it is very difficult for organic and small farmers to find access to the market. We do not have farmers markets in Greece.

After the 'potato movement' in 2011, in many urban places citizens created 'no intermediaries' markets. When these started becoming successful, we were met with teargas and arrests. There are street markets in place, but most of the vendors there are not farmers themselves -they buy from the main vegetable wholesale depots. They have vested interests and do not want farmers, or organic markets to become an institution. So organic and small

farmers find it difficult to access markets and reach their customer. 20 years ago together with organic agriculture started the movement of 'eco-festivals' which was seen as a way for organic farmers to come in direct contact with their customers. They are still happening usually once a year in every region.

There is no tenure security. This is characteristically portrayed in the lack of organic fruits and fruit CSAs as most of these farmers use rented land to farm and of course it is not safe to plant trees on rented land.

Another difficulty is legal and taxation frameworks. It is not easy -or possible, for a farmer to do farming and processing of his produce. If someone wants to grow plants, have a small agrotourist unit and do some processing they would need, in the eyes of the tax office, to create three or more different tax IDs-companies which makes no economic sense. A characteristic example is that of nomad shepherds in the north west of Greece. Traditionally they spend 5-6 months up on the mountains with their flocks; they milk the sheep and make cheese, in makeshift dens in secluded mountaintops. The tax office tells them they are not just farmers but small industry owners (!)

Land prices vary considerably from area to area and according to type of land, if it has water, etc. In places where we see concentrations of organic growers land prices go very high.

Farming land being is also increasingly used for other incomes. During the crisis, the state finally liberated the energy market and gave huge incentives for big "photovoltaic parks" to be created. These, illegally, took the place of cultivations and needed big investments -so again it was not small farmers that benefited at least financially.

Future

We witness a surge of urbanites that want to go back to nature. This is a survival move -as it is deemed easier to survive in a village rather than in a city. These are educated people, with new ideas, more sensitivities towards environment, ecological practices, innovations etc in mind. They lack in know-how, skill, resources, access o funds and land.

They are faced with ludicrous amounts of bureaucracy and legal and fiscal hurdles. In many cases, if they persevere, they succeed. Usually if the products they create are aimed at exports they make a decent living. If they try to cater to local, national markets -especially for raw vegetables, it is difficult to make ends meet.

State and local governments seem to be either oblivious to the farmers' needs and demands at best or at worst they act in a disabling way. A recent example is a new law trying to create a framework for farmers markets that made sure the no intermediaries markets would once and for all close down while at the same time making it really difficult for farmers markets to be created.

Still we have land occupations by groups doing peri-urban and urban gardening, many initiatives resembling CSAs, community and school garden schemes, refugee gardening projects, etc. Most of these are introvert by nature; they do not know of each other's existence and do not engage in networking. One emblematic example is that of CSAs: there are CSAish groups for more than 5 years in existence. The first time they all met was when I organised the first Greek CSA Gathering for the purposes of the European CSA Declaration workshop. Many of these initiatives are averse to subsidies or indeed any form of institutionalised funding possibilities which on the other hand limits their chances of growing bigger or more sustainable or reaching their target markets.

People are experimenting with new types of cooperativism, we started talking of the commons and their management and ownership. Greece is a huge lab where grassroots are experimenting with solidarity economy, collectivism, coops, and everything alternative -from farming practices to housing energy etc. This is a small fragment of the overall population but it is a hopeful sign that needs to be helped in order to come to fruition.

Agroecopolis, our newly founded NGO aims to help in this by promoting CSAs, networking on national and international level, act as a hub for informal groups to get access to resources, start training and agroecological education work on a2l and management/ownership of commons, create food policy councils and work to achieve food sovereignty!

Sidenote

To understand what brought Greece to its present economic situation, I often tell people the following story:

Towards the end of the Ottoman Empire, the other big powers of the time England, France and Russia decided to fund groups of guerrilla fighters in the geography of present-day Greece (in the form of 'shark Loaning' which the Greek state had to repay time and time again leading to multiple bankruptcies along the way). When the first Greek state was created, in its Parliament there were only three parties. Namely, and I kid you not, the English party, the French party, and the Russian party. They then decided that the best way to rule this new state was to bring an eight-year old boy from Bavaria called Otto who became the king of Greeks!

Fast forward to the second world war. And the atrocities that were committed against the Greek people from the occupying Nazi forces. Apart from things like eradication of whole villages as counter strike to resistance fighting, the occupying forces drained Greece of all its produce, to the point that people in the cities were dying in the thousands because of famine. There is footage from Athens towards the end of the war, with scenes that look like a concentration camp. Skeletal people, digging mass graves for others like them...It was so bad that the Germans themselves decided to call this an 'occupational loan' so as to avoid the charge of genocide.

*When the war finished, Greece still had a German king. Those that collaborated with the enemy did not get prosecuted, go to jail, exile or have their assets taken. Instead they went on to become ministers, industrialists, important officials. many of those families are still 'running' the country until today.. . The irony was that many of those that fought in the war, and the generation of their children, had to leave their devastated country to go work as unskilled labourers to rebuild Germany!
Greece has never been independent.*