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Environmental protection and hidden rurality in the peri-urban area of Athens: conflicts, cooperation and civic agro-ecological dynamics

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Résumé / Summary

The paper aims at outlining the diverging and complex dynamics of both agro-environmental stakes linked to urban expansion and newly emerged civic movements that claim the preservation of open spaces (natural and rural) and the re-localisation of food in the peri-urban metropolitan area of Athens under the scope of an agro-ecological perspective.

Chronic socio-environmental conflicts in the peri-urban area of Athens have been associated with the negative impacts of urban sprawl and large-scale infrastructure that led to excessive farmland loss and environmental degradation. Land-use and development pressures on rural land during the past years gave boost to numerous democratic movements and grassroots initiatives. Civil society and solidarity initiatives that emerged especially after the serious economic depression of 2008 are mainly linked to social struggles against privatization of public land, environmental issues and ethics, sustainability and alternative food systems for food security. These civic mobilisation reflects the changing rural-urban dynamics linked to agro-environmental transformation and spatial conflicts.

In order to investigate the hidden rurality of the peri-urban areas of Athens metropolitan area this analysis addresses:

(a) On the one hand initiatives and alternative social movements that deal with food re-localization and environmental constraints that favour the emergence of localised consumer-producer networks and spontaneous civic or public initiatives aiming at reintegrating agriculture into the city or near the city fringe. Peri-urban agriculture, Community Supported Agriculture- CSA baskets and other alternative, locally based agriculture and food distribution movements such as the markets without intermediaries or local organic markets, food and consumer cooperatives (Social Consumer Cooperative Groceries, fair trade and solidary/social entrepreneurship) they all support small-scale farming, local agricultural cooperatives and grocers that often locate in the urban fringe. This enables a more fair, affordable, transparent and environmentally friendly approach to the production-distribution-consumption cycle that promotes locally produced agricultural goods.

(b) On the other hand, complex multi-actor conflicts rising between uses of primary sector, urban development and environmental reserves. The environmental costs from unsustainable farming practices increase as global food demand rises. The scarcity of natural resources in the region around Athens Metropolitan Area influences the nexus between natural environment, agriculture and urban land-use that all claim the same space.

In particular, we take into account:

(a) the importance of social and environmental roles of civil society movements in conflict management and governance mechanisms, and their impact on making visible and viable family farming in the peri-urban

(b) the local agro-ecological processes under the lens of alternative food networks and consumers dynamics and the,

(c) the relations and conflicts between actors who exert pressure to the use and appropriation of environmental resources and land-use priorities (e.g. traditional or modern actors of the primary sector, environmental protection and urbanisation).

Therefore our method is organised as follows: a) Literature review on peri-urban agriculture and socio-environmental pressures in periurban areas and the role of civil society. b) Description of the study area based on empirical analysis of the impact of movements that relate to alternative locally based agriculture and food distribution in the metropolitan area of Athens to the peri-urban agro-ecological processes dynamics e.g. CSA networks, markets without intermediaries or local organic markets, food and consumer cooperatives, c) Some cases of disputes between sectors of agro-economy, urban land-use and the environmentalists, d) Finally, some concluding considerations are presented about the factors, pressures and opportunities that could redefine if the hidden rurality of peri-urban metropolitan areas and create an enabling environment for new forms of resistance for farm strategies, civil society agro-ecological movements and democratic practices.

In summary, our study shows that despite the decreasing importance of agriculture and the increasing pressures on land resources that led to unsustainable land-use practices in rural metropolitan areas of Attica, food and agriculture has gained renewed attention in recent years of social, economic and environmental crises. We therefore consider civil society as an important local force that seems to have a reinforcing effect at the local production and small-scale farming, interacts with urban and rural environment and eventually forms the agro-ecological dynamics/change in the peri-urban areas. However, interacting and often conflicting interests between top-down interventions in the peri-urban metropolitan fringe and bottom-up priorities concerning food and space justice can create unsolved conflicts, unintentional synergies, trade-offs or locally based strategies towards self-reliant systems founded on ecological principles that might disclose the hidden security and resilience of food system.

Keywords: peri-urban agriculture, environmental conflicts, alternative food systems, food security, civil society, solidarity initiatives

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