Nurturing agroforestry systems in temperate regions: an analysis of discourses for an enabling environment in Flanders, Belgium

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State-of-the-art

Although the interest in agroecological practices is growing among researchers, educators and policymakers, a large-scale shift of farmers from applying conventional practices to more diversified and sustainable practices is lagging behind in Flanders. This is also true for agroforestry systems, even though farmers in Flanders are able to benefit of several adoption incentives, such as a subsidy program and the eligibility of agroforestry plots as Ecological Focus Area (1). Hence, it is necessary to look a bit closer to the different requirements necessary for the transition to more agroecological practices. According to Rotmans (2) transition implies changes in the functioning of farming systems at three different levels, i.e. structures, cultures and practices. He considers structures and cultures as system level parameters describing the functioning of the societal systems, whereas practices mediate between them and the underlying level of the actors. In this paper we focus on the cultures-level with respect to agroforestry. Cultures are considered here as the cognitive, discursive, normative and ideological aspects of functioning, involved in the sense-making of practices. Also discourses, perspectives, narratives and viewpoints relate to the same thing, i.e. the way people are seeing or talking about something and which reflects underlying worldviews and paradigms (3).

In this paper we elaborate on a study design to investigate the different discourses with respect to agroforestry. Previous research suggested that between different actors indeed a range of different viewpoints exists on the different aspects of agroforestry (4). This could be one of the reasons that current incentives schemes are not very effective, i.e. since they focus on and address only one perspective on agroforestry, whereas a wide range of existing viewpoints or discourses may exist. Furthermore we hypothesize that the different discourses on agroforestry are also linked with general opinions about agricultural food production and policy. We differentiate here between two narratives on agricultural food production (productivity and sufficiency narrative) and three discourses on agricultural policy (neoliberal, neo-mercantilist and multi-functionality policy discourse). The rationale behind this is that these general narratives and paradigms on agriculture contain a certain rhetoric that will result in different meanings and interpretations of agricultural practices. As such general narratives on agriculture shape how people evaluate what is seen as a desirable evolution of agricultural production systems, and what types of research, technology, markets and policy should surround and facilitate this evolution. In order to bring more clarity about the discourses on agroforestry and how the more general narratives on agriculture are guiding and steering this discourses, we will perform a Q-method.

Methods

Q-methodology or shorter Q-method, was primary invented and developed by William Stephenson in the 1930s to assist in the examination of human subjectivity. Today Q-method usually implies factor analysis, and this to unravel different perspectives on a particular subject and to measure the overlap and difference between them (5). A Q-method exists of six general steps. Here the two first steps in executing a Q-method are explained more in detail.

Step 1: The first step in a Q-study is to identify the concourse, which refers to the communication about a certain issue, here agroforestry. In general the concourse takes the form of a collection of statements which should capture the full range of viewpoints and perspectives that different stakeholders might have (5). In this study, the concourse was created using a combination of several sources. First, we consulted the literature about (1) agroforestry adoption and its wider framing as an agro-ecological farming practice and (2) discourses about farming and agricultural policy. Second, we undertook an extensive stakeholder analysis, including 25 interviews and 2 focus groups, to identify a diverse range of opinions on agroforestry. These two sources resulted in a communication concourse of about 350 statements.

Step 2: Since a concourse of hundreds of statements is too large to present to participants in the Q-study, a group of 30-60 statements has to be chosen from the concourse, which is considered sufficient to elicit the different existing point of views (5). In this study design an inductive approach was used to select statements relating to agroforestry, its definition and different forms, its feasibility and the factors and actors influencing its breakthrough. On the other hand a deductive approach was used to add statements that related to the diverse narratives held about agriculture (productivity, sufficiency) and agricultural policy and markets (neo-liberalism, neomercantilism, multifunctionality).

Further steps: The third step consists of selecting the respondents. In the fourth step the selected respondents will be asked to rank-order the statements according to a forced normal distribution, with different positions ranging from least to most 'according to my point of view'. The fifth step encompasses a principal component analysis to rearrange the data by identifying and ordering components. The sixth and last step consists of an interpretation of the factor scores. In the end a number of 'ideal Q-sorts' are produced, which will represent the different perspectives or discourses.

Expected results

The expected results of this study are the identification of – idealized – Q-sorts, which represent a model discourse indicating the perspectives held regarding agroforestry and how they are related with broader perspectives concerning agriculture and agricultural policy. Further, the results can potentially indicate which perspectives are more common among which stakeholder groups. Using this, implications can be drawn regarding the feasibility of agroforestry, its barriers and drivers and how they relate to broader narratives about agriculture and policy. We expect to identify different perspectives regarding agroforestry – and thus different pathways to transform farming systems into agroforestry systems, depending on peoples' perspectives regarding agriculture and policy.

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