AGROECOLOGY
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MASTER'S OF SCIENCE (UMB)

WHAT IS AGROECOLOGY?

The academic field that bridges agriculture, nature and society.

Agroecology links theory and practice using social and natural sciences to describe, analyze and manage complex agroecosystems. We focus on integrating ecology, organic and conventional agriculture, socio-economics and culture with the ultimate goal of sustaining production, food security, community and environmental health.

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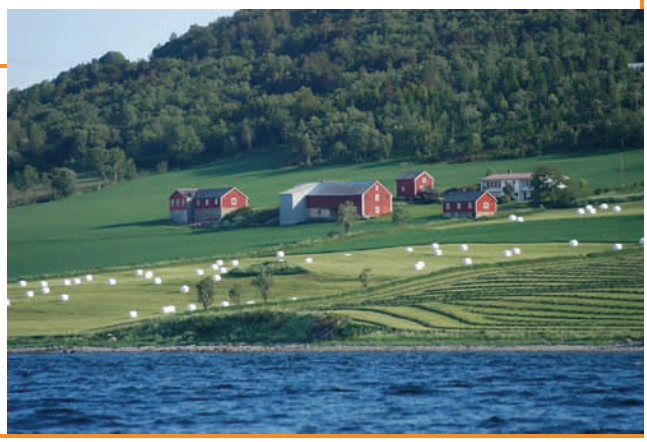


SUMMARY OF THESES COMPLETED IN NORWAY

Agroecology students have explored a wide range of topics in farming and food systems while completing their MSc thesis research in Norway. This summary of topics provides a window on the program to illustrate the opportunities available to Nordic and other students who have chosen to work in this new, interdisciplinary field.

Frøydis Linden (Norway) was active in organizing the organic student garden while at UMB and completed a thesis focused on project-based and experience-based learning activities for elementary school students on Norwegian farms. She explored issues such as the role of the farmer as a teacher, how to design an on-farm education and how to unite farmers' and teachers' knowledge to create a more effective learning experience. She currently works with the organic certification body Debio in western Norway.

Kjartan Åsebø (Norway) completed a survey of farmer's markets in nine locations and found that vendors were highly concerned about educating consumers about where and how their products were grown. The project has continued and expanded over the past five years. Kjartan is now the educational director at the Lyngdal Agricultural School in southern Norway.

Nick Willis (U.S.A.) studied meat goat production in small mountain and valley farms in Norway. He used linear programming to evaluate labor, capital and other costs to find the most profitable system in cooperation with an on-going project of the Norwegian Agricultural Economics Institute. He is now back in Kansas interviewing for positions.

Bastian Hoffman (Germany) completed a thesis project looking at factors necessary to promote an organic food system in Norway and to answer the question of why some regions develop the organic sector faster than others. This involved bringing stakeholders together in workshops to discuss and envision a successful food system with organic agriculture. He continues to work in Norway as a consultant/advisor at the Mid-Helgeland Agricultural Research Association & at Bioforsk, the Norwegian Institute for Agriculture and Environmental Research.

Mikaela Vasstrom (Denmark) used systemic action research to facilitate agricultural innovation and learning on a farm on the south coast of Norway. Her research contributed to changing production on the farm from vegetables to high-bush blackberries, as well as learning about its management. She defends her thesis on March 30th.

Although these students all completed thesis projects in Norway, there are many other opportunities to study abroad. To date, agroecology students have completed thesis projects in Cuba, Colombia, Argentina, Cameroon, Uganda, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Tanzania, Canada and the U.S.A. Other projects are in progress in additional countries. There is often support available for travel and thesis expenses from UMB or other government and non-profit groups in the region, and students are urged to explore these opportunities.

AGROECOLOGY MSC PROGRAM UMB

Norwegian University of Life Sciences (UMB)
P.O Box 5003
N-1432 Ås
Norway

Tel: +47 64 96 50 00
Other: +47 64 96 56 44
Fax: +47 64 96 50 01
E-mail: postmottak@umb.no
www.umb.no

The Student Information Center
Phone: +47 64 96 61 00
Email: opptak@umb.no/studie
www.umb.no/studie

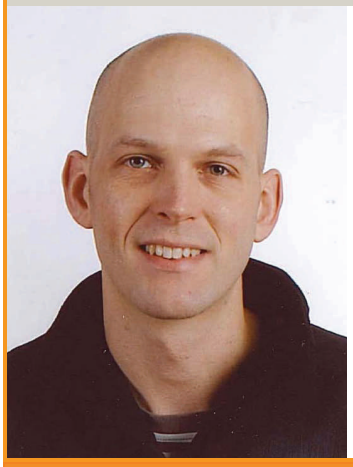
Nordic School of Agroecology/Ecological Agriculture
Phone: +47 64 96 56 44
Email: geir.lieblein@umb.no
www.agroasis.org

Editor/Student Advisor
Karen Adler
E-mail: karea@student.umb.no

AGROECOLOGY MASTER'S OF SCIENCE (UMB)

APRIL NEWSLETTER FEATURES NORWAY

This month the Agroecology department wants to highlight the research possibilities here in Norway. Many Norwegian and foreign students have cooperated with Norwegian farmers, collaborated with Norwegian institutions such as Bioforsk or UMB or helped to facilitate joint projects between Norwegian stakeholders in the food system. While the program is flexible enough to allow travel and research in virtually every part of the world, some students choose to do their research within Norway itself. Resources are possible and there are many existing projects that could use the additional input of an agroecologist to bring a systemic perspective to the project.



Steffen Adler (Germany) conducted a multiple-case study in the Nordic countries about research design and communication in production system experiments. He is presently working toward a PhD degree in grassland management and milk quality at Bioforsk Organic Food and Farming Division in central Norway.

THESIS ABSTRACT BY STEFFEN ADLER

Since the 1980s production system experiments are a commonly used research strategy in ecological farming in the Nordic countries. These types of experiments fit in under the holistic-oriented framework of farming systems research, which was developed in the 1970s as a reaction to the negative impacts of the Green Revolution in developing countries. The approach involves investigating farming systems as a whole and actively integrating researchers, extensionists and farmers into the research design.

In the Nordic countries 48 production system experiments were identified in a survey. By using the criteria of 1) research orientation 2) experimental area 3) duration and 4) other criteria, the design of the production system experiments could be characterised as more reductionistic or more holistic.

A qualitative multiple-case study of production system experiments at the research station Apelsvoll (Norway) and the research farms Logården, Öjebyn and Tingvall (Sweden) was completed to relate communication between researcher, extensionist, farmer and consumer back to the research design.

Both formal and informal communication forms highlighted differences in the communication networks of the cases. Apelsvoll had a more reductionistic research design and a hierarchical one-way communication. Tingvall had a holistic full-scale design that included other actors and a more developed communication network that allowed for two-way dialogue. Logården and Öjebyn had features of both reductionistic and holistic research designs.

Social aspects also played an important role for the development of communication channels. In the multiple-case study a relation was found between reductionistic research design and a less developed communication network on the one hand, and holistic research design and a well-developed communication on the other. However, the integrative approach of the Logården and Tingvall projects was not embedded in the research methodology.

It was found that new knowledge was needed about ecological farming at a farming systems level, including social aspects. This would be necessary to meet rapid changes in social and economic structures on farms and in society in general.

Insights gained in this study may also help to improve the existing research design of on-going production system experiments and to develop new research strategies under the framework of farming systems research in the Nordic countries. In addition, this work may contribute to a greater focus on interdisciplinary approaches and a closer interaction between existing production system experiments.