

AGROECOLOGY

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AGROECOLOGY MASTER PROGRAM UMB

WHAT IS AGROECOLOGY?

The academic field that bridges agriculture, nature and society.

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

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ENOAT CONFERENCE HIGHLIGHTS AND STUDENT RESEARCH IN FOCUS

This month we feature Ina Torp, who defended her Agroecology thesis in June. She writes about her current work with international refugees and how her thesis research on the right to food and land in Guatemala helped to prepare her for her career. A summary of a recent ENOAT meeting on experiential learning attended by UMB Agroecology professors is also included.

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING WORKSHOP IN TARTU, ESTONIA

By Geir Lieblein, Chuck Francis and Aage Steen Helm

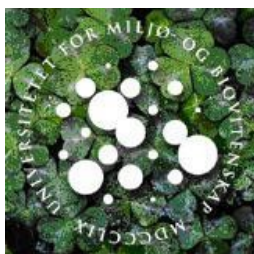
A workshop on experiential learning was organized for the recent European Network of Organic Agriculture Teachers (ENOAT) meeting in Tartu. A group brainstorm revealed that these were the terms most people associated with experiential education: action, field learning, application, experience, practical work, hands-on, and case studies. A number of instructors shared their personal experiences about how students responded to this method. In the Azores and in Poland, a series of interviews with farmers and other clients has been used to identify key issues about what is needed to improve contemporary agriculture. Group work is used as a central part of the courses in Finland, with the students helping to establish norms and seeking tools for efficient operation. In Wageningen, developing a process of group dynamics is considered a key part of learning, in addition to the content and problem-solving activities. In Denmark, the idea is to create a safe space for learning and to encourage students to be more adventuresome in their approach to challenges in agriculture. An instructor from Lithuania summed up the situation: "... students in the classroom are often asleep, and in the field they are *alive*." Several key questions emerged from the workshop. How much lecture and how many experiential learning activities are needed, and how do we find this balance? Is this method only possible with small classes, or are there ways to do this with 100 or more students? Can problem-based learning be more real when focused on smaller and local issues? How do we find more funds to allow field trips and other costly activities? How do we get more farmers involved? The open-ended cases used in the Norwegian agroecology courses were presented as one practical way to encourage creativity and enthusiasm among students and faculty. The workshop in Tartu generated a high level of interest, and several instructors suggested that we should spend most of our time in regional workshops on exchanging ideas and discussion rather than listening to lectures.

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Ina during her thesis
defense presentation.

STUDENT PROFILE: INA TORP

These days I started in a new position as a program assistant in the Asia section of the Norwegian Refugee Council (Flyktninghjelpen). The Norwegian Refugee Council is an independent, humanitarian non-governmental organization that provides assistance, protection and durable solutions to refugees and internally-displaced persons worldwide.

My job shows that a background in agroecology can be relevant for many disciplines and directions. The fact that agroecology gives the students so much responsibility and freedom in relation to thesis and course choices can be frustrating, but it also provides the possibility of choosing a thesis that can relate to many future careers.

I chose to write my thesis on the right to food and land for indigenous people in Guatemala. During the Master degree I learned about human rights with a special focus on food and land. These rights are also highly relevant for refugees and internally-displaced persons. During my coursework, I started to realize that I wanted to work with refugees as a career. I had previously volunteered with Amnesty International on human rights issues, so I decided to work with refugees emigrating to Norway.

It was difficult for me to see while studying how I could use all my experiences to get a good and relevant job. Now I feel extremely lucky to have found the perfect starting point. What strikes me as the most important factor for getting this job was my own motivation- shown in volunteer work, the subjects I studied and previous experiences in the humanitarian field. It was also important that I wrote the thesis in English, since English, together with Norwegian, is now my working language.

Good luck to all the new students. I hope you dig into the topics that you find the most interesting and relevant for you!!!

THESIS ABSTRACT: INDIGENOUS PEOPLE'S RIGHT TO FOOD AND LAND IN GUATEMALA

This study examined the situation in two selected plantation cooperatives in the process of being purchased through the land distribution system of FONTIERRAS in Guatemala. It explored in what ways the land reforms in Guatemala contributed to the fulfilment of the government's human rights obligation to provide land and food for poor peasant farmers who are primarily indigenous people. The study area was chosen in part because the rate of malnutrition among children in Guatemala is high. More than half of the children are stunted, and more than 50% of the population lives below the national poverty line. The aim of this research was therefore to see in what ways the land reforms were contributing to the food and nutrition situation for these indigenous groups.



I collected data on the heights and weights of children in two selected plantation cooperatives. In addition, I held focus group interviews and regular interviews with selected informants. My approach was to analyse the field data and compare the nutrition data to national data for rural children. The results showed that the nutrition situation in the two communities was better than the national average but that the nutrition data differed in the two locations. Through a comparative analysis of the two study areas, I found several factors that contributed to achieving a good nutrition situation. These factors included access for every family to a plot of land for subsistence production, the amount of time available for mothers to provide childcare and access to healthcare facilities. In addition, I found that the relationships among the group members in the cooperative were an important factor in determining whether they would be able to repay the loan their loan to the bank. I also found that 25% of the total numbers of cooperatives being purchased through the FONTIERRAS system were struggling and would most probably fail in repaying their debt. As the laws are today, this implies that the peasant farmers will lose the land. The current system of land distribution as implemented today is therefore not sustainable and the rights to food and land are not provided for according to the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention ILO169.