



Interview with Daniel López García, former coordinator of the Spanish food network Red de Municipios por la Agroecología

Website of the Spanish food network: www.municipiosagroeco.red

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Daniel López García is a tenured researcher in the Spanish National Research Council and has been the coordinator of the Spanish food network from its beginning in 2017 until 2021. He was previously working on a LIFE+ project to restore 12,000 hectares of agricultural land within the city of Zaragoza through organic farming, together with Fundación Entretantos and the Zaragoza City Council. A project that projected to create a European network of cities with agricultural spaces within the cities. Along such LIFE project, it was created the European Network of Cities for Agroecology, which attracted the attention of many Spanish cities, what drove the development of the current Spanish Network of Municipalities for Agroecology.

How did the Spanish network emerge?

In 2013, different groups from social movements all around Spain met to create a charter for food sovereignty for municipalities¹ in the framework of the National Congress for Social Economy. Also, in 2015, there was an important shift in many of the biggest cities in Spain (such as Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia, Zaragoza, Palma de Mallorca, and Pamplona) and some other medium cities. So, in some of the biggest cities, the municipalist parties that accessed the government, or some counsellors in big cities, asked some agroecology and food sovereignty activists what to do

with food. That year, as you know, it also happened the first signing of the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact (MUFPP), with some cities like Barcelona, Zaragoza, and Valencia as initial signatories. So this MUFPP also pushed cities to develop a local food agenda. Then, some activists became consultants of the new city governments, and we began to talk about how to do something together in 2016, how to cooperate, and how to get prepared to keep this new food agenda regarding the possibility of a new shift towards governments not so close to sustainable food, agroecology, or food sovereignty. We began to look for support to create a network, and then we gained support from the municipalities of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria (500,000 people), Valencia (700,000 people), and Zaragoza (600,000 people). With their support (they spent some money) and the support from the Spanish Carasso Foundation, we began to create the

¹ Charter for Food Sovereignty from our municipalities. 2014. www.economiasolidaria.org/recursos/carta_soberania_alimentaria/

network in 2017. At the beginning, with 7 cities, all of them medium or big cities and capitals of Spanish regions. So it began to work in 2017 and was formally created in 2018 in an assembly in Zaragoza with the mayor of the city as the president.

Who promoted the network? People, entities, institutions, cities, movements?

At that time, it was not that clear that difference, because some of the city officers, or even counselors that promoted the network were also agroecology and food sovereignty activists. Whether from the environmentalist movement—for example, I'm part of an ecologist confederation of local grassroots organizations, which is called *Ecologistas en Acción* and is formed by 200 local groups, so some of the counsellors and civil servants were part of this organization too—or other organizations that were part of the movement. The new thing was that, in some other cities, there were also people from social movements that accessed the government. So, they were perhaps not part of the environmentalist or food movement, but they were open to it. For example, some cities were more keen on developing the housing agenda, the transport agenda, or the gender and care agenda, but also open to the food agenda if there were some clear proposals to be done. So these were the two stages: on the one hand, activists that we had been since 2013 trying to prepare proposals for food policies, and on the other hand, people from social movements that accessed local governments and wanted to promote this. However, there was not such a split between us; I mean, the confidence, trust, and links existed before between those people.

So you started with the financial support by Carasso Foundation and, then, has it had any other kind of financial support by someone else?

The cities themselves. And also, at that time, I was working in Entretan-

tos Foundation, which is a foundation located in Valladolid, in the middle north of Spain, that is focused on developing bottom up territorial governance, including environmental issues. The foundation is focused on developing networks, bringing people together, and has its own funding for people to facilitate processes. So, we had funding from them. Since the beginning, Entretantos has been the technical staff to promote the network and is carrying with the technical secretariat.

Do you have in some way institutionalized the network? Is it an informal network, or has it become a sort of association? Does it have a statute or something similar?

Yes, we spent one year developing statutes, and all these administrative issues. An association of city governments was formally created in that first formal assembly in Zaragoza in 2018—which was, in fact, the second one, but the first formal assembly. So, it is an association of public authorities. Social organizations from civil society are also involved, but they are not proper members. They are part of a consultancy body, which is called the Council of Social Organizations, which has a position in the directive board with voice but without vote. So, the association is a formal association of city councils.

Is there any document of this association in which the goals of the networks are stated? What are the goals of the network?

Yes, the document is open and available on the website of the network². The website is quite alive, updated and has a lot of content. In the section “become a member”, you can find some important documents like the statutes, the foundational charter and the services charter, so what the network offers to the members.

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Red de Municipios por la Agroecología website. www.municipiosagroeco.red

The aims since its beginning are to develop a new area within the urban agenda in Spain, with sustainable and healthy food, which was not present in any city before. Not even in some cities like Valencia, Murcia, Castellón de la Plana, Palma de Mallorca, Zaragoza, which have a lot of irrigated agricultural land inside the city. For example, Zaragoza has 12,000 hectares of professional agricultural land and Valencia has 5,000 hectares within the city. These city councils had some departments for agriculture, to deal with farmers, but nothing related to food. So the first aim was to develop a food agenda for the Spanish cities. The way we wanted to do it was by creating a space for cross cooperation between civil servants, supported by social movements, with a clear focus to engage formally cities, civil servants and policymakers. Without politicians at the beginning, as we understood that it was an unstable political moment in Spain, that would last 4 years, perhaps no more. And it turned to be so. Only Barcelona and Valencia, as big cities, kept the government and the food agenda for 8 years, but the rest lasted only 4 years. Thus, we wanted to set cross-cooperation between civil servants. Two years later, in 2020, the network was beginning to become stronger and made a strong paper during COVID. The Network supported cities on how to provide healthy food to people that needed it and how to bring together social services, health and food departments in many cities. We had a really active working group at that moment, and we realized that we needed to go for political support, and we were in a good position to do so. Then, we began to work more on advocacy and bringing mayors from many cities to work together. But at the beginning of the Network, the main aim was to set a safe space for civil servants to exchange knowledge, doubts, and needs on a new topic in the municipal agenda in Spain.

We have seen that you changed the name from cities to municipalities. Is there any reason?

The change of the name highlights an important milestone. While at the

beginning the network was mostly composed of big cities, in 2021 more and more small villages were becoming members. They were quite active, indeed. To give an example, the president of the network is currently the mayor of Ainsa, a small village in the Pyrenees, Huesca. So the change of the name was to open, recognize and visibilize the presence, not only of cities, but also of small villages and medium cities. It was also important to support the implementation of a city-region approach, so involving the main cities and villages in the surrounding territory to cooperate under this idea of city-region food systems. We are still trying to promote and develop this approach nowadays.

How much is agroecology important in the network? Does it reveal a radical position or just more an orientation?

This is a very personal reflection, not as a former coordinator but more as a researcher. Well, Spain has had an agroecology PhD program since 1996, in which many people, such as me and many others, have trained on a very critical approach, based on food sovereignty, social justice, etcetera. Actually, the Spanish school of agroecology is really based on social sciences and focused on a Latin American approach, linked to La Via Campesina, Latin American social movements... So, we have a generation of 30 years of agroecology activists trained on such an approach to agroecology. Then, in 2015, many pioneers trying to promote agroecology joined with new municipalist parties that accessed some local governments and were somehow linked to agroecology as a social movement. So agroecology was the unifying point, the converging point. Agroecology as a transformative approach to food systems, linked or marked by a kind of "peasantist" approach to agroecology —I repeat that this is really a personal opinion. The way we began to promote food policies in the main cities was focused on farmers with this "peasantist" approach to food sovereignty and agri-food issues.

With the development of the network, there was a shift, especially, when

some governments began to change after the 2019 municipal elections (Zaragoza, Madrid, and Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, for instance) and some other cities that came to the network were governed by a wider range of political parties, more on the right-wing. Then, we discussed and decided not to set aside agroecology and the transformative approach but to try to link it with other narratives, which were more used, for example, in Anglo-Saxon countries, like food security issues. Food security is perhaps more dramatic there than in Mediterranean countries, where the culture is more linked to gastronomy and there is a different relation between food and farmers, I guess. But in the city, this is different, taking into account that for politicians, food is not important since cities have no competencies in agriculture. So we began to link agroecology to narratives on food security, health and climate, mainly. The way we are working on agroecology is, for example, that in the 2021 assembly we created a declaration with majors and counsellors from many different cities, from a really wide political spectrum of political options, based on the motto “Local food systems against global risks, from climate crisis to COVID19”³. Agroecology was of course at the core center of that declaration, but at that moment, it was not in the title of the declaration. However, in any case, the name of agroecology has been so far in the name of the network, and the way we try to do agroecology is bringing all together and trying to develop inclusive narratives for many different political parties. But also, for example, by keeping both farmers and social organizations in the formal structure, with their own positions. So the way we do agroecology is with food policy coproduction, even in its administrative and organizational structure, so it is not optional. The structure of the network is agroecological in the sense that it brings together local authorities, social movements and farmers.

You have already said that the network is composed of cities and local authorities, also of associations and civil society that are involved in a consultative way. Is the network doing an exchange of experiences and good practices between the cities?

Yes, the core activities of the network are those, since it's very beginning. Even before the formal creation of the network, we began doing workshops in which, for example, a city that wanted to develop a farmers market and didn't know how to do it in administrative terms, asked for support. We then organized a webinar in which cities that were pioneers on developing municipal administrative formal regulations for developing farmers markets shared their experience. The cities that were also pioneer on the process of creating farmers associations also shared their experience, for example, in Valladolid, where the creation of the farmers market was also an excuse to create a local regional association of organic farmers. We try to have this peer-to-peer methodology as the way of acting of the network. Thus, it was always policymakers from one city talking to policymakers from other cities. Every time, when possible, in first person. Also inviting people from other national city food networks. For example, we used to work a lot with the UK network, Sustainable Food Places, and with the French network, the Terres en Villes, bringing them in our webinars, specially at the beginning of the network.

The network has two kinds of spaces for cooperation. One of them are the webinars I was saying, that we call “itineraries of exchange” and are designed ad hoc based on the demands of the cities. And then, we have formal, task oriented working groups. For example, some people wanted to develop guidance for introducing a sustainable and healthy food approach to urban planning, so we created a working group that has been working during two years on bringing together specialists, researchers,

3 Valladolid Declaration. 2021. www.municipiosagroeco.red/declaracion-valladolid-sistemas-alimentarios-locales-covid-crisis-climatica/

and planners from different cities and regions⁴. The working group has been financially supported by the Valencia City Council and led by researchers from the School of Architecture of Madrid, in the Polytechnic University of Madrid. So along two years, we have been developing a handbook on how to apply an agroecological approach to urban planning. So, in the working groups we bring together researchers and experts to work together with the cities.

The peer-to-peer approach is always in the center of our methodology, as we want civil servants to feel comfortable, so that it is their place, and to empower them in their city councils. We believe that occupying this space was very easy for researchers and activists, but slowly civil servants would disappear from it since they are really busy, and they usually don't have time to develop new projects. With this in mind, we wanted to create a space really comfortable and useful for civil servants, as they are the ones that are going to develop policies. So these peer-to-peer exchanges were a core piece of the network.

In Italy, we don't have a network of cities. Even though there is the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact with 28 Italian signatory cities, at the moment, it has stopped new small and medium Italian cities to enter, because it accepts only big cities. So what we feel on one side is a need for urban local food policy to be considered at the national level. In your experience, do the network does some action of advocacy at the national or regional level in order to have a more general framework?

Before answering your question, since you have mentioned the national networks and the Milan Pact, in Spain, there are about 50 cities that have applied to become members of the Milan Pact. When the Milan Pact said

“no more cities, we're too much, and just big cities”, we were cooperating with the technical secretariat of the MUFPP around the Barcelona Challenge for Good Food and Climate. Then, we were encouraging them to recognize —somehow, because it couldn't be formally— our network as the structure in Spain that would gather and accompany cities to develop their urban food agenda. That was important for us, because, for example, at that time, there were many cities that wanted to join the Milan Pact, some big cities as Bilbao, Malaga and Vitoria, and we wanted them to join our network. Since the MUFPP's technical secretariat had no resources to accompany cities to implement their urban food agenda, we were encouraging them to tell the cities to get into the Spanish network, where they would find support. This was important for us. I think that it could be interesting that Italy also asks the MUFPP to recognise national networks as the structures that can support, in actual terms, cities to implement their food agendas, as cities usually don't have enough resources, knowledge, and capacities to do it, but there are researchers, activists, and other cities that can support them. Somebody has to organize these exchanges, to hold the stake, to open the paths to advance. The idea on meta governance is similar in the UK network and by us. They are social organizations that promoted the network to engage local authorities. But then there is a need to formalize something for local authorities. I think that it can work. Here in Spain, we took advantage of a really singular moment in Spanish politics. It was singular, and I don't know when such a window of opportunity will be open again, but there are chances anyway, and I think this is an interesting way to advance. Also, this lack of support could become a strength to formally engage city governments in a network and thus to prevent political changes to stop the sustainable and fair food agenda.

⁴ Guide. Urban planning of agroecological food systems. www.municipiosagroeco.red/presentacion-de-guia-planeamiento-urbanistico-de-sistemas-alimentarios-agroecologicos

This is very inspiring for us. The other aspect of the question is about the relations with the national and regional government. If you try to do advocacy at that level.

Yes, for example, yesterday we presented a new guide for regional governments to develop policies for the regional administrative level to support agroecology oriented farmers, which is one of the working groups that we have⁵, a guide on how to support agroecology oriented farming. But we have mainly worked on advocacy to the national level, trying to participate in public consultations. As an example, a national food strategy is currently under discussion in the Ministry of Agriculture, and we want to be there to participate on the drafting process. We have some mayors that meet with the Ministry of Agriculture to say “we, as cities, have these needs and we have this position”. In this regard, we had a meeting with the former Spanish General Secretary for Agriculture — which is the second place in the Ministry of Agriculture, below the minister— to talk about organic farming. We want the ministry to strongly promote organic farming and organic consumption in Spain. Another of our main topics to the national level is to develop a framework for green public procurement, linked to organic food. And we are also advocating to protect by law agricultural land around cities. Well, we are trying. I think that this group of mayors organized that go to the ministry is a good point. We were also working with the health ministry, and this is a promising path to follow. And we tried with the climate office in Spain, in the environment ministry. We are trying in different ways, as food is a cross-cutting axis and you can speak with different people. For example, it was much easier to talk with the consumption ministry than with any other. But, well, the most important parts are in health and agriculture. And we are meeting with them.

⁵ Rurbact Manual. Supplying municipalities through agroecology. www.municipiosagroeco.red/manual-rurbact

You were mentioning at the beginning that there was a special political moment in Spain that boosted the urban food agendas, would you relate it to the 15M⁶ social movement, so after the economic crisis?

In the first moment, as I told you, 2013 was the worst year, after the 2008 and 2009 crisis. And in this crisis, I can imagine that there were some social movements that got strengthened in Spain. One was the housing movement, and perhaps the other one was the agroecology and food sovereignty movement. There were a lot of movements in Spain for community gardens, food coops and other people that began to farm, to produce food. But yes, in the cities, agroecology and food sovereignty was a strong issue. And that declaration in 2013 came from this movement. I would not say that these people involved in 15M promoted that from its emergence in 2011, because the people that promoted that declaration in 2013 were agroecology activists before 15M, you know, but it gathers this wave, I can say. On the shift in local governments in Spain in 2015, some of the people that accessed local governments in the municipalities also came from 15M. It is the same wave. It’s a wave, they said, “we have to assault institutions, to assault heaven”. We could say that the institutions assaulted the movements too, we will never know. But I can imagine that it is the same wave of 15M (in 2011) that produced this shift in 2015 in the municipal elections. Perhaps the agroecology movement has its own way, but yes, it is linked, of course. And it is difficult to understand one thing without understanding the other.

⁶ A series of protests, demonstrations and occupations against austerity policies in Spain that started around the local and regional elections of 2011 and 2012 are traced back to an anti-austerity movement, also referred to as the 15-M Movement (Spanish: Movimiento 15-M) and the Indignados Movement.