

## **Self-governance food system before and during the Covid-crisis on the example of CampiAperti, Bologna, Italy**

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At the end of the 1990's agro-industries together with the European Commission cut through meta and mesa spacial and ecological geographies dislocating farming activities from the regional level, and tied producers and farmers to the 'open' competitive market. The abolition of the stable price-mechanism for European farmers and producers in conjunction with the diversion of caring for nature in production, had exposed producers and farmers to a fall in their wages, and land, water, animals were subject to sheer expropriation for the relentless linear production and distribution systems of agro-industries. Emilia-Romagna is a province in Northern Italy and is the second highest agricultural producer in Italy with its vast agricultural outputs of cheese, wine, vinegar, ham, fruits and pasta, of which its products is only 5% certified as organic, whilst 75 percent of intensive farming in the plain area and of animal husbandry employ high and medium agricultural intensive methods causing so-called environmental externalities, such as high concentration of nitrates and phosphorus in freshwater and groundwater and soil erosion. This skewed situation led to the formation of CampiAperti, an Association, composed of about 80 producers and farmers in the region of Emilia-Romagna, Italy, who decided to take the economy, production and nature back through self-governing the markets and their production.

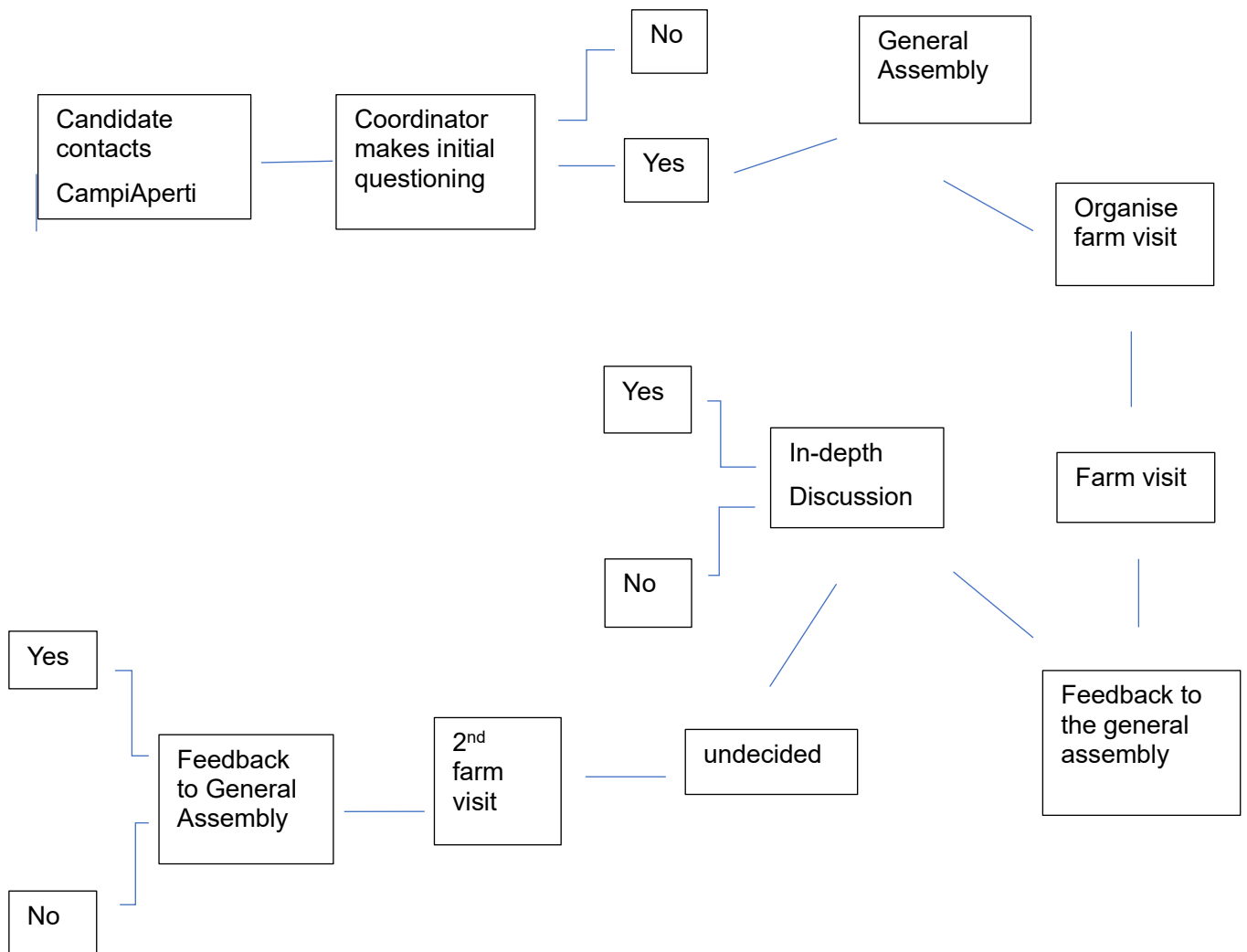
The producers and farmers of CampiAperti decided on exerting complete autonomy over their production and the distribution systems, which would allow them to employ farming practices that can be aligned to sustainable agroecological methods and thus avoiding complying with the regulations for producing goods to the capital- and state-controlled markets. By doing so, they have challenged the regulatory body of the state, which administered the organic certification procedures, on its strong alliances with agribusiness. In Italy, sanitary regulations were composed toward the agro-industries and their production of scales undermining small- and medium-scale farmers and producers in the process, and as a result of this legislation over a third of them had closed down in the early 2000s.

On the merit of commoning, CampiAperti had issued their own certification label for striving toward food sovereignty, and by doing so implementing a de-centralised agricultural system whose production systems is experimenting with and practising agroecological farming methods. Their pursuit is the multiplication of small and medium-scaled farms with each of them producing products from the seed to the farm gate. Material and immaterial inputs for the production of particular foodstuff is coming from close-by circuits or are produced on the farm building up their resource stock over time. Because labour takes place outside of the capital circuits, the valorisation of labour is radically

different than to the commodity cycle. In this context, CampiAperti's foodstuff produced on virtuous farms are certified with their label called Genuino Clandestino, genuine, referring to the production of food products in an artisan or virtuous fashion, and Clandestino, mirroring the hostile socio-political environment.

### **The participatory-guarantee-system**

The PGS is defined by the International Federation of Agricultural Movements (IFOAM: 2020) like this: “Participatory-Guarantee System (PGS) are locally focused quality assurance systems. They certify producers based on active participation of stakeholders and are built on a foundation of trust, social networks and knowledge exchange.” The self-governed mechanisms main aims include: the removal of local trade barriers, to safeguard specific crafts in farming, to protect local biodiversity and diversity of foodstuff and ensure animal welfare standard. CampiAperti uses this system in a modified form adapted to their socio-political and ecological circumstances, and included further no worker's exploitation, ensure quality organic local and affordable foodstuff to the local community and to instigate a decentralisation of food production. Over the years their self-certification process had become complex because of the growing number of farmers, and also, farmers are scattered into all four cardinal directions with a distance of about 80km from Bologna. The self-organized participatory guarantee system by CampiAperti as it is in its current form:



The coordinator of Campi Aperti gets in contact with the new potential farmer and asks a set of standard questions on ecological values and farm structure, and also on their commitment to participate in the self-governance structure of CA. If, at that point, the candidate does not match with the basic principles with CampiAperti, the ‘inspection’ process closes. If, on the other hand, the coordinator decides that the new potential farmer fits into the CA structure, then the coordinator puts forward a request for a visit to the next general assembly. At the general assembly the farm visit is coordinated, usually one person has to share the same craft with the candidate in order to interrogate in detail the how and with what the product is produced and who else is involved in making this product. In case there are third parties involved in making the product, for example an external pasta-making site or a close-by farmer produces barley for the animals, then also these sites are scrutinized for its

sustainable and organic standard.

The other accompanying persons support the interview process with general questions on sustainable productions and on the arising responsibilities and long-term commitment to self-governance organization when taking part at Campi Aperti. The impression and gathered information of the farm visit is reported back at the next general assembly, to which the whole group responds by discussing the sustainable aspect in production in great detail. If a decision was not made, another farm visit is coordinated. At the next assembly another discussion is held with the additional information, before the general assembly finally decides.

The main advantage of this mechanism is its flexibility in the application procedure. By doing so, it is underlining the diversification of agroecological methods and techniques of each specific craft. The merit for qualifying with the PGS is to develop virtuous labour skills and abilities, for example in making cheese, or brewing beer, producing wine or vegetables, etc. in such a way that integrates the intrinsic nature-human-animal relationship. It is in this light that the principles of agroecological methods and practice extends the organic labelling system of the EU's regulatory body, such as caring for soil fertility (no use of petrochemicals), regenerating resource material, respecting the rhythm of the animal's natural production cycle of milk and gestation period, the effective use of natural resources (water collection system; grey water systems), and lastly, producing an output within the limits of one's own manual labour capacity.

For the actualisation of virtuous farm, which is the autonomous production of the seed to the product, farmers and producers have to go through a long struggle with the varied local regulatory bodies, which involves in challenging the structural guidelines for workshops on a smaller scale, for example, a toilet can be reached via a staircase from the laboratory rather than it has to directly be attached to the workshop, or the ceiling can be 2,80m high instead of 3m. During the phase of setting up the farm individual farmers are consistently engaging with the authorities, forming a somewhat relationship with individual bureaucrat. As a result of it, laws and regulations can be interpreted to local circumstances. The bearing of the authorities is in those moments an individual struggle, however, since everybody at CampiAperti has to deal with the authorities, this experience is a shared one. Because of this collective experience, farmers support each other and show solidarity amongst each other.

For changing the dire structural conditions for small- and medium farmers in Emilia-Romagna, only recently, after years of engaging with the local and regional authorities, amendments for local small- and medium-scale farmers were made by the region. Finally, new regulations were introduced that are apt for small- and medium-scale farmers and producers. Despite of this thrust from the authorities recognising self-governance institutions, CampiAperti remains persistently alert to the political and socio-economic situation.

## **The self-governance markets**

The PGS-system distinguishes from other foodstuff on farmer's markets in Bologna in so far that only self-certified products can be sold on the markets of CampiAperti. Farmer's markets in Bologna purchase 100 percent of their foodstuff from wholesale markets, and thus bypassing the regional legislation, which says, that at least half of the foodstuff sold on farmer's markets should come from the producer's production. Because of this shortcoming, CampiAperti only sells foodstuff that went through their self-certification process recognised on their label. They had coalesced with the social centre movement and neighbourhoods Associations in Bologna and together with them or through them were able to set up their own self-governance markets. For each market CampiAperti uses their Association status for applying for a market licence from the Council of Bologna. With the licence they offer a market stall for all producers even for those producers that are not officially registered as producers with the state yet. These markets are vital for the producers as many of them are at the beginning or in the middle of setting up their farms. It gives them from early on an opportunity to earn an income, create a body of clients, and lends them an empowerment to develop their skills and abilities through the constant communication exchange on the market. I must emphasise here that CampiAperti does not have the authority to regularise new or irregular producers, but what is capable of doing is offering an economic opportunity through their Association.

The most important feature of their markets is the annual convergence for establishing a common price list for their products. By doing commoning, they reach out to clients, and thus make them part of the food system. Each year farmers and producers of each of their craft come together and decide on the price of the product. The collaborative price-mechanism subverts the price volatility of the market by fixing a price for their products together. As one farmer puts it: *"It would make no sense to offer the same products for different prices. Otherwise the consumer goes to the stall with the lowest price and the other farmers do not sell anything. And if we set-up the price too high consumers would not come and buy our stuff"*.

Each market is self-organised by the producers who attend the markets. This means when a producer attends three markets, the producer participates in three monthly market assemblies where details of the management of the markets and distribution of responsibilities are discussed. Each market liaises directly with the Council, and in case problems with the Council exceeds the market boundaries and affects all members of CampiAperti, then the issue is put forward for discussion at the bi-monthly general assembly of CampiAperti.

One of the constant issues with the Council is the threat of closures of their currently eight markets, and any methods and tactics is used by the Bologna Council to chase them away. Only recently, another social centre was closed down after more than twenty years in existence. The producers and farmers are resilient and continuing to set up their stalls anywhere, where they think they can create a market. The involvement of city consumers is crucial, who have the

mobility to quickly turn up and support them during negotiations with the Council, battling for new market spaces and licenses, or just lend them support in many other ways.

### **The Covid-crisis, struggle, and strategies**

Now during the Covid-crisis, the Council of Bologna had closed down all markets immediately even though supermarkets and food shops should remain open. With the Covid-crisis, supermarkets had increased their market share by thirty percent. Paradoxically, Rumanian migrant workers were flown into Italy to work in the fields, though are not subject to receive any health checks from their governments and neither from the Italian government. The lockdown in Emilia-Romagna, which had the second highest Covid-rate after Lombardy, was controlled heavily by the police with every ten kilometres a control, tele cameras taking photos from licence-plates, helicopters in the air controlling public spaces and roads from above. This trajectory had given hardly any space for building up a solidarity structure with the producers of CampiAperti. For example, the set-up of a vegetable box scheme is only feasible within the extreme restricted mobility limitations ringfencing the numbers of consumers to a very limited area. Though CampiAperti had opened up their farms for consumers to buy directly from them, but CampiAperti is not located in one place and thus the challenge for CampiAperti was to somehow surpass these restrictions in order to remain together.

The producers geared toward a direct confrontation with the Council of Bologna. They organised a virtual protest with the slogan “Defend solidarity, and not the virus!” asking people to join from balconies, corridors, gardens, wherever people are, and share the individual protest on a collective platform. This protest was part of the petition they have launched successfully to re-open the markets, of which only three were given the permission to open within two weeks after the petition but under social distancing conditions. CampiAperti was not able to sell directly to any customers, but only to members of the Association, which in turn increased the pressure to build-up their membership quickly. This was also coupled with only permitting customers onto the market, who have pre-booked their food items online. In a very short time, CampiAperti had moved from the direct market to putting their products online. The market was turned into a collection point for picking up the vegetables only in order to handle the social distancing between people. They have received an enormous amount of solidarity with membership rising by the day.

At the time of writing there is still a lot of uncertainty around for whom the lockdown is going to be lifted on 4<sup>th</sup> May, and on what conditions will be increased mobility permitted. However, one thing is certain, the producers of CampiAperti are resilient to the market conditions, because of their autonomy. As the founder of CampiAperti said on autonomy: “We will never give-up our autonomy”.

## Conclusion

The acceleration of the local food economy through the commoning institutional framework of CampiAperti had found roots in all regions throughout Italy, which ultimately, had evolved to becoming the Genuino Clandestino movement. The Associations or networks of the social movement adapted to the horizontal self-governance system of CampiAperti in a modified version that is to the socio-economic and political conditions within their trajectory. Though the Covid-crisis is for producers, such as at CampiAperti, just another crisis within the food system to deal with, the Covid-crisis highlights many shortcomings within the agri-industrial system that might have an effect in the long-run in terms of guaranteeing our food security. It is these autonomous networks like CampiAperti, who need our solidarity through purchasing their products not only during the crisis but also thereafter. For CampiAperti it had always been clear that only together with the consumer they can work and walk together toward a de-centralised and real economic and ecological sustainable food system.

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### **About the author:**

Dagmar is currently a Phd-Candidate at the Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience at Coventry University, UK writing her thesis on "*Transformation to Food Sovereignty: Opportunities, barriers and resilience strategies from the commoning perspective on the case study of CampiAperti, Bologna, Italy*". Previously, she had co-founded an ecological-cultural Association in the Apennines in Emilia-Romagna where with others had set up a community permaculture garden, organised events around local herbal medicine, climate change and local agriculture, as well as intercultural events convening African migrants with the local community.