

Doctoral Dissertation

**Newcomer Agroecological Farmers in Japan and Italy: Examining
Scaling Processes for Sustainability Transitions in Agri-food
Systems (Summary)**

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ZOLLET SIMONA

Graduate School for International Development and Cooperation
Hiroshima University

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The study examines and compares newcomer agroecological farmers in rural areas of Hiroshima Prefecture (Japan) and the Belluno province (Italy). Newcomer farmers are meant as people entering farming in ways that do not conform to the established pattern of succeeding to an existing family farm. This category of farmers has so far been neglected in the literature, but their characteristic of being relative outsiders to the farming sector makes them potential innovators and agents of change. Moreover, this research focuses on newcomer farmers employing agroecological practices on their farms, and on the role they play in scaling agroecological transitions at territorial level. A element of novelty of the study is that it combines the concept of agroecological scaling with elements from the broader research field on sustainability transitions. These two research areas have so far advanced separately despite their conceptual compatibility, as agroecological scaling is essentially an example of a transition towards more sustainable agri-food systems. Through the use of different qualitative analysis techniques (grounded theory and critical discourse analysis), as well as mixed methods-based research, this study examines the characteristics of newcomer agroecological farmers based on changes in terms of culture, practices and structures – the three elements of transitions. By using the drivers of agroecological scaling as a conceptual and analytical framing, the research examines whether newcomers' culture and practices have the potential of producing changes in terms of structures, meant as the broader organization of the system with its rules and institutions, and what are the barriers that hinder agroecological transitions. The results show that newcomer agroecological farmers represent potentially crucial agents of change, especially concerning changes in culture within the farming system. However, the effectiveness of changes in terms of practices, and even more so in terms of structures, relies on several context-dependent aspects: the characteristics of the prevailing farming mode in the area (including its historical evolution and its degree of productivist orientation); the existence of supportive policies; and, perhaps most importantly, the capacity of newcomer farmers themselves of creating networks of social organization that can contribute to the scaling out of agroecological practices at a territorial level. This scaling out (increase in the number of farms over a wider territorial level and of the consumers connected to them) is one of the key elements for the subsequent scaling up, meant as institutional uptake or support for sustainable practices. These aspects are highlighted through the employment of a comparative lens of analysis between the two countries, which also reveals the different strategies that newcomer agroecological farmers are using – or that could potentially use – for the territorial scaling of agroecological practices within the agri-food system. The relevance of this topic is twofold: first, in recent years the calls to transitioning towards more sustainable systems of food production and consumption have become increasingly more urgent, and support for agroecological practices has become more widespread. Second, at the local level the continuous decline of rural areas, especially the more marginal ones, is raising concerns about the loss of the numerous essential functions carried out by agriculture, from food production to environmental conservation to the socio-economic and cultural survival of rural communities.