

Session Society: April 12th 11.30 hrs

2s2: Food safety and risks in a circular system

Struggles in circular agriculture discourse: open concept, closed circuit?

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To address the role of agriculture in environmental crises such as climate change, Dutch policy agendas envision the Netherlands to be a frontrunner in circular agriculture by 2030, but to provide space for the development of different approaches, policy texts do not operationalize the concept. This study drew on discourse theory and methods to explore different lines of argumentation and knowledge claims featuring in debates on what it should mean, and on how it might carry forward a profound transformation in the agricultural sector. Our interdisciplinary exploration was based on document-analysis and interviews with farmers who already adopted more sustainable agricultural practices.

First, we identified three (partly overlapping) lines of argumentation featuring in policy and academic discourse, one focusing on 'closing cycles of nutrient flows', another on 'ecology' and a third one relying strongly on 'technology'. In connection to all three, there is a strong call for greater clarity and direction concerning how to realize the circular transformation, by what indicators to measure performance and at which spatial scale to measure it. Second, the interviews revealed that farmers struggle to adapt their farms to the circular ambition. They see a role for themselves in the transformation of Dutch agriculture but experience being 'stuck in the system' for three reasons: a. rules preventing actual closing of nutrient cycles, for example food safety regulations that forbid using food waste as animal feed, b. dependency on external inputs, advice and financial support from institutions that still support linear forms of agriculture within a system that relies strongly on high levels of import and export, c. a lack of remuneration for transition costs and for public goods delivered.

Both the efforts to measure circularity performance and farmers' experience of being stuck pose the risk of limiting the current inclusiveness of the concept and could constrain both the diversity of approaches to address the environmental issues at hand, and the discursive space to deliberate about these contributions. Rather than focusing too much on the operationalization of yet a new policy concept, we argue for greater attention to the above-mentioned struggles. In addition, we see a risk that already established sustainable agricultural practices become displaced and 'lost'. Greater

attention for the combination of persisting hurdles and the risk of displacing already existing alternatives might prevent that 'circular agriculture' becomes an empty signifier that is not linked to the larger systemic changes required for a transformation.

Keywords: Circular agriculture, discourse, systemic constraints, transformation, governance