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Characterizing Circular Agriculture Initiatives in the North of the Netherlands through a Small Wins Perspective

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Circular Agriculture (CA) is increasingly proposed by scientists and policymakers as a way to produce food while respecting planetary boundaries. By closing the loops of biomass and nutrients, CA aims to reduce resource consumption and emissions to the environment. Realizing a CA system requires in-depth changes in current practices, markets, organizations and institutions. This raises the question of how to govern a transition in this direction.

In this paper, we apply a novel perspective on the governance of transitions: the small wins framework. This framework proposes to stimulate emerging initiatives, or 'small wins', to catalyze a transition to CA. Small wins can be defined as small but concrete, in-depth changes that contribute to CA. An accumulation of small wins leads to larger, systemic change. However, stimulating the development of small wins raises the question of how to identify them in the first place. In this paper we address this question by proposing an operationalization of the small wins concept in the context of the CA transition. We applied this operationalization to characterize a set of initiatives in terms of the small wins' characteristics (i.e. the depth and scope of their contribution to CA). Focusing on the North-Netherlands, we created a database of 175 CA initiatives using a document analysis. We then conducted semi-structured interviews with the initiators of a selection of initiatives. Thereafter, we characterized the initiatives based on their function in the food system, the agricultural sector, the CA actions they address and the depth of their CA contribution.

Most of the identified CA initiatives are engaged in primary production but some initiatives focus on retail, processing, finance, ecosystem services or a combination of these. Most initiatives in the primary sector relate to dairy farming, followed by arable farming, mixed farming, poultry and pig farming. Preliminary results show that many initiatives focus on resource efficiency improvements and nature conservation as actions of circularity. A minority of initiatives focuses on the closing of loops of biomass and other nutrients. Most initiatives improve their current practices within existing logics and address just a few CA aspects. The initiatives that do implement CA more in-depth are

typically cooperatives combining different functions along the food chain, enabling these initiatives to close cycles internally and integrate several CA aspects. We end by arguing that in order to catalyze the transition towards CA, fostering cooperation among food system actors beyond sectoral divisions is crucial.

Keywords: Transition, Governance, Circular Agriculture, Initiatives, Small wins