

Special topic 2

Biodynamic agriculture today

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Introduction

Biodynamic agriculture can be described as a comprehensive agricultural system on mixed farms, which should always involve crops and livestock. The system is based on respect for, and efforts in, gaining awareness of the spiritual dimension of all creatures and the inorganic environment. Insights into this spiritual dimension (e.g. detailed descriptions of the spiritual character of animals, plants and physical elements or of planetary impacts) were given by Rudolf Steiner in 1924 (Steiner 2004). These descriptions should give farmers an orientation in their actions and awareness in order to evolve the agricultural system. Furthermore, the formulation of specific preparations was given by Steiner as a particular new element in agriculture. Biodynamic agriculture incorporates the landscape and the ecosystem as essential parts of the whole. It minimises nutrient inputs from outside the farm through proper legume crop management.

General principles in biodynamic farming

Globally, about 3270 holdings in 35 countries and with an area of 104,000 ha are certified under the *Demeter* label. This means that they comply with both the relevant national organic farming standards and the international Demeter Standards (Demeter International 2003). There are a huge variety of enterprises on Demeter farms, covering anything from temperate arable farming to viticulture in France, cotton production in Egypt and silkworm breeding in China.

The intentionally individual design of life processes by the farmer, as determined by site conditions, is one of the basic tenets of biodynamic agriculture. This principle emphasises that humans have a responsibility for the development of their ecological and social environment which goes beyond economic aims and the principles of descriptive ecology.

The vision on which this principle is based is the individual design of the holding in the context of the complex interaction of all impacting factors. The pedosphere, ecosphere and landscape, as well as the atmosphere and the cosmic environment (apart from the sun, these are primarily the moon and the planets) form the natural basis. Crop plants, livestock, the farmer as well as the entire socioeconomic environment have an effect at all levels of this natural environment, are influenced by these levels, and thus form an intricate interrelationship. A farm, therefore, becomes an 'individuality' in which the various factors, just like