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Abstracts of talks and posters

The use of Participatory Action and Learning for Agroecology: conducting research on living mulches in central Italy

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Participatory Action and Learning methodologies help adapting the innovation to the local socio-economic conditions and allow the stakeholders to have a say in the topic of interest, thus bridging the gap between academia and practice.

Living mulches are considered an interesting option in the agroecological transformation of farming systems. Despite the fact that many academic studies have demonstrated their benefits in terms of weed control and soil fertility, farmers in Italy are still not applying this technique. A major challenge is in fact to implement novel practices in a complex agricultural world, where multiple and sometimes contrasting views arise. Our aim was to study the socio-economic conditions related to living mulch application, and to create the first Participatory Action and Learning research group in the area. We set up two farm trials to test different living mulch options for common wheat, and we organized focus groups with the stakeholders with the objectives of defining the trial treatments and periodically assess the results. We followed a Soft Systems Methodology to define the system's boundaries and entry points, and we used the Kolb's learning cycle as a monitoring tool during the research work. We found that our farmers prefer to adopt innovations using a step-by-step approach, and would adopt living mulch if this practice does not interfere with their economic objectives, and especially if it does not increase the complexity of the farming process. Some farmers are still looking for a solution that does not substantially diminish the yield potential, while some others are more interested in the grain quality potential offered by the living mulch technique. Farmers were able to steer the research process according to their own necessities and came up with interesting personal intuitions about future research perspectives. Farmers often do not have information on weed management due to the lack of public extension services, and they are undergoing a process of fragmentation. As a consequence, farmers are usually left out of decisions regarding agricultural innovations, hence they considered participatory group activities as important moments for their personal learning process. This experience provides a good indication that universities and extension services need to incorporate more participatory approaches in their agenda, especially when adoption of novel, environmentally friendly practices is sought. Activities that encourage the creation of networks of farmers, technicians and consumers may foster innovation in agriculture.

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