

NOTES FROM THE FIELD

Re-establishing human links in communities affected by disseminated pesticide pollution

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In the following case study, a small-scale French pilot project will be presented, focusing on how restorative practices can be useful to protect the environment and address conflicts within local communities.

1 Origins of the project

Agriculture is a human phenomenon associated with the evolution of humans from the Neolithic age to today. It is an important economic engine on a global scale and with a clear interest in ensuring human survival. However, agricultural techniques have also evolved, and the desire to mechanise and industrialise the work has led to the massive use of plant protection products that have caused significant environmental and public health impacts.

A paradigmatic case is the herbicide glyphosate, considered by the International Centre for Cancer Research as a probable carcinogen and used very often by farmers, due to its effectiveness and moderately reasonable price. Citizens' concern over glyphosate has generated significant social debate and, as a result, some EU member states, such as the French government, have decided to intervene, for example, by regulating the distance between the treatment area and buildings with the intention of protecting the health of citizens.

1.1 *Phytosanitary victimisation*

On the one hand, many farmers who have decided to use pesticides do so because they believe that without phytosanitary treatments,¹ they will lose much of their

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1 Phytosanitary treatments are plant protection products. They may be confused with pesticides, which are phytosanitary products but only intended to fight against organisms considered harmful. Phytosanitary products are used in large quantities in various ranges of application: mainly agriculture, but also roads (maintenance of roads and railways) and various private uses (gardening, treatment of facilities, etc.). Phytosanitary products include many classes of products such as insecticides (which kill insects), fungicides (which eliminate fungi), herbicides (weeding), nematicides (which kill nematodes and earthworms), rodenticides (used to get rid of various rodents such as rats, mice, field mice, garden dormice, etc.) (see www.glossaire-eau.fr/en/concept/phytosanitary-product) (last accessed 20 December 2020).

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harvest. They see pesticides as an insurance to be able to reap the fruits of their effort and to be able to guarantee their economic survival.

On the other hand, the impacts on people's health, the inhabitants of the territory and on the environment are significant. The organisation *Alerte Médecins Pesticides*² brings together doctors who observe in their practices, increasingly, more diseases related to pesticides used massively in agriculture. In addition, according to the INSERM,³ 'there is 80 per cent certainty that there is a causal link between certain cancers and exposure to plant protection products for professionals.'⁴ For example, they have found a link between Parkinson's disease and vine treatments.

1.2 The water pollution case

The negative impact of pesticides can be measured in water, as analyses show the evolution of the concentration of the different phytosanitary products. These indicators help us to understand that a common and basic good such as water is being polluted, and that the effects of this impact the whole community that depends on it. To address this situation, the French government passed legislation to protect water wells by creating a process to plan for the recovery of the quality of polluted water. Currently, there are more than 2,000 wells classified as priority, and the mobilised actors are farmers, administrations and citizens.

In January 2018, I started working as an environmental engineer in a French administration on two of these wells in the south of France, in Puisseguier (in the province of Hérault). These wells had very high pesticide levels, but the community was reluctant to abandon the well and be obliged to transfer water from another water source more than 400 kilometres away. The environmental impact of this transfer would be very significant and in addition, the price of water would increase. In this territory, water is a rare resource and a precious good, and this situation has obviously created a very intense social atmosphere and debate.

Having realised that the pesticides had affected water quality and at the same time human relationships among the inhabitants, I proposed to restore social ties in order to move the project forward.

2 Conceptual basis

In this project, I wanted to contribute with new strategies in order to generate new and more hopeful results, and it is for this reason that I decided to focus on the link between people and their environment. Indeed, I wanted to move beyond the more typical work which focuses on technological solutions. I wanted to

2 See www.alerte-medecins-pesticides.fr/ (last accessed 20 December 2020).

3 Public institution of a scientific and technological nature in France, under the double supervision of the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Research.

4 See <https://presse.inserm.fr/pesticides-effets-sur-la-sante-une-expertise-collective-de-linserm/8463/> (last accessed 20 December 2020).

understand how human factors play an important role and, in particular, how improving human relationships can improve environmental protection.

This new approach opens the way for restorative practices. I used the following principles of restorative practices identified in *Transforming Conflicts* (2019) by Belinda Hopkins:

- Everyone has a unique perspective and a valuable contribution to make.
- Our thoughts influence our emotions and both influence what we say and what we do.
- Our actions impact the people around us.
- Our actions are strategies to respond to our needs.
- People affected by a situation or a problem are best placed to resolve it (people affected by the conflict are usually the most suited to find a satisfactory way to deal with it together, restore relationships and lay the groundwork for a future coexistence).

3 The implementation of the restorative approach

I decided to concretise the main intention of my approach, which was to create a connection between the actors and thus to facilitate their responsibility and their involvement. To achieve this goal, the most appropriate restorative practice for us was the ‘talking circle’. The methodology is simple and easily reproducible, and, at the same time, there are red lines to respect, as one of the participants testifies: ‘I discovered the importance of really listening, of letting everyone say what they had to say.’

The talking circle is a simple restorative tool that connects people affected by a subject. In this case, I invited the people of the territory affected by the problem of water contamination, without identifying them *a priori* as victims or polluters. Based on three core questions, the participants in the talking circle start a dialogue on the theme that has been chosen and at the end they can establish an action plan to be implemented together or individually. This tool allows participants to learn to listen to each other, share points of view, express disagreements and if possible, it opens the door to doing joint actions. One of the participants takes on the role of initiator of the talking circle. This person does not facilitate, lead or organise; (s)he only explains the method and the framework that is to be respected.

3.1 Preparation

One of the key elements was how to involve the affected parties and the perpetrators of the environmental impact. While working with farmers, I realised the discreet but indispensable role of women in such communities. They managed the farm with their direct work, either by monitoring turnover and administrative paperwork or by morally supporting their fellow farmers.

Based on this intuition, I decided to focus on the women who lived in this territory. At first, the idea was not very well received, as men are very dominant in the agricultural sector. I was also surprised to hear women themselves reject

the proposal: 'Me? But what can I bring you? Ask my husband as he is the one who goes to the meetings,' said one female farmer.

My strategy was to motivate them by valuing their work, helping them become aware of the role of women in the development of the affected territory and explaining that I believed they could bring a new perspective to help solve the conflict in the territory. It also helped to ensure they could talk in complete safety and confidentiality. Another key element was the theme of the talking circle. I preferred not to focus on pesticides because farmers were too sensitive about it. So, I focused on the question: how can we contribute to improving the water quality in the territory?

I drafted the participants list using two key values from restorative practices. First, it was important to invite the affected community, and not just experts and political representatives. Second, it was essential to follow the principle that the people affected by a situation or problem are the best placed to solve it. So, for the first time in this territory it was possible to discuss a topic of global concern by inviting citizens to the meeting, without the need for technical expertise.

I drafted a list of women I knew, trying to include the full diversity of the territory, and most of them accepted the offer to participate in the circle. Finally, the six participants of the talking circle were: 1) a woman representing the French Water Agency, 2) a technician in sustainable agriculture management, 3) a conventional farmer who was part of the representatives of the Chamber of Agriculture, 4) a farmer in organic agriculture, 5) a farmer who is making the transition to organic farming and 6) a young farmer who wanted to recuperate family farming and change the way her father works. I had also invited two other citizens from the territory, who unfortunately were unable to attend due to family problems at the last minute.

One of the elements of discussion in the organisation of the talking circle was the role of the facilitator/initiator. Being a man, it made little sense for me to facilitate the circle, and for this reason I invited a woman who is an expert in restorative practices (Catherine Bonnin, Association 'DIALOG') to play the role of initiator. However, I asked the participants if they wanted me to attend as a listener in the talking circle. Some supported the idea, but others hesitated, so in the end I preferred to leave the room. I think this was a good decision because it allowed the participants to express themselves freely without limits or conditioning to say what is 'politically correct'.

3.2 Implementation

Participants received prior information about the talking circle methodology. On the day of the talking circle, the initiator read the protocol to be followed before starting and we left it in the centre of the circle as a reminder of our commitment. This protocol is a reminder that participants can only speak when they have the 'talking piece', that the values to be used are mutual respect, tolerance and listening. It is proposed not to use judgments or reproaches, and to do everything possible to ensure language that facilitates the dialogue.

The two introductory questions in the circle were: 1) Where do you prefer to bathe – in freshwater or saltwater? 2) What do you know about the actions to

protect water quality that are being implemented in the territory? And the central question was: How can we contribute to improving the water quality of our territory?

In the individual evaluation I carried out afterwards with each of the participants, the difficulty in respecting the turn to speak, and at the same time, the benefits of doing so, turned out to be important elements. According to one participant, listening to the others allowed her to delve deeper into the topic, better understand the positioning of others and finally realise that they shared common needs. The participants also commented that the talking circle had helped them find a space for dialogue on a very painful and complex topic, and that they had felt respect and consideration that they had valued deeply:

At first, I did not feel very reassured, but while listening to the others, I realised that there were other points of view than mine ... I felt surprised ... and gradually, I felt that my point of view changed ... I shared certain needs with them ... and I began to feel like doing things with others ... I forgot who polluted or not ...

In addition, this activity helped mitigate some guilt-laden comments: 'It was important for me to explain to other women that water pollution does not come only from agriculture and that everyone can contribute,' says a participant. And it opened doors to strengthen links: 'I realised that even if we have different cultural practices (in conventional or organic farming) we have common opinions on other subjects,' added another participant.

4 Findings, challenges and further perspectives

After a circle that lasted for two and a half hours, participants decided to draft an action plan: 27 actions on fifteen different topics. Apart from the most common proposals already included in other action plans to reduce the use of pesticides, two very innovative proposals were made: a) to give greater support to the technicians who deal with the protection of water wells, and b) to resort to actions without depending on the administrations concerned. In my point of view, these were two important examples which illustrate how the participants took responsibility. Regardless of the actions of the administrations concerned, they realised that each of them could be involved in contributing to improving water quality. Unfortunately, the project could not continue in the territory due to a political decision. Before leaving the territory, I managed to achieve and co-organise with the participants two of the actions of the action plan.

I can only hope that the participants were able to continue their commitment to what they agreed on in the talking circle. I have stayed in touch with one of the participants, and months later she told me that she had cancer and that it was caused by phytosanitary products, as after the treatments in the vineyard she was feeling unwell. Hoping that she can overcome this disease, I would like to dedicate

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this article to Anne, and I hope that her testimony will help raise awareness in future generations of the territory.

Reference

Hopkins, B. (2019). *Temps de cercle i reunions en cercle. Manual pràctic*. Palma de Mallorca: GOIB CONVIVEXIT.