Article

Approach to the Imaginaries of Agroecology in Paraguay

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Abstract: This paper explores the imaginary of different actors in Paraguay regarding agroecology and whether they contain any similarities. This study used an exploratory, hermeneutic phenomenological approach as its interpretative framework and focused on six key actors: the central government, subgovernmental entities, the private sector, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), farmers’ associations, and academia. The analysis revealed that there are some similarities of imaginaries regarding agroecology’s role as a holistic, integral paradigm that contributes to the sustainability and resilience of the ecosystem, with it being perceived as a practice aimed at small producers with defined niches. The lack of political or state support for small production systems was also evident. Production costs (high for some, low for others) and market niches were mentioned as controversial issues. The results show that the different actors’ imaginaries are not so divergent as to disrupt agroecological practice and indicate the need to conduct more in-depth research to determine what factors affect Paraguayans’ practices or habitus regarding production and their link with nature.

Keywords: agroecosystems; convergence; discourse analysis; dimensions of agroecology; social imaginaries

1. Introduction

Conventional agricultural systems have contributed to worsening social, economic, and environmental problems and are the main threat to global sustainability [1]. For this reason, the current patterns or models of production and consumption must be modified in order to tackle the crises currently facing humanity, such as climate change, access to water, inequality and exclusion, the excessive use of natural resources, pollution, the alteration of natural processes, and the loss of biodiversity [2].

Agroecology is a scientific approach used to study and propose low-input agroecosystem management alternatives [3,4]. Although the term appeared first in the 1930s, it was not until the 1960s that it came to be applied to the entire agroecosystem and food system in general rather than single farms or plots. In recent years, the term agroecology has gained visibility, and it has been argued that it can provide multiple benefits, from resilience to climate change to improved farm productivity. For example, the authors of [5] argue that the concept of agroecology inspires many people, as its results and impacts are encouraging. The authors point to a project carried out in Africa, where approximately 9 million households over an area of almost 29 million hectares achieved increases in yields of between 50% and 100%, mainly in dry rice (Oriza sp.), by applying agroecological techniques. Additionally, it has been proposed that not only productivity increases but also enhanced diversification, such as fish farming in rice fields, could be achieved by the application of this concept.

Conversely, the economy of Paraguay, which has slightly more than 7 million inhabitants [6], is based on a productive and development model known by some as agribusiness that
is anchored in the export of agricultural commodities such as soybeans, corn, and wheat [7]. Meanwhile, the majority of the population, whose livelihood has traditionally been based on family farming, have become more urbanized, as they must coexist with the extensive production model in marginalized conditions or opt to sell their land to large producers and move to cities, where their social, cultural, and economic patterns will be altered [7].

In this scenario, the discussion of agroecology frequently generates disputes between actors who follow production models that are considered antagonistic. Moreover, authors such as Segovia and Ortega argue that agroecology in Paraguay is a utopia and that it is necessary to build, in both discourse and practice, viable production models [7].

Therefore, the questions that guided this research were: What is the imaginary held by actors from different sectors of Paraguay regarding agroecology? Are there any similarities among these sectors, and are all the dimensions of agroecology considered in these imaginaries? Our hypotheses were that there are different types of discourse on the topic of agroecology in each sector (H1) and that the three dimensions of agroecology can be distinguished in these discourses (H2). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to learn about the imaginaries of actors in different sectors regarding agroecology in Paraguay, considering the different dimensions and the common and divergent elements of the different discourses.

Theoretical Bases and Background

From a socio-ecological system perspective, agroecology proposes carrying out the study of an agroecosystem from three dimensions [8,9]: (a) the ecological–productive dimension, which approaches research through dialogue between scientific knowledge and traditional knowledge, cosmovision, and empirical experimentation, using ecologically sustainable agricultural practices and input in a farm as a productive unit; (b) the socio-economic dimension, which concerns the analysis of the socioeconomic aspects (labor, price, yields, social and solidarity economy, property) of this concept and the social relations generated around the productive activity, supporting the construction of participatory organizational structures and horizontal dialogue between technicians/scientists and the rural population, working against the hegemony of the former over the latter; and (c) the political–cultural dimension, which intends to contribute to the strengthening of local autonomy and endogenous capacities, the construction of horizontal relations between actors (collaboration networks, forms of local organization, public policies, participation), and the search for social equity and independence from external inputs.

In this case, the concept of social imaginary was used to explore the agroecology sector in Paraguay. Since Castoriadis proposed this concept in the 1980s, it has served as a basis for various studies on how societies construct their ideas. In the words of Baeza [10] (p. 82), according to Castoriadis, each society develops imaginary meanings to give meaning to its community life; these are referred to as “free creations” and may not be rationally deducible. The imaginaries of different groups are in permanent tension and it is possible to analyze them through discursive practices. For Segovia et al. [11] (p. 1), social reality is different from objective reality, and is the result of “subjective social processes that institute forms and styles of thinking, acting and even judging”, and it is possible to distinguish between dominant and dominated social imaginaries, the former being those that have been successful in the public sphere.

Although decades have passed since the proposal of this concept, the authors of [12] note that this concept lacks an agreed upon definition, adding that it refers to intangible elements and that there are methodological challenges in its application. Issues concerning gender in the construction of the social imaginary have also been addressed. Siliprandi [13] (p. 127) refers to the case of the emergence of women as a political force in peasant and family farmer movements in Brazil in the field of agroecology. Their paper discusses the impact that women’s political action can have “for the environmental debate and for the transformation of the social imaginary”.

Tizón and Iparraguirre [14] (p. 4) studied agroecology and sustainability based on individual and group ideas through surveys of two groups linked to regional agricultural
research and extension practices in Argentina. They also included free response sections that allowed participants to describe their opinions of agroecology. The analysis of these answers allowed preliminary elements of a symbolic approach “aimed at detecting the imaginaries that sustain the discourses” [14] (p. 4) to be found. One aspect was that, for both groups, the “environmental” does not constitute a central problem common to ecological approaches, although the answers from the local (semi-arid) sphere related to climate. They also mentioned that “the traditional is opposed to the agroecological”, alluding to the management of crops according to the period and mode of production, legitimizing agroecology as an alternative productive approach to the traditional one. Finally, as the main conclusion from the symbolic perspective, they indicate that there is an “agroecological imaginary legitimized among other agronomic imaginaries, and at the same time legitimising an alternative way of considering agricultural production in the semi-arid region” [15] (p. 4–5). Thus, this study aims to uncover the similarities and differences in the viewpoints of actors from divergent sectors in order to highlight how these tensions may contribute to or hinder the development of the field of agroecology in Paraguay.

2. Materials and Methods

This study utilized a qualitative, observational, exploratory approach and a hermeneutic, phenomenological, interpretative framework. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were used for data collection, and the interview guide included questions related to participants’ views of agroecology as well as market niches. Participants were selected through convenience sampling, with the credibility of the key informants evaluated based on their work environments [16,17] The sample consisted of six participants, each belonging to one of the following sectors: the central government (through a representative of the executive branch whose work is inherent to the agricultural sector), local government (through a representative of the municipality), the private sector (through a representative of a company that specializes in agricultural production), a non-governmental organization (NGO) that promotes organic production, an association of organic farmers, and academia (through a professor).

We sought to create rapport or empathy between the interviewees and the researchers, despite our use of distance interviews (by telephone or videoconference), due to the social distancing restrictions in place at the time of data collection owing to the COVID-19 pandemic. For the analysis and processing of the interviewees’ opinions, the steps proposed by Eisner were followed [18,19]:

Step 1. Interviews were conducted containing open questions on the participants’ opinions of agroecology, its applicability in Paraguay, and its strengths and weaknesses.

Step 2. Coding: The interviewees’ responses were coded using free or open coding as defined by Strauss and Corbin (16). Codes, words, or short phrases are constructs generated by the researchers to symbolize data [19].

Step 3. Guiding categories. The codes were grouped according to the inherent dimensions of agroecology, which are: political–cultural, ecological–productive, and socio-economic [8].

Step 4. Analysis and interpretation: Data reduction was performed by analyzing the relationships or connections among the data at different levels through the codes and categories chosen in order to establish patterns in the data. The codes were then grouped into guiding categories, highlighting the relationships between them and their prominence within the category. The data are presented using co-occurrence tables and Sankey diagrams. For the analysis, the ATLAS.ti software was used (version 9, Scientific Software Development GmbH, Berlin, Germany).

3. Results

Sixteen codes were identified from the answers of the representatives of the sectors to the interview. The low level of state support for agroecology in Paraguay was a common factor mentioned by the representatives of all sectors. On the other hand, the interviewees
expressed the idea that agroecological foods are healthy and grown mainly in smallholder or family production systems, and the interviewees associated these with specific market niches.

The answers show the different opinions of the interviewees concerning the complexity and importance of agroecological production, which is different from the traditional conventional production system and is beneficial to the sustainability of ecosystems (for governmental sectors, the private sector, and academia). Concerns regarding the low insertion of the paradigm were also expressed. The representatives of the governmental sectors and the NGO sector mentioned the problem of agroecology’s lack of visibility, closely related to the limitations in the certification of their products or production processes.

In addition, the representatives of the subnational government, the NGO sector, and academia stated that agroecology enables communities to achieve food sovereignty. In addition, they stated that it allows or favors ecosystemic regulation and improves resilience, although this concept was not mentioned by the representatives of the production sector, NGOs, or academia.

Finally, it was possible to identify ideas expressed by only one sector (not coinciding), such as that agroecological systems are able to produce enough food for the world (according to academia), can enable food diversification because their design includes the cultivation of different species at the same time (NGOs), and encourage young farmers to settle in rural territories (government sector). Additionally, one interviewee stated that the transition from a conventional system to an agroecological system is difficult (subnational government).

The main imaginaries identified are detailed below.

3.1. Stakeholder Imaginaries of Agroecology

The interpretation of the main imaginaries of agroecology reveals that the dominant idea concerns the role of the state as a driving force or a barrier in the scaling up of agroecology (Table 1). All the actors consulted mentioned the lack of support from the state, even referring to the lack of political will to support a production model that does not correspond to the extensive or extractivist model. This thinking is visualized in the following answer: “On the other hand, in the countryside there is demand from farmers who express interest in implementing agroecological conversion processes, demand training, but do not find the opportunity, the institutional mechanisms and the necessary support for it” (Interview 1, 5 December 2021).

Table 1. Co-occurrence according to codes and actors.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Subnational Government Gr = 15</th>
<th>Government Gr = 9</th>
<th>Private Sector Gr = 23</th>
<th>NGO Gr = 17</th>
<th>Farmers Gr = 7</th>
<th>Academy Gr = 10</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Food for the world. Gr = 1</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healthy food. Gr = 8</td>
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<td>1.05</td>
<td>3.16</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>8.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High cost/price. Gr = 2</td>
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<td>0.00</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>2.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rooting. Gr = 1</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>1.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low insertion of the paradigm. Gr = 7</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>2.11</td>
<td>2.11</td>
<td>2.11</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>7.37</td>
</tr>
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<td>Little State support. Gr = 21</td>
<td>3.16</td>
<td>3.16</td>
<td>3.16</td>
<td>9.47</td>
<td>3.16</td>
<td>2.11</td>
<td>22.10</td>
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<td>0.00</td>
<td>2.11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Diversification. Gr = 1</td>
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<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of visibility (certification). Gr = 6</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>3.16</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>3.16</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>6.32</td>
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<tr>
<td>Market niches. Gr = 11</td>
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<td>0.00</td>
<td>5.26</td>
<td>3.16</td>
<td>2.11</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>11.58</td>
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<td>1.05</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>4.21</td>
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<tr>
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<td>0.00</td>
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<td>7.37</td>
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<tr>
<td>Smallholding system. Gr = 8</td>
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<td>4.21</td>
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<td>0.00</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>8.42</td>
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<td>5.26</td>
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Table 1. Cont.

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<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Subnational Government Gr = 15</th>
<th>Government Gr = 9</th>
<th>Private Sector Gr = 23</th>
<th>NGO Gr = 17</th>
<th>Farmers Gr = 7</th>
<th>Academy Gr = 10</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% Relative Values (%))</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food sovereignty Gr = 4</td>
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<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>2.11</td>
<td>4.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sustainability Gr = 7</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>2.11</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>4.21</td>
<td>7.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>16.84</td>
<td>10.53</td>
<td>28.42</td>
<td>21.05</td>
<td>8.42</td>
<td>14.4</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Gr = Number of citations coded by the code or the number of citations in the document. Source: elaboration of the authors.

It was also mentioned that “the Paraguayan State does not consider the strengths of the primary productive sector in the production of healthy food for the population and therefore does not include it in its agenda” (Interview 1; 5 December 2021). “The government and businessmen are not interested in tomorrow, they are interested in what returns and profitability they can obtain today” (Interview 2; 11 December 2021).

“It cannot be said that agroecology does not work, what does not work is the context. There is no support from national and local authorities to create policies, so that we all have the same right to develop. It is not the person who has more capital who has more rights than the small farmer. Everyone must have the same right to have access to means of income generation and in this case in the rural sector it is agriculture”, according to another stakeholder. (Interview 2; 11 December 2021).

Some interviewees stated that the factor limiting the implementation of agroecology does not lie primarily in its profitability, but in the fact that “the government itself does not promote agroecological production as a production system in the country. Consequently, both Agroecological Production and Organic Production have little impact on the country’s macroeconomy, given that they represent a minimal percentage of foreign exchange inflow to the country” (Interview 4; 19 March 2022).

3.1.1. Market Niches

The promising future for agroecology, according to some interviewees, lies in the identification of market niches, where the sensitivity and degree of maturity of consumers lead them to favor or prefer agroecological agricultural products, and where they are willing to pay for them. However, this imaginary turned out to be conflicting. Some interviewees thought that agroecology represents an exclusive market niche that is willing to pay a higher price for food that is considered healthy and that the population is also beginning to demand healthier products; other interviewees considered that “there is not, for example, a network of consumers or a growing demanding market, so the production sector is not able to close the circle of the value chain” (Interview 3; 20 March 2022). This is closely related to the lack of certification of agroecology products, which reduces their level of competitiveness.

Another view was as follows: “It seems to me that there are. Today there are niches that have to be worked, but those niches, those niches are conquered today with new communicational paradigms, social networks, no longer with a course. Therefore, who is going to do Don Felipe’s Twitter or Instagram campaign? Or how is he going to ally himself with some vegan restaurants in Asunción, for example. In other words, the main work of agroecology today is outside the farm” (Interview 4; 19 March 2022). As for strengths, it was noted that “there are associations of local farmers that work in an organized way and in networks, mainly to participate in local product fairs (local products, some agroecological and others organic) as a tool to reach consumers” (Interview 5; 20 March 2022).

Another aspect that was mentioned and that is related to the production niche is the generally low production volume of agroecology, which is associated with the individualism with which farmers produce.
3.1.2. Healthy Food

Agroecology as a source of healthy food was a widely held opinion of the actors: “what is seen today is that many consumers make the decision to consume agroecological products because of health problems, because they have cancer, diabetes, high blood pressure or other diseases closely linked to poor diet and that requires or recommends consuming healthy products” (Interview 6; 24 March 2022).

“The increase in the consumption of organic products and even more so in the Pandemic, made it like people realize that they have to eat better to have more protection. Eating better means eating higher quality products, without chemicals. So this represents a very important opportunity for organic and agroecological production” (Interview 4; 19 March 2022).

3.1.3. The Smallholder System

Another imaginary that was widely held by the interviewees is that agroecology is related to family farming and therefore there will be difficulties in scaling it up. “In itself, if it is a limitation, the larger your plot, the more difficult agroecology is, because there is a principle of non-use of agricultural machinery, if the criterion of using agricultural machinery is not ecology, do you understand? So, if the production is entirely by hand, it is a big problem to make Agroecological practices on a large-scale production, unless we have an army of rural workers”. (Interview 5; 20 March 2022)

Some of the interviewees expected to see the conversion of agroecological practices to a larger spatial scale: “It is still difficult for medium and large producers to apply agroecology, but it is possible as long as they see successful regional schemes and experiences, they can enter into the conversion process”. (Interview 6; 24 March 2022)

3.1.4. Ecosystem Regulation, Resilience and Sustainability

All these concepts were associated with agroecological production. “The other key advantage and the main one is that it is a production system that does not harm the environment, in fact, it regenerates or returns nutrients or regenerates ecosystems” (Interview 4; 19 March 2022). Paraguay, as an eminently agricultural country, is highly dependent on climatic conditions and, in this sense, it was stated that “agroecological systems have the strength of being resilient to adverse climatic factors”, which can contribute to the adaptation of producers to climate change (Interview 6; 24 March 2022).

“The main source of Greenhouse Gas emissions is the primary productive sector and therefore, the key is to discern what principles and mechanisms have allowed resilient systems, such as agroecological ones, to resist and/or recover from droughts, storms, floods or hurricanes; but it is also key to understand the advantages of agricultural diversification, which in essence, minimizes risks and stabilizes the production of greenhouse gases” (Interview 6; 3 March 2022). Other imaginaries that were mentioned less frequently can be seen in Table 1.

3.2. Discursive Orientation in the Dimensions of Agroecology

The triangulation between the groups of informants and the guiding categories of the agroecology dimensions shows the discursive proportion of the informants; 46.34% related to the ecological–productive dimension, 37.80% to the political–cultural dimension, and 15.84% to the socioeconomic dimension (Table 2). The discourse coming from the private sector (17.07%) is the one that was mostly related to the ecological–productive dimension; while the discourse of the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (14.63%) was more related to the political–cultural dimension. In relation to the discourse alluding to the socioeconomic dimension, the private sector was the one that addressed it in the highest proportion (7.32%).
Table 2. Co-occurrence by code groups in the dimensions of agroecology and stakeholder discourse.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimensions</th>
<th>Subnational Government Gr = 15</th>
<th>Government Gr = 9</th>
<th>Private Sector Gr = 23</th>
<th>NGO Gr = 17</th>
<th>Farmers Gr = 7</th>
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<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% Relative Values</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecological–productive dimension</td>
<td>12.20</td>
<td>4.88</td>
<td>17.07</td>
<td>2.44</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>9.76</td>
<td>46.34</td>
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<td>GS = 10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political–cultural dimension</td>
<td>4.88</td>
<td>7.32</td>
<td>3.66</td>
<td>14.63</td>
<td>4.88</td>
<td>2.44</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Socioeconomic Dimension</td>
<td>1.22</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>7.32</td>
<td>3.66</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>0.00</td>
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<td>GS = 3</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>18.29</td>
<td>12.20</td>
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<td>20.73</td>
<td>8.54</td>
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</table>

Gr = Number of citations coded by the code or number of citations in the document; GS = Number of codes in a code group. Source: elaboration of the authors.

The discursive concentration can also be seen through the Sankey diagram (Figure 1), where the flow of the lines shows the width proportional to the amount of discursive flow on agroecology, considering its dimensions, grouped in the six stakeholders consulted.

Figure 1. Discursive flow of actors according to the dimensions of agroecology in the Sankey diagram. Source: elaboration of the authors.

Characteristics of the socioeconomic dimension are absent in the discourse of the government and academia, which has the lowest discursive flow. The ecological–productive dimension was not mentioned by the producer sector. This is in contrast to the political–cultural dimension, which was present in all interviews.

The imaginary of the governmental sector (central and subnational) is that agroecology represents healthy food, is not visible, and receives little state support. For the private sector, what is most relevant is the existence of specific market niches and the fact that it is a different, complex and small-scale system that produces healthy food. On the other hand, the NGO sector has a very strong idea that agroecology lacks government support, is not very visible, and has a limited market.

The producer sector is the one that shows the least variety of codes in its view of agroecology, seeing it as lacking state support, with a low insertion of the paradigm
and limited market. Academia, on the other hand, highlights in particular aspects of sustainability of the agroecological system and that it allows food sovereignty, although it requires governmental support.

4. Discussion

The representatives of the sectors showed similarities and differences in their answers. The only universally held viewpoint (of the 16 identified) in the six sectors was the lack of state support. Meanwhile, partial agreements were identified in four of the six sectors regarding the concept of healthy food, the low level of implementation of the paradigm, the existence of market niches, and the association of agroecology with the smallholder system. Therefore, H1 is partially accepted. The lack of support of the state for agroecology implementation processes, widely mentioned by the consulted actors, has been expressed in several publications; some have even referred to the lack of public policies directed towards neoliberalism and the associated agroexport model presenting a significant barrier to the scaling up of agroecology [20]. It should be noted that agroecology is currently marginalized in the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) of the European Union and in the policies of most Member States, even within their agri-environmental schemes [21]. Favorable public policies are necessary for the scaling up of agroecological practices [22]; however, social movements face risks when they allow themselves to become involved in collaborations with the state to scale up agroecology through public policies [23]. In the case of Paraguay, the low level of support from the State has led to the weak implementation of the guidelines established as a National Concerted Plan since 2012 for the agroecological and organic sector, which did not receive the prioritization it deserved [24].

Regarding the concept of the need to expand and extend market niches, which is seen as a factor limiting the consolidation of agroecology, in addition to the promotion of the resilience of traditional agricultural systems and the creation of agroecological beacons from which these principles can radiate to local communities, it is necessary to implement favorable policies and market arrangements in order to render the expansion of agroecology economically viable [22,25]. A case study in Paraguay identified biophysical circuits of agroecological products in rural farms centered on the proximity of the market and the links of local actors who mutually support each other and whose positive evolution strategies place strong emphasis on the capacities and growth of local social groups, technical strengthening, and specific commercial links [26].

However, an essential aspect of the agroecological market is certification, which allows producers to provide consistency in markets, promotes confidence in consumers, and makes it possible for producers to sell goods in local markets [27] and offer fresh products in new market niches through networks of trusted producer communities, thereby reducing the consumption of processed foods from conventional markets [28,29].

The provision of healthy food is an essential characteristic of agroecological products according to the actors consulted. Therefore, agroecological farmers are viewed as having healthier diets, as this intake promotes the diversification of nutrients and creates a social environment that is conducive to health [29]. This is a result of the diversity of production which is directly related to healthy food, in addition to the proximity of supply and lower costs [30].

In this research, we found that the smallholder system is a concept that limits agroecological praxis to small farm units, and therefore offers little possibility of scaling. In fact, agroecological systems are deeply rooted in the ecological logic of traditional small-scale agriculture [25]. However, farm size is not as important as management, and the use of the term mini-farm or small farm may hinder agroecology’s efforts to achieve sustainable food production at scale [31].

In this sense, the discourse of the traditional as opposed to the agroecological, due to differences in production mode and temporalities, speaks more of a distinction related to crop management, and confirms that the agroecological productive approach is very different from the traditional [15].
The imaginary of agroecology as an integrated and resilient system with a synergistic approach based on agriculture, environment, food, and health benefits is shared by [20]. From the point of view of a transition towards socio-ecological systems seeking resilience, biodiversity, consumers, education, and governance are promising entry points through which to build such a structured process [32]. Agroecology is therefore a useful means with which to comprehensively understand the dynamics of a community’s food system and develop ways to transition to a sustainable food system [33], coinciding with the imaginary of the actors consulted in this study.

Redesigning local and regional agri-food systems according to agroecological principles has the potential to increase the resilience of farming systems and rural communities, but also focuses attention on transitions towards the sustainability of agri-food systems [34]. The emphasis on the resilience of these systems suggests strong links between agroecology and other issues, such as environmental, ethical, political, and governance [30], as well as people’s values.

In this sense, a reductionist look that omits the “metabolism of society”, due to pressure caused by the deterioration of the planetary resource base, only aggravates this problem [35] (p. 7), since the agri-food system has a global corporate character, applies unsustainable practices, is controlled by large multinational companies, and produces unhealthy food [5]. Therefore, the search for alternative methods that could lead to at least the amelioration of this situation cannot be postponed.

Here, it is also useful to reference Enrique Left, who maintains that “social imaginaries are not an awareness of the world, which could later be translated into habitus or practices, but they are closer to a feeling of self that passes through the lived experience” [36] (p. 60). However, all forms of awareness—in this case, agroecological—relates to an imaginary that is in line with the meaning that each culture confers to nature.

The above could be considered as an underlying cause of the low level of insertion of the paradigm in the points of view identified in this study; but it is also related to what Segovia and Ortega pointed out that agroecology in Paraguay “is a utopia and that it is necessary to build, in discourse and practice, viable productive models” [7] (p. 42). In this regard, it is worth mentioning that sustainable development requires a change in values that takes into account the purposes of development and the fundamental needs of the country’s population.

Finally, H2 is accepted because the discourses clearly identify the three dimensions of agroecology. The viewpoints of the actors consulted and explored in the study reflect the dimensions of the theoretical basis of agroecology, which emphasizes the importance of crop production and protection; however, the environmental, social, economic, and political dimensions are becoming increasingly relevant [31,37].

5. Conclusions

This study revealed similarities in the imaginaries of actors from different sectors. The lack of support from the state (the government in power) at both central and local levels has been highlighted as a recurrent and relevant phenomenon, with the political–cultural dimension being mentioned as a critical point to be considered. Additionally, the dynamics of agroecological processes in the country, agroecological products with a local market niche that favor proximity-based relations (producers–consumers), the need to extend these market niches and establish certification systems, agroecological praxis in complex, resilient, and sustainable systems that provide healthy products for consumption, and the problem of small farm units with little prospects for scaling up were also highlighted. In addition, other divergent opinions were detected, meriting future in-depth research.

In this discursive interpretation, we noticed a distribution with few differences in proportion, with a noticeable predominance of the ecological–productive dimension, revealing small differences in the conceptualization of agroecology. Although these results are exploratory, they constitute an important contribution that will encourage a more in-depth
future review in order to understand the reasons why agroecology has not yet gained significant momentum in Paraguay.

Finally, we should point out that the points of view of the different actors did not differ to the point of preventing agroecological practice, and we suggest that more in-depth research be carried out in order to identify Paraguays’ practices or *habitus* regarding production and their link with nature.

**Author Contributions:** C.S. conceptualization, methodology, resources data, software, formal analysis, review and editing. A.I.O. conceptualization, resources data, investigation, formal analysis. M.J.A.M. conceptualization, investigation, formal analysis, review and editing. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research was funded by the EARTH + ERASMUS Project (598839-EPP-1-2018-1-IT-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP).

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** We confirm that all subjects gave their informed consent for inclusion before they participated in the study. This study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and the protocol was approved by the Ethics Committee of EARTH + ERASMUS + Project (598839-EPP-1-2018-1-IT-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP).

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The funders had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analyses, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript, or in the decision to publish the results.

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