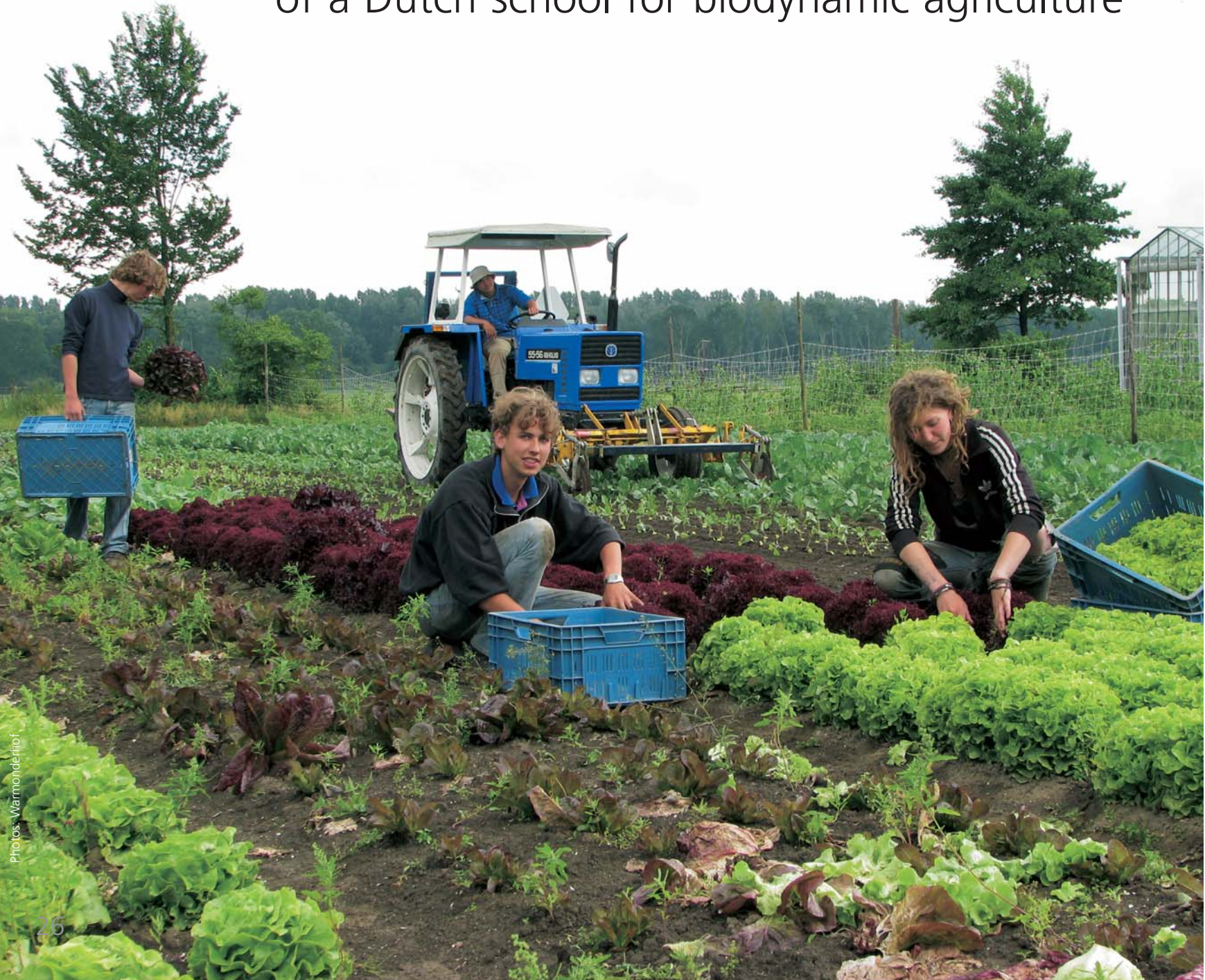


An African's view

of a Dutch school for biodynamic agriculture



Augustin Kouevi works for an NGO that promotes organic farming in Benin. He recently visited the Warmonderhof, a working farm and agricultural college in Flevoland province in the Netherlands. It is a unique school that provides live-in training on biodynamic organic farming to about 90 students from several countries. EDM asked Augustin about his impressions of the Warmonderhof, in particular how appropriate the practices he encountered would be for his home country.

The Warmonderhof consists of two parts. Teachers come every morning to the agricultural college and give lessons to the students in the theory of biodynamic agriculture. The other, practical, side of the Warmonderhof is run by four farmers who

experiential way. I was struck by what I thought was a calabash hanging in front of a greenhouse (see photo). In fact it was a deer bladder filled with herbs, which is prepared and hung up to capture cosmic energy. Once ready, the herbs are added to

The Warmonderhof stands for an integrated approach that involves 'living, working and learning'

lease land from the college and support themselves by selling their produce: vegetables, arable crops, livestock and fruit. In the afternoons the students work on the farms, putting into practice what they have learned during the morning. This integrated approach to learning by doing incorporates all aspects of 'living, working and learning', making the Warmonderhof a unique example of experiential learning.

What is your impression of the Warmonderhof as an agricultural training institute?

'I appreciated my visit in several senses. It is a learning centre where spiritual, technical, social and economic issues are integrated and taught to students in an

compost and applied to the soil to make it more receptive to cosmic energy and encourage plant growth.'

Another way in which spiritual aspects of life are incorporated into the school's activities is through the opening ceremony, which is held at the start of each week. Students are involved in organising this activity: the first-year students are responsible for setting out the chairs, while the second-years take turns to chair the meeting itself and say the *weekspreek*, a kind of prayer.

On the working farm, students learn how to recycle agricultural and animal waste into valuable compost for organic



Deer bladder filled with herbs are suspended to capture cosmic energy.

production. In the social and economic areas, they learn how to organise themselves in cooperatives and to live and work together in an efficient and sustainable way.

The dairy cattle housing is also interesting: it's a deep litter stall with feeding, manure and resting places all in the same building. Cow urine is collected separately and drained through a canal to be recycled as green fertiliser on the fields. Pastures



Students weed onions by hand, lying on a weeding machine.

where the cows graze also form part of the same farming system.

Did you notice similarities between the Warmonderhof and training institutes in Africa?

'I have not yet encountered an institute like this in Africa; I am not aware of any colleges in Benin that teach organic farming. Some farmers work organically,

but no teaching curricula have been developed in official agricultural colleges. Some NGOs and centres organise training for farmers and others who are interested. These do make use of discovery learning approaches, but they differ in the equipment and methods they use (no classrooms but training rooms, no greenhouses but learning in the field), and they place less emphasis on recycling

We need to reconsider the present trend that regards farmers' experiences as backward and not usable for development

Discovery learning is a way of learning based on students' own innate curiosity. At the Warmonderhof students participate once a week in a workgroup. They can bring in their own ideas, but the activities must in some way be of service to the community. A few years ago a group decided it wanted to learn about using horses for pulling ploughs. People who still possess traditional ploughing skills came and taught the students, who learnt how different it is to plough the land walking behind a horse instead of sitting on a tractor. The school now has two horses itself and teaches a course on animal traction.

Biodynamic agriculture is a method of organic farming based on a spiritual worldview. The aim of biodynamic farming and gardening is to revitalise nature, grow nourishing food and advance the physical and spiritual health of humanity. Each biodynamic farm or garden is conceived of as an organism with its own individual qualities and diversity of life. Reliance on home-produced compost, manures and animal feeds is a key objective and external inputs are kept to a minimum. Methods unique to the biodynamic approach include the use of fermented herbal and mineral preparations as compost additives and field sprays, and the use of an astronomical sowing and planting calendar.



The Warmonderhof, Dronten, the Netherlands.

livestock farming waste for crop production. Also, these organisations do not address cosmovision issues.'

To what extent can the teaching methods and subjects be adapted to the African context?

'I think the teaching approaches could be used in Africa. Where I come from in Benin, integrating agriculture and livestock is not common, so lands and farmers are becoming poorer. In my view, these issues need to be introduced both in agricultural colleges and on farms. Using experiential learning would be a good method to use for this, although it is not yet widely used in our agricultural colleges.'

Why might young people be interested in agricultural colleges and farms, using experiential learning methods?

'Financial and economic issues seem to influence young people's decision-making everywhere. There is growing interest in

organic products: a market is developing for these products, so growing organically may provide farmers with a better income source. This could sharpen young people's interest in getting training on organic farming, so they can create their own organic enterprises or work as facilitators of organic farming processes.'

Did your visit change your views?

'This visit did not change my view of my work in Benin and Africa, but it did confirm what I have been thinking for a long time, based on reading and experiences in organic farming in Benin: my conviction of the need to reinforce the discovery-learning aspects of our teaching approach. I also feel that the present trend, which regards farmers' experiences as backward and not usable for development, needs to be reconsidered. Contrary to many scientists, I believe that almost all experiences are useful: you just need to study them scientifically.'

Interacting worldviews at the Warmonderhof

Spiritual

Special preparations are made on particular days in the annual cycle of festivals, e.g. the feast of St Michael.

Social

Students from different countries exchange opinions and experiences based on discovery learning.

Material

The students engage in farming activities every day, putting into practice what they have learned.



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