Discussion Note

Pesticides, Valuations and Politics

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Abstract In this paper, I will discuss some aspects of the Swedish policy to reduce pesticide use by 50%, a decision that has attracted great interest and may sometimes have been over-advertised. It has also been followed by similar programmes in other countries such as Denmark, Holland and Canada. What are the cultural and political backgrounds? What is general and what is specifically Swedish? Why did the demand for this decision first occur in Sweden, where the problems concerning pesticide use are much less pronounced than in many other countries and agricultural areas? Does the Swedish policy imply a new approach with completely different conditions for pesticide use, or should it preferably be described as an adaptation to what modern pesticide and agricultural technology can achieve?

General Trends

One starting point is the shifts in values that have occurred in society during recent decades. Among many other things, these changes have implied moments of general questioning of technology as such and the manipulation of “Nature”. This scepticism is sometimes justified but sometimes it is based on less solid foundations. The use of advanced pesticides and biotechnology are thus exposed to the same kind of doubt. It is no longer the actual or possible magnitude of secondary effects that are decisive. Instead, it is the main issue itself that is questioned.

Technological efficiency thus gives birth, in itself, to scepticism. A new question has emerged — how successful should we be in controlling and manipulating Nature or its ecosystems? These changes in values, where nature is increasingly regarded as being the standard, are tending to become a source of conflict, particularly in matters concerning agriculture and its methods, since cultivation must be defined as a manipulation of the ecosystems.

During the relatively short period of agrarian history in which chemical pesticides have played a dominant role, they have been evaluated in different ways,
in different periods and by different people. They have come to symbolize the technological dream that eliminates the wear-and-tear of every-day life. Others have regarded them as a necessary evil, an attitude that predominates today. Some people assert that they are an unnecessary evil, while the more pragmatic attitude — that these aids to cultivation, like many others, may have their disadvantages, but can be improved and developed — is finding difficulty in being understood at present.

The increasingly perfect “designed” cultivation methods, including pesticides are productive, provide high-quality products and are often resource-efficient but at the same time cause, or contribute to, a more uniform landscape both on the macro- and micro-levels. This implies principally a genuine conflict between the most original aims of agriculture and certain of the demands and values expressed in society.

I believe that it is somewhere within this perspective of modified sets of values, comprehensive changes in rural society and landscape and difficulties in actually influencing the development and use of technology within a sector of great concern to the people that we should recognize the decision in Sweden to reduce the use of pesticides. To some extent the decision reflects general trends in political and public opinion in industrialized countries. To another extent the reduction programmes have specific Swedish — or Scandinavian — characteristics.

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In Sweden, as well as in other technologically developed countries, different systems developed and became formalized during the 1950's and 1960's to regulate the demands placed on individual pesticides and to limit their health and ecological risks. Policy making has largely implied restriction for which economically interesting control inputs will also be utilized. As a result of this and of new technological and chemical opportunities, the individual compounds have gradually improved. In the early 1970s many agricultural professionals believed that what should be done in pesticide regulation had already been done, but agricultural pesticides appeared again on the Swedish political agenda in the late 1970's.

Pesticide use also increased during the decades after 1970 as a result of increased data on the economic importance of pest control and the development of new and more efficient substances. In addition, the non-diversified and intensive cropping systems that have become possible as a result of (or because of) access to new pesticides have increased the need for controls. The very dominance of pesticides in agricultural technology gives rise to problems, the answer to which is increased use of pesticides.

Depending on, for example, natural conditions and the structure of different aspects of agriculture, pesticide use varies between different countries and regions. Sweden and Scandinavia are characterized by a relatively moderate degree of specialization and non-diversification in agriculture, compared with intensive production areas in Europe and the USA, or areas in so-called developing countries where cash crops are grown.

This structure of Swedish agriculture implies that the environmental impact and other side effects of pesticide use will not be unendurable. For example, herbicide