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Allocation of public land to farmers: a way for urban authorities to support a transition toward a nurturing agroecology?

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This paper examines how cities progressively engage in the making of a multifunctional periurban agriculture. It relies on document analysis and interviews around Montpellier (France). This French Mediterranean coastal region has experienced a rapid demographic growth since 1960. The metropolitan authority, federating 31 municipalities, conducted recently two successive allocations of public land to farmers in very different ways, the first from 2010 to 2012 and the second from 2015 to 2016. It thus offers a unique opportunity to compare different procedures, while the surrounding urban and farming context remains the same.

The comparative approach highlights the changes in the political context, stakeholders and procedures between the two procedures, and their impact on the number and profiles of tenants chosen, and type of leases (short or long term; with or without social and ecological criteria).

The metropolis delegated the first allocation to agricultural organizations sustaining conventional agriculture. A former wine estate (192ha), that had been earlier acquired for urban development, was rented to 17 tenant farmers through a rapid but contested procedure. The metropolis then conducted itself the second allocation, taking lessons from the first experiment. Search for exemplarity and transparency led the process. Beyond the 14 ha of land allocated to 2 organic farms, the aims of this second allocation were i) to build a generic method and a toolbox for facilitating future public lands allocations and ii) to contribute to the transition of peri-urban agriculture toward more ecological farming and more local food supply chains, as the metropolis adopted in the meantime an ambitious policy for food and agroecology.

In the discussion, we analyse these two allocation procedures in terms of innovation and social justice: do they foster a transition towards a “nurturing agroecology”? Our study highlights driving forces for change but reveals also tensions between contrasting farming styles and about economic viability of farms regarding the constraints imposed by the public owner. It questions the conditions for an improved dialogue between agriculture and the city.

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