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Organic agriculture and sustainability

...as viewed by rice growers in the Camargue

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...as viewed by rice growers

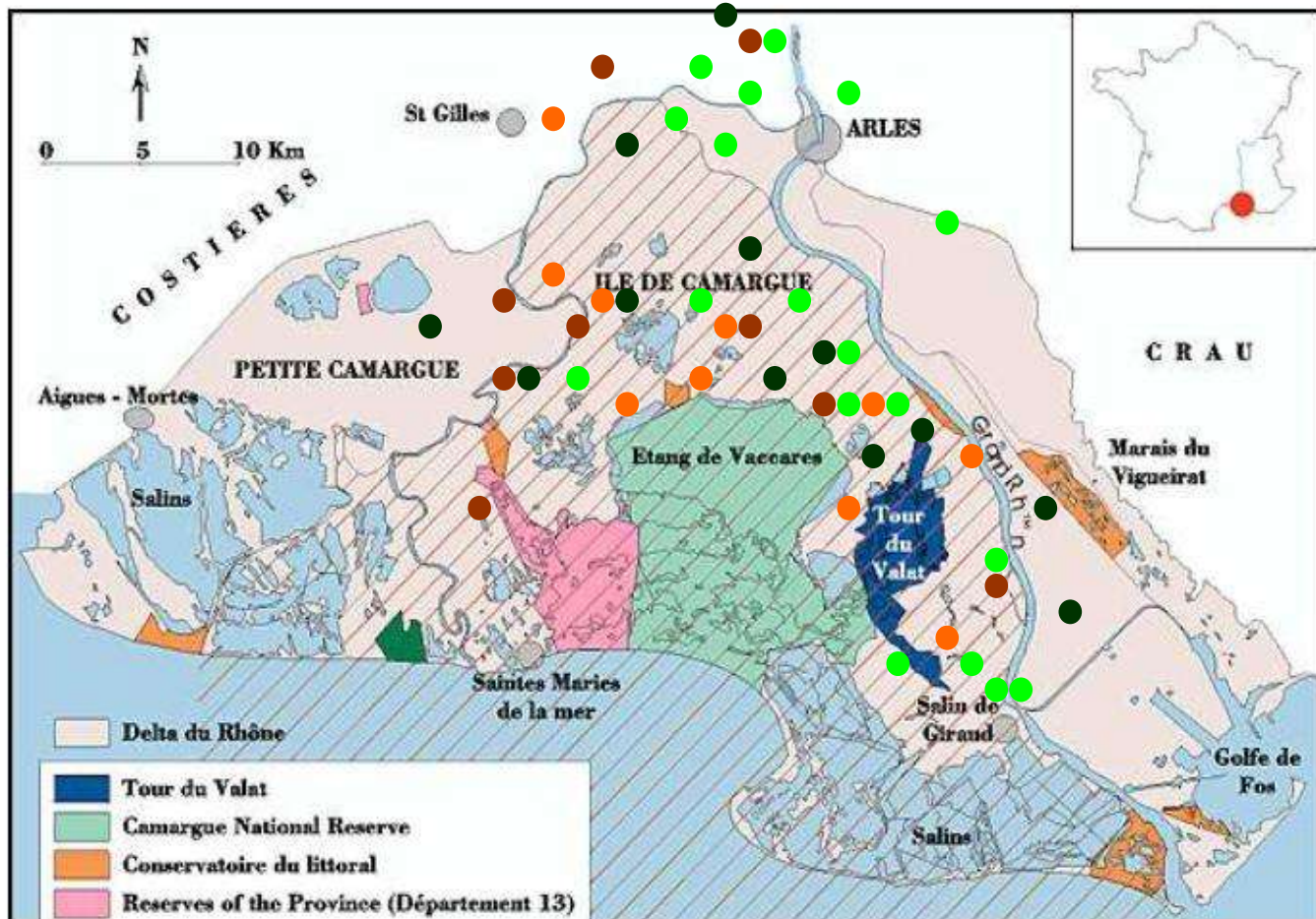
Objectives

- Study the points of view of rice growers on the sustainability of rice production systems in the Camargue.
- Assess agronomic, economic, social, environmental, structural and organisational dimensions.
- Assess practices and perceptions of organic agriculture in this context

Methodology

- Semi-directive interviews were organised with 50 rice growers individually.
- The full diversity of farmers and farming systems were represented.
- The interviews were based on the trajectories of farmers' practices past, present and possible projections for the future.

Localisation and types of participants...



● rice monoculture ● rice polyculture ● rice polyculture/animal rearing ● rice agrotourism

The sustainability of the rice farm

- Main factor of sustainability is **economic viability**
- Inability of the rice growers to intervene in the worldwide market system
“French rice growers have no influence on the rice market. They have no control over the sale of their produce.”
- Rice growers denounce a worldwide market based on massive rice production.

Specific difficulties and perspectives for the organic market

- Organic products are being drawn into the same world market
 - « *The main retail chains are trying to drag organic products into the perverse system of conventional products, where there is no price ; this is unacceptable! »*
- Consumers and their behaviour show limits for the organic market
 - « *It is too dear for the consumer, it's only for the more wealthy » (RC)*
 - « *People go to discount shops, they want organic but cheap. »*
- Organic rice producers want to establish new relationships with consumers
 - « *It is very important to have a good contact between producer and consumer : and between the two, the chain should be clear. »*

Main levers and obstacles concerning the development of environmentally friendly rice cropping systems

The main reference model for sustainable rice growing is the organic system

- The motivations of rice growers to convert to organic are
 - for some, **economic**: the niche market
« ... to have a niche of organic rice in the Camargue is good for the image of Camargue rice. »
 - others are more concerned by the **toxicity of chemical products**
« ...as conventional farmers ...we eradicated everything! It was incredible. And when we came home in the evening our skin was sore and our throats irritated. »

....

- Principal agronomical obstacle to develop organic rice is **weed infestation**
« Farms that have converted to organic practices, the first and second years are wonderful, yields are sky high, no weeds in sight. Afterwards, the third year, well you are looking everywhere to find rice! There are only weeds. »
- The main tool to control weeds is **to introduce rotations** but this can be problematic
 - Cultivate new crops can be agronomically difficult...
 - Crops good for rotations are not always economically profitable ...
« The rotation lucerne or another leguminous plant/wheat/rice is interesting for weed control and as a source of nitrogen. But as for me, I'm not equiped to cultivate leguminous plants, there is no profit in rape and so on...»
 - « In organic agriculture, we are still looking for a third crop that would integrate well into a rotation. »*
 - The introduction of new rotations modify production systems. For many this implies the introduction of **animal rearing** ...

....

- To change farming practices and convert to « organic »...
 - ... is associated to a sense of regression by some...
« The organic system is a bit as if we said : we're going to turn off the electricity and live by candlelight... »
 - ... for others its a re-conquest of their profession
« We are really in the heart of agronomy, we are going to get our « Soltners » back out. »
« It is a type of agriculture that's respectful and modern. Organic methods put dignity back into the farming profession. »

The inadequacy of government policies

- Most rice growers are not at ease being dependant on public subsidies which
 - devalorise their profession
 - lead them to monoculture
 - « *If we want subsidies, we are obliged to grow rice.* »
 - and thus are not adapted to the development of organic agriculture...
 - « *People who practice organic methods of production are not financially helped enough because in their systems one can only grow rice once every 5 years.* »
- ... others mention the « incoherencies » in the evolution of public policies for which they stand accused...
 - « *At the moment, in the eyes of society we are seen as polluters...* »
- They consider that political orientations are not always clear...
 - « *Do we want farmers to produce or to preserve the country landscape?* »

Rôle of research

- A « pragmatic », collective and collaborative research in on-farm situations...

« We need research programmes that are structured and applied, pluridisciplinary and open that function through a network.

Our own experiences must be exchanged with our neighbours and enriched by knowledge brought from outside through research.

I have the impression that advice organisations have not turned down the path of real agronomy which is a mistake as this is what could save agriculture in the Camargue. »

- ... research programmes orientated towards cultivation practices and why not a pilot farm

« ... a decision could be made to create a pilot farm, 100% organic that tests what could really be done in the Camargue... organic farming can not just be imposed on everyone. »

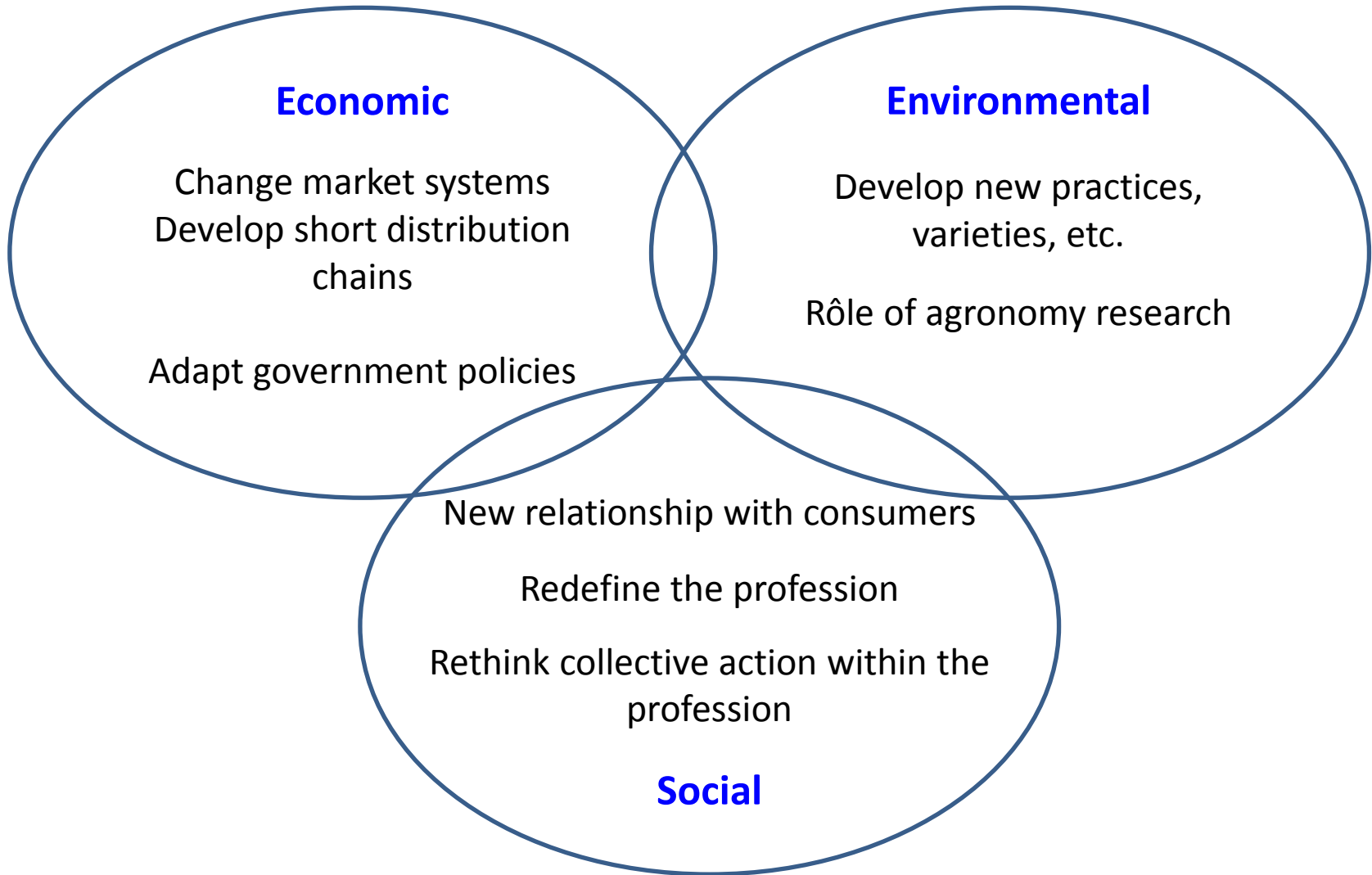
- and towards varieties

« In « organic » research not one selection programme has been carried out, nothing at all. And this is the basis of everything. »

A field of organic rice...



Challenges to the development of organic rice growing as perceived by rice growers themselves



Final thoughts

- The development of sustainable agriculture can prove itself to be difficult for rice growers because it involves a fundamental reassessment of their profession and of their professional activity : both on the individual level in terms of skills, risk taking and so on, and also on the collective level with the necessity to rethink and reorganise the commercialisation chain and their insertion into rice markets. Rice growers underline the crucial rôle that research, extension institutions and adapted government policies have to play in helping them face these challenges.