Organic farming and sustainability: the point of view of Camargue rice producers

Hammond, Roy [1], Mouret, Jean-Claude [2], Le Velly Ronan[3]

[1] Inra, Umr Innovation, Montpellier, France émail : hammond@supagro.inra.fr
[2] Inra, Umr Innovation, Montpellier, France [3] Supagro, Umr Innovation, Montpellier, France

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Introduction

Sustainability of the rice production system is a concern generally shared by all professional and institutional stakeholders of the Camargue territory. A study carried out in 2010 and 2011 by the INRA and financed by FranceAgriMer aimed at analyzing the opinions of rice producers concerning the constraints, assets and conditions of implementation of a sustainable rice production. The question of sustainability in its agronomic, economic, social and environmental implications was addressed. The practices and perceptions of organic farming were commented on and expressed by the farmers themselves in this more general framework of sustainability.

Method

50 rice producers, i.e. 25% of Camargue rice growers took part in the study. The panel of participants sought to represent the diversity of farmers, production systems and their geographical locations in Camargue. The interviews concerned the itineraries of the farmers and their farms, the activities and current or past practices, their short, medium and long term projections.

Results and discussion: Results presented here are not complete considering the wealth of material collected, but the aim is to enlighten the main issues of the current debate.

1. Sustainability of the farm

1.1. First criterion of sustainability: economic viability

- **Situation of French rice productions in the global market**

For rice producers, the primary criterion of sustainability of their farm is economic viability.
Their concern is about their inability to influence the globalized market. "*French rice growers have no weight on the rice market. They have no power over the sale of their product.*"; "*The sector doesn't care about Camargue rice. Collectors are not looking for a rice, but for the lowest possible price.*"
They denounce a system that relies on globalization of markets to turn rice into a mass product and does not allow them to be distinguished from other productions. "*The organization of commercialization absolutely does not want the consumer to know the producer.*"

- **Difficulties specific to the organic market:** i) fear that the market for organic products would blend in with the market for conventional products: "*Mass market retailing tries to pull "organic" into the perverse system of "conventional" where there is no price. It's unacceptable!*"
- ii) The expansion limits of organic market: some rice producers think that the market for organic is a niche market for the most well-off social categories, that this mode of production cannot develop on a large scale, in a nutshell, that it is not affordable for all consumers.
- *"You cannot feed the planet with "organic" rice. It is too expensive for the consumer, yields and surfaces are much smaller. "Organic" is more for the posh 16th arrondissement, Neuilly sur Seine!"*
- They think that many consumers of organic products first and foremost look for low prices without concern for the origins or conditions of production. "*Food is not a priority. Consumers are not ready to devote money to that, they want cheap organic.*"

1.2. Levers and constraints for environment-friendly rice production

· **The motivations to transition to organic farming:** i) Concerns about the toxicity of phytosanitary products for health and environment: "*We switched to "organic" because we saw that with the chemical products we were using in conventional farming, there were no more snails, no more lizards, nothing! And after the treatments, we had skin and throat irritations. We didn't want to keep working like that."*

· ii) The quest for an economic niche market… and the promotion of an image: "*Having a niche of "organic" rice in Camargue is good for the image of Camargue rice.*"

· **First obstacle to the development of organic rice farming: weed control** "*For farms who have transitioned to organic, the first and second year are wonderful, harvests are great, it's clean. Then, after the third year, you sort of have to look for the rice! It's just weeds all over!"*

To control the development of weeds, farmers set up crop rotations, but this entails many problems: the development of new crops requires new equipment and technical competences, the crops introduced do not necessarily find outlets, they are not necessarily profitable from an economic standpoint and can deeply disrupt the organization of the farm: "*Rotation with alfalfa or another legume is interesting in the fight against weeds and to provide nitrogen. But I'm not equipped to grow legumes and rapeseed doesn't pay off", "there was a time in Camargue when each farm had its livestock, but the fall of market prices for that meat led to give up that activity."*

For many rice growers, producing with organic methods means conducting an associated animal breeding activity and some think it is not their trade.

· **The change of practices: between regression and upgrading of the trade**

For some, the perspective of switching to organic sounds like a regression: "*Organic, it's a bit like saying: we'll switch off the light and live with candles. We're all going to get back to horses, hoe the rice fields and transplant. It's a postcard vision.*"

For others on the contrary, this change is synonymous with reconquest of the trade. They must reconnect with the basics of agronomy: "*We are truly in agronomics, let's reread Soltner[1]"* They are proud: "*It is respectful and modern farming. Organic gives back dignity to the farmer's trade."*

2. Inadequacy of public policies

Some express their unease with regard to the dependency on public aid: "*If we want the premium, we have to do rice"*. The CAP subsidies are often considered as necessary but hardly desirable and not adapted to the development of organic production. "*People who practice organic farming do not receive enough aid, because in organic, with the rotations, you can only grow rice every 5 years."*

Farmers underline the evolutions of public policies pinpointing inconsistencies whose responsibility is blamed on them. "*Right now for society, we are the polluters, but farmers were encouraged to apply fertilizers, products, it's the method, it's modern agriculture. Now, they're asking the same people to produce differently. They do not understand."*

They consider that political directions are not always very clear and supported by appropriate measures. "*Do they want farmers to produce or to do landscape maintenance? Decision-makers must say what they want and they must supply the means to achieve it."*

3. The role of research

The role of agronomic research has often been evoked and namely to test the organic methods of weed control. Rice producers are looking for "pragmatic" and collective research, conducted in collaboration with them, in real conditions. There was talk of the creation of a pilot farm. For many, the solution was in the creation of a synergy around adapted research and setting up of financial aid to face the risks incurred.

Conclusion: The development of sustainable rice production proves difficult for rice growers because it forces them to rethink their professional activity entirely, both on a personal level (in terms of competence, risk taking, etc.) and on a collective level, with the need to rethink their situation vis-à-vis markets. **They underline the crucial role of research and development institutes as well as adapted public policies to help them take up the challenge**.

Bibliography

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