

Multi-actor projects: a way of developing sustainable and organic farming?

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Keywords: transition, trajectories, farming practices, stakeholders, social network

Hot Topic 4: Acting collectively: what kinds of institutions, policies, and forms of governance can strengthen society's capacity for resilience?

Objective of the paper

Following the recent "*Grenelle de l'environnement*"¹ different policies have been implemented in France regarding the protection of water catchment areas, the reduction in pesticide use, and the development of organic farming. Even if this represents a shift from voluntary introduction to mandatory integration of environmentally-friendly practices for farmers, only some farmers have adopted sustainable farming practices. For example, in France, in comparison to other European countries, there is still a relatively small number of organic farms. We can thus ask if the policies are effective in encouraging sustainable agriculture such as in the case of organic farming.

Most French policies concerning organic agriculture provide financial backing to farmers, which is limited in time to the five-year legal period of conversion. However, recent studies show that it could be more constructive to prolong the conversion period (Lamine, Bellon, 2008). Moreover, financial supports and policies are often designed for individual actors, while it seems that transitions to organic and integrated protection systems are more enduring when they are rooted in collective dynamics (Lamine et al, 2009). It has also been proved, through initiatives like CSAs in United States or AMAPs in France, those interactions, between production and consumption, can reinforce the practice of sustainable agriculture, even if this would only concern a very limited numbers of farms. Moreover, with the development of "multifunctional agriculture", many actors show an interest in sustainable development and have their own opinion about what agriculture should be. Studies have shown that in France interactions between farmers and several other actors (Lémery, 2003), such as residents as well as environmental organizations and local administrations, are increasing within the context of urbanization and sustainable development. If many sociological studies have investigated farmers' motivations for transition and their decision-making processes during conversion, little is known about the nature of these interactions and the impacts they may actually have on the development of sustainable and organic farming.

Originality and main contribution

Our work is focused on these interactions as well as on farmers' social and territorial networks and their influence on the transition toward a more sustainable agriculture. We ask if the stance of other stakeholders like citizens, environmental organizations, and territorial administrations on the decrease in pesticide use could help the transition process and increase the adoption of sustainable practices. We wish to understand if and how these actors can influence the conception of farmers' work and the evolution of their farming practices. To understand the role of these interactions, we will focus on the specificities of production systems and their transitions. The overall aim of this paper is to demonstrate the significance of multi-actor and territorial bottom-up projects to encourage the adoption of sustainable agriculture.

Method

Our research is based on the greater Paris area where many cereal farmers live and work. Most of these farmers rely on intensive agricultural practices which have a significant environmental impact especially in terms of water quality. In addition, we chose this area

¹*Grenelle de l'environnement*: series of meetings and laws that would encourage environmental sustainability in France.

because agriculture is threatened by a growing urbanization rate, which is bringing farmers and other stakeholders into closer contact. We will analyze two case studies: in the first case, there is an important mobilization of the civil society and environmental activists around local farmers to promote a more sustainable agriculture through the development of local food provisioning systems. In the second case, the problem of the protection of water quality mobilizes all the actors linked to this issue to implement more sustainable practices. For each case, we will identify the role of the different stakeholders in the adoption of sustainable agriculture and the conditions which help or restrain constructive interactions between farmers and other stakeholders. To understand the insertion of farmers into social and territorial networks, we are using qualitative methods based on comprehensive interviews. This approach allows us to trace the trajectories of farmers and the people who interact with them like environmental activists, consumers, or local councilors. The aim of this method is to analyze the evolution of farming practices over a long period (Capillon, 1993) in connection with the farmers' relationships to their context, their local environment, and their social and professional networks (Pettigrew, 1987; Moulin et al, 2008), which can affect the management of the farm system (Strauss, 1992).

Results

Our first results showed that various stakeholders of civil society are involved in the adoption of innovations that would lead to sustainable agriculture. Our study is based on two contrasted cases. In the first case, environmental associations are very active for a long time to build multi-actor projects. If they did not have much influence on the local farming practices, their initiatives are now supported by public authorities and seems to be more efficient. In the second case, environmental activists are as well at the origin of a process of transition to more sustainable practices but public authorities support the initiative since the beginning and put in place incitement policies. In this case, various actors and public authorities are formally involved in the same project and have a big stake in common: water pollution. However, a real multi-actor dynamic is yet under construction to favor implementation of public policies and to change farming practices. Finally, it seems that participation of various stakeholders in addition to public policies is the successful combination to favor transition process.

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