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Coexistence of models in CUMAs: a work-based approach

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Abstract: Farm machinery sharing cooperatives have become established in France's agricultural landscape. At the same time, farms have taken different paths leading to a clear diversity of models within collective organizations. This article aims to assess the ramifications of this coexistence of agricultural models on livestock farmers' work. Starting from the viewpoint of farmers engaged in agroecological transition (AET), we examine the new confrontations taking place over equipment and ideas. Work is essential to consider because each time practices are adapted to actual conditions and needs, the collective benefits. However, two problematic situations are emerging: one involves competition between farm models that have engaged in AET, the other concerns some that, having adopted AET, feel driven to withdraw from the collective approach because work has become unbearable.

Keywords: models, coexistence, work, agroecological transition, CUMA

Introduction

Farm machinery cooperatives (French acronym: CUMA), provide access to shared equipment. When the transition towards agroecology is underway for some of the members, the CUMA remains a space of exchange (social, technical) that helps to build benchmarks guiding farm management. CUMAs also are becoming a forum in which farming models confront each other (Groos, 2019) due to the diverse types of farms (agroecological *versus* conventional) of their members. We hypothesize that within these CUMA, different agricultural models exist which are defined by how livestock farming is both considered and conducted, meaning how work is thought about and actually carried out. This article aims to assess the different ramifications of this coexistence of agricultural models on livestock farmers' work.

Materials and methods

This study was conducted in 2018 and 2019 as part of TRANSÆ (French acronym for the Transformation of Work and Transition towards Agroecology), a project implemented under CASDAR, a special appropriations account managed by the French government dedicated to agricultural and rural development. Five agroecological farmers from western France (Pays de la Loire and Ile-et-Vilaine) who were seeking to reduce work-related concerns, were interviewed about the links between their farms and their CUMA. They were selected out a larger sample of 66 farms because they had spontaneously mentioned their CUMA as an important element to consider with regard to their work situations. We define a work situation (Leplat, 1974) as being situated and extended to what is important on farmers' work (burden of degraded relations between CUMA members, rules of access to agro-equipment). Some of these 5 farmers belonged to a CUMA that is very homogenous in terms of engagement in agroecological transition (AET model= search for autonomy and valorisation of available resources, consumers of few inputs, attention paid to society's expectations in terms of social and environmental performance) while others were outliers within a mainly conventional group (CONV model = productivity per cow a major concern, intensive with regard to livestock management and work, fodder

system based on corn silage, dependence on inputs). The interviews were transcribed and analysed to highlight similarities and differences between these five farmers concerning their work situations and work-related concerns. Intended to give some recommendations for the action, this study did not attempt to cover the whole range of possible situations.

Results and discussion

Three livestock farmers said they enjoyed their work situations; the two others experienced discomfort at work. Each of the farmers expresses an attachment to a particular equipment which refers to singular needs. Work objectives (harvesting grass, for example), meaning the targets farmers fix for themselves in the context of their AET (Coquil, 2014), have evolved, gradually creating a gap within the CUMAs between farmers moving towards agroecology and those continuing to follow a conventional model. The confrontation between these two agricultural models crystallizes around the nature of the equipment (chain harrows and hoers for those engaged in AET versus phytosanitary sprayers and telescopic tractors for the conventional school), or on the pulling power and size of equipment (especially trailers). This equipment, which tends to be more modest in AET farming systems, is a marker of strategies pursued by thrifty farms that enable new work objectives to be realized.

For those who have become engaged in AET, the question is not just being able to advocate for a certain type of equipment, but to defend what they consider to be good farming. In some cases, maintaining an upper hand consists of taking power (*"The organic people have taken over"*), prioritizing an approach that is more collective than those working within a conventional system can do, organizing work regulations, and managing changing workloads in coordination with CUMA employees when they exist. AET livestock farmers point to the need to rethink how work is carried out within mutual support systems by reconstructing sub-groups to gather together farms similar in terms of their agriculture model and needs. Two problematic work situations were identified. Signs of competition between farms appear when most farmers have transitioned towards agroecology and the group has become homogeneous in terms of practices. This competition is more acute during peak periods for harvesting equipment than for mowing equipment. Grass storage methods have been standardized towards hay in particular, opening the door to the possibility of certain difficulties: *"We are now almost entirely organic, there is lots of grass to harvest [...] I've sometimes gathered bad hay."* The expression, *"don't let your hay get wet"* implies that one should achieve the best technical and economic performance possible, but this is not always possible when farmers cannot access harvesting equipment when it is most needed. Once farmers can no longer bring their ideas to life within a group, to mark their work with what they value (Dejours, 2003), the feeling of belonging and the quality of relationships deteriorate. AET farmers mentioned the effects on them, seeing themselves ghettoized: *"I lost the battle"*. Workers take action about their work situation when the latter becomes insufferable by moving away from the core group of conventional farmers to protect their mental health. They reduce interactions with the CUMA to the absolute minimum and may call upon other networks (agricultural contractors) to carry out farm work.

If trade union orientations are mentioned, they are not decisive in explaining the confrontations between agricultural models. On the other hand, mention is made of having travelled an important path in terms of practices and thinking, but also in terms of what farmers appropriate. When these changes lead to a new coherence within the professional arena, it becomes difficult to rationalize remaining within a group perceived as being out of step and sometimes as stigmatizing. However, the coexistence of models within CUMAs does not necessarily lead to confrontation (Groos 2019). This coexistence in work is enabled by an attitude distinguished by tolerance towards other ways of thinking and doing (*"we,*



grass farmers, we're more open to the coexistence of systems"), working together being a means of demonstrating other ways of doing things that may lead to an opening of possibilities for "conventional" models.

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