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The Emergence of Norms and Accountability in Food Consumption: Experimentation of New Consumption Practices within a Public Program

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Abstract

food practices – sustainable consumption – public policies

This paper provides an analysis of an experimental action about sustainable consumption and discusses its learning and normative effects based on a case study in France. At the national level (EGalim law, 2018, Territorial Food Projects, 2014) and at the local level, public policies are part of a process of greening food production and consumption. These processes are pushed by societal expectations that are expressed in national and transnational initiatives and networks. Previous analyses have shown how sustainable consumption has become a new object of the "governability" of consumption (Rumpala, 2009) and that the empowerment of individuals requires a reflexive capacity that can be supported through different instruments (Dubuisson-Quellier, 2016). Our hypothesis is that some social experimentation programs set up by public policies can provide a support for collective learning of new norms and practices among consumers. Therefore, these programmes would provide a tool to support sustainable consumption but also to manage the related learning processes. How are these new food consumption norms co-constructed or rather imposed in this kind of experimentation? What relationship to responsibility is established between public institutions and citizens? We explore this topic by studying an initiative promoted by public policies to test new consumption practices aimed at making food consumption more responsible. The experience, called Positive Food Families, was first tested in 2012 by a civil society organisation in Lyon and in our case set up by a municipality in the south of France. It involves 17 families over a period of a school year through practical workshops and becomes a place for direct experimentation with new normative expectations. Our approach, based on an ethnographic study combined with the analysis of individuals' food trajectories, aims to question the normative scope of public policies pursued with this action as well as the learning and empowerment processes that it allows (or not).