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Roles of Local Governments in the Governance of Agricultural Land in France

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Abstract: This research sheds light on the various roles played by French local governments in the management of agricultural land. It draws upon a database of 84 initiatives documented on a web platform established since 2020 by the French research institute INRAE and the grassroots movement for access to land Terre de Liens. These initiatives involve local governments and aim to protect farmland and support farming, in particular through generational renewal of farmers. Their description is based on feedback from local actors and research studies. This database reveals the diversity of agricultural land actions taken by local governments, presenting a range of solutions and operational approaches related to land-use planning, land market regulation, mobilization of public land, and facilitating local land relations. It allows us to identify obstacles and drivers to local governments' action on land and to draw generic lessons to support local governments in formulating tailored land strategies, engaging with relevant stakeholders, and better aligning the timelines of public policies with those of farmers. Notable differences are observed between initiatives in rural vs. peri-urban areas, and in plain vs. mountainous regions.

Keywords: farmland, strategies, innovations, up-scaling, public policies, generational renewal

Introduction

In France, 88 hectares of farmland are converted to urban uses every day and half of the farmers will retire within the next ten years. There is growing awareness among policymakers regarding the urgent need to take political decisions to preserve land and encourage the renewal of farming generations, as illustrated by the recent discussion of a draft law on such issues at the French National Assembly. However, the question remains as to what public policy levers are available to achieve this renewal. Who should govern farmland? What land policies are likely to encourage agro-ecology and food relocalization? This is a debate in France, but also in other developed countries (Calo et al., 2022; Wittman and James, 2022).

France is recognized internationally for its proactive national agricultural policies established in the 1960s and robust regulation of the land market, through institutions such as the Safer, a private land agency with a public service mission to monitor and intervene in the land market in favour of the local development of agriculture. However, the French government currently faces challenges in adapting its long-standing legal and regulatory instruments to new societal challenges (e.g. financialization of agriculture) and demands (e.g. for local and quality food and environmental protection). Alternative farming communities and grassroots movements have been advocating for years for an ambitious reform of farmland policies (AGTER and Terre de Liens, 2018). Despite this, the current draft law on agriculture does not fundamentally challenge the hegemony of existing conventional farmers over access to land. This national impasse is linked to the historical co-governance (Kooiman et al., 2008) of farmland between the Ministry of Agriculture and conventional farmers' unions, who largely control access to land whether for rent or purchase.

Conversely, at the local level, some local authorities and farmers' or citizens' groups are actively involved in preserving agricultural land and promoting agroecological and food transitions. They identify available lands, revitalize fallow areas or public lands, and support the establishment of new farms (Perrin and Baysse-Lainé, 2020; Léger-Bosch et al., 2020). Such initiatives are however quite recent, as local governments (such as municipalities or groupings of municipalities) hold neither legal nor executive powers over the agricultural sector which are national- or EU-level fields of competence. Local authorities began to take an interest in agricultural issues via other sectors, such as the management of natural areas (1970s) or urban planning (1980s). In the 2000s, they were granted new powers in water management,

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environmental protection, and economic development. In the 2010s, they undertook pioneering local food policies. Combining these sectoral competencies, local authorities are now in a position to take action on farmland itself. However, they still often lack the experience and skills to do so. They are not always aware of initiatives conducted elsewhere, and lack references when it comes to avoiding tensions surrounding land issues that may impede these agricultural dynamics. Local governments of other European countries are facing similar issues (Martin-Prével et al., 2023).

This presentation aims to shed light on the various roles played by French local governments in the management of agricultural land. It draws upon a database of 84 initiatives documented on a web platform established since 2020 by the French research institute INRAE and the community movement for access to land Terre de Liens. These initiatives involve local governments and aim to protect farmland and support farming, in particular through generational renewal of farmers. The analysis of this database reveals the diversity of agricultural land strategies taken by local governments. It allows us to identify obstacles and drivers and draw generic lessons that can support local governments willing to take action on farmland. Finally, we discuss the transformative potential of these land innovations.

Conceptual framework

This research on farmland governance is interdisciplinary and even transdisciplinary as it involves non-academic knowledge from Terre de Liens. In the interpretation of our results, institutional economics provides an analytical framework useful for grasping the evolution of formal and informal norms and their application, the situated institutional arrangements, possible blockages, and collective actions involving various types of stakeholders (Léger-Bosch and Fromage, 2023). Sociology of public action (Lascoumes and Le Galès, 2018) helps to map the coalitions of actors, arenas, instruments, and the knowledge specific to the multi-scale and multi-stakeholder management of farmland. Critical geography is finally useful to dig into the power relations surrounding local public decision-making and land property regimes (Calo et al., 2021).

Methods

Our analysis draws upon a database of 84 initiatives documented on the web platform RECOLTE.¹ This platform was established in 2020 by INRAE and Terre de Liens to gather case studies on local governments' land projects, which are documented through feedback from local actors and research studies. For each initiative, a 2-page text chronicles the project: the local authority's motivation for taking action on farmland, the stakeholders involved, the policy instruments mobilized, and the results obtained. Success drivers, obstacles, and remaining issues are also mentioned. A series of indicators provides additional information on the geographical context (plain, mountain, coast, rural, urban, peri-urban), agricultural production, players involved, political objectives, human and financial resources invested, impact in terms of surface area and number of farms. Our statistical analyses only take into account the 71 initiatives for which the indicators were complete. The qualitative analysis is based on the authors' re-reading of the 84 initiatives published on the web platform. It is also enriched by the authors' more detailed knowledge of several initiatives, gained in the framework of former research projects (Léger-Bosch et al., 2020; Perrin and Nougardès, 2022), or thanks to Terre de Liens' direct implication as a stakeholder in several initiatives.

Results

Five local public strategies on farmland

¹ <https://ressources.terredeliens.org/recolte>

In this section, we identify five strategies that we interpret as responses to the challenge of preserving farmland from urban development, maintaining active farms, and supporting agroecological multifunctional projects.

Creating a new organic farm on public- or collectively-owned land to address the demand for local food and environment preservation

The most frequent strategy in our sample (35 cases) aims at creating one or several new farms, in order to supply more local (often organic) food. Such initiatives mostly target market gardening. The scale of such initiatives is small: one or two farms, typically on 2 to 8 ha, exceptionally more (up to 60 ha) when other productions are involved, such as small-scale livestock (poultry, pork, sheep or goat) or cereals for local processing into flour and bread. Finding the right land is the first challenge for these projects. The local authority can rent public land that is available because it is unfarmed or because the farmer already renting it is ready to step aside. However, in many cases, private land has to be purchased. In most cases, the initiative is led by a municipality. It may also emerge as a community initiative, when citizens advocate to prevent farms from being bought up by (already big) farmers. Either the local authority buys the land itself, sometimes with funding from the regional water agency when the land is located in a water catchment area. Or, the farm may be bought collectively by the citizens, for instance through the community land bank of Terre de Liens. In all cases, important resources in time and money are required before the new farm starts. It includes the diagnosis of soil quality, the writing of a call for projects, the selection of the candidate farmer, and often also investments in fencing, water access, land clearing, etc. if the land was not farmed before.

Such initiatives face several recurring issues: finding/financing farm buildings besides the land, justifying the scale of public resources allocated to the creation of a single farm (when neighboring farms or other businesses may struggle to survive), and integrating the new farmer in the local farmers' community, when such initiative has been managed only by the local authority and alternative farming associations such as Terre de Liens.

Territorial schemes to support the local renewal of farms

In order to avoid the critics related to the first strategy (focusing on the creation of a single farm), and help more new farmers gain access to land, some local authorities dedicate resources to set up a generic territorial scheme aimed at supporting the renewal of farms. Such initiatives (n=15) are often led by large supra-local authorities, such as metropolises, territorial associations of rural municipalities (*Pays ruraux*) and provinces (*départements* in French, European NUTS3 administrative unit). We grouped in such category of strategies: land observatories, designed to identify available land and facilitate the flow of information between retiring farmers and prospective farmers; farm incubators, where new farmers can "try out" farming for up to three years with specific support and the provision of land before setting up on their own farms; and partnership agreements between a local authority and the Safer, so that the local authority is informed of land sales and can intervene by purchasing the land (i.e. public land banking). Public land banking can be permanent or temporary – for a period of 2 to 5 years in the latter case, until a farmer is identified, has started their business, and is in a position to buy back the land.

Convincing private land owners to rent their land, for rural revitalization

For 20 cases, the rationale for community action is rural revitalization. Agricultural decline and land abandonment are perceived by the local authority as an issue for local economic development and landscape (spontaneous reforestation). The spatial scale of such initiatives is often large, following administrative (municipality, groupings of municipalities) or natural (massif, woodland, regional parks) boundaries. The first stage is always to map land opportunities, which implies an analysis of aerial photos and contacts with the owners (private and public) – which often takes years. Based on this diagnosis, several actions can be implemented: negotiations with owners to convince them to rent their land to farmers, involving

sometimes specific instruments – e.g. collective land associations, or vacant property procedures whereby the local authority becomes the owner. These actions are often supported by local development funding from the provincial (*département*) and regional councils, and sometimes from the EU (European Regional Development Fund). The main difficulties are the reluctance of private landowners and, once a plot of land is available for farming, the lack of funding to further support investment in creating a new farm (land engineering, buildings, and so on).

Agrarian landscape as a local heritage to be preserved from land pressure

In some areas, the issue is not the risk of land abandonment due to rural decline but the pressure on agricultural land due to non-agricultural uses. There, the will to preserve landscapes that have been shaped by agriculture for centuries justifies that a given authority goes beyond negotiations with (often absentee) landowners and the creation of land associations and proceeds to actually acquire the threatened farmland. Such strategies (n=7) were found especially in peri-urban areas with high urban pressure (around Paris for *Ile-de-France Nature*), in very touristic mountain areas (*Conservatoire de Haute-Savoie*), and on the coast (close to Montpellier, *Conservatoire du littoral*, *Conseil départemental*). In all these cases, the provincial or regional authority, or a public national agency, buys tracts of land and rents part of them at a low price to farmers, with specific clauses to preserve the landscape and the environment.

Preserving farmland from urban development

The largest initiatives (n=7) in terms of surface aim at preserving land from urban development. Municipalities or a group of neighboring municipalities delimit in their local land-use plan a perimeter dedicated to exclusive farm use, forever. Such perimeter cannot be changed by the local authority itself: it requires the approval from the provincial or national government. Such very long-term agricultural zones range from 14 to 12,000 ha (around Lyon). They have proved to be efficient to avoid speculation on farmland in peri-urban areas, and favor farmers' investments in the land. They require a multi-year procedure and may be politically risky, as landowners lose definitively their building rights without any financial compensation. Most successful initiatives of this type have been led by large local authorities, in partnership with conventional farmers' organizations. Sometimes, they are just the first step of a long-term agricultural strategy, with the local authority then preempting farmland, supporting the creation of new farms, or funding collective actions of farmers included in the protected perimeter.

In some cases, these five strategies may only be a first step to carrying out more actions on farmland. In a peri-urban context, preserving farmland from urban development is a prerequisite to support any local development of agriculture. In deprived and declining rural areas, the first action aims rather at creating new coherent plots of farmland on abandoned farmland. In both geographical contexts, after having achieved these first steps, some local authorities will dedicate more public funding to supporting the creation of new farms (for instance, by buying land and funding land engineering or paying for agricultural extension services). The growing awareness that local authorities cannot provide the same level of support to every new farm can also lead to consider a wider scale of action, with territorial schemes to support the renewal of farms.

Generic obstacles and drivers

We identified fundamental cross-cutting conditions that characterise these different strategies: they include the commitment of elected representatives (mentioned in 53 initiatives), the availability of enough public funding (mentioned in 45 cases), the need for one person to ensure the long-term supervision of the strategy, either within the local authority (technician or elected representative) or within an external organization paid for this service (39 cases). The partnership between the public body and several farming organizations is mentioned as a key driver for success in 44 cases, while it is mentioned as missing or conflictual in 22 cases.

Beyond the formal partnerships are also mentioned the role of informal networks, effective coordination, agency and trust and transparency between all stakeholders. Private landowners are especially identified as an effective barrier in 18 cases (difficult to reach, reluctant to rent their land). While they often lack agricultural skills and experience, local public governments have also to deal during such initiatives with the coexistence and confrontation between different agricultural models (Perrin and Baysse-Lainé, 2020; Gasselin et al., 2023). Long administrative procedures are also recurring obstacles (19 cases). Urban planning takes time, as does the creation of a new farm. Local authorities must anticipate these long, but different, timeframes, and phase their objectives, plan successive steps, so as not to face a loss of collective momentum and political risk. Finally, the context may also impose specific challenges (32 cases), when land is fragmented in micro-properties, is under urban pressure, or with limited agronomic potential (soil texture, water access).

Discussion and conclusion: what transformative potential of local initiatives?

Farmland has gained a place on local public agendas

The number and the diversity of initiatives gathered on this web platform attest that the issue of farmland has gained some visibility on political agendas and that some local authorities feel legitimate to take action on this matter.

Our results first confirm the range of solutions and operational approaches in the hands of local governments, which can act as regulators (with land-use planning, land market regulation), landowners (mobilization and effective management of public land), and facilitators in local land systems (Martin-Prével et al., 2023). They also confirm that local authorities now act on farmland with diverse partners, including more and more alternative farming organizations such as Terre de Liens, beyond the Safer and Chamber of agriculture (Perrin, 2022). Without any legal powers on the agricultural sector, (groupings of) municipalities combine their formal competences on urban planning, environment and water management, and develop new skills and more ambitious strategies on farmland in the framework of local food policies (Liu et al., 2024). We also identified recurring obstacles and drivers which are valuable to support local governments in formulating tailored land strategies, engaging with relevant stakeholders, and better aligning the timelines of public policies with those of farmers.

Of course, taking action on farmland takes time (several years) and some initiatives fail. The scope of our results is limited by the data, which are neither exhaustive nor representative. INRAE and Terre de Liens have tried to cover on the RECOLTE web platform a large diversity of regions and strategies, they have started with success stories to demonstrate the feasibility, and have always asked for the approval of local authorities before publishing the initiatives on the platform. Some cases of unsuccessful actions had thus to be dismissed, even though an analysis of the reasons for these failures would be particularly enlightening for other communities. This is a perspective for future research.

Nevertheless, we can say that a wider range of local authorities are currently taking up a new role in farmland management in France. While urban and peri-urban governments were already identified as pioneers of such strategies in the literature (Baysse-Lainé et al., 2018; Perrin and Baysse-Lainé, 2020; Léger-Bosch and Fromage, 2023), our results show that small rural villages are also engaged with similar objectives. They allocate public land to create new farms and some have been fighting for decades against farmland abandonment. The RECOLTE platform and this study may hence help them to gain further recognition for their actions, in the scientific literature and in networks of local governments. Besides municipalities and groupings of municipalities, already well addressed in the literature, this study also points to the complementary role of supra-local authorities: provincial and regional administrative levels, and other public bodies (natural parks, territorial associations of rural municipalities).

Better understanding the interactions between such levels of public action in the governance of farmland would however require future research, and more qualitative in-depth case studies.

What impact on the use of land and agroecological and food transitions?

The spatial impact of such local initiatives on farmland is often limited to a few hectares, except for the delimitation of new large long-term perimeters dedicated to exclusive farm use in land use plans. Such limited spatial impact echoes other studies on public farmland in France (Perrin, 2017; Baysse-Lainé et al., 2018) or Belgium (Vandermaelen et al., 2022), putting into question the amount of public resources invested on limited surfaces. Most French farmland is still private and farmed by conventional farmers (Sovran et al., 2023). The transformative potential of such initiatives lies hence more in their replication (scaling out), their institutionalisation (scaling up) and the dissemination of new principles of land management (scaling deep) (Moore et al., 2015).

In the French locked-in context, with conventional farmers' unions largely controlling the market of productive farmland and marginal access for new alternative farmers (Baysse-Lainé and Perrin, 2021; Horst et al., 2021), our initial hypothesis was that local authorities could only act on abandoned or less productive farmland. However, our large sample of initiatives shows more nuanced results. Indeed in productive, intensive, market-oriented farming regions, local authorities can hardly buy more than abandoned farmland, or farmland with low productivity. The competition on the land market is mainly taking place among farmers. Buying farmland to promote an agroecological transition requires compromises with conventional farmers, and a formal partnership with the local Safer. Local authorities' initiatives nevertheless do impact productive farmland when they allocate (sometimes fertile) public land or when they protect farmland from urbanisation. In more rural, mountaneous regions, they work on all types of land, including abandoned farmland, but in frequent partnership with the local Safer and Chamber of agriculture (Ardèche, Lozère, Vosges). A perspective for future research would be to take into account the political orientation of the local authorities engaged on such farmland initiatives, to see its impact on the stakeholders and type of farmland involved.

In conclusion, our research confirms that local authorities have found diverse ways to gain new roles in the local governance of farmland in France, despite the absence of support from the state and the frequent opposition of conventional farmers' organizations. The central state does not support local authorities on such topics. It lets them undertake initiatives without giving them the means (legal, financial), or offering them even a framework for consistency or political recognition. This could be interpreted as a withdrawal of the state, a neo-liberal turn, or more simply the pursuit of a policy of co-governance with conventional farmers' unions, which domination was confirmed during the demonstrations of farmers at the beginning of 2024. In such a context, local authorities, farmers' and citizens' groups will have to find other ways to advocate for an agroecological and food transition, and a new governance of farmland, at national and European levels.

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