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Organizing the democratic process of transitions: the case of the “Collectif Nourrir”

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Abstract: Organizing the democratic process of transitions: the case of the “Collectif Nourrir”

To face the challenges of climate change and erosion of biodiversity, both organizational and technological innovations are required. The experience of the “Collectif Nourrir”, which gathers 54 civil society organizations working on agricultural, environmental and food issues, highlights how to implement organizational innovations that respect a number of principles of democratic participation

Keywords: collective, network, organizational innovation, governance, democratic participation

1. Introduction: Deliberating on transitions

Given the urgency of the transitions required to tackle the ecological and climate challenges, and the failure of markets to implement changes, many scholars are putting forward the idea that the transition will either be social or won't be. On one hand, ambitious policies are needed, and on the other hand, democratic control over public decision-making is essential, especially in a context marked by many uncertainties about the consequences of our choices and by the prospect of imminent disasters (Dupuy, 2002): how to rule on the general interest when the consequences of decisions are unclear and incomplete? This issue calls for renewed reflection on the role of institutions, politicians, citizens and public debate. Nowadays, there is no doubt about the vulnerabilities of society (Arnsperger, 2023) and it is important to enhance social dialogue ability within new forums to debate.

Political science has examined the various functions of the public debate. Deliberative practice encourages the production of new information and solutions. It also helps stakeholders to ascertain their preferences and to be aware of the consequences of their choices and preferences. As Blondiaux and Sintomer stressed (2002), public debate allows to overcome actors' bounded rationality (2002). However, since Anthropocene period, public debate should be reframed to involve new goals. This is the reason why recent work has focused on deliberation practices to promote political vision of alternatives, whether at the level of a production activity (Béji-Bécheur et al., 2021), of a life area or a territorial project (Valiorgue, 2020) or at the level of ecological planification (Durand and Keucheyan, 2024).

Following these analyses, we propose to focus on the experience of the “Collectif Nourrir”, since its genesis and mode of governance can be analyzed in terms of organizational innovation. This platform which gathers over fifty associations, acts in favor of agricultural and food system transitions. We will first examine political and social forces that contributed to the creation of this collective, and secondly organizational and relational drivers underpinning its growing.

2. The genesis of the “Collectif Nourrir”

The “Collectif Nourrir” was officially launched in summer 2022. It is the result of the fusion of two platforms working on agricultural and food issues. The first platform was the *Citizens' Platform for the Agricultural and Food Transition*, which was set up in 2017 when French President Emmanuel Macron initiated the “Etats Généraux de l'Alimentation” (EGA). This platform firstly operated informally, i.e. without an



associative structure, budget and dedicated employees. This platform was relying on personal involvement of members and aimed to coordinate demands and actions at different stages (consultation workshops, legislative process, implementation), but was not supposed to elaborate joint pleas and actions.

The second platform was dedicated to the Common Agricultural Policy, the “Platform for another CAP”, operating for several years during the various CAP reforms. In 2017, 45 structures mainly national network heads worked together on alternative proposals. Unlike the “EGA” platform, the “Platform for another CAP” had the status of a non-profit association and benefited from a robust organization and structured governance. This second platform had its own budget and a team of employees to manage actions too.

In 2020, each platform was confronted with reflections on the next steps to be taken, as the political processes on which they had focused were coming to an end. At the same time, the organisations decided to continue their joint work and coordination. It was on this basis that a collective reflection on possible developments was initiated.

A period of benchmark on existing agricultural and food issues coalitions and platforms in other countries was followed by a survey to members of the organisations to identify their expectations and needs (phase 1) a working group on the future of the two platforms was set up, bringing together some fifteen structures (phase 2). The working group’s remit was to work on scenarios and once the merger had been agreed, on the vision, scope and governance of the new structure. Finally, the group’s proposals were debated.

It is important to emphasise that the organisations benefited from the support of an external consultant, specialized in social and solidarity-based organisations for their strategic and organizational development. The consultant helped to define, organize and lead key stages of this process. Financial support of the platforms’ long-standing partners was crucial from beginning to end.

The “Collectif Nourrir”: a space designed to promote shared visions

The process of reflection about creating the “Collectif Nourrir” lasted from September 2020 to August 2022. This long period was undoubtedly a guarantee of success, as it encouraged people to get to know and understand each other’s working methods. This mutual learning was decisive in the collective construction of a strategic vision. The main challenge was to get out of the usual public policy framework and to work on cross-cutting issues and themes that bring all the stakeholders together.

Defining of a common position was thus a crucial step for the “Collectif Nourrir”. A second step was to set up a **document** based on shared observations and main levers to access to agricultural and food system appropriated. This co-constructed document serves as a reference and compass for the work undertaken later.

Then **time for a first joint initiative came** in the very beginning of 2022. A campaign was launched gathering together members of the two platforms (*We produce, We eat, We decide*) during presidential and legislative elections. This mobilisation (stand at the Salon International de l’Agriculture, conferences, campaign kit for volunteers, meetings with candidates, etc.) led to coordinating actions, some of which were carried out jointly.

This trial helped to achieve the merger process, giving an idea of what coordinated actions could be particularly in terms of organisation and governance, that still needed to be fine-tuned.

A second major challenge was to bring together 54 organisations different in terms of nature, size, methods or specific fields of action. The governance of “Collectif Nourrir” was defined step by step, according to the following principles. On one hand, the members of the Collectif were organized in 4 colleges : i) farmers’ organisations, ii) environmental protection and animal welfare organisations, iii) international solidarity organisations, iv) citizen-consumer-health organisations. Each one appointed two representatives to the Steering Committee (the “COPIL”, which is the equivalent of a board of directors), thus ensuring a balance in the representation of the different types of structure and in taking into



consideration their perspectives. In addition, the “Bureau” (a co-chairman, a co-chairwoman secretary and a treasurer) was also composed with one representative from each group.

The COPIL met every 6 weeks. It implemented and monitored the decisions taken at the General Meetings, which were held two or three times a year. The Collective was therefore supported by **responsive governance**, because of regular meetings. This governance also ensured that everyone was involved in decision-making and steering of activities.

3. Outlining the action in thematic groups

The preferred organisational method is based on reflection, debate and proposals for action in **small and very active cells**. Today, “Collectif Nourrir” has five thematic working groups. They are set up according to a clear process, starting with **a formalized set of objectives**. This document defines purposes, goals, organisations of each thematic working groups and are compulsory composed with six organizations from 3 different colleges of the “Collectif Nourrir”. It is proposed to **annual reporting**, amended and voted. These rules of governance applied to thematic groups allow regulation function: on one hand, they set **a framework to validate specific work orientations of thematic groups** by the Collectif as a whole ; on the other hand, they introduce **flexibility in the choice of orientations and means** devoted to each one. This flexible and reactive way of working also promotes diversity. As a result, the levers of action that can be mobilised within the workspaces vary with nature, intensity and timeframe, depending on the expectations and needs of the members and the added value identified by collective action on the thematic.

These working groups are responsible for coordinating actions of their members on specific issues or political processes. They draw on actions of the members and the expertise, which is often supplemented by external contributions from think-tanks, universities or research centres. For example, the "*dignified access and the right to food*" and "*income and trade*" working groups set up in mid-2023 have each organised around ten workshops on specific topics since their launch, improving members' capacity and gradually creating a common basis of understanding. This stage is an essential prerequisite for developing the Collective's positioning, defining its objectives and consequently the activities to be carried out.

Once this base defined, working groups may decide to go further by developing **own advocacy strategies**, as has been done on the CAP for several years. Working groups may search external expertise and research resources on their studied topics, as part of the Collective. They may also decide to organise meetings with decision-makers (ministries, MEPs, MPs, etc.), representing the “Collectif Nourrir” in official consultation forums (such as the Monitoring Committee for the French National Strategic Plan), getting involved in drafting official contributions, linked with European allies, etc. In other words, **thematic groups have a mandate to spread their capacities and areas of intervention**, according to the needs and opportunities of the moment.

Besides, the “Collectif Nourrir”, as an inter-associative platform, is entitled to communicate on the issues it covers (press releases, tribunes, publications on social networks). It can undertake **awareness-raising** and mobilisation **campaigns** targeting different audiences too. Since November 2022, it has set up a working group dedicated to the French “Pact and the Agricultural Policy Law”. In February 2024, the collective launched an awareness campaign called "With or without farmers?" The aim is to highlight both challenges of renewing farmers generations and food sovereignty issues. The campaign targets citizens in order to complain to their elected representatives.

4. Ambitions, innovations and ways forward

Beyond these thematic working groups, characteristic of an inter-association platform, the merger process enabled a new ambition to emerge. Although it is essential to mobilise people around specific political processes for a limited period, linked with social debates, it is not enough and we need to develop **more**



strategies on structural obstacles skills in order to unlock transitions in agricultural and food systems, and to establish a more democratic governance. There are many difficulties to overcome, first of all the lack of time and human resources. Nevertheless, these difficulties also lie in the need of settling a collective and multifactorial approach required for this type of reflection.

The “Collectif Nourrir” has initiated first steps on this innovative way. In November 2023, it ordered to BVA Insight in partnership with Terra Nova and Parlons Climat a survey to identify French farmers’ expectations, concerns and prospects, and more especially concerning new farmers both from farming and non-farming backgrounds. The results of this survey helped to refine action and communication strategy in the early 2024 agricultural mobilisations context, as well as supporting the Collectif’s proposals for the French law on agricultural sovereignty and generational renewal.

Although the “Collectif Nourrir” is quite young and needs to strengthen its foundations, it has already initiated a reflection on how to anchor its project and its methods of action in **longer-term, more transformative perspectives**.

Ethics

The authors declare that the experiments were carried out in compliance with the applicable national regulations.

Declaration on the availability of data and models

The authors used artificial intelligence in the translation process from French to English

Declaration on Generative Artificial Intelligence and Artificial Intelligence Assisted Technologies in the Drafting Process.

The authors did not use artificial intelligence technology in the writing process.

Authors' contributions

Editorial staff: NJ & MJ

Declaration of interest

The authors declare that they do not work for, advise, own shares in, or receive funds from any organisation that could benefit from this article, and declare no affiliation other than those listed at the beginning of the article.

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