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A transformative and critical perspective on the territorialisation and ecologisation of agrifood systems: learnings from the ATTER network.

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Abstract

This paper draws on the experience of the ATTER international research-action network on agroecological transitions at the level of territorial agrifood systems. This network brings together 19 organisations from research, teaching, civil society, local authorities and facilitation, in a system of exchanges and cross-analysis between 16 territories located in France, Italy, the United Kingdom, the USA and Brazil. We rely here on 4 of these territorial case studies to demonstrate how the collective and transdisciplinary work on agrifood systems’ trajectories on the one hand, and on food governance on the other, allows to develop a transformative and critical perspective on the territorialisation and ecologisation of agrifood systems. The analysis of territorial agrifood systems’ trajectories allows to identify the processes that favour or impede transitions and thus understand the relative balance, over time, between the dynamics of “intensification” and ecologisation of these agrifood systems. The balance between public, private and collective action and the reconfigurations over time of power relations within these territorial agrifood systems appear as key elements. Complementarily, based on the analysis of territorial food governance instances that take the form of local food councils (present in three of our case studies), we show that governance instances that allow to collectively assess and discuss these key processes are necessary to combine a transformative/action-oriented and an analytical/critical perspective on transitions processes and thus thicken local food democracy.

Introduction

In a context where the need to transform our food systems is fairly unanimously recognised, relocation has become a mantra, despite the fact that it does not intrinsically promote the sustainability and ecologisation of food systems, their resilience in the face of climate change, social justice and equity between the actors within these systems. Indeed, certain conditions are necessary to move towards territorial transitions that are both ecological and fair. This question is at the heart of the collective work of ATTER, an international research-action network on agroecological transitions at the level of territorial agrifood systems, which brings together 19 organisations and around 150 participants from research, teaching, civil society, local authorities and facilitation, in a system of exchanges and cross-analysis between 16 territories located in France, Italy, the United Kingdom, the USA and Brazil.

This paper draws on the experience of this network and on 4 of these territorial case studies to demonstrate how the collective, transdisciplinary work on agrifood systems’ trajectories and on territorial

food governance allows to develop a transformative and critical perspective on the territorialisation and ecologisation of agrifood systems that appears much needed today.

Building a collective understanding of territorial agrifood systems' trajectories

The ATTER project is based on case studies in diverse territorial contexts, which are carried out by participants with diverse profiles, both in terms of expertise (ecology, sociology, political science, agroecology, geography, etc.) and of types of structures (research units, associations, private firm). Considering this diversity of situations, the choice was to construct a relatively constrained framework to build and represent the agrifood systems' trajectories, with four common and systematic steps in the conduct of the analyses, despite a larger freedom on how to collect data (through students' work, participatory workshops etc.) and on theoretical approaches. The first step is the characterization of territorial food systems through identity cards. The second step relies on a common model to graphically transcribe the transition dynamics in the form of a timeline, showing over approximately 40 years, the main public policies at different levels and the significant local initiatives, and going along with an interpretive summary. Identity cards and timeline are both already available on the ATTER observatory (<https://obsatter.com/>) for most of our case studies. The third step is to compare the analyses of trajectories through mirror effects between case studies. This is done throughout the project through the participants' "secondments", during which shared fieldwork and cross-fertilisation workshops are carried out to develop reflective and comparative analyses. From this two-by-two comparison but also transversal comparison, we are developing a typology of transition dynamics observed in the different territories. To illustrate these analyses, we focus here on two examples over the 16 of our portfolio of case studies.

The first one is the rural region of Southern Ardèche (France), where the analysis shows the recomposition of the dynamics at work in the territorial agrifood system throughout four major periods since the middle of the 19th century, with major tipping points. Until the 1950s-60s, the agrifood system was diversified, mainly oriented towards local markets and "by nature" relatively ecological. Agricultural systems combined crops and livestock, while self-consumption and local exchanges remained high. From the 1960s to the beginning of the 1990s, there was a strong process of specialisation and intensification (in the sense of intensification in inputs, particularly synthetic ones), which is referred to in this region as the "golden age" of fruit production. The agrifood system got increasingly "pulled" by mass distribution. However, the arrival of new rural populations in the 1970s and 80s and the emergence of many initiatives focused on local products valorisation somewhat mitigated the effects of agricultural modernisation, compared to other territories. From 1995 to the early 2010s, there was a proliferation of initiatives around ecological, quality and local food, strongly supported by territorial policies, along with the affirmation of the issue of multi-functionality. Finally, since around 2015, the rise of the environmental, climate, health and social inclusion issues has led to intense debates around the necessary reconfiguration of the agrifood system. This analysis, collectively built based on longitudinal studies and within a working group of local actors and researchers, showed the key role of changing configurations of power within this territorial agrifood system. It also led to discuss competing interpretations of transition mechanisms within this group itself (some focusing on the quality turn and relocation perspective, others raising a more environmental and social perspective, both echoing competing visions of transition that also exist in the agrifood system), and

thus enrich the “final” interpretation of combined dynamics of intensification and ecologisation of the territorial agrifood system (Lamine *et al.*, 2022).

In the case of Sierra Fluminense (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil), three main periods were identified in the trajectory of the agrifood system (Palm, Schmitt and Lamine, 2021). Between the 1960s and the 1970s, the region was impacted by policies aiming to articulate industrialisation, urbanisation and the technological modernisation of agriculture. During the 1980s and 1990s, the private sector expanded its influence in the production, distribution and consumption networks of vegetable crops operating in the region, affecting the composition of demand and imposing quality conventions. From the early 2000s on, the room for maneuver for actors engaged in processes of environmentalisation of agriculture was expanded as organic production and agroecology began to be recognised by social organisations and public institutions as a potential way to enable the social and economic reproduction of family farms. The second half of the 2010s and the beginning of the 2020s were marked by multiple crises, including severe economic pressures, the Covid-19 pandemic, dramatic episodes of rain with floods and landslides (in 2022), and the deconstruction of different public policy instruments at the federal level, including food procurement programs targeting family farmers. The dynamics of ecologisation of the territorial agrifood system thus appears as quite vulnerable and dependent upon public policies and power configurations.

The cross case studies comparison leads to collectively assess the relative balance, over time, between the dynamics of intensification and ecologisation of territorial agrifood systems. While national food systems’ trajectories are largely influenced by similar drivers as was shown by a comparison of the French and UK cases (Lamine and Marsden, 2023), territorial dynamics appear to be linked to the intrinsic characteristics of the territories (for example, mountainous regions versus fertile plains), to the degree of reversibility versus inertia of these agrifood systems, to the power relations and their reconfigurations over time, and to the balance between public, private and collective action. This leads us to our second focus on governance.

Analysing food systems governance and experimenting food democracy

In the different case studies, we analyse the effects of public policies at different levels as well as the specific governance set up around the issue of agrifood systems transitions. In some of the territories under study, local food councils appear as interesting arenas of debate and experimentation. While their common feature is to include a range of actors from diverse backgrounds (institutions, civil society, economic actors) and to aim at influencing food policies and/or coordinating actors and/or actions, they are diverse in terms of their institutional versus citizen anchorage.

In North America, many local food councils emanate from local authorities and are thus most often called *Food Policy Councils*. This is the case of the Madison Food Policy Council (Wisconsin, USA) which was created in 2012 as one of the City’s several thematic committees, and gathers representatives from the city, from different sectors (school, health etc.), and residents. As an institutional arena initiated by public authorities, it tends to work in “bureaucratic” ways in both recruitment and facilitation procedures, and has difficulties in maintaining the interest of participants who are not familiar with institutional processes and set-ups. On the other hand, this strong institutional anchoring facilitates the translation of the

council's recommendations into public policies or programs as well as their funding. For example, a detailed analysis was carried out by the council to map both "food deserts" and food infrastructures and then define future priorities to guarantee local and healthy food accessibility. The work of the Food Policy Council also led to the implementation of calls and grants to local innovative projects, even though these remain difficult to apply to for many community networks.

In the case of Southern Ardèche already mentioned in the previous section, the local food council was created out of an action research collective of around 25 persons (researchers and local actors), set up in 2019 through a careful composition work aimed at bringing together both "mandated members" (representing an organisation or institution) and concerned community members. This group carried out a series of analyses (included that of the trajectory related above) and focused actions. It collectively wrote a manifesto affirming key issues around agroecological transitions and social justice as well as key principles for a thicker food democracy (<https://www.assiette-territoire.com/manifeste>), and organises a yearly local forum which gathered about 100 local actors since 2021. When it was transformed into a local food council, a public call was set up in order to enlarge the social profiles of the participants. The food council now concretely works both in plenary, which allows developing collective critical points of view regarding local policies for example, and through working groups also involving "external" citizens and practitioners, which allows addressing concrete challenges through forms of collective experimentation. However, being an autonomous instance that does not depend upon a local authority, it does not have such a direct impact on local policies as in the case of Madison.

The governance structure defined around the Inter-municipal Food Policy (IFP) "Piana del Cibo" (Tuscany, Italy) since 2018 is somewhere inbetween these two cases. This policy was defined by five municipalities in the Piana di Lucca territory (not corresponding to any administrative unit) out of a participatory process where the University of Pisa played an important role and the political will was expressed in the municipalities' signature of the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact. The overall governance structure includes an Agora (open assembly for participation and consultation), a food policy council as such, and an Assembly of Mayors, the political decision-making body. The food policy council, made up of eight representatives, designated by the municipalities based on their experience or expertise, and five representatives selected from each thematic table, serves as a bridge between the Agora discussions and the Assembly of Mayors.

While the focus of change is quite different in the three cases (with various focuses on food accessibility, food justice, ecologisation etc.) these arenas precisely allow to debate the diverse visions of necessary transformations and appear as potential tools to "thicken" food democracy, under a key condition which is to articulate a collective and critical analysis of (non) transition mechanisms, social inequalities and power relations and a transformative and action-oriented perspective. As the experience of ATTER shows, exchanges across territories and networks anchored in different realities also proves a useful basis to enrich the ways we not only analyse but also experiment food democracy in different regions.

References

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