

Food relocalisation: it is not only the number of hectares that counts!



Many cities put a special emphasis on the “relocalisation” of food, in other words: in bringing back food production closer to cities. A recent article from Adrien Baysse-Lainé (Université Lumière Lyon 2/INRA) and Coline Perrin (INRA) shows that it is not only the number of hectares of land that is relocalised that counts. Cities also need to take into account the quality of that land. More widely, they need to familiarize themselves more with the farming sector in order to provide suitable conditions for farms to come back close to the cities.

A food relocalisation policy showing encouraging results...

When we speak about “relocalising” food, pictures of historic greenbelts around cities come to mind, and associated to that, the idea that cities should aim at restoring these greenbelts. However, are current food relocalisation policies bringing back cities to what they were before?

The researchers have studied the small town of Millau, in the South of France. Millau has implemented a strong policy to support short chains and local food production over the last decade. For instance, it has been working since 2008 to ensure that schools are provided with local food and it makes sure that local farmers are well represented in its markets. The city also buys land to make it available to organic farmers producing fruit and vegetables. Last but not least, the Agricultural Chamber supports the development of short supply chains by making them visible to potential clients, or connecting farmers to food businesses.

Overall, this action is showing positive results. Even if local food still represents a very small portion of the overall supply for the city (around 6%), the number of hectares that are cultivated in order to provide local food through short chains has expanded by nearly 20% between 2006 and 2014.

... but taking place on less suitable land?

When looking in more details at where this relocalisation takes place, researchers found that, contrary to one might imagine, the land that is used to relocalise the production is not the same as the one that used to be cultivated. Productive land has indeed been lost to urbanization or other activities (such as equestrian services).

So where is food being grown now?

- First, food comes from the nearby Larzac region. This region was famous for anti-militaristic struggles in the 70's, and many neo-rural farmers settled there at the time to occupy the land against the project of installing a military camp in the region. Land quality is poor, and therefore, farmers seek to maximize the added value of their production by producing fruit and vegetables that are sent to the city.

- Second, the land that is put into production nowadays is located next to the Tarn river that crosses the city. This land was formerly used for pasture, and the city developed an active policy to buy it in order to make it available to organic farmers producing fruit and vegetables. It is highly productive because it can be irrigated by the river. But it is also at risk of flooding. As a consequence, the local planning authority plans to set up a specific insurance mechanism in order to protect exploitations from that risk.

Therefore, **the local food production in Millau is taking place on leftovers from urbanization.**

Cities should know farmers better

The example of Millau allows us to draw a few conclusions that can be useful for any city:

- First, **cities should aim at preserving the more productive land in their hinterland, as when it is lost, it can prove difficult to find good quality land to replace it.**
- Second, they should always have in mind that it is not only the quantity of land that matters, but also its quality.

According Adrien Baysse-Lainé, who co-authored the article, **this raises a more general question about how cities should tackle food production issues.** Indeed, food relocalisation policies are rather new for cities, and urban civil servants usually have very little knowledge of agricultural issues. This can lead to mismatches between what cities are trying to achieve and what farmers actually need. Cities sometimes earmark land for agricultural resettlement that is not suitable, for instance because it cannot be irrigated, or current urban planning regulations prohibit building the structures – tunnels, etc. - that exploitations will need. Other examples in France have shown that cities might overlook the time that is necessary for a new farmer to settle, hence taking the risk to go too fast.

Overall, if they want to act up food relocalisation, cities need to know the farming world better. Getting these two worlds to know each other better can take time, but it is worth taking, as it will lead to better conditions for food production relocalisation.

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Source

[Baysse-Lainé, A., Perrin, C. \(2017\). « Les espaces agricoles des circuits de proximité : une lecture critique de la relocalisation de l'approvisionnement alimentaire de Millau », Natures Sciences Sociétés, Vol. 25 \(1\), January/March 2017, p.21-35](#)

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