

How fast can urban food policies go?



Anyone looking at the urban food policy field would be astonished at how fast food issues have entered the urban scene. However, actors that are working on the ground have the feeling that things take a lot of time... An article from the French academic journal *La revue des Annales de Géographie* raises the question of the right pace for change. Given the actors, their interests and representations on a given territory, how fast can food policies go? The analysis of food policy in a French department (La Sarthe) from the 2000's onwards highlights the importance of territorial coordination as a catalyzer for change.

From the various meanings of “local” food...

When the concept of « local and sustainable food » first appeared in Sarthe, the French law did not define it precisely. Therefore, actors interpreted it differently. Such differences reveal a variety of representations and interests, making it difficult for all actors to come together into a local dynamics.

For some actors, of which some farmers, “local” only referred to the number of kilometers that food traveled. For them, this new interest for local food was good news. They saw it as an opportunity to renegotiate good purchase terms, get stable prices and improve their working conditions thanks to planned orders, without changing their production practices.

Such a point of view did not take into account issues such as increasing food quality, reducing the number of intermediaries or decreasing the environmental impact of food. These were precisely the issues that other actors, including other farmers, were willing to include in the discussion around “local” food.

The territory was therefore facing diverse, and somewhat diverging, views on what “local and sustainable” meant. How could it build on this diversity to bring about change?

... to action

Researchers highlight that change can happen through two different possible strategies:

- The first one is that of **breakthrough innovation**. In Sarthe, this translated into a project that was ideal on paper as it cumulated environmental and social benefits. The idea was to set up a social enterprise that would grow organic fruit and vegetables through a back-to-work scheme and sell them to local canteens. However, it had to face several setbacks when accessing the land to produce food, or when negotiating with clients (local authorities). The social enterprise went bankrupt only a few years after it was created. In the end, according to Amandine Gatién-Tournat, who co-authored



the article, this initiative probably came too soon for this territory. Around the same time, in other places in France where actors were more ready for change, similar initiatives succeeded.

- The second strategy is that of **step-by-step consensus**. In Sarthe, this happened through the participatory elaboration of a Quality and Proximity Charter. The Charter set requirement for the supply of food to public schools. The participation process was large enough to encompass all representations of “local” and “sustainable”. It was too large, however, to compel actors to really get to the core of the matter and open a debate, on, for instance, organic vs conventional agriculture. On the one hand, the participatory process did not produce a robust Charter that acted as a true quality signal. However, on the other hand, it managed to bring actors together and get them to know each other. And today, it is this initiative that goes on and has some impact on the territory.

Local authorities should invest in time... and territorial coordination

Should one conclude that slower, multi-stakeholders processes are better than breakthrough innovations? It would be delicate to draw general conclusions from a single case study. However, what the history of the Sarthe territory tells us is that **food policy should adapt to the degree of maturity of any given territory**. Depending on how much actors know and trust each other, some territories will probably be able to go faster than others.

The good news is that maturity is something local authorities can work on. According to Amandine Gatién-Tournat, one of the key lies in territorial coordination. This means **investing time and resources in activities that bring actors together on a very small scale**. For instance, in addition to the Quality and Proximity Charter, encounters between canteen cooks and producers were organized to discuss how canteens could better accommodate raw materials.

Territorial coordination takes time, and its results are sometimes difficult to materialize. However, it could be the missing link between the scale of challenges ahead and the actors’ ability to change!

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Source

[Fortunel, F., Gatién-Tournat, A., & Noël, J. \(2016, December\). Qualité et proximité dans l'approvisionnement de la restauration collective en Sarthe \(France\): Jeux d'acteurs entre volontés et réalités territoriales. In *Annales de Géographie* \(Vol. 712, No. 6, pp. 666-691\)](#)

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