

## How can foresight be used in local food policies?



- ✓ Foresight raises awareness about the breadth of challenges on a specific topic
- ✓ Talking about the future allows a more peaceful dialogue, away from present day issues
- ✓ Foresight is a great complement to action planning in local food policies

How can we anticipate the future of agriculture in our communities? **And what can we do to make the future we want happen?** Here are two questions at the core of local food policies that call for strategic foresight analysis.

To better understand what foresight is and how it can be used, let's follow 3 cities in the South of France that reflected upon what agriculture would look like in their surroundings in 2035.

### Taking into account all the aspects of one issue

The foresight exercise was launched in 2016 by the French Ministry of Agriculture in the South of France (DRAAF Occitanie) with 3 medium-size cities (Albi, Rodez and Montauban). These are places where agriculture has a great economic weight, but where it also faces great challenges: consolidation of agricultural activities into bigger farms, aging farmers, too much dependence over irrigation... and, for some of them, neighbouring metropolis that make land prices go up.

The exercise gathered representatives from local authorities, farmers, NGOs, schools, universities and the national State. **In a first workshop, participants were asked to make a list of all variables that could impact agriculture by 2035.** 22 variables were identified. In Rodez, for instance, 8 categories emerged (land management, farmers working conditions, quality, consumer's behaviour and their perception of agriculture, international relations and agricultural policies, environment and climate change, tourism and urban-rural relationships).

This exercise can seem cumbersome, but **it raises awareness amongst participants about the breadth of challenges ahead, whether these are technical, political, economic, social or environmental.** Indeed, each actor usually sees a problem through one lens only. But together, they create a fuller picture.

### What we can do, what we need to adapt to

**During a second workshop, participants were asked to think about how these variables could evolve in the future.**

For instance, reflecting upon young farmers setting up new business, they explored very different futures : on the one hand, a massive influx of urban dwellers into rural areas to create new farms, and on the other hand, the inability of rural areas to attract people willing to work in agriculture.

**Then, in a third workshop, participants built scenarios by combining hypotheses into plausible stories.** Scenarios play a central role in foresight. They can point to:

- Futures we want and that are likely to happen, that can be encouraged

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- Futures we want but may be difficult to make happen, that require strong action
- Futures we do not want but are likely to happen, that call for preventive action
- Futures we do not want but are unlikely to happen, to keep an eye on

For example, a first scenario that all cities adopted emphasized agro-business, with a strongly robotized agriculture in a highly globalised food system. In such a scenario, only the biggest and more competitive farms would survive. Food distribution and processing would drive the system and agriculture would come more and more specialised. In these conditions, it would be difficult to imagine harmonious relationships between urban dwellers and agriculture, as it would have turned into an industrial activity. Peri-urban agriculture would be carried out in closed farms, and people would not have access to it.

On the opposite, another scenario places consumers and their push for more local food at the heart of the future. Elected representatives would then create the conditions for food processing activities to settled around the city, and for environmentally sound produce to be promoted. Agriculture would then be better integrated into the city. However, such a scenario raises questions around food access to all, as it would lead to higher prices.

**In the end, a cross-analysis of scenarios enabled participants to identify key priorities for action:** help for young farmers to set up, agricultural land preservation, adaptation to climate change and collective water management.

### A participatory approach

The benefits of such an exercise first evolve around its participatory approach. **Because it brings together people who do not know each other that well, it enables them to better know and understand each other.** For example, civil servants working in local authorities can get to know wholesalers that already have developed local food actions and subsequently change their understanding of short chains. Any opportunity to understand better the economic reality of the food system is welcome!

As any participatory method, there are limits in how much mobilisation one can create amongst actors. It is for instance always difficult to make supermarkets representatives commit to such exercise, as they do not really see what they will concretely get out of it. Similarly, **if foresight plays a catalytic role for participants, it is more difficult to create momentum amongst those who have not taken part in the workshops**, for instance, elected representatives. It is also important to make sure that momentum is not lost after the scenarios are produced.

### Foresight in local food policies

Beyond participation, the core benefit of foresight is its ability to use the future as an enabler for exchange. Talking about the future allows a more peaceful dialogue, away from present day issues. And it allows to think about scenarios that are drastically different from what actors are advocating, in order to explore them.

In the end, what Julie Seegers, the consultant from Blezat Consulting who led the exercise on behalf of the DRAAF Occitani, remembers from it, is that **foresight made participants want to act**. So anticipation is a great way to trigger action!



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Urban Food Futures would like to thank [Julie Seegers](#) for her inputs and comments.

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