

Institutional innovation from a transformative perspective for agroecological transition: A case study of a regional natural park project.

MOCQUELET Léo, LEVY Rachel and WALLET Frédéric

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Summary

This paper analyzes the process of institutional innovation at work in a Regional Natural Park (PNR) project under development in the Gers region, aimed at facilitating the agroecological transition. It seeks to explore the ability of the PNR team members to innovate and build cohesion through a multi-stakeholder consultation approach. The study is based on an analysis of territorial governance as a lever for establishing trust-based relationships and fostering knowledge coordination among actors. To this end, the concept of institutional innovation is used, referring to the processes of transforming institutions to address socio-economic challenges (AlMalki et al., 2023). The research question focuses on understanding how the implementation of a territorial project in partnership with various stakeholders enables institutional innovation from a transformative perspective in favor of the agroecological transition. The underlying hypothesis is that the establishment of a multi-stakeholder consultation process fosters institutional innovation, thereby facilitating the transition to agroecology. To address this research question, the primary methodology adopted is participant observation, used to study four meetings organized by the PNR with farmers. This method is complemented by a preliminary diagnostic phase. Preliminary results highlight the establishment of coordination processes, as well as the mechanisms and tools mobilized by the PNR. They emphasize the diversity of the actor system, their representations, and the asymmetries between participants. The results also explore the most consensual topics and, conversely, the most divisive ones. Additionally, they shed light on mechanisms of collective construction, collective learning, knowledge capitalization, and the reorientation of participants' perspectives. This dynamic of collective construction has led to adjustments by the PNR members, such as the integration of new themes and the expansion of consultations to groups outside the initial framework.

Keywords

Agro-ecological transition, territorial community, regional natural park, institutional innovation.

Key Points

- An ambition for innovation confronted with the reality on the ground: The project studied aims for institutional innovation to structure a collective dynamic on the territory, but in practice, it currently resembles more of a consultation approach.

- A collective learning process as the main driver: Despite its limitations, the strength of the project lies in its ability to create spaces for collective learning, allowing actors to evolve their perceptions, identify new issues, and gradually build a shared vision, which is an essential condition for any future transformation.
- The major challenge of participation and inclusion: The analysis highlights the low participation of farmers and the underrepresentation of key groups such as women and young people. This uneven mobilization weakens the legitimacy and reach of potential innovations.
- Power asymmetry as an obstacle to collaboration: Even when actors are present, a predominance of speech from elected officials reveals a power asymmetry. This imbalance prevents open deliberation and constitutes a major obstacle to moving from simple consultation to innovative co-construction.

Introduction

Faced with the numerous challenges confronting the agricultural world, actors working collectively are striving to provide responses by driving public action through governance mechanisms at the territorial level in support of the agroecological transition. In this context of transition, territories must renew themselves to address the many issues they face. Thinking at the territorial scale allows for a better understanding of the dynamics between actors and for designing strategies for change. Among the many definitions of territory, we adopt the one that defines it as a “space structured by principles of contiguity and continuity.” These principles likely depend less on the purely material aspects of spaces than on the ideal systems that frame the space in question, as well as the related practices that unfold there (Lussault, 2007).

One of the strategies considered is to view the local society as a collective actor, beyond just local governments. This approach has already been well documented, notably by Lamine (2012). In order to contribute to this literature, this paper focuses on what stakeholder analysis brings when viewed through the lens of a community — understood here as a group based on voluntary adherence by actors sharing certain values, norms, or common interests (Cohendet and Diani, 2003). This perspective is based on the idea that community involvement is essential for the legitimacy and sustainability of territorial transition projects, and that belonging to a community facilitates stakeholder engagement in such processes (Christensen, forthcoming 2025).

In this context, we aim to analyze and question a territory’s capacity to renew itself, to project forward, and to unite actors through the structuring of a territorial community, using the example of a regional nature park project. Regional nature parks are French inter-municipal territorial tools aimed at protecting local heritage. As institutions, regional nature parks can foster innovation, coordinate knowledge use, mitigate conflicts, and provide incentives for more sustainable territorial management. Institutions are social constructs defined by a society’s or organization’s rules, which facilitate coordination among individuals (Ruttan and Hayami, 1984, p. 204). These tools are considered “laboratories” (Desponds, 2007) for implementing sustainable development. Since their inception in 1964, regional nature parks (PNR) have been used to experiment with a variety of tools designed to

economically and socially enhance local natural and cultural resources, while also aiming to ensure their preservation. This tool can be compared to other, less specifically French territorial projects, such as the European Living Labs movement (Dutilleul et al., 2010).

In social sciences, such frameworks are mainly studied in relation to governance and land-use planning. Although governance and planning are core components of PNR projects, not all PNRs respond to these components in the same way (Desponds, 2007). The vast majority focus on preserving predominantly "natural" areas through valorization, most often centered on green tourism (ibid). However, there are parks whose primary objective is to address the many challenges facing the agricultural sector. This perspective is less documented in the literature. This is the case, for example, of the PNR of the Vexin Français. It is in this agricultural perspective that the thinking behind the Astarac PNR project is rooted. These challenges are related to the existing relationship between agroecological transition processes and socio-territorial innovation (Poiraux et al., 2010), which is defined as "a localized innovation process designed to mobilize the creative capacities within communities so they can mobilize themselves to address their issues and develop their potential" (ibid).

From the perspective of establishing a PNR project, the field of institutional innovation is particularly well suited to study what happens at the interface of actors, institutions, and territories — with the goal of designing an innovative territorial project that fosters the formation of a territorial community. Institutional innovation is defined as a process of creating, adapting, or transforming institutions in order to respond to socio-economic challenges in a transition-oriented logic (AlMalki et al., 2023). It refers to the idea of intelligent institutions that thrive in an idiosyncratic manner in a world of exponential change (ibid). Through policy-driven interventions and learning-by-doing, institutional managers become capable of delivering praxis- and crisis-oriented innovations that are essential for their survival and success (ibid).

The research question guiding our study is thus : *How does the establishment of a territorial project in partnership with diverse actors enable institutional innovation in a transformative perspective that supports the agroecological transition ?* The underlying hypothesis is that implementing a multi-stakeholder consultation process enables an institutional innovation process that facilitates the transition toward agroecology.

To address this research question, we will analyze our case using a theoretical framework rooted in institutional economics, particularly following the work of Hélène Rey-Valette (2011) on territorial governance. Our paper is structured in three parts : A literature review, focusing on the territorial governance of the agroecological transition ; the methodology and data used, specifically addressing participant observation within the working spaces created by the association responsible for launching the PNR ; the results and discussion, which highlight the dynamics influencing agricultural consultation and institutional innovation within the PNR project.

1 - Literature review

In order to study the dynamics of territorial governance within an agroecological transition project, we propose to construct an analytical framework grounded in the literature of institutional economics. The use of this framework appears relevant to provide a qualitative analysis of the individual and collective issues at play in a territorial project, the coordination

mechanisms, and the processes associated with their definition, implementation, and evolution.

1.1 - The territorial project as a matrix for a possible transition to agroecology

Arising from a long tradition of local-level initiatives driven by groups or actors of various backgrounds, territorial development promotes the mobilization of local resources and the implementation of solutions based on the creativity or innovative capacities of local populations, within an endogenous development perspective (Gonin, 2025). This implies that in addition to taking into account the economic dimensions, businesses, or public authorities, the actions and intentions of local populations—individuals or groups such as associations and representatives of interest groups or various collectives—must also be considered. These sets of actors are then referred to as stakeholders (Mercier, 2001; Benn, 2016). From this perspective, territorial actions and public policies require the participation of local stakeholders in both their development and implementation (Gonin, 2025). This broader participation thus helps to address the crises of governability faced by public authorities, as well as the territorial development objectives supported by all local actors (Torre, 2018). The territorial project thus becomes an arena in which innovative alternative systems can be imagined and implemented (Bergez et al., 2019; Gascuel et al., 2015; Prévost, 2014).

In the context of the agroecological transition, a territorial project allows a shift from individual conversions to collective mobilization through the creation of local networks; this in turn enables niche initiatives and social innovations to develop at the local level (Nicholls et al., 2018; Ollivier et al., 2018). For example, Girard and Rebaï (2020) refer to a territorial project focused on agroecology as “a process based on the articulation between agroecological innovations and social, economic, and institutional innovations.”

Territorial projects enable actors to find means of action they would not have at other scales, such as the national level, where attempts at systemic change are more constrained (Bui, 2015). Territorial projects thus stand in contrast to the dynamics of “project territories” where implementation tends to be more top-down (Arnauld de Sartre et al., 2021; Banos et al., 2020; Banzo et al., 2019). Territorial projects act as niches constructed by local actors, within which these actors benefit from greater autonomy for action and experimentation in relation to the dominant powers of conventional systems (Gonin, 2025). This autonomy is conducive to economic and institutional innovations (Soulard et al., 2018). Territorial projects that institutionalize actor networks around a shared local transition project are therefore questioned as potential matrices for broader ecological transitions (Corade et al., 2022; Lamine et al., 2019).

The main idea is that the territorial project creates a space of autonomy for local actors, enabling them to collaborate, innovate, and collectively lead an agroecological transition by bypassing the blockages of dominant systems at larger scales.

1.2 - Institutional innovation: room for manoeuvre for a possible transition

One of the main levers enabled by territorial projects lies in the potential to initiate dynamics of institutional innovation. This is particularly true in rural areas where, as Vercher et al. (2023) demonstrate, innovation mainly stems from this type of innovation. The literature on institutional innovation focuses on the creation, adaptation, or transformation of

institutions to improve market efficiency, technological and organizational innovation, or to address new socio-economic challenges such as the transition to agroecology.

Institutions are social constructs defined as “the rules of a society or of organisations that facilitate coordination among people by helping them form expectations which each person can reasonably hold in dealing with others” (Ruttan and Hayami 1984, p. 204). These rules govern behaviours, produce more durable aspects of human systems, and guide societies along specific development paths (McCann 2004; Woodhill 2010), but also depend on the will and creativity of individuals (Shafer 1969). The field of institutional innovation thus examines public, educational, training, and corporate policies that aim to solve complex social problems, with a particular focus on the collaborations that can exist between various actors (public authorities, researchers, industries, or users) (AlMalki et al., 2023).

This form of innovation notably helps to accelerate and amplify learning and to reduce risks in the innovation process (Hagel and Brown 2013; Fuentelsaz et al. 2018; Gretchenko et al. 2018). It depends on mechanisms that help establish trust-based relationships through learning capabilities (Hao and Yunlong 2014; Chittoor et al. 2015; Phornlaphatrachakorn 2019). According to Li et al. (2020), institutional innovation is “the creation of a new and more effective system to encourage people’s behaviour, and the realisation of social sustainable development and innovation under the existing production and living environment.” These approaches show how institutions stimulate innovation by reducing uncertainties, coordinating the use of knowledge, mitigating conflicts, and providing incentives. All of these are inherent components in the implementation of a territorial agroecological transition project (Christensen, submitted 2025).

Institutional innovation is a key lever in territorial projects, because by changing the rules and encouraging collaboration among actors, it helps reduce uncertainties and risks, allowing for more effective steering of a complex transition.

1.3 - What kind of governance to foster institutional innovation

To understand the room for manoeuvre enabling institutional innovation, it is necessary to examine the modes of organisation and governance of these territorial systems, as well as the coordination relationships between actors. Indeed, simply bringing stakeholders together in one place is not enough for innovation to emerge (Chia and Torre, 2025). These actors must exchange knowledge and know-how. This also implies that their activities are compatible and complementary, or that they pursue a shared objective. All this should privilege local exchanges and participation in localised learning processes (ibid).

The realisation of these projects involves various learning processes, spread across time and space, which play a central role in territorial governance dynamics (Le Galès, 2010; Rey-Valette et al., 2014; Vitry et al., 2017). Actors draw upon knowledge derived from past experiences, gained in contexts of cooperation or conflict, which they mobilise to solve problems or develop new initiatives (Chia and Torre, submitted, 2025). In this perspective, learning related to territorial governance is defined by Vitry and Chia (2016) as cognitive or behavioural processes, individual or collective, capable of evolving the modes of governance of a territory. They influence stakeholder participation in discussions, the formulation of actions, the choice of options, or even the steering of a territorial project. These learning processes transform collective mental representations (Senge, 1990; Dieleman, 2013; Huet

et al., 2008), contribute to building a shared vision of the territory (Rist et al., 2007), strengthen trust and cooperation among actors (Sol et al., 2013), while also developing their organisational skills, such as the ability to participate actively in meetings, cooperate, or maintain dialogue (Duguid et al., 2007), even in times of tension (Chia and Torre, submitted 2025). Governance learning thus aims to guide and support territorial development pathways. The way in which this learning unfolds strongly conditions the long-term involvement of actors (Innes and Booher, 2003). It may result in varied territorial configurations, reflected in specific forms of relational networks (Chia and Torre, submitted 2025). For example, collective learning can intensify interactions among actors by enhancing individual skills, which may lead to the centralisation of the network around certain actors to facilitate communication (Newig et al., 2010).

An institutional innovation for a territorial project supporting agroecological transition could lie in moving beyond the logic of communities of practice, to conceive the articulation between stakeholders as territorial communities. These communities could resemble communities of belonging or destiny (Rosenvallon, 2018; Alieri, 1995), acting upon social cohesion and territorial well-being (OECD, 2014; Bourdeau-Lepage et al., 2018).

Indeed, communities of practice, like other forms of communities such as actor collectives involved in common goods management (Ostrom and Schlager, 1992), tend to be poorly inclusive. This closure limits the ability to integrate actors from outside the initial circle, thereby hindering the diffusion of knowledge beyond the sectoral perimeter. While homogeneity within these communities facilitates mutual identification among members and the construction of shared practices based on common references, it can also produce a silo effect. Boundaries then become so impermeable that they obstruct openness to heterogeneous profiles that could, through contrasting viewpoints, enrich existing practices. In line with Olson's (1989) work on collective action, heterogeneity can nevertheless be beneficial, particularly in resource management, by bringing in a diversity of skills and experiences.

In this perspective, it becomes relevant to focus on the forms of institutionalisation of heterogeneous communities by drawing on their territorial dimension. Indeed, several homogeneous communities coexist within the same space, which creates potential opportunities for interaction between them. Yet the literature still rarely addresses this territorial dimension. In this context, a territorial community can be defined as a social construct bringing together all the actors living and operating within the same territory (Hammani and Angade, 2024; Lorthiois, 1996). These actors share values, norms, responsibilities, and a common relationship with their environment (Cohendet and Diani, 2003; Hammani and Angade, 2024; Lorthiois, 1996). As Hammani and Angade (2024) point out, the active engagement of the territorial community is a key factor in the success of local development projects, as it provides initiatives with greater legitimacy and sustainability. Furthermore, a more open territorial community would share some of the advantages of communities of practice described by Wenger (2005), while benefiting from the infusion of new ideas brought by external actors. This blend could enrich existing practices and spark innovative dynamics, particularly around agroecology-related issues.

To foster institutional innovation, the challenge would be to go beyond the often too closed model of communities of practice, and instead support the emergence of heterogeneous

“territorial communities” that allow for deep collective learning and collaboration among all actors within a territory.

2 - Methodology and Data

In this section, we present the Regional Nature Park (PNR) scheme, the approach implemented, the data collected, and the method of analysis.

2.1 The Regional Nature Park scheme

The Regional Nature Park (PNR) scheme was established in 1967 as an instrument serving France’s regional planning policy (Caron, 2008). There are currently 58 PNRs (Fédération des Parcs, 2024). These are institutional territories organised around a development project based on the conservation of local heritage and developed through consultation between elected officials and local populations (Caron, 2008). In order to be awarded the label, PNRs must meet certain criteria: they must be “fragile balance territories, with rich and threatened natural and cultural heritage, carrying a development project based on the preservation and enhancement of this heritage” (Fédération des Parcs, 2024). In this perspective, the law defines five core missions for PNRs: (i) the protection and management of natural and cultural heritage; (ii) spatial planning; (iii) economic and social development; (iv) reception, education, and information; and (v) experimentation (ibid). These missions can be supported by institutional innovation dynamics.

The development and management of PNR territorial projects are entrusted to local elected officials and local authorities. This collective and collaborative governance is formalised through a Charter, approved by a decree from the Ministry of the Environment (Caron, 2008). This Charter is a framework document that materialises the project by setting the objectives to be achieved and the measures to be implemented—by both the park’s managing body and the signatories of the Charter—for the next 15 years. The Charter’s approval results in the official labelling, which subsequently enables stakeholders to access funding to carry out their objectives.

The future Regional Nature Park of Astarac is located in the southern part of the Gers department, where three intercommunalities committed, as early as 2017, to the implementation of a PNR project. The area concerned covers 124 municipalities and is home to a population of 32,983 inhabitants (INSEE, 2016). It has been recognised for its strong territorial coherence based on several heritage-related criteria such as landscapes, ecology, hydrography, history, and quality of life. Although the Regional Nature Park label has not yet been awarded, a collective dynamic is already in motion. This initiative is structured around five major areas: natural heritage and landscapes; agroecological transition; water, climate and energy; spatial planning and built heritage; quality of life, attractiveness and identity.

Agriculture is a cornerstone of the project, as Astarac is a predominantly agricultural area. Indeed, 85% of its land area is used for agriculture, with a utilised agricultural area (UAA) of approximately 108,000 hectares (RPG 2019), distributed across 1,950 farms (Agreste, 2010). The local agricultural model is based largely on mixed crop-livestock systems, which account for 70% of the farms. However, this territory remains vulnerable and faces multiple

challenges: soil degradation, strong reliance on irrigation, declining livestock numbers, and increasing uncertainty regarding the resilience of its agriculture in the face of climate change. In this context, one of the major challenges of the Astarac PNR project is to steer territorial governance towards an agroecological transition.

2.2 - Participant Observation

This study is based on the method of participant observation. Introduced into anthropology by Bronislaw Malinowski, this approach became established in the early 20th century when he chose to spend two years in the Pacific to conduct in-depth research among the populations of the Trobriand Islands.

This initial immersion gave rise to what has been called the Malinowskian revolution, which “encourages the adoption of an ethnographic approach, where the construction of fieldwork data and the development of theory must be carried out by the same researcher.” This shift in perspective, based on immersion, allows for the production of a “thick description” (a term borrowed from Clifford Geertz, cited in Maertens, 2016), which invites us to contextualise and explain the sociocultural meaning of the observed facts.

As a method of data production, participant observation allows the researcher to experience the reality of the subjects studied and to understand mechanisms that would be difficult to decipher for someone in an outsider position. By participating in the same way as the actors, the researcher gains privileged access to information that would be hard to capture through other empirical methods (Soulé Bastien, 2007).

According to Platt (1983), the expression “participant observation” began to take on its current meaning in the late 1930s. It then referred to a research technique in which the researcher observes a community of which they are also a member. The researcher becomes a student of social actors through extended interaction with them (De Sardan, 2001). Given the diversity of forms of participant observation, speaking of a singular definition of the term appears reductive.

In light of this, our approach aligns with the work of Marshall and Rossman (1989), who define participant observation as “the systematic description of events, behaviours, and artefacts in the chosen social setting for study” (p.79). Bernard (1994) adds that participant observation is a process involving building relationships within a community and learning to interact in such a way as to blend into the community so that its members behave naturally—followed by a withdrawal from the setting in order to reflect on and analyse the data. It is within this framework that our participant observation took place.

The term participant observation here refers to a type of observation in which the researcher makes their role explicit. They are known as an outside observer by members of the community in which they operate. While this can potentially lead to artificial changes in behaviour, it avoids ethical concerns since the method is not concealed. Some sociologists have raised concerns about the methodological validity of participant observation, focusing on the practical contradiction of being both a social actor and a detached observer (Bourdieu, 1978). In our case, participant observation involved a non-interventionist presence during

meetings, visible to participants, with informal interactions during the post-meeting discussions.

The observation grid used to study the workshops set up by the Regional Nature Park was inspired by the *“Guide for implementing governance in support of sustainable territorial development”* (Rey-Valette et al., 2011). This tool aims to analyse territorial governance by breaking it down into key issues requiring attention (ibid). The grid was designed in relation to the stages of public policy, in order to assess governance arrangements at various points in the process.

Three sections were identified, corresponding to three complementary levels of analysis (Appendix 1). The first two sections (*Mechanisms set up by the PNR*; and *Understanding actor systems, representations, and asymmetries*) focus on knowledge of institutions, procedures, actor networks, and issues. They describe the working environments that were established. These sections include questions such as: “What are the main objectives of these mechanisms?” or “Which stakeholders are involved and represented?”

The next section (*Evaluation of practices, outcomes, and effects of the workshops*) reflects a more analytical approach. It includes the notion of evaluation (of products and effects). In addition to participant observation, this dimension was also supplemented by a questionnaire distributed by members of the PNR, in order to gather farmers’ positions on the most expected and appreciated actions.

Beyond these levels of analysis, the observation grid also distinguishes between questions related to the structural and dynamic components of territorial governance. Overall, the data processed comes from participant observation, questionnaire feedback, and additional discussions with PNR members.

2.3 - Workshops, Seminars, and Working Spaces

All the data used to test our hypotheses were collected from the workshops, seminars, and working spaces set up by members of the association responsible for establishing the Regional Nature Park (PNR). We distinguish between two types of data.

The first comes from an exploratory field phase (see: fieldwork table). This phase enabled us to become familiar with the territory and its key issues, as well as to understand the collective processes involved in drafting the future PNR charter. It also allowed us to build relationships within the community under study and to learn how to engage in ways that blend into the broader mechanism.

The second type of data comes from four workshops organised specifically for farmers in the region (see: fieldwork table). This phase made it possible to gather the data used in the results section by applying the observation grid inspired by the *Guide for implementing governance in support of sustainable territorial development* (Rey-Valette et al., 2011).

Table 2 - Data description

Events	Description
Preliminary fieldwork	
Thematic Partnership Commissions <i>3rd to 5th October 2023</i>	This first opportunity for exchanges between the region's institutional players was the launch of the drafting of the charter for the Astarac Regional Nature Park project. We attended two thematic commissions: "Agro-ecological transition" and "Water - Climate - Energy".
Seminar « Cap vers l'Astarac de demain » <i>20 and 21 March 2023</i>	This seminar brought together the region's institutional players to build a positive vision for the Astarac of 2050. The aim was to create a common thread running through the charter.
Agricultural information meetings <i>17 June 2024</i>	The aim of these meetings was to inform farmers about the process of creating the PNR and to gather their initial reactions and expectations.
Technical agricultural meeting <i>2 July 2024</i>	This meeting is a time for exchanges with institutional players working on agriculture-related issues in order to present the agricultural diagnosis and the state of play of the Agroecological Transition; exchanges to amend and complete the elements of this diagnosis; and to present the process of drawing up the Charter.
Seminar « Élaboration de la charte » <i>15 October 2024</i>	This seminar marked an important stage in the co-construction of the PNR Charter, bringing together various institutional players to share the strategic project drawn up on the basis of the work of the forward-looking seminar held on 20-21 March 2024 and to amend the definition of the operational objectives of the future Charter.
Seminar to continue the process of drawing up the Charter.	Following on from previous seminars, the aim of this seminar is to present a first version of the operational project; to discuss the

16 December 2024	key elements and their implementation; and to prepare the next stages of the project.
In-depth fieldwork	
Information meeting for residents 1, 3, 8 and 9 October 2024	These public meetings provided an opportunity to inform all local residents about the PNR project and to gather their opinions and questions.
Association information meeting	These public meetings for associations were an opportunity to provide information on the PNR project and to gather their opinions and questions.
Workshops with farmers 8, 9, 12 and 13 October 2024	These workshops specifically targeted farmers to gather their opinions and proposals on the agricultural issues that will be included in the NRP charter (soil, agriculture-biodiversity synergies, water, experimentation and networks, transmission, sectors and added value, diversification and new sectors). The aim was to obtain a gradient of agreement and feedback on the issues identified by the PNR.

3 - Results and Discussion: Agricultural Consultation and Governance in a Regional Nature Park Project

In this section, based on the structure proposed by Rey-Valette et al. (2011), we describe the coordination process implemented by the association's members, the dynamics between actors, and evaluate the impact of the workshops on the collective.

3.1 - A Dynamic Coordination Process Involving Multiple Tools and Mechanisms

Workshops Organised by the PNR

The actors in charge of the PNR implemented a dynamic coordination process aimed at fostering institutional innovation. This process took shape during the initial phase of developing the PNR project, when an agricultural consultation was launched. Farmers expressed their expectations for a mechanism through which they could voice their opinions. In response, the association organised four agricultural meetings to inform the agricultural section of the PNR Charter. These workshops aimed to address several goals : (i) reduce misunderstandings about the project, often confused with a protected area that would impose restrictions on farming activities ; (ii) initiate a dynamic around agroecology with local farmers

; (iii) demonstrate the intention to create synergy between farmers and institutions working in the agricultural sector.

The main objective was to gather farmers' opinions, both through a scale of agreement and open feedback, on the themes identified by the PNR (soil; agriculture-biodiversity synergies; water; experimentation and networks; generational renewal; value chains and added value; diversification and new sectors). The fact that two modes of participation (oral and written) were offered by the association is seen as a strength, as it mobilises multiple participatory tools. Moreover, the diversity of topics discussed allows the various actors present to contribute within their areas of expertise, while also encouraging them to engage with less familiar themes, prompting them to move beyond standardised discourse and common grievances. According to Rey-Valette et al. (2011), this is a valuable condition for effective collective construction.

The workshops organised by the association constitute spaces for deliberation (Rey-Valette et al., 2011). While the methods used were adapted to the local issues, they remained fairly standard for territorial projects. This cannot yet be considered institutional innovation in itself, but rather the early stages of collective structuring — which could, if lessons are retained, evolve into more innovative institutional arrangements.

Facilitation and Dysfunction

To carry out these meetings and enable institutional innovation, the association undertook communication efforts ahead of time and implemented facilitation practices to structure the discussions. Despite these efforts, we identified three main dysfunctions: Low attendance at the meetings ; dominance of speech by elected officials ; limited representation of women and young farmers.

First, attendance was relatively low (26 farmers participated). The difficulty of mobilising farmers in public decision-making arenas is a well-documented issue (Rey-Valette et al., 2011). One explanation lies in a shift in the “deliberative framework” (ibid) among farmers, whose collective identity expression is often weakened by participatory approaches that prioritise individual opinions over collective representation, such as through unions. This low participation could also stem from the farmers not yet perceiving themselves as part of a territorial community of belonging or destiny (Rosanvallon, 2018; Altieri, 1995). They may not yet feel sufficiently connected to the PNR territory or its shared challenges.

The second dysfunction arises from the dominant speech of elected officials, which overshadowed farmers' voices despite the facilitator's attempts to manage speaking time. In participatory systems, power and participation are intertwined. One of the aims of participatory processes is to rebalance power relations, traditionally unequal between local actors (citizens, resource users) and decision-makers, managers, researchers, etc. (Barnaud et al., 2016).

Finally, we observed low participation from women and young farmers. For instance, only five women attended. These underrepresented participants were also more marginalised in the discussions. This reflects a power asymmetry between participants, which was addressed through a form of “unconditional dialogical neutrality” (Barnaud et al., 2016) by the facilitator

— meaning that she gave equal speaking opportunities to all actors without taking sides. However, greater effort to actively solicit the input of these underrepresented groups could help restore balance. This would require adopting a “post-normal non-neutrality” stance (ibid), aiming to counter obstacles to equity in the deliberative arena by actively amplifying the voices of marginalised actors.

3.2 - Actor Systems, Representations, and Asymmetries

Actors with Multiple Identities and Representations

In the process of institutional innovation, the challenge lies in including actors with multiple identities and representations in order to foster a confrontation of knowledge. In line with Olson's (1989) work, the presence of a diversity of actors brings new ideas that enrich discussions and create new synergies.

From the standpoint of multiple identities, we observe a variety in the orientation of agricultural activities, which reflects the diversity of agricultural issues present in the territory. This diversity is further reinforced by the fact that several farmers wear multiple hats — some are also elected officials or involved in local collectives. These farmers tend to play a more prominent role in the discussions, although not necessarily as leaders. They are also the ones who return for successive consultation sessions and are familiar with the process. Their involvement can be partly explained by the mechanisms of collective identity expression often seen in representatives of agricultural professions, such as union leaders. For example, the president of the Young Farmers' union in the canton is particularly active in monitoring the PNR Astarac initiative. Other prominent participants include pioneering farmers and municipal council members.

These multiple identities and representations give rise to debates among stakeholders. Some topics generate more controversy than others, both between the association members and among the farmers themselves. Some topics, like direct payments for ecosystem services or reducing administrative burdens, appear relatively consensual. In contrast, the subject of renewable energy is highly divisive and remains unresolved after the exchanges. A coalition of farmers supporting a solar park project criticized the association members for their perceived opposition to renewable energy, which they view as a valuable opportunity for agriculture. The association members responded that they are not against such projects and assess them on a case-by-case basis. After a heated discussion, PNR representatives clarified that the final decision lies with the prefecture, thereby limiting their role to an advisory capacity. This clarification brought the debate to a close but did not lead to collective progress on the issue. Furthermore, some farmers opposed large-scale solar projects, such as the one proposed by this coalition. The disagreement can be partly explained by the diversity of the profiles present. Despite being part of the same profession, selective groupings and alliances often form based on temporary collaborations, shared challenges, or territorial solidarities — what Rosanvallon (2008) describes as “communities of destiny” linked to new, lived experiences of territory. This example illustrates the challenge of structuring such a community.

Nonetheless, several formal or informal coalitions emerged among the actors involved in the meetings. These coalitions are partly driven by social proximity (Granovetter, 1985) and institutional proximity (Zukin & DiMaggio, 1990). Social proximity stems from the theory of economic embeddedness in the social sphere (Polanyi, 1944) and refers to social ties that bring actors closer and reduce the risk of opportunistic behavior. It fosters a form of implicit relational trust. Institutional proximity complements social proximity by encompassing other trust-building factors such as shared values, norms, rules, and habits (Zukin & DiMaggio, 1990). All these dimensions should be considered in the design of institutional innovations that could support the development of structured communities.

Shared and Asymmetric Knowledge

Throughout the workshops, both shared knowledge and asymmetries were observed. Two types of knowledge emerged as key to the functioning of the collective: knowledge of the agricultural sector, and understanding of the PNR mechanism.

The facilitator and the elected officials showed a good grasp of agricultural topics, helping to avoid major information asymmetries and enabling a reflective discussion on agriculture and related sectors. The facilitator is in charge of the agroecological transition component of the project and has worked on these issues for years in other territories prior to this role. She is therefore well-versed in the agricultural sector and comfortable with technical vocabulary. Similarly, although the elected officials do not come from farming backgrounds, they also demonstrated familiarity with the topics discussed and used appropriate technical terms. One elected representative regularly mentioned his family ties to local farmers. These “invisible institutions” (Rosanvallon, 2024) play a role in building trust and legitimacy around the territorial project.

On the other hand, not all farmers shared the same level of knowledge about the PNR initiative. Several stated they knew little or nothing about it, which motivated their attendance at the workshops. This asymmetry was addressed through an introductory session explaining the PNR framework — a practice seen as a strength by Rey-Valette et al. (2011).

Importantly, this asymmetry can be seen as beneficial. It highlights the development of a potential future territorial community. These participatory spaces, by including heterogeneous actors, allow for a productive confrontation that can enrich the practices and perspectives of all parties involved. Farmers unfamiliar with the PNR process bring fresh perspectives and ideas, contributing to a richer collective reflection on the territorial project.

3.3 - Evaluation of Practices, Outcomes, and Effects of the Workshops

Collective Construction and Collective Learning

Collective construction has been partially achieved. Knowledge has been capitalized on both sides. Various reorientations were identified. For example, the meetings provided better access to information about the PNR mechanism and changed the perception some farmers had of the initiative. As one farmer, previously unfamiliar with the PNR, expressed:

“I’m really happy with what I heard today. I didn’t see it like that (the park project). Fifteen years (as a timeline) is perfect for agriculture (...) but the term ‘PNR’ is scary.” (Farmer 1)

This reflects a strengthening of trust between actors (Sol et al., 2013).

However, others remain skeptical, as illustrated by this pair at the end of a workshop:

“It’s still vague (...) we feel like we’re going to be living off illusions, not something concrete.” (Farmers 2 and 3)

On the PNR side, there are also plans for reorientation. For example, they now intend to address the issue of hillside water retention reservoirs, which was not originally planned. Specifically, they aim to inventory existing reservoirs in the area. The growing concern over water scarcity is driving this shift. Thus, territorial context and past experiences enable the emergence of new initiatives (Chia & Torre, forthcoming, 2025).

Moreover, thematic working groups are expected to form in 2026 — an idea that itself emerged from the workshops. According to Rey-Valette et al. (2011), the creation of working groups is a central feature of collective construction. However, she also cautions that the repeated involvement of certain individuals may lead to the emergence of territorial leaders who could monopolize interactions and overshadow other participants. This is a key concern, especially since marginalized actors were not meaningfully integrated into the co-construction process — aside from their responses being included in agreement gradients during workshops. Still, Newig et al. (2010) argue that centralization around specific actors can facilitate communication.

The initiative also reached fewer people than originally intended. To address this, PNR members adapted by presenting the project at the general assembly of the Jeunes agriculteurs— an idea that also emerged from exchanges with farmers. This adjustment is a strength, as it allows the initiative to reach a broader audience beyond the institutional framework. As identified by Vitry & Chia (2016), this is a process of collective learning that helps evolve territorial governance. This governance adaptation results in a new territorial configuration, expressed through specific types of relational networks (Chia & Torre, 2025).

It is also worth noting that PNR members incorporated farmers’ feedback during the workshops. The real challenge will be to determine whether these contributions are reflected in the official charter — a key indicator of whether farmers’ input was truly taken into account.

These workshops enabled collective learning for both the PNR team and the farmers. Notably, they encouraged reflection on priority actions (via a questionnaire) and improved farmers’ understanding of the PNR mechanism. However, by the end of the workshops, there was still no evidence of the emergence of a shared language or common culture.

Structuring a Proto-Institution

At this stage, the workshops cannot yet be classified as organizational or institutional innovations. Rather, they represent the structuring of a proto-institution — a potential lever for entering into full institutional innovation during the formalization of new governance frameworks for the regional nature park.

This structuring occurs through improved coordination among actors around project planning and implementation. However, the impact remains limited due to the relatively small number of participants. Still, a majority of those involved expressed a willingness to participate further in the implementation of the PNR initiative, as indicated by responses to the workshop questionnaire. For instance, regarding the topic of "erosion, soil, and carbon," and specifically the sub-topic "Improving knowledge," 18 farmers said they were willing to take part in PNR-led actions, while 6 were open to considering it. No farmer said they were unwilling to participate, and 2 did not respond. Other topics generated less interest. For example, in the sub-topic "Strengthening agritourism and food-related professions to promote local products and create new market outlets," 6 farmers explicitly stated they did not want to engage.

These results are encouraging for building the future collective and could guide the organization of future working groups.

Farmers also expressed high satisfaction with the workshops:

- 22 out of 26 were satisfied or very satisfied with the content, and
- 24 out of 26 were satisfied or very satisfied with the format.

Nevertheless, once again, special attention must be paid to participant profiles. There is a need to diversify participants. However, achieving the right balance is complex — between, on one hand, maintaining a stable participant base to build a lasting community and, on the other, ensuring diversity, especially in this case where institutionalization is underway and early-phase actor training is essential.

4-Conclusions

As a reminder, the main research question was to understand how the implementation of a territorial project in partnership with various stakeholders enables institutional innovation from a transformative perspective in favor of the agroecological transition. The analysis of the implementation process of the Astarac Regional Natural Park (Gers) project through the lens of institutional innovation reveals a relevant case study for understanding how a territory can organize itself and mobilize its actors in support of an agroecological transition. The PNR initiative positions itself as an attempt to create a territorial community, where institutional innovation, understood as the creation or adaptation of rules and practices, aims to promote a sustainable agricultural and food system that is environmentally friendly and rooted in local specificities. In practice, the workshops implemented align more with a consultation approach than with institutional innovation. Moreover, at this stage, we cannot yet speak of a structured group acting as territorial communities. Nevertheless, the work carried out fosters learning that may lead to reflections on actions influencing the structuring of a territorial community centered on agroecology through institutional innovation.

The methodological approach, based on participant observation during the agricultural workshops, enriched by an analytical framework inspired by institutional economics and research on territorial governance, makes it possible to decipher the dynamics at play. The analysis highlights the establishment of a dynamic coordination process, characterized by the multiplication of participatory mechanisms and tools (thematic meetings, forms of oral and written expression). This approach reflects a willingness to move beyond traditional sectoral governance in favor of the involvement of a plurality of actors.

However, the study reveals inherent challenges in mobilizing stakeholders, particularly the low participation of farmers—a recurring phenomenon in public decision-making arenas in rural areas. This difficulty can be interpreted in light of the evolution of deliberative patterns within the agricultural world, where individual expression tends to take precedence over traditional collective mobilization. Furthermore, the predominance of elected officials speaking during the workshops highlights a potential power asymmetry, despite the facilitation efforts. Reflecting on how to address these difficulties could enable a full entry into a process of institutional innovation.

The analysis of stakeholder systems reveals a diversity of identities and representations, although certain categories—such as women and young farmers—are underrepresented and marginalized in the discussions. The debates observed reveal points of both convergence and divergence, illustrating the complexity of the issues surrounding the agroecological transition and the need to navigate between sometimes conflicting interests (e.g., the integration of renewable energy sources).

In terms of evaluating practices, the workshops appear as spaces for collective learning, leading to an evolution of perceptions and the identification of new work avenues for the PNR. The recognition of the process by some initially skeptical farmers and the integration of new topics (e.g., water reservoirs) into the PNR's agenda testify to a certain effectiveness of the participatory approach. The prospect of creating thematic working groups in 2026 constitutes a key step in the collective construction process.

In conclusion, this case study of the Astarac PNR project illustrates the potential of the governance established as a lever to initiate an agroecological transition at the territorial level. Nevertheless, this governance remains too close to consultation dynamics and does not yet fully embody institutional innovation. The implementation of participatory agricultural workshops represents an attempt to build multi-stakeholder governance and to integrate the knowledge and expectations of the agricultural sector into the development of the territorial project. However, the analysis also highlights the challenges related to the mobilization and inclusion of all actors, as well as the management of power asymmetries within consultation spaces. Adjustments in participation strategies—particularly increased attention to the inclusion of underrepresented groups and facilitation aimed at balancing speaking time—could enhance the effectiveness of this transformative institutional innovation approach. The charter and future actions will allow for a deeper evaluation of the impacts of these workshops on the territory's agroecological transition trajectory.

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Appendix 1:Table: Participatory observation grid for workshops organised by the NRP

<u>Key words in the definition</u>	<u>Structural components</u>	<u>Dynamic components</u>
<u>1a Systems put in place by the PNR</u>		
<u>Dynamic process of coordination process and tools</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">-What mechanisms (consultation, concertation, etc.) and tools are used to achieve the objectives?-How did these mechanisms emerge (external inspiration and models that may have influenced what is being put in place locally)?-What are the main stages in their development?-What are the main objectives of these schemes?-What forms and types of coordination exist (formal and informal)?-How are divergent points of view handled? How and by whom are they managed?-How is the legitimacy of these systems perceived?-Have there been any major malfunctions?-How were they resolved?	
<u>1b.understanding stakeholder systems, representations and asymmetries.</u>		
<u>Actors with multiple identities and representations</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">-Which stakeholders are involved and represented?-What types of farmers (OTEX) or CSP for the residents?-Age? Gender? Profile mix?-Where are they located (business or home)?-Are there any players present at previous NRP discussion sessions? Who are the new players?-Who are the absentees?-Who are the leaders?-What are their values, representations, interests and justifications?-Why are they taking part in the workshops?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">-What types of partnerships or coalitions (formal and informal) have been formed between the players?-Who are the players involved in several partnerships?-What are the controversies and consensuses?-Who are the fringe players?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -How is the PNR project perceived? Are the players present favourable or unfavourable? -Which players are wearing multiple hats? What are their responsibilities and institutional resources? Do these players play a greater role in interactions? -How did the players hear about the workshops? 	
<u>Shared and asymmetric resources</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -What knowledge is shared? -What tools or resources (information, knowledge, relationships) are used? -Which stakeholders have the upper hand in debates? -Do asymmetries in knowledge between stakeholders create conflicts? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Has the scheme improved access to knowledge (diagnosis and issues) about the PNR? -How has the production and sharing of knowledge and communication between stakeholders evolved? -Is there a capitalisation of knowledge (e.g. existence of practical guides, guidelines, etc.)? -How have conflicts evolved?
<u>3. Evaluation of workshop practices, products and effects</u>		
<u>Collective construction (objectives and actions)</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Has collective construction been achieved? -What is the performance in relation to targets? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Were there any changes of direction during the co-construction process? -Who initiated them? -Were new groups formed? -Were the fringe players integrated?
<u>Apprentissages collectifs</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -What apprenticeships have been created? -Who benefits from this learning? -Are there opportunities to reflect on how the PNR objectives are being implemented? -Are participants more aware of the importance of having a regional project? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Has a common language/culture been created?

<u>Organisational and institutional innovations</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Does the workshop enable coordination between stakeholders in terms of operations and project development? -Are the members of the PNR (re)known by all the players? -Are there new relationships and working practices that make sense to the players? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Have the schemes led to the emergence of other schemes, new organisations or new rules? Why or why not? -Have the systems and tools used been the subject of appropriation strategies? -Is the park project better perceived? Why or why not? -Are the players ready to get involved again? -How are the workshops perceived by the participants at the end of the working sessions? -What were the failures? How were they experienced and overcome?