

Institutional innovation in a transformative perspective in favour of agro-ecological transition. Case study of the agricultural workshops set up by the Astarac regional nature park project (Gers)

Keywords

Agroecological transition, institutional innovation, regional nature park

Classification JEL : O13, O18, O31 et Q10

1- Discussion of the Objective and Contribution of the Article

The objective of this study is to present a case study on a mode of governance for the agroecological transition. It aims to analyze and question the capacity of the actors involved in a Regional Natural Park (PNR) project to innovate and create cohesion. This project is being developed with a strong commitment from stakeholders to ensure a participatory approach.

To address this subject, the concept of institutional innovation (AlMalki et al., 2023) is used. This concept focuses on the creation, adaptation, or transformation of institutions to enhance market efficiency, drive technological and organizational innovation, or address socio-economic challenges such as the ecological transition. Institutions are social constructs defined as "the rules of a society or organizations that facilitate coordination among individuals by helping them form expectations that each person can reasonably have in their relationships with others" (Ruttan & Hayami, 1984). These rules govern behavior, produce lasting cohesion in human systems, and guide societies along specific developmental paths (McCann, 2004; Woodhill, 2010). However, they also depend on the willingness and creativity of individuals (Shaffer, 1969).

The field of institutional innovation focuses on governance processes that help resolve complex social issues, particularly by examining collaborations between diverse actors (public authorities, researchers, industries, or users) (AlMalki et al., 2023). This form of innovation notably accelerates and amplifies learning and reduces risks in the innovation process (Hagel & Brown, 2013; Fuentelsaz et al., 2018; Gretchenko et al., 2018). It relies on mechanisms that establish trust-based relationships through learning capabilities (Hao & Yunlong, 2014; Chittoor et al., 2015; Phornlaphatrachakorn, 2019). According to Li et al. (2020), institutional innovation is "the creation of a new and more efficient system to encourage people's behavior and achieve sustainable social development and innovation within the existing production and living environment." These perspectives highlight how institutions stimulate innovation by reducing uncertainties, coordinating knowledge use, mitigating conflicts, and providing incentives.

The research question guiding this study is: *How does the implementation of a territorial project in partnership with farmers enable 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 explore this research question, we will analyze the case of a Regional Natural Park under development in the Gers region (France), focusing on one specific aspect of the participatory approach: the analysis of four meetings with local farmers. We will first present our methodology and the data used, followed by a discussion of preliminary results.

2- Method of Meeting Analysis and Data Used

The primary method used in this study is participant observation (PO). This method allows researchers to experience the reality of the subjects being observed and to understand mechanisms that are difficult to decipher from an external perspective. By participating as an actor, the researcher gains privileged access to information that would be otherwise inaccessible through other empirical methods (Bastien, 2007). The term PO describes a form of observation where the researcher makes their role explicit. They are recognized as an external observer by the members of the community in which they operate. In our case, participant observation was carried out in two phases. The first phase was a preliminary diagnostic phase, which involved exploratory fieldwork, including participation in all public meetings organized by the project, a thorough review of documents produced by the PNR members, and informal discussions regarding the preparation of agricultural meetings. The second phase was the observation phase during meetings, which was non-interventionist, meaning that the researcher did not actively participate in discussions but remained visible to participants. Informal interactions took place at the end of the meetings, allowing for additional insights into the discussions.

The observation grid used to study the workshops implemented by the Regional Natural Park is inspired by the *"Guide pour la mise en œuvre de la gouvernance en appui au développement durable des territoires"* (Rey-Valette et al., 2011). It aims to analyze territorial governance. This grid allows for the breakdown of the territorial governance process into a set of key issues that require particular attention (ibid). The grid was designed in relation to the phases of public policies, enabling the study of governance mechanisms at different stages of the process. Three categories have been identified, corresponding to three complementary levels of analysis: (i) understanding institutions and mechanisms; (ii) understanding actor systems, representations, and asymmetries; (iii) evaluating practices, outputs, and the effects of the workshops. The notion of evaluation incorporates a reflexive dimension and requires additional information gathered through interviews with members of the PNR project. This dimension is further supplemented by a questionnaire distributed by the PNR members to collect the farmers' perspectives on the most anticipated and widely supported actions.

3- Provisional Results

The actors responsible for the PNR have implemented a dynamic coordination process to foster institutional innovation. This process took shape during the initial phase of the PNR project's development, where an agricultural consultation was initiated. Farmers

expressed their expectations for a mechanism that would allow them to voice their opinions. In response, the association members organized four agricultural meetings to contribute to discussions on the agricultural component of the PNR charter. These meetings aimed to address several key issues: (i) reducing preconceived notions about the project, which is often mistaken for a natural park project imposing restrictions on farmers; (ii) establishing a momentum around agroecology among farmers; and (iii) demonstrating a commitment to creating synergy between farmers and organizations working within the agricultural sector. The primary objective was to gather farmers' opinions in the form of a gradient of agreement and various feedback on the themes identified by the PNR (soil; agriculture-biodiversity synergies; water; experimentation and networks; transmission; supply chains and added value; diversification and new sectors). Additionally, to ensure the success of these meetings and enable institutional innovation, an animation framework was set up to structure the debates. Despite the efforts made by the PNR members, two main dysfunctions were noted: the low turnout at the meetings and the strong presence of elected officials in the discussions, which limited the participation of farmers despite the facilitator's efforts.

Institutional innovation requires the inclusion of actors with diverse identities and representations. Across all meetings, we observed a low representation of women and young farmers, who were also the most marginalized in the discussions. Conversely, the diversity in agricultural activities was notable, and several farmers had dual roles, also serving as elected officials or being active in unions. These farmers played a more significant role in the debates but did not necessarily assume leadership positions. They were also the ones who consistently participated in various PNR discussions and had a deeper understanding of the process. Additionally, we observed both formal and informal coalitions among the participants, which can be explained by dynamics of social proximity (Granovetter, 1985) and institutional proximity (Zuckin & DiMaggio, 1990).

Some topics generated more debate than others, both between the PNR members and among the farmers themselves. Certain subjects, such as the implementation of hillside water reservoirs, direct subsidies for ecosystem services, and reducing administrative workload for farmers, were largely consensual. However, the topic of renewable energy was highly controversial and remained an unresolved conflict at the end of the discussions. One explanatory factor is the diversity among the farmers present. Although they belong to the same profession, their selective affiliations vary based on temporary alliances, shared experiences, or territorial solidarities, aligning with the notion of "community of destiny" used to define new forms of lived territories (Rosanvallon, 2008).

During the workshops, we identified shared resources and asymmetries. The facilitators and elected officials demonstrated a strong understanding of the agricultural sector, preventing significant informational asymmetries and enabling a reflective approach to agriculture and its industries. However, farmers had varying degrees of administrative knowledge about the PNR, depending on their proximity to the initiative. These meetings facilitated better access to knowledge and altered farmers' perceptions of the PNR. Moreover, we observed that the PNR members took farmers' reflections into account during the discussions. The key question moving forward will be whether these considerations are incorporated into the final charter, confirming that a consultation process took place.

The collective construction process has been partially achieved. Knowledge has been capitalized on both sides. Several reorientations have been identified, with some farmers gaining a better understanding of the PNR project, while others remain skeptical. Conversely, PNR members are also considering adjustments. For instance, they plan to address the issue of hillside water reservoirs, which was not initially included in the project. Additionally, following these meetings, thematic working groups are expected to emerge in 2026—a proposal that itself originated from the discussions. However, marginalized actors were not truly integrated into the meetings (except through questionnaire responses), and the initiative reached fewer participants than expected. To address this issue, PNR members expanded the outreach by presenting the project at the general assembly of the *Jeunes Agriculteurs* Union, an idea that also emerged from exchanges with farmers.

These meetings facilitated collective learning for both PNR members and farmers. They helped prioritize actions through the questionnaire and improved farmers' understanding of the initiative. However, by the end of the workshops, a common language and shared culture had not yet been established.

The workshops contributed to the development of organizational and institutional innovations, particularly by fostering coordination among actors in terms of project design and implementation. Nevertheless, this effect remains limited due to the low participation rate. However, a significant proportion of attendees expressed willingness to engage further in the regional natural park project, as indicated by the farmers' questionnaire responses. Additionally, the majority of farmers who attended were satisfied or very satisfied with the content of the meetings (22 out of 26), as well as with the format of the meetings (24 out of 26).

4. Conclusions

This case study examined institutional innovation within a developing PNR project by analyzing the workshops organized to consult farmers. The findings reveal a complex coordination dynamic, with efforts towards inclusivity but also notable limitations, such as low participation, marginalized actors, and unresolved conflicts. Despite these challenges, there is potential for innovation, evidenced by collective learning and project reorientations. Future analyses of interviews and the drafting of the charter will provide a more detailed assessment of the workshops' impact on the agroecological transition.

Indicative biography

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