GOVERNING THE TRANSFORMATION OF REGIONAL FOOD SYSTEMS:
THE CASE OF THE WALLOON PARTICIPATORY PROCESS

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Governing the Transformation of regional Food Systems: the Case of the Walloon Participatory Process

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Abstract: Food systems are made of a myriad of actors, visions and interests. Collaborative governance arrangement may foster their transformation towards greater sustainability when conventional means, such as state-oriented planning, technological developments or social innovations provide insufficient impetus. However, such arrangements may achieve transformative results only under certain conditions and in specific contexts. Despite an abundant literature on participatory schemes, the success of collaborative governance arrangements remains partially understood and deserve academic attention, in particular in the field of food systems reform. This article provides an in-depth analysis of an empirical case study in the Walloon Region (Belgium), where the administration for sustainable development initiated a six-month participatory process to construct collectively a roadmap towards a sustainable regional food system. The article explores the extent to which the process has allowed transformative voices to emerge, and assesses whether the outcome provides a promising tool for adopting a transformative policy at the regional scale. It argues that the facilitation process insufficiently attenuated existing power relations and highlights key underlying factors (including time, resources, expertise and coalition building) that, like in classical negotiation settings, strengthen or weaken specific actors. It discusses the link between the results of the participatory process and the potential for policy-makers to build upon these to guide further the region's food system towards a sustainable future.

1. Introduction

Food system transformations are hard to achieve, despite consistent and long-standing concern among the general population of the issues related to the production and consumption of food, including health, pollution, climate change, rural desertification, international imbalance, among others. The food system, which includes economic actors involved in the food chain, but also from related sectors (education, environment, social, health…), has shown to be strongly resistant to change. Many explanatory factors are at play: public policy, industrial corporations and consumers are interdependent and continue to focus on producing cheap, low-cost food (De Schutter 2017) under the productivist paradigm (Wiskerke 2009), and this despite the growing protests emerging from the field of food democracy. The actions of these actors are rooted in a system of laws and international trade that considers food as a commodity (Polanyi 2001). For this reason, political debates are locked and dominated by the interests of large corporations seeking to maximize their profits (Patel 2010; McMichael 2016). In Europe, including Belgium, democratic systems seem incapable of providing the necessary impetus to transform the food systems in place since the Second World War.

Scholars from various perspectives and disciplines highlight the transformative potential of participation and food democracy (Castoriadis 1975; Booth et Coveney 2015; Renting, H., Schermer, M., et Rossi, A. 2012). By opening decision-making processes to representatives of civil society, deepening democracy and equipping institutions with tools to enable the political participation of citizens, social change in the food system could be fostered. This empowerment should lead to the regeneration of institutions, which in turn may serve to redefine power relations between actors of the food system. In this view, change may be achieved by widening the perspective, and including a plurality of persons, stakeholders and information as compared with top-down political processes.

However, the promises of citizen participation have rarely materialized in practice (Bodin 2017). Indeed, many empirical experiences underline the difficulties of mobilizing ordinary citizens (De Munck et Berger 2015) and highlight the lack of consistency in achieving outcomes (Bodin 2017). This article aims to contribute to this debate by assessing a participatory process conducted in the Walloon region (Belgium) as a case study for the implementation of regional collaborative governance on sustainable food.

The two authors of this paper were invited by the Service Public Wallon du Développement Durable (SPW DD henceforth), the administrative branch of the regional authority in charge of sustainable development, to observe a participatory process intended to define the sustainable food frame of reference in the Walloon region. The process consisted of 12 five-hour workshops organized between June and December 2017. The research team attended ten of these and conducted a series of semi-structured and informal interviews with the organizers and participants in the process. It was the first step of a three-step process, which aimed at providing insights and guidance to the policy-makers before the adoption of a food strategy for reforming the food system at the regional level. The overall approach aimed at providing Wallonia with a global vision, a shared identity, a working methodology, governance orientations and an action plan. The second step was a discussion with public actors including administrations and

territorial collectivities. The third step was made of 34 consultative citizen-based forums between May and October 2018. Moreover, the administration provided the research team with access to the online platform, which participants used to comment on notes and outcomes of the meetings. This article, therefore, is based on primary data sources and seeks to contribute to the debate on participatory processes in two regards: first, we focus on the facilitation of the workshops and the impact on the participatory process and the power relations embedded in it; secondly, we assess the power (as)symmetry in greater depth by considering the dominant actors present and the various strategies deployed by participants to influence the process.

In our view, this analysis may inform the organizers and participants of future participatory processes, and aims to contribute to the literature on food governance and participation though the following inquiry: to what extent does this novel governance mode lead to the transformation of a regional food system? In which ways this process was able to challenge the conventional framing of the questions on food? How far was it able to balance the relations of power among the several actors taking part in this broad consultation? What outcome did it produce?

2. Materials and Methods: A Collaborative Governance Arrangement to build a sustainable Food Frame of Reference

A.   *The context*

In Belgium, the **social context** surrounding sustainable food is vibrant; debates seek to reach the public authorities and encourage them to catch up on this critical public problem. Food sovereignty, agroecology and the human right to food are themes that percolate through to public institutions and the media. Many urban municipalities have adopted food policies, often with innovative governance systems, including food councils (*Gent en Garde*, *Good Food* in Brussels) or food belts (*Ceinture Alimentaire* –in Liège, Charleroi, Tournai or Verviers). This social context explains why the ministry for sustainable development and its corresponding administration decided to pursue the dynamic in Wallonia and initiate the participatory process, which provides the empirical basis of this research.

The process intended to construct collaboratively a common frame of reference for sustainable food, which would be a shared, normative vision for the future of the regional food system. It would encourage the involvement and collaboration of stakeholders and of the political authorities in the whole region. The Department for Sustainable Development (hereafter "SPW DD"[1]) opted for a participatory process with a broad range of stakeholders, including economic actors, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) dedicated to the environment, human rights or cooperation, social actors, consumer associations, health experts and several branches of public administrations. The objective of the participatory process was to inform the regional government by *consulting* actors prior to the elaboration of a resolution on sustainable food systems.

By opening the decision-making process to an ex-ante "**consultative co-elaboration**", the administration pursued a double objective. First, it intended to build a sense of ownership among actors by considering their views, experiences and priorities. A common vision and

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[1] SPW : Service Public de Wallonie; DD: Développement Durable

shared ownership are presumed to improve the legitimacy of a policy and increase the effectiveness of its outcomes. Second, the process was pursued in the aim of developing a systemic, cross-cutting vision of the regional food system. Indeed, the administration considered the existing actions and visions of sustainable food to be "vast and uncoordinated", with perceptions varying among different actor groups.[2]

B. Theoretical Background

Considering the actors involved, the initiators, the objectives and the format of the participatory process described above, we characterize it as a **collaborative governance arrangement[3]**, in the sense that it was organized as a formal collaboration among different public and private actors and stakeholders in a collective forum, initiated and hosted by a public actor. While definitions of such arrangements abound in the literature, the observed process was a *consultation* rather than "a collective **decision-making process** that is formal, consensus-oriented, and deliberative and that aims to make or implement public policy or manage public programs or assets (Ansell et Gash 2008)." Nevertheless, the nature of the objective pursued through the participatory process was very specific, and may contribute to the foundation of a normative, shared *vision* of a sustainable food system in Wallonia. On the other hand, the process could also be perceived as "a simple agreement on vague and noncommittal declarations, largely concealing fundamental trade-offs and contradictions" (Bodin 2017, 357), because its outcome aggregates 8 general principles, 6 strategic objectives and around 100 possible actions[4], enabling many possibilities and closing only few of them.

In the literature on participation and, more specifically on collaborative governance, there is little agreement on whether such arrangements are able to deliver consensual and adequate solutions to an identified problem (Andrée et al. 2019). For example, such processes may be time-consuming (Rosenschöld, Honkela, et Hukkinen 2014), may lead to escalating conflicts (Castro et Nielsen 2001), may overwhelm small stakeholders (Cecile Barnaud et Van Paassen 2013), may not provide any changes or may conduct to a "compilation of actors' own wish lists" (Brummel, Nelson, et Jakes 2012a). At the same time, the strong potential of horizontal deliberation is acknowledged, including the possibility to foster social learning, share information and reduce conflict, in particular in the field of food system (Siddiki et al. 2015; Koski et al. 2018). The advantages of such deliberations have been set forth in the seminal work of Jürgen Habermas, whose theory of communicative action is a cornerstone of the literature on participation (Jürgen Habermas 1987). In it, he describes an ideal speech situation, which is achieved when:

> Under the pragmatic presuppositions of an inclusive and non-coercive rational discourse among free and equal participants, everyone is required to take the perspective of everyone else, and thus project herself into the understanding of self and world of all others; from this interlocking of perspectives there emerges an ideally extend we-perspective from which all

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[2] Quote from Day 1 of *referentiel alimentation durable*; author's own translation.
[3] In the rest of the text, the wording "participatory process" will refer synonymously to the "collaborative governance arrangement"; this referring to the fact that participation may sometime imply the presence of ordinary citizen, as it is not the case here.
[4] The final document is available online: http://diantonio.wallonie.be. Last access: 12/04/2019.

can test in common whether they wish to make a controversial norm the
basis of their shared practice (Jurgen Habermas 1995, 117-18)

For Habermas, such an ideal situation creates a politically neutral space in which rationality can emerge through communication and from which a shared understanding and implicit assumptions can develop (Edmunds et Wollenberg 2001, 222-23). A common critique of the ideal speech situation assumed by Habermas is that this proposal is too theoretical - as indicated by the word *ideal*. In practice, deliberative situations are prone to many disturbances, which preclude the ideal situation.

The literature on negotiation theory outlines many of these issues. Importantly, it distinguishes between **distributive and integrative approaches** (Alfredson et Cungu 2008) where distributive negotiation is a zero-sum game and integrative negotiation seeks win-win agreements. The ideal situation, according to Habermas, which is also the case in successful collaborative governance, is an integrative one: the more stakeholders look for common interest by sharing their views, the more rational and effective should be the outcome. The deliberation would include any actors directly concerned, but also the ones indirectly affected by the discussion.

However, critics note that the integration of a large number of stakeholders leads to a problem that may be at **the opposite** of what Habermas aims to achieve. Indeed, empirically, it is observed that the presence of a large number of stakeholders does not necessarily reduce the asymmetries in negotiating power and unequal capacities. Furthermore, integrative situations may lead to an apparent consensus that underestimates the strong asymmetries in negotiation, whereby participants accept an undesirable proposal because they are indifferent to its consequences or because they lack the necessary information or arguments to oppose it (Alfredson et Cungu 2008).

As a result, the creation of an ideal situation of participation in which "all are equal" requires to take into account the initial inequalities in **the procedural framing** of the debate. How to create a level-playing field for the weaker parties in the discussion? For which reasons should the weaker parties participate if it is to experience a repeated position of weakness? Why should the dominant groups accept the creation of a level-playing field? How can institutions manage these differences in the balance of power? All of these questions must be considered empirically in each particular situation if "communicative rationality" is to emerge. These criticisms lead to the identification of the capacities that are required for participation and which are *assumed* to be universal, but are in practice unequally shared by participants, such as skills related to conceptual abstraction, clear formulation in short timing, access to information, strategic positioning and public speaking (Genard 2013; Carlier 2013).

C. The Walloon Participatory Process

In this perspective, the Walloon participatory process appeared as an excellent empirical experiment. Our analysis focused on the effectiveness of such processes in achieving transformative changes, and on their advantages and disadvantages. Assuming that social change is inhibited by the inertia of the conventional system, the promises of this process is to allow new points of view, controversies, alliances and actions to emerge through the participation of the whole food sector. However, this contribution does not focus on the

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substantive arguments and the content of the discussions, which are likely to be too grounded in the particularities of the Walloon region and may not be of general interest. On the contrary, we observed the formal process, namely whether the participation process has been able to provide a sufficient political space to each participant in order to overcome the classical dominant positions in the debate, largely occupied by private corporate interests.

The process was launched in June 2017 by the SPW DD, who outlined the objectives and intentions, and introduced the facilitators in charge of implementing the participatory methodology. It gathered 30 organizations divided into seven categories: production, transformation, distribution, catering, consumer organizations, cross-cutting associations, administrations. Table 1 and 2 in the Annex provide more details on the stakeholders involved. The SPW DD considered **a wide range of actors** as relevant interlocutors for discussing the notion of sustainable food. Their vision reached beyond those directly involved in the food chain, i.e. the economic actors from producers to distributors and retailers. From the onset, this reveals a relatively strong normative view, where food is no longer perceived only as a commodity, and more as a wide-ranging societal issue. It should be noted that although invited to participate, the region's second most important farmers' trade union did not attend the workshops, but stayed informed about the process from a distance[5]. Moreover, the HORECA (hotel, restaurant and café) sector was weakly represented from the beginning. The process gave the floor to representatives of organized (public or private) interests. Individual citizens were not invited to join, and the discussions held throughout the process were not transmitted nor made available beyond the workshops. The SPW DD decided to restrict the participatory process to representatives of organized groups under the assumption that these actors may build, embrace and implement a common vision.

3. Analysis : Facilitation and Power Asymmetries

A. *The role and impact of the facilitation mode*

Multi-stakeholder processes often rely on **facilitators** to organize meetings and structure the debates. Depending on the context, the process and its objectives, facilitators vary in their *level of activity*, their *posture* and the *extent of their expertise*. In this section, we argue that the role attributed to – or assumed by – the facilitator has an impact on the process and therefore needs to be carefully assessed with regards to these three considerations.

First, there is the **level of activity**. The role entrusted to facilitators ranges from a more passive position, in which the facilitator ensures the basic, logistical aspects of the meetings, to an active mode of facilitation whereby he/she participates in the debate, shaping its form and influencing its direction. Second, facilitators vary in their **degree of involvement** in the community of stakeholders involved and the posture they assume. They may be external to the community and relatively uninvolved in the questions addressed by the process, or they may be embedded in the local context and vying - implicitly or explicitly - for a given normative outcome. Depending on these considerations, a facilitator will have a lesser or greater impact on the participants and the process itself. Finally, facilitators differ in **the depth of their expertise**. As professional moderators working on a range of topics, the individuals who assume this role

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[5] Personal interview of a staff member of the trade union's farmer, April 19th 2018.

can be relatively uninformed about the specificities of the project at hand; alternatively, they may be recognized specialists in a narrow field. In some cases, the role of a facilitator is taken on by scientific researchers due to their qualifications, depth of knowledge and presumed impartiality. Whilst the literature on consensus building acknowledges that the involvement of a skilled facilitator is paramount to participatory processes, it remains inconclusive about the posture and specific modalities that foster optimal results (Innes 2004).

The first two aspects discussed above – the level of activity and the posture assumed towards the stakeholders – are closely intertwined, with more active facilitation modes tending to exert a greater influence on the stakeholders involved. This observation invites a discussion about the desirability and the feasibility of a facilitator to achieve **a neutral position**. On one side of the debate, some consider that facilitators should not hold stakes in the process which they moderate, in order to avoid taking sides and promoting (or demoting) interests by strengthening (or weakening) certain stakeholders. However, it is doubtful that any individual can be entirely neutral in his or her posture. In addition, as noted (Cecile Barnaud et Van Paassen 2013), assuming a posture of neutrality is, in fact, a non-neutral decision in itself, considering the varying degrees of power games that are present in political and participatory processes. When a facilitator decides, consciously or not, to abstain from interfering in existing power relations between participants, there is a risk that the power asymmetries outside of the process will be replicated or amplified within it. The intended neutrality of the facilitator, then, is merely illusory (Cécile Barnaud 2013). On the other hand, a facilitator or mediator who deliberately chooses to influence local power games faces the question of legitimacy: who is he/she to attempt to modify the existing balance of power?

In the Walloon case, the central position of the facilitator was **outsourced to a contractor** through a public procurement process. The contractor was responsible for the logistical organization of the process, including the initial launch, the thematic workshops and the closing plenary session. Prior to the sessions and workshops, the contractor was involved in planning the methodological approach alongside the policy officers of the SPW DD. In the sessions and workshops, the contractor moderated debates by facilitating introductions, giving the floor to participants and ensuring the time limits of the agenda was respected. In between the physical meetings, the contracting company managed the communication with stakeholders, including the online moderation via SmartSheets, a tool that enabled actors to comment on policy objectives and measures, and to take part in virtual votes. The SmartSheet tool was essential for formalizing the discussion (transmitting the debate from oral to text) and emphasizing key elements and points of information, helping to identify shared positions in the room (see section on alliances below). This ensured that the process included feedback loops between the organizers and participants, improving communication and understanding by clarifying positions and concepts throughout the process.

At first glance, then, the facilitation was ensured by a 'third party' actor; i.e. individuals who were neither of the actors with high stakes in the Walloon agro-food system, nor part of the public administration organizing the process. However, in reality, this role was filled both by the contractor ('external') and a key policy officer from the SPW DD ('internal'). The tasks carried out by the **external and internal facilitators** seemed to be partly defined, and partly divided *ad hoc*. For instance, in workshop discussions, the external facilitators were mainly

responsible for animating the debates. At certain moments, the internal facilitator stepped in to clarify a position, ask a question or provide substantive input. Most importantly perhaps, his role was also to set the external boundaries of the debate, ensuring that it remained consistent with the normative orientation already defined in the Walloon second Strategy for Sustainable Development[6].

In between physical meetings, the external facilitators were responsible for the communication and operational management of the online platform, but the internal facilitators handled more strategic decisions about the content (e.g. regrouping specific objectives under common headings, transferring content from one domain to another) and presented the reasons for these to the stakeholders. The presence of both types of facilitators allowed for greater flexibility in response to various situations. In some cases, the presence of the internal facilitator seemed to bring legitimacy to the process and build trust among participants (also due to the longer time horizon of relations between stakeholders and the public administration). In other cases, the external facilitator ensured a greater neutrality or distance from powerful actors, enabling the internal facilitator to retreat temporarily from political pressure.

Overall, the facilitation mode could be considered as **relatively active**. Workshop sessions were fully *prepared*, planned and animated by the facilitators, who asked questions to stimulate participants' responses, sought to point out converging and divergent positions and provide conclusions to the discussions. The degree of expertise was *moderate*: the external facilitators were generally familiar with notions related to sustainable food systems, although at times a deeper knowledge of political, legislative or technical issues could have served to resolve debates or confusions that emerged between stakeholders. The internal facilitators contributed in this regard to a certain extent. Finally, concerning the posture assumed, both the internal and external facilitators were initially attentive to distributing *speaking time* in a fair manner. For instance, at the start of each workshop session, participants received three chickpeas: a playful way of allocating each person three speaking times in plenary sessions. Soon, participants began to question which type of intervention could qualify as one of the three speaking times allowed (e.g. *"Does asking a clarification question count? What about confirming what another actor has said?"),* and the idea was ultimately – though quietly – *abandoned*, opening the road for the most powerful actors to dominate speaking time.

Moreover, while smaller discussion groups (so-called 'world cafés') helped less influential actors to voice their views, no other specific methods were used to build a level-playing field in the face of existing asymmetries. **Collective intelligence methods** and tools could have attenuated some of the dominant positions taken by stronger stakeholders. These methods include specific hand gestures used to communicate participants' needs (e.g. to ask a clarification question, to signal that the speaker cannot be heard by all listeners, etc.) and to represent agreement or disagreement without interrupting a speaker. Circular seating arrangements enhance uniform visibility of all participants, and ensure that each person has the chance to accept or reject the invitation to express an idea for each speaking 'round' (Marsan et al. 2014). Moreover, collaboratively establishing rules (e.g. governing speaking times, the

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[6] Available online: http://developpementdurable.wallonie.be/sites/default/files/2017-08/Strat%C3%A9gie%20wallonne%20de%20d%C3%A9veloppement%20durable.pdf (22/02/2019)

obligation to introduce oneself and one's organization, avoiding interruptions) at the start of each workshop, and, at ulterior stages of the process, encouraging and empowering participants to enforce them collectively could have increased their chance for success, as suggested in the 'critical companion' approach of Barnaud (2013). However, these techniques require a significant amount of time, competences and confidence among participants, as well as a shared interest to deliver their promises. These conditions may have been excessively demanding for the purpose of the case, but could be considered for future, similar processes.

On the whole, and aside from the 'chickpeas' experiment and world cafes, the external facilitators made commendable attempts to alter the existing power games and to challenge relations between actors. We observed that despite the consistent efforts deployed by the facilitators to organize a balanced and fruitful discussion, power relations among participants largely maintained the existing asymmetries, which are discussed in the section below.

B. Power asymmetries: expertise, perceptions, bases of power and coalitions

Significant efforts from the facilitators and from the participants themselves were necessary to build confidence and seek common positions. However, *power struggles* occur during deliberative processes. In this section, we describe the techniques used by participants to pursue their organizations' interests and exert their influence in the process. Four levers are identified that impact the capacities of participants to participate meaningfully during the debate: expertise, perceptions, bases of power, and coalitions.

1. *The Role of Expertise for Influencing Controversies*

According to Habermas, the ideal participatory process would seek to "unlock perspectives" and make different problems and views emerge (Faysse 2006; Dewey 2010), by placing the stakeholders concerned by a social or political object, such as food in this case, around the same table. The information gathered would allow the participants to take decisions in a more informed way, theoretically leading to decisions that are more rational. On the contrary, information may also become a **strategical weapon** to strengthen or weaken positions around this table.

The sociology of public problems focuses on how public problems are constructed (Gusfield 1980; Dewey 2010; Cefaï 1996). In particular, it underlines the concept of qualification of a problem and the competition around such a qualification, which becomes social once the group recognizes and endorses it. **Expertise** is a key element in the qualification process, because the essence of "knowledge" is to participate in the definition of an object. Knowledge can take two forms that are incarnated in the figures of the expert and of the "layman" (*"le profane"*) (Damay, Denis, et Duez 2011). The expert is allowed to tell the truth about something, based on three assumptions of scientific methodology (Stengers 2006). First, she masters specialized knowledge that allows her to consider the complexity of a problem. Second, she puts the object in perspective and is assumed to be external to any conflict of interest. Third, her judgment is based on explicit and understandable reasoning, even if it may be complex (Stengers 2006). Taken together, these three elements give the expert a special and dominant position in a political debate, especially because her assertions are supposedly apolitical and technical. She

is supposed to provide an objective and neutral point of view. Bruno Latour says that the scientist (but this also applies to the expert) benefits from "the most fabulous political capacity: to speak the truth without being challenged."[7]

In contrast, the **layman** may be disqualified by the expert when the two come into conflict during a deliberation, because the former would appear incompetent and ignorant. *De facto*, the knowledge of a layman is based on feelings, experiential knowledge, personal opinions and subjectivity. He uses the register of the testimony (Carlier 2013). However, this is not to say that he has no resources. The challenge for him will be to make his knowledge acceptable for qualifying an object. His strengths are his sincerity, honesty and intimate connection with the discussed object, and these may give him an advantage over the expert, who may appear as being "without heart" or "without human feeling", which may be perceived as degrading her capacity to choose what is right or wrong, good or bad. In some cases, the "layman" is defined as "expert of the living" (*expert du vivant*) – as if there is no legitimacy for speaking without being an expert in a given domain.

The participation of ordinary citizens in collaborative governance arrangements is likely to be difficult if they lack specialized knowledge, know-how and required social and behavioral capacities for public speaking, negotiation, etc.(De Munck et Berger 2015) As a result, **disadvantaged groups**, which are supposed to be favored by participatory schemes, may in fact be less capable of defending their positions if they accept to join the discussion. Many studies have observed such situations, particularly in the case of natural resource management: "*In the context of extreme inequalities in power and diversity of cultures, stakeholders [...] are brought together to hammer out binding agreements in short-term, facilitated sessions organized in supposedly apolitical fora. The results have often been disastrous*"(Edmunds et Wollenberg 2001, 236).

In the Walloon case, this aspect of power related to expertize was somewhat reduced by involving actors specialized in the food system. This created a relative **homogenization** of the capacities related to expertize, which was mobilized frequently during the debates. Participants were not experts *stricto sensu* (and no experts as such were invited to participate) but rather representatives assuming a subjective vision and defending certain interests of the food system. None of the actors involved claimed to be "neutral experts", except in certain cases, the representatives of administrations who provided their views on the feasibility of some proposals from a technocratic perspective. One illustrative case of the use of expertise occurred in the first workshop on food quality (22 September 2017), when a debate began about whether "frozen" food is "fresh", or not. This is a central element for agro-industrial processes, because frozen foods are key products of the food chain. Meanwhile, for vegetable growers, the definition of fresh food tends to incorporate temporal and spatial dimensions: as in "directly from the field" and/or "harvested this morning". The debate was key to all participants, given the association of freshness with sustainable, healthy food. Two distinct perceptions of what is "fresh" emerged among participants.

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[7] Own translation (Latour 1999, 23): "la plus fabuleuse capacité politique : dire le vrai sans être discuté".

In order to overcome the **controversy**, the actors turned towards technical knowledge. On the one hand, one participant referred to "studies showing that nutritional value is maintained in the freezing process in the long term", supporting the opinion that frozen is not contradictory to fresh. In the same vein, others claimed that the "nutritional quality of harvested vegetables tends to disappear quickly if not subject to a conservation process", suggesting that frozen food may be of better quality than week-old vegetables from a garden. It is worth noting that no references of the studies were provided by these stakeholders to the other participants. Moreover, the first participant considered that others had "mistaken assumptions" about processed food. On the other hand, fresh products may be defined as "non-processed," and as coming directly "from the field" through short food supply chains (i.e. locally grown food, with a short time period between supplier and consumer, and few intermediaries). However, this position was dismissed as being not sufficiently grounded by studies. This was the deciding factor: the expertise of the actor defending the first position was acknowledged by others. As a result, it became impossible to exclude "frozen food" from the qualification "fresh food" nor "sustainable food". Under certain circumstances, as it emerged, processed food can thus be fresh: a hard-fought point. Although the discussion around frozen and fresh food serves to illustrate the tendency of participants to resort to expertize, it should be noted that the debate did not result in a consensus, but only exposed a controversy. Differences were visible, not resolved.

2. *Perceptions influence negotiators' strength*

The asymmetries that affect participants when they engage in a negotiation, as in the Walloon case, may be *real* or *perceived*: in both cases, they influence the outcome of negotiations.

In this context, **preparation** is one way of influencing perceptions. It should integrate at least two elements. First, the *mandate* and objectives of the negotiator should be well defined, including the ideal outcome, the bottom line and the best alternative to a negotiated agreement (BATNA). These elements frame the zone of possible agreement. Second, the negotiator must be *knowledgeable* on the subject of the debate and be capable of understanding the key issues, the arguments set forth and their consequences. A clear mandate and high perceived utility reinforces the negotiator's capacity of representation (Bourdieu 2014, XX). It allows the person to feel legitimate in the discussion, to look for opportunities to intervene, to take the floor and to defend or oppose a point. Moreover, preparation influences the attitude of the negotiator, who is likely to be more confident and capable of exerting an impact on the discussion.

Secondly, **perceived differences in power** between participants are crucial. In short, the actors that are perceived as dominant are able to impose their strategy, using a "take-it-or-leave-it" or a "take-it-or-suffer" approach (Guicherd, Damperat, et Jolibert 2011, 21; Pfetsch et Landan 2000). Furthermore, it seems that distributive negotiation allows for the best individual results and is likely to be adopted by the dominant stakeholders. In response, the "target" will only *react* to the strategy defined by the dominant actor and will probably seek to limit the gain of

the dominant actor (and its related lost) rather than turning to integrative negotiation.[8] The dominant actor will, in sum, get better results than the weakest participants in a situation where no effort is made to balance the inequalities of power among participants.

The reader could be disappointed in this shift from participatory literature to **negotiation one**. However, both theoretical frameworks seem relevant to assessing the Walloon process. On the one hand, the vast majority of the actors seemed to adopt an integrative approach aiming at defining a common position. This position was supposed to strengthen the region and to orient the actors in the same direction, achieving more than each one could potentially obtain individually. On the other hand, on some occasions the dynamic turned to distributive negotiation, with actors seeking to obtain individual gains when an integrative approach pursued by other participants would have caused them to lose. This may be understood by distinguishing between actors that are likely to gain from those that are likely to lose from the transition to a sustainable food system. Actors that are dominant *before* a potential transition are the ones with the least sustainable practices (otherwise, no transition would be needed), while an effective transition is likely to reward the most sustainable actors. In consequence, the cost of transition to a sustainable food system is expected to be higher for current dominant actors, while the weaker yet more sustainable actors are expected to incur lower costs and to collect valuable gains. However, this does not imply that the weaker actors are easier negotiators; often, they also have the most ambitious demands and stringent expectations for the transition of the food system.

What would be the alternative to any agreement for the actors, their **BATNA**?[9] For dominant-industrial actors, the *status quo* is favorable because it maintains their present positions. However, changes in the demand for more proximity and healthier food may actually increase their gains, and they may benefit from public incentives to adopt more sustainable practices in order to satisfy this demand. For intermediary actors (mainly organic producers or those involved in ethical trade), the current trend in demand is favorable, and public support may foster its development beyond the present "conscious consumers"; these actors have little to lose. For the smaller, alternative players who consider themselves forerunners of sustainable food (mainly food short chain), the current food system does not support them but the demand of "conscious consumers" only. On the one hand, they may significantly benefit from changes in favor of a more sustainable food system by becoming more profitable and influential; on the other hand, their current economic model is often weak and they may –in the worst case– disappear without public support in the context of competition with industrial actors.

Logically, on many occasions **the dominant actors used their veto** to interrupt/halt the discussion. They regularly used the "take-it-or-leave-it" argument, explicitly or implicitly threatening to withdraw from the process, even if in the Walloon process this threat never materialized. This is a veto power. Indeed, taking into account their weight in the economic landscape, one may consider that a sustainable Wallonia without them is nonsense. They are perceived and perceive themselves as essential to the food system. In one telling example of

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[8] Our translation from (Guicherd, Damperat, et Jolibert 2011, 28): „La seule influence [de la cible] provient de sa capacité à affecter les gains du partenaire, puisque les gains de la source décroissent proportionnellement à l'utilisation par la cible de stratégies distributives".

[9] "The Best Alternative To No Agreement". (Alfredson et Cungu 2008)

this veto power, the actors of the agroindustry threatened to leave the process in its final stages when the notion of "consumer education" was insufficiently visible in the proposal document. Indeed, the perspective that consumers must be educated is a crucial ideological point in the debate around food sustainability: it is often used to support the argument that the food system is adequate, with negative impacts on individual health resulting from poor choices made by uneducated consumers. As "education" was not a key principle in the final proposal, several actors warned they would leave the process if their requests were not taken into account.

Nevertheless, **smaller, specialized players also made use of veto power**. For such organizations, particularly NGOs, their particular demand must appear clearly in the final proposal - or they have no point in being there. For instance, in the workshop on access to food (19 September 2017), an NGO which aims to promote food as a human right considered the recognition of the human rights dimensions of food as a condition to their participation. The same occurred with another organization working on issues related to land access. Representatives of both organizations had a specific mandate and a clear goal to achieve. The condition of their presence in the process was the recognition of their social object - otherwise, they would have to leave the discussion.

A last point concerns the **attitudes** of the participants throughout the process. We observed dominant attitudes, qualified as such based on the following criteria: a paternalistic tone of the voice, little regard for the informal rules of public events (introducing oneself, arriving on time, etc.), non-respect of formal procedural rules (see above) and etiquette (taking the floor without recognition of the facilitator, or interrupting other speakers). Interestingly, these attitudes came from dominant actors in the food system, but sometimes also from representative of a less influential organization. The efficiency of such **behavior** for capturing the attention of others and suggesting superiority was impressive. To counter such behavior, the establishment and implementation of formal rules, such as collective intelligence methods (as discussed before), may be an effective option.

3. *Bases of Power: Time and Resources Available to Participants*

The **means**, or the 'bases of power' (Simon 1953) for securing desired values, include time, resources and legitimacy: these assets may be scarce for smaller, local, 'niche' actors with few employees who coordinate and manage many of their organizations' tasks. Larger, more established organizations may have dedicated staff members for advocacy and lobbying activities. These varying bases of power determine whether an organization is able to send a (well prepared, dedicated) participant to each meeting, different participants to each meeting, or a participant to some – but not all – meetings. In the Walloon case, we observed varying levels of attendance between actor groups.

The collective construction of the Walloon sustainable food frame of reference, organized as 12 five-hour face-to-face workshops, was a highly **time-consuming process,** and prohibitively so for organizations with limited (human) **resources**. Moreover, participants were invited to dedicate additional time outside of physical meetings to consult and comment on the documents produced by the administration. It can be said with little doubt that the more various actors were able to contribute and respond to these requests for participation, the greater their potential

influence: they were able to seek more speaking time, gain a better understanding of the topics at hand, observe the existing constellations and dynamics of other participating organizations, identify potential convergences and divergences to establish coalitions, etc. Clearly, although the mere presence of an organization's representative cannot guarantee his or her power over the process, it is a necessary condition for exercising such power.

Table 2 (in the Annex) shows the number of organizations that effectively participated in the four stages of the process: the launch (introductory session), the first set of workshops dedicated to defining objectives, the second set which focused on identifying levers for action, and the consolidation (closing session). The statistics presented in the table show that economic actors (production, transformation, distribution) traditionally involved in food policies were more present than consumer organizations, for instance. At the same time, administrations and cross-cutting associations had a high rate of presence, while consumer organizations and HORECA actors were generally less responsive to the SPW DD's invitation to participate.

4. *Coalitions*

A deliberative participatory process cannot be viewed solely as a gathering of individual persons or representatives; it is also a space of networking, coalition building and policy learning. **Coalitions**[10] are crucial in negotiations because they allow participants to strengthen their positions through cooperation. They may be defined as: "a group of individual decision makers who: (i) share a common interest, yet also have heterogeneous preferences; (ii) must take a common stance in negotiations" (Manzini et Mariotti 2005, 2). Coalitions sometimes emerge during the negotiation process, but they may also be anticipated or have a recurrent configuration. If the alliance is forged in advance, each actor appears stronger. There will be fewer uncertainties to manage, as the position of the allies is already known and shared, which reinforces self-confidence. Particularly for weak actors, upstream and discretionary alliances may be highly valuable (Johnson 2008). Beyond the pragmatic alliances forged in negotiations, coalitions play an important role in deliberative learning processes. Indeed, participatory approaches to policy-making tend to be complex, due to their inclusion of diverse and often conflicting perspective, interests and objectives. Particularly in subjects characterized by polarized positions, the capacity of actors to build and adjust their coalitions despite their differences is a crucial determinant in the success and legitimacy of the process (Matti et Sandström 2011).

While the strength of alliances became clear during the Walloon process, they were difficult to analyze in detail due to their **implicit and possibly evolving nature**. In addition, while some of the participants met for the first time during the participatory process, others were accustomed to working together in previous encounters. These **shared cultures** created clusters among actors, facilitating their understanding of each other's positions and shared interests.

The most obvious coalition bound together **agro-industrial actors**: producers at various steps of the food supply chain, from farming to food processing. The coalition was manifested through representatives supporting each other during spoken interventions, mainly by agreeing

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[10] A „coalition" is considered in the litterature as longer and more consistant than a ponctual, strategic „alliance". Moreover, both may be used synonymously here considering the short time of the process.

with or repeating points made by their allies. The representatives sat together in plenary sessions and gathered at breaks. This alliance seemed to grow stronger over time, culminating in the final session (6 December 2017). For example, the members of the agro-industry coalition shared a common position on the state of food hygiene norms, even though this subject is widely debated (Peuch 2017). The actors within the alliance supported the idea that while identical sanitary rules should apply to all food operators, control mechanisms should take into account the specificity of small producers, and that the recent reforms taken in this direction were appropriate. They repeated this stance every time the subject was evoked (22 September 2017, 6 December 2017). Meanwhile, other actors considered that despite the changes, the control of food safety regulations remains excessively stringent, leaving little space for innovation and local, traditional production.

Another coalition was forged through the convergence of various associations and NGOs, despite their respective specializations which did not make them obvious partners *a priori*. However, we sensed a shared general vision of "sustainable food", based on local, green and raw products, distributed by short supply chains and with minimal environmental impact – **agroecology**, to put it simply. This view is consistent with a key hypothesis in the advocacy coalition framework (ACF), which postulates that alliances within policy subsystems are structured by a perceived correspondence among actors in normative policy beliefs, which are closely tied to basic value orientations (Matti et Sandström 2011). This group was often close to small-scale farmers and producers who in turn prioritized questions of income and profit distribution throughout the food chain. In addition, many of the actors weren't part of any coalition, such as the administrative divisions. In consequence, they were more marginal and spoke scarcely, with no strong mandate nor vision to defend.

To conclude this chapter on power asymmetries, we cannot claim that the process was one of purely integrative negotiation: the deliberative process combined periods of both distributive and integrative bargaining. This is explained by the fact that interest among participants often appeared as contradictory as they ultimately struggled for shares in the food market. Nevertheless, the process aimed at structuring representations of the food system, not at adopting a concrete action plan which would be subject to a political compromise. It turned distributive when some participants felt that a proposal had reached their bottom line, or when their mandate was not respected. It turned integrative when discussions related to the general food system (i.e. values, principles or consumers' education).

4. Discussion: a Transformative Collaborative Arrangement?

Based on the previous analysis, we further discuss the outcome and the effects that the collaborative governance arrangement had on the food system in Wallonia. The **outcome** of the process was a systematic vision of the desired sustainable food system in the region[11]. The second Strategy for Sustainable Development in Wallonia defined the objective of the referential as "defining the principles and criteria of sustainable food in Wallonia" (p.50). As a

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[11] The full version is available on internet: http://developpementdurable.wallonie.be/le-referentiel-vers-un-systeme-alimentaire-durable-en-wallonie (22/02/2019).

result, the participatory process exposed eight general principles and six strategic objectives, as well as a list of recommended concrete actions. In addition, for each objective, it identified "controversies", which were rendered explicit but not solved: no consensus was found among the actors, and following the debates, these issues were marked as irresolvable in the frame of the collaborative arrangement.

A reading of this outcome shows that **an unequivocal orientation was not offered to the public authorities** by the stakeholders involved, despite consistent efforts of the administration to unlock and explore the frequent disagreements. We argue that the actors agreed on the final document because each found some satisfaction in the outcome. This was stressed by the administration the last day of the process (6/12/2017): "Everyone must feel represented and recognized" ("*Il faut que tout le monde se sente représenté et reconnu*"). However, the final agreement implied power asymmetries. Indeed, some were more successful than others in achieving their aims, as we observed throughout the process. Even if power imbalances are difficult to pinpoint, many observations discussed above shows that asymmetries were not neutralized and produced consequences that are noticeable in several key, illustrative examples in the outcome.

Firstly, the final document makes no mention of "*organic agriculture*", despite the constant presence of the organization in charge of promoting it at the regional scale. Participants in the agro-industry coalition argued that "this is not the only solution" – and ultimately the concept was effaced from the outcome. Secondly, the "*right to food*" declined in important: it began as a key objective, and finished as a recommended action. Similarly, the notion of "*food sovereignty*", debated in the sessions, was downgraded from a key "principle" to a mere criterion for balancing trade in the recommended actions. Thirdly, the replacement of the term "*sustainable food*" by the notion of a "*sustainable food system*", allowed actors to avoid potential controls on the quality of specific products and production processes. In consequence, no product may be banned, and production and distribution units would be evaluated and allowed to evolve gradually, with binding decisions made difficult to achieve. These examples of changes in wording reflect the shift in content from a radical approach to transforming the regional food system, to a more progressive approach aligned with a slow perspective of change favored by agro-industrial actors.

A final example demonstrates the persistence of power relations through an exception that proves the rule. A point that found agreement among all stakeholders in the process was the need to inform the consumer, to improve communication on the internal practices and constraints of companies, to raise awareness on issues concerning the food system and to educate families on healthy cooking and nutrition. Consumer education and awareness were promoted *ab nihilo* to a full "objective". We suggest that this was made possible because education eludes the responsibilities of the stakeholders represented, as no ordinary citizens or consumers were directly represented – it is easier to place the burden on them. These examples demonstrate the strength of the agroindustry in the debate. Nonetheless, these actors were still not fully satisfied: "Everyone needs to participate in the system. But to me it is important that the agroindustry sector should be more visible in the scheme" ("*Tout le monde doit participer au système. Pour moi, il est important que le maillon de l'agroindustrie soit plus présent que ça dans le schéma*").

The outcome also includes **explicit controversies**, in order to avoid "betraying questions that are asked at the level of the food system in general" ("*Ne pas trahir les questionnements qui se posent au niveau du système alimentaire*"), according to the administration (6/12/2017). This demonstrates that conflicting interests were not resolved, nor needed to be resolved, in particular concerning key structural aspects of the food system: trade, modes of production, quality of products and the assessment of their "sustainability", etc. Maintaining controversies contributed to reducing the transformative impact of the process by adding confusion. This was an intentional strategy pursued by participants representing the agro-industrial sector: "What worries me is that some tensions are solved in the chart"; ("*Ce qui m'inquiète, c'est que certaines tensions sont résolues dans le tableau*") or later, at the same workshop: "Looking for a consensus: this, I don't do" ("*Viser le consensus, ça je ne fais pas*"). Therefore, the document fails to provide a clear vision about what a sustainable food system should look like in the near future, nor about how to reach such a system. Instead, it provides a "wish list" which includes contradictory elements – a recurring weakness of the collaborative governance arrangement (Brummel, Nelson, et Jakes 2012b; Bodin 2017). Does this imply a failure of the overall process to propose a transformative policy?

To answer this question, we first turn to the participants that sought a radical transformation of the food system, i.e. the so-called agroecology coalition. For these actors, the outcome of the participatory process was **disappointing from a general perspective**. One participant considered that the workshops would have been more constructive without the presence of representatives of the agro-industry, which he considered to have hindered the process. Another participant suggested that institutions are not fully prepared to adopt collective intelligence processes that go beyond the defense of specific interests, pointing to the lack of time and space for actors to understand each other's points of view. For this person, the outcome resulted in "a catalogue of actions identified by each participant rather than inclusive and systemic solutions". Participants should have adopted a participatory attitude; instead, they arrived with a business-as-usual perspective that was insufficiently challenged throughout the process.

5. Conclusions

The discussion above points to two main conclusions. First, a consensual resolution with an action plan defined by the actors within the proposed arrangement would have led to a **soft consensus** because the visions, practices, interests and objectives were not shared among the participants and proved equivocal. Moreover, the dominant position of representatives of the agroindustry counterbalanced any tentative of radical transformation. We conclude that this would have been unsatisfactory for a region wishing to transition to a food sustainable system.

Secondly, contrary to a frequent assumption on participation, the fundamentally **consultative nature** of the process may have saved it. Indeed, while participation advocates generally call for citizens to co-decide with representatives of democratic institutions (Arnstein 1969; Booth et Coveney 2015), the consultative aspect of the arrangement transferred the responsibility and the content of the decision concerning the future of sustainable food in Wallonia **to an external political authority** (the Ministry for Sustainable Development). The outcome may ultimately be more ambitious than a consensus found among participants for several reasons. First, the Ministry has to comply with other political engagements such as the UN Sustainable

Development Goals and the ambitious Walloon Strategy for Sustainable Development. Second, there appears to be a demand from citizens for changing the food system, a demand that could not find its voice strongly in the collaborative arrangement, but that the political authority might defend. Moreover, the process may have reinforced the expectation of participants and the accountability of the administration and the ministry. Third, the institutional architecture of Belgium gives the ministry sufficient authority to elaborate a strong roadmap for the region. By retaining the ultimate decision on the action plan, the political authorities have the option to distance themselves from the grounded interests of actors, and thus maintain the possibility to adopt a radical policy. This, however, requires political courage. The willingness of the political authorities to take on this important challenge remains to be seen[12].

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[12] The regional government adopted a food strategy in November 2018, called *Manger Demain*. It prioritises the development of a global coordination of the local initiatives through a participatory approach based on food policy councils.

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7. Tables

Table 1. Evolution of participation rates in Phase I of the *referentiel*

Meeting	Stage	Theme	Total number of participants
1	Launch	Introductory session	30
2	Defining objectives	Access to food	13
3		Quality of food	13
4		Prosperity	20
5		Environmental impact	19
6		Governance of the regional food system	16
7	Levers and measures	Access to food	11
8		Quality of food	9
9		Prosperity	12
10		Environmental impact	14
11		Governance of the regional food system	12
12	Consolidation	Closing session	27

Table 2. Number of participants per actor category in Phase I of the *referentiel*

Actor categories	Number of organizations invited	present at launch	present in defining objectives	present in identifying levers and measures	present at consolidation
Production	10	6	9	8	7
Transformation	4	4	3	3	2
Distribution	2	1	2	2	2
Restauration	1	1	0	0	0
Consumer organisations	10	4	4	4	2
Cross-cutting associations	8	6	6	3	6
Administrations	12	8	10	7	8