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Executive Summary

<http://www.food4sustainability.be/>

This project aimed to explore the role of the transformation of motivations, values and visions in the transition of the agri-food system and specifically of the instrumentality of hybrid governance arrangements—arrangements in which both actors of the mainstream agri-food system and actors from niche/grassroots innovations participate—therein. We identified three transition pathways for which we formulate recommendations: (1) change led by grassroots innovations, (2) change led by mainstream actors and (3) hybrid arrangements.

What is the potential of these grassroots innovations for food systems reform? One possibility is that the grassroots innovation simply coexists with the mainstream regime, not temporarily but for a long period of time, thus creating a form of "diversity within the food system". However, transition theorists emphasize the need for these citizens-led social innovations to interact with the mainstream to potentially transform it. Therefore, this project focused both on grassroots initiatives that both promote such diversity and on interactions with mainstream actors that influence regime transformation.

The general hypothesis of the research is that to be a driver for sustainability transitions, changes in actors' motivations, social values and visions need to be systemic:

- A first specific hypothesis is that transformations of motivations, values and visions should not only guide the actors' strategies and activities, but they should also relate to a systemic understanding of the problems;

- A second specific hypothesis of the research is that hybrid governance arrangements that include actors that convey different visions of the future of food systems are a key condition for initiatives to overcome lock-in effects and for the involved actors to enter a transition process.

To explore the contribution of these two hypotheses to explaining sustainability transitions in the agri-food systems, this project organized a series of field inquiries with actors within the agri-food system in Belgium. The first set of field inquiries is related to the so-called alternative food networks, whose explicit aim is to build an alternative model to the agroindustrial system. The second set of field inquiries focuses on market innovations and corporate social responsibility by mainstream actors of the food system.

The contribution of alternative food networks

We conducted face-to-face field interviews across 104 collective food buying groups in the three Belgian Regions. The sample was built to have a broad diversity of food geographies, including 3 large urban areas, 2 small-size urban areas and 2 non-urban areas. Because we aimed to identify the potential network effects, a number of food buying groups within a radius of 30 km were chosen in each area. All the organisations surveyed had developed an economically stable partnership with the producer, and all showed a stable or growing membership.

Two main results stand out. First, an important element is the construction of social and ecological sustainability transitions as a multi-dimensional concept, which goes far beyond the discourse of economic regionalism or satisfaction of individual consumer preferences. In particular, the coordinators of the groups indicated that experimenting with sustainable lifestyle changes is one of the most important objectives of the organization, and they rank support to sustainable farming practices higher than the promotion of short circuits. Further, in a substantial number of the groups that were interviewed, this social networking extended to explicit linkage to broader clusters of social and ecological initiatives, in particular with the members of the transition movement (formerly transition towns).

Second, the collective food buying groups largely favour decentralized modes of coordination for organizing the social network component, as compared to more centralized modes of coordination. In particular, centralized network connections with national or regional authorities rank very low in the questions of the survey related to trust and influence. In contrast, decentralized networks, such as networking with nearby food buying groups, local groceries and other food transition associations all rank very high in the declared relationships of trust and influence.

Analyzing the interactions between the grassroots initiatives and the regime actors

For profit economic actors' pro-environmental drivers

Data for this research was collected through a nation-wide online survey distributed in three languages (French, Dutch and English) to more than 1,737 companies of the Belgian agri-food sector. In total 365 companies responded to the survey and after quality control 201 surveys were kept for the analysis. The units of analysis (the companies) contained a predominant representation of micro and small companies. The majority had a limited company (*Société Anonyme/Naamloze vennootschap*) legal status, and had 16 to 50 years of existence. Most of the companies reported not receiving external support for pro-environmental activities. Thus, most of them develop their pro-environmental actions with their own resources.

This research aimed at understanding what drives the Belgian agri-food companies towards sustainability. In this explorative case study, the main pro-environmental driver is competitiveness, followed by social/legal conformity, and finally social responsibility. The results also show that these drivers are complementary and non-excludable. Thus, policymakers should keep working on regulatory frameworks to accelerate the transition, while competition for a larger share of the market through pro-environmental actions and companies' social responsibility contribute to this process.

The creation of market innovations by regime actors: insights on ethics and governance of sustainability transitions

The analysis of the interactions between grassroots and regime actors was deepened by in depth quality research. For this three initiatives that are now well established in Belgium were chosen, where authorities of the provinces engaged in hybrid arrangements with market and non-profit actors, respectively in the province of Hainaut, Liège and Walloon Brabant. The research on these three initiatives was based on the qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews, field observations and complementary data from several documentary sources. We conducted 36 face-to-face interviews with the various actors involved in the initiatives; realised six observations of workshops and discussion meetings; and gathered complementary data from several documentary sources.

The impact of these initiatives on the practices of the various actors are very similar in Hainaut and Liège, the only difference being the setting up in Liège of a logistics platform. In contrast, a more profound impact can be noted in the case of the Walloon Brabant subsystem. In this local product initiative, not only new marketing opportunities for farmers and new logistic and promotion activities for the province have been created, but the core activities of the provincial extension services have unfolded in new directions. This contrast can be explained by the governance arrangements the initiatives are related to. In Hainaut and Liège, the local product initiatives are implemented by already existing parapublic organisations whose board is

composed of large-scale, mainstream farmers and representatives of the province. In Walloon Brabant, the creation of a dedicated organisation allowed new interactions to take place among various actors of the agri-food system - small-scale producers previously involved in the box scheme, the LAG, and representatives of the province - upholding different sets of values. Their equal voicing in the board favoured the development of new ethical values, and this has had a significant impact on the practices of all the actors involved

Transformation of social practices in niche-regime interactions

In the third thematic field research on grassroots/regime interactions, we focus on stores belonging to two major brands of retailers in Belgium. The analysis is based on the qualitative analysis of 19 semi-structured interviews. All responses are treated as anonymous.

The analysis of the field data revealed that mismatches exist between the practices of large-scale retailers and those of local producers, which became apparent in all three elements of practices: materials, competencies and meanings. In order for large-scale retailers to be able to source and market local goods, this mismatch needed to be overcome in all three elements: the competences of all actors involved, the materials used in the marketing practices and the meanings attached to performance indicators, such as quality, shape and volumes. However, our cases also suggest that the extent to which these adaptations are made can differ and that they largely depend on the position of the strategy of local stores within the overall strategy of a retailer or a healthy fast-casual food chain. Moreover, our results suggest that for the sourcing and marketing of local goods, decision-making power needs to be moved back to the level of the store, allowing a higher degree of individual initiative and institutional entrepreneurship by store managers and employees in reconfiguring new practices.

Project recommendations

1. Our research has demonstrated that the key feature of a successful in-depth transformation is the embeddedness of a given initiative in the broader social network of organisations experimenting and learning on in-depth lifestyle changes for sustainable agri-food systems. To facilitate this embedding process, we recommend the support of bridging organisations, such as regional platforms, umbrella organisations, knowledge hubs, etc.

Such bridging organisations, supported both by public authorities and members' fees, can overcome some of the insufficiencies related to inefficient distribution channels, lack of administrative support and poor infrastructure that often characterize grassroots initiatives. In addition, such bridging organisations may facilitate social learning amongst grassroots initiatives and with other sustainable food associations. This collaborative aspect is often less straightforward, however, than the more conventional supporting activities in terms of exchange of best practices, administrative support and legal advice. Indeed, as shown in this research successful social learning depends on process dimensions such as non-coercive deliberation and inclusive participation.

2. Our results suggest that it is also important to overcome the mismatches between the practices of local producers and those of large-scale retailers and fast food chains. Such mismatches were found at the level of the competences of all actors involved, the materials used in the marketing practices and the meanings attached to performance indicators, such as quality, shape and volumes. However, our cases also suggest that the extent to which these adaptations are made can differ, and that they largely depend on the position of the strategy of local stores within the overall strategy of a retailer or fast food chain. Moreover, our results suggest that for the sourcing and marketing of local goods, decision-making power needs to be moved back to the level of the store, allowing a higher degree of individual initiative and institutional entrepreneurship by store managers and employees in reconfiguring new practices.

3. Overall, our analysis confirms that in order to increase the transformative potential of agri-food system initiatives, hybrid governance arrangements between different types of actors need to be established. These arrangements should not only involve various categories of agri-food and non-agricultural actors. They should also and most of all aim at allowing more voice for interests that have been hitherto largely excluded or marginalised and that are upholding ethical values that are currently missing in the conventional supply chains, so as to foster the dissemination of a more systemic ethics of food system reform.

Keywords:

Sustainability transitions, agri-food systems, grassroots innovations, corporate social responsibility, niche-regime interaction.