

Supporting actors' networks for agricultural development: the experience of a regional meat chain based on Hérens cattle (Valais, Switzerland)

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Abstract: IMALP and PASTO are two research and demonstration projects implemented from 2003 to 2008 in the Swiss Alps with a participatory methodology linking the activation and the research tasks. With this support, a group of breeders, butchers and restaurant owners set up a local meat chain based on Hérens cattle. We analyse the actors and tools involved in this process.

Keywords: actors' network, regional food chain, agriculture, Alps

Objectives and methodology

In Switzerland as in the European Union, farmers in the Alpine regions are faced with crucial choices such as a development of their farming structure and/or their competitiveness in order to preserve the income of existing productions; or the development of new farm orientations by participating in new territorial dynamics in terms of land management, agri-tourism and quality products. In order to work out, experiment and evaluate methods and tools for the accompaniment of the farmers in the development of new orientations, two successive projects – the first one called IMALP (Implementation of sustainable agriculture and rural development in the Alps) - and the second PASTO (Beef production and land management with Herens cattle)- were set up in the Valais canton, a Swiss Alpine region. We propose to analyse the results of these projects through an evaluation process based on the analysis of the networks of actors (Callon, 1996, Granovetter 2005). This evaluation process aims to answer three questions: which groups of actors were mobilized in the project? Which tools for interaction/investments in form (Thévenot 2001) have been used successfully? For which concrete results? The evaluation permitted an identification of the elements which support the passage from one phase to another in the building of an actor network concerned by the implementation of the new market for Herens beef meat. The hypothesis is that the building of an actor network linking the socio-economic actors' system, the information and knowledge actors' system, the public decision actors' system and the end users, is a factor of success in an innovation process (Imalp, 2006; Brunori *et al.*, 2007; Fig. 1 below).

Structuration of the actors' network

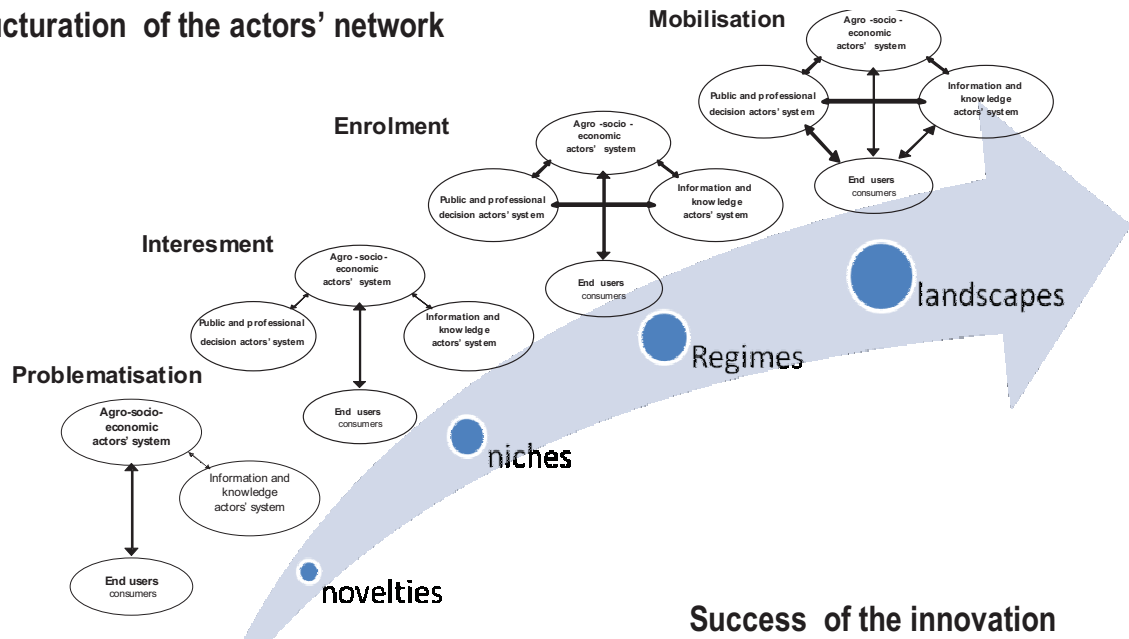


Figure 1. The actors' network as a success factor for innovation

Results

An analysis of the actors' network highlighted the following main actors and investments of form are the following (See also Fig. 2 below):

- The Novelty phase: from 2003 to 2005, during the IMALP project, the local actors implemented a participatory diagnosis and an action plan with the support of the Agricultural Economics Institute. One action concerned the Herens cattle meat. The Herens cow is well known in Switzerland and abroad for its fighting aptitudes. Cow fightings are organised during spring and autumn, arousing great interest among local people but also among tourists and the media (with TV broadcasting). Despite this social success and the high amount of direct agri-environmental payments, the breeding of the Herens cow is hardly profitable due to its low milk production. Faced with this issue, the local actors decided to valorize Hérens cattle meat. Within the framework of the IMALP project, farmers, butchers and restaurant keepers negotiated an agreement on standards and prices for this meat and, having obtained the support of the Canton (subsidy system) and of the Chamber of agriculture (marketing tools), they set up a label with a trademark, a logo and an association. The first labelled meat was sold during the 2004 Christmas period. The quantitative results of the association during this first phase of innovation are given in Table 1.

- The Niche market phase: from 2006 to 2008, the PASTO project was developed in order to reinforce the actors' network around the Hérens cattle meat. It involved socio-economic actors, actors of the knowledge system and the end users. The project allowed the enrolment of new institutional actors such as the Hérens cattle breeding Federation, a Federal research station and the cantonal and inter-cantonal extension services. To better inform the socio-economic actors, reference data have been developed about zoo-technical performance, meat quality, the meat market, consumer preferences for meat and attitudes of the local population and tourists towards the landscape. These references were presented at public meetings and allowed a debate to be launched on the scaling up of the project in two other areas of the Valais canton. To better interact with consumers, the selling of Hérens meat was promoted at a weekly market and also at different fairs. These events have been implemented by both the butchers and the restaurant keepers. The quantitative impact on the activity of the association is not yet known.

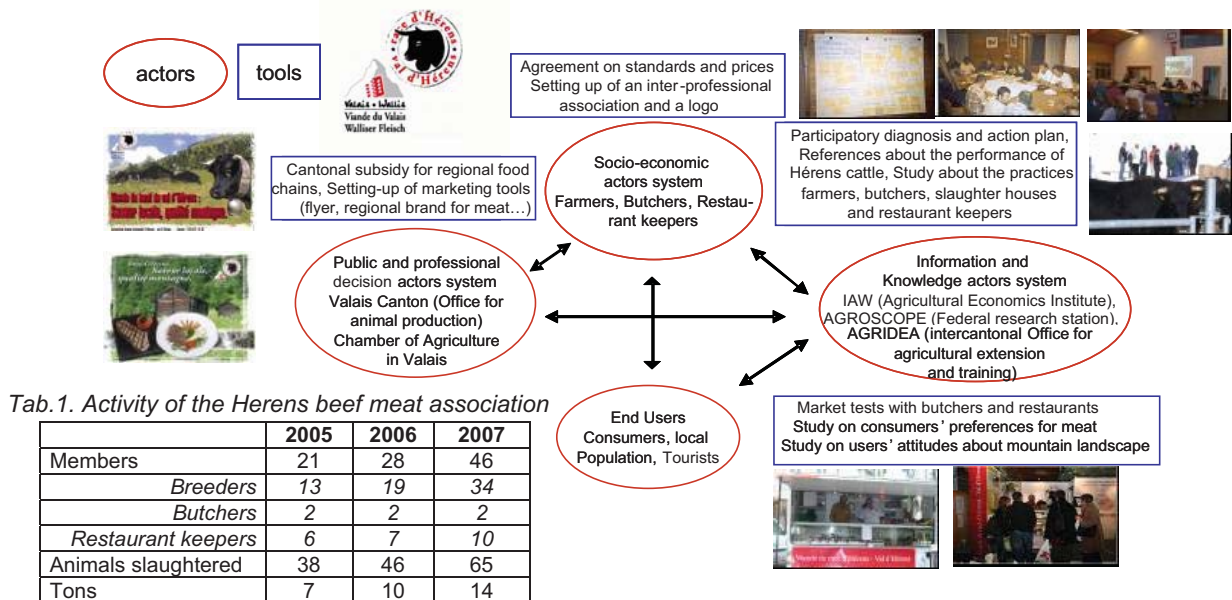


Figure 2. Actors and tools mobilised in the project for Hérens cattle meat

Conclusion

The networking stimulates the collective learning and the integration of economic, institutional and technical knowledge. It is suitable for innovation with rural SMEs who face the problem of geographic dispersion and often lack of social capital.

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