

Territorial extension systems for new farmers: the Terriam project

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Abstract: A team of extension institutions and scientists built a research-action programme to understand and support an increasing demand of projects holders, aiming at creating a rural activity based on multifunctional agriculture. The project identified 3 challenges that extension organization have to consider in order to renew their approaches : a clear focus on new rural activities and not only agriculture, a collective empowerment of local actors, and a more robust identification of entrepreneurs' demand. Such a strategy is now widely considered as efficient, but it still faces resistance, rooted in the dominant model of extension in France and the conflicting interests of institutions. A model was built to address this demand efficiently, focused on entrepreneurs needs and territorial issues. It has been used by local authorities to implement policies to support young farmers and new extension schemes.

Keywords: extension systems, multifunctional agriculture, regional development

From 2005 to 2007, 15 extension associations and 5 research institutions have worked together within the Terriam (Territory and initiatives through multifunctional agriculture) project, in order to promote and strengthen innovative projects on the countryside.

New challenges for farming in Western France

In Western France, mainstream intensive agriculture has been unable to correct the trends of social decline (economic crisis, erosion of employment), environmental damages (on landscape, biodiversity or water quality) and cultural distrust (mad cow, town / countryside conflicts). New activities, not only agricultural *stricto sensu*, rooted in multifunctionality and sustainable development (accommodation, small scale processing, direct sales, local energy production) are now getting more numerous and stronger (Aubree et Maréchal, 2006). Those complex projects need multidisciplinary approaches that the existing extension institutions are not used to implement.

Many local authorities identified the need for new economic networks based on territorial potentialities. But they consider their influence is limited, both by the amount of funding they control and by the formal standards imposed by macro-economic agricultural policies. Most rural actors rely on a local level of governance, called "pays", whose legal mission is to organize participative development on territories defined as the "lived space" of citizens. Involving all organized forces into cooperative projects matching with shared territorial priorities requires new methods for extension institutions.

Western France now receives a strong flow of entrepreneurs or "project holders" willing to create an economic activity in rural regions. This flow is qualitatively different from the classical "young farmer". Some characteristics have been analysed at national and regional levels (Vinatier Roche, 2006) : they are older, more educated, have a wider experience in cities or other jobs, and are seeking a "better life". The figures show that in France, depending on the regions, their number is increasing up to one third of the "applicants for settlement" (Lefebvre et Quelen, 2006).

Existing extension systems unable to face those challenges

Projects holders are often critical about the extension institutions, seen as competing for a number of "consumers" that is sharply decreasing. Institutional reasons more than projects holders' interests motivate a "struggle for life". The fundamental paradigm of extension remains rooted in the belief, settled in the 50s, that technique can solve every problem. When a crossed vision is needed for a complex initiative, project holders hardly can find a transversal advise for managing their project

(Evrard et Vedel, 2003). It happens that they get contradictory advice according to the extension officer they meet. Many times, the education or training of French extension agents lack abilities in social and human sciences to take into account the human background of a project.

The agrofood chains (“filières”) are mainly based on technical and economic standards that only depend on the territory characteristics. Their efficiency is based on a one best way to be implemented and bettered everywhere, trying to gain technical yield. Extension officers are not invited to adapt their practice to local needs or invent new ways. They lack theoretical background and experience to imagine how agricultural activities can be joined as complementary in a territorial open system. The dominant vision remains merely analytical when a systemic approach is needed.

In the regional context of the Terriam project (Western France with agricultural activities in “filières”), multifunctional projects are still called “atypical”. Other regions in France, with more diversified activities, consider them just as legitimate as mass production, and don’t need specific extension tools. For many reasons (access to real estate, ideological opposition, trade union power) innovative activities are not welcome by farmers’ dominant organizations (trade unions, coops, banks), in the regions we studied. This influential opposition leads local authorities to be cautious about their support for multifunctional agriculture.

Outcomes of the project

We came to a clearer understanding of what project holders want. The three main questions for them are : access to real estate in a context of competition for land, access to funding (public authorities as well as bankers are often frightened by projects so original that cannot be compared to others), and “accompagnement”, word chosen to distinguish this new attitude from classical advice.

A theoretical scheme of the new systems’ positioning inside the “extension world” was drawn. It is focused on territorial issues and characteristics instead of standardized methods on the one hand, and on entrepreneurs needs instead of technique transmission on the other. This scheme helped us design a common frame to implement new extension services.

This work also fed us with a disillusioned view of local authorities aims. We are now aware that agriculture is not THE essential topic for rural authorities, but that it can integrate a territorial strategy when it helps solve other challenges or problems.

Concretely, the project produced its results at a time when potential concerns were coming to a matter of public decision. They came at the right time for some authorities that were looking for recommendations to support “new rural entrepreneurs”. They have thus inspired policies at regional scale (Brittany, Centre) and “pays” scale. The interaction, that lasted 2 years, between researchers and advisers also proved an efficient way of training extension agents and inform scientists on a social movement that still kept hidden at the start.

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