

Supporting agroecological transitions in food systems: an international comparison of agrifood policies

In the context of an increasing concern worldwide for environmental impact, climate change, and fair food access, national public policies dealing with agriculture and agri-food issues are very diverse and evolve over time in terms of objectives, paradigms and tools, defining different trajectories. In this short paper, we analyse and compare the trajectories of such policies in the five ATTER countries (Italy, UK, Brazil, USA and France) in order to better understand to which extent they have encouraged the ecological transitions of food systems until nowadays. More specifically, we examine which policies have been set up to favour these transitions at territorial scale in these five countries.

Introduction

The international comparison of agrifood policies in five countries (Italy, UK, Brazil, USA and France) and over the last few decades is an original work initiated through ATTER, partially based on previous researches already conducted at national scales or comparing Brazil and France. Our objective is to identify the extent to which these policies have encouraged the agroecological transitions of agri-food systems, particularly at territorial level. Our approach aims to identify the major phases and key instruments of these public policies, the key players, and the ideas and controversies at work.

This paper describes the main phases of the trajectories of agricultural and food policies in the 5 countries and explores two main questions: How do public policies both depend upon the balance of power between the different components of the agrifood system and influence it? How do they both express and influence the emergence of new narratives and visions? Five examples of specific policies or policy instruments or programs aimed at favouring agroecological transitions at territorial scale are also shortly described.

ATTER's collective work

10 key analytical entrees were used in the ATTER project allowed to characterize the trajectory of agricultural and food policies for each country since the 1960s, alongside literature review, previous studies and interviews with policy makers and key actors:

- Context and drivers (political/sanitary crisis; elections, etc.)
- Key national policies dealing with sustainable agriculture and food systems (laws, regulations, policy instruments, programs)
- Main targets of these policies in the period (farmers /consumers/retailers ...)
- Main key levers (practices, land, prices, food procurement, volume ...)
- Leading visions of agroecology and/ or sustainable food system (in government or public policy)
- Most influencing actors in the definition of policies / coalition, alliances, network
- Opposing forces / main controversies
- Place of territorial policies
- Important or emblematic territorial policies or public/collective initiatives
- Key arenas of debates/networks created in the period

A specific focus has been put on territorial policies, whether these were defined at the national scale to favour territorial transitions, or whether they were defined by regional or local governments.

Three main phases in common

In the trajectory of agricultural and food policies in the 5 countries studied, we can identify three main phases, whose time steps may differ from one country to another.

1. The productivist phase

Between the 1960s and 1980s, the National agricultural policies in Brazil and the USA, and the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) in France, Italy and the UK, promoted (and still promote, to some extent) a productivist agriculture inspired by the Green Revolution

model to ensure food independence with agro-industry development and exports. Agrifood policies were mainly agricultural policies, and food was mainly/only present in these policies through food assistance programs and the establishment of food safety standards, which became stricter after a number of sanitary crises such as the mad cow disease and increasing concerns around the issues of pesticide use and impacts.

2. A variable environmental shift

From the 1980s to the present day, due to the increasing acknowledgement of the productivist agrifood system's impacts and the related societal pressures, an environmental shift led to introduce regulatory instruments and environmental standards for agricultural production, with conservation measures for biodiversity, water and soil. The reconnection of agriculture, environment, food and human health was not yet central, although it was already claimed by the organic farming networks that had emerged and formalised gradually in the different countries. From the 1990s onwards, the five countries gradually adopted national standards for regulating and certifying organic agriculture and organic products, although in the USA, it is mainly the notion of sustainable agriculture that was endorsed and supported by federal policies.

At the same time, mainly in Europe, a decentralization movement was supported through territorial "sustainable development" policies (such as Leader programmes) promoting diversification and local processing of agricultural production, seeking to enhance territorial assets and resources at different scales (municipalities, intermunicipal consortiums, small regions). This came along with agricultural policies also aimed at maintaining family and/or peasant farming, with specific instruments in Europe (second pillar of the CAP) as well as in Brazil (Pronaf in 1995). The US policies were less committed to territorial development than other countries during this period of intense globalization.

3. Towards a food system perspective

In the early 2000s, all countries saw a shift of public agrifood policies towards a food system perspective, marking the beginning of the third phase, although on different time scales and to different degrees. It began sooner in Italy and France, i.e., as early as the 1990s, it is more recent or weaker in the three other countries. From the end of the 1990s on, food and nutrition issues were articulated to environmental issues, which was reflected in various policies: Zero Hunger and Food procurement programs in Brazil, Food Districts and Biodistricts in Italy, Territorial Food Projects in France, Regional Food Systems Programs in the USA. In the UK, while there has been a notable shift from agricultural policies which favour production towards those which prioritize environmental measures with the recent Environmental Land Management schemes for example, there remains little focus on a food systems approach.

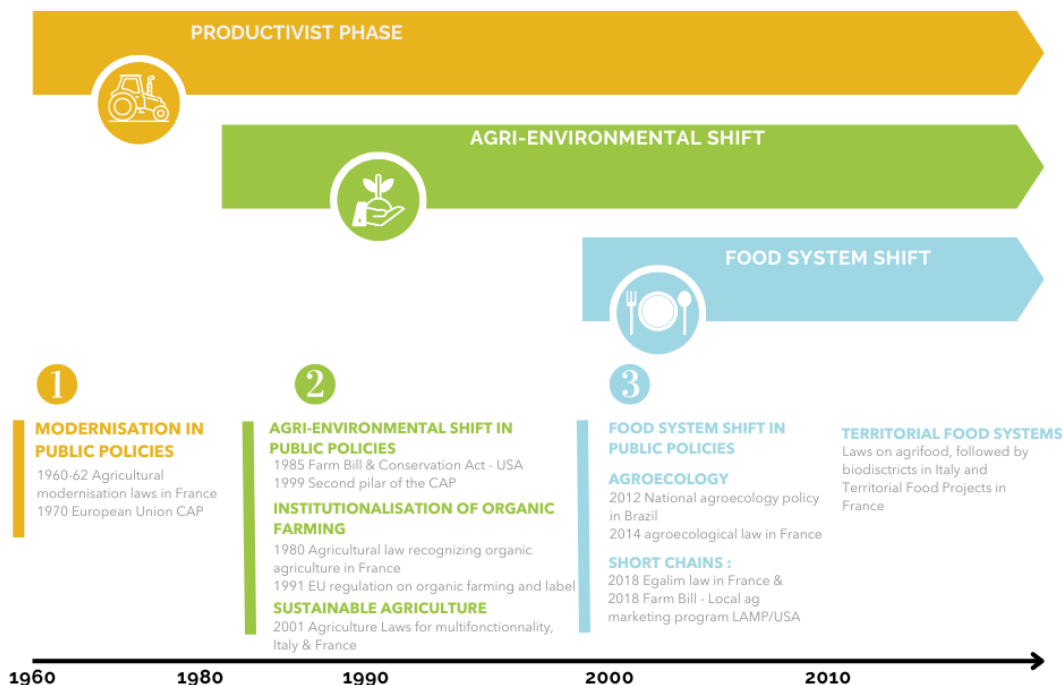


Figure 1. Timeline and policy paradigms

Power balance and controversies in the transformation of food systems

Our national studies have explored how the balance of power, the state of dialogue, and the configuration of alliances have influenced (or impeded) advances in agroecological transition policy support. Relations and alliances between the ministries, institutions, interest groups and farmers' unions or, more recently, organic or agroecological producers' organizations are very diverse in the 5 countries as well as over time. The weight of the agro-industry lobbies (seeds, inputs, processors, retailers) with the support of the conventional farming sector (and its own lobby) against agroecological transitions is considerable in national, regional and international arenas. However, this influence is mitigated by the development of health and environmental standards, particularly in the European context, and by the weight of consumer demands and expectations.

Moreover, in Europe and Brazil, occasional alliances were possible between farmers' unions - even minority ones such as the *Confédération Paysanne* in France or *LWA* in the UK (more recently)- and public authorities at regional or local scales, with the support of civil society organisations echoing citizen expectations and consumer demand. At the national scale, agroecology was institutionalized in national policies in Brazil and in France, as a result of different sorts of alliances and convergences across academic, policy and social movements worlds (Lamine et al, 2019; Niederle et al, 2020). By contrast, in the USA, small-scale family farming disappeared very early and even midscale farms are now on the way out.

In all 5 countries, specific alliances across different components and actors of the food system led to different degrees of legitimization of transition narratives that express different visions of agriculture-food-health-environment-climate reconnections. In the recent period, such encompassing (and competing) narratives would link for example sustainable intensification and food security, agroecology and sustainable food diets, or organic agriculture and short supply chains. There are debates, controversies and growing political contestation about technologically and techno-science driven "sustainable intensification" solutions supported by agro-industries, processors and retailers; *vis a vis* the more radical and place-based approaches associated with agroecological practices. In Europe, proposals for greening agriculture under the new CAP (2023-2027) or the government's agroecological policy implemented in France since 2013 are discussed and considered to be too limited and timid, or too technological and "digitalized" by the advocates of a peasant and place-based agroecology. The European Green Deal for 2030 and the new CAP reform 2023-2027 sets ambitious targets (reduction in the use of pesticides, fertilizers and antibiotics by 50%, 20%, and 50%, respectively, increasing agricultural areas under organic farming (25%), agricultural areas under high-diversity landscape features (10%), and protected areas. However, these new policies are strongly criticized for missing the needed systemic perspective.

Five examples of key policies and instruments favouring agroecological transition in territorial food systems

The territorial scale is increasingly recognised as a relevant scale for supporting the ecological transitions of agri-food systems. This takes different pathways in the 5 countries. These processes of institutionalisation result from specific configurations of power relations and specific interplays between science, policy and experience, where the related actors take a different role, favouring different framings (Lamine et al. 2023).

These different pathways and framings also generate the definition of different laws, policies, and instruments. We present here 5 examples that illustrate this diversity.

Biodistrict, Italy	The Italian organic movement pioneered in 2009 the "bio-district" concept, defined as geographical areas where farmers, the public, tourist operators, associations and public authorities enter into an agreement for the sustainable management of local resources based on organic principles and practices, a definition later on adopted by the EC. https://www.fao.org/3/bt402e/bt402e.pdf
Projets Alimentaires Territoriaux, France	Territorial Food Projects (<i>Projets Alimentaires Territoriaux</i>) were defined by the French law in 2014 and aim at "bringing together producers, processors, local authorities and consumers" to develop territorial food strategies based on a shared diagnostic and a program of concrete actions. In December 2022, there were officially nearly 400 all over France (representing 2/3 of French population). https://agriculture.gouv.fr/projets-alimentaires-territoriaux-les-initiatives-se-multiplient
Ecoforte, Brazil	The Ecoforte program, launched in 2014, aimed at supporting projects carried out through a network of social organizations and incorporating a territorial approach (albeit with very flexible margins), following a work plan oriented towards the implementation of an integrated set of "reference units". https://redes-ecoforte.eita.org.br/
Regional Food System	This suite of grant opportunities supports planning and implementation to strengthen local and regional food economies. Since its first grant round in 2020, it has supported more than 110 efforts to lift

Partnerships, USA	marginalized communities, support small scale processing, improve regional distribution, and reduce GHGs. https://www.ams.usda.gov/services/grants/rfsp
The Good Food Nation Act, Scotland, UK	As the four governments in the UK embark on increasingly divergent paths in terms of food and farming policy following Brexit, any future focus on food systems at the territorial scale must take place separately within each of its four nations. In Scotland the Good Food Nation Act (2022) tasks each council in the country with developing its own 'Good Food Action Plan', placing decision making on food systems in the hands of local authorities. https://www.gov.scot/policies/food-and-drink/good-food-nation/

Conclusion

Across the 5 countries, we can identify a common trajectory with the emergence of environmental, territorial and food turns that introduce in public policies some elements in favour of agroecological transition and some support to alternative models to conventional farming. However, these shifts are taking place on different time and spatial scales in the 5 countries, and are uneven in their effectiveness. New coalitions between producers, consumers and local administrations (district or regional bodies) around food quality, food security, food sovereignty have developed over the last decades. This led to a new focus on regional food systems, with the institutionalization of Territorial Food Projects in France and of Biodistricts in Italy, of territorial agroecological networks in Brazil such as Ecoforte, and of Regional Food System Partnerships in the USA. However, the unevenness in policies and the weak resources devoted to such programs appear as major reasons for the slow progress of food systems transitions. This is caused also by the failure of new policies to detach themselves from earlier prevailing policy regimes which still prioritize conventional agri-business dominated markets. In the future, the rise of climate change issues should make greater account of the necessary changes to food production, processing, distribution and consumption methods. However, the backslashes and regressions that could be observed in Brazil between 2016 and 2022 (Niederle et al., 2022) and more recently at the European level with the CAP revision as well as in 2024 in France with the new agricultural law show the lasting resistance to such changes.

Resources

Niederle et al., 2022

Lamine et al, 2023

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