

Facilitating open-ended agroecological transitions at the territorial scale: Two experiences from Brazil and France

Due to the inherent socio-natural contingency of agroecological transitions and thus their high level of complexity and uncertainties, open-ended approaches, whereby objectives and means are redefined along the way, with futures left open, seem more appropriate. However, financing and supporting schemes still often adopt quite deterministic perspectives, whereby precise objectives and pathways should be predefined. This short paper relies on a conversation built over time between researchers and practitioners involved in two ATTER Case Studies, two rural regions from Northeast Brazil (Borborema) and southern France (Ardèche). It examines the trajectory of projects and networks set up around agroecological transitions over the last years in each region at the scale of territorial food systems and the approaches of the main actors involved in their facilitation. The comparison shows that both cases share a focus on participatory approaches and collective experimentation that supports open-endedness, but differ in the way they balance and articulate approaches based on evidence and on experience.

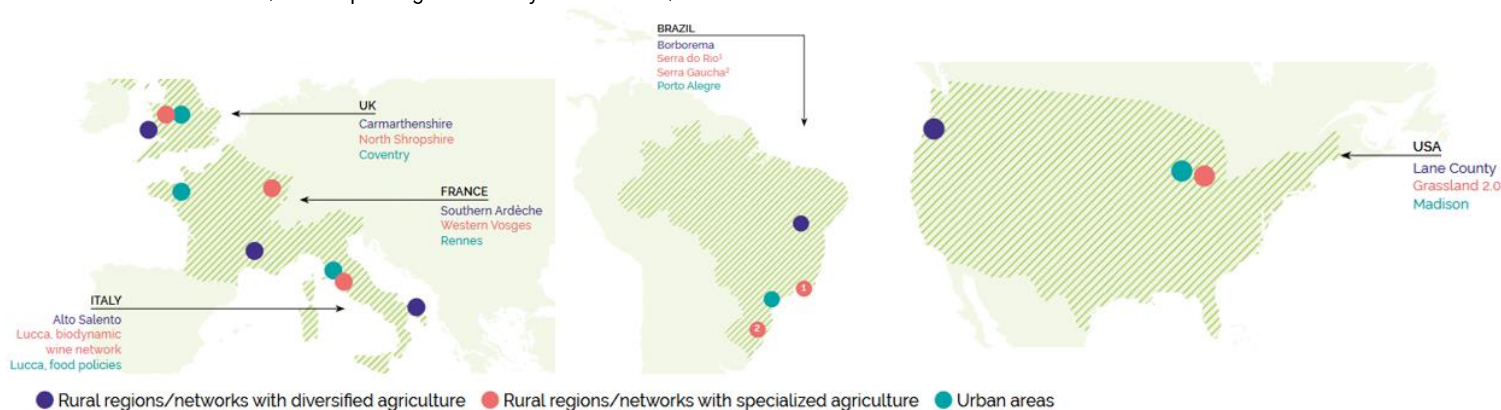
Introduction

The debates over agroecology increasingly reveal competing definitions and visions of agroecology (Rivera-Ferre, 2018), often contrasted by their scope (agricultural practices or food systems, farm or territory etc.) and/or their radicality. However, these debates often overlook the relationship to change as such. This can be characterised by two ideal-typical stances: the deterministic and the open-ended perspectives (Lamine et al., 2021). The first one is based on a predetermination of objectives and means, targets and pathways. The second one on the contrary, is based on their definition along the change process, with futures left open. Due to the inherent socio-natural contingency of agroecological transitions (and thus their high level of complexity and uncertainties) more open-ended approaches seem more appropriate. Hence our question: In which ways may facilitation processes favour (or impede) more open ended processes of agroecological transitions at the scale of territorial food systems?

ATTER's collective work and case studies based exchanges

Following ATTER's key principle, this paper is based on a collective analysis involving researchers and practitioners in exchanges of knowledge and experiences. On the one hand, a collective work was carried out in order to characterize the diverse methodological frameworks aimed at supporting and facilitating agroecological transitions at the scale of territorial food systems in the 5 ATTER countries (France, Brazil, Italy, UK, USA), based on a review of available studies and research projects. On the other hand, ATTER secondments (from ASPTA to INRAE and from INRAE to ASPTA) as well as diverse internal workshops along the course of the project allowed to discuss the two case studies in regard to the facilitation approaches.

The Borborema and Southern Ardèche are two case studies of the larger ATTER portfolio, that includes 16 territorial case studies in total, encompassing a diversity of situations, both urban and rural.



For each of these case studies, an analysis of the trajectory of the territorial agrifood system is carried out to understand the transition mechanisms and their links with both public policies and local initiatives and networks (see [ATTER Observatory](#)). In many cases such as in the two regions of Borborema and Southern Ardèche, specific organizations, instances and/or projects deploy facilitation approaches aimed at supporting such transitions.

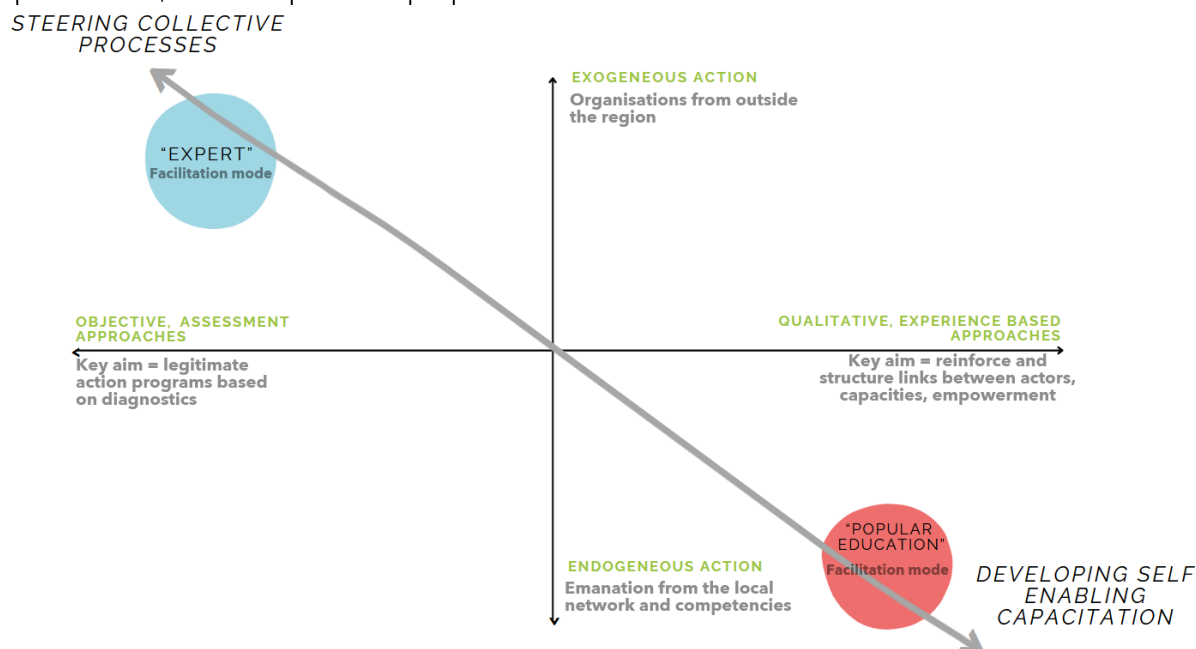
In order to characterise the approaches of facilitation and discuss how they favour in possibly different ways an open-ended perspective to agroecological transition, we first set up an analytical grid that we applied to both regions. This allowed to identify both the main actors involved in the facilitation of these transitions at the scale of territorial food systems, and the approaches they develop and apply.

Characterising facilitation approaches

The larger analysis carried out at the scale of the whole ATTER project and its 5 countries has shown that diverse organisations provide concrete support to territorial approaches: experts or consultants that offer services such as diagnostics, evaluation tools, methodological support to planning processes; civil society organisations that get “professionalised” and also “sell” or offer their expertise; exchange networks set up by local authorities; sometimes also researchers within action-research projects. Hence, facilitators come from diverse backgrounds: from agricultural and sustainability sciences (with many agronomists and engineers involved), from popular education, sometimes also from urban planning.

Their approaches largely depend on these types of organisations and backgrounds: some rather favour evidence-based and/or assessment approaches, others experience-based ones. Moreover, their links to the territories of course also matter: some emanate from the local CSO/actors’ networks, others come from outside the territory.

This conceptualisation allowed us to contrast on the one hand, modes of facilitation that may be qualified as “expert”, that aim at steering collective processes in a rather deterministic perspective on transition, and on the other hand, more horizontal forms that rather relate to “popular education” and aim at developing self-enabling capacitation and experimentation, in a more open-ended perspective.



The 2 case studies present different expressions of these facilitation approaches.

Borborema territory: converging farmers-led facilitation modes

Borborema is a semiarid rural region in Paraíba, Brazil. Its agriculture is characterised by a predominance of family farming (90%), with small farm units and diversified agroecosystems. Key concerns such as water security, resource accessibility, gender inequalities, and rural violence have catalysed the emergence of a strong family farming network as well as a prominent women farmers’ movement.

Originating from resistance and advocacy movements within peasant agriculture in Paraíba's agreste region, in the early 1990s, the farmers' unions of 3 municipalities took on the challenge of putting into practice a strategy of innovative action aimed at fostering socio-organizational dynamics in favour of family agriculture in the region (Petersen, 2015). This led to the creation of the Polo da Borborema which today brings together municipal rural workers' unions, over 150 community associations, a regional organization of agroecological farmers, and a cooperative of family farm producers. It currently mobilizes a social basis of around 5000 farming families (AS-PTA, 2022) and over the last three decades supported a continuous process of technical-productive, economic, and socio-organizational innovation while gaining in recognition and legitimacy. The collaboration of the Polo da Borborema with the non-governmental organization AS-PTA, a key actor of the development of the agroecological paradigm in Brazil, has fertilized the construction and permanent renewal of methodological proposals, of training, of production of knowledge and of intervention in the local reality, in an open-ended perspective.

In Borborema, the methodological strategy is to strengthen the construction of collective agroecological subjects through "dispositivos coletivos": networks of seed banks, of solidarity revolving funds, of farmers markets, of family and community kitchens, of points of commercialization, of young beekeepers, of women and young people, among others. The Polo's role in driving rural development dynamics hinges on supporting the creation and/or enhancement of such collective action mechanisms aimed at collectively managing the commons. This is made possible thanks to the combination of social processes of local innovation on the one hand, and the mobilization of public resources through political advocacy efforts on the other hand. Indeed, the aim is to experiment with alternative patterns of rural development and to advocate for public policies for family farming, leveraging insights gleaned from local initiatives (Silveira et al., 2010).

The Polo's and ASPTA's facilitation approaches emphasise local knowledge and collective learning among farmers and their effects in the reality of family farmers in the region. For example, through a series of initial participatory appraisals since the early 2000s, women farmers in the region have gained recognition on their role in the family farm (Freire, 2015). This has not only triggered a process that led to the visibility of agricultural practices and areas managed by women in the family farms and of their agroecological knowledge, but also to a collective mobilization, today nationally recognized, in the annually held Marches for the Lives of Women and for Agroecology, bringing to the fore a struggle against gender inequalities and oppression.



Figure 1. Women March in May 2022

These marches, drawing over 5,000 participants annually and supported by year-round preparation processes, are also illustrative of how local experiences in agricultural experimentation can link to reflections on inequalities and broaden the themes directly linked to agroecological transitions in the territory in a permanent adaptation to emerging key issues (violence against women, or more recently, the territorial impacts generated by the implementation of wind farms in the Borborema region).

The initiatives primarily focus on agroecological practices, local water management, collective marketing and sociopolitical

organisation, based on the construction of such dispositivos coletivos and on *intercambios* (exchanges) across farmers and local initiatives. Additionally, evaluation tools were developed to measure past and possible progress in the farms' agroecological transitions, thus pointing to an original positioning of the facilitation modes, as they combine experience-based and evidence-based approaches within an open-ended perspective.

Innovation in assessment tools

These assessment tools are diversified and were adapted over time, starting with locally adapted Participatory Rural Appraisals applied not only to technical issues (native plants and fruit, beans diversity, fertility management, livestock etc.), but also to broader issues at the municipality level, and to public policies. Assessment approaches include maps and timelines, which allow for a collective and spatial understanding of local reality. More recently, studies based on LUME, a method for the economic-ecological analysis of agroecosystems, have played an important role. The method, developed by AS-PTA, proposes analytic concepts and instruments capable of recognizing and increasing the visibility of the labour of the different people involved in the management of agroecosystems (Petersen et al., 2020, p.8). Drawing on Chayanovian principles and social metabolism, social reproduction and feminist economics approaches, the method has been incorporated in the assessment of projects and public policies' implementation as well as provided basis for academic studies that aim at shedding light on the social and power relations that condition the labour processes in family farming.

Southern Ardèche: competing facilitation approaches

Southern Ardèche is a rural and mostly mountainous area with diverse landscapes and a quite diverse agriculture featuring a few specialised productions (such as fruits and wine) and a majority of much more diversified farms, a strong presence of quality signs/chains, a lively food processing sector.

Rural development has been supported by a large diversity of actors, including agricultural organisations, alternative farmers' networks, civil society networks and local authorities such as a Natural Regional Park Monts d'Ardèche (also part of the ATTER network), and inter-municipalities.

The successive initiatives launched or supported by these different organisations and networks on the agrifood territorial transition in the last decades were oriented by contrasted visions. Two main competing visions could be identified – despite they are often articulated and considered as complementary by many local actors: one focused on local products' valorisation (for local consumption and export) and one focused on the social inclusion of new farmers and of inhabitants. Concretely, the first vision supported the development of a local brand, of a large processing unit, etc.; and the second one, of farmers' collective shops, farmers' markets, of support schemes for new farmers, of women-only trainings etc. (Lamine et al., 2022).

In the last 10 years, there have been two main types of facilitation processes dealing with agroecological transitions. On the one hand, institutional projects that set up **diagnostic and planning** methods, often with some participatory effort relying on the establishment of multi-actors arenas, in a context of strong institutionalization of Territorial Food Projects in France (See the policy brief on [Territorial Food Projects](#)). Although different, and always using participatory methods, their facilitation process aims at defining an action plan, thus favouring a deterministic perspective on the food system's transformation.

On the other hand, an action research project was carried out since 2019 by researchers, a local farmers' network (CIVAM07), an environmental education network that brings together around 60 different organisations and actors (Petale07), the Natural Regional Park Monts d'Ardèche. This project developed a process of collective **knowledge building**, based on a multi-actors group involving both representative and "concerned" actors. First focused on the analysis of the trajectory of the territorial food system over the last 40 years, this process allowed to discuss and recognise the transition mechanisms at play as well as the contrasted visions that orientate transition processes. It then allowed to express collective concerns and priorities (through a manifesto). It also carried out focused social experimentation on key issues such as access to land for new farmers or food accessibility, leading to develop resources for local action.

This group was later on transform into a Local Food Council that works through thematic commissions, maintains a constant interaction between research work and action, and concretely organises a yearly forum bringing together around 100 local actors and citizens, allowing to expand the scope of the discussions. A key objective of the whole process was and still is to include a wide diversity of actors and visions, with the hypothesis that this diversity could enrich the transition process rather than impede it because of related conflicts (Penvern et al., 2023). There is also a strong concern for collective self-evaluation and reflexivity, that allows related to a rather open-ended perspective on the food system's transformation.

These two types of facilitation processes illustrate the contrast between the "expert" mode and the "popular education" mode that we defined in our analytical grid. Although they both articulate knowledge production and participation, the first one adopts a rather deterministic perspective to transitions (framed by the definition of an action plan) and the second one a rather open ended perspective. The Ardèche case also shows that these perspectives are also linked to the very vision of desirable futures.

Insights gained from the comparison

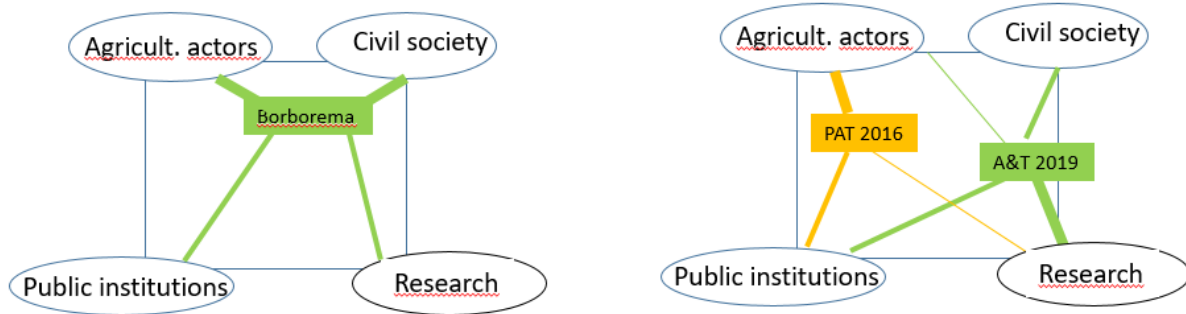
Despite both cases share some key common points in the approaches, such as the focus on collective action, and on key issues at stake, such as the role of the youth and women, they differ and through these differences, can learn from one another.

In the two cases, multi-actors' networks are set up and develop participatory facilitation processes that favour an open-ended perspective on the agroecological transition and concrete adaptations over time, in contrast to the more deterministic perspective adopted in institutionalised projects led by local public institutions in the case of Ardèche.

The comparison shows different balances over time of the role of diverse categories of actors in orienting transition processes (in the case of the successive projects that were carried out in Ardèche) and between the two regions.

In Borborema, civil society and farmers networks are leading these processes and define their orientations, while public institutions (whether local - municipality, regional or national) and research support these orientations and processes.

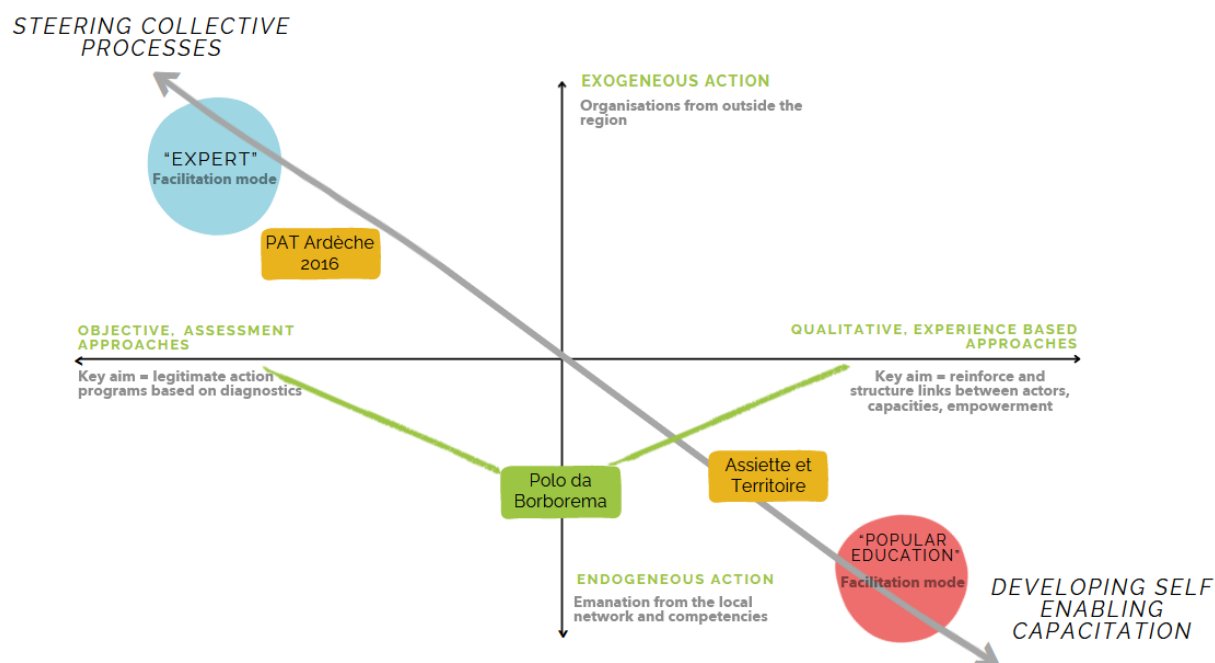
By contrast, in Ardèche, several past projects were led by agricultural organisations and/or public institutions (and some are still since 2021 through the territorial food projects schemes, at a lower scale than our scale of analysis), while the recent action research project on which we focused here was co-led by a consortium that aimed at establishing a balance between local networks (both farmers' and citizens'), public institutions and research. They also supported a slightly different vision of the transition, more open ended and "exploratory" than the action-plan oriented institutional projects. There is thus less convergence than can be observed in Borborema.



This difference in the degree of convergence is linked to these power balances but also to the degree of legitimacy gained by the actors who lead different, sometimes competing projects and have different visions.

In Borborema, the legitimacy gained by the local networks has an important role in providing the Polo da Borborema with strength to defend the territorial project. When faced with constraints or challenges from outside the territory, such as the public distribution of GMO seeds or state- and companies-supported project to implement wind farms in the region, the Polo appears to be strong enough to defend the agroecological territory project, combining resistance, *intercambios* with other impacted communities, and political advocacy. Its strong connection to networks on other regions and at national scale (with coalitions for the semi-arid and agroecology) as well as to policies and research, also reinforces the legitimisation process of both the Polo and the larger territorial project.

The two cases also differ in the way they balance evidence-based and experience-based approaches. The Polo da Borborema is positioned between these two approaches, as the production of assessments and diagnostics support innovative actions while conversely, these local experimentations inform larger comparative analyses and allow to discuss new policies at wider scales. The Ardèche action research network l'Assiette et le Territoire has an original positioning on the issue of including the diversity of actors and visions, based on popular education methods (figure below).



The two cases, while sharing a focus on participatory approaches and collective experimentation that supports open-endedness, differ in the way they balance and articulate approaches based on evidence and on experience and thus illustrate different possible configurations of facilitation approaches and different ways to generate such open-endedness.

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