

How can territorialized policies support food systems' transitions? The case of Territorial Food Projects in France

Territorial Food Projects (*Projets Alimentaires Territoriaux*) are defined by the French law since 2014. At this date, there are officially 430 all over France and they cover 2/3 of French population. Mostly led by territorial authorities (municipalities, inter-municipalities, *Départements*, *Parcs Naturels Régionaux* etc.), they have to include a series of key issues and actions (food justice, food education, food waste, territorial anchoring of food supply) and can receive government funding after a public evaluation process, with an increased funding for the related calls during the pandemic. If after a few years of implementation, some positive effects on territorial food transitions are acknowledged, some weaknesses are also being discussed, including their variable contribution to the ecological transition. Moreover, Territorial Food Projects cover very different scales and sizes of population (from one municipality to a whole department of 300 municipalities or more), which raises a debate over the relevant scales to foster food systems' agroecological transitions. Based on the analyses and debates carried out within ATTER, this policy brief suggests some insights from the French experience that may be inspiring in other countries in order to design and implement territorialized policies.

Trajectory and definition

Initially drafted by a French green deputy, Brigitte Allain, as an amendment to the 2014 agricultural law submitted during its discussion phase at the National Assembly, Territorial Food Projects were finally defined by this law as having to be elaborated *"in concertation with all the actors within a territory and meet the objective of structuring the agricultural economy and implementing a territorial food system. They participate in the consolidation of localised sectors and in the development of the consumption of products from short circuits, in particular relating to organic production"* (Agricultural law, oct 2014, article 39). This wording obviously highlights the economic lens adopted by the government, despite many stakeholders and networks expected a wider perspective, and despite the inclusion of this public instrument in an agroecological law. However, this definition is open enough to let territories include a diversity of objectives and actions.

Territorial Food Projects are implemented and financed through calls for projects framed and carried out by the French Ministry of Agriculture (National Food Program) with an annual budget that ranged between 1.4 and 2 M€ between 2016 and 2020 (with crossed funding from the Ministry of Agriculture, and now the Ministry of Health and the national environmental agency ADEME). It then reached 7.5M€ in 2021, due to the recovery plan linked to the pandemic, under 2 modalities (strengthening

existing projects or emergence of new ones), as well as 77M€ for investments.

The maximum amount that can be financed for their emergence, although it remained quite limited, has also raised from 50.000€ for 2 years to 100.000€ for 3 years (often used to hire a devoted project manager and fund focused actions), and the funding for investments can be up to 2M€/project in some regions. Because of this strong impulse (151 new TFPs were launched only in the year 2021), their number raised to 400 in 2022 (figure 1), and then stabilized, a large part of the country being already "covered", sometimes by two projects carried out at two different scale

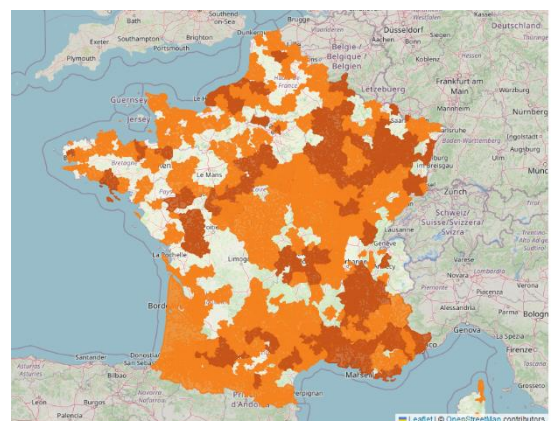


Figure 1. Territorial Food Projects in France, 2024. Source: RnPAT, 2024

Process of recognition



"Territorial Food Project" (or PAT, for *Projet Alimentaire Territorial*) is a brand: a process of labelling is mandatory to be able to use it and to apply to the public funding devoted to this policy.

This labelling, carried out by the regional services of the Ministry of Agriculture and Food

Sovereignty, consists in two levels: one for "emerging PAT", that is valid for 3 years and gives access to facilitation funding (in order to establish a diagnostic and an action plan), and one for "PAT in action" (consolidated ones), that is valid for 5 years and renewable, and gives access to investment funding. Today Territorial Food Projects cover a large part of the country and are widely recognized by institutional and professional actors.

Territorial Food Projects in 2022: leaders, partners, key goals and actions

Most Territorial Food Projects are led by territorial authorities and public entities (large municipalities, rural or urban inter-municipalities, *Départements*, *Parcs Naturels Régionaux* etc.), only 4 of them being led by civil society organisations and 5 by chambers of agriculture in 2022. They have now a larger presence in rural regions than in the first years, when they mainly emerged in contexts that were already favourable to short circuits and/or with lasting partnerships between rural development and peasant agriculture networks on the one hand, and local authorities on the other. The inter-municipalities, that are mainly involved in "short term" action (basic services to the population) are the most current leaders, with a scale which is getting smaller over time (an average of 53 municipalities in May 2022), as a result of the opportunity effects of the funding opportunities. In contrast, "territories of project" that have a longer-term territorial strategy as well as a larger scale (such as Natural Regional Parks or others) appear to be much less present.

Emerging Territorial Food Projects have to include in their goals a series of key issues defined by the National Food Program (food justice, food education, food waste, territorial anchoring of food supply) and related concrete actions. This framing tends to produce a homogenisation of their goals and action programs. Most Territorial Food Projects indeed include actions devoted to local agrifood chains (short circuits, processing units, logistics, distribution), social access to food, health and public procurement. In contrast, actions in favour of the ecological transition seem to be less present in the most recent projects than in the pioneer ones. Despite the 2014 law is oriented by agroecology, this paradigm has suffered strong locking effects, reluctances or weakening processes in the recent years, due especially to the prevailing power relations in the agrifood governance arenas as well as to the recent context (covid, inflation)

A territorial food project in Communautés de Communes d'Aubenas Vals et Val de Ligne

A political legitimization of food issues more than a radically new pathway About 47000 inh. – 32 municipalities

In this rural area with a rather diversified agriculture around a small town, for decades, there have been numerous initiatives linked to short food chains, school procurement, etc. A first partnership established between 3 organizations at the larger scale of Southern Ardèche aimed at launching a Territorial Food Project (2017-2019), but failed due to a lack of shared visions and political will at this time. Meanwhile, an action research project was carried out to collectively analyse the past trajectory of the territorial food system (see ATTER Southern Ardèche case study on [ATTER-OBS](#)), within a multi-actors group of around 25 persons (researchers and local actors). This work and others carried out by local institutions supported the reflexion towards the definition of a Territorial Food Project, an instrument which by 2021 had become more attractive to local politicians and actors than a few years ago. This was done at a smaller scale than for the first above project, with only 2 intermunicipalities (*communautés de communes*) which first decided to hire someone on agricultural and food issues, and then to apply to the governmental call for tenders. The process of definition of the objectives involved a diversity of local actors and was supported by a prospective study and approach carried out by the PNR des Monts d'Ardèche and Terralim (also partners of ATTER network).

The Territorial Food Project funding allowed to secure a coordinator's position, and to launch key focused actions on access to land, food procurement, health and education. Despite some actions would have been carried out even without this project, due to the pressure of new regulations (such as the presence of local and organic products in school food procurement) or thanks to the involvement of local networks (such as the support to new farmers), the Territorial Food Project had a real effect in terms of recognition of food related issues by local politicians and actors, of mutual acknowledgement of local actors involved in different sectors (agriculture, food, health, social, education etc.) and could act as a lever for future programs. However, it acts at a limited scale in relation to the larger scale that had been identified and experimented as relevant by the collective action research work carried out in the region (Lamine et al., 2022) and did not bring a radical change in terms of ecological transition. Moreover, some nearby intermunicipalities that have less skills and means to set up an application, are also less likely to access to the same support and resources, which illustrates the risks of territorial inequity raised by the Territorial Food Projects policy (and rarely discussed as such).

Source: [ATTER project](#), [Southern Ardèche Case Study](#); Lamine et al. 2022.

Montfort Communauté

A project starting from school food procurement and that has difficulties in tackling production

26 044 inh – 8 municipalities – 30km away from Rennes Métropole

In Montfort Communauté (name of the intermunicipality), a rural area specialized in conventional milk production, actions in favour of food transition started in 2017 through an educational entry with a project entitled REPAS for "Re-enchanting our plates for the children's pleasure, the preservation of local agriculture and everyone health". Intended to address educational issues on children nutrition during canteen meals, the project mobilized a diversity of actors: chefs, canteen managers, elected officials, school directors, animators, parents, pupils, etc. Since school public catering is a municipal jurisdiction, Montfort Communauté endorsed the role of project leader and elaborated a roadmap for the 6 municipalities that provide a canteen service, which were then free to adapt it according to their own vision. The project quickly evolved towards the search for local products. In this purpose the Pays de Brocéliande, which gathers four inter-municipalities including the Montfort one, got involved to facilitate the access to its producers' networks.

The involvement of the inter-municipal level in steering a project dealing with issues that are under the municipalities' responsibilities brought out interests and limits. Chefs who work in neighboring municipalities found a space to talk with peers about their own practices and could evolve together through joint trainings. Each canteen was able to identify topics on which they were already efficient and those in which they should invest efforts (waste reduction, meals' costs, use of organic products, etc.). However, intervention in the fields of competence of other public action levels (here, of the intermunicipality in actions that remain under the responsibility of municipalities) always has to be carefully negotiated.

The project was labelled as a Territorial Food Project in 2021. Sensitization actions are now extended to the whole population and financed by the Regional Health Agency. Progressively, access to all to a healthy and quality food is considered as a central issue and the support of short supply chains is identified as one of the answers.

The main challenges for this territory are farms transmission (mostly large dairy farms) and the development of local outlets for products that are today sold on Rennes' markets (closest urban area). Steering the agroecological transition is difficult in this conventional farming context, which can explain why the Territorial Food Project mainly focuses on education and health. However, the inter-municipality also carries out a project devoted to energy and climate and both projects are integrated into a broader planification approach aimed at developing a global food and agricultural strategy.

Source: Doriane Guennoc, Terralim.

Based on the analysis of several Territorial Food Projects as well as a comparison with the Italian Biodistricts, the ATTER team could discuss strengths and weaknesses of this policy tool.

Strengths and key leverage effects of Territorial Food Projects

- Recognition of agriculture and food issues and of the need of a reconnexion of agriculture, food, health and environment in the political agenda
- Intersectoriality (agriculture, food, health, social justice, environment, education)
- Legitimisation of social issues such as inclusion, equity, food poverty
- Inclusion and legitimisation of diverse actors, formerly kept away from agricultural debates
- Development of concrete actions
- Development of inter-territorial exchanges and networks (national network now names France PAT, regional networks, devoted action-research projects etc.)

Weaknesses and limits

- A weak contribution to ecological transition (as attested in recent studies, eg., RnPAT, 2022), despite Territorial Food Projects try to adopt a systemic vision
- Territorial Food Projects are defined at administrative scales rather than at scales that would be relevant to tackle agroecological transitions
- An homogenisation of Territorial Food Projects' contents, due to the framing of the calls for tender and the development of a consultancy market for their definition and facilitation
- Difficulties in assessing deeply the territory's and populations' needs because of the short duration of their elaboration process and of their funding (3 years)

- A gap between the long-term political objectives that may be claimed by the TFP leaders and the action plans that often appear disappointing
- Weak effective results due to the lack of dedicated funding on the longer term, of know-how in local governments to address transversal issues and of lack of political will (in many cases)
- Their articulation with the key planning documents is yet not tackled by the law (especially with those that monitor land use), which limits their potential effects, as an issue raised by a recent report that introduces the notion of “territorial food contract” (Rapport Lemarchand, 2022)
- As urban territories have much more means (teams, skills etc.) than rural ones to set up such projects, the Territorial Food Projects policy tend to increase rather than reduce territorial inequalities or even submit neighbour rural territories to an urban domination

These limits are of course partially linked to the effects of the ongoing larger « projectification » of public action, i.e., its translation into short-term projects framed by public calls, rather than lasting programs with long-term goals.

Lessons learned and inspiration for other contexts

The French Territorial Food Projects experience suggests a few lessons and insights that may be adapted in other contexts.

- **Intersectoriality:** Making territorial food systems more sustainable requires a strong intersectoriality which has to be organised and reinforced through the involvement of the public services and entities in charge of agriculture, food, health, social inclusion, urban planning, and environment.
- **Relevant scales for agroecological transitions.** The territorial scale is now widely acknowledged as relevant to tackle agroecological transitions because it allows to take into account together social and ecological processes that would favor or impede these transitions. However, the French experience shows that administrative/governing scales prevail for Territorial Food Projects, which favors the operational dimension but may weaken the ecological and social ambitions. The overlap of different territorial levels for public action, as is often the case in France, can be either considered a strength (every level brings its own competences) or a weakness (there might be contradictions between the different levels in the case of shared competences). In any case, the relevant scale has to be an object of democratic discussion as such.
- **Enhancing and experimenting food democracy.** Territorial Food Projects are an opportunity to create spaces/arenas of debates over local agriculture and food issues, where new actors can enrich the debate on agroecological transitions. However, in most French Territorial Food Projects, thematic and technical commissions prevail, to the detriment of instances open to a larger diversity of themes and actors, including citizens (see ATTER's policy brief on [Local Food Councils](#)). Networks that were often pioneer in territorial transitions, such as alternative agricultural and food networks should be involved in this territorial food governance.
- **Translocalism:** Exchanges across territories and between projects coordinators as well as comparative analyses are key to the success (and qualitative progress) of Territorial Food Projects and take various forms at national, regional or lower scales. In this aim, the national PAT network (now called France PAT= has been recognised by the law in 2022)

Resources

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