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Building resourcefulness in periurban areas: agroecological initiatives in two towns near Montpellier and Nîmes (France)

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The “agroecological transition” implies a societal shift toward sustainable agricultural practices and a relocalisation of the food system (Stassart et al., 2012), an objective that demands considerable institutional coordination at local and regional scales (Duru et al., 2014). Its implementation is a particular challenge in periurban areas, which struggle to preserve local farmland in a context of rapid urbanization (Bonnet, 2016 ; Cavailhès, 2011). The action-research projet ABEILLE accompanies agroecological initiatives in periurban areas surrounding Montpellier and Nîmes (France). By “agroecological initiative “ we mean a local project initiated by institutional actors, embodying three principles: sustainable food production, consumption and territorial development.

We present two case studies. In Saint-Dionisy (1000 residents) near Nîmes, the municipal team opposes the sale of a farm property to a second-hand trader and has developed an alternative plan: settle organic farmers on the site, build storage spaces and operate a farm shop. In Fabrègues (7000 residents) near Montpellier, citizens mobilization against a land fill project on a local wine estate inspired the municipal council to buy the property to develop a “pole of agro-ecological excellence “ : organic food production, public education and professional development.

Both agroecological initiatives emerge in opposition to the sale of a farm property. Local citizen associations create a demand for and contribute to the initiatives. However, their feasibility ultimately depends upon municipal actors who intervene in land use dynamics. They mobilise new tools (land use planning tools, CAP funding, property owner associations) and create links with environmental and regional planners. However, an active dialogue between municipal actors and farmers is little developed in the projects’ planning stages.

We reflect upon strategies that might strengthen the capacity of periurban communities to develop agroecological initiative and reinforce the resilience of their food system, or “resourcefulness “ (MacKinnon & Derickson, 2013). First, existing resources on farmland preservation must be adapted for municipal elected members who lack familiarity with available tools. Second, the integration of farmers into the early planning processes could improve social sustainability. Action-research and experience exchanges between municipal actors promise to facilitate these advancements.

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