

Citizen initiatives and how to scale them

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The world of tomorrow is already being experimented with today through a proliferation of citizen initiatives that are inventing new ways of organizing food systems. We explore several ways for these initiatives to expand and enable the necessary transformation of food systems.

During the first lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic, references to the ‘world that comes after’ proliferated in France. It would be reached through the transformative phase of the crisis and would resemble the world that collapsologists have been calling for: one that is respectful of the environment, less thirsty for non-renewable resources, where the health of humans, non-humans and the planet is safeguarded, allowing for a liveable climate; a world that is more equitable, inclusive, democratic and characterized by shared well-being (Lancement and Lévêque, 2019). The great uprising seemed to have finally arrived, and many eyes turned to the citizens who were already trying to invent and experiment with this world beyond new consumption practices (Chapter 18) with new ways of producing, trading, managing and governing.

Does the ‘world that comes after’ already exist?

This ‘world that comes after’ seems to have been in the making for years now, under the impetus of citizens and entrepreneurs – for instance, through the movements initiated by the pioneers of organic farming and fair trade. There has been a proliferation of diverse initiatives seeking to build alternative agricultural and food systems, founded on principles such as renewable resource use, relocalization (Chapter 17), the reduction of the number of intermediaries in supply chains, solidarity between producers and consumers, inclusive participation, cooperative

purchasing groups and similar initiatives. In France, various studies and surveys have investigated this profusion of initiatives.¹ Among others, the Daniel and Nina Carasso Foundation has supported many such initiatives in France and Spain, considering that these ‘daring men and women’ are bringing forth solutions that society must take up (Fondation Daniel et Nina Carasso, 2019). Worldwide, but especially in industrialized countries, these initiatives are supported by philanthropic actors concerned with sustainable food systems.²

The initiatives are led by a diverse range of actors, all of whom share civic participation as their starting point. Their status varies greatly depending on national legislation, public funding opportunities and the possibilities for volunteer involvement. In France, these actors all fall under the umbrella of the social solidarity economy (SSE), which is taking increasingly diverse forms, particularly with social enterprises, some of which choose to engage in the capitalist market economy (Chapter 20). What these actors have in common is their desire to address one or more of the environmental, social, health and governance concerns that they feel are insufficiently taken into account in dominant models. They strive to invent and experiment with alternatives, often explicitly seeking to challenge industrialized food systems, even if some of them are partly based on this model. Virtually all these initiatives operate on a local scale – that of a farm, a workshop, a neighbourhood or even a small town – and they often involve only a few dozen to a few thousand people.

These initiatives have given rise to abundant scientific literature, which has detailed their characteristics and investigated their role in the transformation of food systems. Many authors have described these initiatives as social innovations spanning a wider range of action than citizen initiatives. These innovations provide new answers to social needs that are inadequately or insufficiently met. Many of them ascribe to an agroecological approach that is at once technical, social and political (Gliessman, 2007). In the English-speaking world, they are often analysed as ‘alternative food networks’ (Roep and Wiskerke, 2012).

It is important to note that several of these initiatives originated in countries with a rather liberal political philosophy, where individuals or communities are encouraged to address environmental or social issues themselves: permaculture

¹ See, for example, the RESOLIS observatory or the Transiscope, the collection of testimonials by the civil society organization ‘On passe à l’acte’ and the video ‘Ça bouge pour l’alimentation’ (<https://vimeo.com/251774302>), and the case studies by students of the Advanced M.Sc. in ‘Innovations and Policies for Sustainable Food’ (*Mastère spécialisé Innovations et politiques pour une alimentation durable*) (Conaré et al., 2015; Albert et al., 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022).

² For example, the Global Alliance for the Future of Food highlights these initiatives in its ‘Beacons of Hope’ programme (Biovision Foundation for Ecological Development and Global Alliance for the Future of Food, 2019; Global Alliance for the Future of Food, 2021).

was theorized in Australia; the French ‘AMAP’ (Associations pour le Maintien de l’Agriculture Paysanne) networks are based on the US principle of Community Supported Agriculture; and agricultural and food ‘third places’ are partly inspired by Community Food Centres in Canada. In France, where the state is more interventionist, interest in these initiatives is more recent. In the agricultural and food sectors, they were long ignored by public authorities, academic research, professional training programmes or advisory and funding institutions. However, the development of the SSE did provide a foothold for them (Bardot, 2020).

These initiatives are based on a set of principles of action: respect for all knowledge, inclusive participation, emancipation and the empowerment of vulnerable persons (Chiffolleau and Paturel, 2016). They invent new possibilities and experiment with alternatives to prove their feasibility and effectiveness (Lutz and Schachinger, 2013). But to what extent do these initiatives have a transformative effect? (see Box 19.1). How can they move beyond the stage of local and confined experiments to account for a greater share of the volumes produced and consumed so as to have a truly massive and positive influence on the environment, health, social equity and governance?

Box 19.1 Social innovations in countries of the Global South

Opposition to industrial agriculture is also emerging in countries of the Global South, led in particular by peasant organizations inspired by the Via Campesina movement that originated in Brazil. Agroecology is championed by numerous civil society organizations that are experimenting with its implementation (IPES-Food, 2018; HLPE, 2019), with the growing support from research actors, for instance, as part of the Transformative Partnership Platform on Agroecology.³ These movements are still relatively marginal in the face of strong pressure from dominant actors seeking to spread their production and consumption models to countries that are witnessing the emergence of a middle class (allegedly) drawn to the consumer society.

In countries of the Global South, certain non-industrialized agricultural practices can be considered ‘sustainable’ in the sense that they do not (yet) follow the technological paths of chemical agriculture, which is now being challenged in places where it is dominant. Farmers have been innovating for decades in the fields of soil fertility management, biodiversity and plant and

³ <https://www.agroecologytpp.org>.

animal diseases specific to their environments. All this knowledge is a source of inspiration for finding alternatives to conventional farming. How to label these practices remains an issue, as shown in the case of food production in Uganda, a country that is highly involved in organic farming for export markets. Describing them as 'traditional' fails to account for the ways in which they evolve and the farmers' ability to innovate, and risks framing them as rejecting modernity. Calling them 'organic farming practices by default', since no chemicals are used, is problematic as it likens them to organic farming, which is regulated by specifications and certification. As chemical farming has only recently begun to develop in this country, labelling them as 'conventional farming practices' risks conflating them with those of conventional farming in industrialized countries. The women who practise this form of farming speak of *agriganda*, short for 'agriculture' and 'Uganda', referring to a practice that could be described as 'terroir agriculture' (Bendjebbar, 2018).

The same trend can be observed in food processing and retail. Artisanal food makers, street vendors and neighbourhood markets are facing competition from the largest international industries and supermarkets. This industrialization has been criticized for jeopardizing jobs but also more recently for its negative effects on the environment, health and the governance of food systems. From this perspective, 'informal' artisans and retail thus appear as a model that should be supported.

In both cases, it is difficult to describe these initiatives as alternatives, in the sense that they do not aim to replace a dominant model. However, many authors have recognized their ability to approach economic activities as being inextricably linked to social and/or environmental issues (Leloup, 2018). Rather than considering this sector as 'informal', thereby defining it in relation to a formal sector, Jacques Bugnicourt and the teams of Enda Third World have described it as the 'popular economy' (Bugnicourt, 1973; Ndione, 2015). However, the recognition and legitimization of these activities are still controversial: while some see them as constituting a creative sector for sustainable farming or a social solidarity economy (Nyssens, 1999), others regard them as a sign of poverty to be eradicated as part of the modernization process (Maloney, 2003).

Three conceptual frameworks to grasp transformation

Most scientific analyses and many programmes supporting these initiatives assume that, as they multiply, the initiatives are bound to form a system – that is, to interact and synergize with one another to bring about sweeping transformations

of the existing conventional food system. Three major conceptual frameworks are articulated to grasp the transformation of food systems:

- The most widely used concept is that of sociotechnical transitions, popularized in particular by Frank Geels (2002). This concept stems from evolutionary economics and science and technology studies. Transitions result from interactions between a sociotechnical landscape, a regulatory regime and innovation niches. Innovation niches are the home ground of citizen initiatives and other social innovations that seize the opportunities created by challenges to, and the destabilization of, the regulatory regime to ultimately change it and bring about a new ecological and social regime.
- Food regime theory (Friedmann and McMichael, 1989), which stems from political economy, places greater emphasis on the power dynamics at play in challenging the dominant regime. Social innovations represent a critical force that seeks to delegitimize it. The dominant regime responds to this challenge by offering products with new environmental and social attributes through product certification and labelling, without any real structural change occurring. As with the sociotechnical transitions approach, this theory is articulated at a societal scale within the framework of critical and rather descriptive analysis and says nothing about the potential for changing the scale of alternative initiatives.
- Pragmatic sociology combines the actor–network theory of Bruno Latour and Michel Callon with the sociology of criticism based on the works of Luc Boltanski, Laurent Thévenot and Francis Chateauraynaud. It is more concerned with grasping the multiple forms of action of ‘agents’ and the detailed changes underway, through the analysis of ordinary practices and controversies among actors.

Drawing on these three conceptual frameworks, Lamine et al. (2015) consider the initiatives through the prism of a new question: Do they embody a real paradigm shift or are they business as usual?

Alternative or reform pathways

The development of these initiatives can be split into two categories: alternative pathways and reform pathways. Alternative pathways seek to build a system – generally local – based on radically different values that depart from the dominant capitalist or even market model. They propose answers to the various

environmental, social, health, cultural and governance issues surrounding food systems through multidimensional initiatives. Permaculture exemplifies this type of alternative. In his book *Permaculture: Principles and Pathways Beyond Sustainability*, David Holmgren (2002) contrasts the principles of industrial farming with those of sustainable farming and considers that there is no possible compromise between the two: sustainable farming can only come about after the inevitable decline of industrial agriculture, following a chaotic postmodern climax. This in turn points to the need to experiment with alternative solutions, to prepare them today for the ‘world that comes after’ and, as he puts it, to ‘use small and slow solutions’. In her study on sustainable food and the SSE, Florence Bardot (2020) notes that the leaders of multidimensional initiatives are mainly concerned with developing and stabilizing their project in its specific context and that they need more time to do so than projects tackling just one issue. Hence why they sometimes struggle to ‘capitalize on’ their experience and to define key principles to facilitate the latter’s application elsewhere. For these actors, the question of changing the scale of the initiatives does not necessarily arise, as it is not a priority. Some may even be reluctant to do so for fear of losing control of the process and of the values they uphold being corrupted as the innovations become institutionalized.

Reform pathways, on the other hand, focus on developing new market niches by forming alliances or compromising with the actors of the dominant system. The leaders of projects that follow such pathways can be simple opportunists who see these initiatives and the interest they spark as signs of possible market demand that they can exploit, without seeking to truly transform the system. This includes, in part, social business and many of the innovations denounced as greenwashing or fairwashing. In their book *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello (2005) clearly showed the dominant system’s ability to be sensitive to the criticisms levelled at it – even the most radical ones – and to use them as sources of inspiration to commodify the answers to these criticisms, with products labelled as respectful of the environment, fair and socially responsible. This is what makes capitalism so resilient, so capable of overcoming the criticisms it receives by absorbing them without ever being called into question.

Other actors are convinced that this alliance with the dominant system gives rise to reforms that are conducive to the development of sustainable food systems. The ‘fair trade’ label, for instance, has taken the issue of equity in international trade beyond the confines of activist circles and raised awareness among the general public. The institutionalization of organic farming has increased its

importance and offers the hope of large-scale environmental impact. These reformers claim to be pragmatic: they recognize the might of the dominant system and the impossibility of replacing it in the short term and seek instead to reform it from within. In both cases, the innovations driven by these actors often pertain to one, or perhaps two, dimensions of sustainability: the environment or social equity, or at best both – for instance, with the ‘organic and fair trade’ label. Integrating all environmental, social, health and governance issues is very complicated.

Behind this distinction between reform pathways and alternative pathways lies a complex reality, of course, and there are also intermediate pathways that evolve over time. Ronan Le Velly (2018) shows that certain so-called alternative approaches are not always so alternative. Often, they are hybridized with elements of the dominant system. For example, many of these alternative initiatives make extensive use of the digital tools of GAFAM (Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, Microsoft). They can also define themselves in relation to the system they are challenging, as in the case of fair trade, which establishes a fairness premium for farmers based on conventional market prices. A collective research programme coordinated by Pierre Gasselin et al. (2023), which analysed these initiatives’ relationships with dominant systems, called into question evolutionary visions that consider the various food systems as stages – from domestic to artisanal and then to industrial systems – towards new sustainable models in the future. While such approaches have the merit of defining simple models and their ‘modernist’ narrative can be appealing, they struggle to account for grey and hybrid areas – those of dynamic coexistence between artisanal, industrial or alternative systems where complementarities can be leveraged, affording resilience.

Changing scale

Expanding the scale of these initiatives is generally seen as the main driver of the transformation of conventional agri-food systems. What the initiatives’ critics denounce is, indeed, their lack of impact ‘at scale’. Michele-Lee Moore et al. (2015) distinguish between three types of scale change:

- Scaling out consists of increasing the number of people or organizations impacted. This can be done by replicating the initiative in other territories (multiplying the number of social and solidarity grocery shops or community gardens) or through cross-pollination – that is, the dissemination of principles

or know-how, particularly through specifications or labels (certified fair trade, for example). The actors of alternative initiatives often endeavour to scale out their innovations through swarming and multiplication. To state one of the principles of permaculture: ‘Think globally, act locally’.

- Scaling up consists in institutionalizing the initiative, which translates into it becoming embedded in public policies or regulations, at the risk of simplifying and weakening its initial principles. Organic farming, for example, is in the process of being scaled up.
- Scaling deep consists in profoundly changing the cultural values and beliefs that become entrenched in a society. The importance given to ‘local’ food, which is on track to become a widely shared norm in France, could illustrate this process (Chapter 17).

There is a fourth type of change of scale to consider: diversification. This approach is central to the multidimensional alternative initiatives described above and is exemplified by the Canadian food hubs that are developing in France. It consists in integrating a new activity focused on a new dimension of sustainability to enrich an initiative’s model (adding social objectives to activities that were initially geared mainly towards environmental goals, for example). It can also involve collective cooperation dynamics, as is often observed in alternative projects that are firmly anchored in their territories (such as partnerships between social actors and agricultural producers for solidarity boxes). These different types of scaling up are diverse, and in practice they are combined or carried out successively over time, based on how the initiative evolves (Avisé, 2021).

A key question that has received little attention in the literature concerns the role of public funding in supporting the growth of citizen-led innovations in sustainable food systems, their changes in scale and their ability to survive in the current market economy. The public funding cuts witnessed around the world are inextricably linked to the rise of a liberal ideology inspired by Anglosphere countries, which advocates only short-term support for the development of these innovations and modest support for scaling them up, and mainly prioritizes social entrepreneurs seeking profitability through a commercial model. However, some initiatives, which provide a public service, cannot be remunerated by the current market and need long-term public support. Scaling up of what citizen initiatives are inventing in order to accelerate the transformation of food systems requires public policies to create environments that foster access to financial services, training, research and so on. Philanthropy can play a role in supporting precursors and innovation, but it cannot replace public support in the long term.

Conclusion

Discussions with the actors involved in ‘alternative’ initiatives clearly show that most of them are so preoccupied with implementing their projects that they do not necessarily have the time or the skills to define their contribution to the changes that they want to see in food systems. Nor is it necessarily their role. Therein should lie the purpose of public support for these initiatives and of the policies they fuel: they should support the learning and scaling of actions beyond confined initiatives. For example, a municipal school catering initiative to reduce waste, improve nutrition and provide access to a balanced meal for the most disadvantaged demands considerable energy. But it is important to remember that school catering accounts for no more than 2 per cent of the meals eaten by a city’s entire population. The challenge is therefore not only to improve this catering, which is limited in scope, but also to develop its ripple effect on the rest of the food system. Public research has an important role to play in this reflection and support (Chapter 21).

It is also important to bear in mind the ‘counterfactual’ context in which these initiatives are developing: an industrialized food system that feeds the population on a large scale at low economic cost (made possible by very high hidden environmental and social costs). Alternative solutions often go hand in hand with economic and social conditions of access as well as particular discourses that make true social inclusion difficult. As we heard during our fieldwork, ‘the best place for social diversity in the city is the supermarket.’ The difficulty of spreading initiatives to a whole population and particularly to the large mass of people with little money, time or space to spare, already well documented in the context of projects in developing countries (Chambers, 1983), can also be observed in various sustainable food initiatives. Despite the conviction of their promoters, who are often highly educated and aware, getting the whole population to embrace their views is in no way straightforward. Breaking out of social enclaves and ensuring social inclusion (which needs to be developed from the outset of a project) is a crucial challenge when changing the scale of an initiative (Lepiller and Valette, 2021).

Finally, even if initiatives can be recognized as providing solutions, they disrupt the existing set of actors in place and implicitly or explicitly challenge some of them. As long as they remain marginal, there is little pushback. When they become truly influential, however, they can sometimes be openly challenged.⁴ Being able to stand their ground in negotiation spaces requires a

⁴ See American trade unionist Nicholas Klein’s statement to garment workers in 1918 or Gandhi’s statement in his *Young India* journal of 9 March 1921: ‘First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, then you win’ (Refalo, 2019).

political strength that scattered actors lack. Although various networks exist to connect the actors working in the sustainable food space, they are often dedicated to organizing best practice and sharing experiences. They have only recently begun to form a political force capable of negotiating like the dominant players. This undoubtedly provides a path towards a real transformation of future food systems.

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