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Title: Territorial dynamics in the Dombes region: Contribution of a collective project to promote Dombes carp fish in communal catering industry

Abstract:

In a global context marked by environmental and socio-economic challenges (Bricas, 2021; IPES Food, 2023), it is becoming increasingly urgent to promote local food systems considered to be more sustainable and equitable (Impact Capital for Development, 2021; Rastoin, 2015). These systems are referred to as local food circuits (Praly et al., 2014), local food systems (Systèmes alimentaires du milieu SyAM), and VTFN, which stands for Values-based territorial food networks (Nemes et al., 2023; Reckinger, 2022).

They promote environment-friendly agriculture, enhance connections among local stakeholders, and facilitate a more equitable distribution of economic benefits to farmers (Chazoule et al., 2022; Reckinger, 2022). As such, hybrid food systems are characterized by their innovative approach, as they involve the collaboration of both upstream and downstream actors. These actors engage in distinct but complementary activities within intermediary channels, all working towards a common goal. These circuits have the potential to decrease the environmental impact of food production, enhance the local economy, ensure food self-sufficiency, and encourage more sustainable consumption patterns (Chazoule et al., 2018). Thanks to the EGalim law and the development of territorial food projects (PAT), an increasing number of territories and economic operators within them are seeking to develop local, sustainable and high-quality food chains, as previously describes.

Our research is part of the 'A Table' (Dinai) and TRAACT (Transition agricole et alimentaire concertée dans les territoires) (Tetrae) projects, and focuses on analysing the carp fish farming industry in the Dombes region. Carp farming is a heritage and historical practice in the Dombes region, employing 350 carp fish producers and processing companies. This activity, which is of secondary importance to the majority of pond owners and managers, helps to preserve the ponds and their particular ecosystems that supports biodiversity. In fact, maintaining the ponds and keeping the water level constant allows vegetation, phytoplankton, tropical species and insects to grow. It also contributes to the local economy by creating jobs and is a traditional tourist attraction.

This network, which is part of the 'À Table' project, is of particular interest to us because it represents an initiative to localize a food chain within the communal catering services. What's even more remarkable is that, despite its local roots, this traditional product has not been positioned on the local market, due to a poor local reputation of the product, logistical problems and its perceived high price. It does, however, have a major outlet on the Alsatian market.

The dynamics are restored in 2022 with the emergence of a collective project that brings together regional political, technical, and logistical actors with the aim of promoting carp in school canteen managers. After going through multiple stages of recipe development and experimentation, actor mobilization, and animation, as well as the critical role of intermediary and interpreter for the supporting actors, this initiative became feasible.

Using a qualitative approach, our analysis aims to understand the obstacles and drivers to the structuring of this industry involving various partnerships in order to achieve greater sustainability. It also aims to identify the role of support actors as well as the innovations and learning implemented inside the collective. Based on the results of the semi-structured interviews with various stakeholders, our study will begin with a detailed narrative of the exemplary trajectory of the project and its evolution, highlighting the turning points, needs, as well as successes and failures. We'll also note any driving forces and roadblocks that appear throughout the project. We will also determine the essential elements required to attain durable and enduring performance. Finally, we will develop an illustrative diagram of the trajectory highlighting the mentioned elements. Conducting such analysis will enable the acquisition of essential knowledge and provide valuable insights for replicating similar models and processes in other territories.

This collective project's success is evident from the very beginning. The results demonstrate that the human factor has a crucial role. The motivation and willingness of the partners drive the project forward. The network of actors enables the mobilization of necessary partners and the utilization of each individual's technical and professional experiences. The partnership between upstream and downstream partners has enabled the overcoming of several challenges related to recipe development, product cost per meal for school catering, and logistics associated with the delivery of a frozen fish-based product. Further findings regarding the tools and the resources mobilized, actors' interactions as well as organizational changes will be presented.

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