

From local initiatives to territorial transition project: case study of a grassroots food belt project in Liège (Belgium)

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I. INTRODUCTION

Scholars and representatives of the public opinion (media, non-governmental organisations) increasingly define the global agri-food system as unsustainable (e.g. use of chemical inputs, low wages for traditional farmers, long-distance transport). In response to this situation, initiatives are developing alternatives to the global agri-food system. Following the trends of fair trade and organic food, local food is a growing alternative in Belgium for over a decade which now receives great attention from public policy (e.g. call for “food hubs” and “short food supply chain” projects by Belgian policy makers). Local food aims at increasing the sustainability of the agri-food system by localising it (e.g. reducing the distance between farmers and consumers, reducing the number of intermediates, avoiding large retailers and industrial processors, etc.). Some of these local food initiatives take part in the Transition Network movement that gathers citizens of an area to develop grassroots community projects in order to reduce the use of fossil energy and increase self-sufficiency.

II. METHOD

This study analyses one of these local food initiatives in Liege (Belgium) linked to the Transition Network movement: *Ceinture Aliment-Terre Liégeoise* (CATL). The study aims to analyse how CATL evolved from a marginal grassroots movement, to a project of transition of the agri-food system which is considered exemplary by Belgian institutional actors. The analysis of this case study is rooted in pragmatic sociology and based on extensive data selection, including participant observations held between 2013 and 2016, and eight semi-structured interviews held in 2016 with heterogeneous actors involved or affected by the CATL project. The results of the analysis were then presented at a seminar organised with the stakeholders in question. Theoretically, we build on transition theories, and more particularly on multi-level perspective and strategic niche management,

which analyse how innovation and change occur, and more specifically, how a sociotechnical innovation can disrupt an existing system and induce deep change [1]-[4].

III. THE CASE STUDY

Considering that many territorial initiatives and local food projects have emerged in Liege, the stakeholders of the CATL project understood the need to connect these initiatives to go one step further: to move from single initiatives to a territorial transition project. To do so, the stakeholders shaped the objective of the CATL project to implement a transition over the course of 25-30 years by re-localising, ecologising, and democratising the agri-food system of Liege. To reach this objective, CATL acts on two main axes. First, due to its grassroots origins (bottom-up), the project tends to create democratic experiences among citizens in different ways: invite citizens from Liege to get involved in projects (e.g. economically or personally in cooperative projects, going to participatory workshops, becoming a vegetable grower, etc.); sharing knowledge by publishing documents on the issues linked to the agri-food system; and implementing a new model of governance which is as democratic as possible within the CATL's cooperative projects. This implies encouraging citizens to move from being consumers to becoming stakeholders in the agri-food system. Second, the CATL project aims to support and stimulate local initiatives which experiment and implement alternatives to the global agri-food system (e.g. linking heterogeneous actors in the territory to encourage sharing of knowledge and competencies, as well as motivating the creation of new projects).

IV. RESULTS

To understand the transformative power of CATL for the transition of the agro-food system, it is necessary to consider it as using a two-level strategy: the territorialised global niche (meso level) and the local niches (micro level) [4]-[6]. The *local niches* are all the initiatives which

develop alternatives to the global agri-food system in the Liege region and that are aligned with the CATL project. They are concrete initiatives, localised and technical; they develop innovations that require a particular kind of technical knowledge (e.g. new agricultural models, mushroom production on coffee grounds, or the production of local seeds). Local niches mainly focus on adjusting, testing, and optimising their innovation. The *territorialised global niche* participates to anchoring the local niches within a broader societal project more able to effect a transformation of the agri-food system (the sociotechnical regime). To do so, the territorialised global niche (CATL) joins the local niches, helps networking processes, articulates expectations and assists and integrates learning processes [4]. CATL makes explicit the shared rules of the local niches: transition of the agri-food system, long-term vision, co-operative social economy, theorisation of the territorial dynamic, exchange between the actors of the territory, etc. The transformative power of CATL for the transition of the agri-food system of Liege comes from the interaction between these two levels that permits to go over and above the particular – but concrete – characteristic of the local niches on their own, to aggregate them in a transformative project better able to influence the system, while being anchored in the field.

The analysis shows how the CATL project evolved in response to this two-level strategy. We examine the dilemmas and issues with which the stakeholders had to deal along the trajectory of CATL and the solutions they proposed. The results of the study show how the legitimisation and institutionalisation processes of CATL were built in parallel with interactions maintained with policy makers. In fact, after an initial subsidised period, Belgian policy makers (minister of Economic Affairs) did not renew their funding to the CATL project. Despite of the creation of its wide multi-stakeholders network, policy makers underlined its low consequences in terms of job creation. This led to questions on how to structure the CATL project, which strategy is most appropriate to achieve its goals, and how to legitimise it in the eyes of policy makers. Thus, the CATL stakeholders decided to focus more on the creation and development of local niches, and better emphasize the economical and entrepreneurial dimensions of the CATL project.

To do so, the CATL stakeholders invested in a “champion” (one of the emergent local niches) that embodied the *ideal* of the project, and demonstrates its potential. The study shows that

this strategy had two consequences. First, the investment of the CATL project in the development of a champion led to resistance of the actors of the sector (the agricultural sector) who denounced the idea of engaging in the transition of the agri-food system without involving all farmers of the territory. Indeed, CATL relies more on its grassroots basis and the installation of city-dwellers and new country dwellers into agriculture. Second, and ironically, this strategy did succeed in legitimising the CATL project with other policy makers and institutional actors. This led to renewed funding (by the ministry of Economic Affairs) and various calls for CATL stakeholders to participate in institutionalised territorial projects.

V. CONCLUSION

This case study raises important questions about the support and management of territorial projects. Despite the fact that CATL obtained support from public policy makers, it did not gain support from the most relevant administrations, i.e. those of agriculture and sustainable development. Indeed, some administrations which are used to rely on positivist knowledge building do not recognise the pragmatic knowledge brought by CATL. Instead, CATL is being supported by the administration of economy, but only as long as the project focuses on job creation through the development of concrete local niches. This constitutes only one of the facets of the broader CATL project for the territorialised global niche that cannot be financed on the market (unlike the local niches that can be financed on the market). An important challenge for the future is to find political support for entire CATL project, to prevent its ambitions from being reduced to job creation.

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