

An inventory of emerging innovation projects in Belgian agriculture (*)

**G. Van Huylenbroeck¹, I. Verhaegen¹, E. Collet², M. Mormont²,
P. Stassart³ and J. Vannoppen³**

1. Department of Agricultural Economics, University of Gent - Coupure Links, 653 - 9000 Gent, Belgium
2. Unité de Sociologie de l'Environnement, University Foundation of the province of Luxembourg - Avenue de Longwy, 185 - 6700 Arlon, Belgium
3. Department of Participative Research, COOPIBO vzw - Naamsesteenweg, 573 - 3001 Leuven, Belgium

ABSTRACT

This paper describes an inventory of collective innovation initiatives in Belgian agriculture. The inventory contains collective actions of both producers and consumers mainly for the installation of new market channels, but also for the provision of new services and the promotion of regional products. It is demonstrated that all these initiatives emerge from the same logics: restoration of the confidence in production systems and product quality, maintenance and protection of natural resources and struggle against the marginalisation of farm labor and less favoured areas. All initiatives experiment with new forms of economic relations in which principles such as equality, democratic participation and reciprocity between producers and consumers at the local level are important. It is therefore argued that these initiatives fit in a broader movement of a “new social economy”.

() The following text presents research results of the Belgian “Programme of Forward Social and Economic Research” initiated by the Belgian State - Prime Minister’s Office - Scientific, Technical and Cultural Affairs. The authors assume full scientific responsibility.*

Introduction

Today, the agricultural sector passes a kind of identity crisis with a lot of problems, mainly due to the reduction of prices (because of production surpluses), environmental constraints, a bad public image because of a number of scandals (BST, hormones, ...), demands for better quality, etc.. A number of farmers as well as consumers is therefore in search of new forms of production or commercialisation in order to overcome these problems and to re-establish the confidence in the production and commercialisation systems. It concerns not only private initiatives but collective projects as well in which farmers, consumers and/or intermediates cooperate to change the relations between the actors in the marketing chain or within the local community. In their discourses these initiatives often refer to other than economic objectives such as the protection of local resources, ancient production systems, social relations, ethical principles, etc.

Till now, this kind of collective actions of auto-organisation and innovation have not received much attention in scientific literature. The economic theory about this kind of organisations (social economy or non-profit economy) has paid a lot of attention on managerial and organisational questions, but less on theories explaining the emergence and development of innovative initiatives. In the French literature some attention is paid to it ([1], [2] and [3]) with references to relation theories and theory of the economy of conventions.

Today, also public authorities show more and more interest in this kind of initiatives as a possible way of securing the quality of food products and the provision of collective goods such as environmental values. Therefore the Belgian State - Prime Minister's - Office for Scientific, Technical and Cultural Affairs has initiated a multidisciplinary research project to study the factors explaining the emergence, development and functioning of these collective actions and the possible role of public intervention. In the project three research teams are cooperating: the department of agricultural economics of the University of Gent, the department of sociology of the University Foundation of the province of Luxemburg and the participative research division of COOPIBO, an NGO working with farmers both in Belgium as in developing countries. The research is divided into four stages:

- an inventory and classification stage
- an analysis and evaluation stage of a number of initiatives (case-studies)

- an analysis of possible instruments of public intervention
- a generalisation and recommendation stage

This paper is reporting on the first phase of the project, the inventory and classification stage and will focuss on the conceptual framework and the presentation of the inventory results. It must be emphasized that the objective of this first research phase was not to quantify the economic importance of innovation projects or initiatives, but to estimate their coverage over the country and their diversity. As the objective was to cover initiatives relying on social motives and trying to modify the relations between the actors in the production and commercialisation chain, first a conceptual framework and selection criteria for the inventory have been formulated. They are presented respectively in section 2 and 3. In section 4, the results of the inventory are presented, classified according to different criteria. Based on the inventory, in section 5 some analytical observations are presented in a first attempt to isolate the factors explaining the emergence of the initiatives, while in section 6 some first conclusions and perspectives for the further research are formulated.

2. Research framework

As already indicated, the project fits into a research programme on “social economy” with emphasis on collective action and self-organisation of citizens. In this kind of actions moral and social considerations as well as relations based on conventions more than on pure commercial principles play an important role. Therefore the theory of “social economy” was at the basis of our reflections.

Recent literature on social economy is distinguishing two periods. In the first period which started in the 19th century, the social economy emerged as a reaction on an economic system which was only interested in the production of surplus (the fordiste economy), without paying attention to the division of this surplus. Two important movements where the cooperative movement intervening in the production and commercialisation chain to obtain better and fair prices and organisations in the social security more focussing on the redistribution of the profits (e.g. social medicine organisations). In particular the first movement was important for the development of agriculture. These movements are now institutionalised and play an important role in our society. Since the end of the seventies, however, a new development in the social economy can be observed which find his reasons in:

- an “economic” crisis linked to the delay in the consumption on the internal market, the globalisation of trade, the introduction of new technologies and the growing importance of the third sector in the economy
- a “cultural” and “confidence” crises both in the finality of economic activities (is it needed to produce more at lower prices, the quality of products, the production ethics, ...) as in the role of public authorities

As indicated i.a. by [3] this double crises makes that the “fordiste” economic model (standardized production systems and economics of scale) is put in cause. A “post-fordiste” model with more emphasis on the quality of the product and with more attention for segmented markets is starting to develop. As showed in [1] this is in particular true for the agro-food sector. Our hypothesis is that this has initiated, because of the apparent impossibility of the “institutionalised” organisations in the social economy (the above mentioned cooperatives and other non profit organisations) to formulate adequate responses (they emerged in the fordiste model and put emphasis on distribution of profits and social redistribution) to this crises, the emergence of number of new organisations working around the differentiation of the supplied products (higher quality, transformation at the farm, direct marketing, ..) and the inclusion of growing social demands such as the protection of the environment, the maintenance of landscapes and other new services in the production process. These dynamics seems to develop new “networks” (filières) of which one of the objectives seems to be the elaboration of new “conventions” on product definition, quality, production mode, etc. They can therefore be regarded as attempts to find adequate solutions for problems linked to the “post-fordiste” economy.

This observation has led to a research framework in which the relations of the producer with his external environment are the central focuss. Four dimensions can be distinguished in this relation (see Fig. 1):

- the relation with the consumer (the market relations)
- the relation with the institutional environment (vulgarisation and extension, public sector, agricultural organisations, ...)
- the relation with the local environment consisting of both the local society and the local natural environment
- the labour and human relations

The initiatives studied in the project try in one way or another to modify at least one of these relationships. This grid delimitates the field of observation but is not giving real criteria for the inventory. Therefore, selection criteria have been defined that could be used as indicators for the selection of initiatives. They are described in the next paragraph.

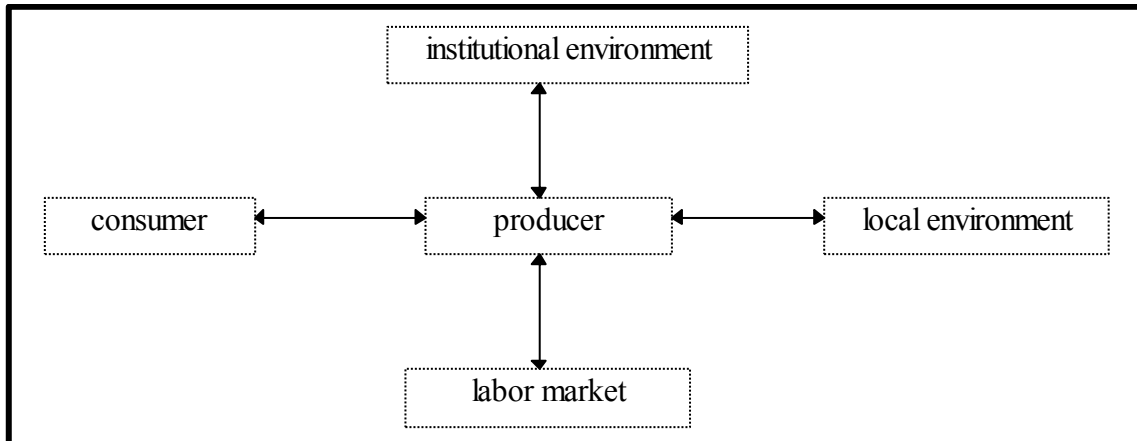


Fig. 1: The farm producer and his external relations

3. Methodology and classification criteria

As explained in previous section the objective of the inventory is to observe the emergence of new configurations for economic activities in the agricultural sector trying to respond to the challenges of the “post-fordiste” society. As there are no data-bases available, initiatives are inventorised on the basis of interviews with privileged observers working in the field such as people from the federal, regional and provincial agricultural administrations or related services (like agro-marketing promotion, agro-environmental measures, etc.), professional organisations, regional landscapes and natural parcs, federations of initiatives, consumer associations, etc. On the basis of these interviews, 323 initiatives have initially been identified. In order to delimitate the field of observation further these initiatives have been checked on six selection criteria permitting to classify initiatives positively or negatively, this means as belonging to our field of observation or not. The selection criteria have been chosen in such a way that they permit to translate the above hypotheses about new initiatives, without excluding initiatives coming from institutionalised configurations. Following criteria have been retained:

a. collective nature

As [2] is indicating transformations and mutations in society provoke new forms of cooperation. As one of the basic objectives of the research is to study collective actions, a criterion allowing to distinguish collective actions from pure private initiatives (as e.g. private initiatives of transformation of farm product, etc.) seems obvious. The collective nature has been evaluated on the basis of:

- the existence of an institutionalised juridical form of cooperation or
- the existence of an informal form cooperation (association de fait)

b. implication of the agricultural sector

As the field of observation is the agrarian sector also this criterion looks obvious. It has been operationalised by the requirement that at least one farmer has to be involved in the project. Farmers can be at the origin of an initiative or participating in initiatives initiated by other groups (consumers, environmental protection movements, etc.).

c. innovation aspect

The innovative nature of projects has been measured in terms of their novelty in modifying the relations described in fig. 1. Projects can be innovative in the production method (e.g. organic farming), in the commercialisation of the products (e.g. direct marketing) or in the provision of new services. In practice, the retained initiatives:

- are producing or marketing “novell” products or services (labeled farm products, remunerated environmental services, ...);
- promote and apply alternative production methods (integrated pest control, organic farming, ..);
- organise an alternative production and commercialisation circuit (farm product market, consumer groups, ...).

d. social and moral aspect

With regard to the fundamental objectives of the social economy, it makes sense to include a criterion that checks in how far the initiatives have broader pre-occupations than only the pure (individual) commercial or financial goals of the participants. In practice projects express an engagement or moral vision on either the production systems, consumption patterns, the human relations between producers and consumers, local development, etc..

e. auto-organisation

Auto-organisation means that projects have to be initiated by private citizens and not by public authorities. This does not mean that initiatives can not be a reaction on policies or use public subsidies. It only indicates that the initiative of the project comes from actors outside the “normal” public and economic institutions.

f. local aspect

Finally, the retained projects are judged upon their use of local resources or their involvement (embedment) in local society. This criterion is the most difficult to judge and has been not used as an exclusive one, but seems to be present in most cases.

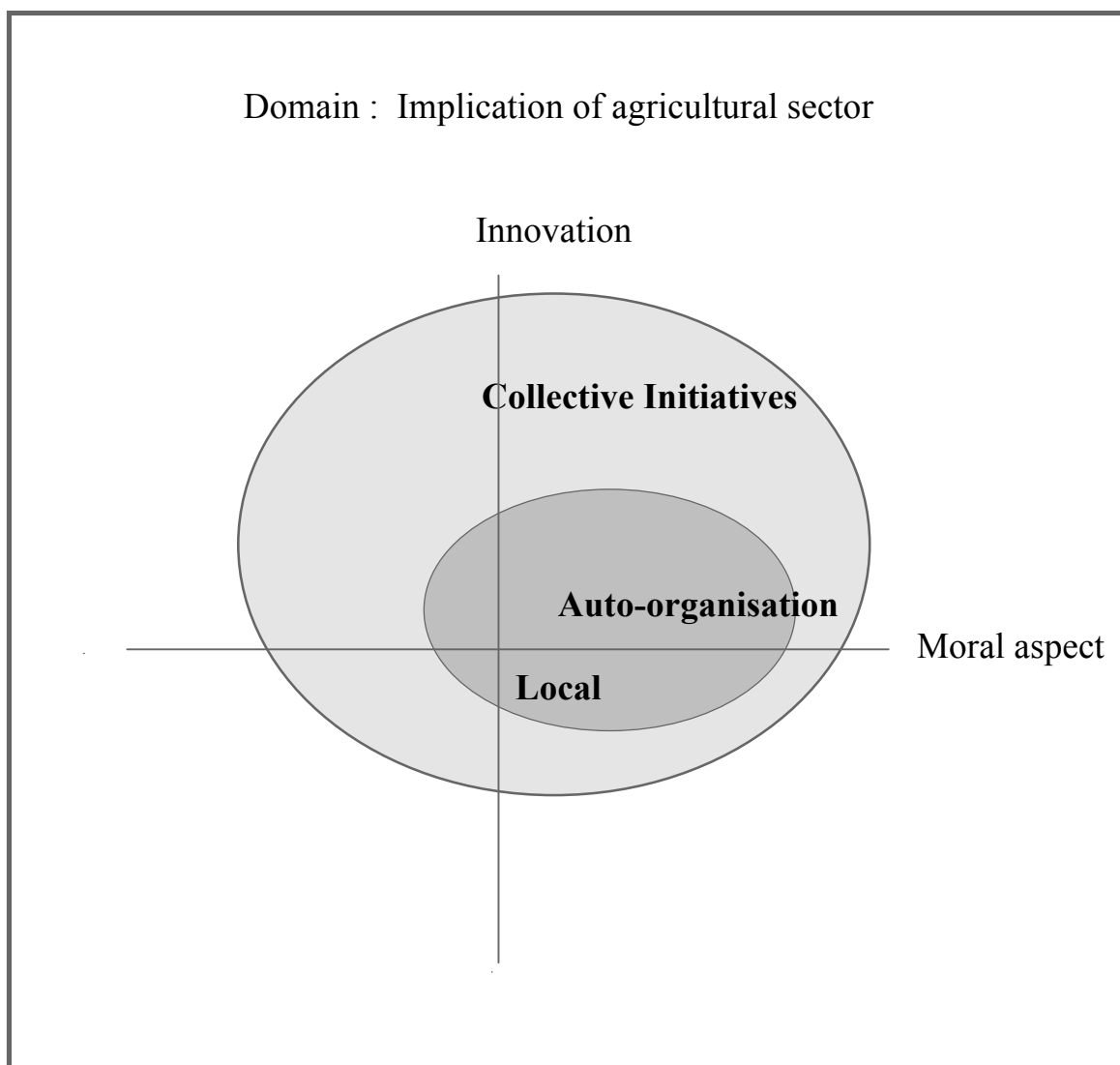


Fig 2: Schematic representation of the selection criteria delimiting the inventory

As a whole the six definition criteria can be regrouped as represented in Fig. 2. The implication of farmers is delimiting the field of observation to initiatives in the agricultural sector. The innovation and ethical aspect are two important criteria given by the objectives of the research. Collective action is delimiting the observation field further and within these movements or projects only those initiated by local citizens are selected (auto-organisation and local criterion).

To make the selection, people involved in the preselected projects have been contacted. On the basis of their indications the projects have been given a score of 0 (absolute absence of the aspect), 1 (partial presence) or 2 (full presence) for each of the six criterion. Only those initiatives which in the judgement of the researchers correspond sufficiently to all criteria, have been retained in the final data-base. The analysis in section 4 refers to those selected initiatives. In total the inventory contains 156 or 48 % of the original revealed projects. This does not mean that our inventory is exclusive and that no other initiatives exist. To be more complete a follow-up with feedback of the people in the field should be organised. However, the number of projects retained is sufficiently high to be able to distinguish certain tendencies and to arrive at some analyses and conclusions.

4. Inventory

4.1. Quantitative results

4.1.1. General

An overview of the collected information is given in table 1. In row (1) of the table the initiatives meeting the criteria are given per province as well as for Wallonia, Flanders and Belgium as a whole. In row (2) the number of federations (covering certain groups of initiatives) is mentioned. In the further analysis, they are considered as a separate group as they do not operate at the local but at the provincial or at the regional or national level.

In row (3) some doubtful cases are mentioned (most of the time because of lack of information), while in row (4) initiatives are mentioned which are not fully meeting the criteria (e.g. private projects or projects initiated by a public service) but which are closely linked to above described dynamics. In row (5) and (6) resp. the number of initiatives signalized after the closure of the survey and the non-active initiatives are mentioned while row (7) gives the number of indicated initiatives which were finally not selected.