



# Greening the agri-environmental policy by territorial and participative implementation processes? Evidence from two French regions



Maude Benoit\*, Caroline Patsias

Department of Political Science, Université du Québec à Montréal, Québec, Canada

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## ABSTRACT

After nearly three decades of agri-environmental policy in the European Union, the negative environmental impacts of agricultural practices are still an ongoing problem. Though a substantial body of work underlines the economic, cultural, and social factors that could encourage farmers to adopt less damaging farming practices, many researchers as well as practitioners raise the question of the efficacy of leaving agri-environmental policy processes in the hands of farmers' organizations and national agricultural departments. The activation of non-agricultural actors in these processes is increasingly considered as a driving force toward greener agri-environmental schemes. Using the case of two French regions during the 2007–2013 period, this study examines the effects of the new, decentralized, and multi-stakeholder governance of agri-environmental scheme implementation. This analysis explores how the presence of regional and local political entities and environmentalist organizations affect (or not) both the content of agri-environmental schemes and the traditional corporatist style of agricultural policy making. This study shows two main results. First, it reveals that non-agricultural actors adopt various strategies to neutralize the reformist effect their presence should theoretically have generated within agri-environmental policy. Second, it indicates the dominance of a sectoral and corporatist policymaking style over the territorial modes of policy implementation. Together, these dynamics underline a path dependency phenomenon in agricultural policies, one characterized by the political-economic dominant position of agricultural administrations and farmers' groups.

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## 1. Introduction

Is the activation of non-agricultural actors in decision-making processes a necessary condition to greening agricultural policies? In light of the poor results of thirty years of agri-environmental schemes in the European Union (EU), many researchers as well as practitioners raise the question of whether leaving agri-

environmental policy processes in the hands of farmers' organizations and national agricultural departments is conducive to making farming practices environmentally sustainable.

It is a euphemism to say that farmers' organizations have been reluctant to acknowledge the rise of environmental concerns in their sector. Studies show that farmers are attached to the productivist paradigm<sup>1</sup> and consider environmental regulation as a threat to economic growth (Ansaloni, 2015; Bourblanc, 2011; Daugbjerg and Swinbank, 2016; Van Gossum et al., 2009). However, conforming to the corporatist tradition in place since the 1950s (Benoit, 2012; Coulomb et al., 1990; Halpin, 2005), many member states have chosen to negotiate with their national agricultural lobby the formulation and establishment of agri-environmental schemes (AESs). AESs are incentive-based instruments that “provide payments to farmers for voluntary environmental commitments related to preserving and enhancing the environment and maintaining the cultural landscape” (Uthes and Matzdorf, 2013:251). Introduced by the EU in the Common Agricultural Policy in 1985, the AES became mandatory for all EU

\* Corresponding author. Department of Political Science, UQAM, Case postale 8888, succ. Centre-Ville, Montréal, H3C 3P8, Canada.

E-mail addresses: [Benoit.maude@uqam.ca](mailto:Benoit.maude@uqam.ca) (M. Benoit), [Patsias.caroline@uqam.ca](mailto:Patsias.caroline@uqam.ca) (C. Patsias).

<sup>1</sup> The definition of agricultural productivism is subject to much debate. We use the definition proposed by Fouilleux and Goulet (2012), for whom the agricultural productivist paradigm refers “to a set of technical processes, organizational arrangements and beliefs engaging stakeholders around the requirement of production increasing and intensification”. Three main dimensions form its core politico-economic frame: “the belief in the benefits of scientific and technical progress; the certainty that agriculture is a business of professionals and specialists; and that its mission is to feed the world while generating profits for industry players” (our translation).

member states in 1992. However, member states retain flexibility in AES implementation, so countries can address national policy priorities, “resulting in patterns of implementation that are often highly coloured by the policy traditions and agri-political cultures of individual member states” (Juntti and Potter, 2002:216). This national and corporatist driven policymaking often leads to large-scale measures with a low or medium level of requirements in order to unite in action numerous and a broad range of farmers.

Despite decades of experience in the design and implementation of AESs and a growing agri-environmental budget (the EU expenditures in agri-environment payments in 2013–2014 amounted to 2937.2 million euros), governments still grapple with how to encourage farmers to shift to real ecological agricultural practices. A substantial body of work has become available in recent years explaining AESs' successes and failures. Much of this literature uses political economic theory and studies economic efficiency and the effectiveness of a scheme's design, underlining the transaction and opportunity costs that influence farmers' decisions to enrol in an AES (Falconer, 2000; Matzdorf and Lorenz, 2010; Mettepenningen et al., 2011). Another research domain addresses various cultural and social factors that keep farmer from engaging in an AES (Beedell and Rehman, 2000; Burton and Paragahawewa, 2011; Polman and Siangen, 2008; Sutherland and Darnhofer, 2012). While these works emphasize the role of individual variables, the influence of collective action and the policy process in the “ecologization” of agricultural policies has received a growing amount of attention in academic research as well as from policy practitioners.

Since the 1990s, the EU's regulations “have increasingly encouraged member states to design agri-environmental policy in a sub-national, decentralized and participatory way” (Beckmann et al., 2009:689). This multilevel and multi-actor governance trend is part of a broad participative turn in Western public policies that aims to encourage community involvement and bottom-up, participatory approaches in decision-making (Prager et al., 2015:120). In agri-environmental policy, this desire to enhance rural participation has led to giving responsibilities to regional, river-basin, or sub-basin levels in implementing AESs, which generally remain funded by EU and central governments. As a result of these decentralized and multi-stakeholder governance arrangements, the decision-making processes have opened to a wide range of participants, from traditional agricultural departments and farmers' group representatives to regional and local political entities and environmentalist organizations (Taylor and Lawrence, 2012).

An underlying assumption of these policies is that a high level of local stakeholders' involvement will bring further legitimacy and efficiency to the AESs. Moreover, this general willingness to move to participative and decentralized policy processes conveys another more subtle assumption: the presence of non-agricultural groups would undermine the traditional alliance between agricultural administration and agricultural associations so as to “green” the design of AESs. In France, the midterm evaluations of the national rural development program for the 2000–2006 and the 2007–2013 programming period have both recommended to “now invite new players around the table” (Millot and Villien, 2012:3) and to transfer the management of the AES at local and regional levels, where the “environmental stakeholders are better represented and organized” (Barbut and Baschet, 2005:47). Although France still has a more centralist tradition than other European countries, France's ministry of agriculture has followed this advice in the 2007–2013 period by delegating key responsibilities to regional level governments and by establishing a multi-stakeholder committee to manage the implementation of one AES. How has this subnational, decentralized, and participatory governance style

been put in place (or has it)? Is the participation of local and environmental actors actually changing the measures implemented?

Despite the increasing complexity of institutional organization in the AES initiative, its influence on agri-environmental policy and results is still not well understood. This paper has a twofold objective: it examines 1) how changes in the institutional implementation of the AES, namely the diversity of actors involved and the degree of administrative decentralization, affect (or not) the “greening” of the AESs implemented; and it studies 2) how these changes affect (or not) the traditional corporatist policymaking style in which the agricultural administration and agricultural organizations are the most influential groups in terms of the design of AESs.

In this paper, we report results from a qualitative multiple case study analysis of the AESs implemented in two French regions, Languedoc Roussillon and Centre. The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 outlines the two main ideas of the corporatist and traditional agricultural policymaking style and the shift to decentralized and multi-actor governance. Section 3 covers the theoretical background, and section 4 describes our cases and method. We then present our findings (section 5) and discuss their implications for the power relations characterizing agri-environmental governance and for AES policy design and results (section 6).

## **2. Shifting from a corporatist and traditional agricultural policymaking style to decentralized and multi-actor governance**

After World War II, many Western states established partnerships with large national corporations to reinforce reconstruction efforts and economic growth (Halpin, 2005:1). The presumed effectiveness of this corporatist governance relies on the state's capacity to obtain support “for the enactment and implementation of its policies by granting privileged participation to a sectoral interest group sufficiently powerful to deliver the support of its benefiting constituency” (Chubb, 1983:26).

This state-group partnership worked particularly well in post-war agricultural modernization. The “Green Revolution” implied major changes, first of all a drastic decrease in the farming population in order to move agriculture from a peasant and family model to an industrial and productive one. By granting a deliberate representational monopoly and giving up part of their decision-making authority to pro-modernization agricultural organizations, Western states managed to develop an agribusiness sector that contributed actively to national growth and legitimated the supremacy of a neo-corporatist governance style.

Over the years, the corporatist partnership has become an institutional feature of agricultural policymaking in many countries. Every partner gained advantages by participating in this alliance: the value of these agricultural groups to the state resides in their national coverage and their capacity to maintain a stable socio-political order, whereas the agricultural group gains the representational monopoly and so the recognition that agriculture is a matter of professionals and specialists, not of non-agricultural actors. The policymaking structure institutionalized this idea in two ways. On the one hand, the agricultural ministry has a special commitment to its “administrative constituency” (Selznick, 1980:145); therefore, it tends to stick up for its partner's interests and to reject competing claims made by other actors. In other words, “agriculture ministers typically see themselves as speaking on behalf of farmers, rather than acting to protect consumer interests or the environment” (Carter, 2007: 186). On the other hand, the very structure of corporatist political processes prevents the

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