

# The everyday work of farm advisors as interface bureaucrats in greening French agricultural policies

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## Abstract

For the last three decades, public agricultural policies in France and in Europe have progressively integrated environmental objectives through a wide range of instruments. Whereas a large body of research has examined the extent to which the greening of agricultural policies has shaped farmers' decisions and practices, few studies have considered how these normative policy orientations may trigger tensions within the agricultural bureaucratic apparatus, and notably among local farm advisors who play the role of interface bureaucrats. In this article, we have explored how farm advisors from different types of advisory structures develop multiple subjectivities and deal with the tensions that they face when navigating between policy goals, professional norms, and their personal beliefs and values. Drawing on plural qualitative methods, we focus on the implementation of two national public agroecological schemes in southwest France that support the emergence and facilitation of farmers' groups engaged towards agroecology. We find that organizational strategies shape the type of tensions advisors face and their ability to manage these. The type of policy instrument we considered also matters in the forms of creative *bricolage* that farm advisors develop: in the case of organizational instruments based on farmers' participation, maintaining relationships with farmers is critical to give meaning to their work. If such instruments enlarge the creative space of farm advisors, the schemes we examined also hold in-built limitations in empowering farm advisors as they fail to address the structural constraints that shape agroecological transitions.

**Key words:** agri-environmental governance, agricultural policies, interface bureaucrats, farm advisors, subjectivities, France

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## Résumé

Au cours des trois dernières décennies, les politiques publiques agricoles en France et en Europe ont progressivement intégré des objectifs environnementaux à travers un large éventail d'instruments. Alors qu'un grand nombre de recherches ont examiné dans quelle mesure l'écologisation des politiques agricoles a influencé les décisions et les pratiques des agriculteurs, peu d'études se sont penchées sur les tensions que ces orientations politiques normatives peuvent créer au sein de l'appareil bureaucratique agricole, et notamment pour les conseillers agricoles locaux qui jouent le rôle de bureaucrates d'interface. Dans cet article, nous avons exploré comment les conseillers agricoles issus de différents types de structures développent de nouvelles subjectivités et gèrent les tensions auxquelles ils peuvent être confrontés lorsqu'ils naviguent entre objectifs politiques, normes professionnelles et valeurs personnelles. En nous appuyant sur différentes méthodes qualitatives, nous avons examiné ces tensions dans la mise en œuvre de deux dispositifs de politiques agroécologiques nationales dans le sud-ouest de la France : les groupements d'intérêt économique et environnemental (GIEE) et les groupes 30 000. Nous montrons que les stratégies organisationnelles varient entre les structures de conseil et influencent les tensions que les conseillers rencontrent et leur capacité à gérer celles-ci. Le type d'instrument considéré affecte les formes de bricolage institutionnel que les conseillers développent – dans le cas d'instruments organisationnels basés sur la participation volontaire des agriculteurs, un point critique pour les conseillers est de maintenir de bonnes relations avec ces derniers. Si ces instruments leur offrent une opportunité de redonner du sens à leur métier, ils génèrent également des frustrations liées aux contraintes structurelles à surmonter pour engager des transitions agroécologiques.

**Mots clés:** gouvernance agri-environnementale, politiques agricoles, bureaucrates d'interface, conseillers agricoles, subjectivités, France, GIEE, groupes 30000

## Resumen

Durante las tres últimas décadas, las políticas agrarias públicas en Francia y en Europa han integrado progresivamente objetivos medioambientales a través de una amplia gama de instrumentos. Mientras que un gran número de investigaciones ha examinado hasta qué punto la ecologización de las políticas agrarias ha influido en las decisiones y prácticas de los agricultores, pocos estudios han analizado cómo estas orientaciones normativas pueden desencadenar tensiones en el aparato burocrático agrario y, en particular, entre los asesores agrarios locales que desempeñan el papel de burócratas de interfaz. En este artículo, hemos explorado cómo los asesores agrícolas de diferentes tipos de estructuras de asesoramiento desarrollan múltiples subjetividades y navegan por las tensiones a las que se enfrentan cuando navegan entre los objetivos políticos, las normas profesionales y sus creencias y valores personales. Basándonos en métodos cualitativos plurales, nos centramos en la aplicación de dos planes agroecológicos públicos nacionales en el suroeste de Francia que apoyan el surgimiento y la facilitación de grupos de agricultores comprometidos con la agroecología. Descubrimos que las estrategias organizativas determinan el tipo de tensiones a las que se enfrentan los asesores y su capacidad para gestionarlas. El tipo de instrumento político que consideramos también tiene importancia en las formas de bricolaje creativo que desarrollan los asesores agrícolas: en el caso de los instrumentos organizativos basados en la participación de los agricultores, el mantenimiento de las relaciones con éstos es fundamental para dar sentido a su trabajo. Si bien estos instrumentos amplían el espacio creativo de los asesores agrícolas, los regímenes que hemos examinado también presentan limitaciones intrínsecas en cuanto a capacitar a los asesores agrícolas, ya que no abordan las limitaciones estructurales que condicionan las transiciones agroecológicas.

**Palabras claves:** gobernanza agroambiental, política agrícola, burócrata a nivel de calle, asesor agrícola, subjetividad, Francia

## 1. Introduction

The 1990s marked a major turning point in public European agricultural policies, embodying both an ecologization and a liberalization of agriculture (Ansaloni & Allaire, 2016). The 1992 MacSharry reforms of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) integrated environmental protection as one of the objectives for achieving multifunctional agriculture (Van Huylenbroeck & Durand, 2003), notably through the introduction of agri-environmental measures (AEMs). This major policy change has attracted considerable attention in recent scholarship, notably as the "greening" of the CAP has largely failed to reach its stated objectives, namely halting biodiversity loss and land degradation (Pe'er *et al.*, 2020). On the one hand, several scholars have analyzed the role of discourses and ideas in shaping policy change (Erjavec & Erjavec, 2009; Fouilleux, 2004; Garzon, 2006).

On the other hand, a large number of studies have explored the factors affecting farmers' participation in these schemes (Burton *et al.*, 2008; Defrancesco *et al.*, 2015) and their effects on farming practices and ecosystems (for a review, see Uthes & Matzdorf, 2013). Yet few scholars have opened the black box that lies between policy design and farmers' decisions, to look at agri-environmental policy implementation "from within", and, in particular, at the everyday practices of the "street-level bureaucrats" (Lipsky, 1980) who directly interact with farmers to implement these schemes. In other words, critical studies on "field-level bureaucrats" are lacking.

Agri-environmental governance is a hybrid policy field gathering a wide range of plural actors (Labarthe & Laurent, 2013; Lowe *et al.*, 2010; Morris, 2004). In this article, we focus on the role of farm advisors as interface bureaucrats. Farm advisory services have been following a trend of liberalization that started in the UK and in the Netherlands in the 1990s (Garforth *et al.*, 2003) and encompass private, semi-public and public organizations, as well as farmer-based organizations or non-governmental organizations (NGOs). They have been playing a critical role in agri-environmental governance, notably by supporting the sustainable transition of agriculture advocated by the CAP (Labarthe & Beck, 2022). Whereas their initial function was to provide farmers with technical advice, nowadays their role goes much beyond that of knowledge-brokers. As interface bureaucrats, they may hold substantial discretionary power in how policy schemes are implemented on the ground. In addition, a few studies have evidenced their role as policy interpreters, whereby they may shape the policy meaning of AEMs conveyed to farmers according to their own beliefs and values (Juntti & Potter, 2002). Lastly, they often embody the face of public agricultural policies for farmers and hence may play a critical role in how farmers, as citizens, perceive the state.

In turn, "ecologized" policies can shape the beliefs and professional identities of the very same interface bureaucrats involved in their interpretation and delivery. This is a key aspect of governance, as from a governmentality perspective, the success of government strategies relies in part on successfully instilling a new mentality in various arms of the bureaucracy (Robertson, 2015). In the field of agri-environmental policies, however, not all advisors adhere to the environmental subjectivities that the state seeks to create. This is all the truer as many advisors are not civil servants, nor do they work for independent advisory bodies: they are directly hired by farmers' organizations. In addition, productivist and neomercantilist discourses (Trouvé & Berriet-Sollic, 2010), which strongly promote productivity increase and the protection of domestic products, have prevailed in the agricultural sector in France since the end of the World War II (Potter & Tilzey, 2005). A large majority of farm advisors work for cooperatives or Chambers of Agriculture, controlled by dominant farmers' unions that still embody neomercantilist discourses. Hence, the greening of neoliberal agricultural policies is likely to generate tensions and resistances within the agricultural bureaucratic public and private apparatus and to shape the emergence of new subjectivities (Nightingale, 2018).

In this article, we explore how farm advisors manage and navigate the tensions that emerge from prescriptive and normative environmental policy orientations, and how it affects their daily practices and policy implementation. We focus on the implementation of two national agroecological schemes in West Occitanie, a southern region of France: the "GIEE"<sup>2</sup>, enacted through the 2014 French Law for the Future of Agriculture, Food and the Forest, and the "30,000 farms", launched under the 2015 French Ecophyto plan II. The former marks a significant environmental turn in French agricultural policies by introducing agroecology as the new model for French agricultural production systems. The latter is the national implementation of the European Directive 2009/128 on the sustainable use of plant protection products (PPP). Both GIEE and 30,000 farms can be categorized as organizational, agreement-based and incentive-based policy instruments (Hood, 1986; Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2004). They rely on farmers' voluntary engagement to form a group, committed to work collectively towards agroecological practices, in the case of GIEE, or towards the reduction of PPP for the 30,000 farms. Farmers do not receive any financial support to engage in these groups, but are entitled to free advisory and facilitation services provided to the group as well as training and small equipment for trials. The labelling "GIEE" or "30,000 farms" also facilitates farmers' access to the European CAP second pillar subsidies or may increase the level of subsidy provided. A wide range of para-agricultural organizations, driven

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<sup>2</sup> GIEE is the acronym for '*Groupement d'Intérêt Economique et Environnemental*', which means 'group of economic and environmental interest.'

by different visions and strategies, provide advisory and facilitation services to these groups, thanks to the public funds dedicated to these agroecological schemes.

## 2. Extending political ecology to consider interface bureaucracies

Political ecologists have had an ambivalent relationship with the state and state theories in general (Robertson, 2015). Several political ecology scholars have engaged with theorizing the state (Loftus, 2020; Meehan & Molden, 2015; Robbins, 2008; Whitehead *et al.*, 2007). Yet few have actually explored the agencies of the myriad of interface bureaucrats whose daily activities and struggles reconfigure the powers and delimitations of the state, despite Robbins' early calls for political ecologists to develop ethnographies of the state (Robbins, 2002; Robertson, 2015). Following Mitchell (1991), several feminist political ecology scholars have explored these interfaces between the state and sociocultures and how they are constantly re-shaped by the micro-politics of resource governance (Harris, 2017; Nightingale, 2018). Recently, there has been a growing interest in the mundane practices of actors located within organizations involved in environmental governance, and their effects (Cornea *et al.*, 2017; Milne & Mahanty, 2019; Resurrección & Elmhirst, 2020; Shrestha *et al.*, 2019; Staddon, 2021).

Several sub-bodies of political ecology literature may provide useful conceptual approaches and tools in this regard. Feminist political ecology (FPE) (Bauhardt & Harcourt, 2018; Clement *et al.*, 2019; Nightingale, 2011; Sultana, 2011; Truelove, 2011), emotional political ecology (González-Hidalgo & Zografos, 2020; Sultana, 2015) and urban political ecology (Cornea *et al.*, 2016; Truelove & Cornea, 2021) have evidenced how power unravels in the everyday practices and struggles related to natural resource access and environmental degradation. They have also paid particular attention to the values, meanings, emotions and subjectivities involved in these practices and struggles. We draw on this rich body of knowledge to focus on "the everyday" as both a temporal and spatial scale, where power relations are negotiated and subjectivities performed. Whereas most FPE works have focused on the household as a privileged site to observe everyday practices, we locate our study of bureaucrats' banal work in their working places: offices, farms and fields. Following a FPE stance, we also aim at connecting micro-scale practices with broader political economy structures.

Our contributions to political ecology are two-fold. On the one hand, we extend it empirically and thematically: agri-environmental governance and food systems in the Global North form an understudied subject of political ecology (Galt, 2013), with only a handful of studies engaging with these topics (Demeulenaere, 2014; Goodman, 2004; Rissing, 2021). On the other hand, we aim at extending it conceptually by combining plural approaches and concepts developed in other bodies of scholarship highlighted below. Whereas political ecologists have already been drawing on some of these concepts, they have not specifically used these to investigate the daily practices and subjectivities of actors who play the role of interface bureaucrats.

First, we draw on public administration studies of street-level bureaucracy (Lipsky, 1980) for their fine analysis of how policies get translated and negotiated on the ground through ordinary practices (Holstead *et al.*, 2021). They have highlighted the heterogeneity of bureaucratic work resulting from relatively high degrees of discretion at the street-level, focusing on how actors' agency affects public service provision, while also considering how structural determinants such as organizational norms have influenced actors' practices. Anthropological studies of the state (Bierschenk & Olivier de Sardan, 2014b) have facilitated a different perspective on interface bureaucrats, by conceptualizing the state "not as an entity but as a bundle of practices and processes in a field of complex power" (Bierschenk & Olivier de Sardan, 2014a, pp. 14-15). Anthropologists have extended the street-level bureaucracy literature by situating local power relationships within the broader political context in which bureaucracies operate, e.g. by analyzing how international development aid has contributed to extend bureaucratic power (Bergamaschi, 2014). This echoes recent research in the field of agricultural extension, which questions how the agency of advisors might affect the content and directionality of advice in the context of asymmetrical power relations between the state, international donors and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) (Landini *et al.*, 2021; Landini *et al.*, 2022).

Also largely anchored in anthropology, the concept of "institutional bricolage" proposed by Mary Douglas (1986) and further conceptualized by Frances Cleaver (2002, 2012) has proved to be a pertinent analytical tool to study the role of interface bureaucrats. Institutional bricolage is an alternative to rational models of institutional design and has become a central analytical tool in critical institutionalism (Cleaver & de Koning, 2015). It refers to crafting processes embedded in daily practices whereby people consciously or unconsciously reconfigure norms, rules and relationships, depending on the resources and material available to them, notably by attributing new meanings and forms of authority to institutional arrangements (Cleaver & de Koning, 2015). The bricolage work of bureaucrats involves navigating between official procedures and local informal norms and using their discretionary power to produce hybrid institutional arrangements (Funder & Marani, 2015; Kairu *et al.*, 2018; Prado *et al.*, 2021). This ability to shape everyday environmental governance means that bricolage may be liberating, but may also sometimes restrict the development of transformative pathways (Funder & Marani, 2015) while raising questions of democratic control and legitimacy.

Lastly, governmentality studies prove relevant to analyze the subtle and banal state work that influences subjects' behavior in neoliberal environmental governance (Fletcher, 2010). Firstly, as the state has delegated public functions to non-state entities, it requires directing the behavior (in French 'conduire la conduite', see Foucault, 1982) of these groups and individuals, by relying on the "responsabilization" of subjects who are increasingly 'empowered' to discipline themselves" (Ferguson & Gupta, 2002, p. 989). Secondly, as neoliberal state bureaucracies have turned into customer-oriented services, affects and emotions play an important role in the work of interface bureaucrats (Penz *et al.*, 2017), notably as bureaucrats and advisors need to make discretionary normative choices on who deserves to benefit from public schemes (Leser *et al.*, 2017). Governmentality studies may prove useful on the one hand to unravel how interface bureaucrats and professionals construct themselves as moral agents (Davids *et al.*, 2014), and on the other hand, to decipher how subjectivities shape their conduct – a relatively unexplored perspective in research on environmental governance (Holstead *et al.*, 2021). Finally, a governmentality perspective can support a better understanding of how mundane bureaucratic practices actively participate in "spatializing the state" (Ferguson & Gupta, 2002) and in making people and spaces governable (Funder & Mweemba, 2019).

### 3. Study context

#### *Implementation of agroecological policies in France*

France was the first country in the world to institutionalize agroecology in a law (Wezel & David, 2020). The leftist Minister Le Foll launched in 2012 the "Agroecological project for France", based on the paradigm of "producing differently", and inscribed agroecology into the 2014 French Law for the Future of Agriculture, Food and the Forest as the privileged model for agricultural production systems.<sup>3</sup> The 2014 Law introduced the "GIEE" scheme as a new legal tool to support the agroecological transition and set the objective that, by 2025, at least 50% of French farms were to be engaged in agro-ecology. The GIEE was the key measure of the law: it aimed at supporting farmers to gather around a collective project to change their farming practices following agroecological principles. In addition, the 2014 Law consists of eight action plans, including the Ecophyto plan II. The latter introduced the "30,000 farms" scheme with the objective that 30,000 farms engage in PPP reduction in France. The scheme is similar to the GIEE, based on farmers' voluntary engagement to change their farming practices through a collective project. The main difference is the narrower focus on PPP reduction.

Although turning agroecology into the new rallying flagship for public agricultural policies may appear to be pioneering and ambitious to external observers, several scholars remark that this choice was first and foremost guided by pragmatic rationales. Firstly, it allowed the French government to meet the EU expectations related to the greening of the CAP, and secondly to adopt a rather consensual concept, that would not antagonize different visions of agriculture (Arrignon, 2020; Lamine *et al.*, 2019), as organic farming did. Far from being

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<sup>3</sup> Loi 2014-1170 du 13 octobre 2014 d'avenir pour l'agriculture, l'alimentation et la forêt, Journal officiel de la République Française [J.O.], Oct. 14, 2014, texte 1 [Law 2014-1170 of October 13, 2014, on the future of agriculture, food and the forest, Official Gazette of France, Oct. 14, 2014, text 1].

radical, the national public vision for agroecology expressed in the 2014 Law was indeed deeply anchored in the mainstream paradigm to reconcile economic and environmental performance (Lamine *et al.*, 2019).

The regional implementation of the GIEE and 30,000 farms schemes is delegated to the Regional Directorates of Agriculture, Food and Forest (DRAAF), who directly report to the Ministry. Both schemes are implemented through a yearly call for proposals. In each region, the DRAAF receives the applications, checks their eligibility and does the administrative monitoring. A committee gathering different regional-level stakeholders approves or rejects the applications. The DRAAF officers do not interact with farmers directly. The group of farmers who put forward an application to be recognized as a GIEE usually ask an agricultural organization to take charge of the group facilitation, the initial and final paperwork for evaluation purposes. The 30,000 farms scheme must be facilitated by an agricultural organization, who applies to the scheme. As explained below, these agricultural organizations may be either semi-public, civil-society or economic organizations. The farm advisors who work in these organizations play the role of interface bureaucrats: they provide technical, administrative and facilitation services to farmers as part of the scheme implementation, and report to the DRAAF for monitoring and evaluation (M & E) purposes. They are upwardly accountable to the DRAAF for the success or failure of the group in meeting its objectives. The farm advisors involved in the facilitation of these groups work for a large diversity of para-agricultural organizations, involved in the provision of agricultural advisory services, which we present below.

The Departmental Chambers of Agriculture (CDA) have undoubtedly been a major player in the field of agricultural advisory services, thanks to their extensive network of around 6,000 advisors in total across France. CDAs are very specific organizations, considered as semi-public. They benefit from public funding (e.g. land taxes) and their mandates are legally defined in the French Rural Code. However, CDA advisors are not civil servants. They work under the control of an elected president representing the farmers' union that wins local elections. Whereas the CDAs are largely subsidized by public funds, they nevertheless have increasingly relied on the commercialization of their extension and support services. This has led to a transformation of advising practices (Petit *et al.*, 2011) and to increased tensions between providing public and commercial services among advisors (Compagnone *et al.*, 2013). As an early leader of agricultural modernization in France, the CDAs still largely frame environmental issues as constraints and barriers to economic growth, aligned with the dominant farmers' union, the FNSEA.<sup>4</sup> However, they have positioned themselves strategically as key players in the implementation of agri-environmental schemes (Benoit & Patsias, 2017). In the *Département* of Haute-Garonne, where some of the fieldwork was conducted, another public body, the Departmental Council<sup>5</sup>, offers agricultural advisory services to farmers, through a network of local advisors. Many of their (free) services are relatively similar to those provided by the local CDA, but with an explicit focus on agroecology.

Farm cooperatives form the second major pillar of agricultural advisory services in France (Villemaine 2013), with more than 7,500 advisors (Sturel & Naïtho, 2021). According to a recent survey, their advisory services are used by a large majority of farmers in the study region (Laurent *et al.*, 2021). In addition to their function of selling material and products to farmers and/or serving as intermediaries between farmers and the agrifood industry, they have also provided farmers with advice while conducting their commercial activities, including on environmental issues. Farm machinery cooperatives (CUMA) form a large network of more than 11,000 organizations in France, aiming at facilitating farmers' use of machinery and equipment through sharing arrangements. Other sharing/exchange arrangements also include labor, material resources (e.g. seeds, feed, etc.) or more informally sharing knowledge and values and developing a shared identity (Lucas *et al.*, 2019).

Lastly, several organic farming and rural development non-profit organizations (e.g. the CIVAM network<sup>6</sup>) have been promoting agroecological/alternative practices and, among other functions, have been proposing advisory services to farmers. The CIVAM network gathers more than 130 local groups of farmers

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<sup>4</sup> The FNSEA holds a majority of seats in the elected bodies of all the 88 CDAs but seven.

<sup>5</sup> This direct involvement of the Departmental Council in the provision of farm advice in Haute-Garonne is quite unique and is not representative of the French context.

<sup>6</sup> The role of CIVAM and other rural associations has been acknowledged by French agricultural policies. They have been recognized by the State as National Agricultural and Rural Organizations (ONVAR) and their federation benefit from certain public funds (Vollet *et al.*, 2021).

and rural people. CIVAM advisors have been relying on group facilitation techniques and communities of practices to work with farmers.

In 2021, Occitanie was the region with the highest number of GIEEs in France, with 152 groups labeled as GIEE since 2015 (roughly 20% of the total number of GIEEs in France, whereas the region is the second agricultural region with 15.5% of the total number of farms). The number under the 30,000 farms schemes is more modest, with 46 groups labeled since 2016. The type of organization involved in facilitating these two types of schemes differs (Figure 1). A higher diversity of organizations facilitates the GIEEs compared to the 30,000 farms scheme, who are mostly facilitated by the CDAs. This may be due to several reasons, one of which may be the narrower focus of the 30,000 farms on the reduction of PPPs, which is not an issue of interest for organic farmers' associations, who in turn represent a large share of the organizations facilitating the GIEEs. The 30,000 farms scheme also requires setting quantified PPP reduction objectives for the group, regular on-farm data collection to calculate a treatment frequency index, and strict individual farm monitoring and reporting.

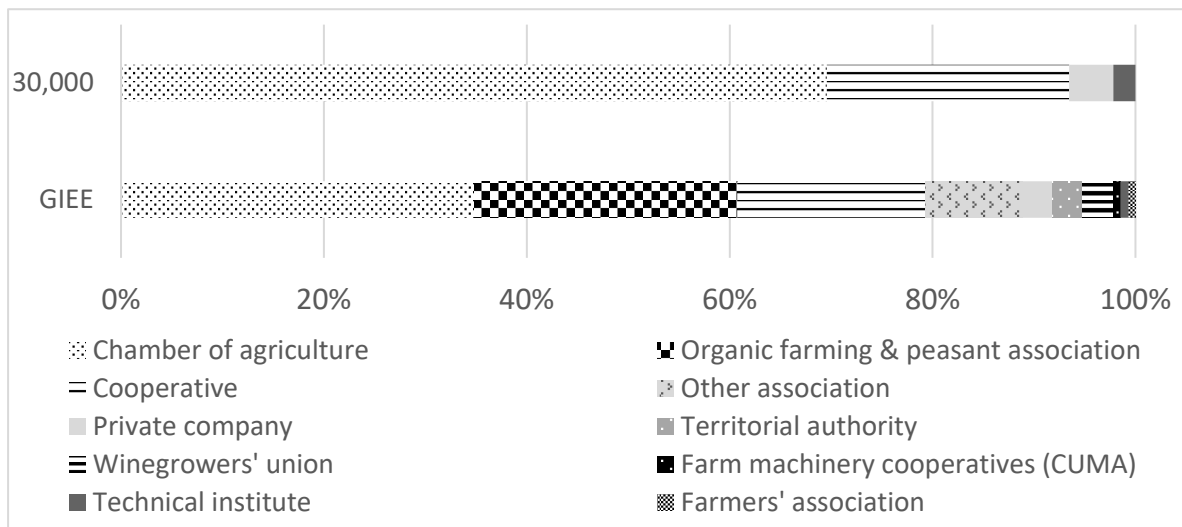


Figure 1: Distribution of the types of organizations facilitating the groups for each scheme in Occitanie. Source: Authors based on 2021 data, kindly provided by the DRAAF Occitanie.

#### *Tensions around the greening of agriculture*

Most research on the role of farm advisors in the European context has focused on the provision of knowledge and innovation, under the Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation Systems (AKIS) perspective. It has notably contributed to understanding to what extent the types of advisory system affect organizational capacities to meet farmers' needs for technical knowledge, for different types of farmers (Cerf *et al.*, 2017; Klerkx *et al.*, 2017; Labarthe & Laurent, 2013; Prager *et al.*, 2016). This has led to an emerging body of literature on the governance of pluralistic AKIS and extension systems (Nettle *et al.*, 2017). Some scholars question the relevance of analyzing changes in advice and AKIS solely from a macro perspective. They advocate for the need to zoom in at micro and meso-scale, to explore sub-systems (Klerkx *et al.* 2017), and understand how actors' practices and knowledge assemblages may result from bottom-up and gradual institutional change (Sutherland *et al.*, 2023). Such a perspective could reveal farmers-advisors relations that could hinder or foster sustainability transitions. A few scholars have explored the role that advisors play in agri-environmental policy (AEP) implementation in Europe, notably through communicative interactions (DeI Corso *et al.*, 2015; Juntti & Potter, 2002). Juntti and Potter (2002) show that agricultural extensionists in Finland followed a "'strong' agrarian interpretation of AEP" (p. 228), whereby they interpreted and communicated general agri-environmental protection schemes to farmers as an income support measure.

An emerging body of knowledge on the role of farm advisors as interface bureaucrats has interrogated the tensions and difficulties that they may face while implementing agricultural policies. They show that farm advisors have been increasingly caught between conflicting discourses and ideologies for the last couple of decades, notably related to the emergence of precision farming and data-driven technologies, advocacy for participatory extension approaches and the rise in environmental and sanitary norms and regulations (Charatsari *et al.*, 2022; Hejnowicz *et al.*, 2016; Juntti & Potter, 2002; Mahon *et al.*, 2010). The professional norms related to both agricultural practices and advisory work have significantly evolved, pushing farm advisors not only to develop new roles and competencies, but also to conform to new professional identities. In this context, farm advisors may have to navigate the underlying tensions resulting from multiple and sometimes conflicting subjectivities, notably when productive modernization remains a dominant individual objective (Landini *et al.*, 2022). These tensions may in turn also affect the way programs and policies are implemented, as evidenced by Mahon *et al.* (2010) and Hejnowicz *et al.* (2016). In France, there has been little research on evolving farm advisors' identities and environmental subjectivities, although recent work has evidenced a substantial bureaucratization of their work, resulting from the increase in the number and complexity of environmental regulations (Mesnel, 2018).

Supporting the agroecological transition, as it is referred to by the French government under the National Agroecology Project launched by the French Ministry of Agriculture, Agrifood and Forestry in 2012, is of course subject to heated controversies and debates (Giraldo & Rosset, 2018). Agroecology has been assigned distinct meanings and values in France (Bosc & Arrignon, 2020), and several discourse coalitions (Hajer, 1995) have emerged, dominated by a rather apolitical and technical discourse (Bellon & Ollivier, 2018). French farmers have been increasingly suspicious of ecological discourses and a recent ethnographic study conducted in southern France indicates that they have not yet adopted the concept of agroecology in their vocabulary (Derbez, 2020). By contrast, a majority of farmers have felt that their agricultural practices are subject to public criticisms from the media, neighbors, and citizens, because they don't meet environmental expectations.

The concept of agri-bashing has dominated public debates on agriculture in the late 2010s: it denotes discourses, policy actions or social activism supposed to denigrate agriculture and farmers systematically, notably in the name of environmental and ecosystem protection. This concept is a controversial one. In other contexts, for instance in the Netherlands, agri-bashing has been interpreted as "regressive populism" in response to environmentalist movements and as an expression of power relations within the farmers' communities (van der Ploeg, 2020). However, the greening of agriculture is only one of the challenges that French farm advisors are compelled to address. In France, 100,000 farms have disappeared between 2010 and 2020, representing a decrease of two percent every year (Agreste, 2021). In addition, farmers have been facing a much higher rate of suicide than the general population according to the *Mutualité Sociale Agricole* (social protection scheme for farmers and workers in the agricultural sector).<sup>7</sup> Although suicide is a multi-faceted phenomenon, some studies have suggested that farmers' high level of psychological distress may not be disconnected from forms of administrative violence generated by the CAP and related feelings of having inadequate knowledge (Jacques-Jouvenot, 2014). This suggests that the farm advisors who support farmers in filing their CAP applications (largely from the CDAs) may also encounter high levels of psychological tension.

#### 4. Methods

The data collection relied on a mix of qualitative methods and spanned across two years. It was conducted in western Occitanie. We used some background material from an action-research project, COTERRA, led in the North Comminges, a rural area located 80 km southwest of Toulouse, dominated by relatively extensive crop-livestock farming (Figure 2). The area was selected because it is a long-term social and ecological research site of the first author's research lab.

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<sup>7</sup> A survey led in France in 2021 comparing the beneficiaries of the agricultural social protection fund with those of the general social protection fund found that the risk of suicide is 43% higher among the former than the latter among the 15-64 year-old sample and 100% higher among the >65 year-old sample.



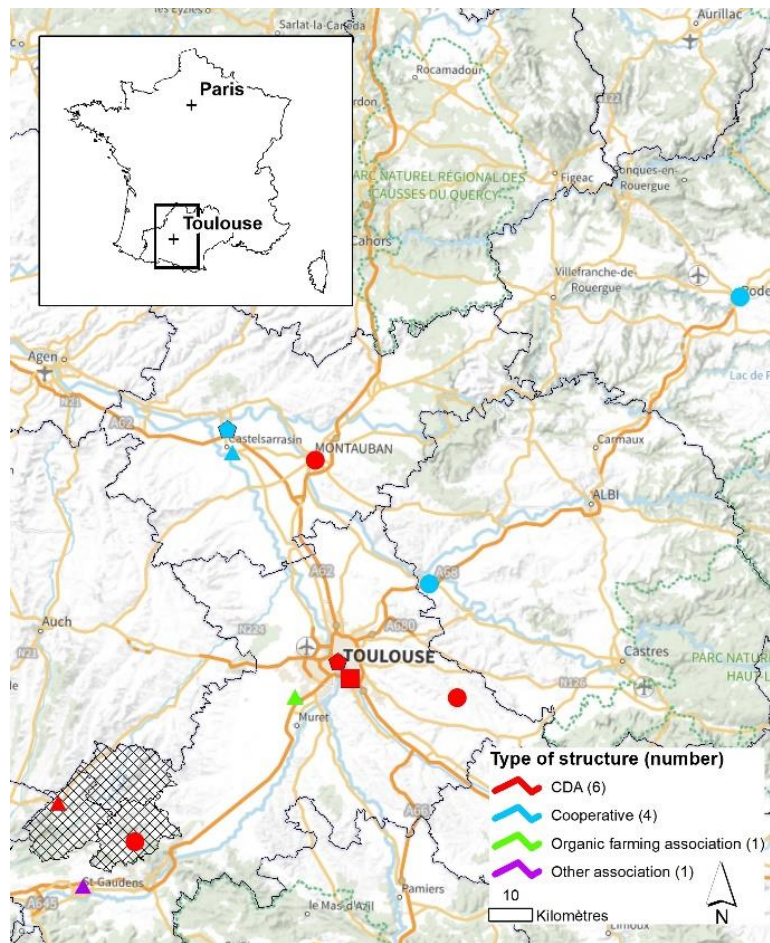


Figure 2: Location of the COTERRA project area (hatched area) and of the TERRAE respondents' main office, by type of structure and type of group facilitated (circle: 30,000 farms scheme; triangle: GIEE scheme, and square: other category of informant). Source: IGN layer, © IGN, map from Sylvie Ladet.

The COTERRA project, co-led by the first author, included an exploratory research stage to gain a general sense of actors' perceptions of the greening of public agricultural policies, notably their meaning and legitimacy. The first author and a master's student conducted around 15 qualitative semi-structured interviews with farmers in 2019, and around 10 interviews with farm advisors and officers from different types of advisory structures, and a few civil servants (cf. Table 1). In a second stage, the first author organized two public debates in late 2019/early 2020, gathering around 30 participants including farmers, farm advisors, local elected representatives, civil servants, watershed technicians and agricultural students. The local-level debate was structured into group discussions about three issues: what was their vision for agriculture, the types of changes needed to reach that vision, and the type of advisory support needed to make these changes. The participants, including around 11 farmers and 7 agricultural advisors, were assigned to different groups to compare their perceptions. The second debate, which gathered around 20 participants, including regional-level government officials, farmers and advisors, exchanged on their perceptions about the policy instruments that they perceived to be the most effective to support the agroecological transition, with the GIEE scheme being one of them. The objective was to assess the perceived legitimacy of different types of policy instruments (regulatory, economic, organizational, information, discursive) by different actors (farmers, farm advisors, state regional and

department-level bureaucrats, elected government officials). Deliberation allowed participants to hear other points of view and to develop arguments to defend their own perspective.

Lastly, the main material used for this analysis is drawn from semi-structured interviews conducted by the first author in 2021 under the research project TERRAE with 10 farm advisors, four in charge of facilitating GIEEs, five in charge of facilitating the 30,000 farms scheme and one in charge of providing technical support to both types of groups. Questions addressed the history of the group emergence, the influence of their organization's strategies and institutions in the emergence and in the group facilitation. We also asked their perceptions of the schemes' objectives and of the rules for group facilitation, monitoring and evaluation, their agency to influence the scheme implementation and maneuvering margin, their daily practices in group facilitation, the issues and tensions they had faced, what they liked and disliked in facilitating the groups, and the relationships they had developed with farmers and other actors as part of their group facilitation.

We also interviewed one technical head of a cooperative and one contracts/partnerships officer in a CDA to explore how organizational strategies may affect farm advisors' agency. The first author first contacted farm advisors with whom she had collaborated in the COTERRA project, then she contacted other advisors working in the same area, and then she selected advisors outside the area according to the regional database of the GIEE and 30,000 farms schemes shared by the DRAAF Occitanie. The sample was selected in order to have a representative sample in terms of types of organization facilitating the farmers' group. Hence, the interviews targeted agricultural advisors, from different advisory structures: CDAs, cooperatives, organic farming organizations and associations, including three advisors working in the Nord Comminges region who had been interviewed in the previous stage. The sampling strategy also aimed to cover a diversity of types of production system, and a relatively equal share of GIEE and 30,000 farms. All but one advisor agreed to do an interview. The interviewees were asked for written consent to participate in the research and for their interviews to be recorded. All collected data was anonymized.

An overview of the 40 actors involved across these research stages, through participation in interviews or debates, is provided in Table 1 (the table is not exhaustive as we did not include farmers' interviews in this analysis). We used manual coding, balancing inductive and deductive approaches (Saldana, 2015), to analyze the data. We did not use a predefined analytical framework and largely relied on a bottom-up approach, creating codes as they emerged from the data, but their grouping into themes was informed by the literature review, relying on key concepts and analytical lenses from the bodies of literature presented earlier: everyday practices, values, meanings (feminist political ecology), subjectivities (feminist political ecology and governmentality studies), advisors' agency (street-level bureaucracy), material resources, informal and formal institutions, i.e. strategies, norms and rules (institutional bricolage).

Research stage (related project name)	Farm advisors		Officers from agricultural organizations		State functionaries	
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
Round 1 of interviews (COTERRA)	3	2	1	1	0	5
Local public debate (COTERRA)	3	4	/	/	/	/
Regional public debate (COTERRA)	1	5	1	1	2	1
Round 2 of interviews (TERRAE)	6	4	1	1	/	/
<b>Total</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>

Table 1. Number of informants/participants across research stages and actors' categories. Source: Authors.

## 5. Results

### *Organizational strategies*

Whereas French policy-makers envisioned the GIEEs and 30,000 farms as a voluntary collective engagement initiated by farmers, advisory structures have in fact played a strong proactive role in the emergence of these groups. In particular, the respondents from the cooperatives we met mentioned that they actively recruited farmers to form groups through the cooperative technicians' networks. CDAs and even associations may also actively recruit farmers to form groups, depending on their individual positioning and strategies. As one cooperative advisor acknowledged, "on the ground, different organizations sort of have their own turfs ... so there is a kind of diplomacy being developed ... or not [*laughs*] ... all these structures, GIEE, 30,000, well, every organization would like to support them!" (interview, July 2021). Some forms of competition between advisory structures, e.g. between cooperatives and CDAs, have indeed recently emerged in France depending on the type of advisory services, but they have also identified distinct orientations that allow some forms of co-existence and complementarity (Compagnone & Simon, 2018).

Our interviews evidenced such differentiated strategies related to supporting GIEEs or 30,000 farms according to the type of organization. For some CDAs, it has been a matter of reaffirming their authority in the sector and also securing funding. One early-career female advisor acknowledged that in the early years of the schemes' implementation, the organizational strategy was to "create groups to create groups, just because there is funding or because we need to [be visible] ..." (interview, March 2021). Facilitating groups has been a way to show that they remain a major player in advising farmers, even if their elected members, mostly from the FNSEA, were not politically aligned with national policy orientations. The FNSEA had openly expressed their defiance about the GIEE scheme when the 2014 Law was being discussed at the Legislative Assembly.<sup>8</sup>

In addition, funding security has become a critical challenge for the CDAs in France, even more as the share of unconditional funding has been decreasing in recent years. One local farm advisor confessed how national funding schemes significantly shaped the advisory services proposed to farmers, as he was commenting on the creation of a renewable energy advisor position. The strategic importance of securing funding is also visible in the emergence of the position of the partnership officer in these organizations, who oversees identifying relevant calls for proposals, supporting funding applications, liaising with partners and developing partnership agreements. They may somehow act almost as a "sales representative" for public schemes to farmers, as one of them explained: "I am asked to present the scheme, to explain farmers what their interest could be, how it works, introduce other groups who have already formed and who have some experience in this" (interview, June 2021). The GIEE and 30,000 farms schemes financially cover around 20 percent and 25-30 percent of the time of the facilitator respectively<sup>9</sup> (depending on the group size for the 30,000 farms scheme).

Securing funding is also an important strategy for local organic farmers' associations. For them, the national GIEE scheme is more flexible and less paperwork-intensive than the European agricultural fund for rural development (EAFRD), which they previously applied to. However, CDAs differ from these associations in their greater ability to cumulate multiple sources of funding to cover their staff time. In the groups facilitated by the CDAs, it seemed relatively common that the farmers who were members of a GIEE or a 30,000 farm were also involved in another scheme, facilitated by the same farm advisor, e.g. a European agri-environment-climate measure (AEEM), or the French *Plants Health Newsletter*, a national monitoring scheme gathering information about the health status of crops in selected farmers' plots. Such "scheme accumulation" allows technical advisors to optimize their time spent across multiple schemes, by combining visits and data collection for two schemes at once. Some advisors from the CDAs also questioned the relevance of complementary funding for the advisory services provided to farmers' groups, which, in any case, lie at the heart of their remit. Some of them reported feeling uncomfortable about this rent-seeking strategy, e.g. getting public funding to pay for the provision of advisory services, which is already part of their mandate: "we add two to three small

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. the minutes of the report of the Economic Commission of the French parliament, 2013: <https://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/14/cr-eco/13-14/c1314030.asp>

<sup>9</sup> This was calculated based on the total annual number of days worked for a farm advisor at the CDA.

things, some indicators. But I think that, in any case, this work, it is already being done, it would be done, huh" (interview, early-career female cooperative advisor, June 2021).

Cooperatives also adopt plural strategies. One relates to keeping a form of legitimacy vis-à-vis farmers as a provider of technical knowledge and innovation. Some cooperatives have faced a decrease in farmers' attendance to the trainings and information sessions they organize. Facilitating a group is a way to position themselves as technical leaders on environmental issues and in particular the reduction of plant protection products' use. It allows them to develop technical references that they can use for their trainings and to demonstrate that they are able to address technical dead-ends to meet environmental standards and regulations. This is critical for cooperatives, as many farmers primarily perceive their role as product sellers, driven by economic interests rather than by environmental concerns. As one technical advisor admits, "farmers were not expecting us on this [advising on how to reduce PPP]" (interview, April 2021).

There are also governmentality tactics at work: creating farmers' groups is a way for cooperatives to make their territory governable and make farmers adopt practices or develop new productions that align with the cooperatives' economic strategies. The groups formed may help cooperatives to identify and establish relationships of trust with innovative farmers, who will be ready to follow the new certification strategies that the cooperatives developed for their products, e.g. High Environmental Value (HEV): "it was for us a source of farmers, which we can then make certified HEV and start developing products – it was our target. So, for our cooperative, it is important" (interview, early-career female cooperative advisor, June 2021). HEV certification has become a major strategy for wine cooperatives who want to go green, but with less stringent constraints than organic farming. It is probably not a coincidence that almost all the cooperatives engaged in facilitating the 30,000 farms operate in the viticulture sector. France is one of the European countries with the highest use of PPPs in the sector (Eurostat, 2017), and there are high commercial stakes associated with meeting potentially future stringent regulations and keeping the reputation vis-à-vis national and international consumers.

For another cooperative, there was a political interest linked to cooperative governance. The GIEEs offered a means to "identify motivated individuals within the group who are ready to invest their time for the cooperative later on" (interview, cooperative male senior officer, June 2021). Some cooperatives struggle to recruit new farmer leaders willing to become future cooperative directors, and there is a strong homophily tendency, as leaving directors often appoint their replacement within their own social circle. Lastly, one cooperative service director claimed it was a way of empowering farmers by involving them in their decision-making process, e.g. regarding product development and marketing strategies. He stressed that this is not the policy of all cooperatives as empowering farmers is not necessarily serving the cooperative's interests: "So, this can be perceived as groups that we create and who become influential groups. This might be a fear: farmers who come together to buy in bulk" (interview, June 2021). The ability of GIEEs to eventually circumvent the dominant economic system was also a fear for the FNSEA, in particular the fact that exchange and sale of agricultural products among the members of a GIEE come under 'agricultural mutual support' and hence are not subjected to the rules of the agricultural economic system.

#### *Meaning-making and subjectivities in everyday environmental governance*

Beyond these organizational strategies, there are individuals with their own values, interests and agency. Farm advisors typically fulfill a wide range of roles, which vary among different advisory structures. These encompass individual technical and regulatory advice, facilitating groups around specific themes or technical issues, providing administrative and financial support to local farmers' associations. On-farm visits also involve forms of mental support. Many farmers feel isolated or experience high levels of psychological distress, e.g. when facing economic difficulties. Farm advisors may thus play an important role in this regard, although very isolated farmers tend to avoid interactions with farm advisory networks. This result is in line with recent findings about "hard-to-reach" population for farm advice (Kingsella, 2018). Signaling extreme cases of psychological distress to social workers is nevertheless part of farm advisors' responsibilities. The increase in environmental and sanitary norms and regulations in the agricultural sector has profoundly changed the balance of advisors' roles in the last decade, notably those operating in the CDAs. Their routine work has largely shifted from technical to regulatory advice. Local generalist farm advisors of the CDAs and the Departmental Council

in *Haute-Garonne* spend one and a half months full-time on supporting farmers in filling in their annual CAP applications. The rest of the year, a large chunk of their work lies in finding the right subsidies, optimizing CAP financial support and advising farmers on how to comply with regulations. Most of the interviewed advisors perceive this technocratization of their work to be disempowering. They not only dislike regulatory and administrative work because they find it debilitating, but also because they find it meaningless and counter-productive. They regret that the time and energy spent on optimizing subsidies and complying with regulations distract both farmers and farm advisors from stepping back and reflecting on the performance and sustainability of farming systems: "Earlier, farmers did not have to do all this regulatory work, and they could spend time on other things, on technical issues. And I think it was more interesting for everyone" (interview, male early-career CDA advisor, July 2019).

The 30,000 farms and the GIEE schemes have offered farm advisors new opportunities to bring meaning to their work. Notably, compared to the CAP regulatory and economic instruments, they allow farm advisors to play a greater interpretative role in how agroecology is framed and translated in practice. Despite this flexibility, it was striking that most advisors, especially from the CDAs and cooperatives, systematically framed agroecology around the triple bottom line principles (economic, social and environmental principles), thereby reproducing dominant national policy discourses (Charrieras *et al.*, 2021). Advisors carry normative visions of agroecology through their discourses, techniques, experts or the thematic focus they choose. For instance, precision agriculture may help to reduce pesticide and fertilizer use through increased efficiency, but does not support farmers' autonomy (see Gliessman, 2016). These visions may align with organizational values – e.g. precision agriculture may be promoted by cooperative advisors rather than by advisors from peasant farming organizations. Yet, we also found that individual advisors had developed strategies to convey their own values and visions of agroecology, as a female CDA advisor indicated (interview, January 2021):

The vision of the GIEE policy scheme? This scheme, in itself, does not necessarily convey any specific vision of agroecology, we have to propose one to farmers. It means that farmers gather around a specific project, which will be a very basic thing [...]. There was a group that focused on grassland improvement and was not really into agroecology. So we introduced it progressively with the field visits, with meetings where we could invite experts to ... precisely, the soil, how their soil reacts even below the grassland, and managed to make them understand how they can improve it by using biodiversity and improving soil structure.

A senior officer at the DRAAF Occitanie acknowledged the pragmatic approach they followed when selecting proposals with different visions of agroecology: "We should be honest. There is no true definition of agroecology. Considering a given policy instrument and the proposals we receive ... choices, even if there are selection criteria, choices are always related to history, to people and to a policy" (interview, July 2019). This approach helps to overcome the seeming contradiction of labeling projects that carry diametrically opposite visions of agroecology, e.g. as mentioned by the same officer: on the one hand, one from a large cooperative engaged in battery intensive Roquefort lamb-breeding, the objective of which was to reduce by half the antibiotics mixed into the lambs' drinking water daily, and on the other hand, one from a group of organic farmers who aimed at improving biodiversity by planting hedgerows in their fields. The GIEEs may hence carry very contrasting visions of agroecology under a single flagship, which leaves even more room for maneuver to local advisors.

Besides the opportunity for advisors to bring a vision, group facilitation also offered space to develop collaborative learning and creative problem-solving. Many advisors stressed how they liked experimenting with farmers, e.g. testing new cultures, brainstorming, etc., because it was an opportunity to break away from their routine work. In the case of advisors facilitating the 30,000 farms scheme in particular, their perceived feelings of adequacy largely rested on their ability to provide farmers with specialized technical knowledge. Reducing PPP has been framed as a highly technical endeavor, hence reinforcing the subjectivities of the 30,000 farms' facilitators as providers of technical knowledge. However, they held different capabilities for providing technical knowledge to farmers and to hold to their role model of technical experts. In particular, several early-

career farm advisors felt they lacked specialized knowledge. Depending on the organization, some of them struggled to get the time and interest from specialized advisors located at their head office when they requested technical support. They also could not pay external experts to come when their organizations chose to use most of the budget to cover their staff time. Not being able to offer technical solutions in turn led to a feeling of frustration and of inadequacy: "Honestly, it is not a lack of facilitation skills; the problem lies in the technical solutions that we can bring. Sometimes we feel inadequate; we no longer know what to propose" (interview, female cooperative advisor, June 2021). This difficulty for advisors to provide relevant technical knowledge has been highlighted in other studies, for instance in the context of the introduction of new crops to adapt to climate change (Sutherland *et al.*, 2023). It is yet to be acknowledged by agricultural advisory policies, which have recently focused on supporting advisors' soft skills.

Yet for many interviewed female advisors, meaning-making largely extended beyond the provision of technical know-how and also resulted from a long-term relational process whereby they helped farmers to develop "a soul and a will for agroecology" (interview, female CDA advisor, January 2021). Several female advisors in particular openly expressed a strong normative commitment towards agroecology, which they felt emotionally engaged with: "agroecology is dear to my heart, it is something that I would like to bring" (interview, female CDA advisor, January 2021). Yet farmers' adoption of agroecological practices might involve breaking dominant professional norms, e.g. related to keeping one's fields "clean" or to maintaining high productivity levels "to feed the world." Depending on the local context and on the types of agroecological practices involved, farm advisors might hence face some peer pressure from local farmers, as one early-career CDA female advisor reported: "I think that what I do with my group bothers some people because we work on the issue of cover crops, and here, some time ago, you were not allowed to talk about it" (interview, March 2021).

However, in most cases, it was personal dissatisfaction about not being able to bring change that generated a feeling of helplessness among advisors:

Well, it is quite tiring and frustrating after a while to feel you are getting stuck. You often feel alone when you facilitate a 30,000 farm frankly! We feel we want to bring about things that will always be a second-order priority in farmers' list of issues. (Interview, early-career female cooperative advisor, June 2021)

This cooperative advisor felt powerless in the face of the lack of influence that the group work had had on the reduction of PPP. Farmers would set themselves the reduction targets to reach and ultimately would still follow the guidelines provided by the cooperative technicians, who have developed long-term relationships with farmers and regularly visit farmers. Despite the recent separation of PPP sales and advisory activities in cooperative structures, imposed by the French government in 2021, several advisors felt that the cooperative technicians' professional practices and their influence over farmers had remained the same. This advisor, who had left her position before the end of the 30,000 farms projects she was facilitating, concluded (interview, June 2021):

Well, I had the feeling that we reached the end of it, and that we needed to move beyond what had been already achieved. But moving further, it is another stage, it is something else ... it is redesigning a system, it is not only their own issue ... maybe it is the cooperative that needs to change their supplies, the marketing outlets, well, there are a lot of other issues to look at. In fact, the 30,000 farms, it is not sufficient for that [...]. The main issue, it is the market, frankly. Frankly, honestly, it is the root cause of everything [*laughs*]. [...] What Carrefour will buy this year, well that's what is going to be produced, nothing else.

She was one of the few advisors to point to the limited transformative potential of the schemes, which focus on changing farmers' practices without questioning or challenging the dominant agrifood system.

*Maintaining relationships with farmers*

Maintaining good long-term relationships with farmers, and among them is critical for farm advisors facilitating the GIEEs and 30,000 farms schemes: "If the group is not proactive and is not close-knit, it is hell trying to set up anything" (interview, female CDA farm advisor, January 2021). If farmers have little interest in the group, the role of the group facilitator soon becomes meaningless: "It is as if you work for nothing. You produce statements. You spend one month making statements. You visit farmers who don't give a damn about it" (interview, male CDA farm advisor, February 2021). Farmers voluntarily join a group, but keeping them motivated over a long period is not a straightforward task. Firstly, several advisors mentioned that agroecology was not a rallying flag for a majority of farmers joining the group: "Initially, the constituting basis for the group does not necessarily rest on agroecology. It is more the wallet, I would say. This is what motivates them initially" (interview, January 2021). Hence, farm advisors often have to navigate between farmers' interests, organizational strategies, policy objectives and their personal values. In the case of advisors personally committed to agroecology, this calls for bricolage work. For instance, a farm advisor working for an organic farming association developed a set of farm profitability indicators to keep farmers motivated, as farmers feared agroecological practices would increase farming costs. The same advisor recalled how difficult it was to gather a majority of farmers for the compulsory GIEE steering committee meetings, as farmers had no interest in such meetings. He thus combined the steering committee with a meeting where they would discuss experimentation results or other business so that enough farmers would come. One cooperative female advisor had to negotiate with farmers to organize a results dissemination meeting (knowledge transfer is a requirement of the GIEE scheme) as some group members felt it was not fair that other farmers reap the benefits of their work, without having spent their own time, energy and efforts in field trials and meetings. This demonstrates how the diverse administrative requirements not only affect the time spent by advisors fulfilling their role, but directly has a bearing on advisor-farmer relationships as they require advisors to shift from the role of a group facilitator to that of a state bureaucrat. In particular, in the case of the 30,000 farms scheme, the compulsory on-farm collection of quantitative data on PPP use for M & E implies a technocratic approach to participation, which, according to several advisors, affects group identity and dynamics.

This points to the particular tensions related to the implementation of participatory approaches. While most advisors embraced the goals of participation, the recurring challenge they faced in the two schemes was related to maintaining group dynamics for a long period, a challenge that was also highlighted in other contexts in the case of farmers' participation in agro-environmental schemes (Prager, 2022). Following a participatory approach required farm advisors to navigate between devolving autonomy to farmers and keeping their group alive: "It is interesting, but it is really hard to facilitate these groups (...). Especially since at the beginning, we had specified with the farmers that they were the players of the group. My role was to be a facilitator (...) but we have to be there to pull them [*laughs*]" (interview, early-career male CDA advisor, July 2019). Most advisors had identified criteria that increased the chances of group failure, e.g. related to farmers' spatial distribution, heterogeneity in production systems and interests, etc. However, *in fine*, they had little control over these criteria. Many emphasized the importance of creating informal times and spaces for the group to build relationships and stressed how these informal meetings proved crucial in providing safe spaces where everyone could talk without fear of being judged or ridiculed. Most advisors emphasized that group facilitation required much more time than anticipated and accounted for in the scheme. The inability to offer this 'quality time' could in turn lead to a perceived failure to meet farmers' expectations:

What is complicated, so this is a bit behind the scenes, is managing to meet their expectations, to respond to them. It is true that sometimes it is complicated because ... they ask a lot. They are quite demanding. They ask a lot in terms of availability, so it is complicated because we would like to meet their requests, but we cannot meet them all ...

Interview, female CDA farm advisor, March 2021

## 6. Discussion and conclusion

Several scholars have called for a renewed approach of policy analysis to address the challenges of contemporary environmental governance (Hajer & Wagenaar, 2003). As environmental governance in Europe has increasingly relied on participatory, contractual and project-based approaches, policy implementation has become more diffuse and ambiguous, raising new questions of environmental justice related to everyday micro-politics (Munck af Rosenschöld & Wolf, 2017; Paloniemi *et al.*, 2015, Sattler *et al.*, 2023). For instance, Paloniemi *et al.* (2015) observe across several European countries that, in the case of biodiversity governance, these approaches tend to include a few powerful actors and exclude several social groups, silencing conflicting opinions. In this context, the analysis of the mundane practices of interface bureaucrats is particularly pertinent, as it allows deciphering how policy implementation is re-interpreted, resisted and re-negotiated by a myriad of actors across multiple sites. To analyze these practices, we drew on a feminist political ecology approach to focus on "the everyday" as a privileged scale to analyze power relations and the emergence and performance of subjectivities. We enriched our analysis by borrowing concepts and bringing in analytical perspectives from three complementary bodies of knowledge: we conceived agricultural advisors as field-level bureaucrats, we interpreted advisors' practices as forms of institutional bricolage that helped them to cope with some of the tensions they faced when performing contradictory subjectivities, and we analyzed how the state governs their conduct to some extent through a governmentality lens.

In line with earlier research on interface bureaucrats, we find that agricultural advisors face tensions related to managing conflicting visions, values and interests and rely on pragmatic decisions to maneuver among these policy implementation dilemmas (Funder & Mweemba, 2019). In addition, we have evidenced how the political economic context and organizational strategies may affect the type of tensions that interface bureaucrats face and their room for maneuvering. Understanding these structural constraints is even more relevant in the case of hybrid environmental governance. For instance, the early strategies of some organizations to pro-actively form farmers' groups have resulted in the creation of groups with lower initial level of motivation and cohesion, requiring in turn more creative bricolage and affective labor from group facilitators to keep their work meaningful and to keep groups alive.

While bringing to our attention this affective and emotional work, our FPE perspective has also helped to unravel in particular the emergence of new subjectivities in this interface. Agricultural advisors perform multiple and contradicting subjectivities in their everyday practices and across different places (see also Nightingale, 2018). They may simultaneously reproduce dominant policy discourses on agroecology in their offices while translating these discourses according to their own personal values on the farms, play the role of administrative officer when reporting on the groups' progress while relying on creative bricolage with farmers to make rules work in practice, or position themselves as technical experts in the fields while struggling to be a group facilitator.

We also found that, in the context of an organizational instrument based on farmers' participation, the forms of creative bricolage that farm advisors develop in this context are not disruptive vis-à-vis the scheme, highlighting a form of governmentality at work: their maneuverings usually aim at keeping farmers on-board, which aligns well with the overall scheme objective. Keeping farmers motivated to participate does not stem from the need to show success to the government; there is no form of state regulatory control on farm advisors as the state has little means of monitoring and controlling farmers' actual involvement in the group in the case of the GIEE. Rather, it is a crucial component of farm advisors' job satisfaction and a way to maintain good relationships with farmers in their working area. Facilitating such groups requires farm advisors to invest a significant amount of affective labor to negotiate between multiple values and build social relationships. The agroecological transition has been largely framed as a technical endeavor based on farmers' adoption of new techniques and practices, but there is a need to better consider the role of affects in such a transition, both as a barrier and as a powerful driver for social movements (van den Berg *et al.*, 2022). FPE offers useful an analytical lens in this regard.

We identified two relatively promising areas for further research, which could not be explored in this study. First, we found that the 30,000 farms and GIEE schemes enlarge the creative space of farm advisors, compared to their current role of "subsidy optimizers", and may help to reshape their professional identity and make their work more meaningful. However, these two schemes also hold in-built limitations in empowering



farm advisors, notably as they focus on changing farmers' practices without considering the systemic constraints within which farmers operate. These limitations seem to be experienced differently depending on farm advisors' personal values, the type of scheme and the type of advisory organization. Exploring this question would have required a slightly larger sample size and more importantly, an ethnographic approach, so we can only offer a few observations here that require further investigation: it seems that early-career female farm advisors, who expressed strong ecological aspirations, were more prone to feel disempowered when realizing the small steps achieved in the face of the need for transformative and radical change. Feelings of disempowerment were also more prevalent in the case of 30,000 farms' facilitators compared with the GIEEs'. One reason could be that the former more narrowly focus on PPP reduction with specific targets, whereas the latter support a more flexible and systemic approach. There is thus scope for further research on how the recent feminization of farm advisory services in France supports the construction of gendered subjectivities that align with forms of agroecological transformation that redress unequal relations and patriarchal structures.

Second, these participatory schemes led by contracted semi-public or private organizations also raise questions of social justice. In the Occitanie region, where the research was conducted, around 2% of farmers are engaged in GIEEs. In turn, facilitating these farmers' collectives requires considerable time investment from farm advisors and thus strongly affects their availability to support other farmers. This is far from being neutral. Although there is no available quantitative data on this, our interviews indicate that farmers who engage in these schemes are often already involved in other schemes or programs, or hold local positions of power, e.g. in local farmers associations, cooperatives or machinery cooperatives. This scheme accumulation partly results from farmers' personal motivation and values, and from a virtuous circle of access to networks and opportunities. However, this virtuous circle is also ultimately reinforced by the strategies of advisory structures who try to optimize the time spent by their advisors across multiple schemes. A defense is to argue that since farmers' participation in the schemes is voluntary, there is a natural form of exclusion of those who explicitly defend intensive forms of agriculture. They, however, may also *de facto* exclude farmers who prefer 'proto-agroecological'<sup>10</sup> approaches (van der Ploeg *et al.*, 2019), farmers who are less vocal or who do not have the capacity to engage in these groups, e.g. farmers in debt traps, or the socially marginalized, including some women farmers. According to our estimate, the GIEEs labeled in 2015 in Occitanie included 9% of female farmers, which is well below the average percentage of female farmers in Occitanie (28.5% in 2020).

In turn, this dynamic reinforces another virtuous (or vicious) cycle. The GIEEs embody the public face of agroecology in France and render agroecology visible and alive in the eyes of the state (e.g. see: <https://collectifs-agroecologie.fr>) and in the eyes of many other actors (including researchers). As the "virtuous farmers" are identified, the territories become more governable, e.g. for cooperatives as evidenced in this study, and may facilitate the implementation of agricultural development schemes and research projects, which are likely to target the same farmers. There is thus a strong risk of marginalization of certain voices and values that deserves further research and attention. Unequal access to advisory services is a common issue for other agricultural policies, at the European level, where the question of hard-to-reach populations has been raised recently (Labarthe *et al.*, 2022), even though a clear monitoring of the distributive effects of innovation policies is still lacking. We thus recommend further research on how the everyday implementation of participatory agroecological schemes intersects with issues of social justice.

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<sup>10</sup> van der Ploeg *et al.* (2019, p. 46) define protoagroecological approaches as "approaches to farming that are agroecological by nature but which may not necessarily explicitly define themselves as agroecological."

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