

Support the emancipation of autonomy to get out of the difficulty in agriculture?

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Abstract: A large part of the French and European agricultural population is today in economic, social and environmental difficulty. A majority of farmers find themselves marginalized and suffering: they are trapped in a political and societal confrontation opposing immobilist representatives of the agricultural profession on one side and an urban and tertiary society expressing ecological and health expectations on the other side. These farmers find themselves increasingly stigmatized by staying away from modernity movements (ecological, technological) emancipating minorities of farmers. As their proportion increases, farmers facing difficulties receive little attention from research and development, which focus on innovative minorities. Through this communication, we analyze farmers' difficulties as work concerns: thus the difficulties are tensions between what they do, what they would like to do, what they think, what they believe in and what they work on daily. The difficulties are set up according to a vicious circle in 3 stages which lock the farmer in a situation of discomfort and suffering: the appearance of problems in the work of farmers, then the decline in farm performance, and a loss of confidence in oneself and in one socio-professional surrounding which lead to isolation. The exit from the difficulty then passes through an emancipation from this vicious circle. The concept of autonomy appears as a means of introducing a posture of questioning, in order to elicit "the intimate and the shareable" with the farmers: the objective is to discuss and adjust the perimeter of trust according to the circles within which the exchange is organized. This concept also makes it possible to explain the resources mobilized by farmers in their work by discussing their usefulness, their relevance, the level of dependence in which their use places farmers and the ways farmers can practice by using them less or not at all. Finally, autonomy legitimizes the participation of farmers in the orientation of exchanges within the discussion circles in which they participate: they build collective responsibility for these orientations.

Keywords: farmers difficulties, autonomy, emancipation, support

Introduction: marginalized farmers

French and European agriculture have been resisting, since the mid-1980s, a change that seems inevitable: the end of the productivist era. Many farmers are in a difficult economic, social, and environmental situation: we call them "traditional conventional", because they claim a form of stability and confidence in the dominant socio-technical regime defended by the profession during the last 60 years. During the last 30 years, average income of French farmers has stagnated or even decreased (Chassard and Chevalier, 2007). Farmers overwhelmingly equate the environment with a stack of costly and oppressive regulations, controls and standards. The agricultural profession, which has become a minority in an increasingly urbanized and tertiary society, is gradually isolating itself: farmers, for many of them, consider themselves misunderstood by a society that lives far from their daily realities. These "traditional conventional" farmers keep away from alternative movements carried by minorities of farmers to propose a sustainable development of their activity (ex: organic farming, economical and autonomous farming...). They are therefore stigmatized because some of their visible agricultural practices, such as pesticides treatments, have become intolerable with regard to society. Thus, the gap is widening between, on one side, an "immobility" defended by the major currents of thought of a profession holding a line of defense of the order of "agribashing", and on the other side, the social, economic and environmental realities which surround the farmers. This gap generates progressive loss of meaning in the work of farmers, according to dynamics that are not always well characterized: the consequences are the difficulties of the daily work of farmers with too often tragic ends (Deffontaines, 2020).

Supporting the exit from the difficulty of these “traditional conventional” farmers remains little studied to date. In the field of agriculture, scientific communities and, more broadly, the research, training and development system, are essentially focused on ecological and industrial modernities that hold promise for the future. Like Geels and Schot (2007), they make the implicit assumption that the transformations of the agricultural sector will be impelled by a combination of innovations of interest for the future and socio-technical and political unlocking of organizations in place. Thus, biotechnical research multiplies inputs and methods: they invent promising technologies and practices for the future; they innovate according to more or less participatory methods in order to stir up the interest of productive circles for novelties; they analyze the socio-technical and political interlocks of the organizations in place (Stassart *et al.*, 2008). This research has many interests in terms of transformations in the agricultural sector and in terms of societal transformations when they encompass the entire agri-food system (Barataud *et al.*, 2019). However, they have at least 3 limits which are probably closely linked: the innovations at work are struggling to develop (Temple *et al.*, 2011); these innovations fail to reach the majority of farmers who are described as “traditional conventional” and who remain silent and marginal to participatory dynamics; they sometimes contribute to the loss of meaning for farmers who try to mobilize them without having the means to support them, or who do not feel able to mobilize them and who are then even more marginalized. Supporting transformations in the agricultural sector requires increasing the number of entries in order to reach these “traditional conventional” farmers, potentially or actually in difficulty in their daily work.

Through this communication, we question, theoretically, the methods to support farmers out of difficulty. Mobilizing theoretical frameworks from work activity, developed by ergonomics, we propose a formalization of the establishment, reinforcement and confinement of farmers in difficulty. This formalization is proposed on the basis of the literature but also of testimonies of accompanists working with farmers facing difficulties in center of France. We then question the possible ways out of this infernal loop via the emancipation of farmers facing difficulties. Based on literature in psychology, sociology, politics and developmental ergonomics, we then focus our discussion on the concept of autonomy, frequently described as a means or, more often, as a goal of professional development. Finally, we question the possibility of supporting the emancipation of autonomous ways of thinking and acting among farmers facing difficulties.

The difficulties of farmers: a process of reinforcement in the work activity?

The populations of farmers facing difficulties and the nature of the difficulties they have to overcome have been characterized *via* studies in rural sociology and psycho-sociology (Louazel 2018, Roche, 2016, Deffontaines, 2014). According to Deffontaines (2014), the phenomenon dates from more than 30 years ago but it has been more publicized in the past 10 years. Roche (2016) characterizes poverty in rural areas: concerning the agricultural profession, she analyzes the difficulties and lifestyles of farmers according to their mode of entry into the profession and the values that drive them. Louazel (2018) and Deffontaines (2014) are interested in the multiple causes of these difficulties, their consequences and their outcomes. Thus, Louazel (2018) analyzes the ways out of difficulties made possible by the support offered by the Solidarité Paysan association in France; Deffontaines (2020) focuses on the suicide of farmers.

Thus, the difficulties of farmers are not new, and they arise in varied life courses of farmers with any distinction of the production systems. The causes of these difficulties are manifold: many external

factors, over which farmers feel they no longer have a hold, which come into contact with personal and professional life histories. The human consequences have degrees of severity ranging from discomfort in daily work to suicide, too strongly present in this profession, and passing through a loss of confidence in oneself and in others. The economic consequences are always very important for farmers facing difficulties and sometimes make it impossible to continue farming.

Indicators of tensions within the work activity of farmers

We analyze the difficulties of farmers as issues related to their work. Work is understood here in the sense of work activity (Pastré, 1999). The work activity has been theorized allowing its analysis and understanding, at a given time or in dynamics.

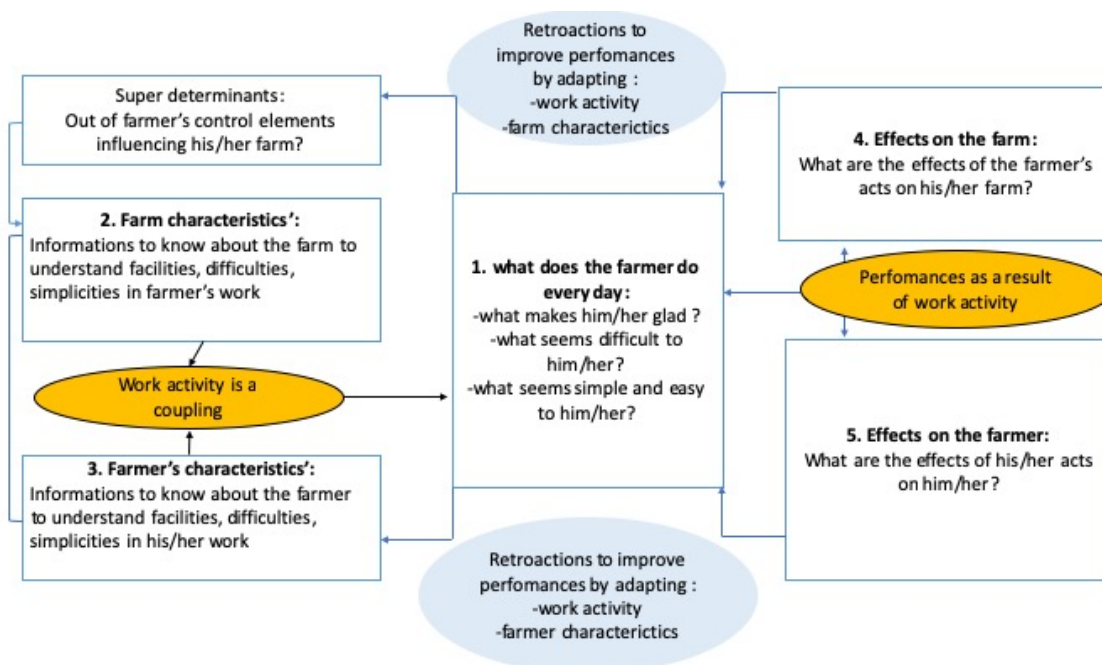


Figure 1. The diagram of the 5 squares for an analysis of the determinants and effects of a farmer work activity.

Work activity according to Pastré (1999), refers to real work, as opposed to prescribed work which is the work expected and most often requested by a hierarchy. Real work therefore refers to work as it exists in life: it composes between what is, implicitly or explicitly, expected and what is possible. Thus, Leplat and Cuny (1974) propose to analyze the activity of the worker starting from real work, as it takes place for the worker, then by analyzing distinctly what determines this work and the effects of work (see figure 1). The determinants of work are thus posed by distinguishing what the characteristics of the enterprise impose on the worker and what his own characteristics impose on him and allow him to do and think. Super-determinants are also posed: these are determinants over which the worker has no power to act, such as the socio-economic context, the market, policies and regulations. The effects of work are analyzed by distinguishing the effects on the company and the effects on the worker. Thus the framework of analysis of Leplat and Cuny, (1974) makes it possible to pose a work situation and to highlight the negative effects of work on the company and on the worker (can be a farmer): it also makes

it possible to list the determinants on which worker can act to rectify the work situation and thus reduce these negative effects.

In his work Béguin (2004) proposes a formalization of the work of subjects according to the professional world. This formalization is taken up by Coquil *et al.* (2017) in order to propose a developmental approach to work (see Figure 2). The professional world is made up of "praxical, axiological and conceptual backgrounds that form a system with the object of the action". This formalization refers to the practical need, for the worker, of consistency in daily work activity: it is the condition of comfort for the subject in his work. Thus, the praxical (knowledge, know-how, pragmatic concepts and acts of the subject) and axiological (also professional standards, defining the ways of doing one's job well in reference to a socio-professional environment that is worthwhile, and the values characterizing the way in which the person situate in the world) backgrounds become consistent with the object of action of the subject in a very stable manner. Discomfort at work refers to an inconsistency experienced by the subject, that is to say a tension between the components of his professional world. To regain coherence and well-being, the subject must change his professional world or even transform it: we then speak of professional transition. The professional transition is sometimes deep in order to reconstruct an object of work, ways of doing things, ways of thinking and defining oneself in the world which allow to find a coherence, a well-being at work.

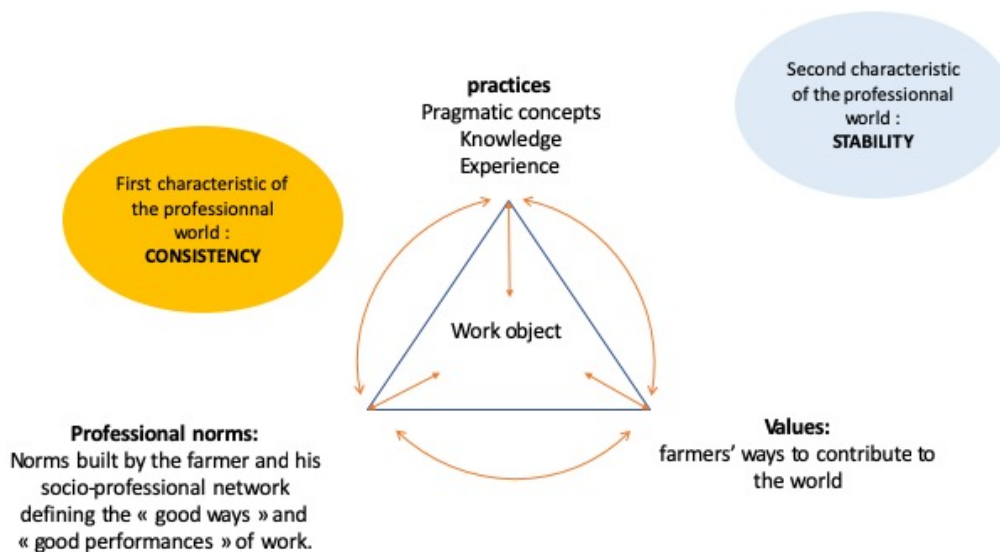


Figure 2. The professional world for a systemic approach to the subjects' work activity. Source: Coquil, 2014 from Béguin, 2004.

On the basis of these work activity approaches, we propose to analyze the difficulties of farmers, not on the side of the failures of the technical system in which he works, but on the side of the farmer's activity: what are the effects of the farmer's activity on the performance of his farm? what are the effects of the activity on himself? what characteristics of his farm can he change, what can change in him / her to set up an activity reducing these negative effects? What is the professional world of the farmer? what are the internal tensions in this world? should we think about a professional transition to allow him to find well-being at work?

Difficulties are no longer taken from the angle of external causes: they are taken with a focus on the work of the farmer. We analyze the way he interacts with his farm and his professional and personal environment (events...) including the dimensions on which he no longer seems to be able to act through his work.

Formalization in a vicious circle in 3 steps

We formalize the process of setting up the difficulty in 3 stages (figure n°3). This formalization is based on activity analysis frameworks, literature dealing with the causes and effects of difficulties among farmers as well as the experience of farmer accompanist, one of whom is co-author of this paper.

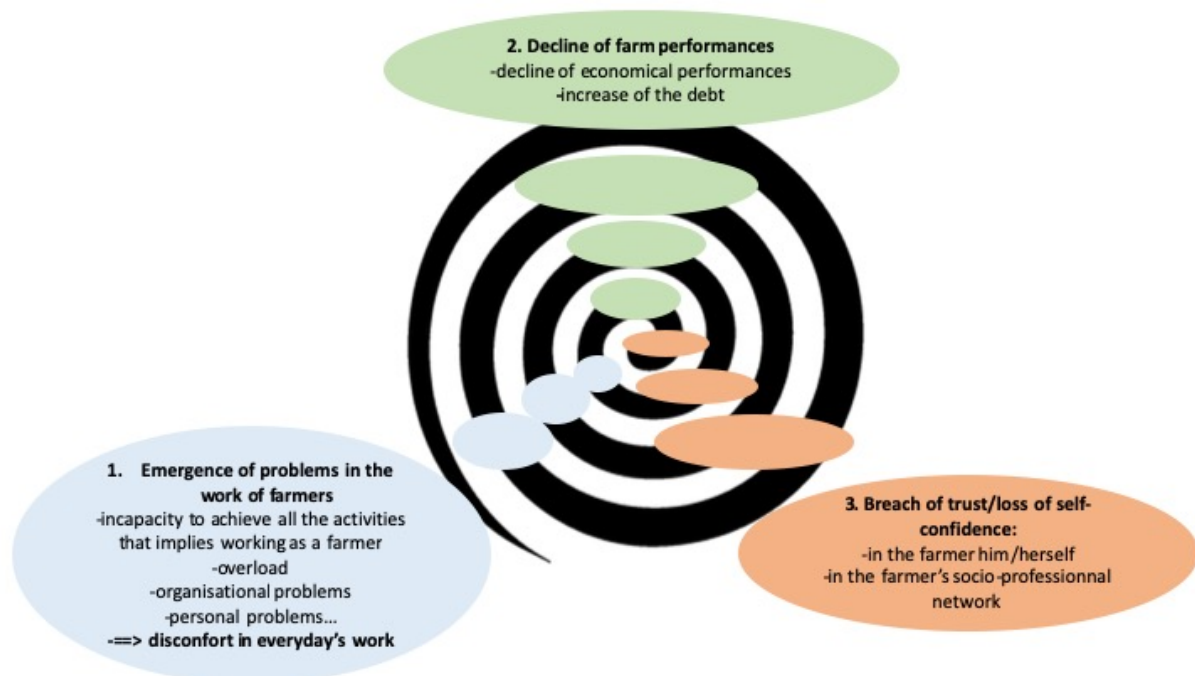


Figure 3. Vicious circle of the deterioration of work activity of farmers and the establishment of difficulties.

Emergence of problems in the work of farmers

Without claiming any completeness, we list here recurring difficulties appearing in the work of farmers:

- overload in work and difficulties in achieving it up to his requirements (of his professional standards) due to an inadequacy between the available workforce, the equipment that can be mobilized and the volume of work necessary to operate the farm.
- a burden and organization of work leaving no room for private and family activities.
- difficulties in assuming the financial, economic and commercial management activities of the farm. These difficulties are due to an inability to comply with the entrepreneurial management imposed by agricultural activity registered in a market economy.
- difficulties to break out of continuity and to develop or transform one's work activity. These difficulties are due to an inability to detach from the passive confidence granted to the dominant socio-technical environment. This socio-technical environment was built, consolidated and locked in by 60 years of co-management between the Ministry of Agriculture and the majority

agricultural policy union. It consolidates an agriculture: (i) producing agricultural raw materials sold at low cost and dependent on subsidies from the common agricultural policy, (ii) delegating marketing, production of knowledge (technical, economic, financial) and management to organizations that are part of the dominant logic.

- a difficult period of life due to personal or private concerns which reduce mobilization at work...

Thus, the work activity of the farmer, not questioned, gradually accumulates negative effects on the farmer himself and on the performance of the farm. Discomfort sets in because the farmer can no longer do his job according to the requirements that he sets for himself and that he lives as imposed by his socio-technical surrounding ...

Deterioration of company performance

Work difficulties gradually generate negative effects on farm performance, accentuating the internal tensions of the farmer. Thus, we note 2 phenomena relating to these degradations:

- a decrease in economic performance which leads to a decrease in farmers' income and an inability to honor their debts. The decrease in income can generate tension in the family unit. Failure to pay debts to suppliers creates additional pressure from farmers' partners, heightening tensions between what the farmer does and what he would like to do.
- an increase in farmers' debt without questioning the work activity and his real difficulties. Here two approaches dominate and are frequently combined. The first approach aims to consolidate the cash flow of farmers by granting them bank loans under cover of a guarantee by the capital they own (land, buildings). The second approach is based on investment loans so that farmers increase their production volumes according to the technical system already in place, and assuming that the production of this additional volume will allow them to get out of economic difficulties.

Loss of confidence / break with the socio-professional world and isolation ...

- the successive reflows by a socio-professional surrounding which tries to treat the debt by considering the dysfunctions of the farm, without considering the difficulties of the daily activity of the farmer, amplifies the difficulties of the farm and of the farmer.
- the amplification of dysfunctions leads to a breakdown of the farmer's confidence in his socio-professional surrounding and a devaluation of his own person. Indeed, he must face a growing inability to operate a farm that no longer corresponds to an activity that he is able to carry out.

This break with the world outside the farm and the attempts to revive the farm through investments therefore feed the difficulties of the farmer's work activity which are worsening. The outcome of the crisis is therefore increasingly distant on the technical and personal levels due to the breach of confidence. The Solidarité Paysan association frequently deplores the late call for help of farmers, who are then deeply involved in this vicious circle.

How to emancipate this agricultural population from this vicious circle?

How do we get farmers out of this infernal loop of deterioration in their work activity? For these farmers facing difficulties, the causes and consequences are intertwined and become indistinguishable. They become withdrawn, lose confidence in themselves and in others, which frequently leads them to focus

their attention on the determinants over which they have no power and which oppress them (liberal market, climate change...). This postponement is a survival reflexe. It is an attempt at reinsurance by shifting responsibility of what they are experiencing (as a failure) to external causes of their work situation. Considering the work activity, getting out of the difficulty requires emancipation from the farmer. By emancipation of the farmer facing difficulties, we mean reconnecting with self-confidence and confidence in others. Emancipation also requires reconnecting with discernment and critical judgment about one's work situation and regaining the power to act. This emancipation is called "putting people back on their feet" within the Solidarité Paysan association (Louazel, 2018). In other words, this emancipation aims to reverse the effects of the third stage of the vicious circle of difficulty, and to allow farmers to take back control of what is happening to them. But to envisage a lasting exit from the difficulty, it seems essential to question the work activity of farmers: it consist in giving a status to the tensions and inconsistencies of their professional world; it consist in giving a status to the negative and positive effects of work on them and on their farm; it is also about questioning the determinants of their activity over which they can have control. Thus, questioning the activity and the professional world of the farmer invites us to convene the autonomy of farmers, as a way out of the vicious circle of difficulty.

Autonomy: a possible path to emancipation?

Autonomy is the subject of three distinct theorizations within the literature, namely (i) the self-determination of the subject and his relation to others, (ii) the mastery of the subject on his technical and conceptual environment and (iii) the subject's contribution to the common future through his involvement in the institutions influencing his development.

According to Grondin and Pichon (2013), Maillard (2011) offers a historical and philosophical reading of the emergence of the concept of autonomy. The concept of autonomy was born from the advent of humanism with the Age of Enlightenment: man then freed himself from the religious and political agents who dictated to him the good and wise behavior to be followed. The singular dimension of the human being becomes significant: we then speak of a form of self-determination of individuals in terms of norms, values and meaning referring to universal reason and the power to act of individuals. The singularity of individuals then becomes an end. This singularity becomes a form of recognition of the capacity to self-govern determining the right of each to an interior space: the collective power is not authorized to penetrate and the individual is his own master endowed with right. Self-discovery and self-determination in order to be able to self-determine: what place should we give to otherness when origin and purpose merge into autonomy (Meyers *et al.*, 1989)? The authors take a step back on autonomy seen as the final stage of development and human dignity, mark of moral maturity and, conversely, devaluing weakened lives. According to psychologists, autonomy cannot be posed without relation to others. Winnicott (1969) and Erikson (1972) demonstrate that we cannot be without being linked to: the concept of solitude irreparably refers to the other. According to Erikson (1972), trust is the cornerstone of human development and autonomy comes in a second step. Subjects take consistency of themselves with caring people: this caring people meet their needs, to a moment of their life, allowing them to be solid and to embark on experimentation by and for themselves. Erikson (1972) then attempts to clarify the place of otherness in the concept of autonomy through the notion of intimacy: it is the subject's ability to decide to share with others.

Illich (1973) bases his theory of autonomy on an alternative development goal. This other development of society (it tackles in particular the North / South imbalances and the interventionist and top-down development policies carried out in particular in South America) requires conviviality and autonomy.

According to Illich, the generalization of an educational or technological innovation makes populations dependent creating new problems. Illich formalizes autonomy as work on the local in order to work from resources that a community master. Use of local resources limit the dependencies generating complexity. Illich then distinguishes autonomous and heteronomous institutions: the latter come from outside a local community and are imposed on it. Illich stands up against this model of community development which gradually takes precedence over the original knowledge of the community and takes away its autonomy.

Castoriadis (1975) bases his theory of autonomy on politics: thus autonomy arises from a collective will to reflect on a self-institution of society. According to Castoriadis, questioning representations and established evidences (that is to say, that are already there) is the central question of autonomy.

From Erikson, we keep that autonomy enable the subject to share his experiences and experimentation in a circle of trust according to his own reserves and wills and respecting his privacy. We retain from Illich the question of the origin of development resources, by favoring resources internal to the community as a condition of control by its members. From Castoriadis we retain the need to maintain a reflexivity on and within institutions: the ability of individuals to question what is given to them as obvious is then essential. Autonomy then becomes a means at the service of the emancipation of subjects more than a finality.

Development of autonomy: a virtuous circle to support?

The life stories of farmers making a professional transition from input consuming and heteronomous professional worlds to self-sufficient and autonomous professional worlds, and the developmental processes at work (Coquil *et al.*, 2017) refer to virtuous dynamics. The emancipation of ways of thinking and questioning work and experience at the level of individuals and of peer groups become sources of pleasure, sources of enthusiasm and sources of personal and collective accomplishment (Barbier *et al.*, 2015).

Coquil *et al.* (2017) describe, at the individual level, a process of professional development that is partly autonomous and partly social. Indeed, the professional transition of subjects is partly motivated by the search for coherence and well-being at work: the coherence of the work object, its praxical and axiological dimensions is a motor of the transition. The transition is also social: this refers to Vygostky's (1934) developmental approach and more particularly to the "excentration" theorized by Leontiev (1976). Men, through their work, transform nature and create a social world. What humanity has become through its work (knowledge and know-how) is "objectified" in the human world of goods, tools, work and knowledge. The development of the individual is achieved by displacements of his action capacity over the experiences he forges in confronting the achievements of others and their internal conceptualization. This autonomous and social process takes shape in the farmers' experience through trials: they lead them to test the ways of doing and thinking in order to try to turn their wishes into reality; they also lead them to solve everyday problems and spontaneously test new tools, methods, knowledge...

The enthusiasm for discovering new ways of doing and thinking can be explained by the collective and situated nature of questioning and discovering the unthinkable. Among heteronomous farmers initiating a professional transition to self-sufficient and autonomous systems considered by Coquil *et al.* (2017) and Barbier *et al.* (2015), support is carried out according to the principles of popular education in peer groups. The animation of the group, entrusted to an animator, aims to clarify work concerns and questions of the farmers; the animator materially organizes meetings between peers on farms: sharing a sensitive experience on the farm, peers question the farmer ways of doing and thinking. In a situation, words as well as hearing, smell, sight, touch, feeling help to understand and to feel (Anglade *et al.*, 2018). Peer-to-peer questioning and discussion takes place on the basis of these information

collections. Sometimes farmers equip this collection with training to shift their gaze (obsalim® method, Pochon grazing techniques, etc.), to stimulate thinking and to open up avenues for action for both. This collective stimulation leads the group to formulate emerging concerns, nourishing reflection and the collective training need. This collective stimulation creates bonds of solidarity and mutual trust allowing farmers to remain mobilized even when they are going through periods of doubt and lack of inspiration. These peer groups are also circles to reassure themselves: they capitalize on experiences that work. Reassurance is of first importance because of their alternative choices in relation to the major development dynamics that surround them.

Thus, summoning the autonomy of individuals is a central means in order to install a virtuous dynamic of professional development for men and women. The call to autonomy requires and generates confidence in oneself and in others as well as enthusiasm. There is a gradual strengthening of autonomy based on several characteristics of individuals and peer groups: trust, reflexivity, cooperation, reassurance, sharing, curiosity ... How to support the implementation of these characteristics in groups of farmers facing difficulties?

The training and development communities working according to the principles of self-sufficiency and autonomy support farmers according to a posture: accompaniment involves the establishment of an attitude of questioning and reflexivity in the accompanied and the accompanist. This reflexive posture aims to bring out the daily life questions and concerns of the farmer and more generally his questions and concerns in his farm and in his life. This posture also aims to make him aware and to formulate his knowledge, know-how and experiences. These elicitations take place face-to-face with the accompanist or through questioning and exchanges between peers. The accompanist empowers the accompanied person on the orientation of the exchanges; the accompanist also questions the gray areas preserving the intimate by respecting the accompanied wishes and needs. The developmental orientation of the farmer emerges via these different interactions which open up the field of "thinkable" or "possible". The support of farmers initiating a transition to the self-sufficiency and autonomy most often starts with a questioning on the ways of doing of the farmer: the economy of means is at the heart. Independent thinking is not the subject of support work: it is suggested via the support methods and via participation in the life of the peer group. The farmer discovers autonomy through questioning, implying critical judgment, but also through professional standards and the values it sets in motion. These methods work most often, but a minority of farmers fail to achieve a professional transition. Coquil *et al.* (submitted) report on the experiences of farmers engaged in self-sufficient and autonomous dynamics and who have not succeeded to a stable professional transition: while working according to more self-sufficient agricultural practices, these farmers returned, a few years later, to agricultural practices mobilizing inputs. These farmers have largely failed, during their journey, to work in autonomous ways: their ways of thinking, learning and deciding have remained anchored in an expectation of expertise coming from outside, in a productivist agriculture attracted by technological and heteronomous progress. Some of these farmers have failed to build sufficient trust with their peer group to make it a resource, a circle of investment and professional reinsurance.

Conclusion: Can we support the emancipation of autonomy among farmers facing difficulties?

Stinging on support methods and postures to accompany the emancipation of autonomous thinking might be sources of misunderstanding and exclusion even for farmers who are volunteers for change. When working with farmers facing difficulties, accompanying the emancipation of autonomy is of first importance. Farmers facing difficulties do not necessarily question the economy of means, which cannot therefore be a gateway to gain autonomy; they have lost confidence in themselves and in others, making it difficult to talk to a peer group. Supporting the emancipation of autonomy deserves to occupy a central place and be a gateway in order to break the vicious circle in which farmers facing difficulties are installed. The 3 currents of thought of autonomy provide us possible actions to question, to test, in order to mobilize autonomy as a means:

- placing the intimate at the heart of the support in order to define, in an evolutionary way, the space of trust that is emerging in the interactions between accompanied and accompanist but also between farmers supported in a group of peers. Thus, the intimate can be defined, explained, thought during the accompaniment.
- debating the origin of resources in order to discuss and reflect on the relevance, usefulness, level of mastery of the external objects used daily in farmers' work: how to do without or with less ... (fertilizers, pesticides)? what internal resources do I have at my disposal (natural resources, know-how, experiences, sensations, etc.)? This questioning stemming from Illich's thought is very important in the context of working with farmers facing difficulties: questioning situations as they exist aims to identify possible denials, difficulties and cognitive conflicts (Astolfi *et al.*, 2008). Elicitation, mobilizing interview methods stemming from psychoanalysis, seems essential in order to be able to open up new fields of the possible and the thinkable for the accompanied farmer.
- legitimize participation in the orientation of the peer group and then take responsibility for this orientation: what do I want to do with this group? what are my desires? what are my needs? how to make sure that nobody wastes their time by participating in this group?

Thus, autonomy as a means leads us to think of an accompaniment working on confidence, critical judgment and the power to act individually and collectively in a synchronous manner in the hope of initiating a virtuous dynamic among farmers facing difficulties.

The challenges are huge for farmers but also for the French research, development and training system: support for the development of autonomous thinking is little worked today because it requires a real epistemological break in order to get out of expert advice. Expert advice is rooted in an epistemology of science based on the Chicago World's Fair "*Science discovers, industry applies and Man submits*". The legacy is heavy and difficult to move. Today in France, autonomy is essentially worked by alternative associations built on the principles of popular education, stated by C Maurel (2010) in these words: "*all the educational and cultural practices that work for social and political transformation, work for the emancipation of individuals and the people, and increase their democratic power to act*".

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