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Doing Social Science in Agroecological Transition. The setting of a collaborative observatory of social dynamics in innovative rural projects

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The XXVII European Society for Rural Sociology Congress

Second thematic line: 'Knowledges in processes of rural change'

13. Shaping methods, shaping voices and the engagement of discourses in an age of uneven rural change

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Abstract:

The objective of this communication is to present an on-going social research project, which aims at setting a collaborative observatory of social dynamics in innovative rural projects placed under the umbrella of the agroecological turn in France. The French Ministry of agriculture has launched a large national Agroecological Plan in 2013 to foster sustainable transitions in agriculture and rural agri-food systems. A display of various public action instruments have been mobilized to enhance this Plan, among them an innovative call for tenders entitled "Collective mobilisation for Agroecology" has been opened to support more directly local initiative and innovative farmers groups without using the incumbent roads of the Agricultural Knowledge System to reach farmers' groups. In this context, 109 collectives of farmers and intermediaries - among 469 initial candidates - have been selected, committed and financed to realise breakthrough initiatives and projects.

A group of 12 social researchers have proposed a research project to accompany and assess the social dynamic at work in 20 of these groups. This project relies on three articulated tasks: (1) a long term collaborative study and follow-up of these 20 projects based on interviews, participant observations and action-research methods, (2) a global appraisal of submitted projects based on advanced documentary methods to depict and discuss the landscape of agroecological initiatives at the national level; (3) a reflexive open seminar with practitioners involved in projects to discuss findings, purposes and issues of the subpolitics of the agroecological turn.

The originality of this project is to cross various methodological streams towards the establishment of a more permanent social observatory that would promote inclusiveness and more direct discussions between researchers and actors with the view to use social science outcomes. It is also triggering (stimulating) methodological difficulties since the coordination of case studies and the type of

combinatory ethnography at work request to address both practical and theoretical issues at the level of the research group. A common methodological framework has been established and a shared format of reporting on each case study enables comparisons of groups' dynamics and accounts for the diversity and the communalities of transition at play, as they are matters of facts and of concerns for actors of those projects.

After two years of existence of this project, this communication proposes to reflect on the methodological design in use and on the problems and performativity of social enquiry (1), and to open a discussion about the ethical and epistemological issues that are at stake when a collective social enquiry is bounded with a public action dispositive that has its own trajectory and political agenda (2).