DRÔME VALLEY  FRANCE

Making the radical mainstream and the mainstream radical to build Europe’s first organic region.
The Drôme Valley is a rural area of 2,200 km² in the Rhône-Alpes region in the South-East of France. Hemmed in by the Drôme river’s watershed and surrounding mountains, it is populated by 54,000 inhabitants and comprises 102 small towns and villages. The agricultural landscape is highly diverse due to differences in natural growing conditions, with cereals, poultry, fruit, and seed production in the lower valley, extensive livestock rearing in the mountains, and wine, cereals, and fruit production on the hillsides.

Organic production in the Valley emerged as early as the 1970s, driven by peer-to-peer knowledge sharing networks, alternative extension agents promoting organic inputs, and the arrival of migrants from urban areas seeking to reconnect with the land and pursue organic practices. In the early 1990s, a network of cooperatives in the upper valley (supplying cereals, aromatic and medicinal plants, and wine) established a program to develop organic supply chains with a view to accessing higher-value markets (Duf-faud-Prevost, 2015).

Changing production practices initially proved challenging. In the lower valley, many continued to question the economic viability of organic agriculture; low availability of organic inputs, lacking extension services, and limited supply chain opportunities for organic products also proved major obstacles. It was not until new modes of inter-sectoral collaboration were introduced that alternative practices and new supply chain infrastructures truly began to emerge. In the 2000s, the value-creating potential of organic was brought to the attention of local institutions, with inter-municipal coordination helping to create the conditions for transition. This culminated in the establishment of an ambitious sustainable development project for the whole valley in 2009: the ‘Biovallée project’ (see Box 3).

While the plan’s initial goals are yet to be met, some 40% of farmers in the Drôme now use organic practices, the highest share of any French département; country-wide, around 8% of farmers are certified organic (Agence Bio, 2018). Major challenges have been encountered along the way. Initial plans to build large-scale processing facilities to support public procurement of organic products had to be shelved as major players pulled out. This marked a turning point in the project, with local authorities turning to smaller-scale, more ‘radical’ actors and initiatives to help bring the plan to fruition.

The Drôme Valley’s transition provides insights into how norms can be shifted over time. Ongoing interaction between mainstream and alternative actors has allowed for rapid upscaling, access to resources, and legitimation of the transition process. The transition has also been advanced through various forms of institutionalization.

### CHANGES IN PRODUCTION PRACTICES

In the mountainous areas of the upper Drôme Valley, the incentives to convert to organic agriculture were strong as yields were relatively low due to poor quality soil and unfavourable climate conditions.

However, further barriers to organic conversion remained. Farmers lacked access to organic fertilizer. In addition, organic certification procedures initially required whole-of-farm organic

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48. The département is an administrative division between the region and the commune.
production; farmers with mixed holdings – producing medicinal herbs, grains, and wine – thus faced the challenge of needing to convert multiple systems to organic, despite only having market outlets for organic medicinal herbs.

In this context, new supply chain infrastructures and new modes of inter-sectoral collaboration were crucial levers of change. Further inputs and services were required to support the widespread organic conversion that would allow the four organic cooperatives of the upper valley – for medicinal herbs, grains, supplies, and wine – to defray their investment costs. Local cooperatives moved to establish composting plants. Furthermore, the wine and grain cooperatives decided to develop procedures and facilities for the separate handling and marketing of organic wine and grains. They joined forces to establish the Committee for the Agricultural Development of the Diois, whose EU-funded Inter-cooperative Program for the Development of Organic Agriculture (PIDA Bio) provided a forum for experimentation, marketing, advice, information, and training.

**BOX 3 – THE BIOVALLÉE PROJECT**

The Biovallée initiative aims to establish the Drôme valley as a regional leader in the management and valuation of natural resources. Its objectives are as follows:

- Develop high-level training opportunities in the field of sustainable development
- Reduce the territory’s energy consumption by 20% in 2020 and by more than 50% by 2040
- Convert 50% of farmers and agricultural surface area to organic agriculture by 2020
- Supply 80% of the procurement of institutional catering using organic or regional products
- Supply 25% of energy consumption through locally-generated renewable energy by 2020, and 100% by 2040
- Change urban planning guidelines such that after 2020 no more agricultural land will be diverted to urbanisation
- Halve the amount of waste brought to waste treatment plans by 2020
- Develop education and research linked to sustainable development (10 partnerships in 2012, aim of 25 partnerships in 2020)
- Create 2,500 jobs in the eco-sectors between 2010 and 2020

Today, the Association of Biovallée Actors (Association des Acteurs de Biovallée®) has 160 members who have committed to contributing to reaching the Biovallée objectives. According to the Biovallée charter, the use of the Biovallée branding is restricted to those members that achieve a sufficient amount of points counting towards the objective. The Association also includes several working groups, such as a working group on an Investment Plan for the Future, allowing local participants to further align their actions.
With the support of PIDA Bio, the grain cooperative was able to add additional silos for separately storing organic deliveries. The wine cooperative put in place a separate organic packaging line; and the supply cooperative built an additional storage room to accommodate the organic inputs it would subsequently be offering to producers.

Organic production emerged more slowly in the lower valley, as opportunities grew for product differentiation and value addition (Stotten et al., 2017). As local councils became interested in the possibility of local development via organic agro-industries, they proposed a cross-valley collaboration to harness the respective strengths of the upper and lower valley. In the upper valley, 15% of the population were farmers, (of which 25% were already engaged in organic production) compared to only 2.5% of the population in the lower valley. Yet the lower valley benefitted from better connections to communication and transport links and had a denser network of SMEs to build around.

The Biovallée project started to take shape in the mid-2000s with the downstream municipalities taking the financial and political lead. In this context, the project was initially focused on developing industrial processing and marketing opportunities for organic products. This led to the development of a vegetable processing factory and large-scale food hub to facilitate public procurement of organic goods. Dissemination of organic conversion practices was mainly supported by the Drôme Chamber of Agriculture, which emphasized short-term yield optimization over a more holistic understanding of organic. However, ongoing interactions between local authorities and grassroots innovators helped to spread an understanding of organic conversion that ultimately went beyond production practices.

**CHANGES IN KNOWLEDGE GENERATION AND DISSEMINATION**

The rise of organic farming in Drôme in the 1970s came in a context heavily dominated by the agricultural modernization paradigm. Farmers were trained in conventional agricultural schools and would be frequently visited by input suppliers. However, this more conventional approach jarred with the values a number of local
farmers seeking alternatives, in particular to reduce their reliance on external inputs.

Farmers were introduced to alternatives in three ways. Firstly, an independent organic input provider (the company Lemaire-Boucher) sent its own salespeople into the field, acting as de facto extension agents advising farmers on the best practices to pursue (in line with their company’s own commercial interests). Secondly, in the 1970s and 1990s, two waves of newcomers arrived in the valley seeking to ‘get back in touch with nature’ and pursue a more balanced lifestyle (Sencébé, 2001). Many were eager to (re)create a social network and joined existing community groups – cooperatives, trade unions, agricultural knowledge exchange groups, and municipal councils. Some of them brought in-depth knowledge on organic markets and became instrumental in establishing the first organic marketing opportunities for the local medicinal herb cooperative.

Thirdly, agricultural knowledge exchange groups (Centre d’études techniques agricoles or CETAs) provided an important space for interaction between organic and conventional farmers. Such groups were traditionally established by farmers in order to pool the costs of technical assistance and gain access to a greater variety of information. In the upper valley, some organic farmers also joined local cooperatives’ boards. Through these channels, the logic of organic agriculture was progressively shared, legitimized, and mainstreamed. Rather than remain a niche, organic production became an integrated part of the local agricultural landscape, and was eventually institutionalized through the PIDA Bio program and Biovallée project.

Meanwhile, the Chamber of Agriculture developed organic extension services of its own, recruiting its first organic advisor in the 1990s, and hiring additional advisors as the number of organic farmers increased. In 2001, a regional network of extension agents specialized in organic production was created. The Chamber assumed a leading role in its coordination due to its high number of organic advisors – which was and still is the highest in France. Since 2007, the Chamber of Agriculture has organized a biennial trade fair to showcase the latest organic innovations – Tech&Bio – attracting thousands of participants and media attention from across France.

The Drôme is now also host to a number of formal and informal agricultural and sustainable development training centres for both adults and children. These include the Centre de Formation Professionnelle et de Promotion Agricoles de Die (CFPPA), the Amanins Agroecological Centre, and l’Université de l’Avenir. The CFPPA de Die became the first institution of its type fully committed to organic agriculture training.49

CHANGES IN SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC RELATIONS

The Drôme transition is rooted in decades of efforts by local actors not only to embed new production practices, but also to build new social relationships and to introduce new ideas into pre-existing rural organizations and social groups. From the 1990s onwards, organic farmers increasingly took on leadership roles, winning seats on their administrative councils. Inversely, a number of the upstream valley’s cereal and wine coop-

49. CFPPAs in France operate as traditional educational institutions under the Ministry of Agriculture, and typically offer training in conventional agriculture.
In the Drôme Valley, France, a new model of agriculture is emerging. Board members converted to organic agriculture. Interaction between organic and conventional farmers was also promoted in key fora for sharing knowledge (see above).

Over time, these developments helped cement a new and expanded understanding of organic farming. They also encouraged a shift in the perception of organic farmers from “backward”, “lazy” or “crazy” individuals to forward-looking innovators. As one advisor described, “in many departments in France, the image of the wacky organic farmer persists, where organic farmers have fields full of weeds and diseases, no yields, where it doesn’t work. In the Drôme, it’s the complete opposite. For conventional farmers, organic is the most technically advanced, the best approach [...] Here, you frequently hear conventional farmers say ‘I am not good enough to engage in organic production’. [...] But they still increasingly use at least some organic practices. They understand that it works, that it’s got its use” (Bui, 2015, p. 343).

Steps towards local food purchasing by businesses and public authorities also represented important socio-economic shifts, and helped to root the transition process in an ambitious and wide-reaching approach to sustainability.

While most organic produce from the Drôme is sold outside the region, new ways of connecting to local consumers also emerged through social enterprises such as La Carline. Originally a small organic buying group made up of a handful of families in the Drôme Valley, La Carline grew from 30 to 600 participating families in 2008 and had an annual turnover of €1.2 million in 2014. As the group expanded, it broadened its scope beyond the purchasing of organic produce to include local sourcing (30% in 2010) and paid greater attention to social equity and fair employment practices. La Carline operates using a tri-partite governance structure split equally between producers, consumers, and employees, allowing the business’s values to be maintained over time. As the most progressive demand-driven initiative
3.5 DRÔME VALLEY, FRANCE

FIGURE 13 - BUILDING BRIDGES BETWEEN DIFFERENT CHANGE ACTORS IN THE DRÔME
(Adapted from Bui, 2015)

Agricultural modernization

Early investments in organic agriculture

Shift from short- to long-term thinking
Changes in production practices

Paradigm shift in favour of organic agriculture
Changes in production & marketing
Formal training in organic practices
Linking producers to consumers
Development of social economy
Formal & informal training in agroecological practices
Co-construction of Biovallée initiative

Supply chain integration
Relocalization of food supply
Changes in local governance

Proponents of conventional agriculture
Proponents of organic agriculture
Proponents of agroecology

in the region, La Carline has acquired legitimacy as the face of organic consumers in the area. As a result, it has been integrated into local governance structures, and now has a seat on the Agricultural Commission of the Diois communities.

Public procurement shifts have also helped to reinforce the transition and forge new relationships. In order to meet the Biovallée’s goal of 80% local/organic sourcing of food for school canteens by 2015, the project originally intended to establish large-scale sourcing and procurement operations. In 2010, the lower valley communities invested in a warehouse and collaborated with a large-scale distributor of organic products, the Société Ardéchoise Euronat, to set up a distribution platform. However, in 2012, Euronat pulled out of the project and closed down operations, citing low margins and a lack of profitability.

Alternative sourcing options also faced challenges. A study undertaken by a local community organization demonstrated that difficulties in consolidating sufficient volume from dispersed small-scale producers across the area was the greatest barrier to local sustainable sourcing for cafeterias. In response, a consumer association in the Montélimar district that had undertaken a similar study stepped in to create the missing logistical tools, offering its services to the Biovallée project. The Agricourt association was established, governed by consumers and producers of the Drôme region, with local restaurant owners rapidly joining the initiative (Bui et al., 2016).

Once these actors were brought into the process, their way of thinking about local food systems significantly influenced institutional perspectives of what was desirable and possible, and a symbiotic relationship emerged. The local communautés de communes50 (‘communities of municipalities’) learned that actors outside the mainstream were the ones best placed to provide the services they required, precisely because they had invented new forms of cooperation and market organization. Furthermore, these alternative actors perceived their activities as a public service and thus endeavoured to reach out to even smaller institutions, such as private day-care centres, which had otherwise struggled to source their food sustainably.

CHANGES IN INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

Institutional support has played a crucial role in promoting transition in the Drôme Valley. Public policies first mentioned organic agriculture in the late 1980s in the context of the European Program for the Development of Rural Zones (PDZR in French). In a context of over-production (e.g. the European Community’s ‘butter mountains and milk lakes’) and pressures to remain competitive as the EU expanded southward, the PDZR identified organic conversion and the diversification of holdings as potential solutions for marginalized areas. This allowed local political actors to come into contact with organic agriculture and provided a foothold for future initiatives, even as public policies remained largely focused on intensification.

In France, the communities of municipalities51 have traditionally been in charge of the local

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50. The ‘communities of municipalities’ are a French administrative division federating a number of geographically-connected municipalities.

51. The two main communities of municipalities in the Drôme Valley, in the Diois (upper valley, comprising 52 municipalities and around 10,000 inhabitants) and the Val de Drôme (lower valley, comprising 36 municipalities and around 30,000 inhabitants) were established in the 1970s.
3.5 DRÔME VALLEY, FRANCE

FIGURE 14 - CONVERGING ON NEW WAYS OF THINKING IN THE DRÔME
(Adapted from Bui, 2015)

The implementation of state-defined rural development programs. In the municipalities of the upper valley, the establishment of the cooperative-led PIDA Bio program sparked the interest of local political actors. These municipalities had been searching for a viable territorial development pathway and a local ‘brand image’, rooted in high-quality production, territorial specificity, and respect for the environment.

The support of local authorities allowed cooperatives to access funding opportunities at the regional (e.g. from the Drôme General Council) and EU levels to develop their business and marketing strategies. The development of the upper valley’s medicinal herb value chain enabled new local businesses to emerge, constituting the only job-creating sector at the time (Stotten et al., 2017). These types of initiatives provided a focal point for local authorities to develop policies based on locally-defined issues and objectives common to both parts of the valley for the first time in many years.

The municipalities of the lower valley originally focused on agricultural intensification rather than actively supporting alternatives. They viewed organic agriculture as a strategy of potential interest for producers in more marginal areas. As a result, only piecemeal support was provided to farmers wishing to convert to organic production. This reluctance persisted even after the launch of the Biovallée project (Stotten et al., 2017). However, when the main-
stream food business actors dropped out, they had little choice but to engage with smaller-scale, more radical actors from the organic production and consumption sectors in order to meet the goals of the project. As described above, this change in dynamics altered the nature of the project and helped to shift institutional perspectives over time.

The Chamber of Agriculture, a key institutional actor in French food and farming systems, also evolved its thinking through engagement with the Drôme project. As more farmers converted to organic agriculture – and particularly with the rise of the PiDa-Bio – the Chamber became keenly aware of the competition it faced, and recognized that organic farming was attracting regional and EU funding flows. The Chamber eventually hired organic extension agents and more recently embraced agroecological projects and alternative value chains (e.g. by organizing the ‘Tech&Bio’ trade fair).

Finally, in 2012, the French government launched a national strategy in favour of agroecology that could end up providing unprecedented institutional support for transitions such as has been undertaken in the Drôme Valley. Through the 2014 Law on the future of agriculture, food and forestry, France aims to become a global leader in agroecology, and aims to support the majority of French farms to transition to agroecology by 2025.52 While this strategy has yet to translate into concerted action, the Drôme transition benefitted and may continue to benefit from the support of institutions at various levels.

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52. Reform objectives include: 1) adapting programs and educational frameworks for farmers to include agroecology-related knowledge; 2) mobilising research as well as research & development (R&D) on agroecological production systems, and encouraging the dissemination of innovations in the field; 3) creating an agroecological self-assessment tool (www.diagagroeco.org) to encourage farmers to reflect on their practices and possible changes to their system; 4) reviewing and adjusting public support and investment subsidies such that they incentivise commitment to agroecology and transitions to agroecological systems; 5) implementing regular monitoring and implementation activities (Ministère de l’Agriculture, n.d.).

This case study is based on the 2015 PhD thesis of Sibylle Bui entitled “Pour une approche territoriale des transitions écologiques: Analyse de la transition vers l’agroécologie dans la Bio-vallée” (Bui, 2015). Unless otherwise noted, all elements are drawn from her text.