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Taking work into account in the production of benchmarks in organic livestock farming

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Abstract: In a context very favorable to organic farming, the availability of benchmarks to accompany increasing conversions is necessary. Within the framework of the Bioref project, farmer work has been taken into account in the production of these benchmarks, and this study reports the main results in five organic ruminant production systems: beef cattle, dairy cattle, meat sheep, dairy sheep and goats. Surveys were carried out in 32 farms using the Work assessment method supplemented by additional information on free time and the experience of work by farmers. The work situations observed in our sample are very diverse, influenced by the production sectors but also by strategies that are very common in these systems, such as the diversification (multiple productions) and valorization of the production (processing and/or direct sales). Farmers' organizational choices reflect a search for consistency with what they expect from their profession. The indicator provided by the Work Assessment Method to assess the liveability of the work situation (the room for maneuver in time), does not reflect the farmers' experience of their workload. This experience seems to be more affected by the lack of weekends or the absence of breaks due to processing and direct sales marketing activities. We explain the specificities of organic livestock work from the point of view of the farmers surveyed. These results confirm that taking work into account contribute to improve the relevance of benchmarks in organic livestock farming.

Keywords: work organization, organic farming, livestock farms, benchmarks

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Introduction

In a context very favorable to organic farming, the number of conversions of ruminant farms is constantly increasing. To accompany these conversions, there is a strong demand for benchmarks, as these systems are still poorly documented. The BioRéférences project is therefore investing in the production of benchmarks for organic ruminant farms in the Massif Central (France), seeking to improve this production by taking into account the consistency of farms. Work as a resource to be optimized, as an organization that articulates the tasks to be carried out with workers over time, and as an activity that builds the professional and personal identity of farmers (Dedieu and Servièrre, 2012), is an essential theme for understanding the coherence and liveability of these systems. This study thus focuses on the consideration of work in the production of benchmarks in five organic ruminant production systems: beef cattle, dairy cattle, meat sheep, dairy sheep and goats.

Method

Surveys on work were carried out in 32 farms (Table 1) out of the 70 farms monitored in the Bioréférences project, chosen to cover the diversity of situations and spread throughout the Massif Central in France. The survey method was based on the Work Assessment Method, which quantifies the work related to the management of land and herds (Dedieu *et al.*, 2000), with additional information on free time and the experience of work by farmers (their perception of their free time or workload *e.g.*).

The analysis of this data made it possible to describe the main characteristics of the work organization on livestock farms, by cross-referencing qualitative and quantitative data.

| | Dairy cattle | Beef cattle | Dairy goat | Dairy sheep | Meat sheep | All |
|---|--------------|-------------|------------|-------------|------------|-----|
| Number of farms | 5 | 7 | 6 | 7 | 7 | 32 |
| UAA Utilized Agricultural Area (ha) | 83 | 123 | 48 | 119 | 95 | 96 |
| LU Livestock Unit | 72 | 114 | 31 | 98 | 65 | 78 |
| pBG Number of person in the Basic Group | 1,8 | 1,9 | 1,5 | 2,4 | 1,1 | 1,8 |
| % diversified farms | 20 | 57 | 67 | 43 | 29 | 44 |
| % farms valorizing their production | 20 | 100 | 67 | 0 | 71 | 53 |

Table 1. Sample description.

Results

A wide variety of work situations

The work situations observed in our sample are very diverse. The workforce managing the farm (the basic group BG) varies from 1 to 5 people, uses volunteers in half of the cases (100% goats) and employees in 44% of the farms. Routine work (RW) varies from 2 hours to 8.5 hours per day and per person in the basic group. Its distribution over the year is strongly marked by the animal production sector (e.g. regular in dairy cattle, U-shaped with a hollow in winter in beef cattle) but also depends on choices linked to the valorization of production or its diversification. These two frequent strategies (valorization and diversification) in organic farming (Ollivier and Guyomard, 2013) impact the forms of work organization, influencing the workload (for goat farms, 40% of the RW corresponds to the processing and sale of products), its distribution over the year and between the different workers. The diversity of situations is also marked by "non-work" (weekends and holidays): in some cases, work is organized around taking time off (more than 3 weeks).

Consistency between the vision of the profession and the choice of organization

Farmers' organizational choices reflect a search for consistency with what they expect from their profession (Dufour and Dedieu, 2010). Thus, farmers who call themselves "agricultural producers rooted in a territory" choose to valorize their production and/or diversify their activities. Those who favour decision-making independence have a low level of delegation, a low replacement capacity and take little time off work. Those who want to reconcile their professional and private lives organize themselves to have some free time, often with a short period of intense work to free up the rest of the year. Farmers who attach importance to work with family or partners organize themselves as a priority in order to make their system sustainable by focusing on the renewal of the collective and the transferability of their farm.

No link between assessment of room for maneuver in time and workload experience

The farmers say they find their work enjoyable, although 47% find their workload too high. The Work Assessment Method evaluates the room for manoeuvre in time, which corresponds to the time remaining to the farmer once the routine and seasonal work has been carried out. This indicator, which seeks to objectify the liveability of the work situation, is little related to how farmers' experience their workload. On the other hand, the presence of long periods with high routine work, the lack of weekends or the absence of breaks, often associated with processing and direct sales marketing activities, seem to be



determining factors in the negative experience of work. This argues for the use of indicators that take into account the temporal distribution of work and its relationship with free time.

The specificities of working in organic farming according to farmers

Farmers in our sample say that working in organic farming requires more observation and reflection; it is more technical. It requires the development of anticipation and adaptation skills. Farmers feel in line with their values (link with nature and respect for health), less dependent on the economic context, and less stressed. They say they "have taken their system back in hand". Exchanges between organic farmers are frequent and important. They feel comfortable in their profession and in line with society's expectations;

Conclusion

Organic farms are often diversified and invested in the valorisation of their production, which strongly marks the organization of work and emphasizes the importance of its temporal distribution. The diversity of work situations encountered and the size of the sample make it difficult to use the data to produce benchmarks. However, this diversity clearly illustrates how taking work into account makes explicit the coherence between the choice of combination of production, technical management, valorization methods of their production and the meaning of the farmers' profession.

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