

EN BREF!

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The Unesco Chair in World Food Systems breaks down the barriers of knowledge on food. The **En Bref!** collection presents the main conclusions drawn from our conferences, publications, and action research projects.

The Montpellier Food Fund: an action research project on food democracy

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KEY FIGURES

61

members of the citizen
committee

385

experimenters who have
contributed at least once

€55

average monthly
contribution

330,000

MonA spent

82%

of MonA spent on organic
products and 20% on fresh
fruit and vegetables

54

approved outlets (including
33 direct sellers, 10 artisans
and 11 shops)

At a time when a transition of food and agricultural practices has become necessary, food inequalities are increasing. For financial, geographical, educational or psychosocial reasons, not everyone has adequate access to a healthy, high-quality diet.

This is a major public health issue, at the intersection of social and ecological emergencies. It is also a matter of social relations and equality, in the face of growing isolation and social divisions. For consumers and producers alike, throughout the food chain, the agro-industrial system is failing to deliver on its promise to 'feed the world' and is offering increasingly processed food, the production methods of which are depleting natural resources and having damaging effects on health. Control of this system by a handful of players with considerable economic weight and political influence is more-over raising questions on its democratic dimension, along with issues of food citizenship.

The prospect of making food a matter of democracy, and of transforming its social and political organisation with a view to combating food inequalities and promoting the sustainability of food systems, is at the heart of a collective experiment currently underway in Montpellier (a city of 500,000 inhabitants): the Caisse alimentaire commune¹ (hereinafter referred to as 'the Caisse'). This is a multi-stakeholder regional initiative underpinned by the principle of redistribution and the collective management of a budget. The main decision-making organ is a citizen food committee, which affords a space for popular education, citizenship and empowerment.

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1. A short documentary explaining the history and functioning of the Fund can be accessed here: <https://vimeo.com/870417159>

How can we promote access to sustainable food for all? How can we make food a subject of democracy and encourage citizens to take ownership of the challenges facing our food systems? What mechanisms can be used at the regional level to make these systems more sustainable? These are some of the questions guiding the experiment, which will run until 2029.

An experiment at the interface of multiple issues

Food insecurity on the increase

Food insecurity now affects widely diverse populations and is characterised by difficulties in accessing food, in terms of both quantity and quality. A CREDOC study² showed that, in 2022, 16% of French people reported being unable to feed themselves adequately. The Montpellier metropolitan area, which has one of the highest poverty rates in mainland France (19.3% in 2019, compared to 14.1% nationally), is heavily affected by this issue, which has been exacerbated by recent crises, notably Covid-19 and inflation. As a result, every year between 8,000 and 10,000 people in this area seek food aid.³

A food aid system at an impasse

The main response to food insecurity to date has been food aid: a charitable intervention based mainly on a vast tax exemption system that benefits large retailers and encourages overproduction. Initially intended for emergency situations, this system has become a structural response. However, it is now being challenged in terms of the quality and diversity of the food distributed and the food violence suffered by those who turn to it to feed themselves. It contributes to reinforcing inequalities in access to fresh, minimally processed, high-quality products (such as fruit, vegetables and organic products), which are nevertheless central to diets that promote transition.

A political horizon: food democracy and food security

To overcome the limitations of the current aid system and promote access to healthy and sustainable food for all, new forms of food solidarity have emerged. These collective actions are intended to be more territorial and systemic, and are part of a 'food democracy movement'. This concept was defined in France by Dominique Paturel and Patrice Ndiaye as *'citizens' demand to regain power over how they access food by reconnecting it with agriculture and, more broadly, the economic, social and environmental conditions of its production'*.⁴ In France, food democracy has found its most successful political concretisation in the Food Social Security project. This consists of reflection and experimentation led by civil society, aimed at jointly ensuring the right to food, farmers' rights, and environmental protection.

It was with this inspiration and political horizon in mind that the experiment with a food fund, the Caisse alimentaire commune, was set up in Montpellier. The initiative has several objectives:

- to reduce social inequalities in access to food, and to combat food insecurity;
- to give residents access to healthy, high-quality products and encourage food-related practices that are good for consumers' health and for the environment;
- to contribute to the development of sustainable supply chains, supporting small-scale farming and good working conditions;
- to make food a matter of democracy.

Three years of unique institutional and civic history

The dynamic of territorial cooperation inspired by Territoire à VivreS

The experiment was born out of the Territoire à VivreS programme, implemented in 2021-2022 by five associative networks across four regions (Montpellier, Toulouse, Lyon and Marseille). In Montpellier,⁵ a collective of 25 actors initiated a strong dynamic of territorial cooperation. It brought together non-profit associations working on food solidarity, small-scale farming, and popular education, as well as a cooperative supermarket, research organisations, the local currency (La Graine), and local councillors and technicians. The structuring of the Caisse was informed by existing 'alternatives' in the region (solidarity-based food hubs, citizen purchasing groups, etc.), by a local micro-experiment with solidarity vouchers, by previous action research on food democracy, and by the concept of food social security.

From citizen mobilisation to the creation of a citizen committee

To foster a regional dynamic of food democracy, citizens were mobilised in various neighbourhoods around food-related collective actions. After receiving training in campaigning techniques, the members of the cooperative collective created as part of Territoires à VivreS planned a six-month series of specific actions: cooking workshops, film screenings, citizen picnics, collective readings of food landscapes, and so on. In October 2022, the citizen committee, then composed of 47 residents of the Montpellier metropolitan area—half of whom were affected by precarity—met for the first time.

Integrating the experimenters

The citizen committee selected volunteers from a panel representative of the metropolitan population, based on two criteria: age (under 30; 30-59; and 60+) and income level. A random draw was organised for the socio-economic categories (among the 12 identified) in which the number of candidates exceeded the number of places available. In addition to this call for participation, around 100 people were referred to the Caisse by members of the cooperation collective and social action stakeholders. This approach made it possible to reach people who

2. <https://www.credoc.fr/publications/la-debrouille-des-personnes-qui-ne-mangent-pas-toujours-a-leur-faim>

3. États généraux de la solidarité (General Assembly on Solidarity), City of Montpellier, 2021.

4. Paturel, D., Ndiaye P. (2020), *Le droit à l'alimentation durable en démocratie*, Champ social Éditions.

5. More information at: <https://tav-montpellier.xyz>



were further removed from sustainable food networks or in particularly difficult situations. Through these two recruitment channels and the initial mobilisation of the first 47 members of the citizens' committee, 385 people now contribute to the Caisse.

The Caisse in practice

A budget with multiple contributions

In practical terms, each participant contributes monthly to the Caisse according to their means (from €1 to €150 or more), and everyone receives the same monthly sum of 100 MonA (= €100) to spend in food shops pre-selected by the citizen committee according to quality criteria. Contributions are one of three sources of funding for the Caisse, alongside public funds (City of Montpellier, Montpellier Méditerranée Métropole, Hérault Département, Occitanie Region) and private funds (Daniel & Nina Carasso Foundation, Fondation de France).

Solidarity food currency

The MonA, a digital food currency used in the experiment, was developed in partnership with La Graine, a local, citizen-led complementary currency in the Hérault Département. The MonA can be used to purchase food in participating shops. The digital contribution and payment system for residents, and the collection system for producers and retailers, was designed to be as user-friendly as possible.

Approval process and distribution network

Defining the approval process was one of the citizen committee's main tasks. During various collective working sessions, visits to outlets and discussions with local producers, a series of criteria and a methodology

gradually emerged. Initially, the outlets approved by the citizen committee were based on the partners of the Caisse project. The committee subsequently approved outlets offering sustainable food, for which it defined the following main criteria:

- minimising the number of intermediaries;
- preference for local origin;
- environmental quality of products;
- low profit margins;
- decent working conditions;
- involvement of producers and/or citizens in governance.

The multi-criteria assessment grid, completed using a questionnaire for potential outlets to assess their eligibility for approval, is the main decision-making tool. The summary sheet then gives all members of the citizen committee access to key information.

Today, the distribution network has 54 approved locations: 33 producers selling directly, 10 artisans, and 11 shops. Their selection has pinpointed areas where there is no satisfactory food supply. Ultimately, the Caisse aims not only to help transform the practices of existing businesses, particularly in terms of supply, but also to support citizen initiatives for the creation of new points of sale co-managed by citizens and/or producers. From a broader perspective, these locations can also serve as meeting places where social ties are fostered through food.

Multi-stakeholder governance

Steering bodies

The Caisse is structured around several bodies that engage in dialogue on steering and decision-making on the project's main goals.

- The cooperative collective is responsible for the experimental project. It designed and approved the action plan and its governance model.
- The citizen food committee is the Caisse's decision-making body. It has developed the guide to self-determination of contributions and oversees the process of approving points of sale.
- The scientific council is the body responsible for monitoring and evaluating the experiment. It has established the survey methodology and meets to analyse the results collectively.
- The institutional committee is the forum in which public institutions, whether they finance the Caisse or not, reflect on the evolution of food policies.

The central role of the citizen committee

The citizen food committee is the Caisse's governing body. After expansion in the autumn of 2023, it currently has a membership of 61, the majority of whom are people affected by difficulties in accessing quality food. Its missions are to define the Caisse's operating methods and its access and approval procedures for outlets, and to ensure its democratic management. In addition, it works with local producers and food actors to co-develop and participate in a programme of educational activities on sustainable food issues for experimenters.

The committee is designed as a space for popular education, bringing together the acquisition and discussion of both objective data, notably through the

involvement of qualified individuals, and subjective data, through the experiences of participants. Monthly working meetings are prepared and facilitated by a group of employees and volunteers from the cooperative collective. Members of the citizen committee have also been involved since January 2023.

The citizen food assembly meets once a year. Attendees include numerous residents, stakeholders and local councillors interested in food system issues and questions of access to food, who discuss their experiences and aspirations as well as the results of the experiment.

Action research hypotheses

Food democracy, a prerequisite for a fair transition

How can a democratic approach to food access issues be developed, with a view to achieving sustainable food security? This is the question driving the action research carried out on the Caisse,⁶ and on the basis of which three hypotheses for change have been formulated.

1. Food democracy is a prerequisite for a fair agri-food transition to bring about changes in terms of access to food, food practices, the food environment and food systems, with a shift towards greater sustainability.

2. Food democracy is fostered by the exercise of food citizenship linked to public policy.

3. The Caisse alimentaire commune, a multi-stakeholder territorial initiative governed by a citizen committee, is a space for food democracy that drives social, public policy and economic change.

Based on these hypotheses, the action research analyses the potential effects of the scheme in various areas: food security; food citizenship; the greening of food practices; the transformation of food landscapes towards greater sustainability and territorial equality; the evolution of public food policies and the fight against precarity; the local economy and the sustainable food economy; the structuring of supply chains and support for the development of sustainable agriculture; and the contribution to the national Food Security project.

Participatory methods

The system thus put in place is at the intersection of evaluation and participatory action research, an approach that aims to produce theories and practices through the cross-fertilisation of knowledge. It is based on the establishment of a multidisciplinary scientific council that develops the research framework and methodology. This includes participant observation of the process, data collection (individual and group interviews, questionnaires) and participatory analysis (research workshops), involving citizens and stakeholders in the experiment.

CONCLUSION

Analysis of the preliminary results of the action research suggests that the experiment will have positive effects, both for the members of the citizen committee and the experimenters, and for the outlets and producers. The former report access to food that is more varied and of a better quality, as well as a sense of 'security' offered by MonA in supplementing their food basket, despite persistent economic constraints. In addition to the impact on food-related practices, the collective commitment and its empowering effect, combined with the exercise of food citizenship, are highlighted. On the retail side, while the impact on turnover appears to be mixed (two outlets account for nearly 55% of MonA purchases), retailers report the satisfaction of being accessible to more people in need.

At the dawn of the second phase of the experiment (2024-2029), an initial scaling-up should enable the integration of around 400 new participants. This will be an opportunity to review the operating procedures and particularly the monthly amount received, the profiles of participants, their conditions of mobilisation, reception and integration, and the role of local authorities. It will also be an opportunity to enhance the democratic dynamic with all participants. In addition, the Caisse aims to strengthen its support for local agricultural and food system stakeholders in order to facilitate their transition towards greater sustainability.

6. Scherer P., (2024), *La caisse alimentaire commune de Montpellier : une recherche-action de démocratie alimentaire. Cadre d'analyse, problématique et hypothèses.*