

An alternative form of strategic development planning for creating sustainable agricultures and conserving good quality farmland in the province of Québec, Canada

Abstract

The aim of this short article is to introduce an alternative approach to conserving good quality farmland while also creating sustainable agricultures. Many jurisdictions have introduced measures to conserve good quality farmland and the agricultural activities it supports through conventional land use planning. However, conventional land use planning can really only support good quality farmland and its farm activities as long as the political actors in charge of the management of such land use planning activities are committed to conserving good quality farmland and the farm activities it supports.¹ Frequently however, in multiple jurisdictions the land use planners and their local (municipal) and regional (e.g. county) municipalities have removed land from agricultural land use zones to be used for subdivision and/or industrial park development. On the other hand, some countries or provinces have introduced legislation to protect good quality farmland, e.g. the Provinces of Québec and British Columbia in Canada, thereby drawing upon a higher level of government. However, while Québec for a long time had a role as a “top down” government, it began to change this position once it recognized the values and abilities of actors on the ground particularly in relation to agricultural development and conservation issues.

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Christopher R. Bryant,^{1,2} Cherine Akkari³
¹Adjunct Professor, Department of Geography, School of Environmental Design and Rural Development, University of Guelph, Canada

²Associate Professor, Department of Geography, University of Montreal, Canada

³Agent for Climate Change, City of Joliette and City of Notre-Dame-des-Prairies, Canada

Correspondence: Christopher Bryant, Adjunct Professor, Department of Geography, University of Montreal and School of Environmental Design and Rural Development, University of Guelph, Canada, Tel 1-226-337-3712, ORCID 0000-001-8625-5861, Email christopher.robin.bryant@gmail.com

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Introduction

At a broad geographic scale, some countries or provinces have introduced legislation to protect good quality farmland, such as the provinces of Québec (1978) and British Columbia (1972) in Canada. This involved for a long time drawing upon higher levels of government—the Provinces in Canada - to improve the capacity of conserving good quality farmland. Towards the end of the 1990s, Québec incorporated into its legislation for conserving good quality farmland the need to conserve appropriate farm activities on this farmland.²⁻⁵ However, while these changes represented a better understanding of what it really takes to conserve good quality farmland, the “on the ground” reality had often been quite different. For instance, as indicated in other references referred to in this article, the upper level of government (the Province) had also been persuaded to remove farmland from the agricultural reserves to allow subdivision development and/or industrial park development, because of relationships between the Province and governments at the local and regional (county) level. Clearly, government has its limits in relation to development processes and protecting good quality farmland and its farm activities. However, in the case of the Province of Québec, the situation began to change towards the end of the 1990’s.⁵ Recently, the MCM (Metropolitan Community of Montréal) stated that since the implementation of the Metropolitan Land Use and Development Plan (PMAD) in 2012, there has been no authorized encroachment on the agricultural area of the territory of the MCM. This is an indication that the reality has been changing. We provide an explanation of this in the next two sections. Furthermore, as we will show, there are some alternative approaches to protecting, managing and developing agricultural activities on good quality farmland. In many respects,

these show that the Province of Québec and its municipalities and counties (most of them at least!) have become examples for other jurisdictions around the world.

A common framework but a highly variable approach to implementation at the county level to take account of the specificities of the different territories

A further success has been that the province of Quebec strongly suggested (‘suggested’ NOT ‘dictated’) to farmers and other actors in the Agricultural Reserves in Québec to produce a PDZA (Plan de Développement de la Zone Agricole—A Development Plan for Agriculture in the Agricultural Reserve). First, this was a very innovative approach which involved the implication of many different actors who have an interest in conserving good farmland and agricultural activities, but also for other reasons, e.g. agricultural development that contributes to maintaining heritage landscapes, and thus also contributes to rural tourism development. Second, this helps mobilize other actors who will also support the conservation of agricultural land and agricultural activities and contribute to the development of sustainable agricultures, which can limit the negative effects of certain forms of agriculture on the environment, including the water quality of rivers and lakes. Thus, these other actors can include actors who represent the watershed organizations in Quebec, especially since productivist agriculture has often been criticized for contributing to the pollution of rivers and other water bodies, actors who represent rural tourism activities and, of course, representatives of the Farmers Union of Québec.

These development plans (the PDZA) for agricultural are, in effect, like strategic development plans for sustainable agricultural development. In the past, strategic development plans for communities were frequently carried out by professional consultants. However, increasingly since the late 1980's many strategic development planning processes in Canada have been managed by teams of citizens and actors who represent different segments of the population, including farmers in the territory under consideration. The PDZA in Québec are therefore not simply plans created by consultants in agricultural territories in Québec but in the best circumstances they are created by farmers, multiple other actors with an interest in conserving good quality farmland and activities, and of course other types of citizens. Bryant has had a long experience of training different actors and citizens in general to not only contribute to the development of strategic development plans but also to mobilize citizens and an extensive range of actors. In the late 1980s, Bryant, while Director of the Economic Development Program at the University of Waterloo, was selected by the Federation of Canadian Municipalities to train teams of citizens from a dozen municipalities across Canada to undertake strategic development planning including mobilizing citizens to participate in the process. Another example that was considered to be very innovative involved the County of Haliburton in Eastern Ontario, Canada, where a whole range of segments of the population were implicated in a process lasting several months; these citizens included retirees, teenagers (who ended up being incredibly innovative in developing projects and even mobilizing the resources necessary for some of their projects), as well as non-residents who had purchased or built homes in this County in many cases to use as properties for their families' vacations, and there were some farmers who were involved too.⁶ Interestingly enough, when the strategic development plan was presented to the County by Bryant, the room was totally filled up with the many actors and most of the citizens who had been involved in the strategic development planning process, who simply wanted to ensure that the plan being presented converged totally with what the different segments of the population had contributed to. The only segment that was not present was the teenagers ... because they were at school! This example in which many different types of citizens were directly involved in the strategic development planning process was quickly appreciated and used as an example of how to do this successfully by the Province of Ontario.

Concluding remarks: a common framework but with heterogeneous implementation processes reflecting the realities of different territories

In relation to the agricultural territories with agricultural land reserves, the development plans in most municipalities and countries where an agricultural development plan was put into place, the emphasis has also increasingly been placed on developing sustainable agricultures. This implies encouraging farmers to farm in ways that minimize any negative effects of agricultural production on the environment, especially in relation to water resources, as well as producing healthy foodstuffs. In an increasingly important number of cases, this has also led to the development of food projects, implicating both farmers and consumers together in preparing and purchasing

healthy foodstuffs. More recently, this also implies integrating the increasing implication of the effects of climate change on agriculture and how agriculture can be encouraged to adapt to the climate change phenomenon, both in developed countries and developing countries.^{7,8} Interestingly enough, in 2008 a workshop was arranged by the Province in which 8 teams from different agricultural reserves were invited to discuss what they had been working on in relation to their PDZA and how the teams were made up. Bryant was invited to attend as one of the Québec researchers with a lot of experience in agricultural development as well as a colleague from the USA for similar reasons. One of the things that occurred was that each team was asked to spend a few minutes telling every one how their 'team' was constructed. The first 7 teams presented therefore the list of actors that had become involved in the PDZA. Then, the person of the 8th team stood up and said that his county's team was not like that; his County had decided that the County councilors had been elected and were paid to do what the multiple actors in the 7 other counties were undertaking! The other teams shook their heads and wondered why on earth this 8th team had done that! The other teams could not believe what they were hearing!

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there was no conflict of interest.

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