

## The creation of the CATL (Nathan Castagne, 2021)

In 2012, informal discussions on a peculiar project blossomed in the food transition associative scene in Liège, Belgium. The project goal was ambitious: ensuring that in a span of 30 years, at least half of the food in the city would be produced locally and sustainably, insuring its own alimentary sovereignty (Bousbaine & Bryant, 2016; Feyereisen & Stassart, 2017, CATL, n.d.). This fanciful challenge was the impulse behind the creation of the *Ceinture Aliment-Terre Liégeoise* (Liège Alimentary Belt, hereafter CATL)<sup>1</sup>, which was officially launched in 2013 (CATL, n.d.).

This structure also emerged from two diagnostics that were shared by the founders. First, there was an agreement that the mainstream global agri-food sector was a failure, both environmentally and socially (Feyereisen & Stassart, 2017). Therefore, it is critical to create alternative sustainable production systems, not parallelly to the mainstream system, but with the aim to replace it. This transition mindset is an underlying component of the CATL (CATL, n.d.). Second, there was enough small-scale project related to alternative food production and distribution in the Liège region, as well as consumers' interest, to ambition something bigger (Feyereisen & Stassart, 2017).

## Recontextualization in the literature

To better understand the specificity of the CATL project, it is essential to understand the Multi-Level Perspective (MLP) framework. In the case of the CATL, this framework is more than an exterior academic interpretation of the structure's dynamic. Indeed, this type of transition theory was essential in the construction of the structure's principles. It was an integral part of the CATL creators' reflection, and it is reflected in the structure's communication and narrative (Feyereisen & Stassart, 2017). Therefore, understanding the MLP framework also help to better understand how the CATL was envisioned.

MLP is a tool of analysis of how transitions occur in a sociotechnical system (Geels & Schot, 2007). Transition is the result of interactions at three levels: the innovation niches at the micro level, the sociotechnical regime at the meso level, and the sociotechnical landscape at the macro level (Geels & Schot, 2007).

Because of its global scale, the sociotechnical regime cannot be directly influenced by regime or niche actors. Instead, it is continuously reshaped by conjunctions of macro-economic and

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<sup>1</sup> The French name features an untranslatable pun between the words 'aliment', 'earth', and 'alimentary'.

macro-political events (Geels & Schot, 2007). It may be better understood as the global sociotechnical paradigm that frames the existence of regimes and niches.

The sociotechnical regime is the trajectory that guides the development pattern of the sociotechnical system studied. It comprises of scientists, policymakers, investors, and any other actor that influences the dominant sociotechnical practices (Geels & Schot, 2007).

The sociotechnical niches are small-scale innovations that present alternatives to the sociotechnical regime (Geel & Schot, 2007). Those innovations are precisely created as a reaction against the current regime trajectory because it is deemed problematic by the niche actors. Hence, the niche level may be described as a ground of constant experimentation of innovation that seek to challenge the regime (Raven & Smith, 2012).

Finally, a transition refers to a change of regime. Several conditions may create a window of opportunity for the transition, notably an evolution of the landscape and/or a particularly prominent and supported niche innovation (Geels & Schot, 2007).

MLP allows us to recontextualise the CATL's diagnostic, narrative, and aim: the sociotechnical regime (the territorial agri-food sector) is problematic (unsustainable) and should therefore be replaced. There was the presence in Liège of enough isolated but coherent local transition/local/sustainable-oriented alternative initiatives (innovation niches) to try to unify them and to replace the regime.

The specificity of the CATL compared to other alternative agri-food initiatives is that it does not only proposes a sociotechnical innovation, but it also aims at grounding this new innovative trajectory in the Liège sociotechnical environment, until it becomes a legitimate part of it (Feyereisen & Stassart, 2017). To do so, the CATL does actively interacts with every actor that are influent in the sociotechnical regime. By creating relations with these pre-existing actors, the CATL tries to become a legitimate actor of the sociotechnical regime, and a link between the innovation niches and the regime (Feyereisen & Stassart, 2017). This is the main proposition of the CATL: being a link between the micro-scale niches and the regime and fostering the growth of the local and sustainable food production and consumption system until it becomes an acknowledged part of the sociotechnical environment, with the long-term goal to replace (partly) the existing regime (Feyereisen & Stassart, 2017).

#### The CATL's different actions

As it was demonstrated, the CATL has a multisectoral agenda. Its actions can be arranged in four categories.

1. The articulation of existing niches in one common project. The CATL serves at a centralized pool of knowledge, capital, and logistic to support the Liège niches (CATL action plan, 2018). This centrality also allows it to facilitate and accompany the creation of new niches, following the CATL's philosophy, and to enhance the communication and connectivity between local actors (CATL action plan, 2018). Hence, the CATL aims at becoming the coordinator of food innovation niches on the Liège territory and to become a "territorial development lever" (Bousbaine & Bryant, 2006, p.8).
2. The creation of a forum of discussion between the alternative agri-food actors and the scientific community, by directly cooperating with university researchers (Feyereisen & Stassart, 2017; Bousbaine & Bryant, 2016). The CATL is thus a welcoming research field for scholars, gaining legitimation and the availability of academic expertise in the process (Feyereisen & Stassart, 2017).
3. The dialogue with institutional actors such as communal council, provincial and regional governments. Seeking the recognition of the structure as an inevitable actor of the Liège agri-food sector. The long-term goal is to be able to propose the CATL's expertise to these upper levels of governance, which would allow to push the CATL's agenda in new policies and become a lobbying force (Feyereisen & Stassart, 2017).
4. To strengthen the link with the citizens and consumers, raising awareness about local and sustainable consumption, and potentially to deepen their commitment. To raise public awareness on the importance of local food production (CATL, 2018).

### The CATL and the Social Development Goals

Given its focus on building a more sustainable food production system, it is not surprising that the CATL's proposition is line with several of the UN Social Development Goals (SDG). Because the project focuses on producing and consuming differently, SDG 12 comes to mind: "Ensuring sustainable production and consumption pattern" (United Nation Sustainable Development Goal 12, n.d.). However, this SDG is not related to food production and consumption, but rather to waste reduction and to efficient resource use.

Instead, the CATL is better linked to goal 2: "End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition an promote sustainable agriculture" (United Nation Sustainable Development Goal 2, n.d.). Target 2.4 on ensuring sustainable and resilient food production

systems is particularly relevant, as well as target 2.3 on the empowerment of small-scale producers.

Finally, the project is also related to goal 11: “make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable” (United Nation Sustainable Development Goal 11, n.d.).

Indeed, as an alimentary belt, the CATL aims at strengthening the links between Liège rural periphery and its urban area, in line with target 11.a.

### The CATL as a social innovation

Although social innovation is a commonly discussed concept in the literature, there is also a large array of different definitions. Nonetheless, Moulaert et al. (2013) identify three aspects that are represented in most of those definitions: a social innovation meets a social need; it does so by reshaping existing social relations; the modified social relations empower groups that were not adequately represented in governance before. This definition helps to highlight which elements of the CATL make it socially innovative.

The first element of the definition resonates with the abovementioned diagnostic that was made by the creator of the CATL. The mainstream agri-food system productivism is not environmentally respectable, it maintains producers at the brink of poverty, and a growing part of the consumers are worried about the quality of their food. Furthermore, the founders also identify the loss of regional sovereignty as a one of the main issues tackled by the CATL (CATL Chart, n.d.). For these reasons, the CATL sought to propose an agri-food system that addresses these issues to ensure a more sustainable food production and consumption.

The second element of the definition, the creation of new social relations, is identified by Bousbaine & Bryant (2016) as the most distinctive and innovative feature of the CATL. They assess that the idea of creating a multisectoral network between all relevant actors of the agri-food sector is the first initiative of its kind in Belgium. Moreover, the link between on-the-field actors and scientific actors is a unique proposition (Bousbaine & Bryant, 2016). The emphasis on the link between producers and consumers is also to be noted, as the ambition of the CATL is to create ‘*consom’acteurs*’ (consumer-actors). To do so, the citizens are invited to actively participate in the project, by financially supporting the production and retailing local initiatives. The CATL’s support of new initiatives is also designed to reduce the barriers to enter the market and is therefore aiming at motivating citizens to become professional actors (CATL action plan, 2018).

The last element of the definition is also relevant to the CATL. Indeed, through its role of missing link between innovation agri-food niches and higher level of governance, the CATL empowers the small-scale initiatives by allowing them to reappropriate territorial food production (Feyereisen & Stassart, 2017). However, this is not the only example of bottom-up process in the structure, as Feyereisen & Stassart (2017) note: most of the newly created relations in the actor network are designed to empower the ‘bottom’ (CATL action plan, 2018). The consumers are empowered to better monitor how their food is produced, and to be a part of this production. The small-scale projects are empowered by the facilitated connexion with institutions, and by the technical and financial support of the CATL. The on-the-field actors are empowered to take decisions for the future of the structure by being part of the CATL direction board. Overall, this bottom-up approach was prioritized to allow the inhabitants of Liège to reappropriate the food production by territorializing it (Bousbaine & Bryant, 2016).

#### The CATL project so far.

Up until this point, the paper focused on the theory behind the CATL and the CATL in theory. However, because the structure exists since 2013, it is possible to scaffold an overview of the structure’s accomplishments. First, the network of local Liège actors is continuously expanding. It currently comprises of around twenty retailer cooperatives, and of hundreds of producers around the province (CATL cooperatives, n.d.; CATL producteurs, n.d.). The network also comprises of other transition actors whose activities are not directly linked to food production. A good example of such partnership is the affiliation of CATL’s distributors with the *Val’heureux* local currency, which is another initiative to territorialize its actions (CATL action plan, 2018).

Regarding the awareness raising mission of the CATL, the biggest achievement is the creation of the festival ‘*nourrir Liège*’ (Feeding Liège), which takes place every year since 2017 (excluding 2020, because of the sanitary situation). This festival was designed as a place of encounter between Liège transition actors and the public. It allows producers and retailers to present their activities, while the public can learn more about sustainable local production (Nourrir Liège, n.d.).

Lastly, Feyersen & Stassart (2017) claim that the most significant achievement of the CATL is its recognition by institutional actors. Although the structure struggles at gaining legitimation from the regional government, its expertise in term of agri-food transition and of sustainable food production has been solicited by the Province of Liège and by several

municipalities of the region. In addition, the authors explain that based on the CATL's example, several other alimentary belts flourished over Wallonia and Brussels, placing the CATL as a 'transition initiative spreader'.

#### Conclusion: possible pitfalls.

The CATL is the trigger behind a transition outbreak in the Liège region. The network is still currently expanding, and the assisting tools for transition-oriented initiatives are more and more concrete. Its position as experts for institutional actors, and the cooperation with the scientific community are also strengthening. These elements are all important in empowering the niches in the sociotechnical regime, which helps to concretise the scenario of a transition occurring (Raven & Smith, 2012).

Nonetheless, given the ambitions and the scope of the project, there are critical pitfalls that should be avoided. The first one concerns the CATL's communication. The current communication focuses on creating a link between transition initiatives and local food consumers, with the hope that the latter will engage further in the project. Hence, it targets citizens that are already aware of the transition's stakes, or that are at least already receptive to the discourse. However, with a long-term goal of furnishing 50% of food consumption in local and sustainable products, this is not sufficient. To meet this objective, the CATL should also seek to reach less engaged citizens, that rely on the mainstream agri-food sector, and which represent a crushing majority of consumers. The 50% goal will never be met if half the consumers agree on the importance of consuming local.

A second challenge for the structure is to ensure its own integrity, considering its complex structure. Ensuring that the project is still in line with every sector and every actors' expectation will be challenging. Feyereisen & Stassart (2017) already identified such crisis occurring because of an asymmetry of expectations between actors. In 2015, the CATL backs the creation of the *Compagnons de la Terre* (the Companions of the Earth), which was envisioned as the spearhead of local and sustainable production. However, this new initiative created a misunderstanding with other producing actors, that felt that the *Compagnons* pretended to be the reference production and distribution system for the transition in Liège. For this reason, those producers considered they were put aside, and that the CATL was not in line with their expectation of how to pursue the transition. For this reason, although the *Compagnons* project helped to legitimize the CATL, it also had a negative impact, since some other partners disassociated from the structure because of it. This type of trade-off effect

between actors and across sectors must be kept in mind at every stage of decision-making to insure a calm and sustainable future for the CATL.

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