



Strategic foresight and the evaluation of public policy on agriculture

An International Panorama

Work on strategic foresight analysis and the evaluation of public policy on agriculture shows very wide disparities among countries with regard to scope, methods, and the resources deployed. Such is the general conclusion reached in the survey of 21 countries conducted by the Centre for Studies and Strategic Foresight at the Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Fisheries. Although forward-looking approaches are being developed in some countries of the North, evaluation continues to predominate. The work done, whether on strategic foresight or on evaluation, is often restricted to the national context, with international partnerships resulting from initiatives taken primarily by universities and research centres. And lastly, economics-based approaches play a significant part in both foresight and evaluation, while work on the social and environmental aspects of agriculture originates mainly in the countries of the European Union.

The purpose of the present note is to offer, on the basis of a questionnaire circulated to our foreign counterparts, a rapid brief of practices in the area of strategic foresight analysis and the evaluation of public policy in the domains of agriculture, food and rural development. The aim here is to indicate trends, highlight areas of concern, clarify the status of the bodies involved, and to provide information on the real importance attributed to the work done on strategic foresight or evaluation. At a time when national markets and agricultural industries are globalised and interdependent, no country can afford to conceive of its policies as independent of the international context. For this reason there appeared to be a need to look at the general picture outside France.

The desire to address both evaluation and strategic foresight analysis at the same time stems from the fact that both are modern, mutually complementary ways of assisting decisions in public policymaking. In order to avoid certain biases in understanding, the survey

questionnaire included definitions of the terms “evaluation” and “strategic foresight”. “Evaluation” is understood to refer to a tool for measuring the effects specifically due to a public action and suitable for comparison of actual with expected results. And “strategic foresight” is defined as a set of scenarios supported by fundamental trends or weak signals and intended to inform strategic thinking.

The information was gathered over the period from October 2008 to January 2009 using a questionnaire circulated in French and English to 56 agricultural attachés in diplomatic posts in France. Of these, 21 responded, representing the following countries: Canada, Japan, Netherlands, United States, United Kingdom, Germany, Austria, Brazil, Cyprus, South Korea, Spain, Hungary, Switzerland, Belgium, South Africa, Algeria, Latvia, Norway, Finland, Poland and Senegal. In addition, interviews were conducted in greater depth with a small number of respondents. The purpose of this was to identify the ministerial bodies or other organisations subject to ministe-

rial oversight operating at national level, to understand how they function and to identify their main activities.

The results revealed a number of things: the predominance of evaluation and the fact that the bodies involved in strategic foresight analysis are fairly recent; the preponderance of economics-based studies; the diversity in working methods; the absence of any approach common to a majority of countries, even on quite specific topics, and the virtually complete absence of any collaborative programmes between countries, at least at governmental level.

The short format of the present note obliges us to present only the main results. More far-reaching analyses, State by State or theme by theme for example, would look closely at other aspects: organisational history, publication formats, team composition, audiences for recommendations, and so on. Following an initial summary of the variety in the different situations (1), we stress the marked preference for evaluation (2). We then go on to see

that the studies conducted generally prioritise an economics-based approach (3) and that their focus is fairly strictly national (4).

1 - A variety of characteristics in the different countries

The first organisations providing strategic foresight analysis and/or evaluations of public policy in the agricultural sector arose in the 1960s and 1970s. For example, Belgium (Wallonia) created at that time a team for public strategic foresight in its *Institut Economique Agricole*, which in 2002 became the Directorate for agricultural economic analysis. It is in Cyprus, Canada and the United States that we find the other oldest bodies of this kind (early 1970s), formed within the ministry of agriculture or an equivalent official administration. But as a general rule, it was not before the 2000s that States really began to set up organisations dedicated to this activity.

The institutions to which such tools for strategic foresight or evaluation are attached vary in nature. Hungary, Norway and Finland indicate that they contract all their research out to public or private research institutes, which are often linked to the agriculture ministry. Where Algeria is concerned, this work is allocated to the General Commission for planning and strategic foresight set up in 2006, which answers to the government. The majority of the other countries declare that they have specific bodies for this within their ministries of agriculture. These are either groups of experts (Netherlands, Brazil) working as advisors to decision-makers, or a permanent team (United Kingdom), an office in charge of planning (Cyprus), a policy coordination department (Latvia), or cells present in various directorates of the ministry of agriculture (Poland). Even in cases where the in-house teams are substantial in size, they nevertheless contract some of their work out to external institutions.

Where the human resources are concerned, the picture provided by our survey is extremely diversified, with the numbers of individuals assigned to such teams ranging from 2 (Austria) to 136 (Hungary). This disparity supports the view that there are different understandings of the boundaries of the “strategic foresight” and “evaluation” functions, and certainly of the meaning of those terms. In Senegal, for example, DAPS, the Directorate for ana-

lysis, forecasting and statistics in the Ministry of Agriculture has a staff of 46 but only 14 actually work on topics related to strategic foresight analysis or policy evaluation.

As far as budget resources are concerned, the information gathered generally indicates an absence of any envelope directly allocated to evaluation or strategic foresight bodies. With the exception of Poland, funds are released as required by projects and there is no real annual programming (Germany, Austria, Brazil, Norway). Some countries work on strategic foresight studies in partnership with international organisations such as the OECD. Canada declares: “*We receive the OECD international perspectives, which we update and use when we produce our own national perspectives. We then fill in a perspective questionnaire for Canada that we send on to the OECD. They then use this along with those from other countries as a basis for drawing up their international perspectives. From an accounting standpoint, all of this amounts to a co-financed project*”. Budgets are in fact difficult to compare because the volume of studies outsourced to the private or public sectors varies very widely. More generally, it seems that such research activities are not always closely monitored and there is some doubt as to their effectiveness.

2 - A continuing preference for evaluation of public policy

Despite the clear development of strategic foresight programmes, although this does seem to be restricted to certain countries in the North (United States, Spain¹, Canada), evaluation of policy in the agricultural and agrifood sectors predominates. While none of the 21 respondent countries refers to any ministerial organisation for strategic foresight, many on the other hand have fairly substantial teams and budgets dedicated to evaluation. In their responses, Poland, South Korea and Japan² point to teams within public institutions staffed by between 10 and 30 individuals and tasked with evaluating instruments linked to the 1st and 2nd pillars of the Common Agricultural Policy (Poland) or the evaluation of agricultural policy at national or local level. Nevertheless, once again the figures given by some States show that the scope of evaluation is understood differently, this prevents relevant assessment of specific national characteristics.

The observation that evaluation is the main priority is confirmed by the way in which organisations see their role. The provision of assistance for public decision-making, with emphasis on the objective nature of the opinions issued, is the primary goal declared by most of the countries questioned. This is followed closely by the attention paid to “the effects of implemented policy” (Japan), “evaluation programmes” (Norway) or “the system for routine evaluation” (Poland). Like Hungary, Spain has set up programmes for the evaluation of public policies implemented under the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). Added to this is a programme of annual studies “on relevant topics” related to evaluation and strategic foresight, to which is allocated a budget of 8 million, from which the brand new Ministry of the Environment and Rural and Marine Environs also benefits.

At EU level, the Commission imposes guidelines on Member States for their evaluation studies and provides shared tools such as the Evaluation Helpdesk and Seamless³, a system for environmental and agronomical modelling linking science with society. In addition, the evaluation of European programmes under the 2nd pillar of CAP is often conducted in the regions, considered to be more innovative, especially in States with a federal structure (e.g. the German *Länder*).

There are also international evaluation networks, covering the whole thematic range, such as that of the European Evaluation Society, a private-sector body in the habit of working with public organisations, which has set itself the goal of disseminating “good practice” across the EU. Another example is the Office of Evaluation in the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD)⁴, which is attached to the United Nations and works more particularly with developing countries.

1. Rapports 1 Reports drafted by the Spanish Ministry of Agriculture:

<http://www.mapa.es/es/alimentacion/pags/consumo/comercializacion/estudio/estudios.htm>

<http://www.mapa.es/app/vocwaj/LisatdoDocumentos.aspx?tg=informes&sec=lct&Ing=es>

http://www.mapa.es/es/ministerio/pags/analisis_prospectiva/introduccion.htm (reports drafted by the Unit for analysis and strategic foresight)

2. See the website of the Japanese Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF) : <http://www.maff.go.jp/j/assess/index.html>

3. <http://www.seamless-ip.org/>

4. <http://www.ifad.org/evaluation/index.htm>

3 - Approaches from strictly economics-based to cross-cutting

According to the responses to our survey, there is a wide disparity in the approaches adopted by the various organisations, and between countries. The United States is among those countries that focus their evaluation and strategic foresight efforts on topics that are essentially economic⁵, whereas smaller countries often have a wider, more cross-cutting and balanced approach.

In the first case (i.e. a focus on economics), the preference is for reflection that is forecast- and sector-based. The themes studied are in such cases revelatory of the way each country sees the economic domain and the future of its agricultural sector. Canada includes “everything that could be important for agricultural markets”: e.g. biofuels, animal diseases, price cycles, market deregulation. Brazil’s response⁶ stresses the economic performance of its agrifood industries, insurance systems and agro-energy production. In Belgium and South Africa⁷, the emphasis is on the economic viability of agricultural holdings and the economic impacts of certain crises. In the United States, concern is focused on the financial efficiency of agricultural policies (e.g. “If we spend a dollar less in government money, does it lower farm income by more than a dollar?”) as well as on the economic slowdown linked to the financial crisis, increases in farmers’ production costs and the implementation of the 2008 Farm Bill in this context. This reading of agricultural issues is shared by the Center for Agricultural and Rural Development (CARD) at the University of Iowa⁸ and the Food and Agricultural Policy Research Institute (FAPRI)⁹, in Michigan.

The economics-focused approach is also to be seen in the preference for attaching teams to bodies tasked with economic analysis. This is the case for the Research Institute for Agricultural Economics (AKI), a Hungarian centre for research into agricultural economics, 78% of the funding for which comes from the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, and the sub-directorate for economic studies and strategic foresight, created in Algeria in 2000 in the Directorate for programming, investment and economic studies at the Ministry of Agriculture.

Other countries look beyond the economic aspects and take into account for example the impact of agricultural techniques on health, the environment, rural development, employment, biodiversity, and so on. This is true of Hungary¹⁰, Poland¹¹, Austria, the Netherlands¹², Germany, Algeria and Senegal. Some EU Member States emphasise such high-priority topics as the post-2013 CAP (Germany), the effects of the CAP Health Check or the non-renewal of milk quotas (Hungary, Wallonia).

While econometric models and statistical analysis appear to be the main tools used where research is concerned, there is little consensus on relevant applicable methodologies at the international level. Some effort has been spent in an attempt to harmonise strategic foresight methods, with an effort to build a common reference base (vocabulary, approach, etc.). One example is COST Action 22 (Advancing Foresight Methodologies¹³), most of the funding for which comes from the Directorate-General for Research (DG Research) in Brussels, and which covers the EU Member States plus Turkey and Israel. Another interesting example of networking is International Assessment of Agricultural Science Knowledge and Technology for Development (IAASTD)¹⁴.

Despite these few initiatives, the slow pace of the creation of any common ‘language’ is a major complicating factor for the possibility of exchanging the results produced by strategic foresight and evaluation studies. It is clear in this area that a uniformly acceptable line of reasoning is still in the process of being defined, and that the relevant approaches and concepts are less standardised than in other academic disciplines. It is sometimes even the case that the tools change according to the type of evaluation being performed. For example, in Japan, statistical databases and measurements of returns on investments are used whether the aim is to carry out a “performance evaluation”, a “comprehensive evaluation” or a “project evaluation”. The same variability is to be seen where strategic foresight is concerned. Here the emphasis is certainly on the scenario method (Spain, Belgium, Hungary, Norway and Senegal), but the precise details of the scenario construction process can vary widely between countries. The same applies to Foresights¹⁵, identical in their inspiration but frequently very different in terms of their execution.

Of the latter, we can cite the UK’s “Foresight”¹⁶, attached to the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, which in November 2008 launched a working programme entitled “Global Food and Farming Futures”¹⁷. In Denmark there is also the “Foresight analysis for world agricultural markets” (AG2020)¹⁸, funded by DG Research, initiated in 2007 and scheduled to terminate in 2010.

Given the information produced by our survey, the same disparity applies to the bodies that commission evaluation and strategic foresight studies. Ministries of agriculture are cited in most cases but in many countries such research may also be commissioned by other bodies: the ministry of economic affairs, the ministry of education and Science (Netherlands), parliament, cen-

5. See document USDA Agricultural projections to 2017, published by the USDA in February 2008.

6. See the website of the Brazilian Ministry of Agriculture: <http://www.agricultura.gov.br> (Projeções do agronegócio informações sobre agronegócio).

7. See the website of South Africa’s Ministry of Agriculture: <http://www.nda.agric.za> (quarterly assessment reports).

8. *What effect does free trade in agriculture have on developing country populations around the world?* April 2008. A study tending in the direction of support for the liberalisation of agrifood markets.

9. Annual Report/<http://www.fapri.iastate.edu/outlook/2010/>

10. See the website of the Hungarian Ministry of Agriculture: <http://www.aki.gov.hu/ekpolc>

11. See the website of the Polish Ministry of Agriculture: <http://www.minrol.gov.pl>

12. See the Wageningen University website: <http://www.agricultureintransition.wur.nl/UK/Subject/>

13. See the web link: <http://www.costa22.org/>

14. See Even M.-A., IAASTD, *une expertise internationale qui marque un changement de paradigme pour l’agriculture*, [IAASTD, international expertise marking a paradigm shift for agriculture], Analysis no. 6 of the Centre for studies and strategic foresight of the French Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Fisheries. http://agriculture.gouv.fr/sections/thematiques/prospective-evaluations/publications9108/repertoire-notes-d/downloadFile/FichierAttache_5_f0/%20Analyse_6_IAASTD.pdf, developed in <http://agreste.agriculture.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/analyse60905.pdf>

15. Foresight: an exercise of forward-looking analysis often directed at scientific or technical issues involving the stakeholders (public authorities, industries, research organisations, NGOs, etc.) and organised at various levels from local to international. Foresight is aimed at identifying probable futures, imagining desirable futures and defining strategies. The outcomes are intended to provide input for public decision-making.

16. <http://www.foresight.gov.uk>

17. <http://www.foresight.gov.uk/OurWork/ActiveProjects/FoodandFarmingFutures/FoodandFarmingProjectHome.asp>

18. http://www.risoe.dk/Research/sustainable_energy/energy_systems/projects/AG2020.aspx?sc_lang=en

tral government, local authorities (Cyprus, South Africa) or the ministry or department of state for public policies (United States, Japan).

4 - Few international partnerships but links with agricultural research and the farming professions

Few international collaborative programmes are cited in connection with evaluation and foresight work on agricultural and food-related policies. Where such exchanges do exist, they are based simply on geographical proximity, between neighbouring countries. This is true of the United States and Canada. Similarly, EU Member States work together through participation in the European Evaluation Network or the Standing Committee on Agricultural Research (SCAR)¹⁹. A third example of collaboration is to be found in Norway²⁰ and the Scandinavian countries in the Nordic Council of Ministries.

There are many instances of collaboration between State institutions and research bodies (answering to government or independent): the Research Institute for agriculture economics (Hungary), the Agency for the restructuring and modernisation of agriculture (Poland), universities and associations of producers (Hungary, South Africa, Wallonia, Canada and the United States), the Brazilian agricultural research enterprise (Embrapa) and the National Company of Food Supply (CONAB/Brazil), Agrifood Research Finland (MTT/Finland), among others. The minister of agriculture and/or food may also call for advice from experts, as is the case in Germany with its scientific advisory board on consumer and food policies and scientific advisory board on agricultural policy.

This lack of international exchanges can be explained in part by the fact that the bodies commissioning such research, as well as the audiences with a potential interest in it, are usually based inside a given country: e.g. ministries, parliament, manufacturing companies, professionals in the agricultural sector, NGOs, the media or the general public. It is unusual for respondents to include the European Commission in their distribution list (Austria). Canada, Hungary and South Africa indicate that they work in partnership with international organisations such as the FAO or OECD “particularly on agricultural perspectives and the modelling of agricultural

markets” (Canada) or on “the multifunctionality of agriculture” (Norway, through the Norwegian University of Life Sciences). However, this is still uncommon.

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It can be seen from the above that the meaning assigned by different countries to the concepts of strategic foresight and evaluation varies, which means that the results of our survey should be treated with some caution. Nevertheless, a few of the observations are quite striking. For example, approaches based on evaluation are still more frequent than those based on strategic foresight, although the latter are developing and evolving in terms of both subjects and methods. Secondly, approaches often based on economics, which is the preference of a number of countries, will inevitably be reinforced by the current context of financial crisis. And lastly, while international partnerships do exist, they are rare in the fields of agriculture and rural affairs, and they often focus on agricultural technology.

It remains to be discovered how far reflection based on strategic foresight or evaluation is actually used in the processes that lead to policy decisions. The information gathered by our survey does not allow us to gain a clear idea on this. Simply, it can be seen that there are some doubts as to the long-term viability and relevance of the functions of such reflection. One comment made by a European country regarding its high-priority topics for the next few years is fairly indicative of the lack of stability and acknowledgement of the work done in these fields: “these topics might change after the next elections”. The embarrassment apparent in the responses to the question as to the real impact of such work underscores this impression of fragility. One respondent

country adds: “Unfortunately, we are not able to determine to what extent a specific decision is affected by our studies”. Nevertheless, the United Kingdom, Belgium and Poland seem optimistic: recommendations made on the basis of studies for the evaluation of public policy are genuinely aligned with the policy decision domain. It is possible to surmise - and hope - that more substantial and frequent international exchanges would encourage national leaders to give greater consideration to such recommendations.

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19. See the main approaches adopted in the Netherlands and other EU Member States in SCAR: http://ec.europa.eu/research/agriculture/scar/index_en.cfm?p=1_n1
http://ec.europa.eu/research/agriculture/scar/index_en.cfm?p=3_capacities

20. Some examples of partnerships formed by the Norwegian ministry of agriculture and national research bodies:
<http://www.slf.dep.no> (Norwegian agricultural authority)
<http://www.nilf.no> (Norwegian agricultural economics research institute)
<http://www.bygddeforskning.no> (Centre for rural research)

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