

Farm incubators in France : Roles and functioning

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A tool to promote entry into farming and local development

The **farming trial period** enables candidates, particularly newcomers, to practice farming progressively and in a relatively risk free way. It is one of the tools to foster generational renewal in a profession that has lost 200,000 workers between 2000 and 2010. It is an answer to the current challenges facing agriculture and local development: producing quality food in a preserved environment and creating jobs.

The farming test is aimed at **anyone with an agricultural project who would like to experience his or her project in full size before getting started**. Candidates are often newcomers to farming, many of them career changers. These prospective farmers need human and technical support, as they do not have prior farming experience. Their projects all seek to develop family forms of farming, relying on direct sales or short food supply chains, processing, organic farming, and community connections (CSAs).

The first experiences of farm incubators appeared in France in 2007. In 2012, there were 10 farm incubators in operation. Today, there are 45 in operation and 27 others in a project phase.

Some definitions: farming trial period, incubator farm, testing ground

The **farming trial period** is a stage in the process of progressively starting a farm business. It enables prospective farmers to develop their farm business autonomously in full scale, while providing a protected environment. The trial indeed takes place over a limited period of time, within a framework limiting risks and staggering development and risk-taking. At the end of the trial period, the candidates evaluate their project and themselves so as to decide whether to continue, adjust or abandon their project.

The farming trial period is not part of vocational training, nor an initial discovery of the farming world. Candidates start a farming trial period only after they have well defined their agricultural project. Through the farming trial period, they may test:

- their motivation to farming : confrontation with reality, a life-size experience, etc.;
- their personal skills : ability to produce, sell, manage, organise, etc.;
- the technical and economic feasibility of the project : quantity, quality, cost, profitability, etc.;
- the adequacy between their project, themselves and the territory : project viability, life/ work balance, local embeddedness, etc.

¹ Text based on internal documents, on the booklet presenting Espaces-test agricoles and the two-page presentation of RENETA. Edited and translated by Veronique Rioufol and Sally Sorel, Terre de liens, Feb 2017.

The farming trial period is therefore a "tool" to enable a candidate to test his/her farming project, not a tool to test a future farmer. It allows prospective farmers to:

- (i) develop personal skills, put them in practice and compare them with those of experienced people;
- (ii) experiment the technical and economic feasibility of their project and secure their entry into farming by limiting risk-taking thanks to progressive investments;
- (iii) enable progressive integration in the local community, thanks to the support of a local mentor;
- (iv) make progressive steps towards entry into farming or, in certain cases, to consider serenely an outcome different from entering farming
- (v) develop their projects financially, technically and economically, with the support of all the stakeholders of the incubator farm.

This approach to farm incubators and the farming trial period has several implications. First, the farming trial period consists in the implementation of a project on a provisional basis. All the conditions necessary for the experimentation are combined, for a limited time period. The farming trial period must also include a self-assessment procedure, with specific indicators. Regular self-evaluation should lead to the necessary adjustments. Furthermore, the farming trial period must provide several possible "exits": starting a farm business, becoming a farmworker, going back to their previous job, changing career, etc. Finally, the farming trial period must guarantee that there is room for error and that the situation is reversible.

The **incubator farm** ("*espace-test agricoles* – ETA" in French) is a practical, coordinated organisation or system offering all the conditions necessary for the farming trial period. Its four main roles are: the incubator/fostering role, the nursery role, the mentoring role and the coordination role (see below). Each farm incubator is unique. Each developed in response to local needs and partners. Farm incubators involve diverse stakeholders: agricultural and rural development associations, people's education movements, business incubators, business nurseries, business co-operatives, regional agricultural authorities, regional natural parks, agricultural colleges and training programs.

Finally, the **testing ground** designates a physical place, equipped with means of production, which serves as a temporary or permanent support for the farming trial period. This place may be used only for farming trial periods or may host other activities (e.g. a farm). An incubator farm may use one or several "testing grounds".

The farming test: how does it work?

Farm incubators are multi-actor systems, providing all the conditions necessary for the farming tests. Their fundamental role is the provision of:

- A legal framework to enable each candidate to carry out their farm business in autonomy = **incubator/ fostering role**
- Production facilities (land, equipment, buildings...) = **nursery role**
- A multifaceted support and mentoring system, adapted to the needs of each candidate = **mentoring role.**

In addition, the governance and functioning of farm incubators ensure connections with local partners and the local community = **animation-coordination role.**

1- The incubator/ fostering role

In France, business incubators generally provide a "legal framework to support people initiating business projects, in real conditions of production, while preserving their social rights" (Ministry of Employment, 2000). It may involve offering physical space or material resources necessary to develop the business. Sometimes, it means providing support for accounting and business management, monitoring and final assessment of the activity, contacts with other business people and local stakeholders.



RENETA talks about the incubator role to describe the provision of a legal framework for the farming trial period, which includes hosting:

- the legal side of the business: signing a contract to provide a work status to the candidate and the business (e.g. CAPE contract);
- the fiscal and financial side of the business: doing the tax and social paperwork, managing the financial flows of the business and the candidate's accountancy (collecting payments, paying expenses, etc.).

The organisation fulfilling role of the incubator involves providing its SIRET number to the candidates so that they may use it for their business. This implies that it is qualified as a farm holding, in order to have the authorisation to produce and market agricultural products.

The legal status of the candidates vary according to the local contexts: agricultural social security contributors², trainees of vocational training, CAPE contract ... But the most secure and frequent status today is the CAPE contract, which aims at supporting business start-up's.

2- The nursery role

In France, business incubators are defined as "facilities for fostering, hosting, providing support and guidance to people developing business projects". They intervene before the establishment of a business. They aim to limit the obstacles linked to the start-up phase and to promote experience-sharing between the emerging businesses. They offer a physical space (e.g. offices, workshops, meeting spaces) as well as shared equipment and services (e.g. secretariat) in order to reduce the costs. They also provide the support of professionals in various fields (legal, tax, banking...). They do not host the legal side of the business.

² In France, access to the farming profession is regulated. Non-farmers can farm on small areas under a special status ("cotisant solidaire"): they pay social security contributions but do not benefit from agricultural health insurance or pension (they have to be covered by a separate social security system). They can sell to an intermediary (with an invoice) but, in some regions, are not allowed to sell directly to the public.

RENETA talks about the nursery role to describe the provision of the means of production:

- land - except where the candidate already has land and wishes to do the farming trial period on it;
- equipment – except small tools which the candidates usually own themselves;
- buildings (storage room, processing facilities, etc.);
- collective meeting rooms and offices.

3- The mentoring role

The aim is to provide support and guidance to the candidates throughout the farming trial period, according to their needs, the difficulties they encounter, and the stages of the trial.

This role has "multiple" dimension:

- technical support: agronomy, farming practices, etc. - provided by a technician from the local organic association, the Chamber of Agriculture or a mentor farmer
- Business support: accounting and management, customer management, investments, choice of marketing methods, etc – generally provided by the organisation fulfilling the incubator role
- human support: personal work planning, coherence work/ life project, etc. – here, the mentor farmer plays the key role
- discovering peasant lifestyle, integration into the social and professional environment
- mediation of the relationship between the candidates and their mentor, between the various candidates on a same testing ground, etc.

Fulfilling the mentoring role requires defining a framework and a "spirit" of the way in which the farm incubator will provide guidance and mentoring. It means defining and implementing a minimum set of tools and procedures ... while avoiding too much rigidity. The stakeholders of the farm incubator must define clear, specific, attainable and measurable objectives, while ensuring that there is room for error and that the process is reversible.

It is also important to define the role, missions and responsibilities of all those involved in guidance and mentoring. The latter must be professional and adequately trained. In some cases, the farm incubator may resort to external expertise.

4- The coordination role

This interdisciplinary role consists in managing the farm incubator as a whole. It includes all aspects of administrative and financial management: accounting, secretariat, fundraising, financing (e.g. advanced payment for crops, etc.). It also includes communication and external relations with financial and institutional partners.

A fundamental part of this role is to ensure the overall coordination of the farm incubator system, in particular to bring together and coordinate all the partners needed to support the candidates. Farm incubators are multi-stakeholder mechanisms. Many different people and

organisations have their part on one or several aspects, either to provide support to the candidates and / or to ensure the functioning of the farm incubator. Good coordination between all of them is therefore necessary.

A national network of farm incubators: RENETA

Established in March 2012, the national network RENETA aims to promote farming trial periods. Its main activities consist in:

- **Experience-sharing and capacity-building:** organisation of meetings and seminars, development of collaborative tools, training, publications, etc.;
- **Peer-to-peer learning and expertise:** support to emerging farm incubators, through peer-to-peer learning and other activities drawing from the wealth of experience in the network;
- **Research and social innovation:** making proposals to change the legal framework for entering agriculture and for creating local businesses, based on the principles of solidarity economy.

RENETA is now composed of 77 members, including 44 functioning incubator farms and 27 in project phase, as well as 6 associate members (national networks). The members of RENETA cooperate and mutualise their work, based on a Charter and common values: social and solidarity-based economy and people's education.

Results so far

In 2016, about 200 people are doing a farming trial period. 70% of the candidates are under 40 and 60% are men. Since 2007, 180 people have completed a farming trial period. The number of candidates is growing rapidly, in parallel with the increase in the number of farm incubators. At the end of their farming trial period, 66% of the candidates started a farm (mostly in the area where they did their farming trial period); 10% became farmworkers; 15% chose to change their plan or return to their previous job. The remaining 9% have not yet defined their professional project.

Today, we can witness a strong appetite for farm incubators, in particular among local authorities. More and more of them become involved with farm incubators, for several reasons: the desire to (re)vitalise local activities, to create jobs, or to provide public catering. They view farm incubators as relevant tools for agricultural and food policies, in particular as part of a new system set up by the latest Agricultural Law to promote multi-stakeholder "Local Food Plans".

Further Reading (in French):

Site web : www.reneta.fr

Ministry of Agriculture, Centre d'études et de prospective, [Les espaces test agricoles: expérimenter l'agriculture avant de s'installer](#), n°92, July 2016