How could bioeconomy projects fit into local political agendas on climate and environment? Reflections in light of a study on the territorialization of climate policy

Alexis Aulagnier*[1]

[1]Centre Émile Durkheim – Sciences Po Bordeaux - Institut d'études politiques de Bordeaux, Université de Bordeaux, Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique – France

Abstract

The development of the bioeconomy requires a territorial approach, as numerous studies have shown (Benoit, 2021). The establishment of production systems based on the principles of the bioeconomy must necessarily be part of a local reflection involving economic and political actors in the territories concerned. The collection, transport and use of biomass are embedded in territorial ecosystems (Girard, 2023).
In this communication, I propose to focus on the integration of the bioeconomy into local environmental and climate policies. In particular, I would like to open a discussion on the capacity of bioeconomy projects to challenge local frameworks for environmental and climate issues.

In France, policies to combat global warming are increasingly territorialised. Public institutions for intermunicipal cooperation (EPCI) have gradually been recognised by the public authorities as legitimate actors in the fight against global warming. Since 2015, EPCIs with more than 20,000 inhabitants have been required to adopt and implement territorial climate-air-energy plans (PCAETs), which are "the operational tool for coordinating the energy transition in the territory" (Bertrand and Richard, 2014). Initial research has attempted to analyse this process of territorialisation of climate action (Mazeaud et al., 2022). These works are critical of the specific effects of these dynamics. They show that the appropriation of the fight against global warming as a "public problem" by local government actors (both technical staff and elected officials) remains limited, despite government mandates and the proliferation of dedicated instruments.

As a postdoctoral researcher, I participated in a collective political science study on the implementation of these climate plans in Nouvelle-Aquitaine and Occitanie(1). As part of this study, we identified a factor that had been neglected in the literature on local climate policies: the specific effects of environmental and climate assessments, which are nevertheless an essential component of these territorialisation instruments. The climate plans imposed on EPCIs are systematically based on the production of such assessements, which are an inventory of the "environmental and climate performance" of the territory covered by the local authority. This assessment is often the first objective representation of the territories' involvement in climate issues. These assessments are the "stable statistical objects"

*Speaker

(Desrosières, 1989) from which local climate action is envisaged, debated and sometimes politicised. Given that numerous studies at other levels have shown how useful it is to study public action and the objective representations on which it is based (Edwards, 2010; Aykut and Dahan, 2015), the lack of interest in these objects is all the more regrettable.

By studying these assessments in detail, we have been able to show that they contribute to the low priority given to climate issues at the local level. On the one hand, the concrete conditions under which these assessments are produced prevent the politicisation of the climate issue at the local level: they typically involve a very small number of local actors. On the other hand, they impose a very specific framing of the climate issue, which in most cases prevents climate injunctions from being translated into local action. These assessments are based primarily on the mobilisation and compilation of quantitative data on sectoral carbon emissions, energy production and consumption, and carbon sequestration potential. This carbon/energy framework may seem legitimate as it reproduces a stable definition of climate issues at the local level. However, it is clear that this framing contributes to the low level of local politicisation of climate issues. The assessments produce a representation of the territory that appears to have little mobilising power compared to other framings for climate and environmental issues. For example, the assessments neglect landscape issues: they do not establish a link between climate and landscape change. They also neglect biodiversity and natural heritage issues: they do not take into account local geophysical and ecological specificities or more sensitive relationships with the territory. The study of the assessments reveals a gap between the local history of environmental policies and the instruments of territorialisation.

In this communication, I would like to use the presentation of these results to open and facilitate a discussion on the integration of bioeconomy projects into local climate policies. What our analysis reveals is the diversity of local framings for environmental and climate issues, as well as the heterogeneous levels of support and politicisation that these framings generate. The widespread adoption of the bioeconomy will necessarily involve local political actors and will be part of the territorialisation of climate and environmental policies. It therefore seems necessary to ask how bioeconomy projects can be integrated into local framings for environmental and climate issues. The study of the difficult implementation of local climate policies can provide rich lessons and questions in this regard. How can bioeconomy projects be integrated locally? According to which frameworks? How can the development of these projects be linked to the political mobilisation of the territory? How can these projects be used to revitalise the territorialisation of public action on climate and environmental issues?

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