

*This brief series was developed in preparation for the Foresight Breakout Session of the Global Conference on Agricultural Research for Development (GCARD 2012) and the Global Foresight Hub<sup>1</sup>. The briefs were written to communicate to a wider audience, such as policy makers, civil society organizations, researchers, and funders. The briefs were classified into three categories: Future Studies, Regional Update, and Visioning.*

## **Securing and Building the Future of Quebec Agriculture and Agrifood**

Mario Dumais, Economist, former member of the Commission on the Future of Quebec Agriculture and Agrifood.

*Changing agricultural policy is not a simple task. A Canadian experience contributes to demonstrate that fact. In 2006, the government of Quebec created the Commission on the Future of Quebec Agriculture and Agrifood, which completed its work in 2008 by publishing the report<sup>2</sup> *Agriculture and Agrifood: Securing and Building the Future*.*

### **A very intensive consultation process**

The work of the Commission was requested and funded by the Quebec government. The mandate of that Commission was to:

- Review the issues and challenges facing the agriculture and agrifood sector in Québec.
- Examine the effectiveness of government actions, including those under the responsibility of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and other ministries that have an impact on the sector through environmental, health, land use, regional development, and other issues.
- Provide recommendations that reflect the challenges of competitiveness, farm income, societal expectations, and the potential for development in the regions within Quebec.

Mr. Jean Pronovost was the president of the Commission, and there were two other Commissioners. A general secretary was hired and a team was assembled made up of communication specialists and researchers on agricultural and agrifood issues.

Representatives of the Commission visited France, Belgium, Switzerland and Germany, as well as Wisconsin in the USA. The Commission organized public consultations in 15 regions and 27 cities and towns in Quebec, resulting 770 hearings, of which 720 were supported by written briefs. During the hearings, many organizations and agricultural and agrifood businesses, citizens' organizations and individuals presented their points of view, providing valuable inputs for the Commission. A document entitled *Ce qu'on nous a dit* (What they told us) was published, which summarizes the views expressed. The complementary research papers that the Commission ordered have also been published<sup>3</sup>

### **A vision of the future of agriculture**

The Commission identified different factors that will have an impact on the future of agriculture:

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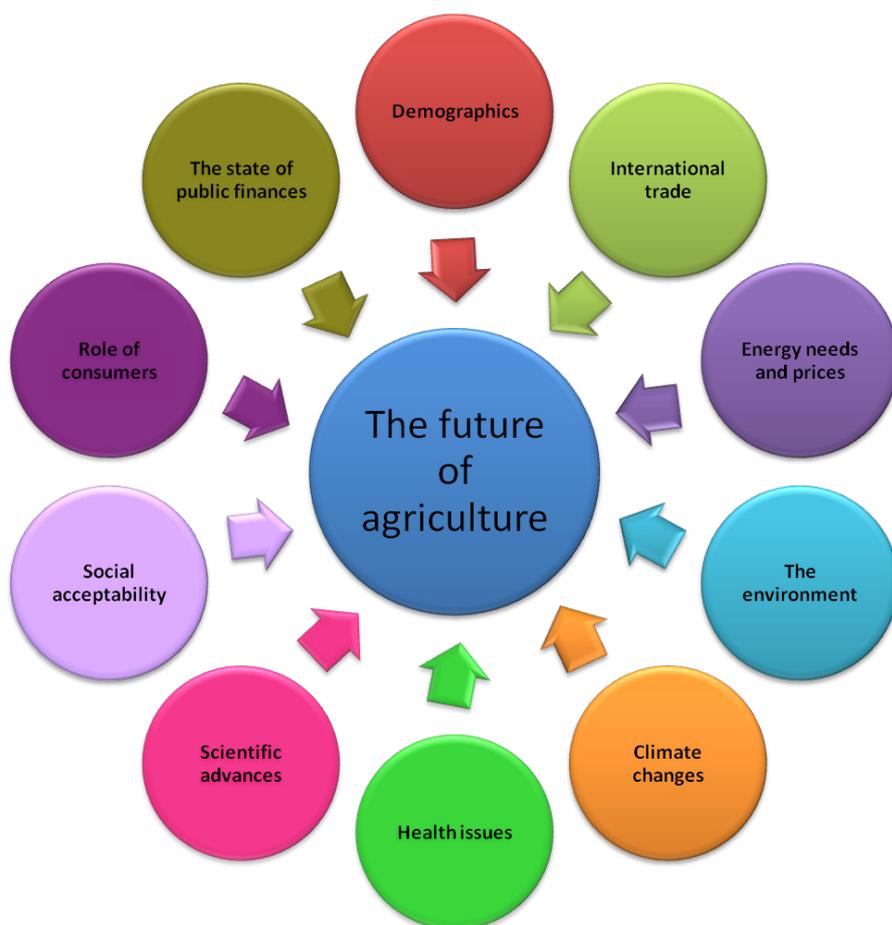
<sup>1</sup><http://www.egfar.org/our-work/shaping-future-together/global-foresight-hub>

<sup>2</sup>[www.caaaq.gouv.qc.ca](http://www.caaaq.gouv.qc.ca)

<sup>3</sup>[www.caaaq.gouv.qc.ca](http://www.caaaq.gouv.qc.ca)

After having synthesized the main messages received from the consultations and hearings, the Commission formulated its vision of the future by articulating the characteristics of tomorrow's agriculture:

- Contribute to feeding Quebecers as its primary mission
- Be multifunctional, in addition to its role as a source of food
- Be pluralist by supporting a diversity of enterprises and crops
- Be rooted in an entrepreneurial culture
- Be highly professional in its practices
- Embrace sustainable development
- Capitalize on its full potential



### Opening up the sector

The Commission synthesized one of the main challenges facing the agriculture of Quebec in the following terms:

The agriculture and agrifood sector is increasingly inward-looking. The systems in place create obstacles to new types of agriculture, the development of innovative products, and the exploration of new commercial opportunities. These systems are built on a dominant agricultural model in which everything is linked to a protectionist vision of the sector. Its goal was to protect Québec agriculture from competition and the risks of innovation, whose complexities we do not always control. We created a fortress for Québec agriculture, which limits the sector's capacity to explore its potential and constitutes an increasingly antiquated shield in a world of economic openness.

In this context, the Commission put forward many recommendations. The most fundamental ones seek to provide oxygen and open the systems of production, marketing, processing and distribution, as well as to provide more freedom to the sector's entrepreneurs. Of its 49 recommendations, the three main ones were:

- Ending the monopoly for the representation of farmers, which is devolved to only one organization that has demonstrated that it represents the majority of farmers.
- Phasing out the monopoly power on the marketing of some agricultural products, which is allocated in Quebec (and in Canada) to producer-controlled marketing boards.
- Phasing out its stabilisation insurance of agricultural income programme, which grants guaranteed prices for certain products.

The Commission concluded that in the future, agriculture would continue to have a large diversity of small, medium and large farms. Some will supply niche markets, but the vast majority will continue to produce commodities for the processing industry. However, all of them will have to be sensitive to the environment and to consumer concerns relating to practices that have harmful effects on the environment (e.g. soil degradation, water and air pollution).

Consumers are more and more preoccupied by the relations that exist between their health and what they eat. Agriculture and agrifood will have to investigate their practices having in mind that preoccupation, and by able to contribute, wherever they can, to the health of the people they are serving.

Four recommendations dealt with research and innovation.<sup>4</sup> The Commission recommended that the government allocate more resources to research and innovation, that a levy be introduced on certain targeted products, that environment and health concerns become priority and that research institutions step up their coordination efforts.

### **Limited impact so far**

The Quebec government has not realized the three main recommendations mentioned above. With respect to the stabilization insurance of the agricultural income programme, the government has introduced amendments, but without changing the programme substantially and, perhaps more fundamentally, without questioning its existence. The programme, managed by the para-public organization La Financière agricole received from the Quebec government C\$ 305 million per year from 2001 to 2008, which was not enough to finance its operations. In 2009, the year after the Commission published its report, the Government committed another C\$ 630 million per year over the next five years, against the recommendation of the Commission. The two other main recommendations have not been implemented.

Other generally less important and less controversial recommendations have been implemented. For example, farmers are not anymore in majority in the management structure of La Financière agricole. In addition, financing has been increased for the programme Prime-Vert, which focuses on the promotion and diffusion of good agricultural practices, on the adaptation of farms to environmental norms and on helping farmers to deal with challenges such as respecting the environment, developing locally harmonious co-habitation, preserving water quality and reducing the production of GHG.

The Government has produced a Livre vert (Green book) for a biofood policy, a tool designed to prepare for the adoption of a bill defining such a policy. The Green book recommends three themes to define the policy:

- Differentiate our food products.
- Improve our competitive capacity.
- Valorize our environment and our land.

### **Why so few results?**

How can we explain the paucity of results? The definition of an agricultural policy in Canada is quite complex, since it has shared jurisdiction between the federal government and the provinces. Moreover, some sector specialists who do not have special interests question the value and relevance of the recommendations, although others wish to see them eventually implemented. The main reason is that agriculture in Quebec is organized by an exceptionally powerful lobby, which exerted pressure in the political arena to prevent the recommendations from being implemented – since they consider the main ones to be contrary to their interests.

In addition, as in many countries, the power of the agricultural lobby in Canada is strengthened by the generally positive image that public opinion has of farmers. Farmers are generally seen as a social class that is responsible for feeding us, works very hard to accomplish this and has the additional responsibility of addressing climatic and biological risks. However, the population should also, as taxpayers and citizens, be better informed about and involved in agricultural policies that governments are adopting on their account, rather than leaving this task to the agricultural lobby (as happens too often). Agricultural lobbies are not exempt from the temptation to put pressure on governments to extract rents from them, which are lucrative for their members, and they often succeed in doing so. Only a better informed and more actively involved public will be able to countervail such power.

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<sup>4</sup>Report of the Commission, p. 160.

### **Citation:**

Dumais, M. 2012. Securing and Building the Future of Quebec Agriculture and Agrifood. *The Futures of Agriculture*. Brief No. 35 - English. Rome: Global Forum on Agricultural Research (GFAR).

### **Contact information:**

Author of the brief Mario Dumais (mario.dumais@videotron.ca). The Brief series coordinator Robin Bourgeois (Robin.Bourgeois@fao.org).

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