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Between the fight against inequalities in access to quality food and the response to the diversity of food cultures: what place for vegetable production?

Allotment/worker gardens



Clustering of separate vegetable plots at a distance from the houses.

≠ shared gardens & community gardens.

Rouen (Jégat, 2021)

Research context

When they were created by the Catholic Church at the **end of the 19th century**, allotments had three objectives : to fix the populations resulting from the rural exodus thanks to a new attachment to the land, to **provide food aid** to modest households and to stop the spread to epidemics.

During the last century, **the profiles of the beneficiaries have changed considerably** : from a relatively homogeneous group of workers to a more diverse public with the arrival of more privileged social categories. These evolutions modify the **functions attributed** to the garden plots as well as the **consideration by the public authorities**.

During **each crisis** (economic, social, wartime), the **food function of these spaces are reinvested**. In the current context of general inflation of consumer prices, the question of food insecurity is again at the heart of social concerns.

From a **scientific point of view**, allotments are studied through the prism of the sociological profiles of the beneficiaries (Pluvinage et al., 1992) and the functions attributed to the plots (Guyon, 2008). Their **food function has been reexamined since the 2008 crisis** (Pourias, 2014 & Marie, 2019).

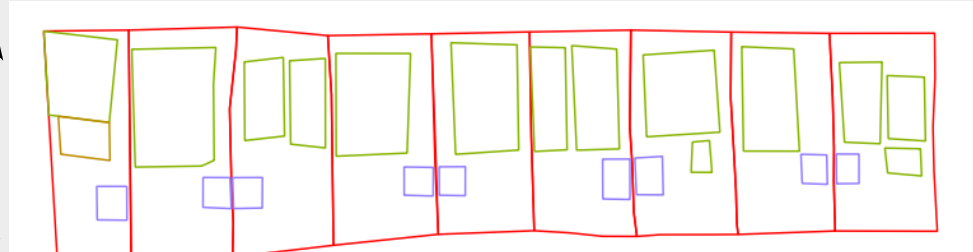
The idea here is to question the allotment gardens as a potential **corrective lever of the inequalities of access to food**. Particular attention will be paid to people of recent immigrant origin whose **food insecurity is increased** tenfold by the difficulties of access to **products corresponding to their food cultures**.

Interrogating the functions attributed to plots through spatial analysis



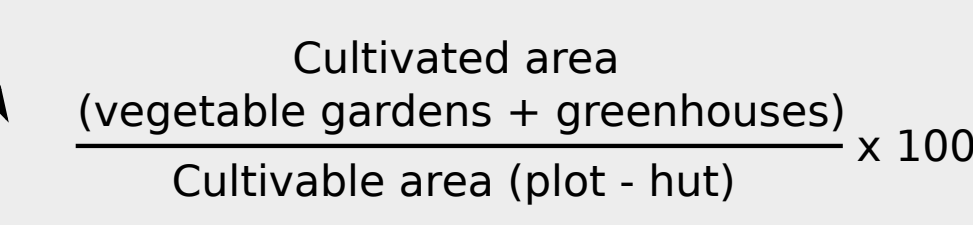
Census of allotment sites from aerial images.

71 groups of gardens : 37 in Rouen, 24 in Caen and 10 in Alençon.



Digitalization of each plot & of the vegetable gardens, huts and greenhouses.

3025 garden plots or 75 hectares.



Crop ratio calculations at the plot, site and study land scales.

57% of the cultivable area (72ha) is cultivated (41ha) : 60% in Rouen, 53% in Caen & 48% in Alençon.



Distinction of the **functionnal trend** of each plot.

68% are used for food production (at least half of the cultivable area is cultivated) versus 22% for recreation (less than half of the cultivable area is cultivated) ; 10% are not allocated (not cultivated).

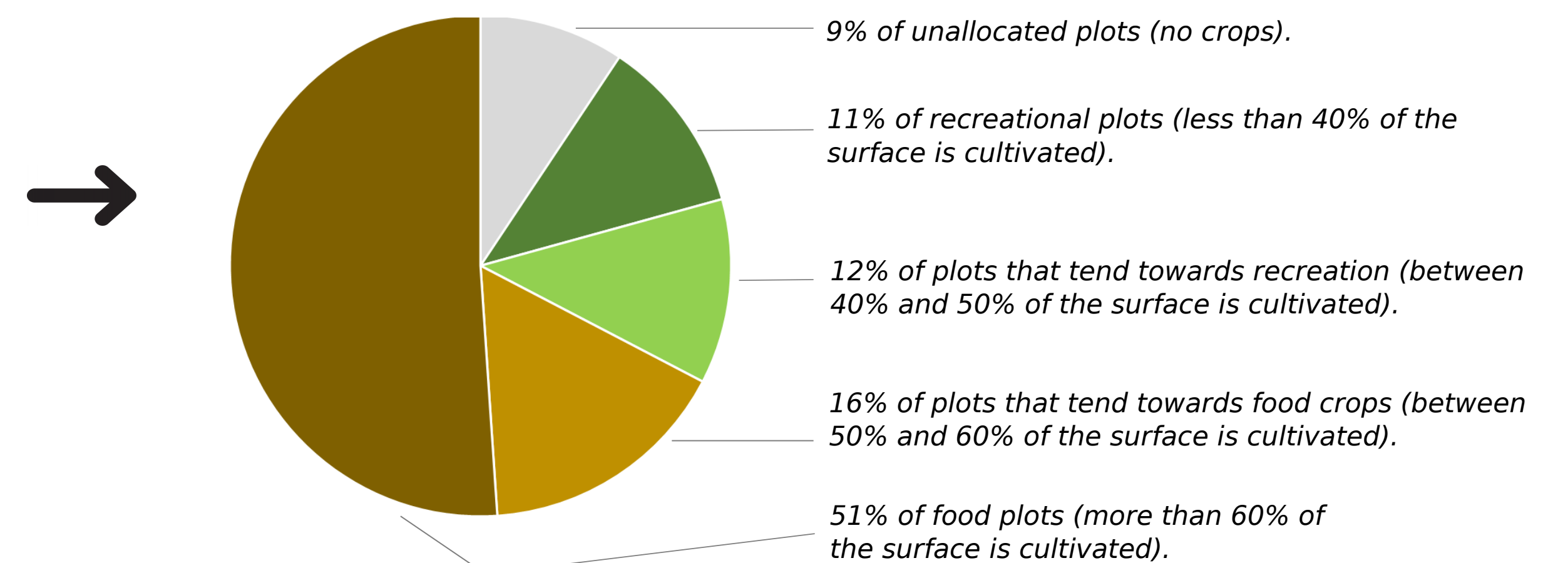
Distribution of respondents in each study site



Sampling for a **questionnaire survey** of 592 allotment holders in the three study agglomerations (direct award in 2021 and 2022).

To question the **food function of allotments**. Three main parts : appropriation of the plot, vegetable production and collection of social properties.

Distribution of the functions attributed to the allotment plots in the three agglomerations



The **importance of the food-producing function varies** between the fields, but also within them, in relation to the **sociological profiles of the beneficiaries** and local public policies (see table below).

	Alençon	Caen	Rouen
Number of plots	347 (10ha)	744 (18ha)	2085 (46ha)
% plots turned to food production	67%	54%	72%
Local public policies	Absence, logic of «let it happen» by the garden associations	Territorial food project, «pro-recreation» actions	Territorial food project(actions aimed at the CSP+) & old model in the working class communes
Context	50,000 inhabitants, aging population still linked to rural areas.	200,000 inhabitants, reduced industrial past.	450,000 inhabitants, persistence of industry.

Some characteristic differences of the study areas (Jégat, 2021)

Allotment gardeners : a socially homogeneous population?

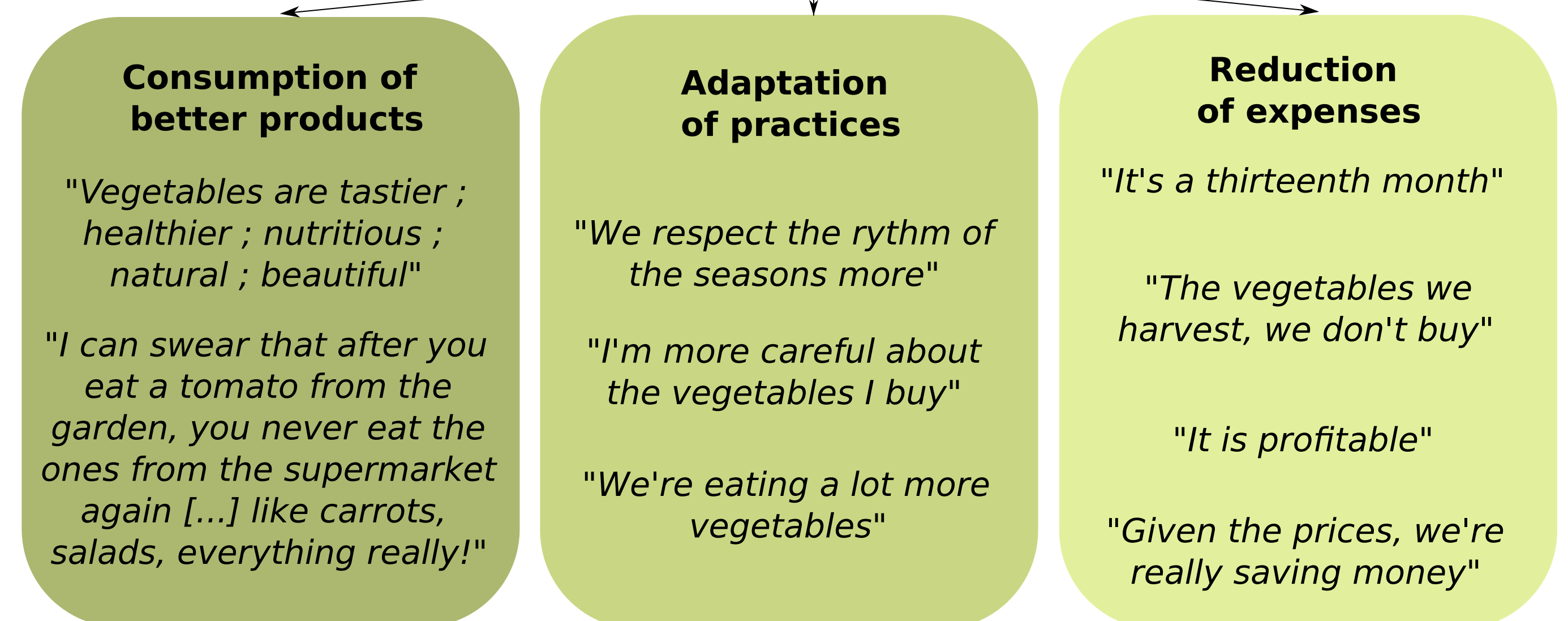
The **sociological profiles of the beneficiaries** surveyed seem relatively homogeneous : men (75%), retired (71%) and belonging to the working classes (69%). We then see a **marginalization of beneficiaries with social or cultural differences**(women, households from more privileged social categories, people from recent immigration and young working people), notably due to a **different vision of the garden**(representation of the beautiful garden and its functions, distribution of roles in the household, types of production, etc).

	% from an agricultural background	% retired	% family activity	% more than 300€/year for the garden	% foodcrops production
Born in France(469 enq)	14%	75%	18%	16%	86%
Born outside(121 enq)	47%	54%	32%	25%	79%
Men(446 enq)	20%	74%	18%	18%	88%
Women(146 enq)	23%	62%	30%	18%	74%
Overall(592 enq)	18%	71%	21%	17%	84%

Some characteristic differences of the gardeners surveyed (Jégat, 2021)

72% of respondents see their plots primarily as a space for growing vegetables.

Vegetable production leads to a **change in eating practices**.



Tendfold challenges for immigrant gardeners?

For people of recent immigrant background the **challenges of access to vegetable gardens are increased** tenfold by the difficulties of accessing products corresponding to their food crops (not marketed or too expensive).

"(water bindweed) is 17€ a bunch and only on the parisian markets [...] here I have 5m² and for almost nothing, I bought the seeds from Cambodia"



Tropical greenhouse & onion monoculture (Jégat, 2021)

In order to cultivate the fruits and vegetables of the country of origin (mainly Spain, Portugal, Maghreb and Southeast Asia), the **pedo-climatic conditions are artificially reproduced** : construction of large greenhouses, covering of the plot, collectivization of the plot...

"The portuguese come with their cinder blocks, it concretes everything and then hello the price of the work to destroy"

It is these **differences in gardening practices** that elicit the most **hostile reactions**, since they do not correspond to the standardized plot shapes sought by local associations and communities (the main argument for dismissing these households from the association).

Perseigne allotment : a particularly important spatial appropriation

Created in the **1970s** for the workers of the adjoining factory (Moulinex), the allotment gardens of the Perseigne neighborhood (Alençon) have more than **150 plots of 400m²**.

During the last 20 years, the site will be qualified as a **"lawless zone"** by the residents (mafia-like management, sale of plots of land, thefts, illicit businesses, etc.). This lack of regulation leads to a **picturesque spatial appropriation** by the beneficiaries: constructions, collectivization of land, sale, etc.

In 2020, the **"Régie de quartier"** (city policy) will take over the management of these spaces. To meet the influx of requests, a **major transformation of the site** is envisaged (division of plots, opening up, collective spaces, etc.). For the current beneficiaries, more than 90 % of whom are recent immigrants, the futur is feared: for them, the garden is a **space for "intensive" vegetable cultivation**. Indeed, each year more than **30 tons of vegetables** are produced in these allotments (according to Marie, 2019).

Conclusion

While the **food functions** of urban agriculture are often forgotten in favor of its social and environmental functions, the poster attempts to recall its **centrality for modest households** from the working classes.

For **beneficiaries of recent immigration**, the **importance of access to a vegetable plot is tenfold** : access to better quality products than those available through the market, products corresponding to the food culture & social integration in the neighborhood via the cultural community. For these households, **access to a garden is complicated** by various obstacles : acceptance by the gardening community of specific cultivation practices, access to the association (language barrier) and preservation of garden plots large enough to accomodate production. In spite of the evolutions of the last decades, **the allotment gardens still seem to meet their basic objective**: to **facilitate the access to good quality food products** to modest housholds coming from the working classes.

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