

*François, by the grace of God, King of France,
Proclaim that, in order to improve our system of
justice, to reduce the number of trials and
proceedings for the good of our subjects, we have
decided and decreed the following, by perpetual
and irrevocable edict.*

.....

*Art 102. – That in the centres of our Provinces,
merchants shall record every week the prices
charged for the main foodstuffs such as wheat,
wine, hay and others, without expecting any salary
for this and on pain of a fine, ban on trading,
imprisonment and any other method of law.*

*Art 103. – To this end, two or three of their
representatives shall every market day bring these
prices to the clerk of the court or his agent who will
record them without delay and without
remuneration.*

*Art 104. – The extract from the clerks' register and
this alone shall henceforth be law, in the execution
of any legal ruling where it will be necessary to
evaluate these foodstuffs.*

.....

*We ask the members of our Parliaments in Paris,
Toulouse, Bordeaux, Dijon, Rouen, Dauphiné and
Provence, our officers of the law and other
competent persons, to publish, record, preserve
and carry out these orders and to oppose acts
contrary to them, for such is our wish.*

*Villers-Cotterets, August 1539, the 25th year of our
reign.*

François.

Introduction

The purpose of the Villers-Cotterets Edict of 1539 was to set up an ordinary system of law and make contractual conditions easier. It required merchants to go to royal agents each week and record the prices of the main foodstuffs on which the courts would depend when evaluating the rights and obligations of contracting parties. It is undoubtedly the first French text to organise the regular monitoring of agricultural prices throughout the country. From the XVIth century, the development of statistics thus contributed to the assertion of a central government. Over time, statistics would adapt to the requirements of economic forces: to stabilise supplies to towns and country, and inform dealers. Nowadays, the statistician depends on this information to analyse the economic climate and measure economic activity.

However, it was not until after the Second World War, for reasons relating to social regulation and national auditing, that indices were used as a matter of course whilst from the Seventies onwards the implementation of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) was accompanied by Europe-wide harmonisation.

The index of farm-gate prices of agricultural products (IPPAP) measures changes in the prices received by farmers. Their calculation is dependent on the social organisation of production and trade that forms the framework of price monitoring. The growth of towns in the 19th and 20th centuries resulted in the appearance of a network of physical markets that correspond to three stages of marketing:

- farmers' markets where farmers bring their products,
- wholesale markets that centrally supply large towns,
- retail markets that supply city-dwellers.

Over the last fifty years, changing lifestyles have been accompanied by the development of mass distribution and the processing industry. Faced with such a commercial force, farmers have joined forces to strengthen their negotiating power and meet the huge demand for standardised products.

The concentration of production and business units has led to deals being conducted elsewhere, with purchasing centres for mass distribution working directly with groups of producers and the trade. Associated historically with the dispersal of production and trading units, the farmers' markets on which a model of price monitoring was based, have gone downhill. The decline in tonnages of fruit, vegetables and meat-based products in the market at Rungis, which supplies the independent retailers of the Ile-de-France, gives some idea of the phenomenon :

- -16% between the first half of the 1980s and the first half of the 1990s,
- -25% over the following ten years¹.

The upheavals affecting the agricultural markets are reflected in monitoring and measurements. Consequently, the methodology of the index of the farm-gate prices of agricultural products² (IPPAP), which was published ten years ago, deserves to be updated and a reminder given of the general principles of measuring price movements, before the problems associated with monitoring and the sources of information are described.

1. According to SEMMARIS

2. The measurement of agricultural price movements, IPPAP Presentation of base year 1990 - INSEE-results n°429, production system n°92 - November 1995 - 168 pages