



The solution is beyond the opposition.

Breaking down the fence between conventional and organic values to secure trust and integrity

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Abstract – Organic farming is a good candidate to analyze sociotechnical transition processes towards alternative farming systems. Our hypothesis is that mid-scale business forms can allow niches to gain enough momentum to trigger a transition process. Studying the case of a French producers' organization whose share of organic products increased from 10% to 70% in the past twenty years, we analyze how this organization succeeded in maintaining organic farming's values through upscaling and outscaling processes. Our first results highlight how intermediate-business actors can apply conventional development tools and strategies, such as vertical integration and horizontal concentration, as a strong lever for organic agriculture.

INTRODUCTION

Considering its failure to meet the challenges of food sovereignty and natural resources conservation, mainstream agriculture has to perform a transformation towards more sustainable approaches. As organic farming is one such approach, it is a good candidate to analyze sociotechnical transition processes towards sustainable agriculture. Transition processes towards organic farming have been analyzed at the national level in several European countries (for example: Belz, 2004; Smith, 2006). These works are mostly led in a retrospective perspective and provide information and understanding elements on the macro-level interactions of passed transition processes. But they don't inform on the different roles and functions that actors have to perform to change agricultural practices and to change the institutional context in an on-going process. This calls for a deepened understanding of the role of agency in niche-regime interactions.

Most scientists focus either on localised initiatives leading to small niche markets or, from a critical point of view, on long distribution channels unable to secure organic farming's values. The main hypothesis explored in our work is that midscale organic food chains are more likely to move from niche to volume while maintaining these values. In a multi-level perspective (Geels, 2002), this leads to this research question: how can midscale business forms allow innovation niches to gain enough momentum to trigger a transition process?

METHOD

Our analysis is based on a French agricultural cooperative case (i.e. a marketing producers' organization) of the Drôme Valley, whose share of organic product – this organization gathers organic and non organic producers – strongly increased in the last twenty years. We combined two qualitative approaches to analyze the determinants for upscaling and outscaling processes to allow the transmission of trust and integrity values. First, we conducted a six-month ethnographic study: we participated to the cooperative General Assembly and to several broader arenas in which other actors were involved, and we interviewed the director, administrators and other members of the cooperative. The ethnographic study aimed to collect the actors' conceptions and to see how they interact, including conflicts and confrontations. Second, we analyzed the evolution of cross-participation and partnerships under a network analysis framework, on the basis of project documents and official documents of the cooperative, of the local extension services and of the local public institutions.

THE DIFFUSION OF ORGANIC FARMING'S VALUES THROUGH UPSCALING AND OUTSCALING PROCESSES

In the interviews we led with organic farmers, organic farming appears as associated to three main values. First, it is related to the conservation of natural resources (soil fertility, water and biodiversity). Second, it is based on the farm's autonomy regarding inputs, including genetic material. For these two reasons organic farming is based on highly diversified cropping systems. Third, it calls for stronger links between production and consumption, which implies relocating food chains. It should be noted that the area under study is considered as the birthplace of organic farming in France.

The cooperative under study is a small cooperative in view of the French agricultural cooperative landscape (550 members, turnover = 2,5M€, 3500 tons of collected cereals). The share of organic products rose from 10% to 70% in the past twenty years. The cooperative started collecting organic grain in 1994, but the real take-off took place at the beginning of the 2000's. In 2008, it set a target of 100% organic production.

This target is quite unusual for such a "traditional" actor of the French agricultural sector. Our analysis shows that one key element is that there is no strong opposition between organic and conventional farmers within the cooperative. Organic farm-

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ers have been increasingly participating in the cooperative's administration board since the 90's. They were two out of 15 administrators in 1996, 8 in 2008 and 14 since 2011. The increasing number of organic farmers in the cooperative's board shows that they are considered to be representative by both their conventional and organic peers. According to the interviews, the "100% organic" target could be set because it is a long-term aim and because the cooperative demonstrated it was a viable strategy for farmers, but most of all thanks to this specific context where there is no major opposition between organic and conventional farmers. Now, let's see how this cooperative succeeded in maintaining organic farming's values through upscaling and out-scaling processes.

Vertical integration

At first, the cooperative was selling organic grain to local transformation industries (grain- and oil-mills). Organic grain production remained below 10% until a strong conversion wave occurred in the late 90's, mainly due to public incentives. In 2002, the cooperative hired a director and merged with a supply-cooperative for practical reasons: they shared the offices and most of the staff worked part-time in both structures. The director was convinced that organic agriculture was a good opportunity for the cooperative's farmers, in this specific production environment, with low yields but also low pest pressure. In 2008, he convinced the administrators to set an "100% organic" target. One key challenge to develop organic farming is to create economic opportunity for rotation crops. That's why in 2009, the cooperative invested in an organic feed-mill. Even though importing organic grain from Italy was cheaper, priority was given to local supply in order to foster the cooperative's autonomy in regards to global market. In 2012, one of its major clients, a local egg-firm, happened to be for sale. The cooperative created a holding with other local cooperatives to buy it, to maintain this outlet.

Horizontal concentration

In 2000, the cooperative created a cooperatives' union with 3 other local cooperatives, aiming at structuring the organic sector, but this union collapsed rapidly due to opposed strategic visions. In 2008, the cooperative created another cooperatives' union with 4 other neighbour cooperatives which had a very low organic production. This operation aimed at structuring and professionalizing organic grain production through pooling storage and transport capacities, human resources and technical skills. In three years, the union's organic production capacity was tripled. This allowed increasing the local share of the feed-mill supply from 10% to 60%. Today, the feed-mill supplies 95% of the local egg-firm needs. By building these alliances with other cooperatives in order to structure the organic sector, the cooperative thus also gives impetus to a re-territorialisation dynamic.

DISCUSSION

Our results show how an initially conventional cooperative which progressively turned to organic production managed to maintain organic farming values through outscaling and upscaling processes. Complementary results regarding its management tools, which could not be presented in this short paper, are along the same line. Although this case study is quite specific regarding the French context, in terms of cultural and production environment, it shows how economic actors can make use of conventional strategies and tools to move organic food chains from niche to volume, while maintaining integrity. At the time of writing, further field work is needed –and scheduled, to study how trust is managed along the food chain.

One key element we would like to highlight is the progressiveness of the dynamic. In the area under study, organic grain production started in the early 70's, but only found impetus in the 2000's. The hypothesis we are working on at the moment –which seems to be confirmed by the first results of the network analysis–, is that the cooperative's targets and strategies could be set because of network activities of innovation brokers in arenas at the broader regime level, gradually leading to the alignment of values among conventional and organic farmers of the cooperative.

CONCLUSION

Our work highlights how intermediate-business actors can utilize conventional development strategies and tools as a strong lever for organic agriculture, breaking down the fence between conventional and organic agriculture. At the time of writing, part of the analysis is still on-going. It should inform on the different roles and functions economic actors can perform to foster niche-regime interactions and to contribute to transition processes.

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