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## Multi-actor building of fair trade food chains with “big operators” for heritage cereals

In France, some groups that are cultivating heritage cereals (members of the Réseau Semences Paysannes) are interested on working with long chain operators and more and more long chain operators are interested in farmers' varieties. Can these two initiatives find a common way to work together?

### An increasing interest in heritage cereals

Historically, farmer's wheat varieties were produced and processed on short supply chains by farmers-bakers, farmers-millers or direct association between a farmer and a baker. However, the interest for such products derived from farmer's varieties has increased quickly those past few years. As a result, many different farmers cultivate farmers' varieties, and some do not want or can't process the wheat on local food networks. Moreover, awareness is raising on seed's crucial role in the creation of sustainable food systems, and consumers' interests for farmers' seeds and varieties is increasing. The actual drop of the margins on conventional food products leads big companies to invest in organic agriculture, as part of commercial campaigns on specific products with a high environmental and ecological value. As a consequence, there is a growing demand for heritage cereals from “big” market operators, such as cooperatives, millers, or other private processors. But those operators are not used to processing farmers' cereal varieties, and farmers producing wheat farmers' varieties are not used to selling it to this type of operators.

Therefore, some groups of the Réseau Semences Paysannes (RSP) decided to build new ethical long-chain sectors, based on multi-actor organisation and on the values they defend. However, developing such initiatives is a long and complex process that raises the question of the definition of a fair trade food chain.

### Building blocks to create fair long food chains: collective decisions at heart

RSP groups have developed all through the years values that are translated into practices and organisations, which represent a basis to build fair trade food chains: collective management of the seeds as a common, social justice for all farmers, fair prices all along the chain, or respect of the agrobiodiversity. Indeed, this is also translated in every innovative action, including the long-chain's sector development. But many questions arise during this process, because “big operators” don't always share the RSP's values. For instance, they tend to propose economical organisations that favour price volatility, and that leave very small space for a collective organisation. Three points were identified to be crucial during the food chain development process:

- The preservation of the collective dynamic is a central point for all the groups cultivating and breeding heritage cereals, because of the political ideas that it represents. But the engagement can be harder to keep when new actors join the groups. This is why the associations are implementing many actions to foster commitment, such as collective trainings, regular meetings, technical exchange, collective management of the experimental platforms and of the varietal selection, but also compulsory participation and charter signatures to be allowed to join the initiative. INNOVATION FACTSHEET #??, 27/02/19 [www.cerere2020.eu](http://www.cerere2020.eu)
- The price building up is also decisive in the development of long-chain in heritage cereals, because it impacts the local food systems entirely, as well as the sustainability of the projects. Indeed, prices volatility and competition with the local farmers-bakers are possible consequences of the creation of long supply chain in heritage cereals. Moreover, the sustainability of those supply chains relies on two very important factors, which are group facilitation (to maintain dynamic management of diversity) and research on farmer's seeds and varieties. Those two processes need remuneration, which should to be integrated in the price of the products. This question is raised in many groups. Finally, a fair distribution of the added value all along the chain seems to be an aspect that needs to be reflected beforehand, to avoid a too high final price, and guarantee a better accessibility of the final product (bred, flour...) to the consumer. Indeed, following the logic of market segmentation, « big operators » often target a wealthy population to buy this type of products.
- The charter implementation in each group, adapted to the local conditions where the initiative is set is important to protect the values of the groups on the long term, especially when new actors enter the food chain.

## Towards a national multi-actor framework?

In France, a national group of reflection started two years ago with different big actors, such as organic cooperatives, millers, or bakers, in order to backup the development of local sectors, in terms of political orientation, technical management, trainings and knowledge exchange. The main motivation of the actors to create this group was to share questions and solutions on how to organise food chains that would match the RSP's principles.

This group has, among other things, produced a charter to be signed by all the different market operators that would join a project of marketing products from farmers' varieties or heritage cereals, and more precisely wheat. This charter engages the actors to foster farmer's seeds and varieties and agrobiodiversity, to manage them as a common, and to recognise the knowledge and know-how around the production of farmer's wheat varieties.

Because of some internal problems (mostly political: the cooperatives shifted their focus towards the up-scaling of the organic market), some cooperatives left the group, leading to a break in the group's meetings and of the reflection. Some operators of the group will continue the work by themselves, and implement the charter, everyone its own way.



1. Flipon E, The mill "Moulins Bourgeois", 2018

2. Flipon E, A field visit with a cooperative, 2018

## The way forward

Even if, for now, the national group is not gathering any more, its dynamic will keep on going because most of the actors involved in the process did recognize the charter's value. The difference is that the initiative will continue at a smaller scale, which may lead to the construction of strong local networks. One observation that arises from this is that from now on, a national cooperation does not seem to be the easiest solution for the implementation of fair food chains based on farmers' cereals varieties.

Nowadays, organic farming is scaling up, which raises many questions among the actors. Regarding this example, the same questions arise among the actors of farmers' seeds organisations, but the response given is different: as opposed to a scaling up, the actors seem to tend to organise an horizontal proliferation(1), also called decentralization. Still, a national cooperation of all the organisations may be interesting in a close future, to establish a power balance on the political and economical bodies. Moreover, at a national level, today's objectives are pretty much the same among all the organisations: there is a necessity to communicate and train more, in order to raise interest among bakers and other processors, as the demand is not much developed among this type of actors.

Finally, the "big operators" such as mills or cooperatives struggle to find outlets for their products. This need to find outlets on the short term is hard to fit with the participatory plant breeding's long term management: the question of the return on investment is therefore asked for those "big operators", who then tend not to invest in research and development for farmer's varieties and heritage cereals.

## Suggested readings

*L'agriculture biologique pour nourrir l'humanité, Jacques Caplat*

*Philip H Howard, oral presentation during the Diversifood final congress.*