



# **The “promise of difference” of cooperative supermarkets: making quality products accessible through democratic sustainable food chains?**

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## **Abstract**

In recent years, collaborative and participatory supermarkets are spreading all over Europe, especially in France, as a new purchase model. This article aims to analyse the “promise of difference” (LE VELLY, 2017) that distinguishes this model from the current food offer. This promise is assessed both through the analysis of those projects in terms of products selection, work organisation and decision making, and through the implementation of concrete regulation activities. The methodological tools we used were content analysis of speeches, documents and on-line newspapers communication, as well as participant observation. The main results show that these models emerge as an alternative to the current food offer, both conventional supermarkets and alternative food networks. The study contributes to demonstrate that these cooperative supermarkets are shaped taking into account economic (reasonable price of products, reduction of fixed costs), social (accessibility, creation of a space to exchange and share, participation to the decision making) and environmental (local and organic products) issues. They inspire on conventional devices in terms of accessibility (low prices, long opening hours) and variety of products range. However, they distinguish themselves, in the first place, for being non-profit organisations, reinvesting the profits into the cooperative itself or into solidarity projects, but also by actively involving consumers in decision-making.

**Keywords:** Cooperative supermarket. Food supply. Re-configuration of the food system.

**A “promessa da diferença” dos supermercados cooperativos: tornar acessíveis os produtos de qualidade através de cadeias alimentares sustentáveis e democráticas?**

## **Resumo**

Nos últimos anos, os supermercados cooperativos e participativos estão se espalhando por toda Europa, especialmente na França, como um novo modelo de compra. Este artigo tem

como objetivo analisar a “promessa de diferença” (LE VELLY, 2017) que distingue esse modelo da atual oferta de alimentos. Esta promessa é avaliada tanto através da análise desses projetos em termos de seleção de produtos, organização do trabalho e tomada de decisões, como através da implementação de atividades de regulação concretas. A metodologia baseia-se na análise de conteúdo de discursos, documentos e comunicação em jornais on-line, assim como em observação participante. Os principais resultados mostram que esses modelos emergem como uma alternativa, tanto aos supermercados convencionais quanto às redes alternativas. O estudo contribui para demonstrar que essas cooperativas se estruturam levando em conta os aspectos: econômicos (preço razoável dos produtos, redução dos custos fixos), sociais (acessibilidade, criação de espaços de troca e compartilhamento, participação na tomada de decisões) e ambientais (produtos locais e/ou orgânicos). Inspiram-se nos modelos dos supermercados convencionais em termos de acessibilidade (preços baixos, horários de funcionamento prolongados) e variedade de produtos. Porém, distinguem-se primeiramente por serem organizações sem fins lucrativos, reinvestindo o lucro na própria cooperativa ou em projetos solidários, além de envolverem ativamente os consumidores na tomada de decisões.

**Palavras-chave:** Supermercado cooperativo. Abastecimento alimentar. Reconfiguração do sistema alimentar.

### ¿A “promessa de diferencia” dos supermercados cooperativos: hacer que los productos de calidad sean accesible través de cadeias alimentares sostenibles e democráticas?

#### Resumen

En los últimos años, los supermercados colaborativos y participativos se están extendiendo por toda Europa, especialmente en Francia, como un nuevo modelo de compra. Este artículo pretende analizar la “promessa de diferencia” (LE VELLY, 2017) que distingue este modelo de la oferta actual de alimentos. Esta promessa se evalúa a través del análisis de esos proyectos en términos de selección de productos, organización del trabajo y toma de decisiones, y mediante la implementación de actividades de regulación concretas. La metodología se basa en el análisis de contenido de discursos, documentos y comunicaciones en los periódicos en línea, así como en la observación participante. Los principales resultados muestran que estos modelos surgen como alternativas, tanto a los supermercados convencionales como a las redes alimentarias alternativas. El estudio contribuye a demostrar que estas cooperativas se configuran teniendo en cuenta los aspectos económicos (precio razonable de los productos, reducción de los costos fijos), sociales (accesibilidad, creación de espacio para intercambiar y compartir, participación en la toma de decisiones) y ambientales (productos locales y/o biológicos). Se inspiran en los supermercados convencionales en términos de accesibilidad (precios bajos, horarios de apertura prolongados) y variedad de productos. Sin embargo, se distinguen por ser organizaciones sin fines de lucro, reinvertiendo los lucros en la misma cooperativa o en proyectos solidarios, e por involucrar activamente a los consumidores en la toma de decisiones.

**Palabras clave:** Supermercado cooperativo. Abastecimiento alimentario. Reconfiguración del sistema alimentar.

## 1 Introduction

The entry of new actors into the food system is leading to socio-economic innovations that offer fresh perspectives on the reconfiguration of the food supply chain.

Food systems have been traditionally analysed through an opposition between two paradigms. On the one hand, the agro-industrial paradigm is characterized by the modernization and industrialization of food provisioning systems, the standardization of food production and processing, and the globalization of food markets. On the other hand, the integrated territorial agri-food paradigm is characterized by the relocation and ecologisation of production and consumption systems through short or direct supply chain. However, in recent years, this binary vision has been questioned by some scholars (WATT et al., 2005; DUBUISSON; LEVELLY, 2008; MAYE; KIRWAN, 2010). They state that a significant part of contemporary food systems is best understood as a hybrid food geography combining elements of both paradigms. The combination of mixed forms or configurations produces the co-evolution of different food models (FOURNIER; TOUZARD, 2014) and might be a promising a pathway towards sustainability for territorial agri-food systems (LAMINE et al., 2012). Furthermore, these two ideal-types actually already go through some forms of hybridization as shown by many example cited in the literature, from the creation of local product brands, the promotion of family farming to the conventionalization of organic products in the large-scale retail chains. El Karmouni H., and Prévot-Carpentier M., (2016) stress that *La Louve* cooperative supermarket although is emerging as an alternative it is the expression of a hybridization to conventional model, incorporating elements of the large-scale retail chains. El Karmouni (2017) get to the conclusion that this supermarket carries out a « promise of difference » by proposing another way of commercialization based on an organization self-managed by its members, and by generating benefits though this different organization inspired by social and solidarity economy and belong to its members- owners.

This article aims to deepen the “promise of difference” theoretical analytical framework developed by Le Velly (2017) enlarging to all participatory and cooperative supermarkets. According to this author, what characterizes alternative food networks is the "promise of difference" they carry. It is defined as the "promise of another modality of organization production, trade and / or food consumption, and the promise of associated benefits" (LE VELLY, 2017, p.24). The author states that alternative systems can be analysed both through their project and through all the regulation activities implemented. Identifying the "project" of an initiative allows to point out the role of ideas in the dynamics of organizations. Le Velly defines “the project” as "the reasons and goals that a collective gives itself in order to justify its existence and to guide its action". In the present study, we thus identify the objectives that coop supermarkets set for themselves, the values they carry and the "paradigm" in which they fit.

In the context of alternative food systems, the project therefore holds a "promise of difference", in contrast to conventional systems. The actors involved criticize the conventional system and identify problematic dimensions. Starting from this critique, they seek to make a change. However, not all initiatives necessarily have the same angle of attack, the same priorities in their promise of difference, as will show the comparison between several examples of supermarkets.

In addition, the project is inseparable from the modalities of its concrete execution. In order to analyse this implementation, Le Velly (2017) proposes to reflect in terms of "regulation activities", in order to "remind that all regulatory activities

come from individual or collective actors". In this line of thought, cooperative supermarkets can be seen as hybrid configurations, integrating some operational modalities of large scale retail chains but with a promise of difference that sets them apart.

In analysing the implementation, Le Velly proposes a distinction between conventional regulatory activities and alternative regulatory activities, the latter being those aimed at "generating difference".

Thus, our interest is both in what is conveyed in the speeches and what the implementation reveals about the operational considerations that lead to opting for certain modes of operation and not others.

The analytical framework around the notion of "promise of difference" is intended to overtake the binary conception opposing the alternative systems to the conventional ones, or even the more recent approaches that focus on the forms of hybridization but still revolve around these two standard ideals. Therefore, according to Le Velly (2017), an alternative agri-food system can rather be analysed as a combination of conventional and alternative regulatory activities. This combination is not necessarily stable and can evolve as the project is put into action. Our analysis thus takes into account both the project - the objectives and values expressed in speeches, brochures, websites - and its concrete implementation, that combines both alternative and conventional regulation activities. In order to compare internal and external perceptions of the initiatives, we analysed how the press perceives these supermarkets and their promise of difference,

The main questions, therefore, are: what do these supermarkets propose differently to the current offer? How the press represent these differences?

## 2 Material and Methods

A qualitative methodology was used to examine the emergence of cooperative supermarkets in France, drawing on analysis of content of speeches (interviews, presentations), documents (statutes and charters), social-networks (internet supermarkets website) and through a direct participation in a French cooperative supermarket, located in Paris, since autumn 2017. An analysis grid was drawn up to analyse the documents and the field notebook so as to understand the organisational model of cooperative supermarkets.

We try to confront the idea of the supermarket and the project implementation process (which system of regulation is established?). Three major aspects have been analysed: work organization, decision-making and product selection.

These aspects are also investigated through media discourse. 99 articles of online newspapers published from January 2017 to July 2018 were collected. A lexicometric analysis using the free software IRaMuTeQ was adopted in order to analyse these articles. This method consists in analysing a text with a quantitative approach, counting the occurrences of the words, their proportions, their uses, and their co-occurrences. More precisely, it relies on the proximities between the words used and frequency statistics. We applied lexicometry techniques such as the top-down hierarchical classification according to the Reinert method and the factorial correspondence analysis. The lexical analysis allowed us to visualize the semantic

articulations within the text related to the characteristics of the article from which it is extracted.

As for the timing of the statistical analysis, we have chosen an ex-ante lexicometric analysis. As underlined by Fallery and Rodhain (2007), this choice implies that the results of the ex-ante statistical analysis support and guide the interpretation. We favoured a lexical analysis over a linguistic one. The lexical analysis, on the one hand, determines the lexical inventory of the corpus, the calculation of the frequencies of the occurrences, the elaboration of a graphic network of different notions, and the elaboration of classes of discourses. The linguistic analysis, on the other hand, studies the connectors in the discourse, the thematic progression, the assessment of markers of form (assertive, interrogative, imperative) in the discourse and it is adopted above all to analyse a person's speech (FALLERY; RODHAIN, 2007). Considering the importance of the corpus - consisting of 99 articles - and the correspondence to a group rather than to an individual, we chose the lexical analysis over the linguistic one.

### 3 The cooperative supermarkets

The cooperative supermarkets are emerging in Europe, for example in France (38 initiatives were identified in mars 2019, at different development stages), Spain (11 initiatives), Switzerland (5 initiatives), Belgium (3 initiatives), Italy (1 initiative).

The survey is focused in France because of the large number of initiatives and the possibility of participating in one of these supermarkets. In France, 8 supermarkets are already functioning and 30 projects are in development stage - more or less advanced in their reflexions and implementation process (13 grocery store lab; 6 collective purchasing groups; 11 associations that carry out the project).

Some years and several steps are required to concretize the idea. Based on the analysis of the process of implementing a supermarket, several steps appear to be fundamental (i-constitution of a group to create an association, ii-setting up of a temporary store or purchasing group; iii-creation of the supermarket). Some of these initiatives point out that the achievement of a minimum threshold of 1500 members is required, both to reach a minimum capital and to ensure sufficient workforce to keep the supermarket open 6 days a week. As highlighted in the projects websites or during the promoters' interviews, these supermarkets arise as an alternative to the current food offer. Two main statements emerge. On the one hand, the large and medium-size supermarkets offer a wide range of products from the agri-food industry, which implies relatively low prices but quality, traceability and environmental impact are questionable. On the other hand, several alternative initiatives offer products of excellent quality, often organic or local, but the majority of the population does not use these channels for their daily shopping because of limited ranges of products, high prices or logistical complexity (time schedule, organisation, accessibility). Thus, these supermarkets are seeking to propose an offer that combines the best of the two previous models, providing a wide range of quality products, large enough to respond to the daily needs of most households, at affordable prices thanks to the members' volunteer work and participation.

These supermarkets therefore emerge as a response to a dissatisfaction with the current offer but also as an attempt to reclaim their purchasing choices,

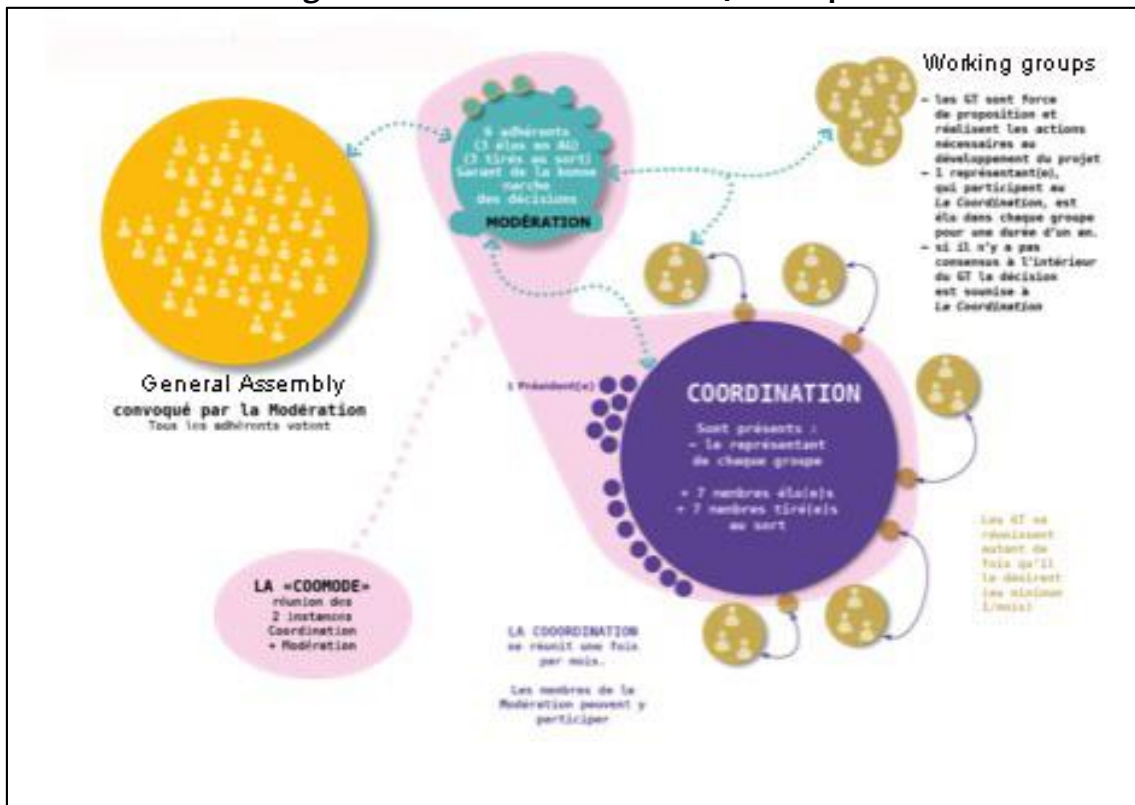
proposing a model that combines and responds to social, economic and environmental issues. In this way, they are indeed a combination of conventional and alternative regulatory activities that characterize alternative food systems, as stated by Le Velly (2017).

The goal of these supermarkets is to allow the co-operators to become decision makers of their supply, determining greater implication in all the chain and process (from purchase to sale). The supermarkets are mostly qualified as cooperative and participatory. Participatory because each member has to devote 3 hours of volunteer work each four weeks to ensure the functioning of the supermarket (shelving supply, product packaging, cash desk services). Cooperative, because the supermarket belongs to its members-customers who own 10 parts of capital and have the right to vote and make decisions about product selection, and other aspects of the functioning of the supermarket. In this way, the co-operators are both “workers” and “decision-makers”. These principles are defined in the “Members’ manual” which contains all the rules that regulate their participation. The work shifts are from two hours and a half to three hours and can be fixed (for example the “b” week from 19 to 22h) or variable (which means that they can schedule their service one by one and not on fixed periods). This system was elaborated in order to facilitate the participation of people with irregular schedules, however, they are encouraged to cover the least requested slots (for example, during the day on weekdays and first slots on Saturdays and Sundays).

Concerning the decision making, according to the project, each member has one vote. In practical terms, each member has to participate or be represented by someone else at the General Assembly (when decisions are made). The operating procedures of the Assembly are defined, in the case of “La Louve” supermarket, in another document (Guide of “La Louve” general assembly) drafted by a group of members et submitted to consultation for a few months before being approved. According to the Members’ Manual, “the proposals and decisions taken by the members during the General Assembly concern the policy and the general functioning of the cooperative, employees being in charge of day-to-day operation of the store, the selection of products or suppliers”. The founder of the Bordeaux supermarket, Supercoop, states that they prefer to assign the selection and approval of the products to specific commissions composed of volunteers. This way, in this initiative, the supply is not the sole responsibility of the two employees. As for the cooperative supermarket “400 coop”, a recent initiative located in Paris, the daily organisation is delegated to the Coordination Committee composed of 10 to 40 members whose mandate is for one year, renewable once. Each working group will have to designate one of its members to sit at the Coordination. The Assembly is convened by the Moderation Committee composed of 2 to 10 members (fig.1).

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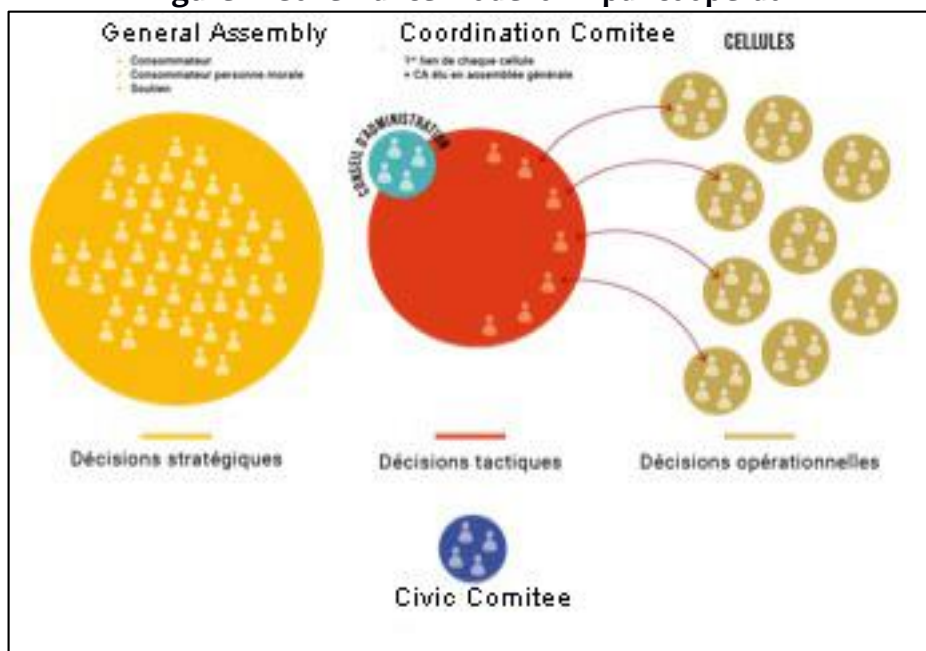
Figure 1. Governance model of “400 Coop”



Source: “400 Coop” web-site.

Another model is proposed by the future supermarket Alpar located in Annecy that designs their decision making process on three levels (Fig.2).

Figure 2. Governance model of Alpar coopératif



Source: Alpar web-site

Once the Alpar supermarket is launched, the General Assembly, composed of all the members, will decide on the strategic decisions of the cooperative.

Operational decisions will be made by thematic working units (from 10 to 15 members). These groups will be self-managed and made up of members of the cooperative.

Coordination committees composed of two representatives of the working units and the Board of Directors are intended to circulate information and make tactical decisions. Finally, the 4 to 7 employees of the cooperative will work full time to ensure the overall coherence of the project, the respect of its values and the coordination of the different working groups.

These sets of regulation activities design new operational models that aim at broadening the decision-making base, without losing effectiveness. The ideal of a more democratic, participatory and sustainable food chain is clearly stated in the speeches of these supermarkets' promoters.

Furthermore, all the supermarkets analysed share the common goal of operating on a non-profit basis. However, each initiative develops other complementary objectives, which vary according to their own specific project. In this way, some objectives concerning economic (non-profit principle; affordable prices for consumers), social (accessibility to everyone; the creation of a place of sharing and exchange), and environmental issues (joint development of sustainable and local food chains) stand out. However, some objectives are at the crossing point of two dimensions, as the promotion of consumption habits that respect people and the environment and fair remuneration.

At the same time the values and principles expressed prioritize the respect for the environment and the creation of an environment of sharing and trust. The environmental concern is explicitly expressed both by privileging products from a local and sustainable agriculture and by promoting some practices within the supermarket to reduce the environmental impact (limitation of packaging, food waste reduction). The second one emerges clearly through the attention paid to establishing "good" relationships with producers (based on trust, ethics, honesty), and between the members as consumers (based on quality, transparency, traceability, democracy) and as workers (sharing, cooperation, accessibility).

The objectives, as well as the values and principles announced, shape the "concept" of these supermarkets that are proposing a more equitable and inclusive food offer while paying attention to the creation of a place of sharing, exchange, conviviality and learning (to a healthy diet).

The product selection is based on several criteria, the most important being: environmental impact, price and taste. Furthermore, the promotion of local development by supporting local and organic producers is also relevant. The people involved recognize the difficulty of finding a quality product that meets all criteria and of supplying only on local and organic products. In almost all projects, it is emphasized that strict local and organic food supply is therefore not realistic, considering both sides. On the one hand, the consumers have differentiated purchasing power, and on the other hand, local organic producers are not able to cover all the supermarket needs in terms of quantity, diversity and logistic requirements.



For these reasons, the supermarkets’ wide product range reflects a global market (chocolate, coffee) but also the diversity of habits based on territorial (e.g. wine, cheese, delicatessen) and cultural (tapioca, manioc, etc.) tendencies and lets the consumers choose. Even though they have not yet found any price regulation systems that allow everyone to access all products. But rather they leave the consumer with the choice through a wide selection of products. The price is established by reducing the margins to 20% or 17% on all products. Any possible profit is meant to be reinvested into the cooperative itself, but also in other related projects. For example, the Eko-Syst’M supermarket, located in Chambéry, decides to invest part of the turnover on social projects, such as the rehabilitation of farm buildings by homeless people; innovation investment and financial assistance for land access alongside local farmers.

Most of these cooperatives claim their inspiration to the Park Slope Food Coop, reviving the concept of 19th century consumers’ cooperatives, such as the *Bellevilloise*, and are based on the idea of paying the right price for quality food, eliminating middlemen, and volunteer members work. Furthermore, the contemporary model differs from the former ones on three main aspects: it aims at democratizing quality rather than changing society; the consumer is both owner and volunteer-worker (EL KARMOUNI; BÉJI-BÉCHEUR, 2016); and it addresses the ecological concern by favouring short food supply chains and the sale of seasonal fruits and vegetables (TOUCAS-TROUYEN, 2017).

#### 4 The press and the representation of cooperative supermarkets

The analysis of the speeches made by the online newspapers is useful in order to understand which ideas reach the general public. The corpus, composed of 99 online articles published between 2016 and June 2018, contains 58,718 "occurrences" (significant words), 4331 "forms" (different lemmas), of which 1831 "hapax" (lemmas that appear only once in the text). To structure the 4,331 different lemmas identified in the corpus subjected to lexical analysis, we chose to operate the top-down hierarchical classification in simple classification on automated segments of about 40 words and for the 2500 most active "active" forms. A form is considered “active” if the lemma is a significant word (e.g. "supermarket") and not a speech operator (e.g. "with"). The top-down hierarchical classification operates a classification of the segments according to the forms found there and the co-occurrences of these forms, iteratively constructing segment classes on the basis of maximizing their differences. The set of forms present in a class of segments, and in particular the forms which are revealed to be the most frequent, constitute a class of words whose internal structure is supposed to be sufficiently coherent to be able to extract an interpretable meaning from them.

Our corpus was very clearly structured in three lexical classes by the top-down hierarchical classification. The dendrogram (Figure 3), which shows in what order was made the discrimination between classes, distinguishes two main branches with, on the one hand, the lemmas centred on the economic and logistic organisation of the store (class 3) and the products selected (class 2) and on the other hand the lemmas centred on the elements that characterized the project idea (class 1).

Figure 3. Lexical classes: dendrogram from the hierarchical top-down classification



Source: Elaborated by the Authors

The first two classes describe on one side the store organisation in terms of workforce ("heure", "mois", "temps", "tâche", "coopérateur",...)¹ underling the diversity of the role assumed ("propriétaire", "bénéficiaire", "salarié", "bénévole")² who participate and, on the other, the criteria for the products selection ("bio", "local", "prix", "circuit court", "accessible", "équitable", "conscience environnementale")³. The third class is distinguished by the characterization of the project that is designed as a "supermarché", "coopératif", "association", "participatif"⁴, that describe the process beyond the creation of the supermarket: the maturation of the idea.

In a second step of the analysis, an AFC was carried out by crossing the active forms with the "year" modality and applying the hypergeometric law for the calculation. While Reinert's method provides a better understanding of the relationships between forms within the text, the AFC is a statistical tool for organizing lexical forms of the corpus no longer on the basis of their frequency or co-occurrence in segments of text, but according to their contribution to the overall heterogeneity of the corpus. The graphic rendering of the result (Fig.4) in two dimensions then figure out various elements of appreciation on the most frequent active forms of the corpus:

¹ "Hour", "month", "schedule", "task", "co-operator"

² "Owner", "beneficiary", "employee", "volunteer"

³ "Organic", "local", "price", "short chain", "accessible", "fair trade", "environmental awareness"

⁴ "Cooperative", "supermarket", "association", "participative"

- in the centre of the graph, the forms that are "almost everywhere", that is to say that they do not contribute to the heterogeneity of the text segments;
- at the four margins of the graph, the forms that have, on the contrary, a very discriminating character, characterising certain categories of segments;
- on the x-axis (factor 1) and on the y-axis (factor 2) are the first two axes of differentiation of the word cloud produced by the AFC, knowing that the software allows the researcher to interpret the possible meanings of these words;
- over the entire graph, provided that two terms are not brought together by the projection effect of the unexplained variability by the first two axes, their graphic proximity reflects close lexical relations.

Factor 1, which seems to prioritize the “project implementation” (from the idea to the purchase) within the discourse, in terms of practices, modes of intervention, resources mobilized and products, isolates clearly what concerns the pre-maturation and the maturation stages (in negative abscissa) and more directly the supply chain and the products characteristics (in positive abscissa). In sum, factor 1 classifies practices according to their theoretical or operational character. The forms in the negative abscissa are more focused on the supermarket “idea” that consists in creating a “project” of a “cooperative” and “participative” “supermarket” starting from an “association”. The forms in the positive abscissa are more focused on the criteria to select the products ("organic", "price", "short food supply chain", "equitable", "seasonal") and the link between food-agriculture and producers.

Factor 2 brings out the operability of these projects. As a first approach, it distinguishes in negative ordinate the concrete and pragmatic values and in positive ordinate a strong operational functioning of the project. This factor marks a difference between the vocabulary related to the organizational and institutional aspects ("project", "open", "solidarity") to the real functioning of these projects in terms of schedule organisation (“month”, “hour”, “time”); of distribution and organization of work (“task”, “management”, “purchase”, “delivery”) and identification of roles (“volunteers”, “employees”, “customers”, “co-operator”).



coffee) but also the diversity of habits based on territorial (e.g. wine, cheese, delicatessen) and cultural (tapioca, manioc) anchorage. At the same time, the “promise of difference” consists in the idea that these supermarkets are places of sharing, discussion and learning, and, therefore, go beyond mere consumption and work spaces. They are conceived as social projects that offer more inclusive and sustainable food consumption. The products selection policy responds to several criteria in terms of economic (price, accessibility), social (quality, taste, consumers’ preferences) and environmental (organic farming) aspects. Thus, a richer definition of “quality products” is being designed, although the challenge of finding a balance between all dimensions is fully acknowledged. The main goal is to make quality products accessible to everyone. At the same time, they propose another model to become a decision maker of own supply participating to the decision making process. The real “difference” is given not only by ideas but also by the modalities of regulation. As Le Velly (2017) thoroughly analyses, alternative food systems can be seen as combinations of both conventional and alternative regulation activities. Cooperative supermarkets inspire on conventional ones in terms of accessibility (low prices, long opening hours) and variety of products range, but distinguish themselves by actively involving consumers in decision-making and for their goal that are no-profit organisation reinvesting the income into the cooperatives or solidarity projects. These supermarkets are looking for innovative solutions to involve consumers into the decision-making process and to promote and enhance a more sustainable food (in term of production-distribution-consumption) system. Those supermarkets looking forward a better food offer in terms of price, accessibility, solidarity, fairness and quality.

Investigation on these emerging initiatives should be carried on, in order to understand their evolution and the concrete modalities of the implementation of their project, through different combinations of regulation activities.

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