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Yuna Chiffolleau, Sarah Millet-Amrani, Adanella Rossi, Marta Guadalupe  
Rivera-Ferre, Pedro Lopez Merino

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# The participatory construction of new economic models in short food supply chains

**Yuna Chiffolleau<sup>a\*</sup>; Sarah Millet-Amrani<sup>b</sup>; Adanella Rossi<sup>c</sup>; Marta Guadalupe Rivera-Ferre<sup>d</sup>; Pedro Lopez Merino<sup>e</sup>**

<sup>a</sup>INRA  
UMR Innovation, 2 place Viala, 34060 Montpellier Cedex 2, France  
[yuna.chiffolleau@inra.fr](mailto:yuna.chiffolleau@inra.fr)

<sup>b</sup>INRA  
UMR Innovation, 2 place Viala, 34060 Montpellier Cedex 2, France  
[sarah-millet.amrani@supagro.fr](mailto:sarah-millet.amrani@supagro.fr)

<sup>c</sup>University of Pisa  
Department of Agriculture, Food and Environment,  
Via del Borghetto 80 56124 Pisa, Italy  
[adanella.rossi@unipi.it](mailto:adanella.rossi@unipi.it)

<sup>d</sup>University of Vic, Spain  
Chair in Agroecology and Food Systems for Social Transformation,  
C/ de la Laura, 13, Vic 08500, Spain  
[martaguadalupe.rivera@uvic.cat](mailto:martaguadalupe.rivera@uvic.cat)

<sup>e</sup>INRA  
Unité Ecodéveloppement, Site Agroparc, 84 914 Avignon Cedex 9, France  
[Pedro.Lopez-Merino@inra.fr](mailto:Pedro.Lopez-Merino@inra.fr)

\*corresponding author

# The participatory construction of new economic models in short food supply chains

## Abstract:

While a number of works question the alterity of alternative food chains, little has been said about the social processes under which new economic models are, or may be, developed within the broader movement around 'short food supply chains' (SFCs) in Europe. Considering SFCs as economic organisations, we propose an analytical framework based on New Economic Sociology and Convention Theory, enriched by Social and Solidarity Economics, to capture the social construction of new economic models in such chains. We apply this framework to two case studies: an open-air market promoting short food supply chains in France, and a partnership between an agricultural cooperative and several solidarity purchase groups (GAS) in Italy. Analysing the trajectories of the two initiatives, we highlight the processes through which new economic models are jointly built via interactions between different actors. Our results open two lines of discussion: one concerning the 'new economic models' that emerge from the two cases, a second regarding the actors' participation in elaborating and enacting these new models.

Keywords: short food supply chain, economic organisation, trajectories, participation, case study

## 1. Introduction

Over the last few decades in Europe, the food sector has witnessed a profusion of initiatives bringing producers and consumers close (or closer). From 'alternative food networks' (or systems) contesting the mainstream agro-industrial model (Renting et al., 2003) to traditional 'short food supply chains' experiencing a revival in Europe (Kneafsey et al., 2015; Chiffolleau, 2017), all of these initiatives, regardless of their origin or initial intention, present a common point: a 'promise of difference', compared to long supply chains. That is 'a promise of another mode of organising production, exchanges and/or food consumption, and the promise of associated benefits' (Le Velly, 2017). The general organisation of alternative or short food systems has thus been extensively described (Deverre and Lamine, 2010), feeding a debate about their 'alterity' (Holloway et al., 2007; Constance et al., 2014). These works, nevertheless, say little about the social processes which have built their alterity, whether 'strong' or 'weak'. Little is said about the tensions that may have emerged, the compromises that have been made during this construction, especially with regards to the economic dimension. This longitudinal approach, which is attentive to the social processes underlying the economic dimension, proves useful, not only to better understand the emergence of 'hybrid' food systems, which combine alternative and conventional attributes (Le Velly and Dufeu, 2016), but also to explore the transformative potential of a diversity of short food supply chains, beyond those classified as alternative (Kneafsey, 2015).

In this paper, we propose to analyse the social construction of 'new' economic patterns which differ from the mainstream model in two cases of market initiatives based on close relations between producers and consumers: an open-air market in France, and a partnership between a cooperative and several GAS (*Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale* - solidarity-based purchase groups<sup>1</sup>) in Italy. We use here the notion 'short food supply chain' (SFC) to address these two initiatives as well as all the 'alternative' food systems (or networks) mentioned in the literature, as the common feature they all share is that they reduce the number of intermediaries between producer and consumer even though their alterity may

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<sup>1</sup> Self-organised consumers' groups who manage a direct relation with farmers along ethical principles.

52 be discussed. Then, considering SFCs as economic organisations, we use the two cases to highlight how,  
53 and under which conditions, they evolve as social spaces where new economic models are discussed  
54 and jointly created over time, addressing new indicators of wealth (Gadrey and Jany-Catrice, 2006)  
55 beyond mere turnover. The original aspect of our contribution is thus to explore some of the paths  
56 through which ‘another economy’ (Laville and Cattani, 2005) is being built in short food supply chains,  
57 as well as to propose criteria on which ‘new economic models’ can be analysed and assessed in, and  
58 from, these chains. Moreover, by showing how these economic models are fuelled by and dependent  
59 on the interactions between ‘skilled’ and ‘unskilled’ actors, our work opens new perspectives for food  
60 democracy. This notion, which appeared at the end of the 1990s, refers in broad strokes to a condition  
61 in which citizens regain control over their food and their food systems (Lang, 1998). Whether  
62 considered from a regulatory perspective (*ibid.*), or in concrete local situations (Hassanein, 2003), food  
63 democracy refers to the capacity of citizens to take part in the decision-making about food production  
64 and consumption practices. Nevertheless, the way this participation can be expanded beyond  
65 ‘enlightened’ citizens and build new economic patterns still needs to be explored (Booth and Coveney,  
66 2015).

67  
68 In the first section, we briefly go back to previous works on the economic dimension of alternative food  
69 networks, local or short food supply chains, to stress how this dimension has been analysed and to  
70 position our own contribution. In the second section, we introduce our framework of analysis,  
71 combining contributions from sociology and economics. In the third section, we present the trajectories  
72 of two SFCs as economic organisations confronted with challenges and designed by social interactions.  
73 In the fourth section, by comparing the two cases, we open two lines of discussion: the first one about  
74 the ‘new’ economic models that are set up through the two initiatives; the second about the nature and  
75 the role of participation in the construction of new economic patterns.

76  
77

## 78 **2. The economic dimension of SFCs as described in the literature: a review**

79  
80 Studying the economic dimension of SFCs is not an easy task since markets are conceived as complex  
81 social spaces in which different actors interact and may jointly define essential issues regarding the  
82 process of selling and buying (White, 1981). In the food sector this conception results in the active  
83 construction of networks by various actors of the agrofood chain, such as farmers, food processors,  
84 wholesalers, retailers, and consumers (Renting et al., 2003). Over the last few years, scientists have  
85 become increasingly aware of the need to look at these initiatives due to their capacity to generate  
86 change, as spaces to define and experiment with innovative socio-economic patterns from a dynamic  
87 rather than a static perspective (Brunori et al., 2011). Consequently, SFCs have been studied to assess  
88 new relationships among producers and consumers in which both willingly become active components  
89 of new supply and demand systems as well as new frameworks to create a common understanding of  
90 food. Renting et al. (2003), who analysed the contribution of SFCs to rural development in Europe,  
91 proposed two dimensions to describe these chains: one concerning their organisational structure and  
92 the specific mechanisms entailed in these to extend relations over time and space; another concerning  
93 the different quality definitions and quality conventions involved in the construction and functioning of  
94 the chains. These two dimensions have thus been widely studied in different European countries and  
95 for different types of SFCs (Kirwan, 2006; Brunori et al., 2011; Maye, 2013).

96

97 Most of these socioeconomic analyses, however, do not develop the economic dimension to the same  
98 extent as other general 'socio-economic' characteristics (Roep and Wiskerke, 2012). Indeed, although  
99 Hinrichs, in 2000, in line with the notion of social embeddedness as developed by Block (1993),  
100 proposed to qualify alternative food networks through 'marketness' (the relevance of price  
101 consideration) and 'instrumentalism' (the importance of individual motivations), the works which have  
102 followed tend to focus on inter-personal relations between producers and consumers (Sage, 2003;  
103 Chiffolleau, 2009). They thus lead mostly to broad economic claims about the contribution of SFCs to  
104 additional income and employment in rural regions, providing new resources for local economies,  
105 enabling synergies with other regional economic activities, and often favouring increased job  
106 satisfaction and organisational capacity within rural communities (Roep and Wiskerke, 2006; Tregear,  
107 2011). In assessing local food initiatives in Canada and their transformative capacity from a social  
108 economics perspective, Connelly et al. (2016), for instance, overlooked strict economic processes, such  
109 as the definition of prices in SFCs. However, from the consumers' perspective, prices, as a reflection of  
110 access to food, are a key element to consider, even for those who care about food security and  
111 nutritional health within alternative food schemes (Dowler et al., 2011). Hebinck et al. (2015) thus state  
112 that the rich literature on alternative agri-food networks has shown its analytical and theoretical limits  
113 by its lack of market analysis. This literature still focuses mainly on community building as an outcome  
114 of the re-socialisation and re-spatialisation of food (the two dimensions of Renting et al., 2003).  
115 However, according to Hebinck et al., the 'crucial point is the creation of new markets'. We could add:  
116 what do we expect from these new markets? Do they really set up 'new' economic models? In a micro-  
117 economic perspective focused on farms, indeed, some works point out that the economic benefits of  
118 SFCs are not obvious. These chains are not always profitable for farmers, especially when the total  
119 working hours are taken into consideration (Capt and Vawresky, 2014). Moreover, when SFCs can  
120 procure a fixed, decent and, in some cases, higher income (Schmit et al., 2016), it can also represent  
121 difficult labour conditions and a low quality of life for farmers, something that has been termed 'self-  
122 exploitation' (Galt, 2013). While an excessively narrow economic vision of SFCs, focused on the financial  
123 dimension, would not allow for this issue to be understood, the social dimension must still be put in  
124 perspective with concrete economic characteristics. More connexions have to be developed with  
125 economists using input-output models to measure the potential 'ripple effect' of these SFCs' economic  
126 activities in the local or regional economy (job creation, income growth, or increased tax revenue...),  
127 especially given that these works also highlight the importance of collecting appropriate data  
128 (Henneberry et al., 2009; Schmit et al., 2016).

129  
130 A growing number of works thus propose to both question the strict economic components of SFCs and  
131 to deepen the interplay between the economic and the social aspects. New research is developed to  
132 analyse the co-production of value in innovative organisational arrangements around regional or local  
133 food, as food hubs (Berti and Mulligan, 2016) or mid-scale chains (Stevenson et al., 2011; Fleury et al.,  
134 2016), especially for procuring school food, or CSAs in expansion (Le Velly and Dufeu, 2016). These  
135 cases are often assessed or discussed with regard to the notion of values-based chains (Conner et al.,  
136 2011), thus enlarging the scope of interest to non-economic values. They also revive the previous  
137 debate on 'hybrid systems', not only showing how these mid-scale SFCs combine conventional and  
138 alternative attributes, but also deepening the economic issues (Le Velly and Dufeu, 2016).

139  
140 Nevertheless, the development of a SFC, and its economic organisation in particular, necessarily  
141 induces choices, negotiation between different values, compromises between economic and non-  
142 economic objectives, and even sacrifices. These aspects have been explored in this literature on SFCs

143 less than their final result, which has been studied as values-based chains or hybrid systems. In line with  
144 previous works addressing the interplay between the economic and the social aspects in SFCs, yet with  
145 closer attention to the social processes through which the SFC's economic orientation, practices and  
146 characteristics are discussed, shaped and possibly maintained or transformed as an alternative model,  
147 we thus propose a specific analytical framework to capture the social construction of new economic  
148 models in SFCs.

149  
150

### 151 **3. SFCs as economic organizations: a combination of lines of research**

152

153 Although recent works on SFCs both address the interplay between the economic and the social  
154 aspects, and economic issues, more attention must be paid to their social construction, especially  
155 regarding the economic dimension. SFCs must be further analysed as economic organisations in which  
156 basic economic features such as prices, margins, governance structure, etc. are defined and negotiated  
157 throughout their trajectory. To capture their potential as 'new' economic models, new criteria must  
158 also be looked at, from ones which are important for the actors themselves to others which may be  
159 instrumental in evaluating and illustrating the conditions under which the systems can replicate. An  
160 adequate framework is required to analyse the social processes through which various actors organise  
161 themselves over time into an economic structure capable of coordinating different values systems and  
162 to address, and produce different types of wealth.

163

164 Both economics and sociology have made major efforts in theorising economic organisations beyond  
165 the Walrasian view of market equilibrium. Among the most prominent examples, the New Institutional  
166 Economics (NIE) approach finds its roots in Coase's classic "The nature of the firm" (Coase, 1937) - and  
167 in the subsequent contribution by Alchian and Demsetz (1972) -, as well as in Williamson's (2002)  
168 relatively recent research programme on governance structure. It pioneered the incorporation of social  
169 and legal norms into economic analysis. However, NIE does not take into account the plurality of values  
170 in economic activities and remains weak in understanding the process of the social construction of  
171 economic organisations (White, 1981). Instead, it focuses on the optimal governance structure (market  
172 or hierarchy) for specific contexts. To overcome this limitation and to analyse the social construction of  
173 economic models in SFCs, we propose combining the New Economic Sociology (NES) and Convention  
174 Theory approaches. This combination – while still rare – holds promise for assessing economic  
175 organisations (Favereau and Lazega, 2002; Jagd, 2007). In doing so, we use NES and Convention Theory  
176 in a different angle from what has been done in previous works on SFCs. Moreover, as alternative  
177 economic models are at stake, we propose to enrich this combination with inputs from Social and  
178 Solidarity Economics.

179

180 NES is mostly known through the works of Granovetter who – prior to Block –, revitalised the notion of  
181 'embeddedness' originally proposed by Polanyi (1944) from his research on the labour market in the  
182 1970s (Granovetter, 1973). As we noted in the literature review, this notion appeared as particularly  
183 relevant to analyse the interplay between the economic and the social aspects in alternative food  
184 networks, as well as to highlight, or to relativize, the strong connection of these networks with close  
185 inter-personal ties (Hinrichs, 2000; Chiffolleau, 2009). More broadly, in NES, economic actions, as with  
186 every action, are considered to be embedded in social structures, and to come naturally with non-  
187 economic objectives. Regarding our research question, above all, NES assumes that economic  
188 organisations emerge from social relationships, including interpersonal relationships, and that social  
189 relationships make organisations evolve, as sources of resources and constraints, thus shaping specific –

190 and not systematically optimal – practices and rules (Granovetter, 1985). Such a perspective pushes the  
191 analysis of the social construction of economic organisations towards the analysis of the role of the  
192 social interpersonal relationships in their (innovative) trajectory. It also highlights the types of  
193 relationships from which alternative economic models are shaped. Nevertheless, NES does not pay  
194 close attention to values, although they are specific resources or constraints around which economic  
195 actors may disagree, debate, and find compromises in order to coordinate their actions. Convention  
196 Theory allows these challenges in the life of the economic organisations to be captured and the  
197 compromises between different conventions which underlie the economic coordination to be clarified.  
198

199 As previously mentioned, Convention Theory has also been used in the literature on agro-food systems  
200 (Ponte, 2016), including farmers' markets (Kirwan, 2006), generally to describe different kinds of SFCs  
201 using Boltanski and Thévenot's classification of 'conventions' (2001): market, industrial, domestic, etc.  
202 Conventions consist here of collective representations, shared systems of values, used by actors to  
203 justify as well as to evaluate economic actions. Beyond this application, this theory is more broadly a  
204 way to understand the process of coordination between actors, carrying different values, in the  
205 construction of economic organisations (Gomez and Jones, 2000): conventions are also shared systems  
206 of values mobilised or produced to solve coordination problems between different economic actors in  
207 an uncertain environment (Young, 1996). They continually move as economic life regularly encounters  
208 situations in which actors learn and evolve, facing trade-offs between various values when regarding  
209 especially the quality of goods and exchange relationships. These challenging moments lead either to  
210 conflict or to compromise which implies a process of negotiating and reconsidering conventions  
211 (Eymard-Duverney et al., 2005) from 'what is suitable' for each one (Thévenot, 1990). When challenging  
212 moments occur, the process of negotiation and the compromise that emerges inform us, beyond the  
213 actors' participation, of who the privileged actors are, what their priorities are, and how they apply  
214 them concretely.  
215

216 While NES and Convention Theory both recognize that economic and social dimensions are intertwined  
217 in an economic organisation, Social and Solidarity Economics allows research to move forward when  
218 'alternative economic models' are concerned. Indeed, practitioners and scholars of this applied field of  
219 research advocate assessing economic activities also through 'new indicators of wealth', which enlarge  
220 the economic objectives beyond conventional attributes (fair trade beyond turnover...), express social  
221 goals (well-being, justice, equity, etc.) and design an expanded vision of the economy (Gadrey and Jany-  
222 Catrice, 2006). In the case of an economic organisation, such a perspective calls for the embedded  
223 practices and the rules through which both larger economic and social ends are targeted, negotiated  
224 and achieved by its actors, to be taken into account.  
225

226 By combining these lines of research and following an economic ethnography perspective (Henrich et  
227 al., 2004), we describe the construction of two SFCs considered as economic organisations: an open-air  
228 market in France, and a partnership between an agricultural cooperative and several GAS in Italy. We  
229 analyse the social construction of the two SFCs in terms of practices and rules embedded in  
230 interpersonal relations, and forged from the challenges and the compromises between conventions.  
231 We focus on how actors organise their economic activities and collectively draw up an alternative  
232 economic model of organisation, in which different values are discussed, various conventions are  
233 mobilised, several kinds of wealth are expected, produced and/or shared between the different  
234 stakeholders (producers, consumers, intermediaries), including external members indirectly involved or  
235 affected by the SFC (e.g. local citizens, public institutions, researchers and so forth).

236  
237 We selected these SFCs for two main reasons: first of all, they imply traditional economic organisations  
238 (an open-air market in France and an agricultural cooperative in Italy), suitable to explore some of the  
239 paths through which SFCs can produce alternative economic models from conventional structures.  
240 Secondly, we had the opportunity to observe these two cases for several years, from the beginning (and  
241 with direct intervention in the French case), which enabled us to better capture the relations which  
242 were behind the economic dimension, and especially to pay close attention to consumer participation.  
243 Our analysis thus relies on longitudinal case studies, based on i) interviews with stakeholders and other  
244 concerned actors, at different stages in the trajectory of the organisation, ii) participatory observation  
245 during meetings or social events involving the organisation, and iii) secondary data processing (internal  
246 reports, communication tools, articles in newspapers...).

247

248

#### 249 **4. Two stories towards a 'new economy'**

250

##### 251 *4.1. Renewing the traditional open-air market economic pattern: the Grabels market case*

252

253 'Grabels market' is an open-air market created in 2008 in the small town of Grabels (7,000 inhabitants)  
254 located in the suburbs of the city of Montpellier (500,000 inhabitants) in the south of France. By  
255 implementing a market in Grabels, the newly elected local authorities (municipality) aimed at reviving  
256 its dormant peri-urban town, giving middle to low-income inhabitants the opportunity to obtain fresher  
257 and better products at reasonable prices, while supporting local small-scale sustainable agriculture. The  
258 local authorities thus did not intend to implement either a farmers' market or an organic one, the  
259 former seen as unable to cover demand all year long<sup>2</sup>, the latter as too elitist. Interested by the works  
260 of a researcher from the French National Institute for Agricultural Research (INRA) concerning short  
261 food supply chains, the local authorities contacted this researcher and decided to develop a 'hybrid'  
262 open-air market, which both mixed producers and resellers, and encouraged short food supply chains  
263 and local products. The project also started with the help of a civic association linked with the local  
264 authorities through political ties. The latter favoured high licensing standards concerning 'sustainable  
265 agriculture': small-scale agriculture from the neighbouring countryside, seasonal products, no GMOs,  
266 no industrial production or industrial processes, 'almost organic' agriculture, a short distance between  
267 the production site and Grabels, 'respect for quality', 'respect for consumers', affordable prices, as well  
268 as decent working conditions. However, implementing the market was challenging and required its first  
269 compromises between 'what was suitable' (Thévenot, 1990) for the local authorities and what emerged  
270 as feasible locally: faced with the difficulty of finding small-scale local producers from the neighbouring  
271 countryside, who were both few in number and already selling their entire production in other short  
272 food supply chains, the initiative had to start with middle-sized producers engaged in *agriculture*  
273 *raisonnée*<sup>3</sup> from the plains, seeking diversification, as well accepting the inclusion of intermediaries.  
274 However, the condition remained that the majority of their goods had to come from their own  
275 production, for farmers, or directly from local farms, for resellers. This compulsory requirement is not  
276 commonplace in traditional open-air markets in France. Moreover, in a region historically specialised in  
277 wine growing, the local authorities realised the need to allow for longer distances to procure meat, and  
278 extending it from the initial target of 30 km to 150 km.

---

<sup>2</sup> Farmers' markets in France are distinguished from traditional open-air markets by prohibiting resale, which limits the capacity of farmers to procure everything that the consumers want. Farmers' markets in France are thus mainly seasonal or one-time markets.

<sup>3</sup> Method of farming in which phytosanitary treatments are implemented after observation and only if justified.



279  
280 The local authorities, nevertheless, decided to draft a charter to be signed before entering the market,  
281 as an 'investment of form' (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1991), in Convention Theory's terms, defining the  
282 minimal criteria to be respected. Anxious to meet the consumers' expectations, the mayor also decided  
283 to share the responsibility of managing the market with a committee bringing together the local  
284 authorities, certain consumers, and sellers along with collegial governance. He insisted on selecting  
285 'ordinary consumers', 'who were representative of everyone', 'who usually shop in supermarkets' and  
286 who were not known for their specific involvement in sustainable food practices (Chessel, 2012). The  
287 committee was thus composed of three colleges (local authorities, consumers, sellers), with three  
288 members per college, and two 'experts', consisting of the researcher from the INRA and the civic  
289 association. Its role was to assess and validate the demands of new suppliers to enter the market, to  
290 ensure their compliance with the charter, as well as to take all the needed decisions to ensure that the  
291 market functioned properly.

292  
293 In 2010 the market faced two new challenges: first, a number of consumers complained about the  
294 prices being 'too high'. The committee decided to compare prices between the market and other points  
295 of sale. The discussion regarding the data collected highlighted that consumers of the committee did  
296 not take the origin and the quality of products into account, thereby comparing 'incomparable  
297 products'. The discussion was an opportunity for consumers within the committee to learn how prices  
298 are set, what is behind a price in terms of farming systems, production costs, and access to subsidies. It  
299 was also an opportunity for sellers to better understand their customers' economic constraints. One  
300 consumer from the committee, however, proposed two solutions, along the lines of the market  
301 convention (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1991): to open the market to more suppliers, in order to increase  
302 competition and decrease prices; and to sell more second-class products that were less expensive.  
303 Indeed, in order to make the market viable for sellers, the committee had initially decided to propose  
304 one seller per product. The re-emergence of one of the founding rules of mainstream economy,  
305 competition, was however kept in check by new knowledge acquired by the local authorities and the  
306 consumers within the committee: they were now aware of the difficulties of the producers participating  
307 in the market, representatives of 'middle-agriculture' which perform less and less in long food supply  
308 chains (Lyson et al., 2008). The collective decision was thus to improve the price comparison<sup>4</sup> and to  
309 communicate about the quality-price ratio instead of reverting to the competitive rules which are the  
310 norm in other open-air markets in France. At this stage, from the political economy viewpoint for  
311 enterprises by Convention Theory, the farmers and their farms became, for the others, 'common goods'  
312 (Eymard-Duvernay, 2002) which had to be preserved, rather than actors with opportunistic strategies  
313 (which would involve setting high prices in response to a high demand). This thus illustrated how to  
314 enact, and not only claim, a 'civic convention'. The committee also decided against asking for second-  
315 category products, which were considered as disrespectful to producers making progress towards  
316 higher quality products. This could also be understood as the introduction of the domestic convention.  
317 While higher than in other short food chains<sup>5</sup>, however, the use of the market remained low among  
318 low-income individuals.

---

<sup>4</sup> Which showed that the market was, on average, a little less expensive than the supermarket regarding a basket of basic products (3 kilos of mixed fruits and vegetables, 4 slices of ham, 2 hamburger steaks, 6 eggs, 0,5 kilo of bread) of same level of quality (middle-range), from local origin (in market case) or from France (in supermarket), and in high season of production (for fruits and vegetables).

<sup>5</sup> According to a national consumer survey in which the INRA took part in April 2013. This higher use may be explained by the fact that while low-income consumers from Grabels still put forward the price as the main disincentive to buy more products in the market, they did not stress the market as 'elitist'. The national survey indeed showed that

319  
320 Secondly, some consumers developed mistrust regarding the origin of the products, with a rumour  
321 circulating that the products actually came from wholesale markets (as in most traditional open-air  
322 markets in France). The local authorities had the idea to signal, through colours on the product labels  
323 on each stand, where the products came from, and the number of intermediaries involved. As  
324 consumers of the committee became more knowledgeable, they proposed to further add information  
325 concerning food quality on the labels. The researcher from the INRA helped to conceive the  
326 experimentation, interested by its general scope in a national context of confusion between short food  
327 supply chains and organic food<sup>6</sup>. The implementation of this labelling system nevertheless created  
328 tension between those (including the civic association) arguing that short chains had to function on  
329 trust, and others requesting objective supervision by an independent external organisation. The  
330 researcher suggested implementing a local participatory guarantee system, such as the ones developed  
331 in other countries like Brazil and certain European states (Loconto and Hatanaka, 2017). While  
332 promising, the idea however remains however difficult to implement in these countries, either because  
333 control is a touchy issue or require high skill levels. In Grabels, the committee faced the same  
334 difficulties. In practice, the most efficient solution was the social control amongst sellers themselves:  
335 each one had to label his/her own products, while other sellers, observing each other in the  
336 marketplace, could later inform the committee about any 'inconsistencies'. While in this practice one  
337 could see a return to the 'market law', the committee itself evoked the emergence of a co-joint  
338 responsibility concerning the market and in building its reputation (Akerlof, 1970). Moreover, the  
339 labelling system appeared as a source of knowledge exchange within the committee about added value  
340 share prior to the point of sale: for all products on resale, coming either from short or long supply  
341 chains, sellers were invited to let the others know about the price paid to the producer at the beginning  
342 of the chain. Green salads were taken as example: producers are paid about €0.20 in long chains, €0.60  
343 in short chains, and consumers pay €0.80 to €1.20 in each case. The committee thus proposed to  
344 publish this information in the city's newspaper, which was accepted by the mayor who took the  
345 occasion to endorse and develop a discourse on 'food democracy', first evoked by the researcher. For  
346 Grabels' inhabitants, short food supply chains with one intermediary thus appeared as not only a  
347 process of buying and reselling, but as a form of economic cooperation amongst local farmers or  
348 between local farmers and resellers, compared with resale of goods procured in long supply chains that  
349 is common in French open-air markets. At the same time, by validating resale from long supply chains,  
350 consumers understood they helped alleviate economic risks for producers, providing them a source of  
351 stability in their business model. Fostering trust and the acknowledgement of specific individuals, the  
352 labelling system thus reinforced the domestic convention in the market, when other certification forms  
353 may instead have favoured the industrial convention (Sylvander, 1997). From 2018, this participatory  
354 labelling system is promoted by the general direction of INRA and is in the process of spreading to  
355 about 30 territories in France.

356

#### 357 *4.2. Expanding the GAS model: the Adesso Pasta! project in Italy*

358

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the elitist image of short food supply chains, maintained by the media in France, was a major disincentive for low-income consumers to shop in short food chains (Loisel et al., 2013).

<sup>6</sup> The national consumer survey conducted in 2013, mentioned in the previous footnote, confirmed this statement: 50% of people purchasing in short food supply chains thought that the products they purchased in these chains were organic.

359 The Adesso Pasta! (AP!) project is the result of cooperation between *La Terra e il Cielo*<sup>7</sup> (T&C), an  
360 agricultural cooperative located in the Marche region in Central Italy, producing high-quality organic  
361 pasta, and 50 GAS, equally distributed between seven regions of Northern and Central Italy. This  
362 cooperation was designed through a long participatory process: during the 2008-2009 campaign, T&C  
363 launched an experiment aimed at making costs transparent to its customers, while setting a stable and  
364 fair price for farmers, thereby freeing them from market uncertainties<sup>8</sup>. At the same time, T&C had  
365 exchanges with two GAS in Northern Italy about the possibility of involving them in their production  
366 activities more closely in order to develop a more stable collaborative relationship between the parties.  
367 This interaction resulted in the idea to jointly promote the AP! project, involving the two GAS and the  
368 cooperative.

369  
370 The project developed around defining all the operational and financial aspects related to wheat  
371 cultivation and processing as well as pasta distribution. This cooperation progressively evolved into a  
372 'civic convention' (in the sense of Boltanski and Thévenot, 1991): in 2010, the cooperative and the two  
373 GAS decided to join in a "Pact of Solidarity Economy". Through this formal agreement, the parties  
374 aimed at jointly carrying out a fair supply relationship, inspired by the principles of price transparency  
375 and fairness of payments, into the broader frame of principles of Social and Solidarity Economics. The  
376 pact established a commitment to purchase a certain amount of production during the year, partially  
377 paid in advance, at a price agreed upon among the parties. The pact also established that a small  
378 percentage of the price (involving producers and consumers in equal measure) would be set aside  
379 aimed at creating a fund to support solidarity economy projects (*Solidarity and Future Fund*), not  
380 necessarily in the cooperative territory, thereby strengthening the civic convention under which it was  
381 founded. The pact was presented at a national scale within the Italian Solidarity Economy Network  
382 (RES) and, more specifically, to the other GAS that were already customers of T&C. Twenty-nine of  
383 these GAS joined the project and started to manage their relationships with the cooperative through  
384 the pact.

385  
386 Over the years, the definition of the economic components of the pact has been subject to refinement,  
387 hand in hand with the growing interest in cost transparency as a basis for learning and cooperation. The  
388 first step was still to define a fair price for the farmers' grain, sufficient to properly remunerate all the  
389 production factors (including the cost of farmers' labour), without depending on global markets trends,  
390 and to share unexpected difficulties. The costs were estimated by taking into account the variety of  
391 situations among farmers (e.g. different size and setting) and evaluated collectively by the two parties  
392 (GAS and T&C) at the end of each cycle to consider any adjustment needed. The price of pasta was then  
393 calculated through a detailed analysis of all the costs related to the production and distribution stages.  
394 Over time, the categories of costs have been expanded to include fixed prices as well, making  
395 consumers more aware about how the cooperative is managed.

396 In addition to evaluating costs, other aspects were considered as important to the integrity of the pact:  
397 i) defining the extent to which economic risks were to be shared; ii) choosing selling solutions more  
398 suitable to the GAS organisation (e.g. type of delivery or billing); iii) defining the level of the GAS'  
399 involvement in managing the delivery activities or, alternatively, the related monetary value to be  
400 assigned to T&C (e.g. higher prices for particular packaging requirements; discounts for cooperation in  
401 managing delivery). All these aspects well illustrate the effort to optimize the economic components  
402 while pursuing the goal of an innovative, close relationship between the two parts. The discussion and

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<sup>7</sup> The cooperative involves about 120 organic cereal farms.

<sup>8</sup> Those years were characterised by strong price fluctuations, in many cases due to financial speculation.

403 acceptance of all these points required consumers to better understand the ancillary issues related to  
404 production, such as the uncertainty of farming, and some critical aspects of the economic management,  
405 such as the cooperative's needs for internal investments. In its turn, and in order to put in practice,  
406 through the pact, the idea of re-embedding the production activity into a community dimension, T&C  
407 had to 'open the firm' and provide all the information needed to define the solidarity price.  
408 Furthermore, T&C and the GAS agreed on the idea of the previously mentioned *Solidarity and Future*  
409 *Fund*. From 2008 to 2015 the fund assigned about 20,000 euros to solidarity economy initiatives. The  
410 beneficiaries were selected collectively by the GAS and T&C during the annual assembly. This illustrates  
411 how the construction of the special economic relationship and the particular management of the value  
412 created are grounded on shared learning, in turn enabled by closeness and social embeddedness.

413 At the end of 2015, the growing complexity of managing the pact, due to the increased number of  
414 participants from different geographical locations, as well as to the demanding activities of revising the  
415 agreement, led to the decision to entrust this task to a third party, responsible for mediating the  
416 relationship between the many GAS and T&C. *CO-energia – Collective Projects of Solidarity Economy*, a  
417 second-level association established in 2010, was chosen for this purpose. In addition to promoting  
418 awareness on social and solidarity economy, the mission of this association is to manage supply chains  
419 potentially operating at a national scale, thus with a level of complexity not manageable by a single  
420 GAS. The presidents of the first two GAS involved in the AP! project were among its founders.

421 Despite the loss of the GAS direct participation, the newly configured relationship with the cooperative  
422 reinforced the project: *CO-energia* assumed a key role in guaranteeing the functioning of the social  
423 pact, managing its complexity and overcoming some weaknesses that had emerged over time. Among  
424 these there were the cooperative's difficulties in meeting the increasingly diversified requests from the  
425 GAS, each of them managing its pact by adapting it to specific exigencies. Another problem related to a  
426 certain irregularity in the purchasing volumes by some GAS, with the consequent weakening of the pact  
427 in economic terms. To overcome this deficiency, particular emphasis was put on the GAS' purchasing  
428 commitment by introducing a minimum amount per year. In this process, one might see a return to the  
429 market convention, to face a certain decline in the civic convention. Convention Theory also allows this  
430 to be understood as a new compromise, in addition to the previous one involving certain GAS (namely  
431 the local ones) whose members used to combine the civic and domestic conventions, the latter  
432 underlying the specific requests to 'their' cooperative. Although the pact was tightened up, it was  
433 complemented by an increased effort to make the terms of cooperation even clearer.

434 The new civic-market-domestic compromise further evolved in 2017, with the creation of the *Adesso*  
435 *Pasta!* trademark, jointly owned between T&C and Co-energia - a choice that emphasizes the significant  
436 cooperation around a new economic pattern between an enterprise and a civil society organisation.  
437 The launch of the trademark was accompanied by the following statement, which encapsulates the  
438 willingness to actualise a socially embedded alternative model aimed at social purposes while still  
439 managing economic aspects: "*It is with pride and satisfaction that we communicate this step forward,*  
440 *which goes beyond the logic of the pure "free market", anticipates new logics and pathways of economy*  
441 *from the bottom, aligns and integrate the roles so far distinguished of consumers, producers and*  
442 *traders, and contributes to the idea of a community that takes care of common goods and is committed*  
443 *to building a different world"*<sup>9</sup>.

444 The experience gained through the pact and the related label, where the latter is conceived as a tool to  
445 spread knowledge of this innovative model, is more recently leading to further consolidate the

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<sup>9</sup> Francesco Tampellini - CO-energia President; Bruno Sebastianelli - T&C President (press release).

446 approach, giving rise to new, shared commitments along the supply chain. It is the case with the project  
447 to use the mechanism of the Solidarity Fund to finance participatory research and facilitation activities  
448 needed to experiment with wheat varieties and populations more suitable to organic farming but which  
449 are not currently available on the conventional seed market. The objective is to make consumers aware  
450 and available to support, through the economic valorisation of the final product (pasta), the whole  
451 farming-food system and its approach to genetic resources. Again, one can grasp here the willingness to  
452 combine the management of economic aspects with the pursuit of social objectives and, in doing so,  
453 prioritising (civic) collective over individual interests. The adoption of the pact model has been  
454 assuming a key role in the Italian Solidarity Economy Network as one of the most advanced form of  
455 cooperation between producers and consumers.

456

## 457 **5. Discussion and perspectives**

458

### 459 *5.1. Towards a 'moral economy'?*

460

461 The comparison of the two stories shows how the development of new economic patterns is embedded  
462 in social relations, which provide – in both cases – the ground for trust, transparency, mutual  
463 acknowledgment and learning. These latter aspects reflect social ends that are (or become) important  
464 for the actors, while at the same time enacting the principle of new economic models that address new  
465 indicators of wealth, and designing new types of 'market relations' between farmers, consumers and  
466 intermediaries (Gadrey and Jany-Catrice, 2006). On the other hand, trust, transparency mutual  
467 acknowledgement and learning are also factors for how the two economic organisations perform, as  
468 pointed out in New Economic Sociology (NES) (Uzzi, 1996): in the both cases, economic activities  
469 generate a growing profit<sup>10</sup> for the suppliers (farmers, resellers, the cooperative) and quality products  
470 are theoretically affordable for all types of consumers. Apart from specific market relations, the two  
471 stories highlight a set of practices and rules reflecting how the economic models that have been built in  
472 the two cases, while different, mix alternative and conventional economic considerations, as well as  
473 social concerns. In this sense, the two stories allow a set of criteria to be defined from which alternative  
474 economic models can be described and assessed in, and from, short food chains (see table 1).  
475

475

476 Defining this set of criteria based on the trajectory of the two cases gives us the opportunity to return  
477 to previous works on SFCs, mentioned in our literature review, which concerned the construction of  
478 new supply chains, and stressed the need to coordinate governance, embedding, and marketing (Roep  
479 and Wiskerke, 2012). Looking further into this coordination by combining NES with Convention Theory,  
480 our cases show how 'dis-embedding' the economic pattern from personal relations through  
481 'investments in form' (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1991) in governance or marketing – such as the  
482 minimum purchasing amount in the Italian Pact or the labelling system in France – is important not only  
483 to achieve the economic objectives but also to re-embed the project in ties more suitable to economic  
484 performance (Grossetti, 2008): from disengagement to reengagement through the modified Italian  
485 Pact; from mistrust to trust through the French labelling system.

486

487 Moreover, as in Civic Food Networks (CFN) (Renting et al., 2012), the new economic patterns developed  
488 in the two cases are characterised by the blurring of the distinction between producer and consumer  
489 roles as being at opposite ends of the chain. Their common actions related to food (comparison of

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<sup>10</sup> Due to the attachment and increase of faithful consumers and to the reduction of costs thanks to a better knowledge of them and to new cooperation relations favoured by the economic organisation.

490 prices, calculation of costs...) set up shared goals and supported the gradual shift from utilitarian-  
 491 private visions to economic models based on solidarity and the defence of common goods, in line with  
 492 processes of moralization of economies. Their discussions and negotiations about prices, in particular,  
 493 are central to establishing a new economic model enacting social sustainability values, as in the case of  
 494 Values Based Supply Chains (VBSC) (Stevenson and Pirog, 2008). Farmers are no longer price takers, as  
 495 in conventional chains, nor are they just price makers as often occurs in direct selling; in turn,  
 496 consumers are aware of the meanings behind the prices they agree to pay. In the Italian case, the price  
 497 is the result of intense interaction between the cooperative and the consumers; moreover, it includes a  
 498 contribution to external solidarity economy projects, showing that producers and consumers both  
 499 agree to accept other 'costs' to pursue social goals. In the French case, faced with mistrust, farmers had  
 500 to explain how they set their prices. This transparency made the consumers and the local authorities  
 501 legitimise the prices set by farmers, as a way not only to cover production costs but also to support  
 502 'middle-agriculture' from the civic convention perspective. In that sense, common economic principles  
 503 emerge from the two cases, consisting of building a business partnership based on normative values  
 504 and economic concerns as in VBSC (Laursen and Noe, 2017) and on suitable coordination mechanisms  
 505 (Bloom and Hinrichs, 2011). In that sense, the new economic models produced from these two SFCs  
 506 may be further discussed in the perspective of a 'moral economy' as debated in the Anglo-Saxon  
 507 literature to define exchanges 'justified in relation to social or moral sanctions, as opposed to the  
 508 operation of free market forces' (Galt, 2013). However, the specific manner in which new practices and  
 509 rules are put in place in each case (see table 1), under-researched in VBSC, also appears as a main issue  
 510 in the development of a new (food) economy which should take into account and respect specific  
 511 contexts and diversity (Blay-Palmer and Donald, 2006), as well as different sets of principles as  
 512 highlighted in Social and Solidarity Economics (Laville et al., 2015).

513

514 Table 1. Comparison of the two SFCs through the 'new economic model' analytical criteria.

Criteria of analysis	Grabels market	Adesso Pasta! Project
<i>'Market relationship'</i>	Trust, transparency, mutual learning and acknowledgment	
<i>Governance and decision-making</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collegial governance committee</li> <li>• Participatory guarantee system</li> <li>• Sellers oversee each other's consistency and transparency</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Committee including the cooperative and the GAS, then a committee including the cooperative and a nation-wide civil society organisation where the GAS take part in the internal governance</li> </ul>
<i>Price setting</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Producers as price-makers initially, though validated by consumers and local authorities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Joint construction, based on fairness and cost transparency</li> </ul>
<i>Value sharing</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Labelling system favouring transparency on margins in different forms of resale</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prices including both farms' and the cooperative's costs</li> <li>• Contribution to Solidarity and Future Fund</li> </ul>
<i>Risk sharing</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Acceptance by consumers of longer supply chains to alleviate the economic risks for producers (guarantee of sale and turnover, even if their production is low)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prices also including fixed costs and pre-payment by consumers</li> <li>• Minimum purchasing amount</li> <li>• Pact</li> </ul>
<i>Managing internal</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• One seller per product</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Open-door and pooling of benefits</li> </ul>

<i>competition</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• New membership dependent on the viability of each stand</li> </ul>	through the cooperative
<i>Economic accessibility</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collective evaluation of the affordability of the products</li> <li>• Consideration by consumers of the quality-price ratio rather than the price alone</li> <li>• However, still few consumers with limited resources</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Despite the careful evaluation of costs and the contribution to the Solidarity and Future Fund, affordability of the final product</li> </ul>

515  
516  
517 *5.2. Enlarging the field of food democracy: collective learning and inclusion of non-specialists in the*  
518 *decision-making process*  
519

520 Delving deeper into the models, these two trajectories highlight how new economic patterns are jointly  
521 built by different actors, including individuals who are not specialists in agriculture, food or economics  
522 (e.g. 'ordinary' consumers and representatives of the local authority in the French case). They also show  
523 how the participation of certain actors may pose challenges to the development of an alternative  
524 economic model. For instance, in the Italian case, the possibility for the GAS members to take part in  
525 producers' activity resulted in an excessive level of freedom of choice, creating difficulties for the  
526 collective project and leading to the adoption of a new rule (minimum purchasing amount).  
527

528 These results thus open a second line of discussion, concerning participation, first in relation to  
529 previous research on alternative food systems. CSAs in North America and equivalent systems in Europe  
530 (AMAP in France, GAS in Italy...) are often presented as examples of participatory food systems in which  
531 consumers take part in the socio-economic organisation of the chain while sacrificing their personal  
532 preferences (no choice for what is delivered) (Goodman et al., 2012). In these systems, however,  
533 consumers most often abide by the rules and principles set by their skilled founders<sup>11</sup>. This puts the  
534 capacity of non-specialists to build new models of organisation or to take part in the process of their  
535 development into question, especially when tackling complex domains such as the economy.  
536

537 This perspective addresses more general works on 'participation' in collective actions, pointing out how  
538 this process may be reduced to manipulation or assimilation when individuals lack the skills or relevant  
539 knowledge (Friedberg, 1996). Considering collective actions aimed at developing food democracy,  
540 Hassanein thus stresses that education in agriculture and cooking, as well as in the culture and practice  
541 of democracy, is needed in order to empower consumers to take part in developing solutions to  
542 common problems (Hassanein, 2003). However, in the Grabels market case discussed in this paper,  
543 comparing the prices of 'incomparable products' (with different origins and production methods) by  
544 'unskilled' consumers results a structuring moment in the joint construction of a new economic pattern  
545 by favouring an in-depth learning process, even for the farmers. Similarly, in the AP! project, the  
546 involvement of consumers in considering all the aspects of production processes affecting price  
547 becomes an important opportunity of learning which strengthens pre-existing favourable attitudes.  
548 Nevertheless, from a growth perspective, consumer involvement in management, while a distinctive  
549 feature of these new organisational models, "may pose new challenges, such as the dilemma with

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<sup>11</sup> In France, the AMAP movement was jointly built with the NGO ATTAC, well known for its opposition to the mainstream economy and its proposal to apply taxes on international financial transactions (Zimmer, 2016).

550 respect to the need for greater professionalism and efficiency, and the will to explore new conceptions  
551 of enterprise, which may include also the societal actors” (Rossi, 2017, p. 11). Mixed participation of  
552 both specialists and non-specialists is thus a complex element for proper management but is an  
553 essential issue to implement a new vision of SFCs as economic organisations which create added value  
554 by embodying values and promoting learning.

555  
556 General research work on participation in collective action has also shown that both individual and  
557 collective interests must be considered for the development and success of collective action (Friedberg,  
558 1996). The decline of cooperatives in Western Europe can in fact be partly interpreted as a failure in  
559 considering both these levels of interests (Touzard and Draperi, 2003). This calls into further  
560 questioning the process through which food goes beyond individual interests and becomes a ‘common  
561 good’ (Eymard-Duvernay, 2005; Vivero-Pol, 2017), related to other common goods such as agriculture,  
562 the landscape and territory. The Solidarity and Future Fund in the AP! project, dedicated to financially  
563 supporting local projects that preserve local resources, is an interesting concrete economic tool to  
564 foster this process which results, through shared learning, in an alignment of individualities around the  
565 collective interest.

## 566 567 568 **6. Conclusion**

569  
570 The economic dimension of SFCs, within a European context marked by a profusion of initiatives aimed  
571 at bringing producers and consumers closer, still feeds a debate focused on its alterity (Le Velly, 2017),  
572 leaving its social construction under-researched. From an original framework, based on New Economic  
573 Sociology and Convention Theory, enriched as well by Social and Solidarity Economics, we have  
574 analysed the social construction of two ‘alternative’ economic models in two cases of SFCs. We  
575 described how new practices and rules were designed by social interactions – especially knowledge  
576 exchanges – through trajectories comprised of challenges and adaptations. Based on the two case  
577 studies, we have proposed a set of criteria from which alternative economic models could be described  
578 and assessed, in SFCs, and potentially in other food chains. Their two trajectories also lead us to explore  
579 the modalities and challenges of participation in the construction of new food economies, thus opening  
580 a new dimension for food democracy. The two case studies thus show that there is no single right way  
581 to organise the new food economy, although the articulation of different capacities and perspectives is  
582 a significant factor which may contribute to uncovering and understanding what is behind the food  
583 economy, especially from the perspective of common goods.

584  
585 Focusing on the social construction of SFCs as economic organisations, our contribution finally returns  
586 to the initial debate: in the interactionist and constructivist perspective we propose, the ‘hybridity’ of  
587 short food systems highlighted in other works is re-conceived as the result of the interaction among  
588 actors with different interests and as solutions to economic coordination problems found through  
589 participation. Still exploratory, our work thus calls for further research to compare diverse ‘hybrid’ SFCs  
590 and to analyse how the participation of actors in the economic dimension may induce a higher  
591 transformative potential, even when participation is combined with conventional rules. Considering  
592 that SFCs are diversifying across Europe and now include the mainstream industry (Kneafsey, 2015),  
593 their hybridity, as a feature, may be a less important aspect to be assessed than the transformative  
594 paths that they are able to induce.

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596

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