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# How to create intermediated and partnership local food networks? Collective performance, collective negotiation, and collective learning

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## Abstract

This article describes the construction of innovative beef supply chains observed in the Loire and Isère departments in France. The aim for their promoters was to build intermediated local food networks without leaving the organizing power in the intermediaries' hands. The authors take the analytical framework of the sociology of “market agencements,” which focuses on market shaping

processes, to show how the ranchers, slaughterhouses, wholesalers, and retailers went about defining quality, prices, and the logistics and administrative organization of their supply chains. They also underscore three characteristics of intermediated supply chain partnerships, namely, the search for collective performance, collective negotiation of the rules of the game, and collective learning.

## Keywords

Agriculture of the Middle, Livestock, Market Shaping, Local Food Networks, Values-Based Supply Chains

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## Introduction

Local food networks, or short food supply chains, have become a core subject of agri-food studies since the early 2000s. In most cases, this research has focused on direct sales (farmers markets, farm shops, community supported agriculture, etc.). However, more recently it has also turned to intermediated forms that include wholesalers, processors, retailers, and contract caterers. They have also clustered around new keywords such as “values-based supply chains” and “agriculture of the middle” (Lyson et al., 2008) or the idea of “hybrid” supply chains that combine the long-global-conventional and the short-local-alternative (Bloom & Hinrichs, 2011).

Even though they have been examined less than direct sales, a record is being built up of the potential advantages and limits of these intermediated forms of local food networks. On the one hand, they are solutions for scaling up. By pooling the supplies of several producers, controlling logistics, or carrying out processing operations, they make it possible to reach such buyers as hospitals, schools, and universities (Cleveland et al., 2014; Conner et al., 2011; Izumi et al., 2010; Klein, 2015). Working with intermediaries such as wholesalers and retailers likewise makes it possible to reach certain consumers who want to get easy access to local products without having to change their buying practices too much (Greco et al., 2020; Milestad et al., 2017; Zwart & Mathijs, 2020). These intermediated forms also have advantages for farmers who do not want to invest in marketing and thereby spare themselves the associated time and mental burden (Le Velly & Dufeu, 2016). We must also point out that some of them have no choice but to rely on intermediaries. That is particularly the case of agriculture of the middle farmers, who are involved in undiversified crops on large acreages and would have great difficulty selling all of their production directly to consumers (Lyson et al., 2008; Peterson et al., 2022).

On the other hand, the creation of intermediated food networks can spawn fears of a slide into the long supply chain’s way of operating, some-

thing that some authors liken to conventionalization (Mount & Smithers, 2014). The main pitfall is that the intermediaries may impose low prices on the farmers and capture the bulk of the added value. More generally, there is the risk of their exercising central power over the supply chain’s organization so that they determine not just the prices but also the production methods. Several investigations attest to the reality of this risk. They relate the farmers’ feelings of not being sufficiently involved in the governance of intermediated initiatives (Bloom & Hinrichs, 2011; Milestad et al., 2017; Mount & Smithers, 2014) or of having to submit to the demands of the supply chain’s other actors (Cleveland et al., 2014; Klein, 2015; Rosol & Barbosa, 2021; Tewari et al., 2018).

Can intermediated local food networks be created without the intermediaries getting the power to organize the supply chain? The researchers who have identified a values-based supply chain model intimate that is possible, that strategic partnerships can take shape between the food supply chain’s actors, but at the same time they underscore the magnitude of the challenges to take up (Stevenson & Pirog, 2008). Moreover, as we have seen, several studies show that despite aspirations in line with the values of relocalizing food supply, it is not rare for farmers to carry very little weight in dealing with the other actors in intermediated local food networks.

This article makes an original contribution to this debate by describing how it is possible to build intermediated local food networks inspired by partnership objectives. To do so, we shall study two French beef supply chain initiatives that we chose because they are particularly well designed in this regard. We shall do this work with the help of the sociology of “market *agencements*.” This analytical framework, which is an offshoot of actor-network theory (ANT) (Latour, 2005), focuses less on the ways that already formed markets operate than on the “marketization processes” that allow their formation (Çalışkan & Callon, 2010; Callon, 2021; for a presentation, see Le Velly & Moraine, 2020).<sup>1</sup> This perspective makes it possible to emphasize

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<sup>1</sup> Callon chose the French term “agencements” rather than “arrangement” because it is closer to “agency.” A market agencement is a sociotechnical arrangement that is capable of productive and market action (Çalışkan & Callon 2010).

the actual operations that are necessary to establish innovative agrifood networks, such as the development of sustainable quality standards for the merchandise, formulas for setting fair prices, new logistic infrastructure or packaging, and so on (Le Velly & Dufeu, 2016; Le Velly & Moraine, 2020; Onyas et al., 2018; Ouma, 2015; Wang, 2018). A fine examination of these processes can then enable the researcher to understand better how the power relations within the network develop. Far from being thought of as structurally rigid and determinate, these power relations are seen more as the results of the market-formation processes in question.

The rest of this article is organized as follows: In the first part we present the two initiatives that we studied and specify the conditions of our investigation. The next part is devoted to the study results, in which we expound upon the characteristics and motivations of their initiators. Above all we shall describe three marketization processes that were carried out in partnership, namely, defining quality, setting prices, and setting up the initiative's logistic and administrative structure. The last part discusses our results with a focus on three dimensions of the actors–supply chain partnership, that is, the search for collective performance, the collective negotiating over the rules of the game, and the learning process.

## Case Studies and Methodology

### *Éleveurs de Saveurs Iséroises*

*Éleveurs de saveurs iséroises* (Isère Flavors Ranchers) is an association of beef cattle ranchers situated in the northern part of Isère Department, France. The creation of this association was triggered in 2013 by the desire of four Grenoble butchers to be able to offer their customers top-quality local beef. Not knowing how to contact the ranchers, they turned to the Isère Chamber of Agriculture, a public establishment that supports the department's farmers. An employee of the chamber brought together and advised a group of 14 ranchers. The ranchers

and butchers then reached a meat quality and price agreement. An administrative and logistic scheme involving a transport company and the City of Grenoble's public slaughterhouse was also worked out. However, this first initiative culminated in a very small number of orders: just 18 head of cattle in all of 2014. A second arrangement was then thought up with a local Super U supermarket in 2015–2016, whereby the latter, located in Saint-Étienne-de-Saint-Geoirs (Isère Department), committed to buying 100 carcasses a year. This second sales outlet led another 14 ranchers to join the scheme and a part-time sales representative was hired. At the end of our investigation, at the end of 2017, a third marketing scheme was being tested. It was aimed at the coordinated coupling of two outlets, namely, the sale of forequarters to the central kitchens serving Isère's public secondary schools and the sale of the hindquarters to a regional group of supermarkets franchised by the grocery store chain Carrefour.<sup>2</sup>

### *100% Charolais du Roannais*

*100% Charolais du Roannais* (100% Roanne Charolais beef) is a trademark boosted by Roannais Agglomération, a public association of 40 municipalities from the north of the Loire Department. Starting in November 2015, Roannais Agglomération held monthly meetings that brought together local ranchers (originally five of them), managers from a regional contract caterer named Coralys, managers and butchers from four supermarkets, and the manager of Charlieu's public slaughterhouse (Loire Department). These actors quickly came to an agreement on the project to arrange supply chains for two products, namely, frozen hamburgers made from the forequarters by Carrel, a company located at Hières-sur-Amby in the north of the neighboring Isère Department, and the hindquarter carcasses. A new actor, Clément frères, was included in the scheme in the course of 2017. The job of this cattle merchant was to select the animals before sending them to slaughter. Then 11 new supermarkets in the department joined the

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<sup>2</sup>The forequarters are the source of the main cuts of meat for braising or boiling, such as for stews and bœuf bourguignon. They are also used for ground meat and processed dishes. The hindquarters, which are considered the source of more choice cuts, provide meat for grilling, pan-frying, and roasting.

project at the end of 2017. To cope with the growth forecast, 10 additional ranchers were also included in the collective. Figure 1 gives a schematic overview of the two supply chain initiatives.

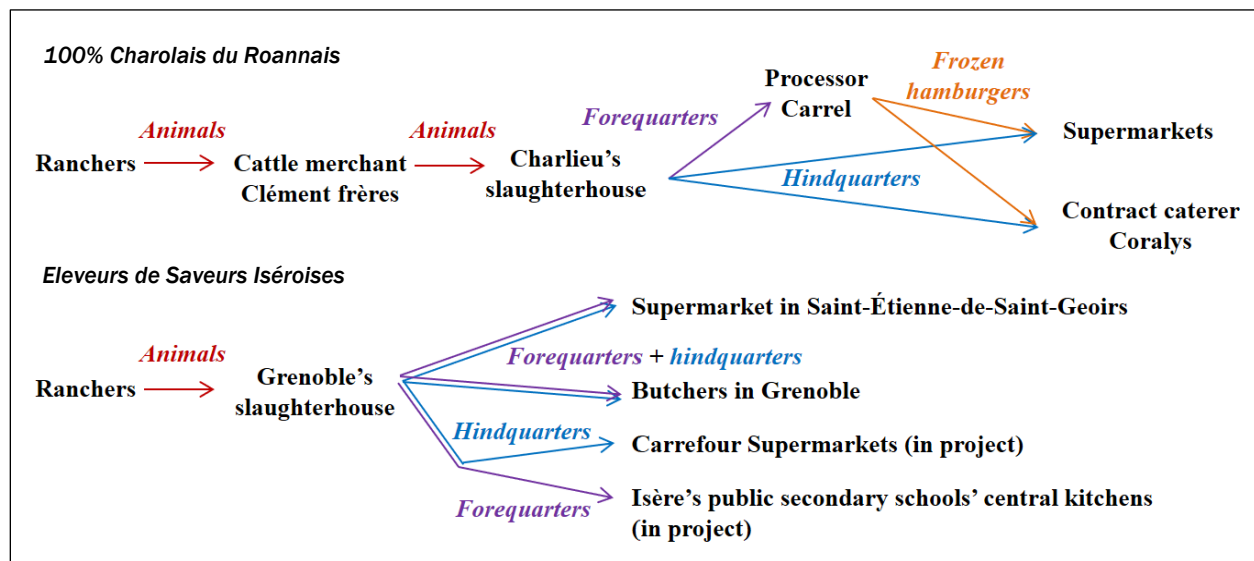
### Methodology

In accordance with the usual methods of the sociology of market agencement, our research relied on an ethnographic investigation that combined archival research, semi-structured interviews, and direct observation. We started by going through the two projects' archives, composed of press clippings, internal regulatory documents (specifications, agreements, and articles of association), and

minutes. The minutes of their meetings, which were generally 2-5 pages long, contained a wealth of information about the organizational choices made and difficulties encountered. We were thus able to study how the supply chains were gradually set up starting in 2014. Next, we conducted 16 semi-structured interviews of the two initiatives' actors in the course of 2016 (see Table 1). Finally, the second author of the article participated in 14 monthly meetings attended by all the participants in the *100% Charolais du Roannais* initiative in 2016 and 2017.

These data underwent thematic analysis in which the coding was guided by the research topics

**Figure 1. Actors and Supply Chains in the 100% Charolais du Roannais and Eleveurs de saveurs iséroises Initiatives at the End of 2017**



**Table 1. Summary of the Field Data Used**

	<i>Eleveurs de Saveurs Iséroises</i>	<i>100% Charolais du Roannais</i>
Semi-structured interviews	9 interviews: 6 ranchers, 1 supermarket manager, the manager of Grenoble's slaughterhouse, and a manager of the central kitchen of Isère Department's secondary schools	7 interviews: 2 ranchers, 3 supermarket managers, the manager of Charlieu's slaughterhouse, and the Loire Agrifood Cluster's task officer
Archives	35 documents: 27 minutes of the association's meetings; 5 press clippings; and the association's articles of association, house rules, and specifications	30 documents: 22 steering committee meeting minutes; 7 press clippings; and the agreement between Charlieu's slaughterhouse, Roannais Agglomération, and Clément frères
Observations		Participation in 14 steering committee meetings in 2016 and 2017

studied in intermediated local food networks (the intermediaries' price-setting power, work necessary to market goods, etc.). The coding was also influenced by our analytical framework, which revolved around market-shaping processes, and especially their material dimensions. Nevertheless, our results were produced very inductively on the basis of data rather than hypotheses. This method produced some unexpected results, such as the importance of the "learning" theme, which we had originally underestimated.

## Results

### *The Actors' Characteristics and Motivations*

The ranchers in the two initiatives were very similar to the ones targeted by some American researchers concerned about the survival of an agriculture of the middle (Lyson et al., 2008; Peterson et al., 2022; see also Brives et al., 2017). First of all, these ranchers did not come from "alternative" networks, such as those organized around organic agriculture. They came from networks of ranchers producing beef cattle for sale to long supply chains via cooperatives or cattle merchants. The ranches were also typical of French cattle ranching operations: farms with an agricultural acreage of a scant 100 hectares (247 acres) with pastures and hay fields on which one rancher and a paid laborer work. It should be noted that in both cases studied the ranchers worked to "red label" specifications, the red label being an official sign for consumers that guarantees high-quality produce. However, this red label is widespread in the French beef cattle-ranching sector, to such a point that its ability to generate market differentiation is no longer clear.

The ranchers' motivations also echo those found in the American research. Their main objective was to sell their products at higher prices. This objective was coupled with criticism of the way the long supply chains in which they participated work. In France, the overwhelming majority of cattle ranchers sell their stock to cattle merchants or industrial slaughterhouses. In the second case, we can describe three types of slaughterhouse: those that belong to ranchers' cooperatives, those that belong to the agrifood processing industry, and those that belong to supermarket networks. The

ranchers in both initiatives criticized all of these actors for imposing their prices with no exceptions. Their criticism of the cooperatives in this regard was of particular note. The cooperatives do indeed belong to the ranchers, but are nevertheless seen as gigantic groups that defend the ranchers' interests poorly. The decisions to turn to the public slaughterhouses of Grenoble and Charlieu were thus linked to this criticism. These small slaughterhouses, which had been kept open by local government actors as part of their local development goals, are used to working for ranchers who market their meat directly. As such, they just work as service providers, without any influence over supply chain organization.

Direct sales of crates of meat could have been envisioned as a way to respond to this desire to recover their price-setting power, but the ranchers in our two case studies were not attracted by this solution. They felt that it was time-consuming and that marketing meat was not their job. So, although they contested the ways that the long supply chains in which they participated worked, they did not reject the principle of having different intermediaries carrying out their respective tasks. This *Éleveurs de saveurs iséroises* rancher expressed this point of view very well:

It's trying to get out of this system of either all long supply chains or all direct sales. Some things between the two exist. I did a little bit of selling directly, but it takes a huge amount of time. I'm thinking [of a way to] combine the advantages of long supply chains and direct sales. (June 2016 interview)

At the other end of the supply chains are the distributors, who also have "conventional" profiles. These are the butchers, supermarkets, and contract catering businesses. Their main motivation was to differentiate themselves from their competitors. These actors saw that their customers wanted local products. A local supply could thus act like a loss-leader on a supermarket shelf. Similarly, proposing menus that included local produce could also be a differentiating way to answer the calls for tenders (offers) to which the contract-catering companies responded.

These actors likewise experienced the construction of the two initiatives' supply chains as an opportunity to recover some control over their supplies. The self-employed butchers, supermarket butchers, and contract catering kitchen supply managers got the overwhelming bulk of their meat supplies from cattle merchants, agrifood companies, distributors, and purchasing unions. They appreciated these intermediaries, who could offer a wide range of goods. However, some of them, such as this supermarket manager participating in the *100% Charolais du Roannais* initiative, were also critical of the loss of power to which this relationship gave rise:

So, you say, what is the difference? It's putting together the product from A to Z with the actors who make it, to be able to be aware of, to control everything. ... A product like that one [*100% Charolais du Roannais* frozen hamburgers] worries me less than a Charal steak [the best known beef brand in France] that I don't know where it comes from or what it was made with. With this one, we know for sure that the animals were slaughtered a certain day, [the carcasses] were not left lying about here or there, that horsemeat wasn't added to the mix. ... We have to go back to things like that, even if it costs us a little more. (April 2016 interview)

This quote provides an excellent transition for introducing the rest of our results. How does one create a new product or new merchandise and a new supply chain "from A to Z"? This is where the sociology of market agencements provides a very useful analytical grid by underscoring the importance of the processes required for market shaping, i.e., the "marketization processes" (Çalışkan & Callon, 2010). For *Eleveurs de saveurs iséroises* and *100% Charolais du Roannais*, three processes appeared to be vital, namely, defining quality, setting prices, and organizing the market encounters. We shall now see for each of them how the participants in these "markets in the making" (Callon, 2021) negotiated collectively over the rules of the game.

### *Defining Quality Collectively*

A first marketization process, one that Çalışkan and Callon call "pacifying goods" (Çalışkan & Callon, 2010), concerns the operations that make it possible to define, stabilize, and guarantee the quality of merchandise.

A major operation in both case studies was drawing up specifications for the group's animal husbandry practices. This was the subject of negotiations that were conducted in different ways by *Eleveurs de saveurs iséroises* and *100% Charolais du Roannais*. In the first case, the Chamber of Agriculture adviser ran the cattle ranchers' meetings with the aim of translating the requests of first the Grenoble butchers and then the Saint-Étienne-de-Saint-Geoirs supermarket into specifications for the ranchers. In the second case, Roannais Agglomération held monthly steering committee meetings in which the ranchers, Charlieu slaughterhouse, supermarkets, and contract catering company took part. The panoply of people seated around the table at these meetings was noteworthy, for it included some 15 people who usually do not meet each other.

In conventional long supply chains, the intermediaries (slaughterhouses, industrial concerns, and distributors) make the necessary adjustments so that the qualities of the ranchers' produce and qualities demanded by the retailers match. In the two initiatives that we studied, the aim was to put an end to that so that the ranchers would no longer be dependent on the intermediaries' organizing power. For the distributors, that meant understanding better the constraints on cattle ranching. For the ranchers, above all, it meant going from reasoning that revolved around the animal to reasoning centered on meat quality and then working back to their ranching practices. None of the ranchers in the two initiatives had ever worked directly with butchers in the past. This *100% Charolais du Roannais* rancher stressed the difficulty that such a change in attitude entailed:

We were somewhat novices in all that. We came full of courage, hoping that it would work, and then it's true that we had some initial problems to deal with. ... People say that meat is complicated, but it's true that it is com-



plicated. It isn't a crate of apples. A lot of handling goes into making meat. When you go from one animal to the next you don't have the same yields, the same degree of fattening. ... There are tons of factors that come into play. You sort of discover what meat is all about. (April 2016 interview)

For the two initiatives, this process first gave rise to the drafting of specifications covering the livestock farming (diet, slaughter age, etc.) and animal conformation requirements (amount of muscle, carcass yield). While these specifications partially overlapped with the Charolais and Limousine red labels with which the two groups of ranchers complied, some of the requirements went beyond them. For example, the *Eleveurs de saveurs iséroises* ranchers took on the additional obligations of three months of dry rations before slaughter. That was a noteworthy change requested by Grenoble's butchers. The dry ration basically consists of hay supplemented with grain and is aimed at replacing corn silage, a feed strategy promoted since the 1960s because of the quick weight increases to which it leads, but that is now accused of producing meat that is tougher and spoils more easily.

The specifications were necessary but not sufficient to achieve all the quality adjustments needed. The experience of the supply chain system set up with Grenoble's butchers likewise attested to this. These butchers were used to choosing their meat from a broad supply of carcasses collected by meat brokers. It was thus easy for them to judge fat levels and choose the carcasses that suited them. The butchers in the *Eleveurs de saveurs iséroises* scheme bought the animals on the hoof, before they were slaughtered. The problem with that was that meat quality does not derive automatically from ranching conditions or conformation. In the case in point, the butchers found the first carcasses delivered to be too fatty. The ranchers then took training courses to learn how to appraise the butchery quality of animals on the hoof. Evaluating the fattiness of a live steer entails skills and practical knowledge that involve visual observation and manual palpation of the animals that today are the monopoly of the intermediaries in the beef supply

chain. The goal was thus to transfer such know-how to the ranchers.

The actors in the *100% Charolais du Roannais* initiative came up against similar issues but found a different solution. This time, Charlieu's slaughterhouse is the one that sounded the alarm. It explained that it had to remove a large amount of fat from the carcasses to achieve a 15% fat content for ground beef, which cost them a pretty penny. It also ascertained very great heterogeneity among the animals, and even pointed to the case of one cow that should have been rejected. Given these problems, which cropped up repeatedly in the three tests in 2016, the *100% Charolais du Roannais's* steering committee chose to use the services of a cattle merchant, Clément frères, that was tasked with identifying the best animals on each ranch. This solution, for all that, did not give the merchant the power to organize the supply chain. Clément frères was more like a service provider to the ranchers and the other actors of the supply chain, doing triage by quality, in a market scheme in which the rules continued to be set collectively.

### *Collective Price Setting*

A second marketization process concerns price setting (Çalışkan & Callon, 2010). Prices can be set by the action of a diverse range of rules or devices that mirror the balance of power in the supply chain. Two aims were sought in our two case studies: achieving an overall balance over the entire value chain and marketing every part of the carcass.

The supply chain actors in both the *Eleveurs de saveurs iséroises* and the *100% Charolais du Roannais* scheme sought to set the prices at each stage at the same time. Unlike what is done in conventional long supply chains, they did not engage in bargaining stage by stage, but sought an overall balance that would satisfy all the participants. This is a noteworthy feature, given that the work of the intermediaries in the long supply chains is generally extremely opaque when it comes to prices and profit margins. More specifically, the ranchers criticized the way that the intermediaries profited from this opaqueness to manipulate information and push the prices they paid to the ranchers toward the lower end of the scale.

This search for a general balance combined



several rationales: comparison with the market prices usually practiced, coverage of the costs specific to the initiative, and a search for added value that would justify the efforts made. For example, in the *100% Charolais du Roannais* scheme, the four supermarkets involved at the start of the project agreed with the ranchers on a purchase price of €9.72 for a 1 kg package of frozen hamburgers. The ranchers calculated that this price would enable them to cover their costs (hauling and slaughtering the animals; cutting up the carcasses; processing the meat into frozen hamburgers; packing, storing, and delivering the hamburgers; and administrative management) on the one hand and would generate added value compared with selling their cattle to the cooperative on the other hand. The supermarkets and ranchers also agreed on a retail sales price of €11.90 per package, which was in line with the prices of the major national brands. As these prices were set, the supermarkets clearly stated that they could not sell the packages at a higher price, as this would discourage customers. They also stressed that they were accepting half their usual profit margin in order to support the product's launch, but this margin eventually would have to rise when the costs linked to organizing the supply chain fell.

In both initiatives, this search for a fair price has resulted in additional income for ranchers. In 2017, once all the fees had been paid, they received around €100 more per animal sold in the *100% Charolais du Roannais* supply chains than what they received in the conventional supply chains. For *Eleveurs de saveurs iséroises*, the difference was estimated at €150. It should be noted, however, that few animals were sold under these initiatives. A handful of *Eleveurs de saveurs iséroises* ranchers sold about 10 animals annually for about a quarter of their turnover from this activity, while the others made only a few percent of their turnover through the sale of one or two animals per year. Similarly, the ranchers more involved in *100% Charolais du Roannais* only sold three or four animals with this margin per year, and the others only one.

The price-setting process was also linked to the problem of selling every part of the animal. Whereas retailers buy carcasses or cuts of meat, ranchers raise and sell animals. In conventional

long supply chains, this constraint is managed by the intermediaries. Neither producers nor retailers have to worry about that. This was no longer the case in the two initiatives that we studied, and their actors set up collective discussions to solve this problem. When the *100% Charolais du Roannais* scheme was created, the parties agreed that the four supermarkets would buy both the hamburgers made from the forequarters and the entire hindquarter carcasses. When in May 2016 one of them announced that it would no longer systematically take the hindquarters, the steering committee considered several solutions. The possibility of excluding this supermarket was raised at a first meeting, with another supermarket arguing that if its competitor was no longer going to abide fully by the rules, it should not be allowed to sell the hamburgers, either. This solution was rejected and the next meetings tackled other avenues. Charlieu's slaughterhouse tried unsuccessfully to find new customers for the hindquarters. It also tried, in two rather unconvincing tests, to make hamburger out of whole carcasses of inferior quality. The project's steering committee envisioned increasing the number of animals slaughtered in summer, when demand for the hindquarters is higher, and storing the surplus frozen hamburgers until winter. However, this option was ruled out because of its cost and the lack of infrastructure. At the time we ended our investigation, no completely satisfactory solution had been found.

### *Agreeing Collectively on Market Encounter Organization*

A third marketization process could also be discerned in the two initiatives that we studied, concerning the rules and infrastructure that allow "market encounters" (Çalışkan & Callon, 2010). In the long supply chains organized by intermediaries, these rules and infrastructure are effective and stabilized, to the point where people are often no longer aware of their importance. For the actors in the *Eleveurs de saveurs iséroises* and *100% Charolais du Roannais* schemes, on the contrary, they had to be recreated.

The rules governing orders, billing, and logistics concern a host of little details that must be settled to allow trade to take place smoothly. To

show this, we can give the example of the problems that *Éleveurs de saveurs iséroises* encountered with its first sales of carcasses to the supermarket at Saint-Étienne-de-Saint-Geoirs. The supermarket asked Grenoble's slaughterhouse to make several adjustments. First of all, the slaughterhouse had to cut up the carcasses more finely than it did for Grenoble's butchers. Second, it had to invest in a new labeling machine so as to be able to include on the carcass labels all of the mandatory information required by law for supermarket retailing. Finally, it had to deliver the meat in a larger refrigerated truck so that its height would be compatible with the supermarket's unloading bays. In the following interview excerpt, one of the ranchers recounts these problems and attests to the learning that they required:

The carcasses have to be cut up in a certain way; they call that "split and ribbed." There's the side with one hind leg; the forelegs are vacuum-packed and ready to be cut up. We also have to work with Grenoble's slaughterhouse. So, the manager of Grenoble's slaughtering line came with us to meet the supermarket's butchers. ... A first carcass was brought over in a 3.5-ton truck, a small refrigerated truck not high enough for the bay, which forced them to unload the truck 200 m from the bay and walk around outside with the animals. So, we had to bring them in 19-ton trucks. So, there you are, those are little things, but we didn't know about them. So, we had to learn. Those are little things, but we can't work with the usual livestock transporters we use with the butchers. Because to go deliver in the middle of Grenoble, it's better to have a 3.5-ton truck. It's all that. And little by little it will become part of our routines. (June 2016 interview)

Production planning is also necessary to ensure "fluid" market encounters. Remember that the *Éleveurs de saveurs iséroises* ranchers have to switch the livestock to dry rations three months before going to slaughter. They also have to be informed early enough to be able to reserve the livestock for these supply chains and not sell them elsewhere.

The rule of planning thus ties in with a good behavior rule: Each party must respect their delivery commitments, even if that complicates things for them. As the various tests were carried out, the members of the two initiatives came to an understanding about the right ways to organize this planning. In practice, they drew up medium-term schedules in which each rancher took stock of the animals available on the farm and shorter-term schedules that distributed the orders actually on the books among the ranchers.

All of these organizational rules could be the subject of informal or written agreements. The *100% Charolais du Roannais* initiative made particular use of the latter. All the stakeholders in the supply chain signed a partnership agreement at the end of 2017 that spelled out each party's commitments. The "ranchers" portion of the agreement provided in particular for taking charge of shipping the animals to the slaughterhouse and doing at least one commercial event in a supermarket each year. The cattle merchant, for his part, was responsible for checking the quality of the animals and had to pay a purchase price per kilo that had been negotiated with the ranchers. The agreement also specified that Roannais Agglomération was tasked with centralizing the customers' orders and making sure that the animals were available at the ranches. And on it went.

## Discussion and Conclusions

The two initiatives we studied are exemplary cases of hybrid supply chains combining conventional and alternative characteristics. This observation is confirmed by the definition of quality (where an original local definition of quality is sought, while using conventional quality standards), price setting (which aims to ensure fair remuneration for all actors, without completely disregarding market prices), and administrative and logistical organization (which is specially defined, while reproducing the usual forms of intermediated supply chains). But hybridity is in no way equivalent to conventionalization. Our study of *Éleveurs de saveurs iséroises* and *100% Charolais du Roannais* suggests, on the contrary, that hybrid supply chains can achieve the partnership objectives given to them by their promoters. It is probably difficult but nevertheless

possible to create intermediated local food networks without leaving the power to organize them to the intermediaries.

In following the actors in these two initiatives we first were able to identify the sources of power of the conventional long beef supply chains' intermediaries. In trying to work with supermarkets, butchers, or contract caterers, the ranchers became aware of the huge number of adjustments that the intermediaries made each day. The cattle merchants, slaughterhouses, industrial concerns, and distributors have a place as mediators between the worlds of farming and retailing, the actors of which never meet each other. This position gives these intermediaries an advantage when it comes to setting prices. It also enables them to appear as unavoidable links in the chain, because they can find outlets for all the animals, guarantee the qualities of the meat being sold, or ensure fluid trade.

Next, our study revealed what was learned in establishing a strategic partnership among the actors of a supply chain. In their trail-blazing article on values-based supply chains, Stevenson and Pirog identify these supply chains' characteristics through a review of management literature. Two of these characteristics proved to be especially relevant in characterizing our two initiatives: "emphasis on high levels of performance and high levels of trust throughout the network" and "emphasis on shared vision, shared information (transparency), and shared decision making among the strategic partners" (Stevenson & Pirog, 2008, p. 120). Case studies published in this journal subsequently confirmed the importance of these factors (Conner et al., 2011; Greco et al., 2020; Klein & Michas, 2014). In continuing in this direction, we were able in turn to identify three cross-cutting characteristics shared by the three previously described marketization processes.


First, the *Eleveurs de saveurs iséroises* and *100% Charolais du Roannais* initiatives were characterized by their search for collective performance in the supply chain. So, even though each of the actors in the initiatives studied was motivated by her or his own objectives, all the actors were also aware of the fact that achieving their objectives would depend on making the right adjustments throughout the chain. For example, their promoters often

expressed the idea that logistical efficiency could not be ignored without harming all the actors and could not be achieved without fine-tuning a host of details. Similarly, the champions of the *100% Charolais du Roannais* initiative explained that the success of their initiative depended on the meat's quality, which itself results from the feed used on the farms, proper selection by the cattle merchant, and quality of carcass chilling (aging) by the slaughterhouse, and also from the way that this quality is promoted at the point of sale, whether by the packaging or the butcher.

This search for collective performance was coupled with the will to develop the supply chain's rules collectively. This aspiration could be explained by the pursuit of partnership values. However, it also met a sort of necessity. Forging supply chains collectively is thus much less simple than continuing to work in supply chains whose organization is delegated to intermediaries. Whereas existing networks are reliable and stabilized, establishing new ones entails identifying good partners, setting and guaranteeing the products' qualities, agreeing on prices, and solving a host of logistic and administrative problems. To do all that, the actors in the two initiatives met each other at meetings and during visits. Above all, they launched experiments that enabled them gradually to discover the right ways to do things. The public actors, Roannais Agglomération and Isère Chamber of Agriculture, had important roles in this regard. They facilitated the encounters among heterogeneous professionals. Yet we must underscore the fact that the economic actors indeed organized the new supply chains themselves.

The two initiatives that we studied finally led us to see the importance of collective learning. In the case of *Eleveurs de saveurs iséroises*, we saw how, in reaction to the Grenoble butchers' criticism, the ranchers decided to learn how to judge the fattiness of their cattle by visual observation or palpation. In a symmetrical movement, the butchers had to talk with the ranchers and think about good livestock feeding. To exaggerate just slightly, we can say that the ranchers learned about meat and the butchers learned about ranching. The trials they conducted played an essential part in generating this learning. In the initiatives that we studied, the rules were

negotiated over and adopted based on the scheduling and assessment of test operations. The first attempt to sell *Éleveurs de saveurs iséroises*'s meat in a supermarket, with all the unexpected problems that were discerned on this occasion, shows this well. The same goes for the groping in the dark that was linked to the difficulty of selling every part of the carcass. All the things learned in this way are both a condition and a consequence of organizing as a partnership. They are indispensable if market

organization is not to be left in the intermediaries' hands and they reinforce the actors' abilities to develop new food supply chains. 

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