A broader context of cooperation and collective action in short food supply chains

Introduction and context





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INRAE

RMT Alimentation Locale

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Is shortening the answer?
Shorter chains are not sustainable by nature – what makes the difference is how actors cooperate.

A changing farming world

−37%

farms in the EU between 2005 and 2020 (9.1 million left)

Eurostat, 2023

−21%

farms in France between 2010 and 2020, and −11% in farm labour (FTE)

Agreste, 2020 census

25%

of French farm managers were aged 60 or over in 2020 (20% in 2010)

Agreste, 2020 census

New entrants, new aspirations

More than a third of recent new farmers have no farming parents; many come from other careers

They seek quality of life: weekends, holidays, time for family – and often organic, diversified farming

Yet long working days remain the norm – the work itself has not changed

What groups can bring to today's farmers

Share the work – and free up time

Shop shifts, delivery rounds and replacements make weekends and holidays possible

Lower the entry barrier

Newcomers can access land, equipment, shops and customers without investing alone

Break isolation

Peer support and learning, especially for those who do not come from farming families

Welcome diverse profiles

Part-time projects, career changers, women, couples – groups can adapt roles to each person

Collective farms – at least three non-family partners – are an emerging answer: about a hundred exist in France (Naël, 2022)

A spectrum of cooperation

1

Working together
on one farm

Collective farms with several non-family partners

Naël, 2022

2

Sharing tools
and premises

Machinery cooperatives, shared processing workshops

COREnet case studies

3

Selling and delivering
together

Producer shops, pooled deliveries

Today's focus

4

Learning together
in networks

Popular education groups (CIVAM), national and European networks (RMT, COREnet)

Networks

Today we focus on collective selling – but the same governance questions arise at every level.

Short chains as social innovation

From politics to cooperation

Ties between farmers in short chains move from shared political commitment to everyday cooperation – exchanges and mutual help that support learning

Chiffoleau, 2009

Between market and social innovation

Short chains renew economic exchange around trust, fair prices and the social and solidarity economy

Chiffoleau, 2019

Rules can be co-built

Ici.C.Local, created in 2008 by the town of Grabels and INRAE: local committees of producers, consumers, retailers and elected officials define what 'local' means

INRAE, 2018

Collective action pays – over time

Collective initiatives are associated with higher farm income, but benefits often appear only after 5 to 7 years

Chiffoleau & Dourian, 2020

Groups make farms more resilient to shocks

Covid-19 (2020)

- Short-chain livestock farms resisted, adapted and innovated
- Collective action was key: shared online shops, pooled deliveries, joint feed purchases, new consumer buying groups

Chiffoleau et al., 2022 – RMT surveys

Inflation (2022–2023)

- Peer networks shared information and moral support
- Farmers pooled purchases and equipment, and coordinated prices at markets
- Ties that start as business relations can become mutual support

Deroche-Leydier, 2025

But enthusiasm is not enough: after Covid, demand fell back and some who had invested on a lasting boom struggled. Resilience needs robust governance.

…but collective action does not happen by itself

Common pitfalls

- Coordination takes time – and that time is rarely counted
- Unequal workloads and free-riding
- Disputes over prices, quality and who sells what
- Money and work: the 'difficult questions' left unspoken
- New collectives often lack pre-existing social ties

What makes it work

- Record each member's time and costs – and compensate fairly
- Clear, written rules, settled early
- Rotate tasks so that no one is irreplaceable
- An external facilitator, especially in conflicts
- Regular meetings that build trust

Sources: Raton, 2023; Raimbert & Raton, 2021; Naël, 2022; Vittersø et al., 2019; MAGPRO

2026: International Year of the Woman Farmer

26%

of farm managers in France are women (130,200 in 2020)

70%

of women-led farms are individual businesses (Agreste, 2024)

~30

CIVAM women's groups use women-only collectives as spaces for popular education and mutual support

Why it matters for cooperation

Groups give women a stronger voice, bargaining power and access to markets and services

But women remain under-represented in the leadership of cooperatives and producer groups

Governance question: who sits at the table, and how can rules make room for everyone?

At the heart of the last COREnet meeting in Ireland

Agreste, 2024; CIVAM, 2022; FAO, 2012

What this means for advisors and facilitators

1

Before

Help decide whether – and what – to pool. Make hidden costs visible.

Tools: Logicout, RMT platform guide

2

Setting up

Settle money and work questions early. Draft simple written rules.

Tools: Filières en communs guides, Naël 2022

3

Running

Facilitate, mediate conflicts, rotate roles, welcome newcomers.

Tools: External facilitation

4

Growing or in crisis

Revisit governance and contributions. Plan for the long term (5–7 years).

Tools: Peer exchange, Golden Cases

At every stage: connect groups to peers and networks – CIVAM, RMT Alimentation locale, COREnet Golden Cases

Governance questions for today's session

- **Who decides, and how?** – membership, voting, roles
- **How are costs, risks, benefits and work shared?** – commissions, fees, shifts
- **How does governance change as the group grows?** – from informal to formal rules
- **Who takes part in decisions?** – including women and newcomers
- **How can advisors and facilitators help?** – at each stage of the project

Thank you!

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