

Intermediary actors: driving forces for the ecologisation of agri-food systems

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Context and issues

Challenges to the dominant agricultural and food model highlight the need to transform agri-food systems. As reported in the literature, the transformation of agri-food systems is framed in terms of agroecological transition (Gliessman, 2016). This process of model change involves innovations of various kinds (technical, organisational, economic, institutional) and a complex set of barriers to overcome. Implementing these dynamics of change requires a comprehensive and systemic approach and an analysis of the agri-food systems from a multi-stakeholder and multi-scale perspective (Angeon et al., 2024).

From this perspective, agri-food systems can be understood as spaces of interrelationships between a diversity of actors whose interests are not always compatible and which manifest themselves through tensions and power relations. In particular, intermediary actors (in the sense that they are, in the food supply chain, between producers and consumers) appear to have significant influence that affects both upstream (agricultural practices) and downstream (food practices) practices in the agri-food systems. In that sense, they are considered as driving forces (Brocard, 2023).

However, these intermediary actors have received little interest in the literature (Baritaux and Billon, 2016; Faliès and Hulot, 2022). When they do are studied, their actions are generally stigmatised because they are described as hindering the sustainability of agri-food systems (Gottlieb and Joshie, 2010; Patturel and Ramel, 2017; Lepillier and Yount-André, 2019). Given their importance and their structuring role, we question their ability to ecologise agri-food systems. This analytical prism constitutes an **original** research approach, which invites us to study the resources that a category of actors, yet rarely integrated in these reflections, mobilises in favour of the transition.

More specifically, the **research questions** raised are as follows: how do intermediary actors' strategies promote the circulation of products from agricultural systems with low levels of pesticides within agri-food systems? What resources do these actors mobilise to integrate such products into the food trade circuits in which they operate?

Our paper therefore **aims** to: (i) characterise the intermediary actors involved in promoting fruit and vegetables with environmental attributes and (ii) identify the obstacles and levers associated with these strategies, as well as their room for integrating more of these products into food trade circuits.

Theoretical approaches used

We refer to the literature on the *sociology of market agencements*, which recognises three essential functions of intermediary actors: 'market mediation', 'market agencement' and 'regulation' (Le Velly and Dufeu, 2016). We **hypothesise** that in order to perform their triple function, these actors mobilise different forms of proximity within the trade circuits in which they operate and that strong proximity ties favour efforts to enhance produce with environmental attributes.

Method

Focusing on the fresh fruit and vegetable value chain, the empirical analysis is documented by a comparison between two contrasting French case studies (in terms of geography, but also in terms of the categories of intermediary actors and the trade circuits in which they operate): Martinique and the Pyrénées Orientales. Qualitative data was collected to document the strategies and practices of intermediary actors. This information was gathered through semi-structured interviews with a variety of actors (retailers, wholesalers, distributors and other market intermediaries), participant and non-participant observation (food sales at open-air markets) and grey literature (regional press, reports). 24 interviews were conducted in Martinique between 2022 and 2026 and 12 in the Pyrénées Orientales in 2022. This empirical material makes it possible to produce results that are both specific to the case studies and cross-cutting, allowing for greater generality on the ecologisation of food trade circuits.

Results

The results obtained enable to:

- (i) Identify the intermediary actors involved in the ecologisation strategies and characterise the trade circuits in which they operate.
- (ii) Enrich a grid of indicators on the forms of proximity activated by these actors. We show that four forms of proximity (spatial, relational, functional, economic) are articulated within the scope of their activity.

These results provide a better understanding of the role and strategies of intermediary actors in the ecologisation of trade circuits and thus their ability to guide, structure and accelerate the construction of more sustainable agri-food systems.

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