HealthyGrowth

From niche to volume with integrity and trust

FULL CASE STUDY REPORT

Biocoop - France

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Content

Most local organic market chains have inherent problems in moving from niche to volume, and mainstream large-scale market chains have inherent difficulties in securing and advancing organic values. The project "Healthy Growth: from niche to volume with integrity and trust" investigated a range of successful mid-scale organic value chains in order to learn how they are able to combine volume and values, and to use this knowledge to support the further development of organic businesses, networks and initiatives. Research teams from ten European countries contributed with 20 case studies. More information and documentation can be found at: www.healthygrowth.eu

1. Introduction

Biocoop is a network of organic shops which today gathers 345 shops in France in early 2014 (190 in 2000) and represents about 15% of the organic market in 2012 (*versus* 2,5% for its main competitor, La Vie Claire, and 47% for the big retailers all together)[1].

http://www.biocoop.fr/

Right from its beginning, Biocoop chose to put forward its basic values (equity, cooperation, respect of strong social and ecological criteria, transparency and traceability, consumers' sensitization) through a formal charter and a guideline. This guideline is composed of 4 conventions (retailing, management, social and ecological conventions). Biocoop's governance has always involved the producers and the employees.
Despite this, in the late 1990s and 2000s, Biocoop's strong and fast growth led to a **strong (internal and external) criticism regarding the respect of organic values**. In order to react to this trend, from the years 2000s on Biocoop tried to reinforce the application of its values especially by favouring local producers and reinforcing the voice of producers in the **governance** of the network.
All these aspects (strong formalization of values, participatory governance, controversies and adjustments over time) make it an interesting case for the Healthygrowth project.

2 Case-study approach: materials and methods

This analysis is focused on the **southeast region** of France and, regarding partnerships with producers, on the fruits and vegetable chain. A study at the national scale would of course be complementary to this regional study.

- **The documentary analysis** included guidelines, charters, guidelines, annual reports, articles, websites, former studies etc. (see table 1)
- **14 interviews** were carried out in 2014 with shops managers, assistant, network referee, organic producers, and a cooperative outside the network

I also took into account around 50 interviews carried out in 2002 and 2006 (see table 2) which allowed for an analysis of the main evolutions.

Table 1. The documents used as information sources.

	Data type	Document number	Short description of content
Home page – biocoop.fr	External /internal		Sections on the history and values, on the producers, on the shops There is also an internal website with all the tools available within the network
Annual report 2012	External		
Biocoop guideline, 1993, revised in	Both		Contents: Biocoop charter, 4

[1] http://www.journaldunet.com/economie/distribution/magasin-bio/part-de-marche.shtml, accessed 11/1/ 2014

2012			conventions (retailing, management, social, ecological), rules of control
Consom'action (Biocoop Magazine)	External		Every 2 months Info about the products, network, producers, recipes etc.
Leaflets			Diverse (often linked to specific campaigns or on proximity/seasonality – see below)
Articles			
Gruffat C., 2010.	Public		Detailed interview (30p.) of Biocoop founder and head, in a business school's seminar
Stratégie offensive chez Biocoop, Journal du Net, June 2006[2]			About the 2005-2006 changes in strategies, prices etc.
LSA, May 2014[3]			
Franchise Magazine, 7 nov. 2011			
Former studies			
Lamine C., 2003. *PhD thesis p.446—468*	Public		Study of 2 organic cooperatives and the Biocoop charter and conventions, carried out in 2002
Grille d'analyse Biocoop, C3D project, 2008	Internal		Study of the Biocoop network (interviews with 22 persons of Biocoop's staff –head office/ shops, and with about 30 consumers) carried out in 2006 within the C3D project
Regarding the fruits and vegetable chain			
Touret C., 2004. Vers un juste prix des fruits et legumes biologiques, FNAB	Internal		A study led by the French organic producers organization in cooperation with Biocoop about the prices, contracts etc. in the F&V sector
List of local producers	Public in some shops		maps with producers' localization, list of local producers (in some shops)
Data about local provisioning	Internal		Rates of local production within the F&V buyings (at individual shops, regional and national levels)

Table 2. Interviews and interviewees[4]

Interviews 2014 Participants and role	Date Approx.. Duration	remarks

[2] http://www.journaldunet.com/management/0606/0606138biocoop.shtml
[3] http://www.lsa-conso.fr/claude-gruffat-president-de-biocoop-notre-projet-est-coherent-et-politique,173208
[4] 3 of these interviews were carried out and synthetized with the help of Emilie Rousselle in 2014.

Shop manager, Biocoop Valence	June 2014, 2 hours	
Historical national leader and former shop manager, Biocoop Portes les Valence	June 2014, 1.30h	
Shop manager, Biocoop Romans	July 2014, 1.15h	
Shop assistant manager, Biocoop Carpentras	July 2014, 1.30h	
Local prov. referee	July 2014, 1h	"Chargée de référencement local", helps the shops (80 in total) to raise their local provisioning. Works at Biocoop regional headoffice (south east)
5 organic producers	Spring 2014	I asked organic producers about their links with Biocoop compared to other outlets
Food chain coordinator, FNAB	March 2014	This person has carried out the work with Biocoop about their prices and partnerships with producers FNAB = organic producers national organization
Manager, Former manager, And president of a consumers cooperative , Die	Spring 2014	As a comparison we also studied another consumer cooperative which is not part of Biocoop (several interviews and visits)[5]

3. France: the national context

France has 65 Million inh., nearly 29 Million ha of arable land. The food productions vary a lot from one region to another: mainly arable crops in the plains of the north and north-west, extensive livestock in the mountains, fruit production in the southern valleys, wine in some specific regions. Despite a general trend of specialisation along the last 5 decades, in many regions and especially in the south of the country, agriculture remains quite diversified. France is also characterized by a high density of traditional products and a strong tradition of quality signs (about 250 PDO/PGI). However, since the 1990s farm specialisation (and farms' average size) has continued to increase despite some incentives for more ecological and/or diversified modes of production.

Today (end of 2014) the organic production represents 26 478 farms (5,4% of all farms)**,** and covers more than 4% of the national agricultural area (about 5 times the area of 1998). France was the leader of organic production in 1985 but then it soon lost its first place and in 1995 organic production represented only 118000 ha and 3538 farms. There was a sharp increase again from 1998 to 2002 due to public incentives (in 2002 there were 518000ha and 11300 organic farms), then a stagnation and increase again after 2008, since when the number of farms has doubled (Agence Bio, 2015). There are big differences between regions with some regions under 1% of organic (Ile de France or Picardie in the north), others above 6 % (15,2% in Provence Alpes Côte d'Azur ; 6,7% in Rhone Alpes).

The organic market is still growing: about 5 billion euros in 2014 and about 2% of the total food market, versus 1,5 billion euros in 2005. It has grown by +47% for example between 2008 and 2011. The organic agrifood sector involves 13000 "operators" (processors and retailers) in total in 2014 (Agence Bio, 2015). Marketing channels for organic products are more diversified than for conventional products with "only" 50% sold in supermarkets (versus around 75% for food in general) even though their part is increasing, and a larger part of direct sales and specialised retailers.

[5] 2 interviews carried out by Sibylle Bui within her PhD, and 1 I had done in 2011.

Since the 1990s, there have been successive national programs for organic farming: Plan Riquois in 1997, « Bio Horizon 2012 » in 2007, and lastly in 2013 "Ambition bio 2017". These programs have defined quantitative objectives for the surfaces and part of organic farming as well as the presence of organic products in the public schools canteens (20%). These national programs also aim to structure the organic food chains with for example the creation of a specific fund "Avenir bio" (with a budget of 3 Million euros a year, from 2008 to 2011 about 130 businesses or producers' groups have been financed by this fund) or, within the current program, incentives for cooperatives' investment and for the development of contractualisation in the offer/demand relation. Deep changes are also claimed in the agricultural extension organizations and in the agricultural schools and programs, towards a much larger place of organic farming.

Besides these government programs, most regions and departments (and sometimes local authorities in small regions) support organic farming and food chains through diverse types of actions: some regions cover the cost of certification for producers, others facilitate the development of organic in public food procurement or the installation of young organic farmers on public land etc.

4. Overview of the case

4.1 Presentation and trajectory

Biocoop is a network of organic shops which in early 2014 gathers 345 shops all over France and represents about 15% of the organic market in 2012 (*versus* 2,5% for its main competitor, La Vie Claire, and 47% for the big conventional retailers all together). Biocoop as a network of consumers cooperatives has emerged in 1986, based on existing local cooperatives. It soon established its own technical and management team, and later on created its own platforms, brand and other management and business tools.

In France, many buying groups of organic consumers had emerged in the 1970s; many of their pioneers and members had been involved in the social events of May 1968 as well as for some of them, in the anti-nuclear movements. The products were initially ordered and delivered in private places and most often limited to dry products. The first cooperatives were scattered all over France but more numerous in some regions where these social movements had been particularly active (such as Britanny and Rhone-Alpes). Some of these cooperatives later on opened shops and started to rely on hired staff, while some others remain more informal. At that time, the choice of market and supply partners was made by each cooperative. They could work with individual producers, producers' groups or cooperatives (or networks), processors, importers, and organic wholesalers.

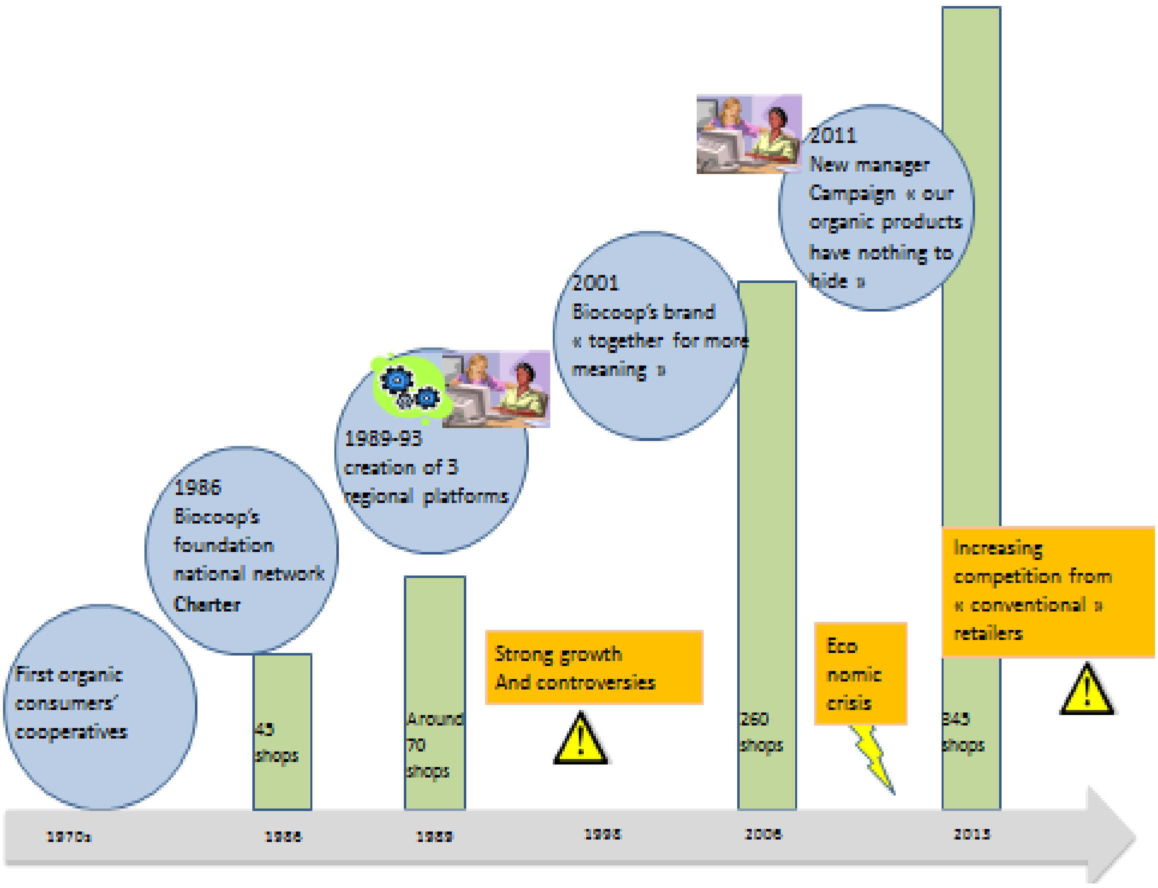
A **first coordination of these cooperatives was set up in 1986** when 50 of them decided to create Biocoop, a national organization with the aim to provide their members with healthy products and support the development of organic farming. A few emerging organic producers' organizations such as Biopaïs in the southeast of France (founded 1984) and Intercoop in the west (1983), also joined this network. This co-presence of producers and consumers right from the origin is probably an important historical feature of Biocoop.

The same year, this network adopted a common **chart** (inspired by the Nature et Progrès'one – one of the leading organic producers' organization), with specific rules regarding the proportion of organic products and their labelling.

At that time they also decided to share some skills and activities especially at the regional scale. **Between 1989 and 1993 three regional platforms** were created, one in Brittany, one in the south-east and the third one in the south-west, and later on (2007) a fourth one in the Paris region. From them on, the network's shops progressively reduced the part of their direct provisioning channels in favour of these platforms. However, from 2008 on, the network tried to reinforce the links with local producers again and a former shop employee was hired as a "local provisioning referee" in order to help the shops in their partnerships with local producers (see section 4.1.3).

The range of activities has progressively been expanded from only food to non-food products (books, textiles etc.), catering, transport. **New branches** have been created for these activities: Bioliodis, Ecodis, Biocoop Restauration, Société de Transport Biocoop.
Right from the beginning, Biocoop chose to put forward its basic values through a formal charter. The **main principles** of Biocoop's charter are: equity, cooperation, respect of strong social and ecological criteria, transparency and traceability, exchange and sensitization about "responsible consumption" (called *consom'action* in the network).
Since 1993 Biocoop has a formal guideline, composed of the charter and 4 conventions: a retailing convention (local provisioning, more than 95% with organic label), a management convention (fair price, transparency), a social convention (75% of hours under permanent contracts, limited differences in wages until X5, quality of life at work, etc.) and since the 2000s, an ecological convention. This guideline also edicts control rules.
Biocoop's strong and fast growth (more than 20% annual growth from 2003 to 2008 for example) has progressively led to a **strong criticism (both internal and external) regarding the respect of organic values** (see 4.1).
In order to react to this trend, from the early 2000s on Biocoop tried to re-affirm the values of the origin of the initiative by getting involved in the structuration of value chains, in partnerships with the national and regional organic producers organizations (since 2000) and by enlarging the part of local organic products from what is today called within the network "**peasant organic agriculture**" in their offer, as well as reinforcing the voice of producers in the **governance** of the network (which in 2002 became a private society but still with a specific governance involving employees, shop managers and producers). Bulk sales (for cereals, dried fruits etc.) are also encouraged in order to limit packaging costs and impacts at all levels.

Figure 1 : Evolution of Biocoop network since 1986



4.2 Basic facts

Short description

- Network of organic shops: 345 shops all over France in 2014
- Product types: initially, food products, today, all types (more than 6500 products included about 1500 non food products)
- Main actors: Biocoop is both a network gathering 345 independent shops (mostly private enterprises, some employee-cooperatives and a few consumers' cooperatives) and a an enterprise which comprises central services, trading platforms and several branches (books, textiles, catering, transport)
- Distribution channels: medium-size shops (about 360m2 for the new shops)
- Juridic form: among the shops, 40% are cooperatives and 60% ltd anonymous companies (SARL). Nationally Biocoop is an anonymous society (SA) which offer central services (platforms, development etc.), and also has branches
- Impact of the 2008's crisis:+2% in 2010 (the lowest rate), as opposed to +15% in 2009 (but +11% again in 2011).
- Consumer prices: in 2005, Biocoop launched a campaign and new range of products named "Organic, yes I can", with 80 products with reduces margin and price reductions of 15-20%

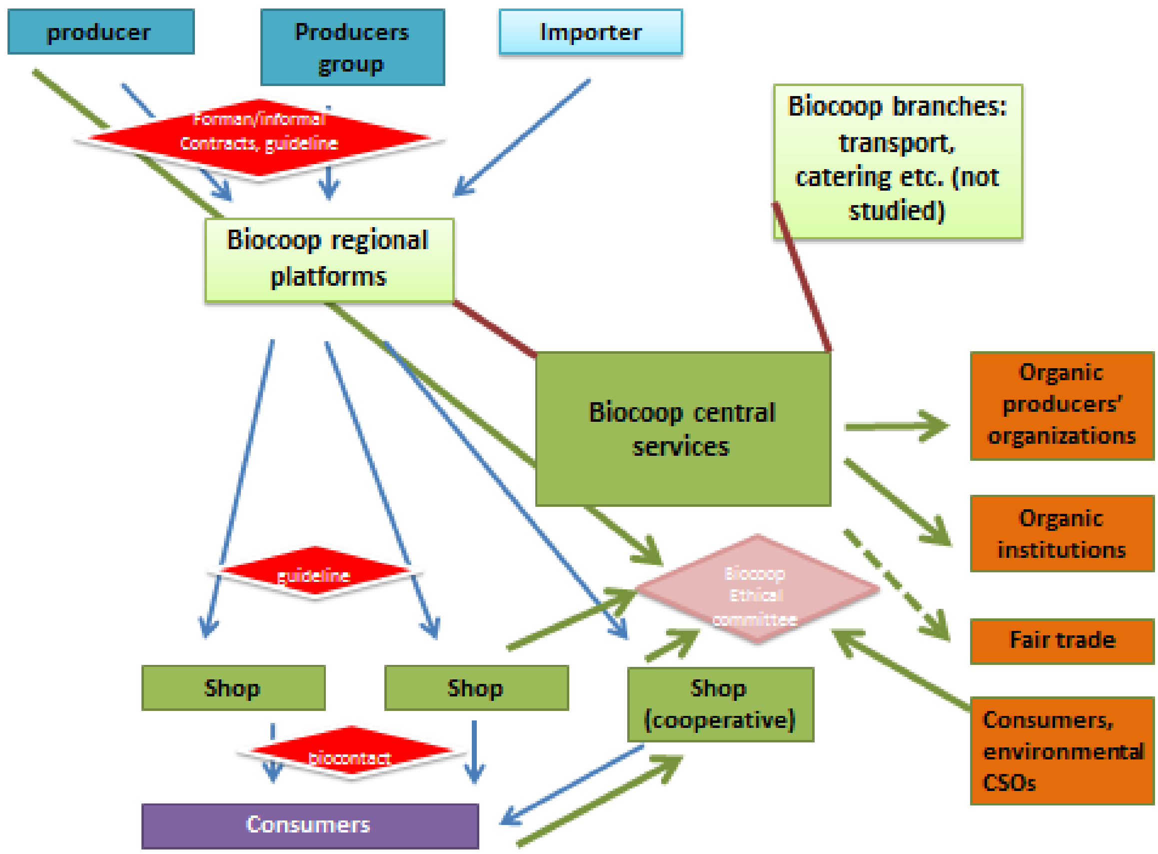
Table 3: evolution of the main figures and facts

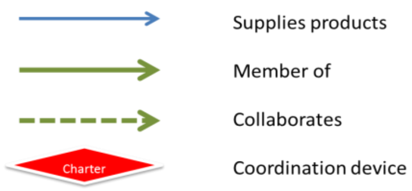
	1970	1986	1989	2000	2006	2013
Number of shops	No network, local consumers' cooperatives	45 shops create the network	About 70	190	280	345
Employees (central services)					460	790
Turnover				111 M€	248 M€	580M€ (+8.2%)
Product range	Often limited to dry products					More than 6500 products
Number of local producers involved						4000
Important steps		First chart	Regional platforms	Involvment in value chain building (with FNAB/F&V	Work on local provising, devoted staff	

4.3 Stakeholder network

Biocoop is a national network with central services (national and regional – there are 4 regions in total) and branches (transport, catering etc.).
Each shop is in contact with the regional platform and directly with local producers (from 5% to 40% of local provision depending on the shops). Direct contracts are most often informal, but the shops can tell each producer the approximate volume they would need for each product along the season. In France a new regulation (2011) makes contractualisation compulsory, and in 2012 85% of all fruits and vegetables produced in France and marketed by Biocoop were under contracts, however this mainly concerns the platforms and large producers' organizations, whereas the local shops reported us they (and the producers) would rather work under informal contracts. "*we have a moral commitment to take at least the same volume the next year, so producers can count on that, they do not want formal contracts*" (a shop manager).
Stakeholders are also committed to Biocoop's guideline (1st ed. 1993) which is composed of the charter, the 4 conventions and control rules. Since 2006 there is also an ethical committee composed of 6 Biocoop representatives, shop managers and employees, and 6 external partners representatives: producers, consumers and environmental CSOs.
Biocoop is strongly involved at the national scale in organic producers' organizations, organic institutions, and fair trade movements: Biocoop is member of the French national platform and took part to the establishment of national rules for this sector in 2005, with what can be considered an intermediary position between that of Max Haavelar (considered too loose and unsufficiently controlled) and that of Minga (considered too alternative and "extremist") (Lamine et al., 2006). Biocoop is also involved in renewable energies (Enercoop, created in 2005).

Figure 2 : Biocoop stakeholder network





At the local scale, the involvement of each shop in the local projects and networks is very variable, depending of course on the length of existence of the shop and on its staff background and willing. Some would for example help and finance local farming projects.

5. Analytical perspectives

The 6 analytical perspectives which structure the following sections were established at the scale of the project, see xx for more details on their conceptual backgrounds.

5.1. Organisation and governance

Positions and controversies over values (internally and externally) and their evolutions

Right from the beginning and the creation of the network, in 1986 - although some shops existed since 10 or 15 years - Biocoop's core values were those of cooperation, transparency, fairness/ equity, solidarity with the producers. The **main principles** of **Biocoop's chart (established 1986)** are: solidarity (involving equity, cooperation), quality (including social and ecological criteria and consumer sensitization about "*responsible consumption*"), transparency *"in order to maintain a climate of trust between all the stakeholders*" (chart, p.3).

During the 1990s and early 2000s, with the multiplication of shops, and the creation of the logistic platforms, some considered that Biocoop tended to become a network of rather "ordinary" organic shops with standardised and non-local products, even if consumers could always become "member" of their shop (which they would do often mostly in order to benefit from a reduction in prices up to 5%). Biocoop's strong and fast growth has progressively led to a **strong criticism regarding the respect of the core values**, both internally and externally.
There are indeed lasting controversies among stakeholders: for example in former studies we carried out (2002, 2006) we observed that some Biocoop members (shops' managers or cooperatives' members) wanted the number of new shops to be limited in order to support a "**qualitative growth**[6] of existing shops" in opposition to a classical quantitative growth based on expanding the network (they were also reluctant to new leaders coming from outside the network) while the central staff wanted to support a expansion of the network in a context of increasing competition and in an aim to share costs, achieve economies of scale, and offer better opportunities for producers, i.e., a larger market (Lamine et al., 2008). In this context, the "development pole" – in charge of the network's development- was thinking of a financial fund in order to support employees who would like to create new shops, and such a system has been implemented since then.

[6] By this notion they meant that the network should rather support existing shops in order for them to improve their activity; i.e., their viability, but also their relationships to both consumers and producers, instead of supporting new opening shops.

In order to react to this criticism, Biocoop tried to re-affirm the values of the origin of the initiative, mainly by increasing the presence of local organic products and reinforcing the voice of producers in the **governance** of the network. Furthermore, Biocoop has a long experience of **communication around values** (and since 2002, a brand named „ensemble pour plus de sens“, ie., together for more meaning“, renamed recently “ensemble solidaires du producteur au consommateur”, ie., together united from producer to consumer[7]). Since 1998, Biocoop has its own magazine, *Consom'action* (every 3 months, every 2 months since 2008), largely present in the shops. In 2004 a campaign and range “organic products yes I can” was launched, with a range of cheap organic products, with reduced margins and in cooperation with the suppliers. In 2011 Biocoop launched its first large campaign on the TV, radio, internet, and big cities “notre bio n'a rien à cacher”, i.e., “our organic products have nothing to hide”, with the aim to show the difference with the big conventional supermarket chains, without making consumers feel guilty (Franchise Magazine, 7 nov. 2011). (cf section 4.4)

Here is how Biocoop's general manager expresses the network's values: “*Our values are those of cooperation, transparency on objectives, fairness between the actors and sustainability of the project. The social role of the project is of major importance (…) the benefit has to be human before anything (…) the notion of profit comes only afterwards. Solidarity characterizes the way we work*…” (Gruffat, 2010).

The type of organic farming which Biocoop claims to favour is “*peasant proximity organic farming*”, accessible to the widest part of the population (notion of *democratisation*). Recently, in a context of strong controversies (within the French organic world at large) over the new European regulations, considered as weakened in comparison to former French ones, Biocoop has decided to get involved in the Biocohérence network and brand, which was founded in 2009 by Biocoop and other networks, and claims to offer “*a real criteria of differenciation in front of the organic sector's industrialisation and banalisation*[8]”.

Today there are still controversies over Biocoop strategies and choices, especially from outside the network, but also inside it[9], but the development of the organic range in conventional supermarkets seems to have rather strengthened the perception of Biocoop as a “militant” (i.e., committed) network among the persons whom I interviewed. Biocoop's strategy for 2012-2016 is focused on the objective to become “*a militant network of shops, farmers and employees, recognized as such by the consumers*”.

Management and governance in the network and changes/adjustments over time, in order to maintain the shared values

At the scale of Biocoop's network: shops' managers, producers, employees, and consumers are involved in the governance since the beginning through their participation to the board.

The **board** (Conseil d'Administration) is composed of 13 members: 9 represent the shop managers, 2 the producers, 1 the employees, and 1 the consumers. In 2006, the board was composed of 11 members: 8 shop managers, 1 producer, 1 employee, and 1 consumer. This way, the producers' role has been relatively reinforced since then.

[7] Like the word ”militant”, the word ”solidaire” is very present in the French context, it suggests a notion of fairness and care, and also coins a new type of economy and of ecconomic activities or businesses (with specific laws and rules) called ”économie sociale et solidaire”, social and solidarity economy.
[8] http://www.biocoop.fr/pages-partenariats/partenaires-militants/bio-coherence
[9] in other regions or at the national scale, some shops or persons have decided to quit the network at different points of the network's trajectory and even in the recent phase.

There are **4 "colleges**" of shareholders ("sociétaires") who elect their representatives in this board: a shops' college, a producers' one (producers' groups), an employees' one and a consumers' one. The decision system is that of cooperatives (one man, one voice).

Every two years there is a congress of all Biocoop shareholders which allows to work collectively on the necessary changes and on the future strategy. There are also regular regional and local meetings (about 3 to 4 times a year). There are commissions for each value chain, i.e. a fruit and vegetable commission, as well as for admission (new shops) and for controlling the shop managers commitments (see below). All shareholders and especially all shop managers have to get involved in some of these commissions and meetings with a "shared time" system, i.e., each one should devote some time to collective tasks, although there is of course some flexibility especially for newcomers.

Biocoop's charter was established in 1986 (see its principles in 4.1.1) and was translated into the Biocoop's guideline which is today composed of **4 conventions**: a retailing convention (proportion of organic labelled products - which used to be 90% and is now 95%, today local provisioning), a management convention (fair price, transparency), a social convention (75% of hours under permanent contracts, limited differences in wages until X5, quality of life at work, etc.) and an ecological convention (for example, in 2009, mineral water in plastic bottles has been excluded).

Some major points included in this charter/Biocoop's rules:

-*proximity*: shops have to buy as much as possible locally (and should favour local provisioning to Biocoop's platform), see 4.1.3.

-*creation of new shops*: internal elected commissions decide upon new candidate shops (on human criteria first and on economic criteria such as a minimum initial capital). There is also a possibility to exclude a shop which rarely happens.

Biocoop's management and governance was adjusted over time in order to reinforce some points such as the place and role of producers in the governance and the importance of local provisioning. Today, Biocoop's guideline is presented in two parts which reflects the progress approach defended by the network: the first part presents the charter and the "**core values**" which describe the commitments of Biocoop shops and shareholders; while the second part presents further "**recommendations**" which "*need to be shared by all the network and re-discussed before being introduced as core values*". In this second part, more demanding criteria are recommended, such as a minimum wage 10% over the national one, the use of renewable energy in the shops, etc.

An ethical committee was initiated in 2006, which involves both Biocoop stakeholders and external ones. Its composition is: 6 Biocoop representatives, shop managers and employees, and 6 **external** partners representatives: producers, consumers and environmental CSOs. Its function is to check the respect of the values, through a yearly report.

At the scale of the shops, the governance and management modes are of two kinds; today, only **40% of the shops are cooperatives** (most involve employees, only a few ones are consumers' cooperative like were the pioneer ones). It means that most often consumers do not take part to the shop's decisions and governance while employees more often do. However, even in consumer cooperatives, only a few consumers really take part actively to the definition of the strategies and rules. T**he majority of Biocoop shops (60%) are today conventional businesses** (French status of SARL) with no formal involvement of employees even though those I met claimed they try to really involve them in the strategy and in the communication.

Of course, a very important issue is the admission of new shops and their control in order to check that they respect Biocoop's core values, which could lead to the exclusion of shops that would not respect these core values. A shop manager who was coming from the conventional retailing sector reported this admission process: "*the first time at the regional admission commission I was looked at like an alien, I felt quite disturbed because they wanted to check my organic mentality… at that time – 2005 – few people would come from the retailing sector*". Interestingly the same night he was called by one of the commission's member who wanted to sell her two shops and he ended up buying them (and still runs them): "*I looked at all the financial documents and saw it was a good business, and I shared her vision of commitment and militancy […] she could not manage it any longer but she wanted someone who would keep it viable.*" This also shows the tradeoff between efficiency and militancy which is at the core of Biocoop's adaptative strategies.

Modes of coordination between the foodchain operators (formal and informal agreements or arrangements), and their adjustments in order to secure proximity and trust

Compared to conventional supermarket chains Biocoop network has set up specific modes of coordination, both formal and informal. Some are formalised in the guideline:

-local provisioning and seasonality (see the focus on fruits and vegetables below)

-possibility to buy products under participatory guarantee systems (if these are agreed by Biocoop board)

-obligation to offer a range of products called the "emblematic range", i.e. products under Biocoop's brand, considered as carrying Biocoop's values, whose list is also agreed by the board

-all shops have to apply maximum prices for the "emblematic range" and for the "organic yes I can" cheap range

-the margin should not exceed 31.5%.

-obligation to favour all forms of fair trade (north/south but also north/north

-obligation to favour food products (non food is limited to 20% of the sales and food complements to 10%)

-specific colours are to be used for product labelling (eg., for non certifiable products such as sea food)

-the charter and the "commitments " are to be displayed in the shops

These principles were discussed and reinforced over time, as in the beginning most were informal. In 2000, the Biocoop's brand "*Together for more meaning*" was established, with a specific governance : a brand committee involving producers, contracts with producers' groups and market operators, negotiation rules over prices ("*prix lissé et equitable*" i.e., smoothed and fair prices with producers). More generally, Biocoop's general manager claims that "*every actor's margin is taken into account to establish the final price*" (Gruffat, 2010).

I am going to focus now on the **partnerships in the fruit and vegetable sector**, in which were established:

- in 1998, a partnership convention with the FNAB (national organic producers' organization) and a common work on costs, prices and distribution (FNAB, 2004)

- in 2008, rules regarding local provisioning (not only for F&V, but most important for these). Shops have to favour local products, local being defined as produced or transformed less than 150 road km from the shop, and buy them directly to producers or to Biocoop platforms (no intermediaries). A person was hired to work on that at the national scale (as she relates, "*Biocoop put money on someone who accompanies the shops so that they work with local producers, I don't bring in any money, this is not classical*…") and then each of the 4 regions set up these competences. Today, the national rate of local provisioning is 10-11% but it ranges from 5 to 40% at the shop scale.

- rules regarding seasonality were also established (no out-of-season products, no summer vegetables during the winter months), with a list of forbidden products (such as Kenyan beans) or out-of-season periods (such as tomato in winter). All shops have to inform consumers about the seasonality (with a common calendar, see the example for May below – source: Biocoop website). As shows this calendar, the scale for seasonality is France, not the region. Air transport is also forbidden.

Figure 3. Fruits and vegetables currently "seasonal" if produced in France (here, in May).

In an article published in 2010, Biocoop general manager claimed that the supply is 100% French for the products that *can* be grown in France (Gruffat, 2010) (this is not the case today though, among F&V there are quite many products imported for example from Italy and Spain).

At the network and regional platforms' scale, there are pluri-annual contracts with producers group and pricing processes are to be transparent.

For shops which buy directly to local producers, all our interviewees said that the volumes are planned and announced to producers in advance, although those who tried to establish formal contracts and production plans said producers were largely reluctant and that trust was mostly based on informal commitments.

From the shops managers or employees' points of view, these changes in the modes of coordination aimed and succeeded in maintaining the shared values and a fairness in the repartition of the added-value. However, this should be further investigated from the producers' side. One of those I interviewed said that he used to supply Biocoop and later on turned to a more conventional retailing chain who would offer better conditions. This might be linked either to the fact that he had quite big volumes (too big for Biocoop which still handles limited volumes compared to major conventional ones!) or to the fact that these conventional supermarkets often have higher consumers prices on organic fruits and vegetables, which might allow them, *paradoxically*, to better pay the producers.

Relationships with the civil society and public policies and influences on values

Biocoop is influenced by national and EU policies mainly through the changes of the European organic certification and what is considered its progressive weakening (which lead the network along with other partners to initiate in 2009 the Biocohérence network and brand, see above). Regulations dealing with producers-chain relationships also have an influence, eg., a new French regulation (2011) makes contractualisation compulsory, and in 2012 85% of all fruits and vegetables produced in France and marketed by Biocoop were under contracts, which mainly concerns the platforms and large producers' organizations, whereas the local shops would rather work under informal contracts as we saw above.

Biocoop has always been willing to show a strong commitment in the development of organic production and in organic networks in general (including producers' organizations and alternative farmers' unions) and even anti-nuclear or anti-GMOs movements. Biocoop has been involved in the commissions that were dealing with the organic certification at the national level since 1989; and been member of the interprofessionnal instances since the early 1990s. In recent years, the network also got involved in fair trade movements (see 4.3.) and in the social and solidarity economy.

These strong relationships of course had an impact on the level of ethical requirements inside the network. It seems that shops where consumers and civil society are strongly involved have higher ethical requirements (local origin, fair prices etc.) than those which are conventional businesses, although these present a large diversity. And if we compare Biocoop to other organic networks, there is nothing comparable in ethical terms even though some networks might have "copied" (as say some interviewees) – or just elaborated on their side? - some similar principles…

At the local scale the involvement in local projects and networks is very variable, depending of course on the length of existence of the shop and on its staff background and willing. Some would for example help and finance local farming projects either directly or through another organization like Terre de Liens. All the shops managers whom I interviewed were willing to develop these partnerships and considered it was part of their activity and motivation, though they lacked time for that.

5.2 Business and management logics

Biocoop is an anonymous society (SA) – or public limited-liability company - which offers central services (platforms, development etc.), and also has branches. Among the 345 shops of the network, 40% are cooperatives and 60% limited anonymous companies (French SARL, with shareholders).
Biocoop has a total turnover of 580M€ versus 390 in 2006. Its annual growth rate has remained around 20% from 2002 to 2008, then the impact of the crisis was a +2% growth rate in 2010 (worst year), but it went back to 10-11% again from 2011 on.
Regarding benefits, at the national scale of Biocoop SA, the "*net result is limited to 0.33%, the objective not being to cumulate benefits but to offer good prices*" (Rapport d'activités, 2012). At the shop scale, most managers relate they put most benefits in reserve for investments.

At the national scale, the key business objectives (goals) are focused on ethical aspects even though of course profitability, growth and investment capacity have to be ensured (and are indeed). Biocoop's 2012-2016 strategy was defined, as we saw above, this way: become "*a militant network of shops, farmers and employees, recognized as such by the consumers*". Another motto is to favour is a "*peasant proximity organic farming*", accessible to the widest part of the population. This means that organic farming is not sufficient, the farmers have to be from as close as possible and be "peasants" – a historically and sociologically meaningful but fuzzy category which relates to the idea of small scale family farms, but also to the well-known farmers unions whose name is "Confédération Paysanne"…

At the individual shop's scale things are much more variable. Those that have a private legal form and especially in their first years set up clear growth and profitability goals (20% growth for example for the first year for a new one I studied, versus 10% for one that has opened several decades ago, while a third one that was a consumers cooperative had no particular growth objective). Those that have the legal form of consumers cooperatives do not have to make benefits and just try to make sure that revenue stay ahead of costs… In all cases and shops, employee retention is also a common goal.

Therefore management strategies differ according to the shops legal form and number of years of existence.
At the scale of the national network, the management changed quite significantly during the growth process in the 1990s and early 2000s and in challenging periods such as the late 2000s (see 4.1).
Although maintaining good and trust-based long-term business relationships and remaining an alternative marketing channel have always been at the core of Biocoop's strategies, some changes over its nearly 30 years occurred and today more importance is given to the development of local/regional production base and transparency around products' origin.
In a recent article C. Gruffat, Biocoop general manager, expressed his strategy (and explained his success) with these words: "*a voluntarily restrictive and demanding definition of organic, a wish to influence the market through higher criteria, a specific business culture linked to cooperative groups*" (LSA, 15 May 2014)[10].
These adaptations surely helped to overcome challenging periods and it seems that Biocoop reacted much better to the late 2000s crisis than its competitors.

As Biocoop is historically and still socially a militant network, transparency, communication, fairness, trust, responsibilities, and participation are very important in the internal organisation, and codified in the social convention of the guideline which edicts both codified and more general rules (75% of hours under permanent contracts, limited differences in wages until X5, quality of life at work, regular internal meetings etc.). The most important management instruments for the internal

[10] http://www.lsa-conso.fr/claude-gruffat-president-de-biocoop-notre-projet-est-coherent-et-politique,173208

management appear to be an open communication, regular meetings at shop, regional, and national levels, clear responsibilities on each level, reduced price for employees.

The most important instruments supporting the cooperation between chain partners and rank them are regular negotiation of fair prices, preference for local chain partners, forward contracting of supply volume (although more formal for platforms and more informal at shop level, as local shops would rather work under informal contracts), chain partners meetings, sponsor or participation to local community events or projects (although less frequent for more recent shops), informative attitude - more formal through newsletter and website – both at national and shop level, and more informal through the interactions between shops employees and consumers.

Over time Biocoop has developed strategic partnerships with producers' group and with processors (as is the case for example for milk, fruits and vegetables) and also developed its own tools as is the case for logistics (4 platforms and a branch devoted to transport).
Biocoop has created a large diversity of proper business instruments in order to secure product properties and qualities through the chain, such as its own brands, guidelines, packaging, advertising etc.

In the beginning, most principles about fair prices and margins were informal, and these principles were discussed and formalized over time, through the general guideline, through specific internal ranges/brands, and specific partnerships.

Regarding producers prices, shops that buy directly to producers can either apply Biocoop prices grid or negotiate their prices.

Regarding consumers prices, today, following Biocoop guidelines, all shops have to apply maximum prices for the "emblematic range" "*Together for more meaning*" and for the "organic yes I can" cheap ranges. In 2000, the Biocoop's brand "*Together for more meaning*" was established, with a specific governance : a brand committee involving producers, contracts with producers' groups and market operators, negotiation rules over prices ("*prix lissé et equitable*" i.e., smoothed and fair prices with producers). In 2005, Biocoop launched a campaign "Organic, yes I can", with 80 products with reduced margin and price reductions of 15-20%.

Regarding margins, Biocoop's general manager claims that "*every actor's margin is taken into account to establish the final price*" (Gruffat, 2010). Following Biocoop guidelines, the margin should not exceed 31.5% (as opposed to 30% to 50% for other supermarket chains)[11].

Regarding the fruit and vegetable sector which is my specific focus, a partnership convention was established in 1998 with the FNAB (national organic producers' organization) and a common work on costs, prices and distribution (FNAB, 2004).

Fairness between chain members appears as an issue for all chain partners I met, even though some producers are critical and left Biocoop (see 4.1 on all these points). In periods of difficulties, for example when there is so much production that prices go down everywhere, shop managers report efforts are made on both sides, even though these variations are usually predictable (prices are higher in the beginning and at the end of a fruit/vegetable core season and lower in the middle). Producers and producers' groups are considered strategic partners and their degree of dependency is highly variable. Those who supply Biocoop platforms with big volumes are often more dependent than the small producers who supply one or a few local shops and often have other outlets.

[11] http://lexpansion.lexpress.fr/actualite-economique/la-marge-de-la-grande-distribution-entre-30-et-50_1006868.html

In short, Biocoop as a national network (and a private company as well) has undoubtedly an **overarching logic** which combines business strategies and instruments in the daily business with the chain partners, and management strategies with shop managers and employees. In short I would say that this overarching logic tries to combine competitiveness (maintain affordable consumers price in order to remain democratic and to resist in front of competitors) and fairness (guaranteeing fair prices and decent wages and conditions to producers and employees) while appearing as the most "militant" organic shops network. Of course these strategies and claims are contested but still the network has the best results among the organic retailing sector and is also probably quite unique at the European scale. Its main competitor in France, La Vie Claire, which is a more classical model (with proper and franchised shops), has a turnover and an organic market share both about seven time lower and also a lower growth rate (8.7% in 2011 as opposed to 12% for Biocoop).[12] In 2014, the professional media most often consider Biocoop as an economically successful and highly competitive chain compared to its competitors (other organic chains).

5.3 Trade-offs between quality differentiation and volume and economic performance

As Biocoop as a national shops networks has undergone a high growth rate (more than 20% annual growth from 2003 to 2008, around 10-12% today), maintaining a balance between quality differentiation, volume and economic performance has always been a challenge.
Historically, even though Biocoop is not the oldest organic network (its main competitor, La Vie Claire, was created in 1948 vs 1986 for Biocoop), it is the most "militant" one. Right from the beginning it emerged from a network of consumers cooperative (see section 4) and values always remained the basis of its positioning on the organic market and towards competitors.

The main product qualities which are put forward in the Biocoop network and by its stakeholders are: fairness, lasting commitments, fair prices, democratisation of organic, changes of consumers practices, ecological quality, transparency, geographic proximity, freshness and seasonality (especially for fruits and vegetables that were my focus), non GMO, local regional economy, fair working conditions, communication with consumers. All these qualities and values are codified in Biocoop guidelines and its 4 conventions, even though some aspects are more codified (maximum prices for consumers), and others less (prices paid to producers, even though there is a maximum margin rate and internal prices grids). (see 4 and 5.1)

Most shop managers also talk about the relationships to their clients, which they consider as making a big difference with the conventional retailing sector: "*we have to be present, answer all clients questions, it gives an image to our shops, they are happy to enter our shops, we introduced the notion of small grocery store (épicerie*)", as said s shop manager I interviewed.

Growth has influenced quality differentiation strategies first in the sense that over time some values/rules had to be codified (or maybe, more rarely relaxed), and that some new qualities came to the foreground, such as local origin of products. For example, guaranteeing local origin and direct links with fruits and vegetables local producers is a way to remain different than competitors (both mainstream supermarkets and other organic shops).

It is difficult to assess if stakeholders think growth processes have maintained a fair distribution of economic performance along the chain: network stakeholders, whether shops managers or national teams would probably think that this is the case – and indeed they accuse the mainstream supermarket chains to have "*killed the small producers*" and now to try to show consumers that they buy local. On the other hand, some producers might be more critical as we saw above.

[12] http://www.journaldunet.com/economie/distribution/magasin-bio/chiffre-d-affaires.shtml, acc. 11/1/2014

Biocoop both at the national level and at shop level seems overall satisfied with the development of their economic performance. Among the people I interviewed, only a shop that had opened just a year ago reported to have lower results than expected and planned, and had been compelled to fire one person, although its turnover would regularly grow and allow to maintain the business (but it had not reached its balance point yet).

At the national scale, Biocoop quality differentiation strategy has influenced growth strategies in the sense that Biocoop tries to control its growth through a severe and close accompanying of new shops projects (see 5.1). Biocoop leaders also claim that the network tries to establish fair partnerships with producers, which takes time. Of course, one could wonder whether at some point there is a need to increase production for economic reasons, such as for the 4 regional platforms which of course need a minimum volume to be profitable. However, Biocoop's position over this issue is that growth at all level has always been under control and limited or framed by the core values of the network. Our former studies showed that the western platform had undergone a progressive enlargement which allowed to follow the needs (and not "force" the shops and volumes growth).

At the shop's scale, the notion of economic performance differs according to the legal form and type of organization: private companies would look for benefits while consumer cooperatives mainly try to balance costs and revenue and be able to invest enough to maintain their working tool (and in some cases to support local projects).

Regarding local provisioning specifically, the priority is not necessarily to increase the local proportion of products "per se" but to ensure the high level of quality and fairness of partnerships, therefore there is a compromise between different qualities or values, i.e., proximity and fairness, loyalty.

In short, Biocoop is a large network and of course there are numerous challenges in combining quality differentiation, growth and economic performance at all levels, and most stakeholders would rather show how they successfully solved these challenges. In the future, fairness and proximity will probably remain core values, while the alternative and "militant" image is a new or re-affirmed value.

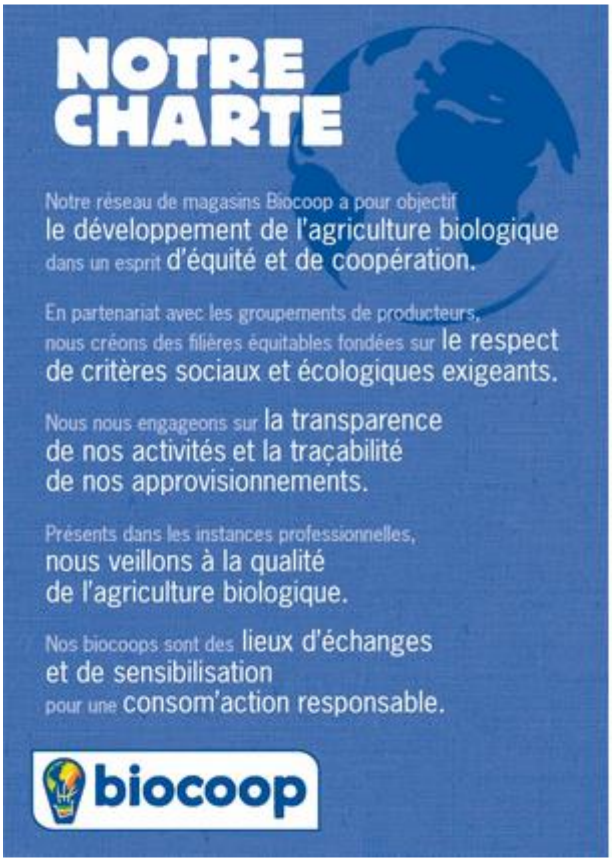
5.4 Communication of values and qualities among the members of the food chain

Biocoop emerged in the mid 1980s from very alternative consumers and producers cooperatives and has a long experience of discussing around values and of trying to define them internally, as well as of communicating around these core values: equity, cooperation, respect of strong social and ecological criteria, transparency and traceability, consumers' sensitization.

In brief, the **evolution of Biocoop's communication strategies** over the decades:

1986 - First charter, rather for internal objectives initially. Today the charter is part of Biocoop's guideline, composed of 4 conventions: a retailing convention, a management convention, a social convention and an ecological convention. This guideline also edicts control rules (see 5.1). The charter and Biocoop's commitments have to be displayed in all the shops:

Figure 4. Biocoop charter, as displayed in the shops



1998 – first edition of *Consom'action*, Biocoop's magazine (every 3 months, every 2 months since 2008), largely present in the shops. It is financed by the shops that buy it in proportion of their turnover

2001 – advertising campaign "ensemble pour plus de sens", "together for more meaning" (with producers and processors, and in the shops)

2004 – campaign "organic products yes I can" (a range of cheap organic products, with reduced margins and in cooperation with the suppliers)

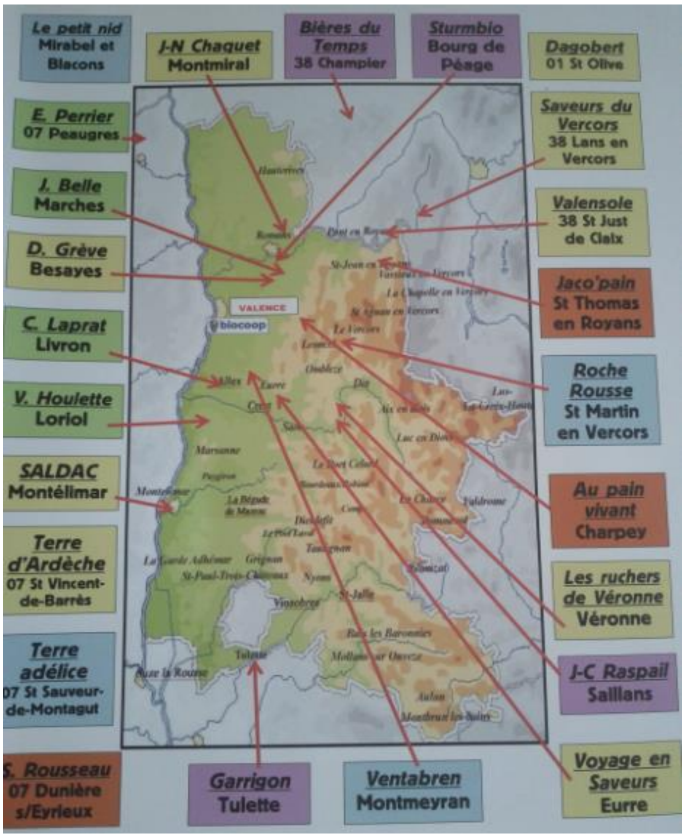
2011 – first large campaign on the TV, radio, internet, in big cities "notre bio n'a rien à cacher", i.e., "our organic products have nothing to hide", with the aim to show the difference with the big conventional supermarket chains, without making consumers feel guilty (Franchise Magazine, 7 nov. 2011).

Biocoop leaders claim that these communication strategies are collectively decided with producers, shops and employees' representatives (*ibid*.). Indeed such issues are debated at the Biocoop national congrsses that take place every two years.
All Biocoop shops have a website (conceived by the national network and which they can adapat) with an access to national Biocoop newsletter, website etc.
However, the shop managers I interviewed reported that in terms of communication, direct links (both with consumers through the staff's availability and with producers) at the shop scale were of major importance (and one of Biocoop's specific feature when compared to other retailers, whether organic or not), even though all of the interviewees were also satisfied with the numerous

communication tools offered by the network. Therefore they suggest a complementarity between national communication strategies and locally adapted ones.

In terms of communication, we have to distinguish here between national management and communication tools that all shops should use and local instruments which some shops adopt.
What is defined at the national scale and common to all shops are the rules defined in the guidelines about local origin and seasonality (see 5.1). Biocoop offers its shops common tools such as posters to be displayed in the shops (about the seasonality for example, cf figure 3 above). All employees who are responsible for the fruits and vegetable shelves should wear an apron where is written "*c'est pas de saison, c'est pas en rayon*" (outseason, out of our shelves).
Some shops also set up specific means and tools such as establishing a map with all the local producers (see below), presenting each producer on a card displayed over her/his products etc. Most shops also organize regular events with local producers who would come and present their products and meet consumers once or twice a year. Some also organize farm visits with their producers in order for consumers to get to know the farm, the farmer and his work, which is a way to incorporate some characteristics of direct-access to the production process which as can be the case in some CSA type box schemes or on-farm sale (Lamine, 2005). However shop managers report that it is not easy to get consumers to participate to such visits.

Figure 5. Map of local producers who supply the shop, displayed in one of the studied shops (Photo, C.Lamine)



The communication between the shops and the producers is most often direct (in presence) at least at the beginning (either producers come to local shops to propose their products, or sometimes shop managers enter in contact with producers thanks to organic producers organizations or lists). When they get to know each other better, it is mainly on the phone or through internet that orders are made and prices fixed.
However all shops leaders report that they like to meet their producers regularly and this is the case as most often they are small producers and deliver the products themselves.

The communication between the shops and the consumers will largely depend on the shops. Some shops use internet a lot (website and newsletter), but most rely on direct contact and shop employees are supposed to be available to answer clients requests and questions. Indeed, the staff availability in Biocoop shops appears indeed as much higher than in mainstream supermarkets.
Feedback loops are often not formally organized, and shop managers and employees consider they receive them directly (and if necessary discuss them internally afterwards), however all Biocoop shops have a website where consumers can enter comments and questions. The websites are generally quite often visited by consumers but few introduce suggestions/demands (which can be such as, you could contact this producer/supplier or offer this product, or could we organize this kind of activity – present a book, organize some health/wellbeing activity in your shop etc.) and very rarely do they give feedback on specific products (consumers would rather express their feedback directly in the shop).

At the local scale, some shops organize meetings and workshops with other chain operators, or take part to meetings organized by other organizations such as the regional organic institutions. Such meetings allow regional Biocoop shops and local producers or processors (and these organic institutions) to get to know together and possibly establish business relations. In the Rhône Alpes region where I did most of my interviews, several specific institutions try to develop interactions between local economic actors and some would organize specific events such as "BionDays", 2 days devoted to economic actors involved in the organic chain. Other events and meetings are specifically devoted to public procurement (school canteens), and these would also involve local authorities, and sometimes lead to more formalized commitments such as future volumes and prices.
At a larger scale, Biocoop shops, shareholders (employees and producers along) can interact in regional or national meetings (see section 5.2).

5.5 Quality mediation through the chain

Here I will focus on the fruit and vegetable value chain.
As we already saw before, many Biocoop stakeholders and Biocoop as a whole in its communication put forward the type of organic agriculture (defined as a "peasant" one[13]) as well as the proximity. Surprisingly taste is not that often mentioned as a criteria by the persons whom I met. When asked about the quality of their products when compared to other supermarkets or organic retailers, shops managers consider that Biocoop always sells high quality products thanks to its systems of quality and guidelines.
Of course producers would claim the high quality of their products but once again, it is often in comparison with more conventional chains or big, industrialised organic productions. Farmers often relate the high quality of their primary products to the mode of production (not pushed, not grown too fast with too much fertilizers or water), to the varieties they choose, and also to the fact that that they are picked up ripen and not transported and stored for long periods (cf Lamine, 2003), and to the simple fact that Biocoop only sells products of the current season (out of season products are forbidden, see 5.1). There is a kind of equivalence that farmers and consumers along willingly make between small farms and good products. Of course, some stakeholders contend this vision and claim that products coming from large farms – and even from other countries! – can be as good as local

[13] See above. Peasant is a historically and sociologically meaningful but fuzzy word in the French context (see also Van der Ploeg'w work) which is both what farmers used to be before becoming for their vast majority, "agriculteurs", or even "entrepreneurs" through the modernisation process from the 1950s on, and today relates to the idea of small scale family farms, but also to the French well-known farmers unions whose name is "Confédération Paysanne"… This term makes sense for most people as agricultural issues are quite largely debated in France and also because there were famous leaders like José Bové.

products, but this is not the main discourse, and not the "politically correct" one, i.e. the one one can publicly express. When farmers are gathered in producers group as is the case in the south-east with Solebio for example, they would coordinate the production of these higher qualities especially through the choice of varieties, the adoption of common guidelines, and the exchange of knowledge.

Biocoop shop managers and employees do a lot to support fruit and vegetable qualities in their shops, all the more that this is often one of the main and more symbolic shelves. A lot of care is given to products storage and freshness, especially when we compare with the situation about 10 years ago, when the lack of freshness of these shelves was one of the most common critics made about many organic shops (and still is in some shops).

Shop managers seem to accept to pay higher prices for products that come from local producers even when they could get the same products cheaper at the platform, and adjust theirs margins, but of course the acceptable price difference is limited (around 15% overprice max was mentioned). "*We have a lower margin with local producers and we compensate with products coming from the platform, often from Spain or Italy, we do not put them in competition with those spanish or italian producers, we protect them, and they come saying Biocoop puts forward local producers and should take our products*" (a shop manager)

In the recent years, Biocoop has entered into a new quality approach through the new label and guideline "Biocohérence" which claims to go much beyond the organic label in environmental and social terms especially (see 5.1). At the network scale (whether national or regional) they want all their producers to adopt progressively this new label. However, small farmers are reluctant to enter into one more guideline and the administrative tasks that get along with it, even though the costs are partly covered by Biocoop. Therefore it is likely that this new quality approach will concern once again rather producers' group or large producers than small and isolated ones.

Most shops inform their clients about the provenance of the fruits and vegetables and often about the producers themselves. However this last point is a matter of controversy or at least of diverse practices in the sense that some shop managers consider that now that many big conventional retailers have started to talk about their producers (which does not mean they fairly treat them), Biocoop does not need this kind of arguments which have been "perverted" or misused by others (these big retailers). As said before, F&V shelves employees wear an apron where is written "*c'est pas de saison*, *c'est pas en rayon*" (outseason, out of our shelves), a motto which is also displayed on the shelves along with local producers names but also promotions based on imported products (photo below).

Figure 6. Information on local producers, seasonality but also promotion based on imported products, in the shelves (Photo, C.Lamine)

If proximity, and ”peasant” (small scale) organic agriculture are claimed as central by most Biocoop managers and employees at the shop scale and at the network scale, this is a complex issue as generally, according to shop managers, local producers do not provide sufficient volumes nor enough regularity and ask for generally higher prices than the platform. New shops even have difficulties in finding local producers. In this context, a new system has been set up in the last years to help them in that (through devoted competences at the regional scale). Some shop managers report conflictual discussions with producers about (too high) prices, but most say that the adjustment is rather easy and smooth and that efforts are made on both side (shops would accept to reduce their margins and producers to sell a bit cheaper when national prices go down, see 5.2). Of course it is probably very different for the regional platforms where much bigger volumes are handled.

5.6 Resilience

Over its nearly 30 years of existence, Biocoop has endured both stresses and shocks, and both at internal and external levels.

As developed in 4.1 and 5.1, during the 1990s and early 2000s, with the multiplication of shops, the entrance of many people coming from the conventional retailing sector (both in the national staff and as shop managers locally opening new shops) and the creation of the logistic platforms, Biocoop seemed to some people, both internally and externally, to become a network of rather “ordinary” organic shops with standardised and non-local products. Biocoop’s strong and fast growth (more than 20% annual growth from 2003 to 2008) has led to a strong criticism (both internal and external) regarding the respect of organic values.

In a resilience perspective, I would consider this a *stress* as it was indeed gradual.

The economic crisis could be considered as a *shock*. The impact of the crisis was a lower growth rate in 2009 and 2010 (the worst year with only +2% growth rate), but it went back to 10-11% again from 2011 on.

Another type of shock was the withdrawal of several shops at the same time. It happened several times that a shop manager who had opened one or even several Biocoop shops decided to get out of the network because of conflicts in visions or in order to run his/her shop individually or even to launch an independent network. Biocoop has economically suffered from such withdrawals in the sense that these shops might represent a large part of the economic activity of a given region (and platform), and these experiences have also questioned the collective spirit within the network.

The management of these stresses and shocks has been quite different. The lasting criticism about lost values (it was often said that “*Biocoop was losing its values*”) led to reinforce some aspects of the charter and the guidelines as well as the admission procedure. In order to open a new shop, it is required to present an application to a specific commission in several steps, there is a training period and an internal referee, and the shop is controlled during its first year of existence. The guideline has been reinforced especially in its retailing section, where new principles around peasant proximity organic agriculture were adopted.

The shock of the 2010 “close to zero growth” – after years of being the “*kings of the world*”, as an interviewee reported, has been managed differently. The choice has been to professionalise the organization and the network and integrate competences that would allow it to be more efficient. This led to hire employees with higher education in business management and logistics and these changes in the employees’ profile was largely supported by the growth process. A better ”efficiency” was reached in terms of logistics (flows of products, orders etc.) both at national, regional and shop scale and also in terms of coherence of the communication/management tools (shared logistics and communication tools). This trend was of course relatively gradual, but was stronger in 2010-2011, a clear sign of it, often mentioned by our interviewees, being the restructuration of the general management with the nomination of someone initially coming from the retailing sector as general manager, while the historical head of Biocoop, C. Gruffat, became the "president general manager". As relates one of the shop managers, quite recently entered in the network, "*everybody suddenly understood that an excessive growth could be dangerous, we realized we had to get better structured and professionalised […] the new general manager has done a good job by defining very offensive marketing strategies*. *They realize they should develop a real business with a real management while maintaining this cooperative and collective dimension, which is fabulous*".

Finally, the shock of having several shops leaving the network roughly at the same time was handled through a reinforcement of shop managers' commitment towards Biocoop, through the admission commissions, the admission procedure and the formal commitments new shop managers have to take (cf supra).
The interviewees claimed that challenges and changes have been handled collectively through their shared governance, set up right from the beginning. However, there is probably a difference between the "stress" period (the 1990s and early 2000s) and the "shock" one (crisis of the late 2000s), which seems to have been rather handled by the head/managers/business people (in a more "conventional" way), due to the necessity to react more quickly.

Still following a resilience perspective, the adaptive capacity seems to have been facilitated through the multilevel and participatory governance style of Biocoop, which is completely unique in the retailing sector. As says a shop manager: "*we have whistleblowers everywhere… in the regional meetings, in the national congress we see what is discussed*". Regular meetings are held at the small region ("basins"), large region (there are 4 regions in France for Biocoop), and national scales, where the main stakeholders (shop managers, and in some meetings, employees, producers and consumers) can interact and confront their views. Biocoop guideline, a central management tool, is revised regularly based on this multilevel and participatory governance.
Of course, some stakeholders consider there are too many meetings but most interviewees considered these allowed for a continuous adaptation of the network to the emerging problems and difficulties. "*We talk of problems that we all have. It allows to debate, to see how each of us finds solutions to his problems and to mutualise these solutions, it allows to discuss national themes, mainly the new things that are going to be introduced in the guideline*". (a shop manager)
Most of them also consider Biocoop to be rather sustainable on the long term, thanks to its strong "militant" (highly committed to strong values) and high quality image. The main vulnerability that they see for the future is the price level – in a context of growing competition among organic or partly organic retailers - although it is not always higher than other chains and even than big supermarkets where basic organic products like milk would be much cheaper but fruits and vegetables often much more expensive. Others also mention the age of leading people as a possible problem. But most consider organisational issues such as logistics are quite successfully handled, and indeed this has been set up since more than a decade, even though it has to be adapted all the time.
In terms of vulnerability and resilience, we can conclude that now that Biocoop has profoundly and permanently worked on its values and governance and in a larger context of strong controversies over values in the organic sector (which in a way gives Biocoop a good external image in comparison to more conventional retailers), the Biocoop as a whole migt be more resilient (as a network) than 10 years ago. Most stakeholders I met are quite confident that Biocoop will remain the strongest organic network but that it has to "cultivate its difference" and its "militantism" (and strong values).

The high number of meetings at all scales and with many producers/suppliers as well as the strong presence of staff in the shop and their availability to customers (as opposed to supermarkets) allow for feedbacks along the chain. Strategies are redefined or adjusted at all scales in these meetings, more or less formally of course.

6. Future orientations

The development of the organic sector in general is considered to have a complex but promising future: the organic production (and other chain levels) grew very fast in the last years and this growth might slow down a bit, but there is still a lot to be done.
The organic retailing sector more specifically is considered as increasingly harder with high competition levels, mainly due to the entrance of conventional retailers in this sector.

Biocoop as a whole, in its official communication, and most of our interviewees, adopt a position of militancy, quality, proximity and transparency in relation to "mainstream organic". "*Our definition of organic is restrictive; our project is coherent and political*", says Biocoop's CEO, C. Gruffat (may 2014).[14]

At the scale of Biocoop network as a whole, the strategic orientation towards future growth is clearly linked to a tradeoff between high, demanding values and militancy – the 2012-2016 strategy is defined this way: "*a militant network of shops, farmers and employees, recognized as such by the consumers* - and efficiency and competitiveness (through affordable prices).

This strategic orientation towards future growth might differ among actors within the chain, but these differences are not necessarily linked to the level of the chain where they are positioned. For example among the shops managers I met, some insisted a lot on the militancy and proximity issues while others would talk much more about efficiency and prices. "*Of course militant image is a must… but the basis is to have quality products, and regularity, to remain better than the others on that […] and to stop being considered as expensive, and to offer a better service*" (a shop manager). "*At one point the development of the network was a bit anarchic, we need a real strategy to cover the territory first and then we can be militant*". One could expect these positions depend from their professional background and that those who come from the conventional retailing sector would rather talk of efficiency than of militantism, despite it is of course not that simple either…

These future visions/growth aspirations/strategies are discussed at various scales of the network. Regular meetings are held at the small region scale ("bassins"), at the regional scale (there are 4 regions in France for Biocoop), and at the national scale, where the main stakeholders (shop managers, and in some meetings, employees, producers and consumers) can interact and confront their views. It is also in these meetings that Biocoop guidelines are discussed and revised.

The changes that the different stakeholders expect regarding internal organization seem to rather converge, there might be more differences and controversies regarding market orientation, partners, and communication to consumers with for example a lasting controversial point within Biocoop that deals with promotions. Some shop managers consider that "*we should not hide this, this is what people want. The network values, some come for that, but others no, they are looking for good prices, I see they have fidelity cards of other supermarket chains".* Some militant stakeholders consider that Biocoop does not have to do like the supermarkets and that a price is a price (and should be calculated according to production and retailing costs) and not vary, while others consider it necessary to attract more consumers. Another challenge and possibly controversial point deals with the (urban) consumers demand for individual packaging, whereas Biocoop has always claimed to limit packaging and favour bulk products.

The most important challenges that Biocoop face today is the increasing competition both due to the presence of conventional retailers in the organic sector and to some "aggressive" strategies of other organic retailers, some of which are considered to "copy" some of Biocoop good ideas and tools.

[14] http://www.lsa-conso.fr/claude-gruffat-president-de-biocoop-notre-projet-est-coherent-et-politique,173208

However, shop managers say they strongly believe that Biocoop will remain the main organic network and will be more and more recognised for its stronger values in a context of increasing competition of supermarkets on the organic market.

7. Concluding reflections

What seems interesting in Biocoop's case is the evolution and challenges that the network had to endure. I have identified **3 main phases** in its history, based on the analysis of all the documents and interviews and confrontation to former studies: Biocoop in a first stage (1986-1995) grew with a strong respect of its core values and a very different kind or management and business strategies than most retailers, then in a second stage (1990-2006) Biocoop set up the tools, management and business strategies adapted to its strong growth, which made it more comparable to other retailers (even though of course the values were still very strong and present in the network), and in its last stage (from 2006/08 on), Biocoop set up specific management and business strategies devoted to a reinforcement of values and especially of local farmers' place and organic values and definition (in a context where the new European regulations are considered as weakened in comparison to former French ones).

As one of the historical leaders of Biocoop put it: "*Biocoop needed logistic tools, platforms, it needed a transport branch, an estate company and set up all this because it was becoming really necessary, these are tools. And in qualitative terms Biocoop remains philosophically largely ahead, when for example it refuses to sell water in plastic bottles*". Maybe one of the reasons for Biocoop's success and sustainability over the decades has been its ability to set up necessary tools, often borrowed from the mainstream model, while maintaining its militant values and criteria and transcribing them into guidelines that apply to all stakeholders from employees to producers through shop managers. In other words and as demonstrated in 5.2, Biocoop has an overarching logic in the sense that the network tries to combine competitiveness (maintain affordable consumers prices in order to remain democratic and to resist in front of competitors) and fairness (guaranteee fair prices/decent wages and conditions to producers and employees) while appearing as the most *militant* (committed) organic shops network. Today, the network has the best results among the organic retailing sector and is also probably quite unique at the European scale. Of course these strategies and claims are contested, as we see on many internet forums for example and through the regular exit-processes from the networks. In my different surveys I also interviewed 3 consumers cooperatives who had at once considered to enter the network and decided not too, because they considered that Biocoop's values were not strong enough (a too large range of products, an insufficient fairness, too high margins were among the main criticisms) and that the network was too consumer- and business-oriented". Paradoxically, this led one of these cooperatives to rely much more on "mainstream" organic wholesalers, compared to some Biocoop shops (not all of them though) which really try to work with local producers, due to too small volumes or lack of time and skills[15].

An interesting feature of this network is also its multiple scales and their complementarity: the national scale of the network and tools, the regional scale of some tools, support and meetings, and of course the local scale of direct interactions with consumers and producers.

It might seem surprising that Biocoop never aimed at developing in other countries: indeed, this was considered and discussed in the network at some point, but the choice has been to rather strengthen the network in France and keep an internal coherence.

[15] I have not investigated the cases of former Biocoop shops which decided to quit the network, which would probably bring interesting insights on these controversies and criticism. It would also be interesting to study the internal relationships in the shops, i.e., between the managers and the employees (I focused on the relationships with producers in this study).

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