



Collective Farmers' Marketing Initiatives in Europe: Diversity, Contextuality and Dynamics

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Abstract. Collective action by farmers has played an important role in the history of European agriculture. During the twentieth century, the foundation of agricultural marketing co-operatives contributed in many countries to better market access, increased farm incomes and rural employment. However, European agriculture is facing a range of new challenges nowadays. Farmers have increasingly lost control over supply chains, due to globalization processes and the growing power of retailers, and they are also confronted with a general decline and reorientation of policy support. At the same time, there is a need to respond to changing demands for food safety, quality and an attractive countryside. Against this background, a range of new types of collective farmers' marketing initiatives is emerging across Europe by which farmers in coalition with other categories of societal actors aim to find answers for the challenges they are currently facing. Based on the outcomes of the European COFAMI research project, this article explores the diversity of strategies that characterize these newly emerging collective marketing strategies and the different types of social network relations that they are generating. Also, it outlines some main methodological principles for studying the dynamics and operation of new collective marketing initiatives.

Introduction

Collective action by farmers has played an important role in the history of European agriculture and rural development. During the first half of the twentieth century the joint action of farmers in many European countries gave rise to the foundation of agricultural marketing co-operatives, resulting in improved market access, a better negotiation position towards downstream market parties, and thereby indirectly in

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increased farm incomes and rural employment opportunities. More recently, farmers' collectives have made an important contribution to the development and dissemination of sustainable production methods, for example through study groups in organic and integrated agriculture.

However, wider market, political and societal contexts have changed considerably and European agriculture is now facing a range of new challenges. Increasingly, farmers have lost control over supply chains, due to globalization processes and the growing power of retailers, resulting in downward pressures on product prices and the conditioning of access to mainstream markets by farmers' capacity to meet quality requirements. At the same time, farmers are confronted with important changes in agricultural and rural policy frameworks of the European Union (EU), implying a general decline in price and income support and a stronger orientation to broader rural development measures. More generally, there is a need for agriculture to respond to changing consumer and societal demands for food safety, quality and an attractive countryside. Again, collective action may potentially play a central role in finding appropriate answers for these new challenges.

This Special Issue focuses on new forms of collective action of farmers in the marketing of food products, services and public goods that are emerging throughout Europe in response to the outlined changes in market, policy and wider societal contexts. The articles herein result largely from the European research project 'Encouraging Collective Farmers Marketing Initiatives' (COFAMI),¹ complemented with contributions from a working group on the same topic at the XXth Congress of the European Society for Rural Sociology (ESRS) in Wageningen, Netherlands, in August 2007. The COFAMI project looked into experiences and policies related to collective farmers' marketing initiatives in 10 countries (Austria, Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Netherlands, Latvia and Switzerland) with the aim of obtaining an overview of the development and dynamics of such initiatives across Europe. Also, 18 in-depth case-studies of collective farmers' marketing initiatives (COFAMIs) were carried out to provide insights into their methods of operation and the factors that enable and limit their emergence, impact and further development.

The results of the COFAMI project draw a rich picture of the diversity and dynamics of new collective farmers' marketing initiatives throughout Europe. This diversity is reflected by the collection of articles selected for this Special Issue, which covers both different strategies of collective action in marketing as well as very different contextual settings in which initiatives emerge. The articles have a strong empirical basis, partly focusing on a particular case example of collective marketing initiatives and analysing the specificity of this experience from a specific theoretical perspective. Other articles apply a cross-country perspective and draw general conclusions from the comparative analysis of COFAMI experiences in different contextual settings across Europe. In line with this, the following sections of this introductory article give an overview of the overall insights gained from the COFAMI project, both the conceptual understanding of the emerging diversity of collective farmers' marketing strategies and the main methodological principles for the study of these.

Diversity of Quality Dimensions and Social Network Relations

The outcomes of the COFAMI research indicate that across Europe new forms of dynamism in collective action of farmers can be observed in an attempt to strengthen

the position of farmers, to increase rural incomes and employment, and to develop collectively viable adjustment strategies towards the future. While there are important differences between countries and between the specific strategies applied, these newly emerging collective marketing initiatives have in common that their approaches go beyond the classic mechanisms of co-operation characterizing traditional agricultural marketing co-operatives. The success of classic marketing co-operatives was largely based on a strategy of building countervailing power by pooling volume and joint investments in processing and marketing, thereby strengthening the negotiation position of producers vis-à-vis downstream supply-chain actors, generating cost advantages due to economies of scale, and exercising collectively more influence on price levels and conditions of exchange (Dijk, 1997).

However, the growing scale of operation of food supply chains and the concentration of processing and retail industries within globalizing food regimes (Friedland, 2004; McMichael, 2005) has undermined increasingly the strength of this classic co-operative model. To some extent, one might say, the continuous drive towards scale enlargement in which many classic marketing co-operatives find themselves caught has neutralized much of the initial strengths and co-operative principles (ownership, democratic control by farmer members). For farmers it has become more difficult to understand the processes taking place and the management decisions taken. As a result, member farmers have less influence, identify less clearly with 'their' co-operative organization, and are gradually relegated to the position of suppliers of raw materials. From the perspective of the co-operative management, the treadmill to invest continually in new technologies and quality control is often strongly felt. Thus, many traditional marketing co-operatives are struggling with the challenge to reconcile member involvement with effective marketing strategies in a highly dynamic market and policy environment (Knickel et al., 2008).

This does not mean that classic co-operatives have completely lost their importance within European agri-food markets. In fact, traditional agricultural marketing co-operatives continue to play a role as key players on food markets throughout Europe, and classic co-operative mechanisms of pooling volume and joint investments are still applied even by many newly emerging COFAMIs, though often in combination with other strategic orientations. However, classic forms of co-operative marketing have lost much of their innovative capacity, and an inventory made for the COFAMI project for 10 study countries across Europe makes clear that much of the dynamism in collective marketing initiatives corresponds to new co-operative strategies. On the basis of the COFAMI research, the following typology of empirical expressions of new collective marketing initiatives could be developed: 1. initiatives focusing on high quality food products; 2. initiatives focusing on regional food products; 3. initiatives aiming at direct producer-consumer relations; 4. initiatives developing markets for non-food products, services and public goods; and 5. initiatives establishing a regional brand (for more details, see Knickel et al., 2008; Renting, 2008).

These new forms of dynamism in collective farmers' marketing go clearly beyond traditional co-operative mechanisms of building countervailing power among farmers vis-à-vis downstream supply-chain actors. Rather, the new initiatives attempt to counteract the loss of producers' control over food supply chains by creating alliances and co-operation with other categories of societal and market actors. Also in other respects, new collective marketing initiatives can be understood as active re-

sponses to changes in market, policy and wider societal contexts. Especially relevant in this respect are:

- the increased importance of markets for distinctive food qualities arising from changing perceptions and consumer concerns over food;
- the emergence of new markets for non-food products as well as for services and public goods provided by agriculture (e.g. tourism, landscape, biodiversity, energy production) coupled with a growing recognition of the multifunctional nature of agricultural activity (Van Huylenbroeck and Durand, 2003; Renting et al., 2008, 2009);
- the growing differentiation of rural areas and evolving relations between the city and the countryside (Kováč and Kristóf, 2009; Morgan, 2009);
- changes in national and European rural policy frameworks with an increased importance of multi-sectoral, territorial governance approaches.

The exact ways in which farmers' collectives respond to these contextual changes are differentiated to a considerable degree. Consequently, the new collective marketing initiatives apply a diversity of strategies – sometimes in combination – that are crucial to take into account in order to understand their functioning and (potential) impacts.

The *notion of quality* is of paramount importance in the different strategic orientations. In many respects, quality has become a key aspect of contemporary agri-food systems (Murdoch et al., 2000; Harvey et al., 2004). On the one hand, food quality has become an important instrument for producers and providers to differentiate their products from others offered on the market and to demand higher prices or access to specific market segments on the basis of distinctive quality attributes. On the other hand, food quality has become an important domain of power struggles between different actors involved in food supply chains, with key questions being who is in control of defining what are considered distinctive food qualities and who has the power to appropriate the added value generated by accentuating these.

Many of the newly emerging COFAMIs can be understood as collective attempts by farmers to regain control over the definition, marketing and valorization of the distinctive quality of their products and, by doing so, to retain value added at member farms and within rural areas and to improve access to specific markets. However, the exact mechanisms applied for realizing this general aim are highly differentiated between various categories of collective marketing initiatives (see typology above). Initiatives focusing on high quality food products using distinct production methods (e.g. organic or animal-friendly production systems) build their strategy of quality differentiation on adhering to generic production codes, often controlled and guaranteed by an external control agency and/or backed up by state legislation. In contrast, in the case of initiatives focusing on regional food products, quality specification is effectuated by strengthening the link of the food product with the territory, emphasizing its place-based nature and embeddedness, for example by valorizing traditions of typical local products and gastronomy or by referring to specific nature and landscape values associated with regional production systems (Roest and Menghi, 2000; Barham, 2003). Often, locally specific ecological resources (e.g. soil types, specific animal breeds, or local crop varieties), producers' knowledge and experience to valorize these (e.g. artisanal methods, traditions) and distinctiveness in taste and authenticity are emphasized to further differentiate the product. Again another strategy of quality differentiation is followed by initiatives aiming at direct

producer–consumer relations, in which the distinctive quality of food products is based mainly on direct, face-to-face exchanges between producers and consumers, the trust and authenticity developed by these, and the fairness of prices paid to producers (Renting et al., 2003; Holloway et al., 2007).

The central and strategic role of quality dimensions in new collective marketing initiatives in this Special Issue is further elaborated in the article by Noe and Alrøe. They analyse the construction of quality in different types of collective marketing initiatives, and above all how quality is mediated along the food chain. Using nine cases from the COFAMI project a typology of dimensions of quality is developed. The authors look into the processes by which different quality dimensions are mediated between producers and consumers. Their final conclusion places special emphasis on the importance of creating coherence between different categories of actors along the food chain, irrespective of the specific strategic orientation of the initiative.

Another key aspect differentiating various strategies of new collective farmers' marketing initiatives concerns the *nature of social network relations* required for their emergence and successful development. As indicated previously, newly emerging collective marketing initiatives have in common that they all build and capitalize on new social networks of farmers that go beyond the agricultural sector. By doing so, they create alliances and coalitions with other categories of societal and market actors that help to regain part of producers' control over food supply chains. Again, the exact ways in which new networks and alliances are constructed beyond the agricultural sector is highly differentiated between various collective marketing strategies.

A comparative analysis of case-studies for the COFAMI project indicates that within the variety of newly emerging collective marketing initiatives three main orientations for the construction of relevant social and market network relations can be distinguished, depending on the collective strategies applied by the initiative. A strategic orientation on quality differentiation through chain networks is mainly adopted by initiatives focusing on high quality food products, which generally have a strong market orientation and depend on alliances with other supply-chain actors to valorize the distinctive quality of their products. A second category of initiatives also aims at quality differentiation, but through networks with social and market actors within the territory and by building trust-based relations within dedicated markets. This strategic orientation on quality differentiation through territorial networks and dedicated markets is, on the one hand, applied by initiatives focusing on regional food products, which often implies the building of alliances with small-scale processors, retailers and government agencies within the territory.

Initiatives aimed at direct producer–consumer relations are to be considered part of this second strategic orientation. A key element for their emergence and successful development is the establishment of new, dedicated and trust-based network relations between producers and consumers, often with a basis at the territorial and/or community level. The example of constructing direct producer–consumer relations in this Special Issue is further elaborated by Brunori et al., who describe the experience of Solidarity-based Purchase Groups (GAS) in Tuscany, Italy. Perhaps in a strict sense GAS are not COFAMIs, since they are mainly consumer-driven food networks; however, as Brunori et al. indicate, the creation and alignment of network relations between consumers and producers have played a key role in the emergence and development of the initiative in this case too. They demonstrate that the innovative nature of the initiative lies especially in the joint development by consumers and

producers of shared cognitive frameworks, codes and practices and the progressive adjustment by farmers of their farm structures and production methods to these.

The contribution by Vittersø and Jervell also highlights the importance of building new network relations to open up opportunities for collective farmers' marketing initiatives, by analysing the interrelations between recreational consumption, rural tourism and direct marketing of farmers in Norway. The article shows how tourism and recreational consumption are used actively by farm businesses as a means of creating 'alternative food spaces' in a country that is characterized generally by a highly centralized food distribution system. Collective farmers' action plays a role both in organizing the supply of rural tourism activities and the co-ordination of direct selling at farmers' markets through the organizations HANEN and Bondnens Marked. The article concludes that direct markets have developed into an interesting option for consumers, both as a leisure experience but increasingly also as part of ordinary food consumption.

This links into a third and last category of collective marketing initiatives with an orientation on network relations that are instrumental to the development of markets for new rural services and (public) goods. As the Norwegian example demonstrates, the development of markets for new goods and services provided by agriculture often presupposes the establishment of network relations with categories of actors outside the food-related supply chains in which farmers are accustomed to operate. This is the case for markets for new services such as farm-based tourism or care activities, but even more for the valorization of public goods provided by agriculture (landscape, biodiversity, water management, etc.) for which 'markets' are often incompletely articulated and largely depend on the successful enrolment of (semi-)public institutions in networks.

The Interplay between Contextual Factors and Capital Assets

The collection of articles presented in this Special Issue reflects the *diversity* of collective marketing approaches and strategies across Europe. This diversity is not only of analytical interest but has implications for aspects such as the potential impacts of COFAMIs on farm incomes, wider rural development and sustainable food production, on what are relevant categories of actors to be mobilized and enrolled for the success of each of the strategies, and on which possible support strategies may be put in place to enhance their performance and dissemination. Hence, it is important to obtain a better understanding of the operation of collective marketing initiatives and their constraining and enabling factors.

Apart from the diversity of strategies they represent, *dynamics and contextuality* are important methodological principles for a better understanding of the development of collective marketing initiatives. The results of the COFAMI project show that the emergence and development of marketing initiatives can often be understood only as active responses of farmers' collectives to changing contextual settings; they also show that the opportunities and bottlenecks embodied in each specific context to a considerable extent influence the specific development trajectories of particular collective marketing initiatives. The importance of contextuality for the development of COFAMIs in this Special Issue is most clearly demonstrated by the article by Tisenkopfs et al., who analyse the specific expression and challenges of collective marketing initiatives in the context of Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries with their specific history of collectivism during the socialist period. On the basis of

four case-studies in Latvia, Czech Republic and Hungary they indicate that newly emerging collective marketing initiatives in CEE countries share a common challenge to overcome the legacy of imposed co-operation during communism, which has had a long-standing effect on farmers' attitudes and their ability to co-operate. The authors conclude that, in order to overcome the path dependency resulting from this particular historical context, more emphasis needs to be put on innovative mechanisms to rebuild trustful links and increased stocks of social capital.

However, the emergence and development of COFAMIs certainly does not only depend on the (lack of) opportunities embodied in particular contextual settings. This is illustrated by the article by Megyesi et al., who compare two case-studies of COFAMIs set in two very different environmental and historical contexts in Hungary and Austria. The article also highlights the role of social capital in collective marketing initiatives, but from a quite different analytical perspective. While the article by Tisenkopfs et al. uses a macro-perspective to analyse how social capital mechanisms can assist in enabling a transition towards post-socialist environments, the contribution by Megyesi et al. aims to grasp the internal dynamics of COFAMI development and the role that social capital mechanisms play in these. The authors analyse the role of different forms of (bonding, bridging and linking) social capital in the development of each initiative and conclude that an unbalanced composition of types of social capital may hamper the development of collective action and undermine the capacity of the COFAMI to valorize the opportunities offered by its specific contextual environment.

The perspectives of both articles on the development of collective marketing initiatives are therefore complementary and suggest that the dynamics of COFAMIs are to be understood as the outcome of the interplay between contextual factors and the internal development of the collective initiative. In line with this, Figure 1 visualizes schematically the main elements of a conceptual model to analyse the emergence and dynamics of collective farmers' marketing initiatives.

The conceptual model shows how, at a particular time and place, different contextual factors and given capital assets are the starting point for the emergence and dynamics of collective action (left-side of the figure). Contextual factors may concern market conditions, policy frameworks and institutional structures, but also social and cultural trends, and may be limiting or enabling for the development of the collective marketing initiative depending on the specific contextual setting. Capital assets, on the one hand, consist of naturally given (climate, soil, etc.) and historically co-produced assets (landscape, culture, heritage, etc.), but also cover existing social networks, knowledge, or material resources contributed by members. In correspondence with the various capital assets a COFAMI can draw upon, it can choose and design a specific strategy for collective action to valorize opportunities or overcome constraints resulting from its particular contextual setting.

In addition to contextual factors and capital assets as a starting point for COFAMI development, the conceptual model addresses the internal dynamics of collective action (right side of Figure 1), in order to understand by which mechanisms resource assets are mobilized, combined and recombined in order to build, reproduce and expand the capacity for collective agency of the initiative over time. The specific goal and strategy of the COFAMI need to be operationalized in an effective internal organizational structure, and other actors in relevant social networks need to be mobilized in order to build capacities within the initiative. The collective agency resulting from these capacities and networks in the next step translates into (social, market,

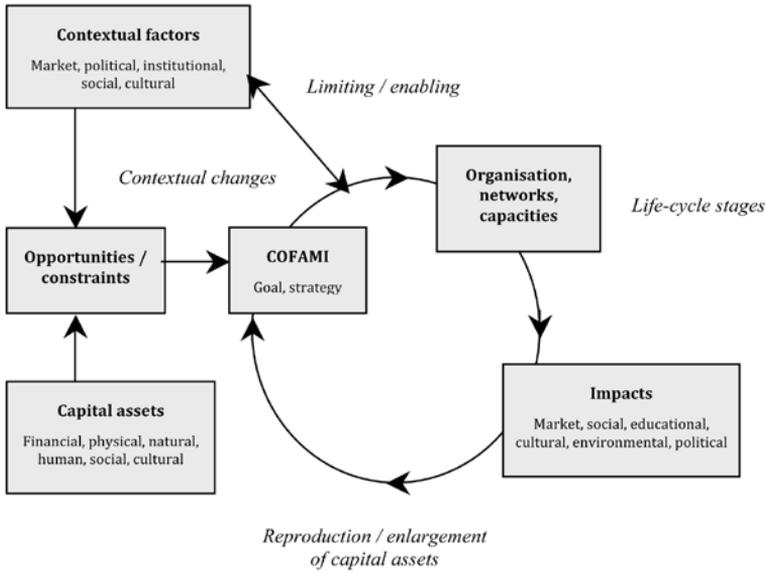


Figure 1. COFAMI dynamics as the outcome of the interplay between contextual factors and capital assets.

educational, etc.) impacts that, in turn, may result in changes in contextual factors and improvements of the capital assets that the initiative can draw upon – thereby opening new opportunities and challenges for a next ‘cycle’ in the development of the COFAMI. Following this analytical framework, the development of COFAMIs may be understood as a dynamic process over time in which different resources, conditions and networks of relevant actors required for the functioning of an initiative are combined and in interaction determine the performance and impacts of a particular COFAMI strategy.

The articles in this Special Issue provide a variety of examples and insights to illustrate the complex interactions between contextual factors and capital assets within the dynamics of collective marketing initiatives. Several case examples of initiatives are cited that highlight the role of contextual factors and social changes in triggering, enabling or hindering the emergence of COFAMIs and conditioning the choice of particular strategies of collective action. Vittersø and Jervell indicate that in the context of Norway changing policies towards local food and innovation support programmes in agriculture have resulted in a positive environment for the emergence of farmers’ markets. Megyesi et al. mention the example of small-scale dairies in Austria that were forced to reconsider their marketing strategies in view of their country’s accession to the European Union. Not only political and institutional developments, but also wider societal and cultural changes have effects on the emergence and dynamics of new collective marketing initiatives. Tisenkopfs et al. in this respect refer to the development of environmentalism as part of a civil society movement, which facilitated the founding of the region branding initiative Tradice Bílých Karpat (TBK) in the Czech Republic, while Brunori et al. point at the importance of growing consumer concern and opposition to mainstream agri-food systems as a driving force for the emergence of Solidarity Purchasing Groups in Tuscany.

Unlike the Sustainable Rural Livelihoods approach (Chambers and Conway, 1992), which conceptualizes the development of livelihood strategies in response to a vulnerability context, the COFAMI research revealed that in the case of collective marketing initiatives there are no universally enabling or hindering contextual factors. Similar contextual factors can operate as limiting or enabling factors, and whether they are perceived as opportunity or impediment always depends on the capacities and available resources of collective initiatives to respond to them. Megyesi et al. indicate along this line that the change of marketing system provoked by Austria's EU accession caused the collapse of many small-scale dairies. However, it also enabled a number of others, such as the Walserstolz case presented in this Special Issue, to design a successful niche product and to forge new network alliances along the supply chain and within the territory.

While contextual factors are the setting in which the economic activity of COFAMIs operates, capital assets represent the means by which the collective initiative responds to the challenges and opportunities arising from these. Most commonly, five different forms of capital are distinguished, namely financial, natural, physical (or built), human and social capital (e.g. Goodwin, 2003). Additionally, Svendsen and Soerensen (2007) distinguish between tangible and intangible forms of capital. Physical, financial and natural capitals are classified as 'tangible', because they can be measured and are objectified. Human capital is considered 'less tangible' since it is incorporated in human beings and thus not objectified, although it can be measured by education levels. Finally, social capital and related forms of organizational and cultural capitals are classified as 'intangible' as they are difficult to measure and are mediated by the agency of human actors. Contrary to common assumption, the analysed COFAMI cases underpin the importance of intangible forms of capital, and especially the crucial role of social capital, over tangible forms (see the articles by Tisenkopfs et al. and, especially, Megyesi et al.). Still, so far the main national and European support measures for collective marketing provide almost exclusively financial capital and physical infrastructure and, more generally, in economic projects the focus is put on financial, physical and human capital resources.

The importance of intangible capitals for sustaining competitive advantage is also underlined by economic approaches to business management following the concept of a resource-based view (Barney, 1991). The intangible character of capital assets makes it easier to prevent imitation or substitution. By basing their strategy on these capitals, firms can develop capabilities (a bundle of assets needed to perform a business process) and competencies (internal capacities to achieve competitive advantage) that allow them to stay ahead of and differentiate themselves from other firms. Another relevant insight from the empirical studies of collective marketing initiatives is that capital assets cannot be viewed in isolation. They act upon each other and a coherent strategy of collective action may result into a 'spiralling up' of different forms of capitals (Emery and Flora, 2006). Along similar lines, Megyesi et al. show for the Hungarian Arany Sárfehér case that social capital can mobilize human capital and may trigger indirectly the support by financial capital.

This leads to the observation that, in the course of their life cycle, COFAMIs gradually transform capital assets into capacities. They build organizations and networks that allow them to professionalize and institutionalize individual forms of capital and, by doing so, make them permanently available for use by the collective. Social capital, which is crucial to the building of internal cohesion within the organization and for establishing relevant wider social networks, obviously requires collective

action and may be strongly improved by actions of the initiative. Human capital is less strictly dependent on collective action, but COFAMIs have a high potential to improve this capital asset, e.g. by mobilizing member's leadership qualities or by facilitating collective learning processes. Political capital provides the link to institutions and for mobilizing or influencing policy frameworks. In the initial stages, it is often provided by key figures of the collective initiative but needs formalization to be permanently available for the entire initiative. Failure to do so may lead to crucial weaknesses in the COFAMI's organization in the long run, as suggested in, for example, the Austrian Walserstolz case described by Megyesi et al.

Thus, the configuration of contextual factors and capital assets is no longer the same at the end of a full development cycle as it was initially, resulting in the need and opportunity for the COFAMI to readjust its strategy. On the one hand, collective initiatives may succeed in expanding their capital asset base over time, but, on the other, external factors may change autonomously beyond the influence of the COFAMI. An example of gradual changes in the balance between context and capital assets over time is provided by Tisenkopfs et al., who describe how cultural barriers to collective action have been gradually overcome due to the socialist legacy in CEE countries. During the last decade, farmers have begun to reconnect to the history of pre-collectivization and to integrate lessons from COFAMI experiences in other parts of Europe, resulting in a more positive attitude towards new forms of collective action. Successful COFAMIs have the potential to positively influence and reinforce this development and thereby, at least to some extent, develop a transformative power to shape their own environment.

More generally, newly emerging collective farmers' marketing initiatives comply to a high degree with the goals and objectives set by society for future agricultural and rural development policies. The recent Communication by the European Commission on the future orientation of the EU Common Agricultural Policy after 2013 calls for measures to improve the bargaining power of farmers vis-à-vis other supply-chain actors and to enhance its value share in the food chain in order to guarantee sustainable and viable food production (European Commission, 2010). In this respect, the practices of COFAMIs as described in this Special Issue on a regional scale are often perceived as flagships and hold important lessons for the design of future European and national support measures.

Note

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