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## ► To cite this version:

Quentin Chance, Ronan Le Velly, Frédéric Goulet. How to influence the trajectory of organic agriculture's development when you are not in the driver's seat? The case of the French National Federation of Organic Farming. *Open Agriculture*, 2018, 3 (1), pp.632-643. 10.1515/opag-2018-0066 . halshs-02081398

**HAL Id: halshs-02081398**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-02081398>**

Submitted on 27 Mar 2019

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## Research Article

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# How to influence the trajectory of organic agriculture's development when you are not in the driver's seat? The case of the French National Federation of Organic Farming

<https://doi.org/10.1515/opag-2018-0066>

received June 24, 2018; accepted November 22, 2018

**Abstract:** This article describes the actions taken by the National Federation of Organic Farming (FNAB) to try to influence the course of organic agriculture's development in France. This federation wields the strength that accrues from its network of regional associations, but has no direct control over the economic actions of farmers and enterprises in the organic sector. It is trying to influence these actions in three different ways. First, it is drawing up a normative framework, a stabilised discourse about the risks that are linked to the current strong growth of the market and about the economic model and values that it wants to defend in this context. Second, the FNAB tries to affect the ways that the food supply chains are organised by promoting certain production and trade organisation schemes. Third, the FNAB produces information and references to help farmers and economic operators get their market bearings.

**Keywords:** Conventionalisation, Organic farming, Producers' organisations, Scaling-up, Supply chains

## Introduction

The French organic farming sector has been marked by very strong growth over the past ten years. The number of farms that were certified or converting to organic practices

rose from 11,978 in 2007 to 36,691 in 2017, which was a mean increase of close to 12% per annum. Similarly, the number of operators processing or distributing organic products rose 171% over the same period. The total turnover of products bearing the organic label stood at 8.3 billion euros in 2017, or four times the figure for 2007, and organic produce accounts for a non-negligible share of the retail market in the case of certain products (30% of eggs and 12% of milk, for example) (Agence Bio 2018).

This situation may trigger contrasting feelings amongst the French organisations that have been promoting organic agriculture, sometimes for many years. Fears are cropping up regarding the spread of low-priced organic product ranges in mass distribution, supermarket chains dedicated to the sale of local produce, and collaboration with agrifood multinationals. Of course, these elements provide great leverage for the growth of organic production, but might this not also carry the risk of being subjected to a price squeeze? Of moving towards practices closer to those of industrial farming? All in all, the various players are voicing worries about the risk of what rural sociologists since Julie Guthman have been calling the “conventionalisation” of organic agriculture (Guthman 2004).

Academic research about the conventionalisation of organic agriculture abound.

– A first series of farm and farmers surveys tried to determine whether the trend that Guthman observed in California was borne out in other parts of the world. This research generally looked at whether the characteristics of organic farms and farmers were really different from those of conventional ones, or whether recently converted farms and farmers had different profiles from the pioneers in the sector (Best 2008; Constance et al. 2008; De Wit and Verhoog 2007; Flaten et al. 2006; Goldberger 2011; Hall and Mogyorody 2001; Lockie and Halpin 2005; Oelofse et al. 2011; Padel 2001). This work triggered extensive

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methodological discussions that likewise made it possible to clarify the criteria to use to grasp these phenomena of conventionalisation (Darnhofer et al. 2010).

- A second group of investigations focused on the role of standards and certification in the conventionalisation process. Their authors worked on the content of organic standards to determine how distant they were from the agroecological principles that inspired the foundation of organic farming (Padelet al. 2009; Rosset and Altieri 1997; Seufert et al. 2017). They also studied how these standards were codified at the crossroads of multiple stakeholder influences, including those of the state, producers' organisations, middlemen, agribusinesses, scientists and consumers (Arcuri 2015; Campbell and Liepins 2001; Guthman 2004; Vos 2000). They finally observed the effects of the different types of certification, stressing the problems of third-party certification and the benefits of participatory guarantee systems (Fouilleux and Loconto 2017; Nelson et al. 2010; Seppänen and Helenius 2004).
- A third group of investigations highlighted the possible co-existence of different forms of organic agriculture in a given area and for a given crop. This co-existence can take the form of a “bifurcation” or “fragmentation” combining the development of a form of organic agriculture meeting the conventional regime's constraints and the reassertion of deep organic agriculture's original values in alternative sales channels (Coombes and Campbell 1998; Dinis et al. 2015; Smith 2006). However it can also take less binary forms, with the development of highly diverse forms of farming practices, quality conventions, sales channels, and consumption patterns (Guptill 2009; Kjeldsen and Ingemann 2009; Lund et al. 2013; Rosin and Campbell 2009; Stassart and Jamar 2008; Thorsøe and Noe 2016). An important lesson can be drawn from this research, namely, that the consequences of the growth of the organic sector are not predetermined. Neither conventionalisation nor fragmentation is unavoidable trend. The future development of organic farming will depend on numerous negotiations amongst place the various players of agri-food systems on the meanings of organic and the very concrete rules that organise the sector.

This article belongs to this third vein of research. We shall study how the French National Federation of Organic Farming (FNAB) tries to influence the economic

functioning of the organic sector in order to bend the trajectory of the development of organic farming in France and to avoid some of the pitfalls of conventionalisation.

The FNAB federates the historical associations of the development of organic farming in France. Its members are regional networks of organic farmers (see Box 1). The FNAB is not an economic operator. It neither produces nor processes goods, does not buy or sell, and signs no commercial contracts. Nor is it a government body with powers to act upon the sector by supporting it financially or setting its regulations. So, examining the actions undertaken by the FNAB network to bend the trajectory of organic economy is particularly interesting. How does this federation, which has no control over either economic or regulatory activities, try to affect the path taken by organic agriculture in France?

To answer this question, we shall deliberately not consider actions aimed at influencing the public authorities, *i.e.*, advocacy work linked more to a federation's role as a trade union and political force representing its members. Previous research has already stated that regional or national producers' organisations such as the FNAB are key players in the negotiations and debates surrounding the establishment of regulations (Vos 2000; Guthman 2004; DuPuis and Gillon 2009; Rosin and Campbell 2009). In this paper, we shall focus rather on the actions aiming at influencing the economic behaviours of the various actors of the supply chains. Actions aimed at economic operators are particularly stimulating in respect of our questions. Trying to act upon the economic players means trying to bring one's weight to bear on an extremely heterogeneous set of producers, traders, processors, and distributors working with different products and in different territories. It also means trying to influence highly opaque actions with regard to which the players have great freedom of choice. To the best of our knowledge, only one article has up to now dealt with such a question in the context of the debates on conventionalisation. Guptill and Welsh (2008) have described how ORFARM strives with success to coordinate the marketing practises of some producers' organisations in the United-States in order to maintain remunerative prices for small farms and develop regional distribution channels. The ORFARM case is similar to ours, as ORFARM and FNAB are not direct economic players, but it is also different. As we shall see, FNAB's ambitions are greater than ORFARM's; they go well beyond the goal of coordinating its members' commercial actions.

Our article shall unfold in five phases. In the first part, we shall briefly present our methods. Then, in the second part, we shall show that the FNAB has drawn up

a normative framework on what it calls the “*changement d'échelle*” (change in scale), a stabilised discourse stating the risks entailed by the scaling-up of organic market on the one hand and the economic model and values of organic production that it wants to defend in this context on the other hand. In the third part, we shall stress the actions that the FNAB takes or has taken to try to bring its weight to bear on the ways the food supply chains are structured by advocating relying on collective farmers' organisations, territorial dialogue, and partner-based food supply chains. In the fourth part we shall see that the FNAB also acts by producing economic landmarks (performance assessments and market analyses) and price-setting tools for farmers and economic operators. In the last part we shall come back to our original question and wonder if one national producers' organisation such as the FNAB can influence the economic actions and bend the trajectory of the French organic sector's development.

## 1 Methods

We firstly focused on FNAB's public discourse and analysed a large corpus of documents produced by the federation (annual reports, press releases, manuals, and online videos) since 2010. Most of these documents are publicly accessible in the official website of the federation ([www.fnab.org/se-former-sinformer/nos-publications](http://www.fnab.org/se-former-sinformer/nos-publications)) or in their Youtube channel ([www.youtube.com/user/delegationFNAB](http://www.youtube.com/user/delegationFNAB)). We selected documents that explicitly addressed the “*changement d'échelle*” (change in scale) of organic agriculture or, for the older documents, that

were dealing with the sector's structuring needs triggered by a strong demand growth. We also collected and analysed documents produced by FNAB member regional associations (basically for Hauts-de-France, Occitania, and Provence-Alpes-Cotes d'Azur) dealing with the same issues. This corpus consists of about fifty documents, with an average size of 10 pages for written documents and ranging from a few minutes to nearly two hours for videos. We then encoded the documents manually in order to identify the recurrent common themes and ideas that they contained.

The first author conducted thirteen semi-structured interviews – six with FNAB directors and paid staff in Paris and seven with members of different regional associations (salaries of Gabnor, Agriculture Biologique Picardie, Bio de Provence, Sud&Bio and Bio66). The aim of these interviews was to clarify the meaning given to the studied actions and to avoid misunderstanding on our part. The interviews ran for between 45 and 90 minutes and have been totally transcribed.

We also attended several public events organised by the FNAB and/or the regional associations (conferences and trade fairs) since 2011. The second author was an active participant in some of them in 2012, 2013 and 2016. In the first event, a workshop where some twenty farmers or employees of the FNAB network were present, he presented the results of his research on the mainstreaming of fair trade. In the second, he explained research on conventionalisation to introduce a one-day conference dedicated to the scaling-up of the French organic sector. These two events were part of the “*Nouvelle Économie Bio*” programme led by the FNAB, which we shall present later.

### Box 1. The National Federation of Organic Farming (FNAB)

The French National Federation of Organic Farming (FNAB) was created in 1978. It consists of regional and departmental rural development bodies working to support organic farmers and the development of organic production patterns. The federation defines its action as consisting of three strands: (1) representing and defending organic farmers in discussions with the government and other professions; (2) doing extension work in the form of providing expertise, assistance, and monitoring services to the farmers, local administrations, and economic operators in the respective regions; and (3) promoting organic agriculture to civil society.

Whilst the FNAB may be considered an organisation speaking with one voice, it is first and foremost a federation set up by an alliance of independent, autonomous structures. The Organic Farming Groupings (*Groupements d'Agriculture Biologique* or GABs) and Regional Organic Farming Groupings (*Groupements Régionaux d'Agriculture Biologique* or GRABs) act on the departmental and regional levels, respectively, whilst the federation's central office, in Paris, acts on the national level. The FNAB oversees the harmonisation of information in the network and coordination of inter-regional programmes and actions. Horizontal thematic committees ensure that information circulates between territories and set projects or identify common issues that should be brought to the attention of the national echelon. The federation itself is a small structure, with only eleven people on its payroll in 2017. However, the FNAB network (FNAB, GRABs, and GABs) is a much larger movement, with more than 200 paid staff and close to 10,000 members (close to one out of three organic agriculture-certified farmers in France). In the past, the FNAB network also helped boost various economic organisations of farmers starting with organic corn (i.e. grain) farmers in the 1980s, followed by organic fruits and vegetables and meat in the 1990s. The FNAB is also a member of the Board of Directors of Biocoop, which is the largest French network of shops specialised in organic produce. These relations are usually associated with the sharing of common values, but they do not for all that signify agreement on all subjects. In particular, producers' organisations such as Biocoop that are close to the network are free to set their own sales strategies.

In both cases, he argued that the future of French organic farming was not already cast in bronze and supported FNAB's ambition to influence its development trajectory. In 2016, he took part in a panel discussion organised during the trade fair "*La terre est notre métier*".<sup>1</sup> The panel discussed the actions that should be taken in the context of a change in scale, especially when organic producers begin to work with the main conventional players such as supermarket chains. During this round table, he stated that the rules organising economic relations are more important than the actors' supposedly good or bad intentions, echoing on this point, too, one message that the FNAB usually wants to broadcast.

## 2 Producing a normative framework on the development of organic agriculture

Starting in the early 2010s the FNAB gradually drew up a normative framework on what it called the "changement d'échelle" of organic farming (change in scale). This normative framework takes the form of a well-structured discourse that is uttered regularly in documents in which the FNAB expresses its political stands officially, *i.e.*, press releases, activity reports, a charter, and so on. This discourse first concerns the growth of the market, establishing the dangers that this trend carries but also asserting the aim to influence ongoing developments (2.1). It also describes the economic model (2.2.) and values (2.3.) that the FNAB intends to defend in this context of scaling-up. This normative framework, with its statements regarding a bad and a good development model, is designed for the farmers and economic operators alike, be they close to or remote from the FNAB network.

The FNAB made considerable efforts to draw up and disseminate this normative framework, especially at the time of the "New Organic Economy" programme ("*Nouvelle Économie Bio*", 2011-2014), which we shall describe in the second section. These efforts can also be seen in the many events organised by the GABs and GRABs on the regional level, especially in conjunction with their general meetings. These efforts can be interpreted as default action resulting from the federation's inability to act upon economic relations directly. However, they can also be understood as concerning a vital component of the organic sector's future. The messages broadcast by these efforts belong to what economic sociology calls "fictions":

narratives that the players develop to give meaning to the existing economic world and to guide the construction of future economic worlds (Beckert, 2016).

### 2.1 Thinking about the risks carried by the "change in scale" to avoid them more easily

The FNAB talks about a "change in scale" to describe the strong growth and current reconfigurations of the organic sector, and its vision of the threats and challenges related to these changes. This "change in scale" is not just the statistical scaling-up of organic farming and organic consumption. It includes a political interpretation of the current situation and a normative vision of what the French organic sector should be in the future. According to the FNAB, the "change in scale" is a challenge to the integrity of the historical organic systems in the face of newcomers on the market (specialised large farms, mass distribution networks, and agrifood multinationals). In the introduction to *L'agriculture biologique, prix Nobel de l'économie* (a compendium of examples showing that organic agriculture would deserve a Nobel prize for its positive role in the economy), the FNAB writes:

"With the change in scale, new institutional and private actors have become involved in the organisation of the organic sector with a vision that often differs from that of the sector's pioneers. Their views are steeped in greater economic rationality that tends to give a back seat to social and environmental performance. The consequences of such a development include large increases in the volumes available on the market, increased competition, and the risk of farmers' being less involved in the governance of their organisations. In changing scale, organic agriculture is also undergoing "mutations", especially when it comes to the way its produce is sold. These mutations carry the risk of degrading the principles on which organic agriculture is founded and of changing organic farmers' social, environmental, and economic plans for the future."<sup>2</sup>

The FNAB identifies possible drifts very precisely. It starts by positing that in the conventional scheme the farmer is a variable of adjustment in price building in the various food supply chains. The farmer is embedded in an unfavourable balance of power that does not allow her/him to be paid fairly for her/his work. For the FNAB, this conventional scheme also leads to the specialisation, intensification, loss of quality, and loss of autonomy of the farm. Whilst the FNAB does not oppose the development of relatively large, specialised, mechanised farms, it also

<sup>1</sup> "The land is our calling"

<sup>2</sup> FNAB, *Une économie bio qui concilie intérêts privés et bien commun*, 2014.

wants highly diversified and very small farms to be able to survive. Similarly, it supports the presence of diversified crops in a territory rather than specialised production by territory. Finally, the FNAB fears that the “change in scale” will occur to the detriment of the multifaceted performance, of the multiple services provided by organic farming. By this term it underlines the fact that organic farming must not be seen through only the prism of the environmental benefits that the standards guarantee. It must also generate good-quality jobs, social ties between farmers and consumers, fair trade relations, and so on.

Despite all these fears, the FNAB does not believe that the entrance of new operators on the market and the growth of the market must be prevented. The solution that it advocates is not to opt for “post-organic” forms centred exclusively on small farms and short supply chains (Guthman 2004; Goodman *et al.* 2012). According to the FNAB, the “change in scale” is already upon us, as intimated by the title of a round-table discussion, “Change in scale in the organic sector: It’s already here, so what do we do?” that it organised at a trade fair for organic farmers (*La terre est notre métier*) in Retiers in 2016. The FNAB also believes that the organic sector will grow with or without its participation. The problem is thus to influence this development, to avoid alignment with the conventional system, and to produce “an economy that knows where it is heading”.<sup>3</sup> Through its description of the dangers linked to the “change in scale”, the federation thus ends up proposing a form of self-defeating prophecy that will be coupled with the affirmation of a specific development model. So, the FNAB is guided by a strong ambition, as its secretary-general acknowledged in an interview:

“If we do not try to fashion the economy now, others will do it in our stead, and they won’t do it as we’d want. So, we are forced to take the plunge. That is a case of completely mad hubris, but we have no other choice. If we don’t do it, we shall have failed our historical responsibilities”. (Interview, April 2017)

## 2.2 Promoting a “new organic economy”

Between 2011 and 2014 the FNAB carried out an action called *Recherche-action Nouvelle économie bio* (New Organic Economy Action-Research) explicitly to take up this last challenge, *i.e.*, to clarify the economic model that it wanted to defend in the context of a “change in scale”. A succession of conferences, meetings, and surveys took

<sup>3</sup> FNAB, *Quels débouchés pour la production bio française ? Les enjeux de la structuration des filières biologiques*, 2011

place within the network over this four-year period with government funding.

The methodology adopted was to put the producers and staff of the FNAB network in the position of “researchers”, which was understood as stepping back from the issues. In the views of the programme’s leaders, such as Claire Touret of the FNAB, the aim was also to get these social actors to “think for themselves” rather than “having others define them and think for them” (Touret, 2013). A panel of farmers from various food supply chains and types of organisation was created for this purpose. Its first aim was to determine the stakes riding on the “change in scale”. This gave rise to a one-day workshop run by a specialist of such activities. Small groups worked on the general issue and then on more specific matters. Finally, the panel chose the following question from a pool of about thirty wordings: “How should farmers be organised to accompany the “change in scale” of organic agriculture and allow the development of a fair, sustainable, relocalised agrifood economy?”

Another part of this action consisted in listening to researchers from different fields. The announced aim was ambitious, as attested by this excerpt from the invitation to one of the seminars concerned: “The action-research sponsored by the FNAB strives to establish from organic farmers’ practical realities a new theoretical framework that will basically make it possible to show how we ‘make’ the economy”.<sup>4</sup> Its work was thus aimed at developing an original notion of the economy of the organic sector. On this point, Julien Adda, FNAB director, often stressed to us the importance of breaking away from a notion of competitiveness and narrow economic rationality that he associated as much with conventional farming as with economics. The FNAB’s concerns thus converged with those of many of the social movement organisations in France that claimed to promote a “social and solidarity economy”. Whilst we may ask whether this set of actions truly contributed to the creation of a “new theoretical framework”, it did enable the FNAB to reassert some of the ends it was striving to achieve, namely, diversity (of farms and market channels), integration in a territory, consultation and cooperation amongst players, and fair trade relations.

Based on this, the FNAB then chose to highlight some successes that attested to the fact that this “new organic economy” was indeed possible. In echo to the initial problem, it then turned its gaze to farmers’ organisations. Two six-month missions were conducted to understand

<sup>4</sup> FNAB, *La nouvelle économie agroalimentaire: accompagner le changement d’échelle de l’AB*, 2012.

better how “Organic Farmers’ Economic Organisations” (OFEOs) worked. In the FNAB network, the acronym “OEPB” (in French) refers to marketing collectives initiated by organic farmers and selling organic products only. The legal status of these OFEOs varies (cooperatives, associations, simplified joint-stock companies, etc.), but their governance is always predominantly in the farmers’ hands. They were historically assisted and supported by the FNAB, GRABs, or GABs. It thus made sense for the FNAB to take these organisations as examples of good practices, as its president, Stephanie Pageot, stated during a General Meeting in 2014: “What we want to do is to show, especially to conventional farmers and those with plans [farmers wishing to convert to organic farming], the novel, driving force of the organic sector through technical, economic, and social innovation”.<sup>5</sup>

In 2014 this “New Organic Economy Action-Research” led to the publication of a series of booklets called “*L’agriculture biologique, prix Nobel de l’économie*” (Organic agriculture, a Nobel Prize-winning economy) in which information gleaned from nine OFEOs (Norabio, Biolait, Bio Loire Océan, etc.) was put forward. A first booklet summarised the federation’s views on the “change in scale” and the “action research” approach. Four thematic booklets then described virtuous practices implemented by the OFEOs. They concerned consultation within the organisation, the ability to unite various local players around a project, the solidarity or complementarity of different types of production, the IT tools that structure the OFEOs’ work, and finally the establishment of socio-economic relations based on transparency.

### 2.3 The “Charter of the values of the FNAB and its network”

The “Charter of the values of the FNAB and its network” that was adopted at the General Meeting of April 2016 is the last piece of the normative framework developed to deal with the “change in scale”. In its preamble, the FNAB states explicitly that it is not opposed to the scaling-up and is ready to work with the players who have been very remote from organic farming historically. Then, it reasserts that this “change in scale” must respect certain values: “*We want the extension of the acreage of organic farms ultimately to embrace all our agricultural land. At the same time, we want this development to occur in line with a certain number of qualitative principles that go beyond what is stipulated in the European organic*

<sup>5</sup> FNAB, *Rapport d’activité 2014, 2015*.

*farming regulation.*”<sup>6</sup> The charter was then thought of as a “compass [making it possible] to situate organic farmers’ plans for the future in the context of the “change in scale”. It sets the bearings that organic farmers, both old and new ones, must use in orienting their agricultural, economic, and social practices”.<sup>7</sup>

The charter, which is divided into three parts, subscribes to a systemic approach for the farms that is part and parcel of agro-ecology and calls for a “fair economy” on the territorial level and “a more equitable and humane society”.<sup>8</sup> The economic focus is on a food supply chain structure rooted in the territory, composed of a diversity of market channels, supplied by collective farmers’ organisations, and marked by trust, cooperation, and transparency.

Whilst the federation defines itself as an organic agriculture development agent, it does not consider itself to be the sole guarantor of this development. It includes all the players, be they public or private, historically organic or conventional. It urges all of them to take up the challenge of sustainable, cohesive development. “*We are all jointly responsible for the development of the organic sector,*” the FNAB’s president writes.<sup>9</sup> In this arena, Julien Adda gives the federation the function of an interface between economic agents. The charter is put at their disposal to enable them to take it up and use it to guide their practices. In referring to his interactions with representatives of mass distribution on the national level, Adda adds, “*If we hadn’t had the charter, we would listen to them. However, now, we allow ourselves to meet them and say, ‘What do you think of our values (...) Intimating, Are you ready to work differently?’*” (Interview, July 2017)

## 3 Supporting the structuring of the food supply chains

The normative framework asserted in the “New Organic Economy” and “Charter of Values” is relayed by other FNAB actions aimed at equipping the economic players with knowledge and tools. Beyond the production of institutional discourse, the FNAB does indeed provide and promote specific advice on the ways to structure the food supply chains. We shall describe three actions in succession, actions that address the players in the field vegetable chains (3.1), local administrations (3.2.), and

<sup>6</sup> FNAB, *Charte des valeurs de la FNAB et de son réseau*, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> FNAB, *Rapport d’activité 2016, 2017*.

<sup>8</sup> FNAB, *Charte des valeurs de la FNAB et de son réseau*, 2016.

<sup>9</sup> FNAB, *Rapport d’activité 2013, 2014*.

a major processing and distribution enterprise (3.3.). In each case, we shall see that two main organisational recommendations emerge: establishing or relying on farmers' organisations along the lines of OFEOs and building lasting partnerships jointly with the other operators in the food supply chains and local area. In theoretical terms, it is thus possible to assert that the actions conducted are aimed at creating "market *agencements*" (Callon, 2017) that respect the FNAB's stated values. They try to create collectives involving a great variety of players that can act in line with these values (Le Velly and Dufeu 2016).<sup>10</sup>

### 3.1 The Organic Field Vegetables Programme ("LPC Bio")

Several regional associations in the FNAB network conducted a research and development programme on "organic field vegetables" (LPC Bio) between 2010 and 2013 (Perret *et al.* 2013). This programme, financed by the French Ministry of Agriculture's rural development fund, had three aims, namely: (1) to boost the cultivation of field vegetables in traditional corn belts; (2) to improve the yields and quality of these vegetable crops; and (3) to facilitate the harmonious development of local marketing of these vegetables through contractualisation between producers and operators. The regions targeted were Auvergne, Burgundy, Centre, Champagne-Ardenne, Nord-Pas-de-Calais, and Picardy. The GRAB for the Centre Region, called Bio Centre, coordinated the programme.

In France, the term "field vegetables" ("*légumes de plein champ*") refers to vegetables grown on relatively large, mechanised farms that are specialised in from one to ten vegetable crops and cater mostly for long food supply chains. It is the opposite of "market gardening" ("*maraichage*"), which is characterised by small farms (1-5 hectares) with a high diversity of crops (20-40 vegetables) that are sold via short food supply chains. This programme thus targeted farmers who were able to produce large volumes and meet the growing demand for organic vegetables, which was a clear sign of the ongoing "change in scale". So, even though the possibility for the targeted farmers to sell directly to consumers was not ruled out, the bulk of the work done in this programme focused on selling to agrifood companies, wholesalers,

and supermarket chains.

LPC Bio produced a wealth of documentation, in the form of practical information sheets and videos, about the way sales should be organised. The first recommendation was for farmers to be organised in collectives and then to have the operators get their vegetables from such collectives. With regard to this point, four economic organisations of organic farmers (OFEOs) were presented, with emphasis being put on the diversity of their operating modes and the importance of developing collective tools that farmers truly support, tools that are in phase with their characteristics and plans. The second recommendation was to create the market exchange framework by means of consultation and partnership. So, a fifteen-page practical guide described the conditions necessary for good partnerships from four angles, to wit, (1) knowledge of each other (of the businesses and their respective constraints), (2) co-construction (discussion and consultation about the ends and means and a collective search for solutions), (3) sustainability (a long-term commitment, fairness in setting prices, and solidarity between players), and (4) transparency (amongst all the players in the food supply chains, including consumers).<sup>11</sup> Drawing up a long-term contract that set the parties' respective commitments was then described as allowing everyone to share the risks and commit themselves in full confidence. Another document used the term "supply chain contract" ("*contrat de filière*") to summarise this method. Moreover, this supply chain contract recommends going farther than the practical guide by setting as an objective taking account of all of the crops produced by the planting and rotation schemes implemented on organic farms.<sup>12</sup>

This desire for partnership was also manifested by the organisation of days of exchanges on production techniques and economic subjects. These moments enables the stakeholders (farmers, processors, collectors, and distributors) to broach their perspectives and expectations for the food supply chain and to discuss the conditions that would promote partnerships (those of contractualisation and planning in particular).

<sup>10</sup> It should be pointed out, moreover, that this proximity to Callon's approach goes beyond what we can say about it. FNAB Director Julien Adda is familiar with Callon's approach and has even referred to it in a post on the FNAB blog on the "New Organic Economy".

<sup>11</sup> LPC Bio, *Boîte à outils Partenariat et contractualisation pour des relations durables et équitables dans les filières légumes de plein champ bio*, 2011

<sup>12</sup> FNAB, *Fiche expérience du réseau FNAB. Filière grande culture. Des contrats de filière pour développer les grandes cultures*, 2013

### 3.2 A documentary site for local administrations

During the same period, the FNAB created an Internet gateway called Devlocalbio for local elected officials and local government agencies and administrations. Thirty-two informative documents “to match up socio-economic reality and the environment” are disseminated via this site: monographs of exemplary territories, an information sheet explaining the method for conducting concerted local projects, information sheets on the regulatory tools that can be used by local administrations, and thirteen action sheets to guide project implementation. The subjects covered by these materials are very diverse and include support for conversion, agricultural land ownership management, water management plans, developing short supply chains, and so on.

All of these materials shared the recommendation for an operating mode called “territorial dialogue”. The idea is to clarify on each territory the particularities of organic agriculture and then to mobilise and involve the stakeholders in and around a project that they define. This idea is expressed in particular in the sheet on structuring long organic food supply chains (“*Structuration des filières bio longues*”), where issues linked to the “change in scale” are particularly prominent. The document explains that the local administrations have a role to play in this regard. The FNAB urges them to think about the complementarity between short and long food supply chains, to support the creation of farmers’ collectives (OFEOs) in their areas, and, based on the outcomes of the LPC Bio programme, to support the establishment of “fair and lasting partnerships”. “Territorial dialogue” thus includes all the different links in the food supply chains present locally, including collection, storage, processing, and distribution bodies. For the FNAB, the local administrations must lead this general dialogue, which is itself an innovation:

“The innovation lies mainly in the ability to organise discussion and consultation amongst all the links, that is to say, from the farmer to the distributor, to bring them together and involve them in a comprehensive local project fostering sustainable trade amongst the parties. Leading such discussions is not these economic operators’ role. This role of facilitator can thus be taken on by the administration via a working party or steering group composed of conventional farmers from the area, organic farmers, local cooperatives and businesses, distributors, (...)” (FNAB, *Structuration des filières bio longues*, 2014)

### 3.3 Assisting the agrifood company Picard

The FNAB was contacted by Picard, the leading company in the French frozen food production and sales sector, in 2016 with a special request: Picard wanted to offer a range of frozen vegetables grown and processed locally, but had problems finding the requisite raw materials to do so.

The FNAB thus signed a contract with the company to structure the supply chain over three years. This service consisted in identifying the production areas and assisting the market release. For this, it quickly proved necessary for the organic farmers who were until then selling their products through the traditional organic food channels to earmark part of their harvest for Picard and to have a regional operator process and freeze the products before delivering them to Picard’s points of sale. The initiative was launched in the course of 2017, with admittedly small volumes and for a test series of summer and autumn vegetables, but larger volumes are planned for the following years if the test results are conclusive.

In this framework the FNAB is trying to influence the way Picard does its purchasing. In so doing, it is reasserting the organisational recommendations that we outlined above. First of all, the FNAB advocates getting the vegetables from farmers involved in collectives such as the OFEOs. Three OFEOs in two pilot regions (Brittany and Provence-Alpes-Cotes d’Azur) were thus identified for the test period. Second, the FNAB is encouraging territorial dialogue. For example, in the case of Provence-Alpes-Cotes d’Azur, a first meeting between Picard and the OFEO Solébio was held on a vegetable farmer’s farm in March 2017. The venue had been chosen to “*show Picard the realities of organic farming*” (interview with a FNAB staff member, July 2017). At this meeting, Picard employees working in marketing, product design, packaging, and quality control met the OFEO’s manager, one of the employees, and two member farmers. Telephone conferences conducted between physical meetings made it possible to determine the volumes available for the test series. Two other meetings were held on the vegetable processing site in June and July. The three project stakeholders (Picard, the processor, and Solébio) visited the processing facility and set the supply details (volumes, products, calibres, etc.). Finally, the FNAB insisted on having the stakeholders’ commitments enshrined in charters, the terms of which were to be defined jointly. The FNAB staff member in charge of the Picard file defined this point of the federation’s action as that of a “pebble in the company’s shoe” (interview, July 2017).

The idea was to force the operators to formalise their commitments, to discuss fairness, to be transparent about their profit margins, and to devise dispute settlement mechanisms ahead of time. Even though the FNAB does not and will never have control over the trade in question, it is pushing the operators to establish a frame of relations in line with its “New Organic Economy” vision. This same employee also told us, “We don’t know how Picard is going to behave. We are trying to set landmarks, to build a partnership of trust in which the farmers, processors and Picard feel committed, have a common project” (interview, July 2017).

## 4 Providing economic landmarks

Beyond the production of a normative, discursive framework and carrying out initiatives in touch with actual players on the ground, the FNAB is assisting farmers by producing and disseminating knowledge about the economy of the organic sector that we shall call “landmarks”. In a 2011 newsletter the FNAB made economic information an indispensable foundation for the market to function well, but also wrote that, in the agricultural sector, “transparency is often fictitious, information is truncated and unequally accessible”.<sup>13</sup> In the FNAB’s view, it is thus necessary to equip farmers, in short and long supply chains alike, to help them make their choices. For farmers to be able to get their bearings on the market, they must be able to know and assess it when it comes to both general trends and specific developments: What are the production and price trends? Which operators sell in which territories? What marketing channels and strategies do these players set up? What risks exist in the various supply chains? The staff of the FNAB and regional and departmental groupings strive to produce landmarks, each on their own scale, to help answer such questions. In this part we first present the references and economic information that they generate to provide the farmers in the network with landmarks (4.1.). After that, we shall present the more specific work that is done to help set remunerative prices (4.2.).

### 4.1 Assessing the market to make decisions: references and economic information

To help its members get a grasp of the market, the FNAB network provides economic information that is analysed

<sup>13</sup> FNAB, *Construire son prix de vente en agriculture biologique*, 2010.

and put in the context of each territory. According to the FNAB, 45% of the departmental groupings and 95% of the regional groupings produce references for their members. The staff inventory, with or without the help of partners, all of the operators listed in various guides as marketing organic products in their areas, identify the trends in and needs of the various supply chains, draw overviews of marketing in specific sectors (market gardening, field crops, etc.), and compile compendiums and guides on good sales practices. In some areas, the GRABs serve as Regional Organic Observatories under contracts with the state agency in charge of promoting organic farming, Agence Bio.

Several information materials and references are also produced on the national level. The sector bulletins deal with each major production system (orchards, field crops, milk, vegetables, meat, and grape-growing). They provide information about the general situation of the supply chain, economic aid and regulatory developments, and ongoing research and testing, plus some exemplary practices. These bulletins are complemented by economic situation notes intended for farmers, but also for the economic operators on the various markets. These notes exist for milk, cereals, and processed fruits and vegetables, i.e., produce that can be stored and for which it is useful to know the state of the market and stockpiles. To produce this information, the FNAB takes stock of crop-year results from data collective from biological farmers and GRAB and OFEO representatives. In the case of vegetables, two crop-year assessments are made, one at harvest time (summer) and one at the end of the crop year (winter). These reviews also give some elements about the coming crop year (volumes, prices, and grades) in order to be able to look ahead and adjust market release dates. One FNAB employee in charge of these activities attests to the usefulness of the landmarks that these assessments provide, saying that the information exchange has value not just as a result, but also as a discussion process:

“The operators need this information. They ring each other up quite a bit, for those who know each other. But there is no place to centralise [the information], to express the entire [market] dynamics. That is why these notes on market conditions are interesting. Not just as write-ups on current market conditions, but for the exchanges that take place to provide their content.” (Interview, 2017)

Whilst the farmers want economic information from the FNAB network, the latter is also eager for information from the farmers to guide its own actions. It has organised meetings with OFEOs, all supply chains combined, several times a year since 2016. These discussions and debates, which take place upstream from the federation’s board

meetings, concern regulations to come and stand on agricultural policies, but also food supply chain structure.

## 4.2 Landmarks to maintain remunerative prices

Keeping prices remunerative, which is at the heart of the challenges raised by the “change in scale”, is a key objective of providing farmers with economic references. Several actions of the FNAB network contribute by providing landmarks to help set prices or decide when to go to market.

Teaching the farmers how to compute their costs and set their sales prices in short and long supply chains alike is seen as a way to avoid the failures experienced by conventional agriculture. The emphasis put earlier on forging lasting partnerships in the supply chains is coupled with the aim to bolster farmers' abilities to set remunerative prices:

“Organic farmers must take control of setting their prices and not leave this up to the downstream partners alone. If not, specialisation and the weakening of environmental and social values are inevitable. (...) Organic agriculture must change its approach to price-building so as not to fall back into this trap.” (FNAB, *Construire son prix de vente en agriculture biologique*, 2010)

Since 2011 the FNAB has proposed a cost price computation tool for non-livestock farming. Training courses for GAB and GRAB advisors provide the approach and tool for helping farmers determine their cost prices. Richard Laizeau, an organic orchardman in Vendée, is the man behind the tool. His initiative was triggered by the realisation that farmers, unlike the other links in the value chain, do not calculate their cost prices. In his opinion, they usually have prices imposed on them by downstream operators or, if they set a price, do so by observing their neighbours or the prices posted in market reports. Learning how to compute the cost price, on the contrary, “gives farmers what they need to be able to assess their production and sales strategies and to think about adaptations or variables to modify in order to succeed”.<sup>14</sup>

Other tools target the farmers' organisations and the other parties that put the produce on the market (distributors and wholesalers). The FNAB is consequently behind the production of a calendar to harmonise the sales periods for organic apples and pears. France's

climate diversity and the earliness of its various varieties result in different production peaks according to the production area. The lowest prices are correlated with the production peak on the national level, and vice versa. The ability to sell apples and pears at the right time thus helps to ensure a good price. Setting its sights on solidarity between production areas, the FNAB set about organising discussions amongst the various regions and national distributors in order to ensure that purchasing would not favour one region over another. The go-to-market calendar for organic apples and pears implemented by the FNAB and its partners can thus be considered to be a market regulation tool. A first version was ratified in 2012 and a second one in 2017. It involves three specialised distribution networks, four OFEOs, and the FNAB. As FNAB Director Julien Adda points out, the calendar ultimately makes it possible “to force competitors to work together” (Interview, 2017).

## 5 Discussion and conclusions

How can the FNAB influence the transformations of France's organic agriculture, especially its economic course, when, as mentioned in the introduction, it has no direct control over the sector's economy? This excerpt from a 2016 activity report sums up a good proportion of the initiatives that we have singled out in this article:

“Accompanying the change in scale of the organic sector is a trade-union fight for development that does not make do with self-fulfilling prophecies (industrial organic farming, a two-tiered organic sector, etc.), but proposes specific solutions for the upstream and downstream players. The difficulty of the exercise is to acculturate conventional and/or organic operators to the idea of a competitive but fair organic sector by situating our agricultural development network in the economic field. No prior judgements of the players' supposed intentions, but an analysis of market release practices and actual deeds understood as practices of cooperation amongst the stakeholders, from farmers to consumers.” (FNAB, *Rapport d'activité 2016*, 2017)

The FNAB's action concerns first of all the production of a stabilised narrative on the current “change in scale” that gives meaning to the current transformations of the French organic sector and defines a normative framework for evaluating them. All the actions carried out around this issue must be understood as wanting to impose a cognitive and normative framework comparable to those that have been observed in the sociology of the social movements (Benford and Snow 2000; see also Stassart and Jamar 2008). They also testify to this actor's

<sup>14</sup> FNAB, *Accompagner les producteurs dans la définition des prix des productions végétales*, 2011.

projective agency, *i.e.*, its capacity to imagine alternative desirable futures and to identify broad lines of actions to reach them (Le Velly 2018). The key elements of this narrative are that development trajectories other than those painted by fatalistic discourse are possible and every player in the organic sector is responsible for the future. The FNAB's action then consists in disseminating organisational recommendations aimed at building a "new organic economy" that will fulfil the objectives of fairness, sustainability and territorial embeddedness. By building on some practices of the producers' organisations that are part of its network, the federation also gives strong examples that legitimate the soundness of its project.

In this article we have described the actions taken by the FNAB network, but we have not assessed their impacts. The federation organises events, repeats its vision of the "change in scale", meets operators, and disseminates operational tools or markers, but do these actions actually bend the development trajectory? It would be worthwhile to assess this impact subsequently. Still, we can already state that the FNAB's action is extremely ambitious. The comparison with ORFARM's case is informative. ORFARM is an organisation that tries to coordinate the marketing strategies of producer's organisations which have previously expressed their will to take part to this kind of collective action (Guptill and Welsh 2008). The recipients of the FNAB's action are much wider: The FNAB would like to impose its vision of the "change in scale" and its project of a "New Organic Economic" to all the players of the French organic sector. This definitely won't be easy. Success is not certain, even for the farmers' organisations close to the FNAB network (the OFEOs). The FNAB's "New Organic Economy Action Research", to take a case in point, strove to strengthen the ties between the national federation and historical operators. Whilst some of the latter have remained close to the federation, others have more tenuous relations and act without referring too much to the models that the FNAB promotes. It should also be pointed out that a whole swathe of France's organic agriculture has little or no contact with the FNAB network. Two-thirds of the country's certified organic farmers are not FNAB members and many farmers' organisations, especially cooperatives selling organic and non-organic produce, are developing alongside the network. Even though the FNAB does not exclude them from the "new organic economy" that it is promoting, its influence over these players is necessarily more uncertain. The same goes for the bulk of the country's agrifood and distribution players. Considering that the further development of organic farming will be

the result of the co-evolution of strategies and actions by a wide range of stakeholders (Darnhofer 2014) entails targeting this whole set of actors, as the FNAB does. But this just makes things harder.

Upon coming to the end of this article we see clearly how little direct control the FNAB has over the economic dynamics under way. Does that mean that its actions are in vain and the fight is lost in advance? The future may tell us. At the very least, this article attests to what extent the federation has tried to do and its ambitions at a key moment in the history of French organic agriculture.

**Acknowledgments:** This research has been funded by the French National Research Agency (grant ANR-15-CE21-0006 'Institutionnalisation des agroécologies'). The authors thank Gabrielle Leyden for the quality of her translation and the Open Agriculture reviewers for their comments.

**Conflict of interest:** Authors declare no conflict of interest.

**Ethical approval:** The conducted research is not related to either human or animal use.

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