

# Combining nested markets and the multi-level perspective to understand the agroecological transition of the food system

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**Abstract** – A twofold framework based on nested markets and the multi-level perspective on sustainable transitions is presented. We argue that there are promising intersections between these interrelated concepts, which are useful to understand the emerging dynamics of new markets, their relations with the broader food system and their potential to sustain more sustainable food practices, as illustrated from a case study in the french overseas territory of La Réunion.

**Keywords** – nested markets; geography of transitions; multi-level perspective; case study.

## INTRODUCTION

Over the last twenty years, scholars in social sciences engaged with "alternative food networks" in order to know how renewed relations between producers and consumers can lead to more sustainable food systems (Forssell and Lankowski, 2015). The social and ecological costs, as well as the distances and disconnections associated with the so called "corporate food regime", and the more recent variant, the "corporate-environment food regime" are acknowledged (Levidow, 2015). Criticisms have raised against the geographical dualism that puts alternative and conventional food spaces against each other. Researchers have begun to warn scholars about the processes whereby the alternatives are incorporated into mainstream food systems of provision. Sonnino and Marsden (2006) have invited for more nuanced readings and understandings of this "divide". The danger for scholars and practitioners is also to fall into the "local trap", by considering the spaces, places and practices of alternative food as free from conflicts and power relations, and thus performing the bias of defensive localism (Born and Purcell, 2006). Our work tries to go beyond these limitations, by applying a twofold framework, in order to understand which market dynamics can support the agroecological transition in Reunion Island (fig. 1).

## THEORETICAL FRAME

We mobilize the multi-level perspective (MLP) on sustainability transitions and the concept of nested markets. Central to the MLP is the idea that systems (regimes) are "locked-in" to a steady trajectory. Novelities can emerge both inside and outside of regimes,

requiring development and/or protection from mainstream regime market trends by niche actors (Geels, 2011). Scholars working on transitions in the farming sector recently argued that while *markets are more embedded in the MLP conceptualization than is currently recognized (...)* little consideration is given to the development of niches for which there may, or may not, be a functioning market (Sutherland et al, 2015; pp. 208-209). This statement converges with the emerging field of the geography of transitions (Boschma et al, 2017). According to these authors we argue that there is common ground between economic geography and transition studies, which can provide explanations about the processes of market construction.

The concept of nested markets come from neo-institutional economics. The nested character of these markets must be seen as a response to conventional global markets, with which they interacting continually, by acting strategies of differentiation and linking with new consumers' demands, thus reducing power asymmetries (Hebinck et al., 2015). In the authors' view, the main features of nested markets justify the adoption of a MLP framework in order to better understand their emergence. The approaches are complementary and their joint mobilization makes it possible to account for lock-in, breaks and more generally the market trajectories within a given system.

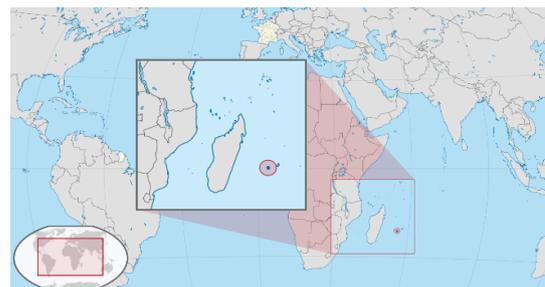


Figure 1. The french overseas territory of Reunion island.

## METHODS

The following findings are based on: 40 semi-structured interviews realized between December 2016 and February 2018 with various actors of the food system; a bibliographic analysis; a review of regional press (more than 300 articles from 1983 to 1995).

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Interviews lasted from one hour to one hour and a half, and be sometimes completed by a new exchange in order to fill some lacks or to assess previous statements.

RESULTS FROM CASE STUDIES: RQDO AND AMAPEI

The "Ruche Qui Dit Oui" (RQDO) is a French based private company which utilises web 2.0 tools to connect local food producers with consumers through a local intermediary which is the point of delivery (fig. 2), an e-commerce platform which allows individuals to take their orders and related bills. The first one was created in July 2012; one year after there were 5 RQDO on the island. There are actually 9 active RQDO on the island, (one is under construction). RQDO is actually spreading in ten countries across Europe (with more than 1100 points of delivery), contributing to the global movement of food relocalization.

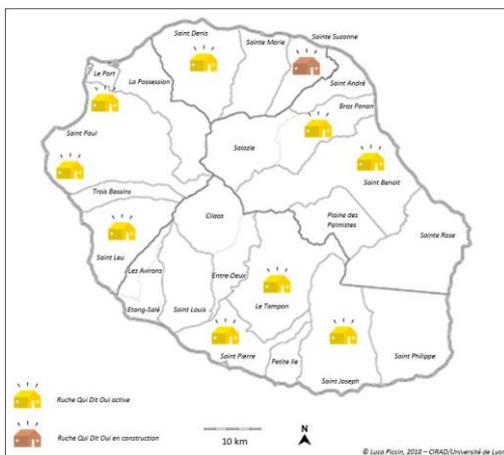


Figure 2. Location of the ten RQDO existing in the island.

AMAPéi is a locally adapted version of the well-known french "Association pour le Maintien de l'Agriculture Paysanne". Péi is a creole word, meaning "local" or "terroir". These short supply chains are promoted by the "Conseil Général" (regional authority), which set up a fund to promote consumers and family farmers' associations. Since 2016 the regional authority in charge of agriculture allowed 30.000€ to every AMA-Péi to face operating and investment costs. AMAPéi are managed on e-platforms and are mostly based on urban consumers. There can be one or more farmers. Members participate consciously in an attempt to make the food system more sustainable, but they often go beyond this aspect by engaging with broader activities like permaculture, community gardening, and other so-called makerspaces and sub-cultures. As shown in figure 3, AMAPéi are less represented in the east part of the island, because the majority of farmers are in the south and the captive demand is mostly concentrated in the biggest cities of St Denis (north) and St Pierre (south) or on the west-coast.

CONCLUSION

Both AMAPéi and RQDO are present locally but also worldwide, giving more evidence to the fact that transitions are processes occurring at multiple inter-related scales.

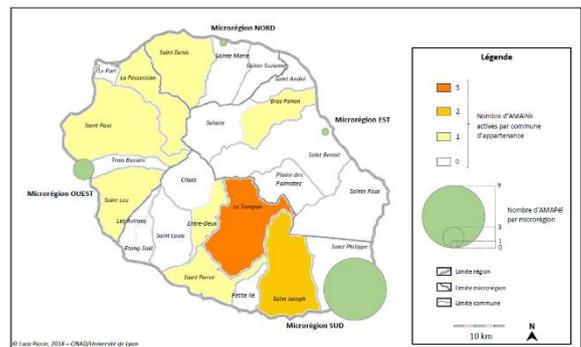


Figure 3. The uneven spatial distribution of AMAPéi.

These emerging markets spread in the last five years. Key reasons of this success are: the diffusion of Internet, which can allow the circulation of knowledge and the connection between consumers and farmers; the support of local authorities; a shift in values towards new forms of more meaningful citizenship engagement, that can also be seen in other nested markets like box schemes, bulk sales and community gardening. Our findings suggest that nested markets are niches which can be considered as precursors of potential markets for new goods and services. As such, they constitute useful tools for the transition to more sustainable food systems, offering answers both to the new needs of civil society and to rural and peri-urban areas.

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