



## Values and Volume in Sustainable Organic Market Chains: A Multi-perspectival Analysis

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**Abstract.** Values-based food chains (VBFCs) are investigated increasingly by various disciplinary perspectives, and with different outcomes in terms of understanding and recommendations issued to stakeholders. How can values be maintained throughout their growth process? VBFCs are complex study objects, which make different research perspectives such as coordination and organization, marketing and business logics, communication, mediation of values, resilience and sustainability relevant to address this key question. Rather than discussing which perspective is most favourable, the approach in the HealthyGrowth project has been a multi-perspectival approach. The aim of this article is to explore how this multi-perspectival analysis based on the perspectival findings of 19 European VBFC case studies help to assess key factors that in successful organic VBFCs allow integrity and trust to be maintained during growth from niche to volume. Three key processes were identified through which values can be upheld over time: 1. a continuous process of negotiation and sometimes redefinition of these core values; 2. a synchronization of time bindings and time horizons within the decision-making processes of the different agents involved; and 3. an extended understanding of professionalization that relates not only to the classical division of tasks but also to a diversity of skills. The multi-perspectival analysis provides an insight that is dependent on the perspectival findings, but not visible from any single perspective alone.

### Introduction

Organic sectors and markets differ throughout Europe, but common to all is that local organic market initiatives have inherent problems in moving from niche to volume (both in terms of management and logistics or course, but also in terms of maintaining their core values), while mainstream large-scale market chains have inherent problems in adopting and advancing organic values. This has been examined extensively within agri-food studies and especially within the conventionaliza-

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tion debate. However, beyond these often dichotomized views, an assessment of the diversity of organic chains in diverse European countries has shown the existence of numerous intermediary cases that can be considered as mid-scale 'values based food chains' (VBFCs) (Kvam and Bjørkhaug, 2014). These chains are based on forms of organization and partnership between farmers, businesses and consumers that often combine conventional (or mainstream) and alternative principles, and sometimes actors, in order to better mediate between the values of producers and consumers, despite and throughout the growth process. These mid-scale VBFCs differ from direct-marketing initiatives insofar as they aim for growth in volume and scale and often include intermediaries; and they differ from the mainstream globalized food chains in that they aim to reconnect producers and consumers (although often not through direct relationships). These forms of marketing initiatives have received less attention in the literature, especially in relation to the role of the interactions between the different actors of the chain (including intermediaries) in the mediation of values.

In this context, the aim of the HealthyGrowth European project (2013–2016) was to explore the extent to which the forms of organization, partnerships and strategies set up by such mid-scale VBFCs enable them to combine growth in volume with a high and often increasing level of organic values throughout the supply chain (HealthyGrowth, 2014). It was also to analyse whether such VBFCs can offer a sound foundation for organic integrity and consumer trust, and constitute a substantial potential for the development and growth of organic markets in the future. In the project, these two questions have been addressed from five different analytical perspectives in a multi-perspectival setup, drawing on in-depth case studies of 19 organic value chains and three territorial case studies carried out in 11 countries (see <<http://healthygrowth.eu>>). This article is based on the findings relating to these five analytical perspectives that are considered here through a 'second order observation' in order to discuss the overall questions of the project (Alrøe and Noe, 2014a).

The cases were selected on the basis of three criteria: 1. values that transcended the framework defined by the organic food regulations; 2. they represented some of the diversity of initiatives, ranging from CSA, box schemes, and organic supermarket chains, to new market relations involving mainstream market actors; and 3. they had to have experienced periods of growth with a greater or lesser degree of difficulties and challenges in maintaining their core values. The cross-country comparative analysis of these cases has been conducted from five different analytical perspectives: a sociological perspective on organizations and governance, a management perspective on business logics, a theory of communication perspective on communication of values, a relational perspective on the mediation of values, and a resilience perspective on the chain's ability to deal with crises and changes. These perspectives were chosen because they offered specific and complementary insights on the different key processes through which our central question – 'How can values be maintained throughout the growth process?' – is addressed in practical ways by the actors in these initiatives, along their collective trajectory.

The article is organized in four sections. The first section discusses this specific case of mid-scale VBFCs within the conventionalization debate, and how VBFCs have addressed the problems of mediation between values and volumes in order to avoid conventionalization. The second section presents the multi-perspectival framework, an essentially novel framework initiated in previous research (Alrøe and Noe, 2005, 2016; Noe et al., 2008) that has been further developed and improved

under the HealthyGrowth project (Alrøe and Noe, 2014a). The third section discusses the selection of perspectives and cases and presents the five perspectives that have produced the input for this article.<sup>1</sup> The fourth section expands on the central findings of the multi-perspectival analysis that led us to identify three key processes through which values can be upheld over time: 1. a continuous process of negotiation and sometimes redefinition of these core values; 2. a synchronization of time bindings and time horizons within the decision-making processes of the different agents involved; and 3. an extended understanding of professionalization that relates not only to the classical division of tasks but also to a diversity of skills. Relational reflexivity, finally, appears as a transversal principle cutting across these different principles. The fifth section discusses the transversal insights and reflexions afforded by this approach, and finally the conclusion summarizes our answers to the main question of this article: How can values be maintained throughout the initiatives' growth process?

### **Values-based Food Chains and the Conventionalization Debate**

Values are a predominant theme and an epistemological object or category in agri-food studies, and more specifically in the literature about organic food chains. They have been addressed in many ways. Moral values have been analysed as being central to the development of alternative food networks (Alkon, 2008), even though the question of whether some of these values (such as fairness or social justice) are actually upheld is a matter of debate, both within the industry and academic arena. The place of values has been debated by a number of authors, based not only on cases of fair trade but also on those of alternative food networks in northern countries (for a synthesis, see Goodman et al., 2012). These debates and arguments, although not limited to organic networks, echo the conventionalization debate in the late 1990s. The concept of conventionalization describes the intrusion of agribusiness logic into the more idealistic organic production, related to the industrialization of the organic sector (Buck et al., 1997; Guthman, 2004a, 2004b). Price competition undercuts farmers' ability to maintain a strictly agroecological approach in their practice unless they received some form of subsidy (Guthman, 2004b, p. 310). The conventionalization thesis emerged in a specific context, that of the US organic sector characterized by processes of horizontal integration and concentric diversification, both at the farm level and in the 'off-farm' segments of the organic food industry (Howard, 2009). In some European countries, by contrast, due to structural features of the farming and agri-food sectors and to the role of the European and national agricultural policies (Fonte, 2013), situations appear to be more nuanced with, for example, supermarket chains accounting for 90% of the Danish organic market but 'only' about 45% of the French one.

Lockie and Halpin (2005) have criticized the conventionalization thesis for being based on the organic sector's normative claim that it is under threat from incoming conventional elements. They argue that the conventionalization thesis implies a bifurcation within the organic sector, between, on the one hand, large-scale industrialized farms that see organic as an attribute enabling them to add value to the product and, on the other hand, smaller farmers with a sincere devotion to the organic ideals. In line with this critique, Darnhofer et al. (2010) advocate a move beyond this bifurcation; they suggest that scholars should focus on understanding the different dynamics driving organic farming, and concentrate on the importance of the funda-

mental values and principles, rather than only on structural changes. The classical dichotomy of conventional vs. alternative has been questioned by many authors (Watts et al., 2005; Sonnino and Marsden, 2006; Ostrom and Jussaume, 2007; Jarosz, 2008; Kings and Ilbery, 2010). Another way to avoid the dichotomy is to recognize the heterogeneous nature of actors' motivations in organic markets. Indeed, different perspectives, such as organics as protest or opposition to conventional farming, the devotion to organic ideals or the interest for market-based niche production, capture different aspects of what involvement in organic farming entails (Alrøe and Noe, 2005).

The dichotomized vision of organic networks reflects a larger phenomenon within the agri-food sector at large, which can be described as having split into two streams, one consisting of small-scale food chains based on direct interactions between producers and consumers, and a second stream consisting of large-scale/bulk food chains with no interaction and most often also without any possibility of identifying the individual producer (Murdoch and Miele, 1999). However, a growing number of food chains have emerged, and form what can be described as an intermediary position based on a combination of conventional and alternative principles and, sometimes, food chain actors.

Exploring the diversity of organic chains in 11 European countries, this is what has been assessed in the HealthyGrowth project, where mid-scale, values-based organic food chains have appeared as an interesting new (although quite diverse) type of initiative (Kvam and Bjørkhaug, 2014). These initiatives wish to maintain the trust and integrity of small-scale food chains, yet at the same time aspire to handling larger volumes. The latter, however, de facto renders personal interactions impossible or very limited, and makes it difficult for producers to maintain their distinctiveness as an alternative to conventional food systems (Mount, 2012).

The emergence of this 'middle' or mid-scale position has attracted some scholarly attention both in Europe and in the US. In a European context, the debates over alternative food networks (AFN) (Renting et al., 2003; Tregear, 2011), a notion most often used for short food chains and rather small initiatives, have recently pointed out the need to take into account more hybrid and sometimes mid-scale initiatives and their complementarity with more 'radical' alternative networks in supporting agroecological transitions, especially at the territorial scale (Lamine et al., 2012). A number of initiatives, such as medium-scale food retailers and larger producer-consumer initiatives, are based neither on direct marketing nor on large-scale bulk chains, but rather on combined elements from both types of food chains (Schermer et al., 2011). A similar concern is found amongst American scholars with the notion of mid-scale food value chains (Stevenson et al., 2011).

This development of heterogeneous mid-scale, values-based organic food chains calls for the development of a research framework to study how diverse actors deal with the tensions generated by their growth process, and are able in some instances, to consistently combine values and volumes.

### **Theoretical Framework and Methods: A Multi-perspectival Approach**

In order to understand the objective and the stance of this article, it is necessary first to have a basic understanding of the HealthyGrowth project as a whole. As mentioned in the Introduction, it was set up as a multi-perspectival research project, based on the previous experience of being involved in a series of cross-disciplinary

and multidisciplinary projects dealing with wicked problems. Wicked problems are complex problems where there is disagreement over the nature of the problem, as well as varying interests and perspectives involved, all framing the problem differently, and often proposing contradictory solutions (Rittel and Webber, 1973). One of these previous projects dealt with multi-criteria assessment of organic farming. It showed that most criteria could be understood from contrasting perspectives, underpinned by differing values. For example, regarding animal welfare, one perspective would be to reason in terms of human care for the animals, whereas another one would focus on the animals' possibility to express their 'natural' behaviour (Alrøe and Noe, 2016; Alrøe et al., 2017). The approach that has been defined as the conceptual basis for the HealthyGrowth project has been described in a series of articles explaining the underlying philosophy of science and the methodology (Alrøe and Noe, 2005, 2011, 2014a, 2014b; Noe et al., 2007). These can, of course, not be fully unfolded here but some of the key elements and arguments are included in this section.

How some mid-scale organic food chains combine values and volumes within their growth process is what we can call a wicked problem in that it holds different intricate dimensions. Such problems represent a methodological challenge, since the problems do not belong solely to one discipline. Instead, they *appear* as specific problems within a given discipline, while simultaneously appearing as equally specific problems in other disciplines (Rittel and Webber, 1973; Whyte and Thompson, 2012). This implies that wicked problems call for interdisciplinary approaches.

Yet in most research projects, interdisciplinarity remains 'first-order science' (Alrøe and Noe, 2014a). It often actually amounts to *multidisciplinarity* and results in a patchwork of coordinated yet distinct perspectives followed by a synthesis through the lenses of one disciplinary perspective, essentially maintaining a first-order perspective throughout the entire research process. Wicked problems must be approached from a different angle that avoids the inherent controversy on their ontological nature. The solution proposed by Noe and Alrøe is to adopt a constructivist posture and deal with wicked problems as an epistemological challenge rather than as an ontological issue (Noe et al., 2008; Alrøe and Noe, 2011, 2014a). In other words, we choose to examine how different disciplines observe the problem, rather than focussing on the problem as such, considering that wicked problems can be observed only at the level of 'second order' observation. Methodologically, this means organizing the research project with a multi-perspectival, second-order approach.

The theoretical foundation of multi-perspectivism builds on Niels Bohr's idea of complementarity. Following this idea, there are many relevant but complementary 'scientific truths' about any complex problem that, precisely because they are complementary, cannot be observed from a single 'first-order' perspective, however holistic it may claim to be.<sup>2</sup> Based on this understanding, the question is not how to select the correct or best perspective, but rather how to appreciate and use the perspectival insight instead of partial knowledge (Kellert et al., 2006). The multi-perspectival approach starts from the semiotic idea that every perspective (whether economic, organizational, agronomical or other) constructs the object of observation according to its own basic assumptions and research interest (Alrøe and Noe, 2014b). The theoretical underpinnings of a multi-perspectival approach differ from those of other traditions within multi- and interdisciplinary approaches in two ways. First, instead of merging or integrating different perspectives from a new and more holistic perspective, the idea is to sharpen and strengthen the analytical power of the different disciplines involved. Second, instead of being a synthesis of the perspectival



findings, multi-perspectival communication is meant to be a process of second-order communication around how these perspectival insights contribute to the overall understanding of the shared problematics.

In accordance with this multi-perspectival idea, the HealthyGrowth project designed five different analytical perspectives, based on the competences of the research partners. The aim was to combine the insights obtained from these five perspectives in a 'second-order', multi-perspectival communication about the conditions and processes that allowed organic, values-based food chains to grow with integrity and trust.

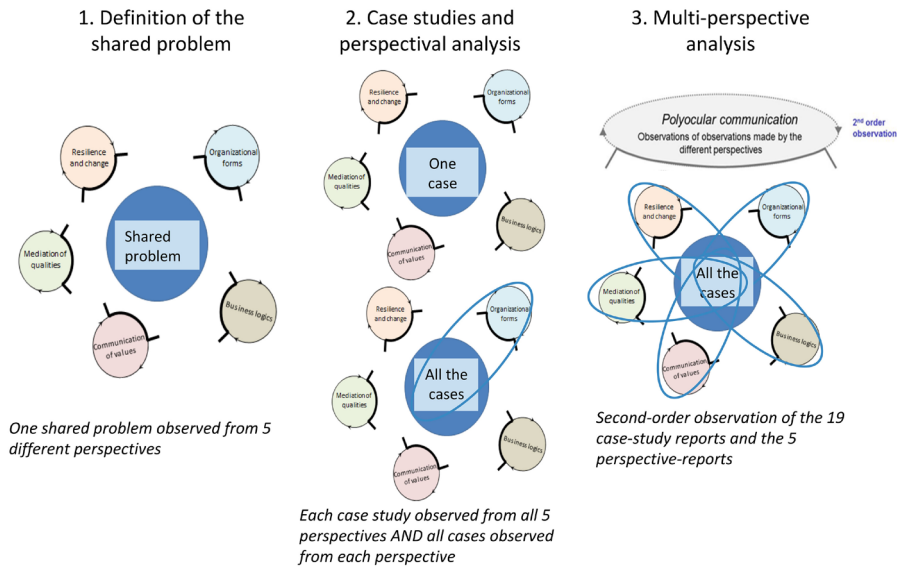
As described by Alrøe and Noe (2014a), a multi-perspectival research project is a dynamic process including three substantially distinct phases of multi-perspectival communication: 1. an exploration of the shared dynamic problem: in our case, how the problem of growth with integrity and trust can be observed from the different perspectives; 2. an analysis of the different case studies from the different perspectives, based on the formulation of a shared methodology; and 3. iterative work between the different perspectives that produced the transversal outcomes.

In HealthyGrowth, phase 1 was organized as a collective process of communication regarding the problem of maintaining integrity, and trust in the growth process was understood from the different perspectives. This allowed for a multi-perspectival understanding of the shared problem to emerge, and for multi-perspectival communication to be developed on how the different perspectives represent the shared objects that are the 'values-based food chains'. An outcome of this first phase was that each of the participating perspectives had to demonstrate clearly how they observed the 'object' and 'problem' shared in the project. In this first phase, when the shared problem was formulated, we also chose a number of cases in which this shared problem could be explored, i.e. cases that shared the characteristic of being values-based food chains and of having experienced periods of growth with greater or lesser degrees of difficulties and challenges in maintaining their core values.

In phase 2, the main objective of the multi-perspectival communication was to establish and then apply a shared guideline for the case-study methodology and case-study reports. These guidelines (for the surveys) and templates (for the reports) contained a section reflecting each of the analytical perspectives, which effectively allowed the researchers to apply different perspectives in their empirical fieldwork, even though they were not themselves anchored in these perspectives. The major challenge of this phase was to develop case-study reports and descriptions that could work as a basis for both the perspectival analysis, as well as a multi-perspectival one. The outcome of this phase was a series of 19 case-study reports,<sup>3</sup> where *each* case was analysed through *all five* of the different perspectives, and a series of five perspectival reports where *all the cases* were analysed through *each of the five* perspectives (see Figure 1).

Phase 3 consisted of the multi-perspectival analysis itself and aimed at constructing transversal insights based on the second-order observation from the different perspectives. This article is one of the main outcomes of this analysis, and was based on the various task reports generated by the individual perspectival analyses in phase 2, and on iterations between these perspectival analyses (and reports) and the multi-perspectival analysis.<sup>4</sup>

As we see in the description of these three phases, a multi-perspectival research project is a dynamic process oscillating between perspectival analyses and multi-perspectival communication, and thereby also between first- and second-order observa-



**Figure 1.** The 3 phases of the MPA.

tions. Here, first-order observation relates to the observation of the cases through the lenses of each of the five different perspectives, and second-order observation is the observation of these first-order observations. It means that the multi-perspectival analysis can only be based on the observation of the shared dynamic objects (the values-based food chains, i.e. the cases) through the lenses of the observations made by the perspectives involved. It does not form a new privileged and holistic position to observe the ‘world’ as such. Multi-perspectivism thereby contrasts with a linear and diachronic understanding of multidisciplinary research based on a synthesis or a comparative analysis of the perspectival work. It can be seen as an extra layer reflecting on the work process and the complementarity of the perspectives involved.

### Presentation of the Five Perspectives and Case Studies

The HealthyGrowth project’s cooperation with 11 national teams afforded the opportunity to obtain a unique selection of case studies as the input for the five perspectival analyses, i.e. a sociological perspective on organizations and governance, a management perspective on business logics, a theory of communication perspective on communication of values, a relational perspective on the mediation of values, and a resilience perspective on the chain’s ability to deal with crises and changes.

One of the challenges in using a multi-perspectival approach is that each perspective is embedded in its own observations of the shared (or dynamic) object. Each perspective is anchored in a specific discipline or disciplinary field, has its own definition of the relevant object, its own understanding of values and ways to observe them, its own hypothesis about the core question of the project (the shared problem, i.e. how core values and thus trust and integrity can be maintained over time during the growth process), and finally its own terminology. One consequence is that

Table 1. Key concepts of the five perspectives.

	<b>Sociological perspective on organizations and governance</b>	<b>Management perspective on business logics</b>	<b>Theory of communication perspective on communication of values along the chain</b>	<b>Relational perspective on the mediation of values</b>	<b>Resilience perspective on the chain's ability to deal with crises and changes</b>
Main disciplines	Sociology of organizations and controversies	Economy management	Information and communication	Social systems theory (sociology)	Social ecology
Objects for observation	Governance models, competing or shared visions	Business logics/management tools	Communication activities and flows	Mediation of values	The chain as an evolving socioecological system
Understanding of values	Core values of the chain give way to controversies and adjustments	Added values define product quality Shared values are related to business goals	Values attached to the products are embedded in communication	Values as subject/object relations (interactions)	Shared values as condition for trust
Way to observe values	Analysis of the changes within governance structures and of the inclusion of various stakeholders (internally/externally)	Analysis of business logics and management instruments	Analysis of communication strategies and tools	Analysis of the value relations between agents and food items	Analysis of crises/changes and how these were dealt with
Hypothesis regarding how values can be maintained over time (within the growth process)	With open and dynamic modes of coordination and governance the core values can be maintained (and the different visions integrated)	A consistent overarching business logic is vital for achieving an equitable and inclusive growth process	Communicative ways of substituting the direct contact between producer and consumer are necessary to transmit the core values	Each link in the food chain supports the mediation of value relations	Chain resilience relies on the learning and adaptive capacity of the actors in the system
Terminology: how people and initiatives are named	Stakeholders Organization	Managers, leaders, staff Business	Producers, consumers Up- and downstream partners	Agents Organisations Systems (incl. business)	Actors in Socioecological systems



the same words can have different meanings depending on the perspective. This is not a problem per se, but a challenge to the multi-perspectival communication. To support this multi-perspectival communication, it is necessary to clarify not only the theoretical frameworks that underpin each analytical perspective, but also the understanding of the key questions: Within each perspective, what empirical objects are observed? How are values understood? How are they analysed? What is the core hypothesis regarding how values can be maintained over time? It is also necessary to clarify the meaning of some key notions, such as the way people and initiatives are named from the different perspectives (do we talk of stakeholders and organization, or of managers and businesses? etc.; see Table 1).

The *sociological perspective on organizations and governance* is based on the hypothesis that specific modes of coordination and governance are needed to maintain, reaffirm, and adjust when necessary, the core values of a given initiative. This perspective is mainly inspired by the sociology of organizations and markets and the French sociology of controversies (Dubuisson-Quellier, 2003; Chateauraynaud, 2011). It is based on a sociological analysis of modes of governance, partnerships, and stakeholders' visions and controversies and their changes over time. This first perspectival analysis showed that in 'successful' cases, the different stakeholders, despite their possibly different or diverging visions, are able to collectively elaborate and adjust these modes of coordination and governance over time (both internally and externally), during the expansion process.

*Management perspective on business logic*: The business logic is an expression of the overall logic that connects the different decisions made by a given business. This approach is based on the idea that consistency in business logic and goals, development strategies and management instruments, and the related adjustments during the growth process, are preconditions to a sustainable development of values-based food chains. This perspective is based on management science, which focuses on the design and administration of complex systems (Jackson, 1991). The key analytical questions therefore concern the overall consistency of the business logic, the analysis of management adjustments during expansion, and the contribution of this business logic to the productivity and sustainability of a given business and of the larger food chain. This second perspectival analysis showed that a consistent business logic is vital to ensuring, and balancing, competitiveness and resource-efficiency, and to achieving an equitable and inclusive growth process (Münchhausen, 2015b, 2015a; Knickel et al., 2016).

The *theory of communication perspective on communication of values along the chain* builds on the hypothesis that successful values-based supply chains need to find communicative ways to substitute for the direct, face-to-face communication of values when the values-based food chains grow in volume and number of actors. It furthermore includes the assumption that the mediated contact fosters identification of producers with their product, motivates them to increase their efforts to ensure quality, allows consumers to develop trust in the integrity of producers, and promotes solidarity between producers and consumers. This perspective is based on the information and communication sciences (Shannon and Weave, 1963; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Kastberg, 2015). It builds on a communicative transition model that includes the notions of redundancy (i.e. more information fosters understanding) and of communicative circles and feedback loops, and the idea that the information's recipient also has to give feedback in one way or another. The key analytical question concerns how the frequency, forms, and content of communication influ-

ence the communication of values throughout the food chain. In our study, this highlighted the role of food ambassadors, informal meeting spaces (coaction), and social media as a key mechanism in the communication of values.

The *relational perspective on the mediation of values* builds on the hypothesis that mediation of qualities depends on the relation to the food items of all the links in the chain. It draws mainly on the theories of Pirsig's relational metaphysics of values (Pirsig, 1991) and Luhmann's systems theory (Luhmann, 1995). In this framework, quality is understood as a relation, meaning that it holds value for someone or something; in other words, quality is a value relation. This definition of qualities encompasses not only the physical attributes of products, like taste, appearance, health, and nutrition, but also qualities such as animal welfare, nature, handcrafts, history, care, etc., as all of these involve value relations. The key analytical question is how value relations are mediated between the agents involved in the values-based food chains, and how this influences the way each agent relates to and handles the food items concerned. The analysis showed that all agents in the chain are important for the mediation of values, and that only one agent in the chain is able to disrupt this mediation.

The *resilience perspective on the chain's ability to deal with crisis and change* helps us to understand how the mid-scale organic value chains address and cope with change, and how well equipped they are to face the future. Resilience means that a system can absorb change and reorganize while retaining essentially the same functions and structure (Walker et al., 2004). Adaptive capacity is the ability of actors to cope with stresses and crises (Gunderson and Holling, 2002). A high adaptive capacity is a prerequisite for resilience building (Walker et al., 2004). The key analytical question is how the different actors involved manage crisis and change. We showed that the analysis of changes and crises facilitates understanding of how organic mid-scale initiatives build resilience, based on actors' capacity for adaptation.

### **The Central Findings of the Multi-perspectival Analysis**

The aim of the multi-perspectival analysis is to discuss the key issues in relation to maintaining core values. Each of the analytical perspectives applied in this project contributes substantially to the understanding of this 'shared problem'. A multi-perspectival analysis cannot comprehend all the insights obtained in the case studies and perspectival analysis,<sup>5</sup> but has to focus on a few transversal themes. In close cooperation with the research teams, these transversal themes were selected and developed through an iterative process based on case-study reports and the task reports. From the multi-perspectival communication process, we have selected three cross-cutting themes deemed centrally important in understanding how values-based organic food chains can successfully maintain core values throughout the process of volume growth.

As mentioned above, all 19 case studies have been included as representations of the shared dynamic object (the values-based food chains) and explorations of the shared problem (how core values and thus trust and integrity can be maintained over time during the growth process) through the five perspectival analyses. The analytical findings are based on the full body of cases. However, to simplify and to better illustrate the outcome of this multi-perspectival communication, we have selected one core case as an example for discussing each of the three themes selected here. Regarding this core case, we illustrate how the different perspectives con-

tribute to our multi-perspectival communication, and to our understanding of the theme. The idea is not to form another first-order analysis of the case, but to build on the inputs from the various perspectival analyses.

### *Forging or Reworking Values: A Continuous Process*

In some HealthyGrowth project case studies, values seem to remain fairly stable over time and, according to the stakeholders, act as 'cement' between them throughout the growth process. There is, however, a constant process of translation of these values into actual rules or practices that allow them to be upheld. In other case studies, threats and tensions over values were experienced during the growth process. While most of them were overcome, this was not always the case. Whether values appear stable or are challenged, there is constant work on the initiatives' core values, in the form of reaffirmation or redefinition. Sometimes new values are added and adopted. This constant work on values can be analysed through the different perspectives adopted in our project. Successful management of values depends on governance and coordination, management tools and business logic, communication, mediation of values, and resilience. What the multi-perspectival analysis shows, is that in order to be stable and to undergird a stable organization, paradoxically, values must be negotiated and renegotiated constantly.

Biocoop is a good example of the various perspectives that can be adopted in this continuous process through which values are redefined. Biocoop, a network of organic shops that emerged in 1986, consisted of 345 shops in France in early 2014 (as compared to 190 in 2000) and accounted for about 15% of the French organic market in 2012 (Lamine, 2015). In the late 1990s and 2000s, Biocoop's fast and steady growth triggered strong (internal and external) criticism regarding its lack of adherence to organic values. In response to this trend, from the 2000s onwards, Biocoop sought to reinforce the application of its values (equity, cooperation, compliance with strong social and ecological criteria, transparency, traceability, and consumer awareness), primarily by favouring local producers and reinforcing the voice of producers in the governance of the network.

This Biocoop case can be analysed through the lenses of each of our five perspectives.

From a *sociological perspective on governance and organizations*, the Biocoop network was able to maintain its values over time because it set up governance modes to involve, in addition to shareholders and leaders, employees, consumers, and producers. Moreover, the network was agile and able to adjust this governance model over time. First, over time, Biocoop reinforced the voice of producers in its governance (in addition to shareholders, employees and consumers) and involved civil society through an ethics committee, thus allowing different points of view on values to be expressed and discussed. Second, the network organized not only large meetings with the network members every two years, but also frequent local meetings that offer spaces where values can be debated in closer circles. Lastly, Biocoop introduced new rules in order to reaffirm its values, and even new values, in a context where controversies regarding respect for organic values are intense, both in this network, and more generally in the French organic sector (Lamine, 2015). For example, the preference for local and peasant organic agriculture<sup>6</sup> was translated into rules increasing the presence of local (and more recently peasant) organic products in shops. Through these means, the network is striving to maintain openness to discussion

and debate over its core values. Although, as in other case studies,<sup>7</sup> some pioneer members left the network because they disagreed with some orientations taken during the growth process, this desertion (that still occurs today) has not caused the network to collapse. The network has succeeded in reinforcing its shared values, despite numerous events that might have been analysed as failures. When some shop managers or teams left the network because they considered the values to be too weak, and felt that the network had accepted too many 'supermarket-like' shops and rules, the network was urged to reinforce its rules and shop managers' commitment to Biocoop. Such a process of value reinforcement can rely on formal governance structures, as in the case of Biocoop, but it can also be more informal, as shown by most HealthyGrowth case studies where, on a daily basis, the stakeholders report on the role of informal interactions in sharing and reaffirming core values.

From a *business logic and management perspective*, Biocoop has reinforced an overarching priority of combining competitiveness and fairness with suppliers. They accomplish this by, for example, guaranteeing fair prices and decent wages to producers and employees. This classical tension was resolved through shared rules about the level of the margins that could be applied by each intermediary in the chain. This was true whether the intermediaries were internal (i.e. the shop, the platform, the transport) or external partners. Therefore, although there were many claims that Biocoop was adopting a corporate retailer's business logic, the network now claims to be a 'militant' (committed) organic network – a claim that currently appears to be a core element of its overarching business logic. Therefore, from this business logic perspective, these controversies over values can be observed as a challenge for forming a coherent and overarching logic that frames the interactions between the actors involved.

From a *communication perspective*, Biocoop has established elaborate communication strategies over the decades. Apart from these numerous communication tools offered by the network, the shops' managers and staff report that direct relations at the shop scale (both with consumers through the staff's availability and with producers) are of major importance, particularly to allow for feedback loops. This complementarity between national communication strategies and locally adapted ones is what allows values to be constantly reaffirmed and reworked, based on feedback loops and direct interactions.

From a *mediation of values perspective*, the continuous translation and 'reforming' of values that are conducted by the products rely on close interactions between the diverse partners and links in the chains. In the case of Biocoop, producers, processors, managers and employees support this mediation of values in the products' qualities, thanks to the adoption of common guidelines, frequent interactions, and the exchange of knowledge. In this way, values *should* be able to be reaffirmed in each link of the chain – *should*, as of course there are some cases when this process fails (for example, the values associated with local and peasant agriculture are not always properly mediated 'down' towards the consumer when there is a rupture at another point in the chain).

From a *resilience perspective*, being able to discuss and adjust or even rebuild shared values is an issue of learning and diversity, both of which are key aspects of adaptive capacity in situations where the initiatives are confronted with shocks or stressors. Over a period of 30 years, Biocoop has experienced both stresses and shocks at both the internal and external levels. In this case, favouring learning processes and considering the diversity of experiences and visions around core values have helped

push the discussion about values forward, thus reinforcing values continuously.

While each perspective has its own insight about value management, the multi-perspectival perspective shows that maintaining shared values is a continuous process, be it of redefinition, reaffirmation, or even new values definition. This is the case of Biocoop, where beyond traditional values (such as equity, cooperation, respect of strong social and ecological criteria, or transparency), new values (such as the preference for local and peasant organic agriculture) were included over time. Even when values appear to be stable, and even though this stability appears necessary for the basis of the economic relationships (both up- and downwards along the food chain), it is only because they are translated constantly into practices (and if necessary reworked and adjusted) that they can provide this 'stability effect'.<sup>8</sup>

#### *Time Bindings and Synchronization of Time Horizons in Decision-making*

As stated above, one of the overarching themes for the multi-perspectival analysis is the issue of coordination of the decisions and strategies of the different businesses or agents involved in a given values-based food chain. The challenge and importance of this coordination become especially visible in periods of growth, either growth in the number of activities of the core business, and/or growth in the number of businesses or agents involved in the values-based food chain. The multi-perspectival analysis of our range of case studies has revealed the importance of the two notions of *time bindings* and *time horizons* to illustrate how organizations create their own time bindings through the decisions taken about time. In line with Esposito (2011), we define time bindings as restrictions on change that are produced by a system. 'Time bindings bind the system and not the world' (Esposito, 2011, p. 22). The time horizon of a system, or of an operation (such as a decision made within the system), is the period of time in the future that is communicated about and is taken into consideration in the decision. A system may have an overall time horizon, or it may have different time horizons for different operative processes. In the initiatives that we studied, the agents had different time bindings and time horizons for the activities in which they were involved. Our studies show that a certain alignment of time horizons between different partners or stakeholders is necessary to stabilize mutual expectations. In its most simple form, the purchasers' expectation is that farmers have products to sell that they have an interest in buying. While the time frame for the farmers' decision on what to grow or produce may be a growing season or even longer, for a purchaser it may be day-to-day business (of course time horizons differ between processes and products, depending on risks of deterioration, vegetation period, and storage capacity). Moreover, time horizons change between chain partners because, for example, the product cycle lasts a year for the grain farmer, six months for the pig farmer, one day for the slaughtering house and two weeks cooling for the shop that sells the fresh meat.

A good case to illustrate these insights is Kiurvesi Municipal (KiMu) catering. KiMu has developed the use of local and organic food in public catering since the 1990s. The strengths of this initiative lie in the rich regional agricultural production structure and in the commitment of the municipal authorities to local and organic food (LOF). The LOF strategy of public catering is based on a territorial approach, and it has been adopted as a means of enhancing the attractiveness of the municipality, which is located in a fairly remote area and which has been facing a declining population dynamics over the past few decades. The LOF strategy is considered im-



portant, especially in view of the regional economy. An overarching goal for KiMu is securing local and organic food in municipal catering. The major restriction in the use of local and organic food is the availability of the products suitable for the needs of institutional kitchens. On the one hand, the volumes needed in municipal catering services are fairly large and, on the other hand, the kitchens do not have preprocessing facilities, which limits the range of products that can be used. Price is also important, but the price constraints can, to some extent, be compensated for without compromising the nutritional quality, by substituting expensive items by less expensive ones, and by careful menu planning.

From a *sociological perspective on governance and organizations*, there are at least three different kinds of organization involved (the school kitchen, the municipality, and the producers), which operate with quite different time horizons and time bindings. The decision-making of the municipal policymakers operates within the four-year electoral mandate, and furthermore within the time horizon of the annual budgets and the associated tenders. Moreover, the catering service is constrained by the strict regulation of the EU purchasing law, which requires that tender calls be put out for competitive bidding. The local kitchen operates with three different time horizons, one of which is linked to long-term investments in processing and cooking facilities, the other to an annual budget, and the third to the daily planning of menus. The local suppliers have to deal with the long-term investments, not only in production facilities but also in processing facilities, in order to meet the demands of the kitchens – facilities that in many cases are underutilized if the cooperation with the municipality ceases. These local suppliers furthermore have to deal with the yearly planning of production and the one-year contract of the tender calls. The initiative therefore involves various organizations with different time horizons and time bindings for their decisions, thus requiring inter-organizational cooperation that allows a synchronization of these time horizons and bindings.

From a *business logic and management perspective*, it appears that in relation to the overarching local public procurement logic, there is a challenge concerning all the businesses of the chain regarding time bindings. The annual call for tender may well be effective to synchronize the decision-making and time bindings within the time horizon of the call, within a short-term perspective. However, a call for tender is a very insufficient tool to stabilize this cooperation and develop values-based cooperation in the long term. This makes long-term commitments and mutual dependency very unsafe. The municipality is by law forced to hold annual open calls for tender for public procurement; however, in the case of Kiurvesi, the municipality tries to find ways to overcome the negative long-term effects of these calls, by including specifications in the call that make it easier for local producers to be selected. This helps to stabilize future expectations.

From a *communication perspective* it is an interesting case too. The long-term contracts awarded in the tendering system are a matter between municipality decision makers and the caterers/local producers, while the daily matters of coordination are managed by kitchen staff and caterers. However, there is no shared forum for communication among the stakeholders that could deal with the issues of synchronization. A consequence of this lack of a forum is a lack of alignment between the food prepared in the kitchens and the potential production of the local producers, in terms of seasonality and new products.

From a *mediation of values perspective*, this lack of a long-term perspective in the synchronization of time bindings between the municipality and the local produc-

ers also limits the values or qualities that can be built into the food chain. Producers cannot depend too heavily on public procurement for selling their production; they need to be flexible with regard to other market outlets and values that can be mediated by these relations. The kitchens have to obey the logic of calls for tender where 'local' and 'certified' are the only stable values that can be mediated because the producers may change from year to year. The consequence is that the kitchens and producers cannot build long-term value relations and adjust their strategies accordingly.

From a *resilience perspective*, the theory defines two main time horizons, the short term (shocks) and the long term (stresses), and can further our understanding of how a given initiative reacts to both, and how these reactions are thought of collectively or not. While dealing with shocks and stresses, are the other stakeholders' time horizons considered? A short-term successful adaptation can have negative consequences on the long term, and/or a successful adaptation for one initiative can have negative consequences for the overall chain. In the case of KiMu, the tender calls, as means of synchronization of time horizons, make the cooperation between the actors of the chain vulnerable to both stress and shocks. Shocks can be induced at both ends of the chain – for example, when a crop fails or animals get sick, or the producers could not renew the contract in a tender call. The municipality has managed to some degree to build a platform where partners can meet and talk about the cooperation, yet the regulation is a stressing factor for the resilience of the cooperation on local procurement.

In summary, it is crucial that every actor of the chain be aware of the time horizons and bindings of the other actors in order to synchronize decisions across different time bindings and time horizons. This understanding of mutual dependency is crucial to ensure that the temptation of short-term profits does not spoil the possibilities for a long-term sustainable partnership.

### *Professionalization*

The issue of professionalization is raised in all five perspectival analyses as a major strategy to deal with the challenge of maintaining the values throughout the growth process. The perspectival analyses contribute to a complex understanding of the means of professionalization in relation to values-based food chains and their challenges.

The initiative of Landwege represents a good case as a starting point to illustrate and discuss the various perspectives and challenges of professionalization. Landwege is a German retail business that sells a range of 6000 organic products to consumers. The Landwege cooperative runs five organic supermarkets located in Lübeck and the neighbouring town of Bad Schwartau. The fresh products are provided by around 30 member farms and represent around 30% of the total turnover of the Landwege retailer (Münchhausen, 2015b). The Landwege community has managed to solve significant problems during the different development phases over the last 25 years. Responsible teams and team members were learning by doing, supported by partner experts. The cooperative developed from a food initiative in the late 1980s to a professionally organized business avoiding the trap of conventionalization (Münchhausen, 2015b).

From a *sociological perspective on governance and organizations*, Landwege has moved from a grass-roots, non-profit, local food initiative without legal registra-

tion, based on voluntary work, towards a professional retail business organized as a consumer–producer cooperative. This organizational professionalization has not been without controversies. Some of the pioneer activists left the initiative because they did not want to change the non-profit model. Part of this professionalization has been to form an executive board to take the decisions about the management of the cooperative and to prepare the discussions with the cooperative partners at the general assembly. Even though consumers no longer have to be members of the cooperatives to shop in Landwege, the analysis shows that Landwege has been able to maintain the value relations between producers and consumers that were very strong in the pioneering period.

From the *business logic and management perspective*, we observe a strong professionalization of management. This includes personal coaching of staff to improve their management skills, and employment of staff from the conventional sector for particular tasks (logistics, procurement, shop leader and shop assistants, etc.). This included also forming an executive board for quick and effective decision-making and division and specialization of tasks and in some cases outsourcing of tasks – e.g. web design and communication tools and financial administration – to other companies. The CEO of Landwege stresses that professionalization is a way to address the large number of challenges during growth.

From a *communication perspective*, there is a relatively close relationship between producers and consumers, because Landwege is a local initiative. Although the initiative has grown substantially over the last 20 years, Landwege is still dedicated to its core values in relation to local food, and the outlets function as pivotal points for communicating the values between farmers and consumers. In order to cope with the increase in internal complexity as an effect of the growth process, a professional business partner for communication has been hired. Another aspect of professionalization is the education of younger staff members who have professional training in the conventional retail business. They are often less familiar with the organic food sector and tend to know less than the consumers about the products and the producers. Training inexperienced staff members about the details of products and producers is therefore seen as an important issue, in order to prepare them to function as food ambassadors.

From a *mediation of values perspective*, Landwege holds a strong focus on communication of values as the backbone of the cooperation. A balanced and coordinated professionalization of values communication has been a core focus of Landwege in the growth process. Here, values communication is understood as ethical communication about right and wrong, good and bad, while economic communication is understood as communication about prices, costs and profits. In the growth process, value communication became increasingly important and an increasing challenge for the members of the chain, and therefore required professionalization. As the in-depth analysis in the perspective report shows, the ability to handle hybrid communication requires that both ethical and economic communication be seen as preconditions for a successful mediation of values. Professionalization of management and of the related tools and means is understood as a professionalization of economic communication.

From a *resilience perspective* it was found that, for Landwege, the reflective learning processes have been professionalized both through the reflexive communication between the agents involved and through the overall management of the organization. Changes in the management teams were decided during an internal review

process supported by a professional coach.

From a multi-perspectival point of view, these insights provide three important aspects of understanding. First, professionalization is an important aspect, if not a precondition, in managing a successful growth process. The different perspectives offer different understandings of professionalization, including on: the formalization of the organizations and businesses involved; the implementing of professional tools and means in the management processes; the explication of plans and business strategies; the division of task and outsourcing to specialists; and, finally, professionalization that relates to explicit learning and reflexive activities. In other words, there is not just one way to professionalize. Acquiring management and business skills is one, acquiring coordination skills to be able to lead participatory approaches is another. Likewise, among a diversity of box schemes that were studied within the Healthygrowth project, some adopted the first vision of professionalization and appeared to be more 'business based', while others, often anchored in civil society, would rather adopt the second vision. In most cases, the growth process led to an increasing division of tasks within the initiatives, which echoes the first dimension of professionalization and makes the communication of values more difficult. Initiatives that appeared successful in maintaining their core values resolved these tensions by favouring learning and reflexivity through devoted skills, spaces and times.

### **Discussion: Relational Reflexivity and Trust**

The second-order analysis based on the five different perspectives adopted in the HealthyGrowth project has allowed us to identify and better explore three themes that further our understanding of how values-based organic food chains can successfully maintain core values throughout the process of volume growth: values as a continuous process, synchronization of time horizons and expectations, and professionalization. Apart from these three major themes and factors, two transversal notions have been identified in our multi-perspectival communication process. These two notions of relational reflexivity and trust contribute to an overall understanding of the success (or difficulties) of the initiatives under study, and to the debate on conventionalization in organic food chains.

Relational reflexivity (and the modes of organization that support it) seems to be a common denominator in the success of maintaining shared values over time, and also enables us to understand the lack of success of other cases. In most case studies carried out within the HealthyGrowth project, the way the different food chains' stakeholders would take into account not only their own interactions/interdependencies *with* other stakeholders but also the interdependencies *between* these others appears as a key success factor. This was true regardless of the pace of growth and well as stability of core values. This 'relational reflexivity' was expressed either in informal discussions or in formal fora. It was reinforced by the existence of spaces of debate where stakeholders could communicate openly about values, which in turn allowed them to consider the perspectives of the others. Such fora and spaces of debate were particularly important in the case of large initiatives with a high degree of specialization, such as Biocoop. Relational reflexivity, which is key to an initiative's resilience, must be dynamic. With the growth process, there is a need to constantly adjust the access to the others' reality, i.e. the visions and knowledge that actors have of their partners. There is also an ongoing need to adjust the awareness of their interactions/interdependencies *with* them, and of the interdependencies *between* others.

This implies that specific means must be set up in order to allow dynamic relational reflexivity.

Besides mutual reflexivity, another outcome of this multi-perspectival analysis is that it leads to a new vision of trust. As is amply documented by the literature and as experience has shown, long-term, trust-based business partnerships are a cornerstone in values-based food chains. In the definition of this research project, trust was therefore seen as one of the main components for the success of values-based food chains. This understanding is strongly supported by the case studies and the multi-perspectival analysis. However, our study also points to the fact that trust is something that is produced by the ways in which the partnerships in the chain are organized and managed. In most cases, the communication atmosphere is one where people feel able to speak openly with one another, and where knowledge is shared with other stakeholders. Most stakeholders consider it crucial to keep one another up to date, and to be transparent. Therefore, an informative attitude and the flow of information along the chain leads to stronger identification with the value chain and the final product. As one of the stakeholders in one of our case studies commented, 'We support each other, we owe each other success, [there's a] feeling of being in the same boat.'

Another important aspect of building trust is the feeling that shocks and crises are not to be handled individually but as a partnership. While the conventionalization thesis has stimulated a fruitful debate on the trade-offs between growth and consistency within alternative food networks' fundamental values (Guthman, 2004a; Brunori et al., 2011), our approach provides an insight on the way mid-scale organic food chains strive to maintain their values. We have shown that a dynamic approach to values avoids the classical dichotomy of conventional vs. alternative, and facilitates understanding of the dynamic mechanisms that foster integrity and trust. These mechanisms consist of a constant reaffirmation or redefinition of values, attempts to make time horizons and time bindings explicit and to synchronize them, and a collective adjustment of professionalization. Together they rely on the need to maintain a relational reflexivity between the actors in these mid-scale food chains. This does not mean that power relationships and conflicts are absent from these initiatives. However, instead of seeing them as structural features, we demonstrate that a dynamic stance on controversies and debates allows one to analyse the consistency of values along the growth trajectory. This trajectory is an on-going process characterized by the reaffirmation of these core values and a redifferentiation from mainstream operators' co-optation and appropriation strategies. Similarly, we do not claim that the initiatives succeed in avoiding food sector tensions. We do, however, contend that even those that are the most embedded in these dynamics, such as Biocoop, try to overcome these tensions by seeking to develop partnerships with large regional producers' groups that could provide them with needed volumes. An interesting issue is the influence that such relocalization strategies have on their more conventional competitors, as can be observed in the case of French conventional supermarkets, and the way values such as fairness (fair prices and partnerships with producers) are dealt with by these actors within such strategies.

## **Conclusion**

The main purpose of this article was to explore how values-based food chains can achieve volume growth while still maintaining integrity and trust. The underlying



understanding in relation to this shared question was that there are trade-offs between values and volumes, and that balancing the two is a great challenge. Based on our multi-perspectival analysis of the case studies, we had to revise and reconstruct this understanding. The study initiatives follow widely heterogeneous growth pathways and visions of growth. In some, business grows internally. In others, partners are added in the larger chain. Others, such as box scheme networks, grow by cell division into more autonomous groups. Still others, like Biocoop, open new units. Therefore, the success of maintaining integrity and trust along the growth process does not primarily rely on trade-offs between volume and values, but on designing an appropriate development pathway and line of thinking. As the case studies illustrate, there are many important aspects concerning possible development pathways. In this multi-perspectival analysis we have focused on three central aspects.

1. The importance of value definition fluidity through a continuous process of communication, negotiation, and sometimes redefinition.
2. Synchronization of time bindings and time horizons in terms of decision-making is crucial to successful long-term development of a values-based food chain, in order to coordinate a co-development process that is satisfying for all partners.
3. Professionalization of diverse skills is a prerequisite for handling the increasing complexity of food-chain growth.

These aspects appear as central preconditions for successful organization and management of values-based food chains in their growth process. The lessons learned from the analysis of our case studies – most of which succeeded in achieving growth and the mediation of values – should provide new options for values-based food chains to maintain their partners' and consumers' trust, which is critical for long-term viability. These lessons also provide recommendations of strategies to support vibrant development of values-based food chains.

The use of the multi-perspectival analysis leads us to some reflexive insights about this approach. While these perspectives are rooted in social sciences, the perspectives offer distinctly unique ontologies and normative standpoints. As with case studies, researchers are anchored in individual theoretical frames, just as various countries present unique histories. Working within a multi-perspectival approach prompted researchers to recognize their blind spots by considering their personal standpoints. This perspective enabled them to contextualize their analyses. While the multi-perspectival approach is rather novel, this was also true for most members of the HealthyGrowth team. This project has therefore been a very intense and interesting learning process for the team. In the final analysis, enhancing reflexivity and contextualization within the research work appears as another important outcome of the multi-perspectival approach.

## Notes

1. Each perspective has been discussed in depth in a research report that is available on the HealthyGrowth's home page <<http://www.healthygrowth.eu>>.
2. For an elaboration of this argument see Alrøe and Noe (2014a).
3. For an overview of the studied cases and the comprehensive case reports see <<http://www.healthygrowth.eu>>.
4. This was carried out in workshops and through the circulation of successive versions of the multi-perspectival analysis report among 'perspectival approach leaders'.

5. The 19 case study reports and the five task reports and related papers have to be read in their own context (see <<http://healthygrowth.eu>>).
6. Despite different competing definitions, peasant organic agriculture can be defined as small- or medium-scale organic agriculture on family farms (as opposed to capitalistic industrial forms of agriculture).
7. Like Landwege in Germany, for example.
8. We could mention here that these adjustment processes themselves have to be discussed, as an approach based on Elinor Ostrom's framework (Ostrom, 2005) would claim. In Ostrom's approach, there are several levels of rules in an organization, and the possibility to revise the rules is one of them, which makes it necessary to devise 'adjustment/revision rules' (or second-order rules). See Lamine and Rouchier (2016) for an application to a CSA-type box scheme network.

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