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# **An analytical framework to study the role of collective actions in the restructuration of three French local biosourced sectors (hemp, wool, and leather)**

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## **Abstract**

Agriculture is facing to various challenges which push the stakeholders to review their organization. This reorganization occurs particularly through the creation of new form of collectives considered as privileged cooperation space. This article presents an exploratory research work to study the importance of these collectives in the adaptation of the agrifood systems facing to these challenges. It mobilizes an original framework combining two approaches rarely mobilized together (i) the collective action framework, and (ii) the institutional change. This combination allows (i) to characterize the collective action (group characteristics, products, ...), and (ii) to determine the level of institutionalization of the collectives studied. We apply it to three French local biosourced sectors: hemp, wool, and leather. They have known a period of deindustrialization in the seventies before reemerging on the territory around three new collective actions. This exploratory study reveals two main research tracks: (i) the membership heterogeneity impact negatively the collective efficacy, and (ii) collective action plays a significant role in the redeployment of the biosourced sectors, although it remains fragile because it is not sufficiently institutionalized. The relevance of this analytical framework will be assessed and strengthened through further field investigations.

**JEL Codes:** O170, P000, P320



## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Agriculture sector is facing today to various challenges, from prices' volatility, mutation of consumer's demand to climate change or even global competition, etc. These challenges force the agricultural actors to review their organisation in order to face them and to find innovative solutions. The solution can take the form of different organizations. This phenomenon is visible notably at local scale.

The recourse to the collectives is today privileged by actors in different world's areas. This is particularly true in France, where recent research works demonstrated the come back to the collectives. These solutions take mainly place through two ways: (i) the reorganisation of the "traditional" structures of the agricultural cooperation (Groos et al., 2021), and (ii) the creation of new collectives' type (Demeulenaere & Goulet, 2012; Lucas et al., 2014).

In particular, recent research works relate the new collective actions' role as changes makers especially to transform agricultural sectors to face societal issues. Collective transformation workshops, collective short circuits, agricultural collective or economic and environmental interest groups, all these collective actions' types lead in the literature to technical or organisational innovations which allow (i) the restructuration or the growth of the added value, and (ii) the producers 'replacement at the centre of the decision-making process (Demeulenaere & Goulet, 2012; Lucas et al., 2014). For example, in 2021, Raimbert and Raton studied the emergence of new emergent collectives within the short food circuits of proximity. They highlighted that these collectives built themselves among new social links through a coordination with more and various actors (Raimbert & Raton, 2021). Another example could be the collective points of sale by Vincq and al. (2010) which provides a new commercialisation way for the sector's actors involved (Vincq et al., 2010).

To study the importance of collective, the action collective theory is used in economics research to characterize the collective (agent's involvement, cooperation mechanisms, ...), and to establish its role in the changes operated by the actors (Terrieux et al., 2021). In this article, we also mobilise this theory. However, this analytical framework does not allow us to know in which institutionalization the collective is into. It takes a picture at a specific instant. While it can have an importance to identify the trajectory followed by the collective to reach its institutional perennity. This is why in addition we mobilise the institutional change theory to determine at which level these initiatives forms institutions.

We understand institutions as defined by Williamson (1996), which considered them as organizational frame to control a framework to enclose the agent behaviours: "the institutional framework within which the integrity of a transaction, or related set of transactions, is decided" (Talbot, 2008). The originality of this paper lies in this exploratory analytical framework. It represents a way to analyse collective action (i) in its globality, to understand the different factors which are building it through the framework of collective action described by Markelova and Meinzen-Dick (2009) (Markelova & Meinzen-Dick, 2009), and (ii) more specifically, to understand its alternative and evolutive character as an institution through the one of Greenwood and al. (2002) belonging to the institutional theory (Greenwood et al., 2002).

In fact, in the French research literature mostly analyses only precise sector's link and does not investigate their roles in the whole sector's structuration especially for the one on the way to renewal. For these studies, they mobilise either the collective action theory or the institutional change theory, but rarely both of them.

This approach of collective action will guide us to figure out an analytical framework to study three agro-industrial, local, and historical sectors in the south of France: leather, hemp, and wool, and their role in the restructuration of these sectors. These last ones have been hugely changed by deindustrialization since the seventies and are just reemerging since 2010 through business' creations, public policy discourses, and collective actions' foundations. To be concrete, three initiatives have emerged since 2015: (i) a departmental professional association "Pôle Cuirs et Peaux Aveyron" in 2015 to redynamize the leather sector in a Occitan department, (ii) a cooperative society, in 2018, engaged in the social and solidarity economy "Virgocoop" for which the main goal is to act for the agroecological transition of the territory around the hemp sector, and (iii) "Filature Colbert", in 2018, a company supported by a ewes milk producers association based in Aveyron, the "Association des Producteurs de Lait de Brebis de l'aire de Roquefort (APLBR)" (association of ewes milk producers of the Roquefort area). Thus, these cases studies are legitimate experiment field to observe initiatives and their role on agro-industrial sectors. For this exploratory work, we attempt to validate three hypotheses which will guide us to constitute our analytical framework for the continuation of this study.

Firstly, these initiatives are collective actions which can be considered as institutional entrepreneurship as mobilised in the institutional change concept by Greenwood and al. (2002).

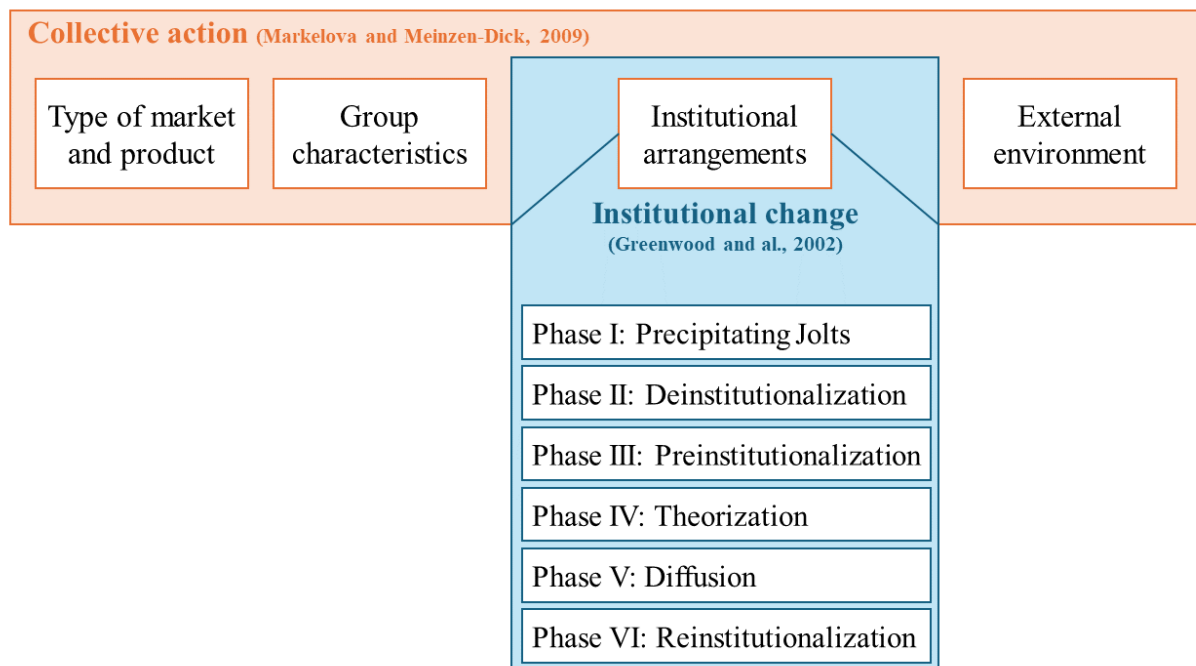
Secondly, these initiatives mobilise (i) physical people with heterogeneous life's trajectories and/or (ii) economic entities with heterogeneous characteristics (incomes amount, workers 'number, activity area, ...) creating difficulties to formulate precise common objectives and therefore negatively impacting the collective efficiency.

Finally, these initiatives belong to the Preinstitutionalization phase (involving that the phase I and II have already been completed) through local initiatives and economic, social, or institutional innovations compared to the previous situation in the territory (their post-deindustrialization period). The validation of this hypothesis will justify the alternative character of these initiatives.

## **2 | ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK**

To explore these collectives and their roles, we structured our research work thanks to the framework defined by Markelova and Meinzen-Dick (2009). The authors sum up the main collective action's dimensions as following: (i) type of markets and products, (ii) group characteristics, (iii) institutional arrangements, and (iv) external environment. For each factor, their specificities and their research front has been developed below. In addition, we have mobilised the institutional change as described by Greenwood and al. (2002). It allows us to consider deeper the evolutionary and alternative institutional character of these collectives (see Figure 1 below).

**Figure 1: An analytical framework combining collective action and institutional change**



*Sources: Greenwood, Suddaby and Hinings, 2002 ; Markelova and Meinzen-Dick, 2009*

## 2.1 | Collective action concept

The collective action is a topic which has already been explored in economics research, to understand in particular the involvement of the agents, and the cooperation mechanisms leading to the creation and the success of the collective action (Amblard et al., 2018; Isaurralde, 2015; Terrieux et al., 2021). Meinzen-Dick and al. (2004) identifies three common points mostly shared by research literature to define collective action concept: (i) the involvement of individuals group, (ii) the existence of a shared interest within the group, and (iii) the implementation of common action to pursuit the shared interest (Meinzen-Dick et al., 2004). These three requirements correspond to the collectives that we are studying here.

To go further in the characterization of the collective action, Markelova and Meinzen-Dick (2009) suggest the analyses of four factors. The first one, concern the “type of markets and products”. It refers to (i) the definition of the commercial and marketing basin of the products sold by the members which can impact the competitiveness of small and medium businesses. It refers also to (ii) the type of products sold by the members: staples, perishables, or cash crops implicating different storage and transport processes. The second one, “Group characteristics” relates to (i) the group size influencing its cohesiveness, and its costs, (ii) the internal composition of the group in terms of socioeconomic characteristics: ages, wealth, norms and values, experiences of working, and the capacity of the group leaders to be knowledgeable, skilled in collective action, and trusted by the group members. Then, the third one “Institutional arrangements” corresponds to the set-up of rules, responsibilities, execution mechanisms, decision-making processes. The last one “external environment” considers the relationship between the group and the state, market and civil society (Markelova & Meinzen-Dick, 2009).

However, these four factors are “important for the formation and the functioning” of the collective action, three dimensions have to be considered to refine our framework. Foremost, the dimensions of member heterogeneity in group have to be specifically measured. This dimension is taking more and more place in the research in the agricultural field according to (i) the increasing diversification of the members in terms of personal characteristics, farm strategy and objectives by being a member in agricultural cooperatives (Lucas et al., 2014), and (ii) the numerous questions that persist about how the different dimensions of heterogeneity impact the cooperatives’ performance (Höhler & Kühl, 2018). Höhler and Kühl (2018) list three categories of studied heterogeneity in research, concerning agricultural cooperatives: the “farm-level characteristics” (farm size and location), “member-level characteristics” (age, education, ...), and “product-level characteristics” (type of product and product quality).

Concerning the institutional arrangement as defined in the Markelova and Meinzen-Dick framework (2009), the process of collective action’s foundation is a process that can involve at the beginning informal actions and arrangements (Isaurralde, 2015; Terrieux et al., 2021). Also, given that we are in a multi-actor cooperation approach in the agricultural field for our three cases studies, this process can be influenced by territorial conditions related to their material (characteristics of the resources considered), organizational and/or ideals dimensions (Amblard et al., 2018).

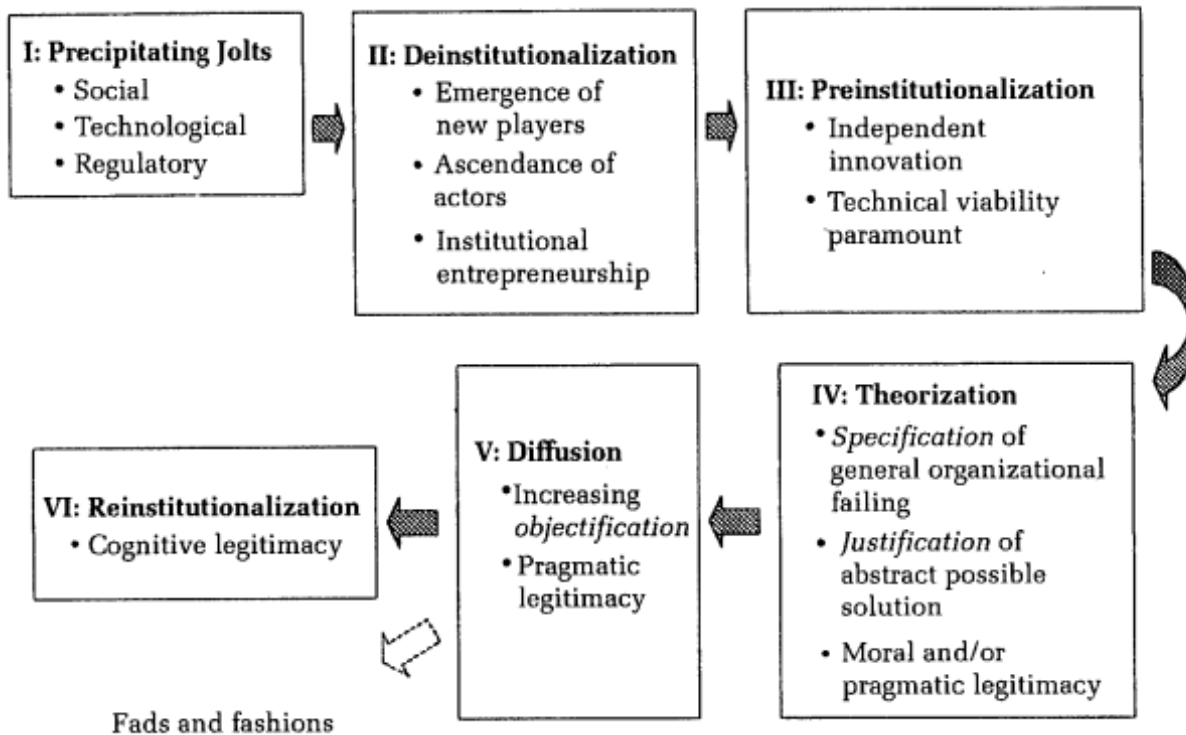
## **2.2 | Institutional change and the institutional entrepreneurship concept**

The institutional change belongs to the institutional theory. It refers to the importance of the institutions in the economic processes. The institution has defined along the time in different dimensions. In the institutionalist way of thinking of Williamson, institutions are a lever of coordination to compensate for the world’s uncertainty where individuals have a limited rationality. The institutions are thus “a substitute or a market complement”. In addition to limited rationality and uncertainty, the opportunism of the economic agents and the nature of the transaction leads to transaction costs. This governance structure called institutions are then here for economic agent to minimise these transaction costs. “the institutional framework within which the integrity of a transaction, or related set of transactions, is decided » is the founding definition of the institution and the transactional theory. This theory is accompanied by a governance structure of reference which is the market because of imperfections, leading agents to other forms of coordination (Talbot, 2008).

By the way, institutionalists have been always working on the processes of institutionalization recognizing and attempting to understand change. In this frame comes the concept of institutional entrepreneurship, a growing term in the institutional research area which is define as “activities of actors who have an interest in particular institutional arrangements and who leverage resources to create new institutions or to transform existing ones.”. This phenomenon occurs in organizational fields, “sets of organizations that, in the aggregate, constitute an area of institutional life; key suppliers, resources and product consumers, regulatory agencies, and other organizations that produce similar services or products” that can be mature or emerging. Consequently, the strategy of institutional entrepreneurs would be different depending on the sector situation, the actual organizational field (forming, in crisis, ...) (Maguire et al., 2004).

A bridge can be edified between the institutional change with the concept of institutional entrepreneurship. Greenwood and al. (2002) through the institutional literature pointed it out what they consider as the different stage of institutional change (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Stages of Institutional Change by Greenwood and al. (2002)**



*Source: Greenwood, Suddaby and Hinings, 2002*

The first stage is the “Precipitating Jolts”. It will occur when there are jolts or events which are happening implicating technological disruptions, social upheaval, regulatory change, or competitive discontinuities, such jolts which appear during period of deindustrialization (disappearance of businesses, job’s deletion, ...) (Vigna, 2017). This phenomenon brings to the “Deinstitutionalization” which manifests itself through different change triggers as the appearance of new players, the rise of existing or local institutional entrepreneurship. These triggers allow to change the social constructed organizational fields providing new ideas able to initiate change. Then, appears the phase of “Preinstitutionalization”, here, the organizations are innovating independently to answer to their local issues, before entering the fourth phase is “Theorization”. This phase consists in a wide adoption of the located innovations set up in a simplified form. This step needs to achieve two tasks: definition of a general "organizational failing" and the “justification of abstract possible solution” for it. These tasks will be completed only if the innovations can be embedded in the dominant framework or can prove its superiority providing “pragmatic legitimacy”. The theorization’s success entails “Diffusion”. On its side, this phase requires increased legitimacy and objectivation. The last stage “Reinstitutionalization” marks the natural adoption of the innovation models where “the ideas themselves become taken-for-granted as the natural and appropriate arrangement.” (Greenwood et al., 2002). In the frame of our paper, we mobilise this framework to analyse at which level of institutionalization are the different initiatives and their capacity to complete this institutional journey for their durability.

### 3 | METHODS

#### 3.1 | Study context

Through this research work three sectors have been explored with a study's perimeter based on (i) their location, in Occitanie, a region area in the West South of France, and on (ii) their historical character with their territorial implantation since the Middle Age. After, their well implantation during the Middle Age, these three sectors have been industrialized, before being entirely deindustrialized until 2010. Since 2010, these sectors are knowing a new emerging period on the territory through (i) the increase of companies, and (ii) the politic policies which are acting using two levers: (i) building financial aids, and (ii) taking part in collective actions through animation or administration supports. These phenomena are visible in Occitanie through three collective actions: (i) "Pôle Cuirs et Peaux Aveyron", a leather professionals' association (following the 1901 French law) funded and animated by a public entity, (ii) "Virgocoop", a new cooperative type producing hemp, dedicated to social and solidarity economy, and (iii) the company "Filature Colbert" transforming wool in collaboration with APLBR (association of ewes 'milk producers based in Roquefort). These three collective actions, even if their structuration is quite different, highlight the phenomenon of restructuring of the collective following new forms of governance and functioning to face contemporary issues belonging to sustainable development of agricultural chains. This is why we are naturally interested in these sectors and their specific collectives to study: firstly, at the collectives' scale, (i) how these new forms of collective are functioning and are constituting alternative collectives and institutional entrepreneurship, and secondly, at the sectors' scale, (ii) which can be their roles in restructuring sectors to face sustainable development issues (economic, social, environmental and governance issues).

***The Occitan leather sector*** exists even before the Middle Age, but it was at this period that this sector began to be strategically structured around areas which can bring essential raw material for the raw skins' transformation. This sector concerns a particular product which is defined as a material which comes from the animal skins having specific transformation operations and necessarily tanning, making an imperishable skin. These operations need water, vegetal tannins and raw skins. Thus, the production areas were concentrated respectively around: rivers, forests, and breeding areas. In Occitanie, this strategic location led to a Leather actors' concentration in two specific Occitan zones: (i) Tarn with a specialization of the cities Graulhet and Mazamet in wool pulling and ewes' skins' tanning, and (ii) Aveyron with the city Millau specialized in glove-making. From Middle Age to the seventies, this sector has been progressively developed around these cities and export market such as the United States with fashion long gloves. However, in the seventies, the opening to the international concurrence and the fashion's evolution negatively affected the production of leather and leather article as gloves. For example, a decrease of - 84 % of the unskilled textile and tannery workers amount has been registered between 1984 and 1999. This deindustrialization has been increased even more with the 2008 economic crisis (Baillon, 1989; François, 1939; Vigna, 2017). However, since 2010, new local businesses are appearing, and regional or departmental public policies are encouraging the leather sector's revitalization through the creation of collective such as "Pôle Cuirs et Peaux Aveyron". This collective has been funded in 2015 by the "Chambre de Commerce et d'Industrie (CCI)" (Chamber of Commerce and Industry) of Millau to revitalize and to bring visibility to this sector and its professionals. This



collective is a professional association which united 20 leather transformation businesses belonging to the first and the second leather transformation: tanning and making.

***The Occitan ewe wool sector***, like the precedent sector, is attached to the textile and clothing industry, which partly explains the huge deindustrialization of this sector during the seventies, with the demand change. In Occitanie, the wool industry reacted by positioning their products on high quality wool and technique market. However, nowadays, the wool is a product mostly destined to Chinese market which does not represent an important source of incomes. The ewe breeders' outcomes are based on the milk and cheese (Roquefort) sector, especially in Aveyron and in Tarn. The Covid-19 strengthened this phenomenon by blocking this market and making the wool stuck in farms. Consequently, the wool is a waste for breeders who are trying to give it "for a pittance". Occitanie is the first French dairy sheep production basin with a sheep livestock reaches 1,568,000 ewes (lactating and dairy ewe combined) in 2022. In 2020, 4,080 French sheep dairy farms are registered, with 1,790 in Occitanie (44 %). Even if, there are various breeds involved, the Occitan main breed is the Lacaune breed which corresponds to these 1,790 dairy farms (France Brebis Laitière, 2022). Among them, 1,334 are members of the association of milk producer for Roquefort. This association is precisely delimited and concentrated mostly in Tarn and Aveyron. In 2018, it participated to foundation of a collective action considered as an economic project for the sector. It manifests itself in the form of a wool spinning company, whose aim is to transform the local wool on the territory to value it (APLBR, 2023).

***The Occitan hemp sector*** diverges from the other sectors by being structured around a vegetal product and by having a different actual implantation on the French territory. Originated from Asia, the hemp production has been extended through centuries. From the XV century to the XVIII century, the hemp industry has been particularly developed around the maritime and war market to make ropes and sails. For proof, in 1860, France was possessing 176,000 hectares of industrial hemp. With the competitiveness of the cotton and the progress of the petrochemicals at the origin of the synthetic fibres' development, the French production hugely decreases until it reached only 700 hectares in 1960. In revenge, the French hemp sector continue to be perpetuated and structured itself through (i) the production reorientation (from the maritime and war sector to the stationery), (ii) scientific investments in research among vegetal selection, and (iii) creation of specific structuring entities, for example, the National Federation of Hemp Producers in 1932. In 2017, the French hemp sector is considered as totally controlled from the seeds' production to the first transformation but not straight to the final consumer. However, the majority of the French hemp actors are localized in the North, notably the sector's structuring entities. Also, this sector has to face multiple issues categorized by InterChanvre (the hemp interprofessional association) in two global categories: (i) economic issues and even social issues (production's securing, correct incomes for producers, ...), and (ii) environmental issues (promoting the hemp's environmental advantages, increasing the organic hemp production, ...). In 2022, the industrial hemp represents 20,000 hectares in France and only 100 hectares are in Occitanie (so 0.5 %). Even so, the hemp crop could be a way for the Occitanie to pursuit a politic in favour of an agriculture more respectful of the environment (Abot, 2010; InterChanvre, 2017). This context leads us to Virgocoop, a cooperative society founded in 2018 by 4 people from Lot (Occitan department). The aim is to act for the agroecological transition of the territory through the hemp production and other textile materials. For this, the cooperative is focused on the production and the first transformation of hemp. It unites divergent stakeholders: citizens, farmers and businesses. In 2022, the cooperative counts 141 members (114 citizens, 9 farmers and 18 business partners) (Jouhet, 2022).

### 3.2 | Data collect

To fit in this analytical framework, we have used two different methods of data collection: (i) bibliography based on the previous study realized during engineering school graduation course concerning each sector which have provided data from 32 interviews with leather actors, 18 with hemp producers and 36 interviews with wool actors, and (ii) comprehensive interviews with 10 actors involved in these initiatives.

***Bibliography.*** The bibliography phase is composed of the utilization of three masters' thesis. Each one was made to provide exploratory data about this sector and the initiatives. The masters' thesis about Occitan leather and hemp sectors have been written in 2022 whereas the one for Occitan wool achieved in 2023. These data are recent and provides various information about the initiatives observed in terms of history, organization, members' attributes, members' perception. In addition, we have consulted the website and the social networks of the initiatives to learn more about their project and to update information if necessary.

***Comprehensive interviews.*** Comprehensive interviews have been conducted from November 2023 to January 2024. There were 10 persons interviewed: 6 concerning the leather initiative, 3 concerning the wool initiative, and 1 for the hemp initiative. For all sectors, the aim was to have the main people involved historically or currently in the collective's functioning who can have for this first exploratory work a more global vision of the collective action. For the "Pôle Cuirs et Peaux Aveyron" we succeed to interviewed: (i) its actual president, (ii) its actual vice-president (and ancient president), (iii) its animator from the CCI of Millau (in Aveyron), (iv) its ancient vice-president and actual member, (v) the ancient administrator of the "Communauté de communes Millau Grands Causses" (municipalities of Millau Grands Causses), who was here at the beginning, and (vi) the ancient businesses' manager at CCI who was at the origin of the association's creation. Concerning the "Filature Colbert" we interviewed : (i) one of the original creators, (ii) its director operational (also, a company's shareholder), and (iii) the actual president of the APLBR, as a representative of the principal shareholder and unique provider of raw wool for its production. For the hemp, we had one interview with one of the four creators of Virgocoop and its actual president.

By interviewing them, the goals were (i) to meet the people involved in the initiatives in order to present them our research work, (ii) to collect more information about the initiative's genesis, and (iii) to complete the four dimensions of our analytical framework (type of market and product, group characteristics, institutional arrangements, and external environment). For this, an interview guide has been structured in 3 parts. The first one permits to characterize the collective action and to take in consideration the dimensions of heterogeneity which can exist (business, personal and products). Thereby, it collects information about (i) the collective actions' governance and functioning (ii) the business of the person interviewed, in particular, quantitative attributes which can be compared (incomes level, workers number, quantity delivered to the collective if applicable, and the production capacity) and qualitative attributes (location, activity sector, and motivations to join the collective), (iii) the personal attributes of the person interviewed to determine its sociodemographic profile (age, location, education level) and to understand her life's trajectory (motivations to join the collective at a personal level and her story of her professional and life journey which lead us to be in Occitanie, to be involved in a collective, ...), and (iv) the products'

strategy provided by the interviewee in terms of number, range and positioning on the market. The second one was to explore the roles that can be played by the collective in facing sector's sustainable development issues by questioning the interviewee about: (i) for them, the main goal pursued by the collective through which actions, (ii) the way the collective is achieving these goals, and (iii) the change that occurs for them since their membership. The last one deals with the interviewee's perception of the initiatives' functioning. More precisely, how they estimate their satisfaction according to their membership's motivations, and how they define: (i) their collective efficacy (capacity to establish common objectives, and to act collectively), (ii) their governance functioning (presence of conflicts, implication of the members, etc.), and finally (iii) their areas for improvement.

This interview guide was a support for interviews of approximatively one hour. They were realized preferably in person with a recording by phone, or otherwise by videoconference with the software Microsoft Teams. Then, word for word transcriptions were done on Microsoft Word and an analysis grid was built on Microsoft Excel to register the main idea which were emerging from interviews.

## 4 | RESULTS

### 4.1 | Collective actions facing heterogeneities and ancient territory failures

Thanks to the method presented previously, a table has been built to sum up the main information about the three collective actions following their dimensions (see Table 1). We can already have evidence of the studied collectives' diversity in terms of organization and shareholders.

**Table 1: Collective actions foundations**

Collective action dimensions	Type of market and product	Group characteristics	Institutional arrangements	External environment
"Pôle Cuirs et Peaux Aveyron"	No product or market strategy  International or national market for products sold individually by members	<b>20 local small or medium businesses</b> belonging to the leather transformation steps	<b>Professional association</b> , animated and managed mainly by the local CCI	Aveyron (12) at Millau <b>Ancient industrial leather district</b> <b>Ancient failure</b> of collective action ("Collectif du Cuir")
"Filature Colbert"	Production of <b>wool fabric</b> for insulation and mulching  International or national market	Providers are the <b>APLBR members</b> who invest in the project so potentially <b>2,640 breeders</b>	An economic project through the foundation of a <b>company</b> financed by 5 public or private actors	Aveyron (12) at Camarès <b>Breeding territory</b> with a structuration around the Roquefort sector and more generally ewe dairy sector <b>Ancient failure</b> of project for wool valorisation by producer organization
"Virgocoop"	Production of <b>yarn and fabric</b> with Occitan hemp producers  International or national market	<b>208</b> shareholders composed of <b>citizens, farmers, transformers, and businesses</b>	"Société Coopérative d'Intérêt Collectif" (SCIC)  <b>Cooperative Society of Collective Interest</b>	Lot (46) at Cahors <b>Ancient failure</b> of project for hemp valorisation ("Agrofibrés") by a cooperative

***“Pôle Cuirs et Peaux Aveyron”***. For this initiative, the main goal is not economic. Its objectives are: (i) the communication about the local leather sector to promote the local businesses, and (ii) the safeguarding of know-how inside businesses, and (iii) the reinforcement of a professional social network around common actions. They are summarized, respectively, in three axes : “Make it known”, “Know-How”, and “Make together” (translated from French). Thus, there is no collective dependency of this association to the market. Because, we are in presence of a by-product, the sector followed by the leather is industrial and various operations of transformation have to be done before having the final leather product. In this group, the 20 members are part of this long transformation phase, either by tanning the skins, for 5 of them (25 %), or by making articles, for 15 of them (75 %). Even in these 15 makers, different making process are involved. We will find out gloves-making, leather goods, saddlery as well as shoemaking. In addition, the members had divergent business’s strategy corresponding to two different markets: (i) the luxury market translated by partnership or integration of the local businesses to luxury houses, and (ii) the handwork market with small individual factories. In this way, our data does not register the level of heterogeneity but give us the interviewees’ perception among it: *“we mix a small maker alone who makes slippers with a tannery which has 50 employees, a leather good which has 80 to 100 employees, depending on Chanel so finding actions common to all of them is very complicated”* (EEC 1), *“Yes, there has been an evolution, we have more people, it’s more dynamic, there are clearly fewer actions, there is no action”* (EEC 4). 5 of the 6 interviewees have mentioned the heterogeneity between businesses as a difficulty to make concrete actions or precise common objectives. Moreover, this initiative does not come from the businesses themselves or other direct agents of the sector. This initiative has been initiated in collaboration with the municipalities of Millau Grands Causses even if the local businesses have been consulted by them. This proposition followed a failure of a precedent collective, the “Collectif du Cuir” (“leather’s collective”). The ancient administrator of the municipalities explains that there were too many historical conflicts between historic tanners and gloves makers that led to a low dynamism of the collective until it stops in 2013: *“difficulties between companies, their managers in working together, I think that there are quarrels, well I am not from Millau, but there are old quarrels which continue from generation to generation”* (EEC 6). These conflicts were caused by comparisons between the methods of production, for example. This new collective inherits this liability. However, if we can think first that its trajectory is going to be the same as the precedent, it takes another path. In fact, the actual interviewee currently involved in it express that even if its dynamic needs to be stimulated with more common objectives and actions, the integration dynamic of new members is a good point for the association. For them, it allows the group (i) to do not be stuck in the ancient conflicts: *“If I’m lucky enough to have not seen this past, I’m not going to make it my own.”* (EEC 5), (ii) to support little local handwork businesses by helping them access to services as communication and by putting them in contact with bigger businesses in relation with the luxury leather sector : *“Some have done subcontracting for others because they were not doing well with their activity, so it allows them to maintain their activity for the time being.”* (EEC 1), and (iii) to bring new ideas and new visions of the sector. Thus, it seems to emerge three important aspects impacting the functioning of the collective: (i) the businesses' heterogeneity by negatively impacting the definition of common objectives, (ii) the members' heterogeneity by impacting positively the dynamism of cooperation, (iii) the presence of an ancient leather activity constitutes a point of vigilance in the appearance of conflicts between ancient members.

**“Filature Colbert”.** It is an economic project initiated at the beginning by two persons particularly concerned about the wool and the local historic sector. Then, the project has been adopted by the APLBR which became the strategic shareholder of the project, a wanted strategy to have an initiative anchored in the reality of the local *“reality”* (EEL 1). Moreover, an operational director was wanted to bring to the investor a certain viability. This is a reason why a director was recruited. To manifest his commitment, he bought shares in the factory. Nowadays, five associates are present (5 shareholders) by: (i) providing funds the APLBR, the Agricultural Credit (through a subsidiary company), the operational director, a private investor, or (ii) realizing contributions to industry, the director and creator of the “Sac du Berger” (“shepherd’s bag”, a company making leather and wool products locally). This diversity of organizations involved brings divergent vision of the factory’s future, as mentioned by one of the company’s initiators: *“The day we will have a sufficiently solid vision”* (EEL 1) and *“two slightly different visions”* (between shareholders) (EEL 1). Moreover, the APLBR president mentioned (i) ancient project about wool valorization which have failed provoking apprehension among farmers members : *“In short, it's never worked, and as a result, there's quite a lot of mistrust on the producer side, to a greater or lesser extent depending on the individual.”* (EEL 3), (ii) the farmers’ objectivity concerning the economic project’s ambition: *“And there are very few people who really believe in the wool industry on the breeder's side. History tells us that there is no money to be made and that it is more of a money pit.”* (EEL 3). This fact echoes the difficulty met by the factory to find market opportunities. Today, they are concentrating their production for mulching and insulation instead of the initial strategy which was focused on the textile sector. The non-existent or low incomes of this sector, especially compared to the Roquefort sector in which the APLBR’s farmers are integrated, allow them to take part in the project without economic issues for their businesses. But, at the same time, the commitment is not equal within the APLBR depending on their business’ location: *“We are too far away if you like. At the moment, the outlets at the Filature Colbert are too small, and it is those who were near Camarès who have given the wool away, that is all. [...] Camarès is far away. We are more than an hour's drive from home.”* (EEL 3). This global view of the collective action permits (i) to see a potential negative impact of the diversity of organizations evolved in the project, and (ii) to observe an unequal member’s commitment depending on their business’ location. Furthermore, the ancient failure of the local industrial sector seems also to stay in mind of the actors and to negatively impact their perception of new initiatives involved in it.

**“Virgocoop”.** Created in 2016, this initiative followed the “Agrofibras” project. This ancient initiative was a regional transformation factory for the hemp’s valorization (at Cazères in the Occitan department Haute-Garonne) integrated in a cooperative’s economic project to develop specific sectors. Due to lack of profitability, the factory closed in 2014. Here, the cooperative society has the particularity to have changed its legal status to become a SCIC in 2018. This way of making a collective was found to reach the founders’ original purpose: the *“desire to participate in the agroecological transition in the territory”* (EECh 1), and *“it is obviously not a coincidence that we are in a social and solidarity economy cooperative”* (EECh 1). This innovative collective has a particular governance structure built as a tool *“for citizen reappropriation of economic issues with people who can become members”* (EECh 1). It means that different types of stakeholders are involved in the social and solidarity economy project: citizens, businesses and sector’s actors as producers, transformers, etc. It implies that the professional and personal lives of the people of

the shareholders do not belong necessarily to the agricultural field. All the values depend by the collective are institutionalized in its legal status.

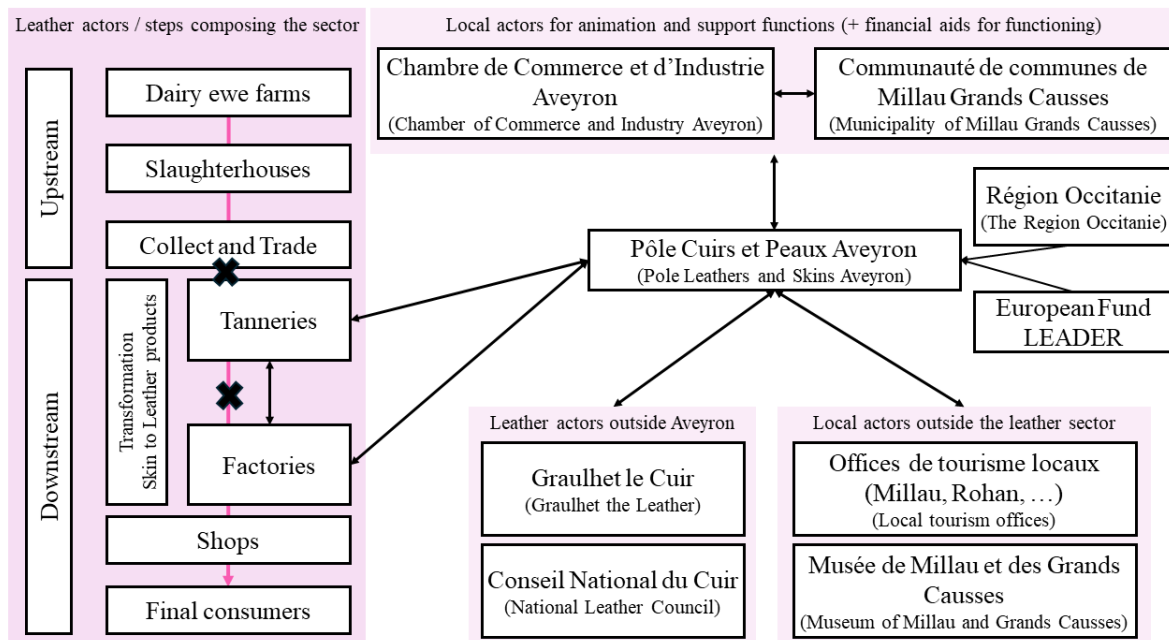
#### **4.2 | Collective actions as institutional entrepreneurship**

To go further about the collectives' institutional arrangements, an institutional schema of the different entities has been established for each (see Figure 3, Figure 4, and Figure 5). The diagrams are completed with a brief representation of the actor's sector to show where the initiatives are intervening (on the left of each diagram). For this purpose, (i) the black arrows represent the informational and monetary (contributions) flows between the entities, (ii) the pink arrows, the material flows, and (iii) the black crosses the breaking points in the local sector concerned. They allow having a better perception of the institutional arrangements, to understand the interaction between the collective and its institutional environment, and thus, to figure out the collective's level of institutionalization.

To begin, thanks to our collected data, we can validate that these initiatives can be considered as institutional entrepreneurship. In reality, all these initiatives unite businesses who have specific interest in revitalize their sector: (i) for the leather, the interest is in cooperation between professionals and communication services by creating a particular institutional arrangement, (ii) for the wool, the interest is to valorize a material considered as a waste which taking place in dairy farms by creating a complementary business next to the collective APLBR, and (iii) for the hemp, the interest resides in the agroecological transition of the territory through the hemp production by creating an innovative institutional arrangement (a SCIC).

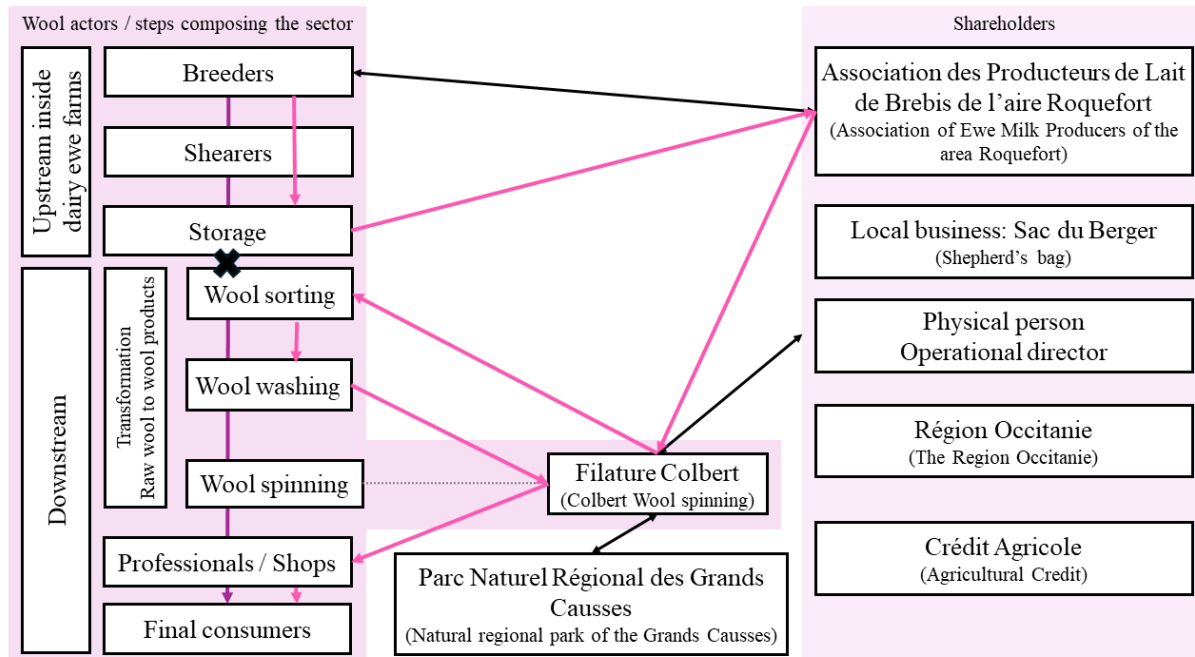
For the leather initiative, if we begin on the left of the diagram, we can see two breaking points in the local leather sector (see Figure 3). The first one occurs when the local skins are collected and sold to foreign countries instead of the regional market because of their insufficient quality either for the national luxury or handwork markets (which need more high-quality skins found in Spain). The second one is between the two actors of the transformation. In fact, the tanneries are providing in priority the luxury factories, which are not necessary on the regional territory, for economic rentability. Here, the association intervenes at the transformation level only through informational and monetary (contribution) flows (on the right of the Figure 3). The entities in charge of animation and support functions are using existing devices in their organization. Thus, there is not a real technique innovation, the innovation is residing at a social level because the professional association has been opened to more small businesses of leather creators. This collective device has also been established in Tarn, which have a similar leather industry history. However, this initiative seems to belong to the phase II "Deinstitutionalization" because actors continue to appear on the territory and inside the institutional entrepreneurs. Moreover, this type of device is existing and provides services to professionals, but there are not innovative except in their application sector: the leather industry. Thus, Pôle Cuirs et Peaux Aveyron is in a phase of "Deinstitutionalization" concentrating new players and instituting cooperation between them because of economic and social upheavals without brings now specific innovations.

**Figure 3: Pôle Cuirs et Peaux Aveyron's institutional arrangements with territorial entities**



Concerning the wool sector, the breaking point arrived since the ewe dairy farm (see Figure 4). This fact comes from a huge jolt: the Covid-19 pandemia, which locked the international market. Thus, the wool is not valued in France and particularly in Occitanie, where the production tools are no more existing. Here, the Filature Colbert brings a solution to the breeders “to get rid of” this by-product by the APLBR. The APLBR is the principal shareholder with 110,000 €, corresponding to 50 % of the invested capital in the business. By this way, the APLBR members are able to provide the wool to the wool spinning factory if they want depending on their proximity with the factory (the logistic is not stabilized at this stage). The business takes over the wool and send it to wool sorting and washing before transforming it by itself. This approach allows bringing back to the territory production tools and a new way of local wool valorization (bypassing the breaking point). It constitutes, at the same time, a technical and an organizational innovation. For the time being, the organization is not stabilized, and the project is not profitable. For proof, another fundraising of 300,000 € have been realized. The half comes from the APLBR with the breeders’ agreement, showing their motivation in the project. The other half comes from the Agricultural Credit. This new investment will also generate financial aids from the Region Occitanie at a height of 300,000 € (1 € from the Region, for 1 € invested). The collective’s perspective stays uncertain and in construction. This leads us to conclude that the collective action still at the second stage of the institutional change with (i) a profitability which is a work in progress, and (ii) partnership and institutional arrangements in formation to reach the market (business opportunities).

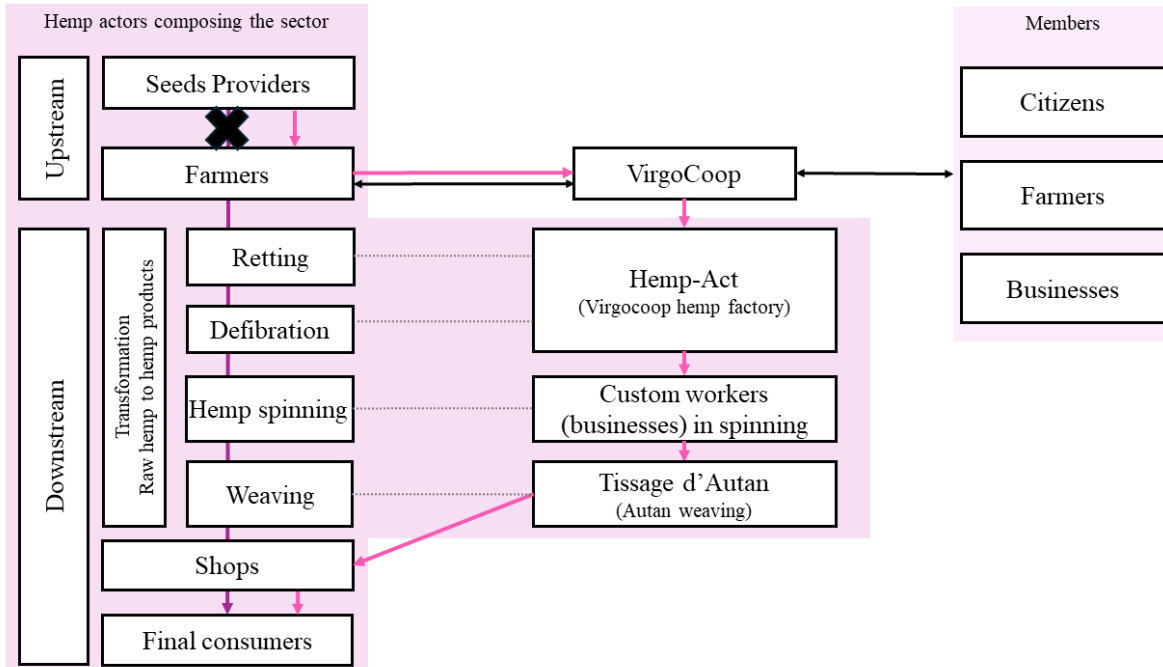
**Figure 4: Colbert wool spinning's institutional arrangements with territorial entities**



The hemp situation diverges from the wool and the leather sectors in the way that its production was completely left abandoned in Occitanie. Virgocoop has then instituted a new dynamic on the territory from the downstream to the upstream of the local sector by: (i) recruiting Occitan producers in organic agriculture or in conversion, (ii) investing in the creation of a defibering hemp factory “Hemp-Act”, (iii) creating partnership with hemp spinning factories in France and Europe, and (iv) buying a local fabric factory (weaving) “Tissage d’Autan” (see Figure 5). This hemp initiative seems to be the most advanced of these three institutions with: (i) a growing membership pattern of + 47 % (Between June 2022 and December 2023), (ii) an average increasing of 45 hectares of hemp surface per year (between 2019 and 2023), (iii) a growing business opportunity in terms of market, and (iv) the extension of the approach to the wool sector. Thus, the cooperative society is innovating independently bringing territorial innovations at technique (production tools reimplanted on the territory), agriculture (improvement of the local farmers’ crop rotation) and social level (establishment of contracts with farmers, partnerships with factories, and other institutional cooperations). This institution is in a phase of “Preinstitutionalization” resolving the local issues through innovations and rising their position within the local sector: *“we are in the process of overcoming a certain number of technical stages, and we have brought this dream or this ideal into the industrial and economic straightjacket”* (EECh 1).



**Figure 5: Virgocoop's institutional arrangements with territorial entities**



## 5 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

First of all, the action collective framework defined by Markelova and Meinzen-Dick (2009) allows us to characterize the collective actions around four factors (group characteristics, type of markets and products, institutional arrangement, and external environment) (Markelova & Meinzen-Dick, 2009). Thanks to it, two dimensions are pointed out as structural for the collective's functioning: the group characteristics and the external environment. The institutional change framework mobilised by Greenwood and al. (2002), , has helped us to consider the collective as non-stabilised institutions and to define their level of institutionalization between the Phase II "Deinstitutionalization", and III "Preinstitutionalization" (Greenwood et al., 2002). This fact pointed out that they are emerging collectives which needs to stabilise their institutional arrangements in order to be sustainable. For the moment, their sustainability is not proven at this stage of their institutionalization even if this deeper work about their institutional arrangements seems to highlight their role coordination inside the local sector.

However, this analytical framework needs to be enhanced with more field investigations. In particular, on these three following points.

Firstly, the membership heterogeneity in terms of personal and business attributes which seems to impact negatively the collective efficacy of the collective actions. This is validating our initial hypothesis and previous research works on this topic (Höhler & Kühl, 2018). Nevertheless, this hypothesis needs to be deeper analysed through a complete investigation of the members characteristics compared to the collective efficacy of the collectives.

Secondly, the territory's historical experiences with these agro-industrial sectors appear to have an impact on the involvement and the cooperation of members and organizations involved in the

collectives. This fact can constitute a main research track to study the link between history, territory and collective's development.

Finally, the vision of the collective action accentuated on the institutional arrangements highlighted (i) the institutional entrepreneurship formed by the collectives through their own ways, and (ii) the coordination role emerging from these collectives even if their structure is not well stabilised or even deals with obstacles (market opportunities, financial means, ...). Thus, this coordination role has to be deeper studied.

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