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**NEW TRENDS IN THE SOCIAL AND SOLIDARITY ECONOMY REGARDING  
AGRICULTURE AND FOOD: A COMPARISON BETWEEN FRANCE AND INDIA**

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**Abstract**

*On the question of food and livelihood, international institutions and States call for efforts towards food security under the form of help in subsidies or better access to the market for farmers. Such efforts rely on large scale solutions and make food security depend on tall vertical institutions aiming at bringing change in a very large area at a time. On the other hand, small initiatives are born everywhere and take up on the question of access to healthy sustainable food. Farmers' self-help groups, shared gardens, community supported agriculture, cooperative supermarket and other organisations make up this landscape and are being born everywhere. Such initiatives are often missed by observers as case studies of single organisations can not bring into light the global effort of such initiatives. Nevertheless, they can be put together and showed as being part of the same global movement. If their juridic forms, organisations, and goals are somewhat different, some trends can be established in the justification they offer to their action (Boltanski, Thévenot, 1991). In order to discover these justifications and establish trends, a study of the discourse and practices of such initiatives is offered in the following article.*

*Namely, our study takes 20 initiatives dealing with agriculture and food. In order to find out trends, this article elaborates on the fieldwork of about 500 hours spent within said initiatives, and 50 interviews with project planners, coordinators, and motnitors. In order to show global trends, these initiatives have been chosen in two vastly different social and economic contexts: one takes place in Nancy, a medium French town, the other takes place in Ahmedabad, a very large Indian city.*

*The results of the study show three major common trends between France and India, and between initiatives pertaining with small farmers, shared gardens, cooperatives and other social and solidarity initiatives. Firstly, there is a general call for localized, short food circuits, namely producers and consumers ask for a direct connection to each other, and even to grow the food they eat and eat the food they grow. Secondly, participants in said initiatives do not claim to be part of a recent innovative wave, but rather fall back on traditional ways to grow, sell, and cook food. Thirdly, despite the small size of such initiatives – with 200 participants at most and sometimes as small as 2 members – the ambition of these organisations is to change things on a global scale, make people from every path of life ask themselves questions and change their behaviour, and even, struggle against global climate change through small localized actions.*

**Keywords**

*Key words: self-help groups; agriculture; France; India; social and solidarity economy; rural development; ecology*

**Communication**

The question of food procurement and livelihood is raised in the northern countries as well as in what is called the third world. Issues like sustainability, ecology, health, local development and still food security are at stake, be it in America or Africa, Europe or Asia. In the last issue of its State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World<sup>1</sup>, for the year 2018, the Food and Agriculture Organisation states that: “New evidence continues to signal a rise in world hunger and a reversal of trends after a prolonged decline. In 2017 the number of undernourished people is estimated to have increased to 821 million – around one out of every nine people in the world.” All the while, “Nearly 151 million children under five – or over 22 percent – are affected by stunting in 2017.” Access to food hence remains an issue, while in other parts of the world population, the abundance of low-

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.fao.org/3/i9553en/i9553en.pdf>

quality food raises a challenge too: “Adult obesity is worsening and more than one in eight adults in the world – or more than 672 million – is obese. Undernutrition and overweight and obesity coexist in many countries.” This lack of access to healthy nutritious food for all is happening in a quickly changing environment, consequences of climate change beginning to be felt everywhere. The FAO therefore calls for “Actions [that] need to be accelerated and scaled up to strengthen resilience and adaptive capacity of food systems, people’s livelihoods, and nutrition in response to climate variability and extremes.” Hunger is a global problem, and examples of poverty and lack of access to food can be spotted even in the most developed countries. A 2015 study<sup>2</sup> in France found that many professors see children obviously having trouble to eat sufficiently. It states that some pupils rush to the bread at the canteen and fill their pocket with it before week ends, when their parents can still afford to send them to the canteen. One professor in north east France states that she sees “with sanitary and health issues: bad teeth, skinny children, sleep deprived kids”, in other instance children are spotted in front of

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<sup>2</sup> Grande pauvreté et réussite scolaire, Rapport dirigé par Jean Paul Delahaye, mai 2015 : [http://cache.media.education.gouv.fr/file/2015/52/7/Rapport\\_IGEN-mai2015-grande\\_pauvrete\\_reussite\\_scolaire\\_421527.pdf](http://cache.media.education.gouv.fr/file/2015/52/7/Rapport_IGEN-mai2015-grande_pauvrete_reussite_scolaire_421527.pdf)

school all throughout lunch break, not going home to eat only to rush themselves onto the 4 o'clock snack schools offer.

Agriculturists themselves suffer from hunger, being actually the first social category to be stricken by hunger. 80% of the 800 million people living in hunger live in the rural areas of the planet, and 65% of them work in agriculture<sup>3</sup>. Furthermore, farmers suffer from debts, rising prices in agricultural goods and lack of revenues, this situation leading to endemic poverty for many. In India, 300.000 farmers have taken their own lives from 1995 until 2015<sup>4</sup> – 2015 being the year the Indian National Crime Records Bureau published the last numbers pertaining with farmers' suicide<sup>5</sup>. In India, farmers' suicide is so prevalent that it was the root cause of a 2018 social movement which saw tens of thousand of Indian farmers march from their farm to the Indian Parliament in the capital, Delhi<sup>6</sup>. In the United States, a study from California Polytechnic State University shows that: "suicide rates in agriculture are five times higher than the

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<sup>3</sup> [https://www.lepoint.fr/economie/les-petits-paysans-victimes-du-rechauffement-et-de-la-faim-17-12-2017-2180649\\_28.php#](https://www.lepoint.fr/economie/les-petits-paysans-victimes-du-rechauffement-et-de-la-faim-17-12-2017-2180649_28.php#)

<sup>4</sup> <https://ruralindiaonline.org/articles/maharashtra-crosses-60000-farm-suicides/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/centre-has-no-farmer-suicide-data-since-2016-minister-told-parliament-1965532>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-46396118>

national average — and shockingly, even double the rate for military veterans<sup>7</sup>.” In France, researcher Nicolas Deffontaines states that farmers’ suicide is a long term structural problem and is not only caused by agriculture crisis<sup>8</sup>. In France, a farmer commits suicide every other day<sup>9</sup> and the risk for suicide is 20% higher among the farmers than general population<sup>10</sup>. The issue of descent wages for agricultural work and better recognition of farmers’ position within society hence becomes crucial in many countries.

In order to solve the issue of hunger and farmers livelihood, institutions at every scale have tried to implement new policies almost since their inception. All throughout the last centuries, the issue of food procurement has been one of the major tasks in politics and development activities. Nowadays, global efforts are deployed to try and ensure the production and access to sufficient nutritious sustainably grown products. The Millenium Development Goals of the United Nations list “Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger” and

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.farmprogress.com/outlook/farmer-suicide-topic-few-will-discuss>

<sup>8</sup> <https://journals-openedition-org.bases-doc.univ-lorraine.fr/etudesrurales/9988>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.euractiv.com/section/agriculture-food/news/one-french-farmer-commits-suicide-every-two-days-survey-says/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.ouest-france.fr/economie/agriculture/suicides-dans-l-agriculture-un-phenomene-tabou-qui-dure-6018998>

“Ensure Environmental Sustainability” as part of their main objectives, and promote actions achieving such objectives via United Nations Development Program, the World Food Program or the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

At the national level, countries develop new schemes to increase food security. For example, in India, the National Food Security Act of 2013 subsidises the access of derelict populations to food grains. In France, the government has recently proposed for every school to offer breakfast to children in the most impoverished territories of the country<sup>11</sup>. Some countries also provide subsidies to farmers switching to organic farming. In France, subsidies of 90 million euros each year are devoted to farmers switching to organic farming via special funds from the ministry of agriculture<sup>12</sup>. They are allotted as a help to switch from extensive to organic agriculture and to remain an organic agriculture farm<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.lci.fr/famille/video-petits-dejeuners-gratuits-dans-les-ecoles-comment-fonctionne-le-dispositif-au-royaume-uni-2098463.html>

<sup>12</sup> <https://agriculture.gouv.fr/mesures-agro-environnementales-et-climatique-maec-et-aides-pour-lagriculture-biologique>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.agencebio.org/vos-outils/financer-son-projet/les-aides-aux-agriculteurs-bio/>

Non-governmental organisations also strive to try and improve the access to quality food for all. Widespread organisations such as Action against hunger or Care International strive to achieve such goal too via emergency relief help and development programs.

Even businesses try and work towards food security. Danone has allied with the Grameen Group to sell low priced nutritious yoghurt to the children of Bangladesh via a social business, which motto is “no loss, no dividend”.

But on the ground, difficulties abound in the implementation of such solutions. Global programs are arduous to adapt to every local context, corruption and conflicts have emerged concerning the distribution of the food, solutions designed from the top have seemed to show their limits. Researchers like Amartya Sen, Olivier de Schutter or Esther Duflot insist on the need to study local context and listen to beneficiaries in order to design well fitted plans. Funding from the State are often dependent on the economic situation and the priorities in budgets. As for the idea of social business, researchers

like Kirsten Humberg have shown the small extent to which such solutions really develop themselves on the ground.

On the other hand, local solutions are developed by simple citizens everywhere under the form of cooperatives, associations or informal groups. From consumer supported agriculture to self help groups, groups of citizens and local NGOs try and act right where they are for a global improvement in terms of food security and sustainability.

Such initiatives - sometimes gathered under the name “social and solidarity economy” - are very differentiated from another. Nevertheless, could trends be established among the ones born in different places on the planet? Though their organisations are designed for one particular local context, could similarities be found in the way they operate and in the arguments their designers and implementers use to defend their action?

#### Methodology:

This research is based on my PhD thesis, currently in its fourth year, called: “The means and the end: new answers to the challenge of food

security and sustainability, between social business and social and solidarity economy". This thesis aims at exploring the organisation, action and values of numerous initiatives working towards food security, quality and sustainability in one French and one Indian city. In this research, I use material collected amidst my fieldwork in Nancy, France, and Ahmedabad, India, where I have visited and studied 20 initiatives, interviewing 50 of their members/coordinators/founders, along with more than 500 hours of observation. The fieldwork consists in interviews, observations and documentation work about the associations and groups under study. Via these data, I try and investigate their action, their organisation and their philosophical and ethical underlying discourse.

Fieldwork has taken place among the following organisations:

In Nancy, France

Initiatives	Activities	Interviews
Japaden	Shared garden of the students from University of Science and Technology, Nancy	2
Jardin des 3 clochers	Shared garden of one parish of Nancy	2
Jardin partagé des trois maisons	Shared garden of a community center	1
Jardins citoyens	Shared garden in Laxou, a suburb of Nancy	2
Racines carrées	Network of shared gardens on private properties in Nancy	4
Amap du Crapaud sonneur	Amap ("Association pour le maintien de l'agriculture paysanne"; Community supported agriculture in English)	2

## Social and Solidarity Economy: Moving Towards a New Economic System

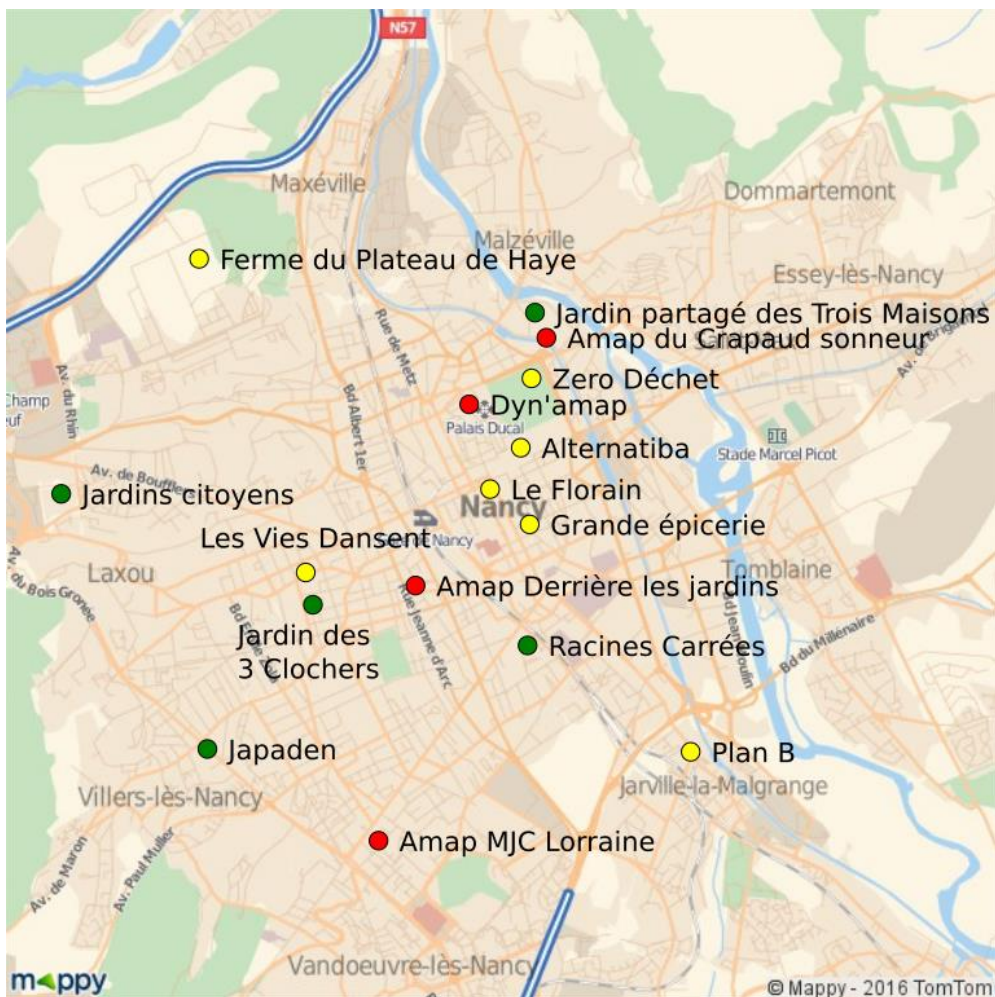
Amap Derrière les Jardins	Amap	2
Amap MJC Lorraine	Amap	2
Dyn'AMAP	Amap	2
Alternatiba	Single day event organised as a village of alternatives within the city	2
Florain	Local associative currency of Nancy	1
Plan B	Network of associations struggling against climate change	2
La Ferme du Plateau de Haye	Agro-ecological farm	2
La Grande Epicerie	Association aiming at opening a food cooperative	2
Les vies dansant	Urban gardening project	2
Zéro déchet	Association aiming at reducing wastes in Nancy	2

In Ahmedabad, India

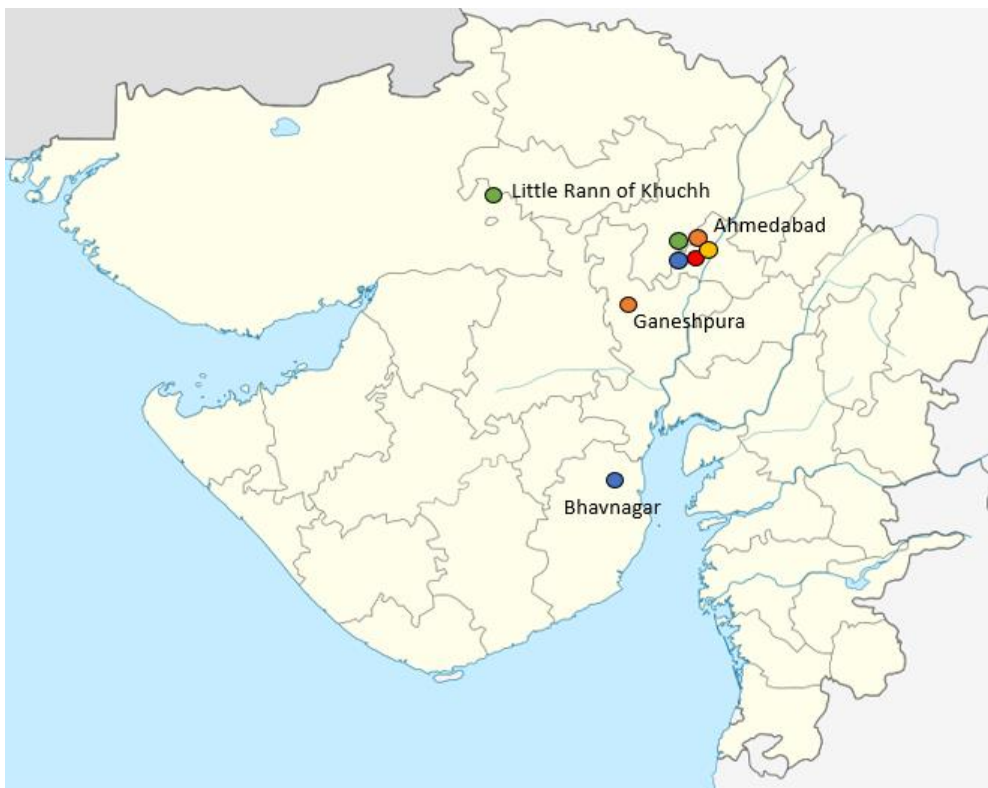
Initiatives	Activities	Interviews
Projet Cutting Edge	Farmers' Self help group	1
Projet Sanctuary	Farmers' Self help group	4
SEWA	Farmers' Self help group	3
Green Grids	Shared garden and organic farming promotion	2
Manas Vadna	Social enterprise specialising in waste buying and selling	1

## Maps of the initiatives on the studied territories:

### Nancy



## Ahmedabad and the State of Gujarat



- Projet Cutting Edge
- CEE - VIKSAT
- Green Grids – Farmers' market
- Manas Vadna
- SEWA

Key results:

- “What we grow we don’t eat, what we eat we don’t grow” Ela R. Bhatt, founder of SEWA (association working for rural women in Gujarat), Ahmedabad, India, 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2016

In India or in France, among wealthy or disenfranchised populations, a frustration can be felt as to the length of the tracks food travel to go from the field to the plate. Ela Bhatt, recalling her many travels to meet farmers on every continent, explains that these words are the ones she has heard everywhere. In Ahmedabad, one of the first aims of the self-help groups constituted among poor farmers is to let them eat and sell the food they grow and prevent them from only growing “cash crops”, cotton or tobacco. Cash crops are used to bring revenues but often bringing debt and the enrichment of owners, middlemen and corporations. The aim of self help groups is to allow farmers to eat what they grow but also to secure indigenous ways of growing and selling food. The planner of a self help group, Atul Pandya, states that he is cautious with business methods and big companies to solve the agriculture crisis:

When asked if a business model could solve the farmers' issues "you know that is also a threat, why farmers suicide are increasing in India? If you just go by economy or the market trend and these things, purely on cost benefit, you say yeah, let me also try this, but trying that requires lot of input which is external, or market based or multinational company based, and it's a threat, once you are in that train, one thing goes wrong then you're gone, that is what's happening in agriculture."

The struggle for traditional grains is emblematic of this objective, as many in India want to regain "seed sovereignty". The project designer of the Cutting edge initiative tells what happened:

"Monsanto, what they did in cotton: within ten years, no indigenous seeds available in India, as far as cotton is concerned. One seed, one BT technology they have introduced in 2003, ok? And the entire country almost, or cotton growing area just talking about BT, BT BT BT, and one fine day, indigenous seed of cotton are gone now. So, there are huge amount of money going through BT export cotton, India is rating n°3rd for cotton export, Gujarat is 1st in India for

cotton export, there are advantages, ok, but now we are entirely dependent on Monsanto. Even the remotest tribal area, they are dependent on Monsanto for the cotton seed, every year you have to buy”.

In the same city, middle class consumers regroup and contact farmers to organize their own farmers’ market, in order to try and gain access to healthy, organic food and establishing relations of trust with the people who grow what they find on their plates. In Nancy, France, amidst sanitary scandals implying major food industries and a deep crisis for the revenue of small farmers, inhabitants set up communities and contracts with small farmers in order to have a see and a say on their food, and to ensure constant sufficient revenues to the farmers. Through interviews, it appears that one of the main objectives of participating in an “amap” is to eat something consumers can see and control, as they have a direct link with the producer. In Nancy again, citizens gather to cultivate small field of land or wood beds in the city to try and regain a link to the plants they eat, share that production and the knowledge they derive from it. In all of these initiatives, members speak of regaining something

they thought they had lost: a connection to the food they eat and the people who grow it. Vincent, a urban gardener recalls laughing the days when he was like “everybody else” as in “all those people who don’t have a clue about what they eat and how it grows”. Going on, Vincent declares that he gained this knowledge first with a sabbatical working on farms in Canada, then coming back to his city to reclaim the land and participate in shared gardens initiatives. The theme of the connection, or even complete circuit between soil to food, consumer and soil again is mentioned by most informants, one of them having even written a programmatic book called *Anubandh* or “bondage of all things” in Sanskrit.

This goes against most of the recommendations that have been made in order to create worldwide food security. Institutions like the Food and Agriculture Association<sup>14</sup> claim that the solution has to come through the efforts of national governments which, « To realize the full potential of our globalized economy,[...] must expand social protection schemes for the most vulnerable. Providing this opportunity for equitable economic growth will raise the purchasing power of the poorest 2 billion people which in turn will create

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<sup>14</sup> [https://www1.wfp.org/zero-hunger?\\_ga=2.220618257.82185621.1557844737-1585413387.1557408847](https://www1.wfp.org/zero-hunger?_ga=2.220618257.82185621.1557844737-1585413387.1557408847)

incremental demand, generating new jobs and jump-starting local economies. Investing in inclusive development isn't just the right thing to do; it makes good business sense." Such efforts are seen as required to "Pave the road from farm to market". The need for global policies implemented by supranational institutions is often recalled by food security advisors worldwide. One of the leading experts in food security, Edgard Pisani, states that: "Time might not have come to create [“a Food Security World Council, constituted in regional Union”] but the growth in population, evolution of natural aspects of the situation, and the appearance of agriculture that is not destined to feeding people ask for us to prepare and think about it<sup>15</sup>.”

The only cure to world hunger is hence described as dependent on global moves, welfare efforts from national States or push to make small farmers enter the global economy: “Access to affordable, nutritious food for everyone—all 7 billion of us—is vital. We must innovate and invest in making our supply chains more efficient by developing sustainable durable markets. To support these markets, we must also improve rural infrastructure, particularly roads, storage

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<sup>15</sup> <https://www-cairn-info.bases-doc.univ-lorraine.fr/revue-pour-2009-3-page-5.htm>

and electrification, ensuring farmers ability to reach a wider consumer base<sup>16</sup>. » The strive to make farmers access the market is opposed by most of the interviewees we have met on the field, and the same can be said about the need to “innovate”, claimed again and again by the promoters of food security through global efforts.

- “We invent nothing” Louis, founder of Japaden (a shared garden run by the students of the University of Science and Technology), Nancy, 20<sup>th</sup> October 2016

Interviews among said initiatives show a general feeling of rediscovering lost knowledge rather than creating radically innovative ways to grow, sell and consume food. As Louis would put it:

“We invent nothing, everything we do here is nothing but a painful and slow re-discovery of what our grand-fathers and grand-mothers knew very well [...] In Nancy, you used to have a green belt with vegetable farmers growing food everywhere and selling it directly in

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<sup>16</sup> [https://www1.wfp.org/zero-hunger?\\_ga=2.220618257.82185621.1557844737-1585413387.1557408847](https://www1.wfp.org/zero-hunger?_ga=2.220618257.82185621.1557844737-1585413387.1557408847)

the city. They created ways to grow tomatoes all through winter with glass and mirrors.”

In contradiction with the topical trend in institutions and even researchers hailing such initiatives as “socially innovative”, the informants met on the field do not claim to make things in a completely new way. Antoine, planner of a shared garden in Nancy, when asked if he thinks his action is innovative, replies: “Definitely not, it is not innovation, it is just coming back to something we have lost, to a knowledge that was there and was thrown away when the agriculture revolution happened.” Monisha, the founder of a farmers’ market in Ahmedabad, agrees: “We are only looking for traditional ways of doing things, growing food, eating...”

Be it in France or India, data show that the members of these initiatives state that they look for a return to traditional ways and describe everywhere the setback constituted by the agricultural revolution of the second part of the twenty-first century, with industrial scale production and genetically modified plants. The importance of indigenous seeds raised in interviews everywhere

exemplify that parameter fully, as seen above in the first part of this text. As put by the planner of the Cutting Edge project: “in India agriculture is a fight of the old civilisation, occupation, so those generations have conserved those [seed] varieties and within ten years or twenty years, you are losing those, it is a crime actually, that's my opinion”.

According to a gardener in Nancy: “Progress is also being able to look back to where we came from, to look behind. Today, everybody talks about permaculture but when you look into the definition, it is nothing but the agriculture we used to have a century ago. It's only because, since then, we have mechanized everything, we have put way too much chemicals in the ground, but one century ago men were growing food in accordance with nature and it was almost permaculture. So at one point, let's accept and come back on some things we've done because, all in all, what has been done during the twentieth century was no good, really, no good!”

- “Our goal is to generalize our way of doing”, Samuel, active member of Racines Carrées (network of shared gardens in

Nancy), Le Florain (an alternative currency used in Nancy), Alternatiba and Le Plan B (networks of local initiatives aiming at fighting climate change), Nancy, 13<sup>th</sup> June 2018

During this study, I have come across a multiplicity of small initiatives, often unheard of even on a regional scale. These initiatives are invisible to a global audience and most of the time they are seen as various in forms and action, rendering their action too small for widespread results. The publicity achieved by models such as the social business developed by Muhammad Yunus is in no proportion with the audience of described initiatives. Nevertheless, the ambition of these initiatives are to spread practices and values. For Samuel, the coordinator of several projects, from a network of shared gardens to the local currency or forums on ecological initiatives, the aim is to spread the word and practices to as many people as possible. The objective is political in the broad sense of changing the ways of doing, and for him everybody should be included in such dynamics, from small to big stakeholders, from active members to the general audience. What should be spread? According to interviewees, the first thing to develop for everyone, and the first thing they developed in

their own initiatives, is the reclaiming of their own life and environment. For Laura, who participates in a waste management association, the objective is to re-appropriate her relationship with what she eats and how she lives. Through the question of how to reduce waste she was able to think and act on the way she eats, she takes care of her body, of her house, of her pets, in summary, according to her, she was able to re-enter her reality in order to choose and order it in a way she likes. Most of the interviewees, whether French or Indian, raises this reclaiming as the objective and the result of their action. Whether they call it “dignity” – mainly among Indian self-help groups -, “lighter impact on the environment” – in France -, or “bonding with the world” – in the words of Ela Bhatt -, this process of re-thinking and changing their ways of doing is present in both cities and countries. In both places, the goal is to spread such process. In India, self-help groups take up the issue of how to include derelict populations in such process, but in France too, project coordinators have this at heart. At the Ferme du Plateau in Nancy, one of the founders explains the ambition for his project of creating a farm in an impoverished part of the city, a neighbourhood

seen as problematic and prone to societal problems by the authorities and citizens from other parts of the city:

“The idea is that we must start here, otherwise there won’t be any change. If you only work with bobos [meaning: BOurgeois BOhème, a stereotypical inhabitant of city centers, having a strong purchasing power but also left wing and ecological views on politics and life, often hailed as being hypocrites] you won’t change a thing. But if you manage to change the people who are the most remote from such reflexions, then you can start and have an impact on things.”

In most of the initiatives studied, the goal is to work and spread this same idea. Everywhere, applying a moral imperative to work here and now for food security, including all members of the initiative equally. In that sense, even if most of the interviewees ignore or reject the term “social and solidarity economy”, they participate in it as it has been described by Bruno Frere as relying on such moral imperative. Among the multiplicity of initiatives, and between two vastly different countries, the common answers gathered through

this research seems to show that a global answer is being born out of local actions.

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