

# Beyond supermarkets: food distribution in local food systems

Cities know little about independent wholesalers and retailers

However, these actors could play a role in the re-localisation of the food system

Working with them could be a way to ensure access to sustainable food to the greatest number of people, but without giving up on the key values underpinning local food policies



Distribution is a key step in food chains, but it is rarely tackled in urban food policies. Indeed, cities know little about wholesalers and retailers, and too often assimilate distribution with supermarkets. In an article published in the French-speaking *Revue de l'Organisation Responsable*, two researchers from VetAgro Sup Clermont and AgroParis Tech Clermont Ferrand (France) discuss how independent retailers and wholesalers should be integrated in local food strategies.

## Between supermarkets and short chains

Who exactly are the food distribution actors? They are a very heterogeneous group, from wholesalers to small retailers, that works along various steps of the food chain. In the article, **the researchers focus on independent actors, i.e. wholesalers and retailers that do not belong to supermarket companies.**

These actors have something in common: **their weight in food distribution has steadily declined during the XX<sup>th</sup> century, as supermarkets developed.** In France, however, they still represent an important part of food distribution. Over the last few years, with cities gentrifying, it seems that urban dwellers are coming back to retail outlets. As for independent wholesalers, data from 2005 show that, at that time, they accounted for around half of the value of agricultural products sales.

**These actors are facing a double competition.** On the one hand, with supermarkets, especially the ones that are coming back in city centres. On the other hand, with short chains, as selling directly to consumers means doing without small retailers and wholesalers!

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Urban Food Futures would like to thank [Virginie Baritoux](#) and [Camille Billion](#) for their inputs and comments.

**Source:**  
[Baritoux, V. & Billion, C. \(2018\). Rôle et place des détaillants et grossistes indépendants dans la relocalisation des systèmes alimentaires : perspectives de recherche. \*Revue de l'organisation responsable\*, vol. 13\(1\), 17-28.](#)

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You can find this article on the URL below:  
<http://www.urbanfoodfutures.com/wholesalers-and-retailers>



### Taking part in local food systems?

How do these actors react to this competition? And how can they fit into local food systems?

The researchers highlight that **proximity can be an opportunity for them, as they can use it to assert their difference from supermarkets**. Indeed, over the last few years, in France, many of them have shown interest in integrating local food chains. For instance, some independent wholesalers are developing local food certifications, or are providing their clients with communication material (posters...) they can use to show where food comes from. One should not, however, underestimate supermarkets' ability to innovate, and to compete with independent wholesalers and retailers on the local food niche.

### Are middle-men adding value?

More broadly, this article raises the question of the role that independent intermediaries should play in local food strategies. It highlights that **these actors have resources and expertise that can create value and proximity in food systems**. For instance, they know very well what is produced in their local area, and they can share information regarding the quality and origin of products. They can also play a valuable role in food logistics and urban planning.

However, they are not really integrated in local food policies. Local authorities have historically sought to foster equity in the food chain, and therefore put an emphasis on helping short chains and direct marketing channels. Today, for Virginie Baritoux, one of the article's co-authors, they should start to think about how to work with these independent intermediaries that they do not really know nor understand. **Could it be a way to ensure access to sustainable food to the greatest number of people, but without giving up on the key values underpinning local food policies?**

Integrating these actors in local, fair and sustainable food dynamics is therefore a key challenge for local food policies.

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