

Exploration and exploitation. Complementary strategies for small and medium-sized resilient family producers

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Abstract

In a research undertaken in the early 2000s, we observed a change in existing regulations in the European Union (specifically, the appearance of Eurep Gap norms and mandatory traceability) faced by small and medium off-season fruit exporting companies from Uruguay and Argentina. For producers to be able to make the necessary investments, some of their main clients –we will refer in this paper to the prototypical case of the French supermarket Carrefour– changed the type of contract they used to sign with them (common in captive value chains) and adopted a type of contract more frequent in relational chains. The new contracts were based in a *cahier de charges* agreed with the producers regarding the changes to be implemented, offering a price stability guarantee as a counterpart for the period necessary to implement them. Did this mean that producers abandoned their traditional products and production modes? By means of a historical analysis of their exporting trajectories, the study of the chains –made from the point of view of the producers– revealed, on the contrary, that their resilience (understood as their ability to face difficult situations, remaining competitive) depended in the long term from a prudent combination of offensive strategies –as the one mentioned in the beginning– and defensive ones, based on maintaining old and local productions and distribution channels (not always), less profitable than exporting.