

TYPES OF APPROACHING THE ISSUE OF LOCAL FOOD THROUGH EUROPEAN PROJECTS

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Abstract: *Using the result of case studies and articles describing European projects in the local food or local food chain field, the article aims at synthesizing a relevant image of how a successful project in the local food field might look, and also to reveal the influence of local specificity and country culture over the types of projects that can be sustainable in different countries. The historical, social and cultural traits of the European states can be translated from a state to a group of countries; following historical periods of similar regimens, therefore illustrating the situation in a few European countries can suggest a bigger picture of the state of facts in the local food field. Supported by European funding, the various projects concerning this new approach on food have peculiarities and stand different chances of success, united in purpose, yet divided in means of attaining it.*

Key words: *local food, CAP, rural development, European projects, sustainability*

INTRODUCTION

The “Europe 2020” Strategy opens a new perspective in what regards the UE Common Agricultural Policy, the objective being to promote a more competitive and sustainable agriculture and rural revitalization. It is expected for the CAP reform to take effect from the 1st January 2014.

The important role of the food sector in the EU rural development has been underlined by the European Commission in its policy emphasis on promotion of farm products. In 2011 were launched new proposals to better this policy, drawing attention that the “EU has a culinary heritage of great diversity that should be exploited to the full.”

Partnership approaches for strengthening regional and local food markets are highlighted in the EU Green Paper Proposals which observe how Leader rural development methods are able to provide constructive elements. The Leader program's elements bring a useful encouragement for different types of rural businesses which thus are able to explore new ways of cooperating in order to have a better chance and more solid gains.

These guiding lines are the result of the general evolution in the food sector, as proven by research and studies trying to share an accurate picture of the real live developments and trends.

METHODS AND EXAMPLES OF STUDIES IN THE LOCAL FOOD PRODUCTS FIELD

The Opinion of the Committee of Regions on “local food systems” at the plenary session held on 27th and 28th January 2011 offers an official definition of the local food within the EU space.

A booklet entitled “Examples of EAFRD food projects”, edited under the auspices of the Directorate General for Agriculture and Rural Development and the European Commission focuses on the benefits of the EAFRD, as applied in various countries in order to enhance the opportunities in the food sector.

A study entitled “Environmental impacts of eco-local food systems – final report from BERAS Work Package 2”, ensued by the Centre for Sustainable Agriculture of the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences provides in its turn an inside in the field of the environmental impact of the local traditional production methods in agriculture versus the modern industrialized methods, with a larger view of the theme in the European space.

The Facilitating Alternative Agro-Food Networks: Stakeholder Perspectives on Research Needs (FAAN) study, which ran from February 2008 to March 2010, also offered its results in the form of a booklet, providing very interesting insight in this field.

RESULTS OF THE STUDIES AND A COMPARATIVE OVERVIEW OF THE LOCAL FOOD SYSTEMS IN SOME EUROPEAN STATES

The FAAN project produced in 2010, to summarize the result of its research, a booklet entitled “Local Food Systems in Europe - Case studies from five countries and what they imply for policy and practice”. The case studies are from Austria, England, France, Hungary and Poland, thus the research team making sure to cover different areas of Europe and different states that joined the Union at various points in time. The diversity of their social conditions and cultural background ensure that, by putting all these examples together, the research team is able to offer a comprehensive image of what the local food concept means in the European context and how it is handled by the states. The activity of research itself was a co-operative effort, in each of the five countries, the study being done by a team consisting of an academic research institution and a nongovernmental body with interests in this field.

It can be observed that the methods vary, from field research and individual interviews of the concerned persons to larger gatherings and Q and A forms, handed to the test subjects in order to be completed.

In the Austrian study, the funding available through the Leader program was put into use by two groups from the Almenland region, ALMO - a cooperative of farmers and businesses in the Almenland region, producing and marketing beef from alp oxen as a high-quality product, founded in 1988, and Almenland Bauernspezialitäten - an association of about 40 direct-selling farms in the Almenland region, founded in 1997. The two different groups used different strategies. ALMO started to select their business partners, and in order to guarantee a constant turnover for farmers, in 1993 they approached a big meat processing company and established co-operation based on guaranteed purchase and prices and a honest business relationship, while keeping the farmers’ ownership of the brand. The narrow field of commercialization they are in raises the problem of maybe founding a new firm for the commercialization of female calves’ meat. Almenland Bauernspezialitäten aimed at creating a good working infrastructure for direct-selling farms, by establishing co-operation with regional organizations such as groceries or gastronomy and tourism enterprises which enabled the farmers to reach a wider group of consumers, since the area is a well known tourism destination, while still counting on its local steady customers. Its problems consisted in the self sufficiency production only in the case of some farmers, instead of an expanding production.

Another case study in Lower Austria concerns another two projects aiming to create short supply chains, the cooperative BERSTA and the association EVI, and a third object of study - a new organic food cooperative in Vienna. BERSTA, founded in 1980, is a cooperative of 17 organic farmers in the Waldviertel region in Lower Austria linked to a group of consumers in Vienna, functioning at the time of the study as a non-profit association of 25 organic farmers, working with the BERSTA organic wholesale trading company, which sells products from these farmers as well as from elsewhere. EVI, a producer-consumer initiative also founded in 1980 functions as a non-profit association aiming at promoting disadvantaged regions and selling products at affordable prices to the urban customers from St.Pölten; in 2003 the association dissolved and two independent organic EVI stores were established in St. Pölten and Krems.

The organic food cooperative from Vienna, founded in 2007 as an association to collectively buy organic food directly from producers aimed at making organic food available for the association's members at an affordable price, and at supporting organic small-scale agriculture around Vienna. Also financially independent from public funding at the time of the study, The cooperative faces lesser challenges since it does not include the producing phase, rather only the connecting the producers with the customers phase and also benefits from the voluntary work of its members and from their initial attitude of rejecting the retail chain stores activity.

Although BERTA and EVI do have a history of successful activity and an independent self - sustainable position, their problems ensued from competing with the "corporate organic sector", a rather new branch of commerce in some supermarket chains. They differentiate themselves from the chain stores by their principles and out of factory production.

In the UK study, the case study was located in Cumbria and focused mainly on the producers who are registered as organic or biodynamic, using direct sales and/or cooperative marketing; many organic farmers sell through supermarket chains, yet some others have developed closer relations to the consumers, in order to gain more of the market value that they add and to promote knowledge of sustainable food production.

The food producers studied were: Hadrian Organics, an organic farmers' cooperative providing direct sales for five producers; Low Sizergh Barn, an organic dairy farm, with a farm shop and café; Little Salkeld Mill, a water mill that grinds English wheat from biodynamic cultivation methods in Cumbria, and sells wheat flour and bread; Howbarrow Farm, which grows organic vegetables and runs a box scheme; Growing Well, a community enterprise that grows and sells organic vegetables, involving volunteers recovering from mental illness. As for the financial support, some small grants have come from the Rural Development Program, sometimes cumulated with Structural Funds (such grants have promoted organic conversion, on-farm food processing, infrastructure for farmers' markets, school visits to farms) and here the problems were the standard criteria and the excessive bureaucracy in relation to the small amount of money made available. These were mostly favoring large producers.

The successive Leader programs have facilitated cooperative networks (e.g. infrastructure for farmers' markets, Cumbria Organics and Made in Cumbria), and have also helped producers to cooperate in shortening the supply chain to large buyers, like supermarkets.

The substantial and various kind of paper work required by official bodies was generally mentioned as the main burden.

The evolution and sustainability of these case studies were estimated by those concerned as depending on the personal efforts of the producers that had led to the success of their businesses and initiatives. Social changes were linked to the business activity, such as re-localizing the food economy, developing a closer, trust-based relationship with the consumers, reconnecting to both the physical place and community, informing the consumers about the agricultural production methods, sometimes even the consumers having become producers, by actively participating in horticultural courses and production processes.

The second part of the British case study concern the large urban agglomeration of Manchester, where the targets were Glebelands Market Garden (growing and selling predominantly leafy crops), the Unicorn Co-operative Grocery, (a whole food worker cooperative, prime seller of Glebeland's produce), Manchester Permaculture Network (supporting several community food-growing projects, using permaculture methods), Healthy Local Food (HeLF) Partnership (engaging young people and adults with mental health difficulties in food cultivation activities- renamed Bite project), Herbie Fruit and Veg Van (providing affordable, fresh produce to communities adversely affected by the closure of small local shops), Dig Vegetable Box Scheme (sourcing and distributing local produce, especially organic).

The funding here has been approached from a multi social perspective, e.g. funds for a better social cohesion have been involved in a food initiative if this one included a better social cohesion, or health funds, as the fresh organic food affects the customers health for the better. The problems mentioned were linked to the British overall economic system, which still favors large enterprises whilst the small initiatives have less advantageous conditions, as well as the fixed registering conditions for the local farmers that act as a deterrent. The success formula seems to reside in the social branching of the food initiatives, the changing of the public's attitude and the enthusiastic feedback in what concerns healthy, fresh, socially benefiting local food enterprises.

The French case study proceeded to invite FRCIVAM (Federation Regionale de Bretagne des Centres d'Initiatives pour Valoriser l'Agriculture et le Milieu Rural) to study and present an overview of the territory, with the help of Agrocampus. The chosen study area was that of Rennes, where The CIVAM (Centres d'Initiatives pour Valoriser l'Agriculture et le Milieu rural) movement has been promoting short food chains (SFC) in Brittany for 20 years. Generally speaking, France is proud of its traditions in the area of local production of food and food related items, and used to rely on multipurpose farms or households. The preliminary questions were addressed to a number of 40 concerned attendants and the answers created an image of the local situation. The most relevant issues were: the necessity of diverse modes and places for SFCs; the trust in public action, even through micro-decisions, illustrated in the farmers adapting their daily routine in order to meet the shopping ours of their urban clients; the creation of around about 300 jobs, while the usual agricultural jobs in the sub-region are fewer than 1,000.

The other French case study concerned the Pays du Centre Ouest Bretagne - a grouping of local authorities, which also has the status of a Local Action Group area under Axis 4 (Leader) of the regional Rural Development Program.

In the 1990s, through Leader were supported collective initiatives to promote and help groups of farmers, like the Bro An Are initiative, a cooperative farm shop, which received a grant to buy equipment for a frozen food system. Also, Kreiz Breiz Terre Paysanne, supported in their production of a booklet.

In addition to the start functions of leader, the European Social Fund also provided support for initiatives to develop co-operation between consumers and producers, as it did for Biopole, a box scheme system, which was among the beneficiaries of a scheme offering 100 % support up to 23, 000 Euros for 1 year.

In this particular area among the issues met was the lack of particular training on the farmers' side, the uncertain hygiene regulations. The formula to succeed locally in the case study area seems to be rather changing, associations are created then dissolved or restructured, the farmers often resort to limiting the production at a lower level, easier for the farm to support on a long term. Rather than succeeding in converting the traditional multipurpose farms, the settlement of new specialized producers seems to be more practical in this case, although they have problems in turn with the access and availability of the lands.

An illustration of France's Leader program application is the Pays Loire Nature Leader Local Action Group (LAG), where opportunities from collaboration between food businesses, rural tourism operators and local residents were supported by providing Leader financial assistance from the EAFRD to the Indre-et-Loire Chamber of Trades & Crafts and Chamber of Agriculture for their local food project, concerned with expanding the market share for local food products, strengthening the tourism value of the area through high quality gastronomy, encouraging environmentally sensitive approaches resulting from local produce. Action of awareness raising were carried on in 2008 through promotions of the local products, special events, tasting and cooking sessions, advice providing and publicizing information about the environmental benefits of the shorter food chains.

The Hungary case studies comprise the case of "Szövet: Alliance for the Living Tisza" – an organization functioning along the Tisza River, in Eastern Hungary, aiming to preserve and promote the region's ecological values, which include a diversity of local fruit tree varieties; currently operating weekly on four farmers' markets in Budapest, integrating pre-ordering and home delivery to its services, developing partnerships with stores in Budapest that will sell its processed products such as juices and jams; and promoting local agro-tourism activities; Szövet developed the 'Living Tisza' certification label for farmers and service providers in the region. It included at the time of study circa 30 small-scale farmers.

Another example is the traditional Hunyadi market from downtown Budapest, operating as a fresh and affordable food source to local people, giving space to 75 contracted farmers, many of them originating from within 100 km of Budapest. Its existence was menaced in 2006 by the authorities plan to build an underground parking and supermarkets in its hall, which led to the forming of a group called "The Market: Our Treasure", to express the public reaction to these issues; working on a voluntary basis and organized through a community blog. The campaign focused mainly on legal work, on the mobilization of farmers and locals and led in turn to the local authorities deciding to modernize and renew the market.

The main problems result from the long domination of a centralized agro-food system, continued by the domination of multinational food processors and retailers. There had been food scandals in the industrial food chain and large-scale farmers' mobilizations, and the public awareness started to be raised. Yet the authorities do not have a consensus of positive actions in support of the local food, and the private initiatives are scattered and fragile. The human resource seems to be predominantly voluntarily participating, which can be both an asset and a weakness.

In Poland, the study gives the example of the Warminsko-Mazurskie Culinary Heritage Network, part of a pan-European initiative called the Culinary Heritage Europe Network, where the leading role belongs to the regional government office (RGO) of Warminsko-Mazurskie region in north-east Poland, which wants to promote the idea of regional development through promotion of specific local food in order to improve the small business development, and the enhancement of rural tourism. It comprises 29 restaurants and inns, 4 farm shops, 50 producers and processors. The main problem with the network would be that, being managed by the regional administration, the small farmers do not feel that they own the structure.

The second Polish case study consists of the Vistula Valley Friends Association, based on a long tradition of orchard planting and fruit production, mainly plums. Having a very active leader, the locals have established the VVFA, which aims to provide better business opportunities by creating a wide network of businesses, local associations and local authorities, which would promote, produce and distribute local fruit products; members are also working to reintroduce old varieties and to recreate traditional orchards, to promote direct selling and traditional processing and to develop local events such as the Festival of Taste, Plum Day and the Day of Kijewo Municipality. The difficulties are in the financing department, in the hygiene provisions department and in the industrialization of traditional production. VVFA is helped by the Local Action Group, funded by the EU Leader program and by the local Rural Women's Associations.

In Poland the instrument involved in the EU food sector is EAFRD (European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development), supporting in a flexible way the Rural Development, as it has a proven track record with these sorts of projects in all of the 27 Member States and fitting the Europe 2020 initiative. It mainly offers financial support for Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in the food sector in rural areas. An example of beneficiary is Sokpol Koncentraty's SME, based in Lubelskie Voivodship, specialized in converting yearly 50 000 tones of fruit and vegetables from local farmers into juice and puree products that are sold to domestic and EU markets. The product of this enterprise does not qualify as a "local food" as it is defined in the European space by the Committee of Regions official Opinion on the matter, because it is not sold exclusively on farmers markets or through small scale stores, yet its preoccupation for environmental issues make it an adjacent example.

CONCLUSIONS

In view of the cases presented above, one could state that in what the local food is concerned the European states are moving in the same direction, yet in various ways and speeds. In the countries with former less centralized food sectors over the past 50- 60 years, like Germany or UK, focusing on a healthier and more natural way of food producing is more a common sense element and a social emanation – the people are enthusiastic about it and link the local food to the local well being and the sense of

community, whereas in the former socialist countries (including France), the local food trend is an educational matter, more tensions arouse because of the polarity of private initiative versus the authorities, and in many cases the guidelines of what used to be local or traditional are blurred by the centralized system of organization in agriculture and food dominating over the last decades. These lower-level, local tendencies are trying to be coordinated by the European CAP, since it has been concluded at this level that a better local food chain cohesion would help with the economical and environmental problems.

By establishing an official definition and conditions for registration and functioning of the specific local food enterprises and providing the financial support for growing later independent business, the European Union uses its already functioning methods and puts them in the service of this rural development and economic development concept of local food.

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