Local food in European supply chains: reconnection and electronic networks

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EDITOR’S NOTE

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Background to the UK local food sector

At the Bordeaux workshop, it became apparent that the emergence of local food in some European countries originates in regional cultural histories and traditional food cultures embodied by particular foods and formulations, or recipes. The UK market for regional and traditional foods tends to be more mainstream industrial than elsewhere in Europe, products such as Eccles cakes, Lincolnshire sausages, Melton Mowbray pork pies, and Cornish pasties are national dietary staples distributed through multiple-retailers. Other more specialist but often industrially-produced products, such as jams and biscuits, are offered for sale under marketing terms such as ‘traditional recipe’, ‘home made’, ‘farmhouse’, ‘cottage’ and ‘old fashioned’, and are widely available through leisure outlets such as garden centres, as well as supermarkets. The local food sector in the UK, by contrast, formed from the existing organic sector once the pressure on small farms of distributing organic foods through supermarkets became apparent in the early 1990s and the local sector has since retained a secondary emphasis on the ecological quality of produce¹.

Formalising the concept of the local food economy, comprising ‘short’ or ‘direct’ personalised supply chains as an alternative structure to international supply chains

¹
distributing faceless products, added to a growing academic and political interest in ‘localness’ at the start of this century. More recently, economic geographers Watts et al. (2005) identified two types of alternative food system – one which emphasises the quality of the product and one which emphasises product-origin, ‘relocalisation’. The authors conclude however that these product-based models of alternative food systems are weaker than models which emphasise the networks through which the food product passes.

This article attempts therefore to shed light on the role of local food in a range of food supply networks and, in accordance with the UK perspective, to compare these networks against a framework of sustainability ‘assets’. To this end, the relationship between local, organic and fair trading networks will be examined and within the analytical framework consideration is given, following Goodman (2004), to the ways in which local food-supply systems inform and/or involve consumers and citizens. The analysis based on a meta analysis of findings and experiences relating to a series of academic activities over the past five years, addresses therefore the question of what strategies have been adopted by different networks associated with the supply of ‘local food’? And how do these networks balance the needs of producers with the demands of the market and market demand?

The emergence of local food systems in the UK

In the 1990s, with the loss of guaranteed markets as the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) moved away from production-oriented support, and a strong UK currency rendered exports less attractive, many small scale producers were compelled to consider new agricultural marketing initiatives and to reconnect with consumer demand. This coincided with a sense within the organic production sector that the Soil Association’s policy to support organic market growth through the multiple-retailers had led to the encroachment of industrial-scale production, distribution, and ethos, into the organic sector. Several organic players started to focus instead on reviving some of the other principles of the International Federation of Organic Movements relating to the scale of operation and length of supply chain, and began to encourage a smaller scale ‘organic and low input/extensive’ market, via farmers’ markets and box schemes. With rising interest in the alternative food economy the term ‘local food’ took firmer root and farmers’ markets became an alternative route to market, especially in fresh produce, for disillusioned farmers squeezed by CAP reform. Then in 1998, the Soil Association set up a subsidiary company dedicated to local organic. Funding for local initiatives, such as the formation of marketing co-operatives, has also been available through the UK Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) and the EU LEADER programme.

The European Model of Agriculture within Agenda 2000 of CAP reform has also provided opportunities for farmers to differentiate their product. The Model balances production with social cohesion, conservation and food safety/quality, and through EC-controlled designated labels for food from a specific geographical region or traditional process (PGI, PDO) farmers are able to diversify into premium products. However, although there has been some uptake of these in the UK, local food is more associated with community-based initiatives such as slow food (Pretty, 2004). The UK local sector has been associated also with food safety and risk perception more than with traditional diets. Local food is seen as a means to address ‘deficits in dis-embedded trust resulting from widening chains of interdependency, crises such as BSE and the introduction of
unfamiliar new technologies' (Sassatelli and Scott, 2001). To some extent related to risk culture, local food in the UK has also entered into the public healthy eating debate through being for the most part ‘extensive’ and due to the implied nutritional bonus of being fresh. The recent high profile given to school meals in the UK could see a transition to locally controlled catering. Although for many schools such a development is constrained by existing long term industrial supply contracts (Holt, 2005), policies encourage to local food catering (as an educational as well as nutritional resource) have been adopted in Wales.

The role of local in food sustainability

6 Local food has become incorporated into a range of niche markets driven by an ever more overlapping set of criteria and objectives of supporting actors. Overarching these niche markets is the concept of ‘food sustainability’ represented by an umbrella of food, health, and farming consumer and lobby groups. Food sustainability relates to both product and process and is defined by fresh, home cooked, seasonal foods consumed within local food systems – meaning the use of artisan methods, short supply chains and ‘ecological’ production systems. Long-distance transportation of food across the world is considered incompatible with food sustainability because it contravenes the requirement to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 60% by 2050 (ISIS, 2006).

7 Environmentalist appraisal of food consumption in this way has led to the emergence of the concept of the ‘informed consumer’ and the strong belief that, ‘to reduce “food miles” … will require … a relocalisation of shopping’ (Lang, 2005). Informed consumerism may in turn be seen as a move towards a cohesive set of behaviours, codified in the Sustainable Consumption Model, and a growing body of thought that the ‘sustainability transition’ is ‘a real process, not only a vision’. For some authors, sustainable local food consumption is less a choice than an inevitable outcome - ‘as industrial agriculture fails due to a scarcity of oil- and gas-based inputs, we will certainly have to grow more of our food closer to where we live, and do it on a smaller scale’ Kuntsler (2005).

8 However, whilst local food initiatives hold the promise of supplying holistic solutions to economic and health problems, there is also a danger that the informed consumer discourse places pressure on consumers. To some extent the local food ethos directs urban consumer behaviours specifically towards ‘the significance of rural identities' in food purchasing (Enticott, 2003). Moreover, the element of reconnection between producers and consumers that is a crucial feature of alternative or local food networks, whilst it may be ‘nostalgically framed in terms of mythical past connections and closeness’, in reality is ‘not a simple re-establishment of old-fashioned ways’, and can in fact create anxiety, because reconnection often demands more time, thought and energy than more convenient markets, and can lead to ‘consumers feeling overwhelmed by the enhanced sense of responsibility for the problems of industrialization and globalization’ (Kneafsey et al, 2003). As a result of the premium on price and time of many local speciality, and artisan food products, informed consumerism ‘equates privilege not only with good taste but also with good ethics’ (Powell, 2005; see also Burt, 2005). Certainly, there is evidence that the consumption of organic and other niche products increases in higher socio-economic groups, and conversely lower consumption of processed and convenience foods - traditional meals however are most prevalent amongst older members of lower socio-economic groups (Cowan, 2004). Alongside these considerations of consumer purchasing power, it is
worth remembering also that supermarkets succeeded, not only because of economies of scale but also, because by combining preservation technologies with a greater degree of ‘self-service’, they actualised the forces reshaping post war gender norms and relations, ‘In this early moment of mass retailing, social politics mattered as much as economic rationality (Deutsch, 2002).

Sustainable livelihood dimensions of trade networks

The emergence of long-distance, ‘globalised’, commerce has most recently been placed at around 5-7,000 BP (before present) (Watson, 2005); Phoenician sea traders travelled as far north as Britain 2-3,000 BP trading. Whilst much of this early trade was in non-perishable, non-food commodities such as textiles, metals, and artefacts, wine, salt, spices and dried fish were also traded. The importance of trade as a vehicle for ‘spreading ideas and cultures to widely separated people of different cultural levels’ has long been recognised as ‘one of the outstanding factors in the progress of civilisation in prehistoric Europe’ (Cleland, 1927). The contemporary environmental arguments against international food trade rest on the impacts of preservation technologies required, as well as transport per se. and whilst local initiatives have made links with organic production, the informed consumer focus on ‘food miles’ and ‘reconnection’ sits in opposition to the formation of links between the local food sector and the pre-existing fair trade network, within an umbrella concept of ‘food sustainability’.

Fair trade grew alongside both organic and vegetarian markets out of the wholefood movement in the 1970s, which ethos linked a diet composed principally of grains and pulses, with fair trade with Third World producers. As the embryonic fair trade, vegetarian and organic food companies succeeded in the niche chain of shop and consumer cooperatives, from the 1980s, onwards some of these new brands found separate but parallel niche markets in the supermarkets. The Fair Trade Federation label directly links the purchase of fairly traded products with support for producers and workers in the developing world through not only wages but also health and safety in working and living conditions.

Fair trade chains for coffee, tea, bananas and chocolate have also tended to link with organic production due in part to the non-chemical starting point of small farms in developing countries; agro-inputs are costly. And, since the 1990s, the World Bank has emphasised the value of export-led development. Into this world economic scenario, the availability of wealthy European and Japanese markets for high premium organic foods has offered opportunity for small farm international export. To some extent triggered by the increasing involvement of fair trade in organic production, the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM) has also begun to re-examine the quality of life for those involved in organic farming, and as ‘ethical trading’ becomes mainstreamed, internationally traded organic produce will need to comply with the current view of ethical labour codes in global supply chains.

Thus the above glimpse of the rise in ethical trading and environmental de-trading, suggests that with a growing recognition that trade can be, not solely profit oriented but also, community based and focused on the preservation of local cultures and economies, the balance between the social and environmental components of sustainable food is shifting. According to the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) - ‘Sustainable trade takes place when the international exchange of goods and services yields positive economic and environmental benefits reflecting the core criteria of sustainable development’ (IIED, 2006). The academic
discourse has also shifted somewhat, with some scholars seeking a broadening of the concept of sustainable local, ‘Civilisations have always required supplies from distant markets – it would be great if we could all live in a part of the world where we had ready access to local wheat, pepper, olive oil, wine and citrus as well as fresh tomatoes and zucchini, but we don’t and can’t’ (Association for the Study of Food and Society, listserve, January 2006).

It is within this context that the following classification was devised to introduce a comparative element within the discourse around issues of environment and trade within the local food and food sustainability debates. Table 1 presents a suggested framework analysis of idealised local and fair trade networks, providing a comparison of each with the other according to an interpretation of the dimensions of sustainability and ‘livelihood’ assets.

A Sustainable Assets framework for local food and fair trade

The Sustainable Asset Framework has been adapted from the Social, Economic, Environmental (SEE) dimensions of sustainability first enshrined in the Brundtland Commission’s Report (1987)13, and the Sustainable Rural Livelihoods framework promoted by the UK Department for International Development (DfID), which uses five livelihood assets or resources, i.e. human (including health and skills) and ‘physical’ (e.g. infrastructures) assets in addition to SEE (designed by Carney, 1998), and there is arguably a case for a sixth, political, asset. To illustrate the way in which the Sustainable Asset Framework can be used as a methodological tool to compare sustainability impacts, Table 1 applies the framework to the aims or claims of local food economies and fair trade. The Sustainable Asset Framework is then used in the next section to compare different components of the case study networks.

Table 1. Sustainable Assets Framework for idealised local and fair trade networks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assets</th>
<th>Local food networks</th>
<th>Fair/wholefood trade</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Environ.</strong></td>
<td>To avoid fossil fuel use, reduced food miles and non-industrially processed foods</td>
<td>Linked with organic production where possible, often as a continuation from the practice of non-chemical agriculture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Biodiversity encouraged through extensive/organic production</td>
<td>Enables regeneration of marginal agricultural land through fertilisation and preservation of indigenous cultivars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Landscape/provenance fosters culture-nature embeddedness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social</strong></td>
<td>Assists family farming</td>
<td>Community development aims e.g. hospitals and schools, stated in fair trade contract</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Helps build community vibrancy and retain local traditions</td>
<td>Potential for first world community involvement via local ‘wholefood’ outlets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Aids tourism and associated regional identity formation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Economic</strong></td>
<td>Short supply chains and farmers’ markets keep income and employment in locality</td>
<td>Specifically World Bank policy for small-scale producers in developing countries to export to wealthier markets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PDJ/PGO added value for producers</td>
<td>Opportunities for added value e.g. organic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Provenance fosters tourism</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human</td>
<td>Fosters fresh, seasonal food intake – reduced post harvest period ensures high content of vital water soluble vitamins</td>
<td>Broader nutrient availability from consumption of out of season vegetables</td>
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<tr>
<td>-------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Increased fibre and lower fat, sugar and salt content of non-industrially processed foods</td>
<td>Increased fibre content of whole dried foods and grains</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sense of ‘connectedness’ increases mental health and motivates healthy diet choices</td>
<td>Diet variety enrichment through consumption of ethnic foods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Provides sense of achievement in terms of improving quality of life for developing country communities</td>
<td>Provides sense of achievement in terms of improving quality of life for developing country communities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 demonstrates the multi-dimensional nature of food sustainability, and the employment of idealised networks holds the possibility for hybrid networks to also exist and co-exist. In the next section I provide a brief outline of six networks in which a positive encouragement of sustainable local food contributes to the design of the supply network. This is followed by applying the Sustainable Assets framework to four criteria of the six case studies.

Cases studies of local food in regional, national and international supply chains

The following examples, each currently in operation in Europe, depict different approaches to the immersion of local food in trading networks. The cases briefly outline the main aims and modes of the supply networks based on project and marketing documents. These are followed by a map showing the location of the networks in Europe and the identification of five different types of network exhibited by the cases. In the subsequent section the benefits of networks are set within the Sustainable Assets framework and this is followed by discussion. The analysis is introspective in as much as the case networks are interpreted through a series of texts including interview transcripts, marketing literature, survey data and field notes. Such researcher-generated textual interpretation creates ‘uncommon knowledge structures’, which are nevertheless subjective.

Case 1: Regional Organic Farmers’ Network (ROFN)

ROFN is an initiative of the Centre for Systems Studies at the University of Hull Business School, UK, to create an effective network to which small organic businesses can cohere without sacrificing autonomy. The research project aims to support networking practices by improving the regional organisation, logistics and technical infrastructure of organic producers and retailers in North Yorkshire. Rather than working with isolated businesses the project is based on establishing new partnerships between local growers and distributors, and with local consumers, restaurants, schools and hospitals. The project uses internet systems to set new standards of user-friendliness, functionality and effectiveness to foster a culture of mutually supportive co-operation between autonomous businesses and consumers. Such a sophisticated information community would allow buyers to find out what is coming into harvest and who has surpluses, and enable growers to assess demand, share good practice and plan planting. An e-bay-like method of assessment, providing feedback on all transactions and from all users, will be used to develop indicators for quality, value, speed of payment, and speed of delivery.

Case 2: Bio-regionen or ecoregions

The term bio-regionen was first defined by the Centre for Mountain Agriculture, University of Innsbruck, Austria. Bio-Regionen is a neo-endogenous kind of regional
development, which is advocated as a promising strategy for Austria. In the long run the aim is for ecoregions to extend the values of sustainability inherent in the philosophy of organic farming, to other actors and sectors in the region and apply them on a territorial scale. Because ecoregions are a direct response to specific regional problems they vary in expression. Some are regions of origin for organic products retailed in supermarkets; others are a strategy to market the image of the entire region using organic products. A closer connection to the region is seen as essential to avoid growing competition with the more favoured lower lying regions. Core organic values re-embedded into regional sustainable development. Ecoregions could thus create competitive advantage for marginalised production areas. So far, 23 potential ecoregions have been identified. Natural, social and organisational pre-conditions have to be met, such as the absence of heavy industry, an above national average number of organic farms, the presence of relevant NGOs, and a certain degree of organic image especially to visitors. The emerging typology suggests that there are mainly two strategies for ecoregions, one focusing on economic aspects of competitiveness and the second more directed towards regional policy and the social sphere. A third approach would be the ideological decoupling of the region from the global world – this notion is not expressed as an explicit strategy but ideas of regional self-sufficiency form part of a long-term vision underpinning many of the initiatives.

Case 3: AlimenTerra Sustainable Trading Network (SFN)

19 AlimenTerra is a new network of European organisations committed to developing practical and co-operative actions leading to the creation of a truly sustainable European food system. Participating organisations come from France, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain and the UK and cover the chain from farmers’ unions and development organisations to NGOs, local food initiatives and organic support bodies. Two major initiatives currently in progress are:

The objective of the SFN is ultimately to create a common infrastructure for the distribution and marketing of local, sustainably produced food products. At the first meeting in Holland in October 2005, representatives from 12 producer groups and 4 Leader+ Local Action Groups discussed the possibilities of developing a transnational European Sustainable Trading Network. The meeting decided to move ahead with two sub-projects, one on the trading network itself and one focussed on research, training and exchange.

Case 4: AlimenTerra Sustainable food laboratory (Food4Health)

20 The way the food system works lies at the heart of the problem between food and health and also of the way children are educated on this theme. A change in the food system must be connected to a change in diets and in the way we teach children, this must be reflected in a fundamental change in food policy towards the promotion of a healthy system. Starting in the United States, Western Europe, and Latin America (primarily Brazil), participants include: Carrefour, France, Farm Worker Movement, United States, W. K. Kellogg Foundation, United States, General Mills, United States, DG Agriculture of the European Commission, Ministry of Agriculture, the Netherlands.

Case 5: The e-MENSA electronic platform

21 The aims of the e-MENSA Specific Support Action were to develop an understanding of the role of emerging platform technologies in the European food industry, for supply chain management, and the inclusion of SME producers within platforms.
The SSA provided an open forum for dialogue in which the relevance of concentration in the food industry and centralisation of food supply chains could be discussed alongside new alternative approaches to food sustainability through cooperation. Additional focus for debate included parameters for traceability, quality and food safety tracking and sensing and business management. Consensus on a research agenda revealed the importance of support for the SME sector and of encouraging the development of decentralised e-platforms. Decentralised platforms for example might have advantage in niche products where producers can aggregate around added value, such as high value meats, organic products and wine. A developed electronic trade platform can support the special situation in niche markets in which there is a small focused target group, a lot of credence product qualities and intangible use-criteria, and specialised trading processes. http://www.tecnoalimenti.com.

Case 6: True Food Community Co-op

The True Food Community Co-op is a not-for-profit Industrial & Provident Society formally registered with the Financial Services Authority in 2004, and is now co-funded by local authority Community Enterprise Agency, Voluntary Action, and Primary Care Trust, and EU Social Funds. True Food is committed to providing accessible and affordable organic foods within the community, from growers and wholesalers, respecting the environment and supporting local producers, using co-operative principles and community building and networking. The online ordering system allows customers to add small quantities to an existing Orders Wanted list, which is submitted when sufficient orders for an item are requested.

Putting supply networks on the map

The geographical locations and networks of the six case studies are depicted on the map below (Figure 1). On the map, ‘Sustainable trade’ represents AlimenTerra’s two case studies. This geographical depiction draws attention to five types of network that local products have been incorporated within:

- Specialist farmer networks
- Regional networks
- Producer-consumer informational networks
- Fair trade networks
Cross comparison of local food trade network cases

Having demonstrated the broad scope of the Sustainable Assets framework in Table 1, Table 2 below, applies the framework to the six network case studies. In this way, various network ‘qualities’ can be assessed according to different sustainability dimensions allowing for the comparison of networks in relation to each other and to the food sustainability ideology. The analysis in this instance, in Table 2, shows potential benefits of the network in each dimension. The analysis is suggestive rather than definitive and best viewed therefore as an attempt to examine the relative merits of existing food strategies involving local food, in order to broaden the discussion on food sustainability.

This article set out to identify ways in which local food is part of the diversity of strategies for food supply chains. By strategy I mean a supply network for goods that embodies elements of localness, such that products are distinguishable from mainstream, mass or conventional products, including small scale production and processing, traditional processes and provenance, whether or not conventional goods are also traded through the network. One form of network that has been noted in the local sustainable context is the integrated supply chain. Chain integration is a reflection of consumer sovereignty and the consumer’s right to be informed of product and process information, and for producers and consumers to make ‘intensive commitments... in every link of the chain’ (Korthals 2001). The supply of origin-transparent products is thus potentially a means to add value to the chain and increase the ‘quality’ of the chain. But this approach is consistent with current competition strategy which shifts the locus of competition from product sector to vertically integrated chains, and the creation of alliances to target niche markets20.
This preliminary analysis represents a basis from which to consider the value of each chain from the perspective of sustainability and livelihood. For example – do electronic networks represent a skills benefit, an environmental cost or both? Do long chains offer greater or fewer opportunities for skills enhancement than short chains? Do long chains offer any socio-cultural benefits or short chains any socio-cultural disadvantages? Clearly the answers to these questions are complex but the framework creates a broad perspective of local as product and local as ideology, within which different food supply networks can be compared. Many factors could have been selected for comparison including the type of agriculture, the scale of production, the length of the supply chain and number of intermediaries, the range of distribution, and the composition of the product. To this list can also be added institutional factors such as method of communication, and the value of electronic networks. This preliminary comparison is based on four measures: measures of scale, agricultural methods, electronic chain management, and extent of internationalisation.

Table 2 Sustainability Asset framework for six food networks founded on the inclusion of small farms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Environment</th>
<th>Social</th>
<th>Human</th>
<th>Economic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. ROFN</td>
<td>Organic</td>
<td>Cooperative principles</td>
<td>IT - Cyber communities</td>
<td>Market information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low food miles</td>
<td>European connection</td>
<td>consumer access</td>
<td>Reduced transaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>traceability</td>
<td>costs/cost of technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ecological knowledges</td>
<td>and training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low food miles</td>
<td></td>
<td>Ecological/traditional knowledges</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. AT - SFN</td>
<td>Organic/traditional</td>
<td>Cooperative principles</td>
<td>Ecological/traditional knowledges</td>
<td>Distribution and marketing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low food miles</td>
<td>European connection</td>
<td></td>
<td>infrastructure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Rural communities</td>
<td></td>
<td>Public-private partnerships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. AT - F4H</td>
<td>Organic/traditional</td>
<td>Cooperative principles</td>
<td>Healthy food</td>
<td>US corporate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Transatlantic connection</td>
<td></td>
<td>involvement and markets</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The different networks revealed through this framework are further illustrated in the Appendix and discussed in the subsequent section.

Implications of the sustainability framework for considering networks for local foods

It has been noted elsewhere that the context and functions of food networks requires a ‘more nuanced approach’ in order to understand the competitive relationships that alternative food networks have with the conventional sector\textsuperscript{21}. In Table 2 above can be seen great diversity of approach to supply chain. Case 6 (Truefood) demonstrates the intertwining of local food and fair trade systems as complementary activities whilst two other cases (AT-F4H and e-MENSA) provide models for establishing collaborative partnerships between the alternative and conventional sectors. The case studies suggest therefore that there are various routes to develop local fair trading networks and these can be seen as an attempt to bridge the gap between local and global economies by linking small scale farms and processors into international food chains with the corporate sector.

As well as providing direct returns to the local economy through local sales, the purpose of local can be preserved in international supply chains through the immersion of consumers in the stories that local products tell. This is particularly so in the urban context; local initiatives selling whole foods in low income urban areas can be seen also in terms of building communities. These community outlets for local and whole foods are a resource, and in terms of easy access a meeting place, which fosters cohesion and awareness of the global context of culture and the ethical and local components in food. In this perspective, local is compatible with, not only territorial seasonal diets but also, multicultural cosmopolitan diets.

Producers stand to gain from digitalisation of the food industry not least because systems such as traceability provide a greater opportunity for local and origin labelling to become more widespread and raise consumer awareness\textsuperscript{22}. But the current retailer-biased balance of power implies that producers will need to take steps to increase their power prior to entering networks with larger companies. This is being achieved through virtual collaborations and enterprises, such as marketing networks. For the strategy to work, certain conditions have to apply such as secure coding and coherence between
system interfaces. The producer level virtual enterprise should also be owned by producers and able to provide:

- Reliable supply
- Range of products
- Full traceability for all products
- Certification for EurepGAP and organic systems
- Full HACCP throughout
- Knowledge of market trends adequate to anticipate customer demands

The elements of product provenance and authenticity can therefore be retained within trade systems through diverse local trade strategies. However, the success of a strategy depends significantly on pre-existing human and natural resources, such as the ability to achieve critical mass amongst small and micro enterprises in order to access economies of scale, the potential for branding and marketing (i.e. the projected and perceived identities of the authenticity and aesthetic appeal of the product and/or region) and willingness of stakeholders to innovate and cooperate at each stage of the chain (as noted also by R. Sonnino, this edition). In this regard, the value of sustainable local lies, not only in the non-industrial and/or traditional nature of the product and sustaining farm livelihoods but also, in the social and commercial gains that cooperative management strategies can bring.

Concluding remarks

Local food systems are a key driver of the goal of food sustainability. However, the debate on sustainability is frequently hung on environmentalist criteria and thus there are conflicting views relating to local food and trade concerning energy expenditure in both human and environmental terms. Although there are undisputed environmental, especially fuel, costs of transporting food, and sound socio-economic arguments for regional development, there are also sound social arguments in favour of trade, which include cultural knowledge, dietary ‘complementation’, export opportunities for developing country producers, and comparative advantage for small producers in Europe and elsewhere. The solution may be not either local or mainstream but rather the development of local systems alongside movements to promote awareness of environmental and social impacts of existing international trade.

By fostering regionally-based supply networks in tandem with continued pressure to equalise trade rules, the concept of local food sustainability could replicate the market success of e.g. fair traded chocolate, tea, coffee and bananas. Local fair trade networks could create new fairly traded dietary staples (such as Mediterranean peppers, olive oil, salad vegetables, and Asian lentils, grains and pulses) and work with nutrition educationists to promote the health benefits of local food trade (such as consumption of whole grains and variety in fruit and vegetables). In this way, the shopping basket reflects the ways in which we engage with different cultures through food, from locally-made products (after Berard, L. and Marchenay, P., see Conclusion, this edition) consumed within the locality to the consumption of provenance-labelled products and ethnic foods.

I have attempted to illustrate and compare the way in which local food systems can be promoted through international trade. In order to advance this holistic approach, a clearer definition of local food in global trading is required, one which includes the authenticity of the local product and elements of connectedness and fair trade. However, a pre-requisite for local fair trade is robust organisation and electronic
connectivity at local level. It is possible that ‘virtual trading posts’ could compete with the convenience of on-line services offered by supermarkets – but who would own them – corporations, the state or a collective of traders? Further research could involve working with pilot networks to develop and benchmark the processes to implemented efficient virtual interfaces between producers, marketing channels and consumer groups.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


APPENDIXES

Appendix: diagrammatic representation of the range and scope of case study networks

1. Ecoregion

2. AlimenTerra

3. Organic Farmer Network

4. e-MENSA
NOTES

1. Holt, 2003b
2. for example Marsden et al., 2000; and Morgan and Murdoch, 2000
3. Watts et al, 2005
4. Cases discussed in this paper were encountered through research funded by the European Commission – Conversion QLK5, coordinated by The Centre for Agricultural Strategy, The University of Reading, UK; e-MENSA SSA 007124 coordinated by Tecnoalimenti S.C.p.A., Milan, Italy; and the edition of Sociological Perspectives of Organic Agriculture (Eds. G.C. Holt and M. Reed) CABI; Wallingford http://www.oup.com/
5. Holt et al, 2003a
6. See Introduction this edition for details of these labels
7. Slow Food was launched in Italy in 1986 out of concerns over the increasing homogenization of fast food and lack of local distinctiveness, and is now an international movement in some 100 countries.
8. Morgan and Sonnino, 2005
9. Reusswig et al, 2004
12. Sulaiman and Holt, 2002
13. Farnworth, 2004
14. Browne et al., 2000
17. 'Introspection' is founded on a methodology that has mainly been utilised in consumer research (Hirschman, 1998).
18. Wallendorf and Brucks, 1993
19. Schermer, 2004
20. Valli, 2000
21. Sonnino and Marsden, 2006
22. Holt et al., 2007

ABSTRACTS

After giving an overview of the market for local food in the UK, as well as a definition of the concept in relation to short supply chains, organic agriculture and fair trade, the article draws on cases encountered through EC-funded research and networking to identify different types of network concerned with the concept of sustaining local food. Historical uses of shopping habits...
play here a central role and the article observes the balance between historical, social and environmental components of local food. From these researches and experiences, it has been possible to demonstrate a range of understandings in relation to the concept of ‘food miles’. With reference to six cases, the article underlines the importance of local food systems within food sustainability, and highlights the weight of human and social qualities in the market balance.

Après une présentation du marché des produits locaux/localisés en Grande Bretagne, ainsi qu’une définition du concept en fonction des circuits de distribution courts, de l’agriculture biologique et du commerce équitable, cet article se fonde sur des études de cas, issus de projets de recherche européens, pour identifier des différents types de réseaux concernés par le concept de produit locaux durables. Les habitudes historiques concernant l’achat des produits alimentaires jouent ici un rôle central et l’article observe l’équilibre entre les composants historiques, sociaux et environnementaux des produits locaux/localisés. A partir de ces terrains de recherche et de ces expériences il s’est avéré possible de déterminer différentes compréhensions de « produits locaux » en relation avec le concept de « distance alimentaire/food miles ». En se référant à six cas donnés, cet article souligne l’importance des systèmes localisés en matière de durabilité alimentaire, et met en valeur le poids des qualités humaines et sociales dans la balance commerciale.

INDEX

**Mots-clés:** produits locaux, chaîne de distribution, plateforme électronique, moyens d’existence durables, commerce équitable, agriculture biologique

**Keywords:** local food, organic, supply chain, electronic platform, sustainable livelihood, fair trade

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