

# Co-producing cultural coherency: impact and potentials of civic food networks in Spain

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## Abstract

*Since the 1960s, modernisation and specialisation of agricultural food production caused and still causes a loss in the socio-economic and ecological performance of the rural as a productive natural resource base. From an agro-ecological departure point we study collective forms of food governance as 'laboratories' in which cultural coherency is co-produced between consumers and producers. More in particular, we analyse how initiatives of both producers and consumers contribute to the re-organisation of the relations between nature and society. In this paper we present the preliminary results of a survey held among newly emerging consumer initiatives in Spain. In our analysis we focus on their socio-ecological and economic 'configuration' and reflect on the (potential) impact of these forms of civic engagement on farming systems and the wider food system.*

## 1. Introduction

The global food regime (Friedmann 1987) has caused and still causes an undeniable degradation of the natural resource base (Altieri 2002, Toledo 1990; 2002), which increasingly is responded by what is defined as the alternative model for rural development (Lang and Heasman 2004, Marsden 2003, van der Ploeg 2006; 2008, Wiskerke 2009): a territorially grounded, sustainable rural development model (Marsden et al. 2001) that is founded on the increasing integration of production and consumption (Holloway et al. 2007, Sevilla Guzmán and Martínez Alier 2006) and re-positioning of agro-ecological perspectives in food production (Horlings and Marsden 2011, Swagemakers et al. 2012).

In section 2 we outline the contours of such a rural development model, followed by a theoretical exploration of the patterns of coherence of alternative food networks in Spain. Next, in section 3 we introduce the features of 'horizontally organised' initiatives: their characteristics, organisational modes, and the constraints they meet in contemporary society. In section 4 we discuss more in-depth consumer initiatives and reflect on preliminary results derived from a survey among 30 of this type of initiatives. Finally, we briefly comment on the social-ecological performance of the initiatives and their contribution to a regime shift at the global level.

## 2. Territorial agri-food paradigm

A territorially grounded, sustainable model for rural development implies incorporating of citizens in the production and allocation of food products (Kirwan 2004, Sevilla Guzmán and Martínez Alier 2006, Wiskerke 2009). Hence, sustainable food production and consumption is best co-produced between consumers and producers: consumer initiatives looking for attractive products (social-ecologically sound produced food) and exchanging these products within a group of

people 'at distance from the production site' is an important motor for the co-production of new urban-rural relationships. Ideally, social interaction between different life worlds generates cultural coherency (Berger and Luckmann 1966, Long 2001) and should result in the optimisation of the agro-ecological features of food production. The territorial agri-food paradigm aims to embed food production within, and upon, the qualities and distinctive features of a region.

### **2.1 Repositioning of agro-ecological perspectives**

Sustainable rural development (in which natural resource management is incorporated) should allow for processes of change that last in the long-term; it is therefore important that they are territorially rooted (Marsden 2003, Wiskerke 2009) and developed in collaboration with local groups (Bruckmeier and Tovey 2008). Following Rammel et al. (2007:9), it can be seen as an 'open evolutionary process of improving the management of social-ecological systems'. An important element in our definition is the systems' capacity to adapt (Holling 2001, Stagl 2007, van der Ploeg 2008) and its ability 'to reconcile the impacts of human activity on the environment' (Murphey 2000:2). An actor perspective makes agro-ecosystems (Altieri 1995; 1999) perceived as 'materialised connections' between nature and society (Holloway et al. 2007, Sevilla Guzman and Martínez Alier 2006). Through co-production between humans and nature, i.e. the specific interaction and mutual transformation of humans and living nature (Toledo 1990), farmers continuously (re)produce, increasingly reshape and (possibly) improve natural resources (van der Ploeg 1997; 2003; 2008, Gerritsen 2002, Swagemakers and Wiskerke 2011). Although farmers can be seen as brokers between nature and society, their interactions with nature do not always result in an improvement of the ecological stock in an area.

### **2.2 Co-producing cultural coherency**

Agro-ecosystems win increasing interest in recent years (see the report of the United Nation's Special Rapporteur Olivier De Schutter on the potential of agro-ecology (United Nations, 2010)) and can be improved by the agency of actors (Giddens 1984) or when practitioners (including consumers) pay more attention to optimising their performance (Warde 2005). Ecological entrepreneurship, as defined by Marsden and Smith (2005), can be strengthened by the further integration of producer-consumer relationships (Sevilla Guzmán and Martínez Alier 2006; Holloway et al. 2007) in which consumers demand for modes of food production that are based on the use and reproduction of ecological capital (Swagemakers and Wiskerke 2011). Thereby the value of food should be extended from the economic costs of production to the intrinsic values resulting from the production process.

### **2.3 Towards a sustainable food regime**

Civic food networks contain 'institutionalised' relationships of mutual knowledge, recognition and acknowledgement that 'bring advantages' (Bourdieu 1986) to all practitioners (i.e. consumers and producers). These networks are sustained by the incorporation and institutionalisation of specific and 'shared' values, which simultaneously sustain the network in the course of time. When knowledge is derived from, and maintained by, social interaction (Berger and Luckmann 1966) and rural development is conceived as the outcome of knowledge generation an important role can be allocated to civic initiatives that perform 'optimally' and hence 'guide' society towards a more sustainable food regime.

## **3. Civic food networks in Spain**

In Spain we identified over 180 'horizontally organised' food networks (Simón Fernández et al. 2010) that aim at achieving a 'more sustainable' match between the production, distribution and consumption of food products. More in particular, they carry democratic principles stimulating

consumers' involvement and learning about sustainable food production and consumption. This is just the top of the iceberg of alternative food networks in Spain (estimated at over 560 initiatives).

### 3.1 BICERA

In initiatives recorded in the BICERA (Base de Iniciativas de Consumo Ecológico y Responsable de Alimentos: Database of Initiatives for Ecological and Responsible Food Consumption) people 'empower' themselves: they re-take control over the food chain start and stabilise food circuits in which they consider the availability of sufficient and healthy food besides 'a right' also 'a good' that brings obligations and responsibilities. The BICERA focuses on bottom-up initiatives, always initiated by citizens or small-scaled organic producers. Most often they promote horizontal power relations and democratic decision making procedures on the objectives and the directions the initiative takes. Among the organising principles are the equal share and distribution of costs and benefits among producers and consumers and the promotion of local food networks. Often, the trade among members of the fair and ecologically soundly produced food products is based on trust rather than on certification schemes solely. Cooperation, solidarity and food sovereignty are keywords in the networks' vocabulary. Paying fair prices to food producers and organising a 'stable' and sustainable short supply chain channel are among the characteristics of producer-consumer relationships in these initiatives.

Among the initiatives, the degree of commitment differs. Whilst the consumer (ACCERA) and producer (ACPCERA) initiatives are relatively open accessible associations, agro-ecological cooperatives (CACERAs) valorise and optimise similar interrelations but its social structure is the determining factor. These latter initiatives represent 'closed-communities' in which an internalised social component is maximised: democratic principles and strong commitment to the community are the main characteristics. As a consequence, this model differs from 'real world' consumer-producer relationships. From an abstract, agro-ecological point of view, however, it represents an 'Ideal'-type transformation of society. A fourth category contains individual producers optimising the social-ecological performance of their farm system, (public) catering services oriented on local food circuits, urban agriculture, etc. ('others').

### 3.2 Critical citizenship

In this paper we further focus on consumers initiatives, the so-called ACCERAs (Asociaciones / Cooperativas de Consumo Ecológico y Responsable de Alimentos: Associations / Cooperatives for Ecological and Responsible Food Consumption). In these initiatives consumers increasingly act and operate as critical citizens and obtain food products outside the conventional food supply chain (with usually the supermarket as representative 'selling' point).

These consumer initiatives aim at strengthening relationships among consumers and producers by promoting a different model of consumption in which a more autonomous consumption pattern and obtaining fairly traded products that are accessible to a wide range of people. People within these networks share ideas and have similar concerns about the impact of contemporary food regime on health issues, overseas import of food products, fair trade, and the impact of food production and distribution on the environment. The objectives and participation in the initiatives, however, differs among people. As a result, the initiatives develop differently: cultural coherency between consumers and producers is differently co-produced and, hence, contributes differently on the re-organisation of the relations between nature and society.

In-depth analysis of the responses of ACCERAs to an explorative survey in 2011 (amplified with specific doubts and questions we had in this exploratory phase of the research) generates insight in the differences in dynamics among these initiatives. Additional information and clarifications

obtained by email and/or telephone calls enriched our knowledge about their internal dynamics. Exploring the internal differences among the initiatives we hope advances the recognition and understanding of civic food networks and their (potential) contribution to the sustainment of the global food regime.

#### **4. ACCERAs: horizontally organised consumer initiatives**

In this section we explore and compare the characteristics of initiatives that share agro-ecological ideological departure points: consumer initiatives that search for products that relate differently than products in conventional food circuits to health issues, food quality, environmental impact, and biodiversity maintenance (the use of autochthonous breeds and / or plant varieties). These initiatives however manifest and perform differently. In our preliminary analysis we focus on two 'groups' or two 'Ideal'-types of consumer initiatives: consumer groups and consumer cooperatives.

##### **4.1 Local versus global consumer-producer relationships**

The preliminary results from a survey among ACCERAs clarify that consumer groups focus on the 'locally established' connections between food production and consumption. The contact between consumers and producers is actively organised: consumers know about the producers, their location, and their motivations and can visit the production units. Most often, the products concern 'freshly produced' vegetables and fruits. The participants are strongly oriented on closing nutrient cycles, emphasis the degradation of natural resources by the use of GMOs and protection of animal rights. Most often a physic place (a room or an office) lacks. Instead, products are being packed at and distributed from one of the production units delivering to the participants in the initiative. If a room is available it is used for meetings among the participants. In general, consumer groups consist of 15-20 members (although an exemption with ove150 participants exists). Often, weekly tasks (like packing and distribution of products) rotate among the members.

Consumer cooperatives supply products that are 'organic' and/or 'fair trade' and some are among the strongest organisers of anti-GMO campaigns. These initiatives are 'open to a more global consumption-production relationship': food is partly shipped in from overseas and hence scoring differently on the ecological foot print of (individual) consumers. Offering a wide range of products however attracts a large group of consumers. They attract between 10 and 30 consumers in the initial phase and grow until 50 members in average, except one that started with 100 and has grown to 750 participants. Many cooperatives organise monthly excursions to producer-sites and one of them informs its consumers by labelling products ranging from local, regional to global (the products have stickers with different colours that identify the 'origin' of the product), and pricing 'local products' competitively.

In both Ideal-types fresh food products (for example vegetables and fruit, eggs and meat) are mostly obtained from producers within a 50 kilometres radius and at maximum 120 kilometres distance (only occasionally a distance of 200 kilometres radius is applied). In the cooperatives the fresh products unavailable 'nearby the consumer' are imported from larger distances (for example bananas from Canary Islands, oranges from Valencia, and asparagus from Navarra). The supply of fresh fish products from producers to consumers is mediated in only one of the initiatives in the survey. Initiatives that only mediate the consumption of fresh products are limited; most of them combine the provision of fresh products with elaborated products. The elaborated products are derived at different distances: some apply a strict rule on trading products within a 60 kilometres radius whilst others import (fair trade) products from Latin America (common products are pasta, rice, oil, milk and dairy products, bread, legumes, flour and ready-cooked vegetables). Further, some initiatives guarantee its food products to be 100% organically certified, whilst others claim a

trust based relationship to guarantee the quality of the products (without any extra certification costs).

#### **4.2 Open versus closed food circuits**

In both Ideal-types the interrelations between consumers and producers are differently organised and optimised. In consumer cooperatives the provision of food products sometimes is limited to members only but often open to non-members. In consumer groups the delivery is strictly limited to the members of the initiative (often the consumers and a group of producers). Furthermore, the type of products that can be obtained and the conditions around the provisions of food products differ. Often the system of a weekly basket is used, which can be 'open' (the consumer decides every week what to buy in what quantity) or 'closed' (a fixed basket with a range of fresh food products).

The 'open' baskets consist of fresh food products listed by the producers. Consumers can decide freely on what and how much they buy. Nowadays, online ordering makes such a system fluid and dynamic. It holds the promise to reach a large group of 'distanced' consumers that have an interest in the consumption of 'healthy' food products. Hence, fresh food can be more easily sold outside of consumer groups: it holds the potential to upscale the impact of this type of consumer-producer relationships, with the possibility consumer groups develop into consumer cooperatives. Consumer groups though, most often dislike this option.

A 'closed' basket contains, like the open basket, seasonal products (varying along the year) and consequently varies in size and price. Consumers are supposed to accept the seasonal variation and sometimes, if products are unavailable, the replacement of a product by another. The closed baskets guarantee the producers' fresh products to be sold. The open basket perhaps loses this type of reciprocity in 'direct' producer-consumer relationships but might attract a wider circle of consumers and thus form an attractive alternative for producers as well. Often, participants in the more open platforms (the consumer cooperatives) obtain a general discount on the products they consume as compared to relative outsiders, which stimulates people to become a member, benefit from the discount and contribute to the volume of 'sustainable' food products consumed in the household. Hence, consumer cooperatives often grow larger in size than consumer groups and simultaneously aim at incorporating consumers.

#### **4.3 Decision making processes**

The decision making process in the consumer groups as well as in the cooperatives is based on 'democratic' principles and a search for consensus on the type of activities are organised and the products obtained. A general assembly is the main organisational body of all initiatives and meets varying from ones every week, every fifteen days or every month (one third of the respondents), to quarterly or each half year (another third) or yearly (again a third). Some initiatives combine the participation of consumers and producers, in others only consumers. In a third of the initiatives that responded a 'junta directiva rectora' (a management board) manages the daily operational functioning of the initiative (accountancy, the purchase of products). It consists of a small number of persons (maximum of ten) and meets on a weekly base or once a month. Most logically, this happens among consumer cooperatives

#### **4.4 Informal and formal structures**

Due to their size, consumer groups (15-20 participants) in general have a less structured, more informal management structure. Tasks rotate among the members and decisions are taken on the basis of group consensus. The meetings most often take place at the production site. Consumer cooperatives, often the larger consumer initiatives, have several committees in order

to get all the production, delivery and accountancy arranged. Tasks are divided in the following commissions, for example in 'delivery', 'economic aspects and accountancy', 'communication', 'supply':

- a) A 'delivery commission' decides on the criteria for product purchasing, the availability of products by means of the management of an Excel list (often composed of the 'uploads' of products on the list by the producers), and keeps an eye on the collection, delivery and traceability of the products at the list. This commission is in charge of obtaining the food products and manage relationships with the producers of suppliers: it makes sure that the products that are listed and chosen arrive to its consumers.
- b) In 'economic commission' acts as treasurer: in general, it controls bills and payments. It controls member quotas and arranges the payments to the producers. It carries out administrative tasks and secretary work. In some cases this commission writes a viability plan for the initiative and/or searches for subsidies and other contacts with public institutions.
- c) A 'communication commission' manages the internal and external communication of the initiative. Its main task is to inform people who are interested in join the association and the media, other institutions and associations. Furthermore it is in charge of carrying out activities that aim at increasing social awareness and responsible for the dissemination of ideology, objectives and issues that the initiative is concerned about. This is done by organising and/or participating in conferences, courses and colloquiums and building relationships with other organisations / similar initiatives. Another task is to 'watch' the general functioning of the initiative: the coordination of the different commissions and their interrelations.
- d) The 'commission supply' takes care in the search for new producers of fresh and/or elaborated products.

#### 4.5 Degrees of commitment

Some of the initiatives are 'open to the public', whilst other require 'high levels of involvement' of its consumers / participants. Besides flexible or fixed baskets, we refer to differences in tasks, requirements (or obligations), and the rights of participants in the 'management' of the different initiatives. Some limit the number of participants, and have waiting lists and/or regulations on the entrance of new participants. This is related to the type of consumption pattern that is strived for, and thus relates to the degree of local to global consumer-producer relationships and the related availability of (fresh) food products. The 'more local' the orientation of relationships, the stricter is the regulation on the access and the participation in the initiative. In consumer cooperatives tasks and responsibilities are administratively characterised. Participants are expected to share ideological departure points and can be part of the decision making process, but not necessarily need to become an active member (supply physical input in the daily functioning of the initiative) in order 'to belong' to the initiative. Often, the consumption of products is restricted to members. In consumer groups more 'physical involvement' is required and often these initiatives declare the need to share and assume similar reasons, goals, principles and philosophy among participants.

Common duties we traced are: actively joining decision-making processes (by being a consumer one 'accepts' the rules and regulations of the initiative; but attending a general assembly is hardly implemented as duty), taking up tasks in the different commissions (half of the initiatives require active participation in accountancy, delivery activities or field work), and paying a periodically

contribution to the initiative (and obtaining a general discount on the purchased food products). In some cases, a reimbursement is required which is returned when finishing the membership. In a single case in category two, an initiative obligates its producers to accomplish to the on fore-hand agreed production volume.

#### **4.6 Different profiles**

In general, work load often comes to a small group of people within the initiative. Obtaining and increasing the variety and volume of quality products remains a task that continuously demands attention. Problematic is to supply a 'complete' basket of products all year around; this constraints the objective of reducing the distance between production sites and consumer networks. If consumer-producer relationships are optimised along this factor, this limits the expansion of the initiative in terms of numbers of consumers.

Therefore most consumer groups intend to remain relatively small producer-consumer platforms. Instead of growing numbers of consumers per initiative, the number of these initiatives increases. Often, these initiatives consist of young and alternative, very motivated people with less family / work obligations. In consumer cooperatives the involvement of new consumers is constrained by the competition in terms of price and availability of conventional food products. On the one hand, relatively 'closed communities' (that apply requirements / compromises on the issue of baskets of fresh products) perform better in terms of binding consumers, whilst more freely accessible food circuits might attract easier consumers who consume both in the conventional and the alternative food circuits, and thus reach a wider public and have more 'development potential'. Regarding this issue, an important constraint is the 'lack of time' to start campaigns on informing the public and raising awareness. Often these initiatives consist of young families with children and people with busy jobs. Most of the work load is carried out by volunteers (also having a job elsewhere in society). A general wish among initiatives is spreading knowledge about the characteristics of both conventional and alternative ways of food production: how food is elaborated and about the distribution of 'benefits' in the food supply chain.

#### **4.7 Development constraints**

The increase of the access to fair and ecologically soundly produced food products is among the core activity of the newly evolving civic food networks. The degree of involvement of consumers is a determining factor in the success of the initiatives: a lack of consumers' compromises to the objectives of the platforms erodes their proper functioning. Consequently, the growth of initiatives and the increase in numbers of initiatives is constrained by a fundamental disconnection between conventional consumers and knowledge on sustainable food production. This disinterest hampers the evolvement of civic food networks in this explorative research; fighting this disinterest and the incorporation of a growing group of conscious consumers should be the concern and objective of a territorially grounded, sustainable rural development model.

### **5. Discussion and final remarks**

Within the pool of the identified more horizontally organised networks, about 100 initiatives act as civic food networks driven by critical consumers. In these networks consumers have empowered themselves and increasingly re-take control over the food chain and contribute to food sovereignty more in general. The hybrid character of the initiatives (balancing consumers and producers interests in the provision of healthy food) holds the promise to sustain food production. Despite the promising configuration of these initiatives, policy makers to a large extent neglect the relevance and the potential socio-economic impact of this type of initiatives.

In this paper we theoretically re-envisioned the marginal phenomena of emerging food networks and analysed how consumer initiatives differently organise and perceive their tasks. The further exchange of experiences among these initiatives and in particular the constructed 'prospects' we expect to result in learning about the different premises and limitations in varying contexts and as a result might strengthen the initiatives and their impact.

The wider spread of knowledge on the performance of the initiatives we think might 1) cause a rise of this type of initiatives, 2) enlarge the improvement of the multifunctionality performance of small-scaled and medium sized producers, 3) favour the territorial based integration of production and consumption, 4) increase the political impact of 'unfolding' social movements and hence 5) result in improving social-ecological performance levels of food production. The development and contribution to food sovereignty and sustainable rural development more in general depends on the adaptation of legal frames and the implementation of policy measures based on democratic, social and ecological values as internalised by these social movements. We invite consumers, politicians and scientists in all their different 'roles' to reflect on the incorporated and embodied message of civic food networks, and to respond and contribute to its attractiveness by becoming an associate.

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