

What characterize and differentiate alternative food production systems and chain

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Abstract: *Our contribution, using examples taken from western France, questions the reasons for using alternative approaches for increasing performance in food production and aims to specify the factors that may influence their durability.*

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Introduction

Over the last 15 years, alongside the combined effects of changes in the food market and the significant upheaval in the farming and food industry, we have witnessed the development and/or structuring of approaches for increasing performance based on both local and regional identity and that claim to be alternatives to approaches leading to homogeneous production. These initiatives have increased over recent years, taking many forms, and it is time to ask why they should be considered as valid alternatives. The hugely diverse nature of the cases studied requires some explanation : they differ in terms of their objectives, the type of initiator, (farmers, producers, small businesses, caterers, as well as institutions and development agencies), the local background, the link between region and increased product value, or the main food distribution channels in which they are found. In terms of market sector, these approaches are considered as alternatives when they break away from standards models as organic production, protected denomination of origin, but also all those activities based upon local relationships between producers and consumers, (direct sales, Community Supported Agriculture, shared promotion of agricultural products, theme markets) or more widely on the diversification of agricultural activities towards food processing on the farm and other subsidiary services (generally related to tourism). As regards geographic area, these alternatives are considered to depart from the usual logic of development. The accent has shifted to the (re)localization of the food supply chain, the creation of links with local parties outside the agribusiness network, refocusing on the form of value creation, and the choice of economic, self-sufficient production methods. Within this framework, the nature of the alternative is thus found in the affirmation, construction and increased performance of an identity, whether sector-based, or regional, or both. The demonstrable difference may involve a differentiation related to regional attributes, and to resources that must be qualified in terms of content and forms of enhancement within the framework of development projects.

In the light of these thought-provoking components, we venture the hypothesis that these approaches lead to radical change in producer-consumer relationships and contribute to redefine possible new agricultural commitments within geographical areas. More broadly speaking, they also lead to a modification of the relationship between farming and other rural activities, particularly through the emergence of subsidiary activities linked with tourism. Even so, while recent work on the topic primarily clarifies the main categories of human activities and highlights the main differences in terms of development trends, it does not look with enough perception at the determinant factors in the alternative approach, specifically from the perspective of changes in rural areas.

Our contribution, using examples taken from western France, questions the reasons for the alternative, even innovative, character of such approaches. Within this framework, in addition to providing definitions, our purpose is firstly to understand how approaches considered as alternatives contribute to the mutation of rural areas through the definition of new forms of organisation able to enhance local links between producers and consumers, and secondly to specify what may be the factors influencing their durability .

Analysis framework

As well as on-site data-gathering and literature review, a frame of reference with different levels was used to identify, though not exhaustively, some relevant indicators for qualifying the approaches according to the chosen classification.

A first level qualified the initiatives in terms of emergence (innovative person or organisation, motivations, farms characteristics, production and distribution system, dates of setting up, spatial location, links with other organisms), of internal operating procedures (status, modes of production, products supplied, internal governance, logistics, charters and in-house control methods), and of regulation (channels and modes of distribution, producer involvement in commercialisation, sales promotion and events, relationships with consumers, charters and quality labels, official controls, relationships with farming and non-farming organisations, regional links).

On the basis of this information, a second level analysed what could justify the more or less alternative character of an approach and the characteristics differentiating what is and what is not alternative. It also placed the approaches on a value scale according to their more or less alternative character. In the first place the main categories of action as described in recent works on the topic were used (anything differing from main production and distribution channels or from classical models of territorial development was considered alternative). However, the preliminary results have shown the inadequacies of these approaches and have led to the inclusion of entries relating to the modes of governance of the approaches and to the modes of relationship with consumers in the analysis. Secondly the outcomes of observations have been moderated according to the more or less emergent character of these approaches, including their territorial context (some types of approaches are pre-existent to main channels, such as direct sales on the farm or producers' markets).

The third level, evaluated factors weakening these approaches as well as those influencing their durability. This evaluation was primarily based upon observing approaches at three stages (emerging, structuring, regulating) and then comparing with external criteria describing regions and the agricultural production, to identify their strengths and weaknesses.

Results

The first results presented in this poster, based on the application of these ideas to purchasing groups and producer shops highlight, in addition to the diversity of observed situations, some indicators that are relevant for analysing their alternative character and allow a preliminary classification of these activities to be proposed (See poster). Similarly, they show the more or less renewed nature of the relationship with consumers and the implemented regional connections. It thus comes to light that new connections are determined at different scales and redefine the links with areas through new territorial meshing.

As well as the spatial insertion of these networks relying on new agricultural approaches, the regional link forms itself through producer and consumer (residents or tourists) relationships, through implicit and/or explicit references to product origin.

Identities thus make connections at different levels, according to the observed approaches. This leads us to re-examine the regional development notions from a variety of perspectives, mixing concepts of micro-development, spread, action networks and regional footprints.

Even so, such an evaluation based on the effects on rural area changes and on territorial development would not be complete without an analysis of the factors influencing the durability of these approaches. From this point of view, our results particularly indicate that the more alternative the approach, the more the human factor prevails. This represents as regards the governance and regulation of these approaches a significant potential weakness with respect to their durability.

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