

Canada - Europe Transatlantic Dialogue Policy Workshop
Local Sustainable Food Systems in Policy and Practice
March 3-5, 2011

Reconnecting Producers and Consumers in Europe:
Markets, Communities, Knowledge, Policies
Maria Fonte

The CORASON project (A cognitive approach to rural sustainable development: the dynamics of expert and lay knowledge) analysed various case studies of food re-localisation in ten different European countries, with a focus on the dynamics of knowledge. Here I will, emphasise the characterization of the different strategies of relocalisation with respect to differences in the agri-food contexts in which they are carried out, discuss the role and characteristics of 'local' (nested) with respect to 'global' markets, point to the relevance of policies in the different strategies of re-localisation, starting from some considerations of the Italian case.

1. Two Relocalisation Strategies: Contexts and Local Knowledge

The case studies analysed in ten European countries demonstrated the co-existence in Europe of different strategies of relocalisation. The most important of these are the '*valorisation of origin*' model, aiming at valorising traditional food, whose special qualities derive from a conjunction of 'natural and human factors', and the '*reconnection perspective*' aiming at establishing or strengthening social relations between producers and consumers. These two strategies of relocalisation are also referred to in the English literature as 'local' and 'locality' food (Maye and Ilbery 2007; Watts, Ilbery and Jones 2007). Local food (the reconnection perspective) is usually considered a more radical perspective of 'locality' food. The objective of 'locality' food is to integrate food with a local identity into dynamic (or distant) markets, while the objective of 'local' food is to strengthen the relationship between producers and consumers in the local market.

While it is extremely important to differentiate between the two strategies, it is necessary to point out that we are not referring to national strategies. In fact, we can find initiatives responding to both strategies in the same country, as I will try to show for Italy. We observe that they are linked to different agri-food contexts: 'food desert' in the case of the 'reconnection' strategy and 'marginalisation' in the case of 'valorisation-of-origin'.

In the research areas of Ireland, Scotland, Sweden, and Germany (Table 1) where initiatives of reconnection have been studied, food production is disconnected from local consumption and food distribution is based on large retailers who have outcompeted small producers from the local market. In these areas, food relocalisation is promoted as an opposition to the disempowering social and economic effects of globalisation.

These contexts contrast neatly with the territories where initiatives of food origin valorisation have been studied (Table 2). The Southern European research areas are characterised by the persistence of a more traditional agri-food system, including small-scale family farms and local food culture. Here, we often find the presence of many traditional food products from small farms, which are sold to consumers in both local and distant markets, often linked to producers by personal relations. We also find typical products that are certified according to EU or national geographic indication norms. In Valdres, Norway, typical food has a centuries long history, especially the two products taken as case-studies: fermented trout and salami. Similarly the Podhale region in Poland presents a strong heritage of local food culture which was preserved under the communist regime, not least a result of the traditional model of agriculture based on family farms.

In relation to the difference in context, there is another big difference between the two models, relating to the dynamics of different knowledge forms. In the food desert, created by the development of an agri-industrial food economy, the specificity of local resources (plant varieties, animal breeds, typical food) has been lost and with it the 'local knowledge' of that area. Farmers do not know how to cultivate with nonconventional techniques, therefore, local lay knowledge needs to be rebuilt through experience and exchange with other farmers. Scientific knowledge is not always reputed as useful or sufficient in the reconstruction of local food because the expert is seen as someone who has 'already done it'. It is interesting to examine how initiatives aimed at reskilling farmers and consumers in agri-food practices in two case studies: the Skye and Lochalsh Horticultural Development Association in Scotland, and the Eldrimner initiative in Jämtland, Sweden. Reestablishing local knowledge means learning *how* to do things: how to cultivate vegetables, how to prepare and refine food (e.g. how to make cheese, jams, salami, etc.).

In the context of 'marginalisation', local knowledge about food is maintained by farmers and consumers in the form of 'traditional knowledge'. The valorisation of local food sets in motion a process of recuperation and maintenance of traditional knowledge. While traditional artisanal knowledge remains the hallmark of product excellence, knowledge dynamics frequently lead to an interaction with experts (i.e. managerial or scientific experts) who are familiar with processes, norms, and regulations.

In a 'local' food project, the interaction with scientific knowledge is sporadic and occasional, while the priority is seen as the construction or reconstruction of the local knowledge of the area. The two forms of knowledge (local and scientific) remain separate. In the process of valorisation of the territorial origin of food, traditional knowledge interacts more often with scientific knowledge, creating opportunities for the integration of local and professional forms of knowledge. This may lead to a *Mode 2* science (Nowotny et al. 2001; Kloppenburg 1991), or an integration/dialogue between the two forms of knowledge. However, there also exists a greater risk of appropriation of traditional knowledge.

2. Strategies of Reconnection in Italy: The Experience of Solidarity Purchasing Groups

As underlined above, we are not referring to different national strategies or models. To avoid any misunderstanding, I will provide some data on the diffusion of alternative short supply chains in Italy since the 1990s, as a response to the 'reconnection' strategy.

Italy experienced an explosion and a strengthening of initiatives aimed at reconnecting producers and consumers. These ranged from more traditional to more innovative actions including on-farm selling, farmers' markets, and solidarity purchasing groups. According to a survey by Coldiretti Agri2000 (2010), 66,300 farms practice direct selling to consumers, with an increase of 64% since 2001. In Italy, there are more than 700 farmers' markets and about the same number of Solidarity Purchasing Groups; 17% of Italian consumers regularly purchase from farmers.

Among these, the most innovative experience is surely that of the Solidarity Purchasing Groups (GAS is the Italian acronym). GAS are groups of families (or consumers) who share an opposition to the dominant model of consumption and try to build an alternative solidarity economy by changing the way they buy their food (and other goods).

Since the first GAS was born in Fidenza (Parma) in 1994, they have multiplied rapidly and today there are more than 700 GAS connected to national and local networks (www.retegas.org).

Each GAS may be a formal or informal group, usually consisting of around 20-30 families. If it grows beyond that, then another group is organised, which may be under the supervision of the original one. Maintaining a small organizational size is considered important in order to facilitate the development of personal relationships among all the members of the group.

In each group, a few coordinators (who may periodically change) organise the provision of food or other goods in direct contact with producers. Generally local producers are chosen through personal contacts or information from other GAS, based on sustainability, locality, and transparency

criteria. Goods are delivered in points of collection, which can be a public place (e.g. a town square) or the headquarters of a social or political organisation (often a fair trade shop).

3. Articulating the Concept of Market and Locality

We are very familiar with research on the commoditization of food. In light of these new experiences of relocalisation and re-embedding of food, should we talk of a process of de-commoditization?

Local food is not only about short travelling distances and environmental sustainability. Geographical proximity is also important because it makes face-to-face interaction between producers and consumers possible. The shortness of the local food chains makes it possible, in some cases, to trace food back to the individual farmer who produced it, which enables dynamics of *trust* to be established in the local community. In this way, food production is recontextualised within the formal and informal social relationships that constitute the basis for community life. Partially protected or separated from global competition, local economies encourage values different from the suffocating market law of profit. These include respect for natural resources, attention to cultural and biological diversity, economic sustainability for small farmers, social justice and food sovereignty (Fonte 2008, 2010).

Local food points, such as the local market, can act as potential drivers for the construction of new food communities. In so doing, local markets are strongly differentiated from global markets. This differentiation is discussed by Polanyi (1957): in contrast to the global market, that is, the self-regulating market that subordinates social life to its own rules, 'typical local market[s]...are an adjunct of local existence...are essentially neighbourhood markets, and though important to the life of the community, they nowhere showed any sign of reducing the prevailing economic system to their pattern' (Polanyi 1957: p.62-63). 'On the local market, production was regulated according to the needs of the producers, thus restricting production to a remunerative level. ... Local trade was strictly regulated' (Polanyi 1957: p.64). In other words, we can say that local markets are socially embedded.

More recently van der Ploeg, Nico Polman, Henk Oostindie and other colleagues from Wageningen University have used the concept of 'nested markets' as markets where the specificities of resources, place and networks are important. They propose to conceptualise such markets using the common pool resource theory and stress the relevance of collective actors and the need for hybrid forms of governance in these markets (Oostindie et al. 2010; Polman et al. 2010).

Going back to the two relocalisation strategies analysed in the CORASON project, we see cases of 'local food' travelling to distant markets. Are these markets less 'embedded' than markets for local consumers? On the grounds of CORASON results, I would suggest avoiding a dualistic vision and instead moving towards a 'continuum' of vision. For example, we often assume that social and geographical proximity coincide. However, in a world of increased mobility, this is not true. For example, in marginal rural areas, depopulated through emigration, local markets have declined and lost the ability to provide a sustainable livelihood for the local population. At the same time, migrants have not cut their relations to their place of origin and, in the distant places where they work, they often look for their 'native' food. We found that in many cases, local food travels to distant markets only to reach 'socially proximate' consumers or, to put it more simply, emigrants from Italy, Greece, Spain.

On the other side, it is well known that rural development strategies aim to revitalise local economies, both by valorising local food in distant markets and by attracting tourists. In a way, we are tracing different combinations of 'local' and 'distant' (nested, embedded) markets, and we find a range of possible combinations of relations between producers and consumers in this space, from the 'warm' sociality of direct exchange in local markets to the 'colder' negotiations of distant markets (Callon 1998).

Based on this evidence, we also need to reconceptualise the ‘local’, that is the ‘territory’. Rather than looking at ‘local’ as the opposite of ‘global’, we need to consider it as a different modality of governing food production around reconciled economic, social and environmental values. We need to think about the construction of the local, not as the definition of territorial boundaries (a ‘closure’), but rather as political collective action that runs through horizontally coordinated localities, which are connected with one another across regions, and are able to become interconnected, without becoming ‘cosmopolitan’ (Sassen 2006).

4. Policy Reflections

Local food systems respond to the societal challenges of our time, i.e. improving the environmental and social sustainability of local communities. Since the 1990s the PAC reform and the turn towards ‘quality’ and ‘multifunctionality’ in European agricultural policy, as well as the construction of the ‘Second Pillar’, the rural development policy, have created a favourable context for the relocalisation of food. This is especially the case, since the emphasis on productivity has left little room for an appreciation of the multifunctionality of agriculture and the biocultural diversities of agriculture and food. Going back to the two strategies of food relocalisation, we can reflect on which policies work better for each of them. Both strategies however, need multi-sector, multi-level policies.

European policies (in particular the regulation on organic agriculture - Council Regulation (EC) No 834/2007, that repeals the former Regulation (EEC) No 2092/91 - and that on the recognition of geographical indication (Council Regulation (EC) No 510/2006, repealing the former Regulation No 2081/92, on the protection of geographical indications and designations of origin for agricultural products and foodstuffs) have been extremely important in the strategy of quality and ‘origin’ valorisation. Local (municipal or departmental) interventions have been more important in the strategy of ‘reconnection’. We can think of public provision policies, city and land planning, local infrastructural policies or trade regulations. All these policies are under the competence of the sub-national authorities (in Italy, regions and municipality). But some national laws have also been important in the Italian experience of the reconnection strategy. For example, a very important national law (DL 228/2001) introduced the possibility for farmers (individually or associated) to trade other farmers’ products besides their own. This is to be done in minor quantities with respect to one’s own farm production, with fiscal incentives, and only under the condition that they are registered at the Chamber of Commerce in the ‘Register of Firms’.

In 2007, the national financial law also expressed the will to promote ‘the development of markets in which farmers could sell directly to consumers, satisfying their demand for products linked to the territory’ (legge Finanziaria 2007, art.1 comma 1.065, in Guidi 2009). At that (national) level, it was simply an omen, which was under the competence of the regional level to make effective at the time. In fact, it is at the regional (and municipal) level that most interventions in support of short supply chains, especially farmers’ markets are deliberated (Tuscany, Lazio, Piemonte, Calabria, Veneto). But I would say that it is precisely the convergence of policies at different levels that is important.

The relationship between GAS groups and institutions in general, is contradictory. On the one hand GAS were invisible to local and national institutions, while on the other, GAS wanted to defend their autonomy, in part through the informality of their organisation. Recently though, in many regions, GAS have been legally recognised as non-profit and formal associations that can participate in the provision of services connected to food/ nutrition literacy and education.

Finally I would put forward that what is essential are ‘hybrid’ multi-level / multi-subject policies, working synergistically and coherently - among levels and subjects: state, market, civil society, but also public as well as private individual and *collective* actors - towards the same objective, that of strengthening the local food system.

Bibliography

Callon, M. (ed.) 1998. *The Laws of the Markets*. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell.

Fonte, M. Papadopoulos A. 2010, *Naming Food after Places*, Ashgate.

Fonte, M. 2010. Introduction: Food Relocalisation and Knowledge Dynamics for Sustainability in Rural Areas in Fonte, M. Papadopoulos A., *Naming Food after Places*, Ashgate: pp.1-35. available at: <http://www.ashgate.com/isbn/9780754677185>

Fonte, M. 2008. Knowledge, food and place. A way of producing a way of knowing. *Sociologia ruralis* 48, 3: pp. 200-222; available at: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1467-9523.2008.00462.x/pdf>

Guidi, F. 2009. Filiera corta: percorsi di innovazione tecnici, organizzativi e sociali nella gestione strategica delle nicchie. Esperienze in Toscana e in Provenza. PhD Thesis, Alma Mater Studiorum, University of Bologna, available online at: http://amsdottorato.cib.unibo.it/2058/1/Guidi_Francesca_tesi.pdf

Kloppenburg J. Jr. 1991. Social theory and the de-reconstruction of agricultural science: local knowledge for an alternative agriculture. *Rural Sociology*, 56,4:pp.519-548.

Maye, D. Ilbery, B. 2007. Regionalism, Local Food and Supply Chain Governance: A Case Study from Northumberland, England, in *Alternative Food Geographies. Representation and Practices* edited by Maye, D., Holloway L., Kneafsey M. (eds.). Oxford, UK: Elsevier, 149-167.

Nowotny H., Scott, P. and Gibbons M. 2001. *Re-Thinking Science. Knowledge and the Public in an Age of Uncertainty*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Oostindie, H. et al. *The central role of nested markets in rural development in Europe*, paper presented at the seminar "Processi e Politiche per lo Sviluppo Rurale in Brasile, Cina e nell'Unione Europea: scambio di buone prassi e di esperienze di ricerca" February 2-4 2010, available online at: <http://www.reterurale.it/flex/cm/pages/ServeBLOB.php/L/IT/IDPagina/2643>

Polanyi, K. 1957 *The Great Transformation. The political and economic origin of our time*. Boston USA: Beacon Press.

Polman, N. et al. *Nested Markets with common pool resources in multifunctional agriculture*, paper presented at the seminar "Processi e Politiche per lo Sviluppo Rurale in Brasile, Cina e nell'Unione Europea: scambio di buone prassi e di esperienze di ricerca" February 2-4 2010, available online at: <http://www.reterurale.it/flex/cm/pages/ServeBLOB.php/L/IT/IDPagina/2643>

Watts, D., Ilbery, B. and Jones, G. 2007. Networking Practices Among 'Alternative' Food Producers in England's West Midland Region, in *Alternative Food Geographies. Representation and Practices* edited by Maye, D., Holloway L., Kneafsey M. (eds.). Oxford, UK: Elsevier, 289-307. Sassen, S. 2006. *Territory Authority Rights. From Medieval to Global Assemblages*, Princeton University Press.

TABLE 1. Re-connecting the producer and the consumer in the local food network

Ireland

Cahir Farmers' Market

The C.- Farmer Market (in Tipperary, South east of Ireland) was established by the C.- Development Association, a civil society organisation, with the aim of attracting people in the village of C- on Saturdays, and to promote the selling of a wide range of local products.

Scotland

Skye and Lochalsh Horticultural Development Association (SLHDA)

Isle of Skye Seafood (IOSS)

The Skye and Lochalsh Horticultural Development Association (SLHDA), in Scotland, was set up in 1995 by an economic development officer of the Highland Council. It is a network of actors committed to supporting horticulture on Skye and teaching horticultural skills that have gradually been lost.

Sweden

Eldrimner initiative.

Eldrimner is a rural network for small-scale refinement of agricultural products with a centre in Rösta, in the municipality of Ås, in Jämtland. The project is targeted to meet the needs of local small-scale food producers, farmers and entrepreneurs in the food-refinement business and aims at creating better conditions for small-scale production and distribution in the region.

Germany

Netzwerk Vorpommern

“Netzwerk Vorpommern” is a voluntary association promoted in 1995 by a group of active citizens who were organic food consumers. At the beginning, they founded a food-coop association, with the aim of establishing a regional network for environmentally-conscious consumers, promoting the creation of local market channels for organic products and strengthening the relations between organic producers and consumers. Then the initiative gradually grew, with various activities supporting new projects for a sustainable local and regional development

TABLE 2. Origin-of-Food Perspective
(Regional speciality products, consumed or not locally)

Portugal

Barrancos Cured Ham PDO certified

Barrancos Cured Ham Not certified

Spain

Utiel-Requena PDO wine

Requena sausages Protected Geographic Indication

Greece

Mavro Messenikola wine production “Quality Wine Produced in Specific Region” (VQPRD)

Nemea wine production (VQPRD)

Italy – South

The construction of the “*Aspromonte National Park Product*” certification

Fratelli Fazari Olive Oil Firm / Palizzi Wine IGT / Canolo local economy

Poland:

Oscypek cheese

Norway

Valdres rakfisk brand (traditional fermented fish)

Kurv frå Valdres BA (traditional salami)