

Local food systems: A GLOBAL SOLUTION?



In the 19th century, colonial empires and the industrial revolution radically transformed agrarian and food systems. Two centuries later, the environmental toll is heavy. Air, water and soil pollution, deforestation and the destruction of biodiversity are rampant. And what was once considered a major advance has failed to end food insecurity. Faced with this situation, a new trend has emerged: local food systems. This new paradigm presents local food as the path to healthy, nutritious food, fair prices, strengthening social ties and promoting resilience in the face of international crises. This paper asks: do local food systems really provide all these solutions?

What is a local food system?

Local food systems implies a temporal and spatial movement from the global to the local. The “global” takes the form of international markets and world trade characterized by long supply chains, i.e. food that is limited to a few industrially produced crops, travels thousands of kilometres, passes through numerous intermediaries and processors, and generally sold through supermarkets. This establishes several indicators for local food systems, such as distance travelled by food and agricultural input, the reduced number of intermediaries, agrobiodiversity and a sustainable production. However, these indicators remain relative. For the moment, no distance has been set at international level as an indicator of proximity. Each country has its own indicators for defining the local origin of a product, as well as its own concepts. In the European Union and the Walloon Region, for example, the terms “short network”, “proximity channels” and “local market” are used. The emphasis is on the reduced number of intermediaries (maximum 1) and the short distances between the farm and the consumer.

Local food systems imply a shift from the global to the local scale. Local food systems does not mean a “return to the past”. Although local markets are places of exchange rooted in the history of agriculture and regions, local food systems do not constitute a replica of the past. Since everything has changed: the environment, infrastructures, people, culture, the economy, and so on; local food systems are rather a way to reclaim food systems by and through space and people. This reappropriation is at the heart of this paradigm.

Local food system under the microscope

The implementation of local food systems, including small scale and local food channels, aims to meet the challenges that the conventional and predominant system, has not been able to meet: feeding the whole of humanity while preserving ecosystems. To achieve this objective, several interdependent postulates have been identified within the studies on the local food systems:

- 1 Products sold through small scale and local channels are healthier and more nutritious.**
- 2 Small scale and local channels strengthen social ties.**
- 3 Prices of products sold in small scale and local channels are fairer.**
- 4 Small scale and local channels are more sustainable.**
- 5 Small scale and local food channels are more resilient in the face of international crises.**

1

The literature shows that products sold through small scale and local channels are not fundamentally healthier and more nutritious than products sold through long channels. Nutritional quality depends above all on how products are grown, processed and the time elapsed between their harvest and consumption. On the other hand, there is a positive correlation between the consumption of local produce and a healthy diet, as people who consume local produce generally: prefer it organic and fresh; eat more vegetables and eat homemade meals more often.

2

Direct sales outlets, such as farm sales and markets, bring farmers and consumers together. Other mechanisms exist to bring people together when there is an intermediary, such as farm visits,

newsletters and festive gatherings. Farmers who take part in these activities are generally the least visible, such as small or new farms, women-run farms or organic farms. Social proximity enables these farms to integrate feedback from their customers, to reconnect them to their seasonal products and to “rediscover pride in their profession”. For consumers, the search for this connection concerns not only the content of their plate, but also their social and food environment, in other words, the area they live in.

3

The literature shows that it is difficult for farmers to set a fair price, as most do not know their production costs, and it would be costly for them to do so. Therefore, most farmers set their prices according to the market. However, most farms are not economically profitable. Indeed, most farmers in the OECD depend on public subsidies. Some combine cereal growing with market gardening to diversify their income. Still others use central purchasing agencies to supplement their vegetable supply.

4

In terms of environmental sustainability, it appears that transport accounts for barely 10% of greenhouse gas emissions from farming and food systems, with the majority of GHGs emitted during the production phase. Agricultural practices are largely responsible for the degradation of the environment, the destruction of the ecosystems and the increase of the GHGs. When we look at the occupation of agricultural land and its purpose, it becomes clear that a large proportion of cultivated farmland is destined for export, such as for livestock feed, agrofuels or agro-industry, and not for feeding local populations. Local food systems are not synonymous with environmental sustainability, as this depends above all on cultivation practices, but it does contribute to local food security.

5

Resilience, like environmental sustainability, depends more on agricultural practices than on the distances food travels. Organic farming, by using organic inputs (e.g. fertilizers, pesticides) and not petrochemical-derived inputs, frees itself from oil price fluctuations on international markets. On the other hand, transports still depend on these fluctuations. Direct sales therefore enable us to achieve greater autonomy and resilience. But, this resilience is not automatically reflected in prices, as these are fixed on the market.

Headwinds and winds in favour of Local food system

Despite the public’s enthusiasm and public policy support for local food systems in high-income countries, between 2007 and 2016, only 15% of European farms sold their produce through direct sales. And with good reason: the obstacles to their development are many and varied in nature, ranging from political structures and the organization of agrarian markets to cultural and ideological barriers. Public institutions have to cope with two centuries of industrialization and globalization, which have gradually destroyed local agrarian and food systems. Relocating them therefore requires identifying the mechanisms that hinder and destroy them.

Three major obstacles to local food systems:

- 1 Agricultural policy in favour of industrial and export agriculture**
- 2 Hegemony of industrial agriculture in schools and scientific research**
- 3 Markets and infrastructures designed for industrial agriculture and long circuits**

Conclusion

Despite, local food systems have many advantages, they also have limits. Indeed, they encourage healthy, balanced diets by providing access to fresh fruit and vegetables. They support the development of market gardening, particularly organic farming. As, small-scale organic farming is more resilient from international markets crises, prices still depend on the market and do not a guarantee a fair remuneration for farmers. Fair prices depend on the policy and not the market. However, discernment is also needed, as local agrarian and food systems are not intrinsically sustainable, but depend on agricultural practices and models. Local food systems put producers, consumers and local governments at the heart of the food system. Although local food systems alone cannot meet all contemporary challenges, they are an essential part of the answer.



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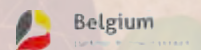
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The Phosphore collection is a series of studies launched by the SIA collective (Autre Terre, Humundi and Iles de Paix) on the challenges of food systems. It is characterised by the analysis of contested issues that drive the decision-making arenas of food systems. It seeks to understand the reading grids that underlie political discourses, the competing arguments and their scientific validity. Each issue is intended to provide an overview of a debate, and aims to equip readers in the controversy.

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