

# Local food consumption and production: cultural and institutional barriers

*Erik Mathijs*

*Department of Earth and Environmental Sciences, University of Leuven,  
erik.mathijs@ees.kuleuven.be*

## Introduction

Local food systems (LFS) are systems in which consumers prefer to buy their food from local sources for both social and environmental reasons. Often, but not necessarily, such systems are based on direct contact between producers and consumers. The role of intermediary institutions, both governmental and non-governmental, is often a prerequisite for the establishment and sustainability of local food systems. Since the 1990s, there is increasing interest from consumers in local food systems. Key to local food systems is that consumers purchase their food from predominantly local sources. A host of marketing channels is used for this: on-farm sales, farmers' markets, community-supported agriculture, farmer cooperatives, box schemes and various other ways. But also institutions such as food banks, school lunch programmes, local nutrition education and food policy councils can be part of local food systems. As the central theme of local food systems is that the distance from producer to consumer is as short as possible, they are often denoted as short supply chains (Mathijs et al., 2006).

Local food systems are also argued to be a key component to promote the sustainability of agriculture. A particular concept describing LFS is the foodshed that consists of "selfreliant, locally or regionally based food systems comprised of diversified farms using sustainable practices to supply fresher, more nutritious foodstuffs to small-scale processors and consumers to whom producers are linked by the bonds of community as well as economy" (Kloppenburg et al., 1996). The term foodshed, borrowed from the concept of a watershed, was coined as early as 1929 to describe the flow of food from the area where it is grown into the place where it is consumed. Recently, the term has been revived as a way of looking at and thinking about local, sustainable food systems.

The establishment of local food systems is based on a combination of supply-driven, demand-driven and institutional factors. The most crucial factor in the emergence of local food systems is the consumer. Research has confirmed the importance of consumer concern for food safety, animal welfare, environmental effects, regional development and the interest in better quality and fresher food (Nygard and Storstad, 1998; Hinrichs, 2000; Vannoppen et al., 2001; La Trobe, 2001; Weatherell et al., 2003). Part of the reason can be found on the supply side. Farmers turn to direct marketing practices as a key strategy for survival. However, to establish local food systems substantial transaction costs need to be overcome. Cooperation is crucial in saving on such transaction costs (Verhaegen and Van Huylenbroeck, 2001). Finally, various governmental and non-governmental institutions can facilitate the emergence of local food systems.

In Belgium, current local food systems find their origin in farmers' markets in the beginning of the 1980s. Later, also vegetable box schemes were established following Dutch examples.

Food teams have been established since 1996. Presently, efforts to stimulate local food consumption are predominantly organic produce. Pretty (2002) argues that local food systems or foodsheds have two aims: (1) to eliminate some of the negative transport externalities by shortening the supply chain, and (2) to help build trust between producers and consumers, ensuring that more of the money spent on food actually gets back to farmers.

## **Barriers to the development of ‘the local’**

Under pressure of a manifold of driving forces, Western European agriculture is in transition from a supply-driven commodity-based system towards a demand-driven system bringing forth differentiated food of high quality, both with respect to product and to production process. According to Geels (2004) a transition from one system to another is a dynamic, multi-level process that can be described as follows:

- A sector is characterized by a set of socio-technical regimes, that is, the rules (formal and informal) by which production and consumption in the sector occur;
- Radical innovations occur in protected places or technological niches in which experimentation is possible;
- Developments in the wider landscape (e.g., climate change, cultural shifts) put pressures in the existing regimes which creates windows of opportunity for novelties;
- Different niches are gradually linked together, take advantage of the windows of opportunity and start competing with the existing regimes.
- The new technology takes over, defines a new socio-technical regime and influences the landscape.

However, system change is often hampered by the presence of system imperfections, which open the door for government intervention. Woolthuis et al. (2005) have categorized system failures as follows:

- Infrastructural failures: infrastructure refers both to the physical infrastructure (IT, telecom, roads, etc.) and the science and technology infrastructure;
- Institutional failures: institutions refer both to hard or formal institutions, such as rules, and soft or informal institutions, such as culture and values;
- Interaction failures: interaction refers to the linkages between actors that can be too strong resulting in myopia or too weak resulting in lack of cooperation and blind spots;
- Capabilities failures: this refers to a lack of competences or resources especially with small and medium-sized enterprises.

Using insights based on case study research and interviews with key informants, Mathijs et al. (2006) identified the following system failures for local food systems:

- Universities, applied research stations and other science and technology actors are still geared towards the existing mainstream of commodity production. The development of knowledge relevant for the LFS niches occurs itself in niches within these actors. A typical problem is that LFS are not able to generate the necessary co-financing for applied research projects compared to mainstream sub-sectors.
- The rules governing the agricultural and food sector are based on the old system of strictly separated production stages. In LFS, however, production stages are reintegrated leading often to a conflict with the existing rules. This may refer to food safety regulation, transportation, retail, zoning regulations, etc. But also producer-consumer relationships in LFS often do not fit into the strict categorization of modern society in domains such as social security, fiscality, etc.
- Networks tend to be limited to a small group of people sharing the same assumptions and having established trust relationships. This refers both to other farmers, advisors and consumers. This may lead to myopia towards developments outside. This is also clear from the learning journeys that actors in local food systems undertake to kindred initiatives and the invitation of experts who are part of the same inner circle. At the same time, weak ties with external partners outside the LFS sector are generally lacking.
- Farmers and other actors in LFS often lack the appropriate managerial and relational competences to develop their initiatives, including the ability to question their own mental models. These findings are consistent with the general literature on inter-firm collaborations. For example, Ring and van de Ven (1994) emphasized the importance of congruent sense making, personal relationships and the trade-off between trust and formality for successful cooperation.

In retrospect, I would argue that institutional failures, and particularly soft or informal institutions are the most critical system failure. This view is substantiated by a recent report prepared for the Standing Committee for Agricultural Research (Freibauer et al., 2011) that points to the existence of two competing narratives. A narrative is a discourse that is based on a coherent set of assumptions and principles underpinning and communicating a certain worldview. Assumptions and principles relate to claims about what in the view of a particular narrative are the problems, the underlying causes and the solutions that should be adapted. Freibauer et al. (2011) refer to the dominant discourse as the Productivity Narrative—the socio-technical regime in the language of transition theory, while they call the alternative narrative the Sufficiency Narrative. Tomlinson (2012) also points to the dominant imperative of increasing food supply as a necessary strategy to tackle food security in the future.

How does this affect the development of local food systems? The main issue here is that current formal and informal institutions are still shaped by a dominant discourse of productionism, despite the discourse of demand-driven supply chains. This not only hinders the development of alternative strategies, as discussed before, but it also affects the very nature of local food systems itself. In fact, under the umbrella of local food systems is a diversity of initiatives that not all have the same ‘DNA’. This poses the question what local food systems are *really* about. Are they one of many strategies *within* the prevailing capitalist system of a post-political consensus? Or are they strategies *outside* the prevailing system, governed by a new set of rules and institutions, and challenging the capitalist system in a grassroots way, and thus political per definition?

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