Developing effective local food networks

Effective networks are required for consumers to buy food that has been produced locally between participants, including consumers, producers and retailers. New research into local food schemes in Europe demonstrates how different forms of knowledge, such as scientific and lay knowledge, need to be managed to enable participants to be actively involved in the process.

In many parts of Europe, ‘food deserts’ have arisen where consumers have no choice but to buy food from supermarkets and all connection with local producers has been lost. The importance of consuming local food has received attention recently as a means of encouraging sustainable rural development and of reducing ‘food miles’. The rising popularity of the local food movement can also be viewed as a reaction to the organic certification movement, increasingly seen as aimed at wealthy consumers and promoting products that may be shipped long distances. The authors differentiate between two main tendencies in Europe to strengthen local food networks. These are:

- the move to rebuild local networks of food production and consumption
- the promotion of typical local specialities destined for more distant consumers.

For example, the European Union scheme for Protected Denomination of Origin (PDO) which certifies the origin of food products.

There are also two main forms of knowledge involved in developing local food: lay, local, tacit and traditional, and expert, technical, scientific and managerial. Food relocalisation projects in 10 European countries showed that the balance of knowledge and power in local food networks varies according to whether the scheme is aimed at reconnecting local producers with local consumers, or whether it is aimed at valuing food specialities by certification.

In Ireland, Scotland, Sweden and Germany, food is typically organised by large supermarkets and there is a lack of a strong local food culture. However, since the 1990s there has been a growing trend towards relocalisation of food with new schemes emerging such as farmers’ markets, community supported agriculture and training courses for farmers in local food production. These schemes have tended to be consumer-driven and aimed at addressing concerns about food miles, quality and community revitalisation. Economic sustainability is not usually stressed as an important factor. In these contexts, there is a strong need to rebuild lay knowledge that has been lost through delocalisation, for example learning which crops suit local soil types. Scientific knowledge can help with this adaptation process in some circumstances.

In contrast, countries such as Greece, Portugal, Spain, Italy, Norway and Poland have a stronger local food culture. Food is often sold through local markets and traditional agriculture persists through small family farms. Here the emphasis tends to be on sustaining local livelihoods and economies. In these contexts, many small-scale producers have retained traditional knowledge originating from pre-industrial times. However, there is increasing focus on the production of certified speciality foods, such as olive oil and ham, which requires ‘experts’ to award certificates. This creates new hierarchies of power and has potential to diminish the inclusive nature of local food networks.

The researchers point out that a better understanding of the individual contexts of local food schemes will affect how they need to be monitored for social, environmental or economic impacts. They believe that the opportunities for diversified models of rural development based on local food are great, but the role of the expert and of scientific knowledge has to be carefully considered to avoid risks of excluding the local community from the benefits arising from local food production.

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