



Amsterdam Food Strategy, The Netherlands

Urban-rural linkages enhancing European territorial competitiveness - Mini case study on food chains

Short description of the setting

Amsterdam, the Dutch capital, and other major cities (Rotterdam, Den Haag, Leiden, Haarlem and Utrecht) encircle the “Green Heart”, a relatively thinly populated area in the Randstad region. It is characterized by rural functions which contrast sharply with the urban areas around it. Agriculture, the preservation of nature and recreation are the primary activities in the “Groene Hart”. However, linkages between the city of Amsterdam and the surrounding area until recently have been few with respect to the consumption of regional food. But with almost 40% of Amsterdam’s ecological footprint caused by the provision of food (transport excluded) and unhealthy eating habits and lifestyles causing considerable negative impacts on citizens’ physical well-being (s.a. obesity), there was plenty of reason for the city of Amsterdam to develop a strategy on healthy, sustainable, regional food chains, with special emphasis on urban-rural relationships.

Innovative activity

With the “Proeftuin Amsterdam” (a play on words: test garden, taste garden, or field of experiment), the city of Amsterdam has initiated a multi-faceted strategy aimed at creating a more environmentally-friendly food chain that will benefit urban and rural dwellers alike. Local food production, improved eating habits and a countryside able to meet the food and recreation demands of urban dwellers are critical elements of the strategy. The approach derives from the concept of the Sustainable Food Chain, covering all steps from production, processing, and distribution of food to selling, preparing, consumption and waste disposal - with a central position for the consumer. It is intended to ensure that, at any step in this food chain, health-related, environmental, economic, social and cultural requirements are taken into consideration and matched with the interests of key organisations, both in the city and the countryside.

The “Proeftuin Amsterdam” strategy also relates to current policy themes in Amsterdam’s Green Metropolis Plan and combines policies, initiatives and activities which serve the following objectives in Amsterdam and the surrounding region:

- provide naturally-grown and preferably local food for everybody while minimizing environmental impacts
- promote healthy eating habits, esp. among children & young people.
- achieve a balance between the demands of urban consumers and the supply of food products from the surrounding countryside
- preserve the surrounding agricultural landscapes of Amsterdam.

Amsterdam’s strategy entails launching discussions in the city and the region to find common interests, and building alliances between public and private actors such as schools and institutions, farmer associations, movements for the promotion of traditional and organic foods, and commercial firms. Thus, the initiators invited the mentioned stakeholders from all over the region to fill the objectives of the action plan with concrete targets and projects in May 2007. The results were grouped in four main themes of the action programme, i.e.: ‘health and taste’, ‘the environment and animal welfare’, ‘local and natural production’ and ‘marketing, knowledge, employment and training’.

As an umbrella strategy, the ‘Proeftuin’ Amsterdam serves to bring together initiatives with respect to healthy and sustainable food chains, supported by the web site of Proeftuin Amsterdam as a main communication tool and online portal to (sustainable) food issues in the Amsterdam region. But the ‘Proeftuin’ is also the driving force behind projects to raise the awareness of citizens for good, healthy and tasty food. A steering committee was appointed, consisting of representatives of

municipal, regional and national authorities, to oversee and coordinate the various projects and their implementation, or their monitoring respectively.

As one of these initiatives, local food markets are organized by community groups in close collaboration with the city boroughs, organizations like SlowFood and farmers associations in the region. Also the function of the centrally-located wholesale food market is being reconsidered: as a sustainable fresh food hub especially for regional products it serves the whole city.

In co-operation with associations for regional products and with national bodies, Amsterdam and the neighbouring provinces have started mapping supply and demand of regional products in order to overcome existing problems in the delivery of fresh and local foods. Amsterdam has also issued municipal guidelines for the public procurement of (organic; regional) food in municipal canteens, and some local farmers switching from conventional to organic food production methods are supported by subsidies. Together with Syntens – an innovation network for small and medium enterprises, the province of Noord-Holland and the municipalities of Zaanstad and Amsterdam have initiated further projects to stimulate innovation and sustainability in food-related enterprises. Amsterdam recently joined PURPLE: the Peri Urban Regions Platform Europe, as well as an international network of metropolitan regions to exchange experiences and good practices for regional food systems and the role of the public sector in it.

Competitiveness contribution

The Proeftuin action programme for healthy and sustainable food chains has shown impressive impact and resonance. Already in the first year after its initiation in 2007 its various activities have raised citizens' awareness of the resources, qualities and products of the agricultural areas surrounding Dutch cities. This is especially evident for initiatives in the field of education (schools gardens, school meals, farm-related projects) and the promotion of regional markets to connect producers and consumers. All in all the Proeftuin Amsterdam testifies to the good sense of connecting environmental and health aspects of food systems with the preservation of the peri-urban area around Amsterdam. This rural landscape has traditionally been a vital asset for city dwellers in providing open space for recreation as well as cultural and educational resources. But now there is renewed emphasis on peri-urban agriculture and horticulture and the related activities that reinforce these assets. Such regional food strategies can be instrumental in meeting the challenges Europe will have to face with respect to changing global food markets and demographic developments.

- Local production can be more efficient e.g. in reducing food miles;
- It provides opportunities to offer fresh and healthy food to city dwellers;
- It raises awareness about the identity and origin of products, linking them to the landscape as well as the local cultural heritage;
- It contributes to the quality of the peri-urban landscape including its management with respect to environmental benefits e.g. biodiversity;
- It encourages diversification and innovation of urban-rural relationships, thus promoting future economic growth in peri-urban areas.

The programme has not only succeeded in building alliances between various actors in the cities, but has also established close cooperation with neighbouring municipalities and regional, even national authorities – increasingly making Amsterdam and the surrounding rural landscapes an interlinked region for food consumption and production.

Contact and references

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<http://www.proeftuin.amsterdam.nl/>
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