

# Common People's Sustainability: Connectivity within a Food System Rhizome

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*They say that sustainable development has been around for about 20 years and not very much progress has been achieved. However, this view may refer to difficulties in identifying sustainable developments in everyday business activities without particularly visible publicity. Currently, new serious activity towards sustainable food systems, starting from retailing, processing industries and farmers as well as other food system actors seem to strive to connect the supply chains for sustainable food. This paper makes use of the notion of 'social rhizomes' structured as different networks to identify sustainable developments in actors' lived experience. Furthermore, the notion of connectivity, as the ability to activate heterogenous ideas, persons, materials and spaces for sustainability within a 'social rhizome' is used to explain the progress towards sustainability within local, national and global food system. Empirically, the paper is based on two presentations given on the Finnish Organic Conference 2008. The presentations were analysed for the progress towards sustainability within social rhizomes structured as chanceworks, meshworks, strategic networks and socially overlaid networks. Results suggest, that connectivity between different networks leads to transformations between the networks towards more shared economic, environmental and socio-cultural benefits, which can be identified as common people's sustainability.*

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Food system, social rhizome, connectivity, networks, sustainability

### 1. Introduction

#### Food system as a social rhizome

"I was absolutely pleased about your smashed beetrootpotato product before Christmas... Can I still buy the delicious product somewhere in Helsinki?" asks a customer of a retail chain in his/her customer feedback. The product is a new organic convenience food item, developed by a series of encounters between actors of both organic and conventional food networks in Finland, sold under retailers' organic label. This positive experience of sustainability was not necessarily translated into such by the customer nor the retailer. 'Massiv facts' like Our Common Future with all the political, programmatic and practical consequences on levels from local to global may appear disconnected for common people in their everyday lives. Therefore, the commonly felt claim that sustainability has been around for 20 years and not much progress has been made, may be a premature and partly mistaken evaluation. Rather, within the food system there seems to be several lines of

thoughts and actions towards implementation of sustainability, but these are not necessarily recognised literally as such by the common people nor the researchers, and therefore remain unidentified (Mikkola and Begrström 2007). This paper sets off to look for evidence about sustainable developments within food systems by focusing on the lived experience as lines of thoughts and actions for sustainability among 'common people'. The paper uses the theoretical concept of 'social rhizomes' and connectivity within them, understood as the ability of 'the social' to link up with new persons, materials and spaces. Rhizome was originally presented by Deleuze and Guattari (1987) as a metaphor for social relations taking place between different, heterogenous actors, leading to events unfolding from those encounters. In this paper, the social rhizome is further structured in different networks in order to take into account the interactions between existing networks and those taking shape. The findings are based on empirical material from the Finnish Organic Conference 2008, where two cases of increase of organic food market and decrease of environmental burdens were presented (Luomupäivät 2008).

## 2. Theoretical background

Deleuze and Guattari (1987) presented their notion of rhizome as a metaphor based on biological exemplar, the mycelium growing and decaying dynamically in multiple directions, depending on the connection with organic matter and water. In case of connection, the substrate and water transform into new mycelium, resulting in ongoing expansion of the rhizome. By rhizome, Deleuze and Guattari present and confirm the world as fluid, immanent and connective whereby nature and society are continuously reformed by new knowledge and events (Styhre and Sundgren 2005). The rhizome presents links between heterogenous traits, signs, and even non-sign states (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) and offers connections which may again produce new opportunities for action (Styhre and Sundgren 2005). These connections have rarely evident roots or necessary consequences, which asserts the contingent character of simultaneous and serial lines of thoughts and actions in the lived experience. Styhre and Sundgren (2005) have used the rhizome as a platform for studying creativity; the interest of this paper is in sustainability, which actually comes close to creativity as being defined as a reformist and imaginative discourse without fixed aims or methods (Dryzek 1997). How do rhizome knowledge and events unfold towards sustainability out of connections in the lived experience of common people? Common people do act within their social rhizomes, through connections, which also may be understood as networks, some more extended and dynamic as well as stable and structured than others. To give the social rhizome more structure, it is further seen as networks, categorised as chanceworks, Escobarian meshworks, strategic networks (Jarrillo 1988) and socially overlaid networks (Mikkola 2008). The chancework is understood as the most contingent encounter, with most open consequences; meshwork is used to note a conventional social encounter, but without more committed relation. Strategic networks include shared economic benefits and mutual support for differentiation of activities, and socially overlaid networks function in most committed ways sharing risks and efforts as well as benefits. The social rhizome structured as different networks may be used to analyse the connections and their mental and material expressions between actors and flows from local to global; who is connected with which flows and how, by whom, through what kind of networks, with what kind of consequences, when and for how long.

### 3. Empirical material and methodology

The naturalistic empirical data for research of social rhizomes would be ideal but practically impossible to collect; one would need to get confidential and contingent material from a number of encounters in highly unconnected environments. However, the story telling mode offers the possibility for a subject to compact the events of his/her lived experiences for the audience, whereby the subjects present their understanding of events (Linde 1993). In story telling, the subjects are free to deal with any personal, social and material matter they consider as meaningful, and thereby build valid ways to perceive the development in question from their point of view. In this paper, a Finnish two-day Organic Conference 2008 (Luomupäivät 2008) was taken as a point of departure for tracking two cases of social rhizomes in action for sustainability through their different networks, classified here as chanceworks, meshworks, strategic networks and socially overlaid networks. The first case was a Finnish organic vegetables rhizome and the second a Swedish organic rhizome. The ecological, economic and socio-cultural expressions informed by the conference presentations were identified in terms of commonly agreed orientation for sustainability; more financial resources, more environmental benefits and more positive and 'healthy' social-cultural idiosyncracies pointing to 'good life'. A social rhizome model is visualised here in narrative form (Linde 1993). It is clear that these stories do not cover the encounters of the whole social rhizome, but only the ones deemed worth sharing by the subjects in the conference talk. These stories express no 'final' truth, but only a socially mediated version of it. However, both cases represented consorted activities, not depending on one or few subjects only, and the first case was also presented by four professionals participating in the social rhizome events. The rhizome presents no 'from the beginning to the end -development', but deals with limited time frame, connected with rhizomes of the past and leading to those of future. The concept of social rhizomes and story telling may also be said to conform well to the way people think and act; these analytical concepts seem to comply with the lived experience.

### 4. Active social rhizomes

The Finnish organic vegetables rhizome was initiated within a large retail chain. The retail management recognised the positive market development of washed organic carrots sold under retailer's label. They valued their label because customers valued it, and wanted to develop the market for organic products because of commitment for environment and sustainability besides interest in profit development. The research chemist at the retail chain discovered that the carrot purée could be a product needed by customers, since during Christmas time traditional dishes were made of carrot but the peeling and smashing was largely given up in 'convenience food economy'. The chemist contacted the vegetable broker supplying organic and conventional, domestic and imported vegetables. The broker had extensive networks, and had also connected himself with a co-operative of organic farmers, who became his suppliers. One of the big carrot farmers in his networks identified the new product as a solution to the problematic side flow of second class carrots. The process phase of the product needed a contact; the executive director of a small former dairy had recently lost a big volume product of several hundreds of thousands of euros from his assortment. The director was not so happy with the process trial introduced by the

broker, but he needed the replacement although he did “not believe in Santa”. In order to create a reasonable price for the new product he changed the pricing from fixed kilogram price to a percentage price of the product weight. The research chemist, the manufacturer and his workers developed the process parameters to yield a combination of fresh taste with minimum of microbes in vacuum package. The carrots were peeled by a preprocess entrepreneur included in the transport phase, called to work by the broker. The retailer wanted to promote organic market by offering products at reasonable prices and the value added was shared between all actors in the chain; there were no on-the-spot profits. Actors agreed on steady income, long life cycle and position for the product on the shelves of the retailer. The 30% increase of the sales of the organic product took place during the first three months, supported by 34 top magazines used in advertisements for less than one week. The broker appealed the “organic folks” in the conference: “if you know somebody who has organic carrots in surplus, please inform us, we need them.” The rhizome actors agreed on that consumers need value added in the product, including even quality, good taste, easyness of use, healthyness, environmental friendliness, availability through the year and a trusted label. For the retail chain, the future seems more organic than they thought. Today, several new vegetable products are made by the same concept. This story captures the progress of an organic product group, participating in the overall progress of Finnish organic market, which is only about 1% of total food market. (Luomupäivät 2008).

The Swedish organic rhizome was presented by the retail chain Coop Sweden, which has about 20% market share of the Swedish retail market. The total sales of Coop Sweden correspond to 1,2 billion euros, and 5% of their total sales is organic food, growing about 20% yearly. The share of organic food of the total Swedish food market is about 2,6% (Luomupäivät 2008), which emphasises the work done by Coop Sweden. The initial bend for organic food took place already in the 1960s, when Silent Spring was published and an appeal made by Coop members for environmentally friendly food. Further appeals were made to Coop in 1984, and the retail chain developed their mission program for food. In 1986-1987 they put notices in the newspapers for organic producers to contact them, in order to build up organic supply chains on local and regional basis. Later in 1991 a symbol for organic products was developed: Änglamark logo indicated organic food, but also environmentally friendly and ‘fair’ products in general. Furthermore, in environmental analysis made by the Coop management also agriculture, energy, packaging, waste and knowledge/competencies of the employees were identified as core aspects in environmental protection by their food chains. Following these lines of thought, the actions were taken to decrease the use of agrichemicals, fossil fuels and synthetic fertilizers, as recorded by Coop. There were several sales targets for organic products, ranging from 8,5 to 10% in the near future. In order to offer the message about organic products visible for consumers, a new consumer receipt with green tree signifying organic groceries was developed. The receipt was based on data about organic products within Coop management systems. The consumers are also informed about organic product options weekly from Coop, whereby 3,8 million households receive direct marketing material. So far, Coop does not approve GMOs but is active towards increasing biodiversity. As a huge future vision, Coop Sweden looks forward to marketing 100% organic produce from all over the world. (Luomupäivät 2008).

## 5. Rhizome specific development

The first social rhizome case started within a strategic network, as a retailer chemist, with a new product idea, contacted the broker of organic first class carrots, a success product under retailer's label. The broker had extremely extensive networks, and was known for promoting farmers', manufacturers' and transporters' business interests in collaboration with retailers and wholesalers (Mikkola and Seppänen 2006, Mikkola 2008). The broker turned to his socially overlaid networks and particularly one actor within them, the large scale organic carrot farmer. He had a problem with unused sideflow, the possible use of which connected him immediately to the social rhizome-in-formation of the new carrot product. The rhizome built so far was in need of transporter and preprocessor; they were found in meshworks of the broker. The processor was not easily connected with the rhizome, but agreed to a process trial because of losing a market of another product. The chemist, the retail chain, the broker, the farmer, the transporter-preprocessor and the processor became actors for the rhizome-in-formation in terms of the new product, but they also had previous, although partly fragmented mutual network connections. The chemist and the broker can be seen as actors in the strategic network, connecting initially to the chancework of 'random' customers and to the meshwork, even strategic network of more regular customers for the organic carrots. The broker, the preprocessor and processor could be interpreted as meshwork based on the presented story. The carrot farmer as well as other carrot farmers and the broker represented a socially overlaid network. The consumers can be seen as chancework when they discovered the product in shops before Christmas, and due to the good response given by them, they were joined into something more than chancework, rather meshwork or even strategic network. The second social rhizome case started to build up by a chancework, when workers, managers and customers of Swedish Coop learned from media about pollution and organic agriculture as a way to decrease environmental degradation. The message within the chancework transformed into lines of thought and activities, by which organic producers were invited to supply for local and regional Coop retail outlets, initiating a meshwork. The deliveries became more continuous over time, and developed into strategic networks, perhaps even to socially overlaid networks, and strengthened the environmental and sustainability orientation of Coop. The tree symbol for organic groceries and advertisement can be seen as a huge chancework, meshwork and even strategic and socially overlaid network event, continuing for extended periods of time, increasing the market share of organic products.

The rhizome becomes an interpretive resource by making visible how the connections between the persons, products, materials, messages, networks, organisations and sites were not selfevident and foreseeable; rather, the development was contingent progress of linkages into the rhizome through connectivity, the ability of actors to make linkages within their different transformative networks. The different kinds of networks were constantly operating within the social rhizome, and fed the transformation of each other into more or less contingent or committed networks. All the networks had a role to play in developments; the chancework operated to call new actors to conventional meshwork relations, and by offering and recognising mutual support the meshwork may develop into a strategic network. Again, when commitment increased, the development may reach socially overlaid network, whereby shared flexibility and availability of resources

increased, leading to advanced sustenance of eventual ups and downs. The development within networks, as structured layers of social rhizomes, can also be understood to degrade in the way that the orientation is towards less commitment between actors and their mutual sustainability. Connectivity, the ability to make linkages, can be seen as a condition for rhizome growth, and vice versa, the lack of connectivity may be understood to prevent the growth or induce the decay of the rhizome. Wielinga (2007) has developed a theory of 'living networks', one feature of which is the keeping of the parties of the encounter from using evaluation or judgement as the first 'face' when participating in social rhizome events. This behaviour supports more profound evaluation of the event. Another aspect of connectivity, visible in these social rhizome cases, was the willingness of actors to use sustainability as a new 'master frame', and to develop creative, contextual and situational solutions in order to promote it.

## 6. Progress in sustainable development, after all?

The social rhizome as a concept was useful in making visible and tangible everyday activities of common people for sustainability and tracking the flows of knowledge, materials and persons in encounters within structured networks. The analyses of interaction between structured networks and their mutual transformations gave a sense of mediation of everyday lived experiences for sustainability. Sustainability became envisioned as a possible progress, which, however, seemed to be delicately balanced with interests of actors positioned within their networks and therefore sensitive to as well as dependent on connectivity and commitments within overall social rhizomes. The rhizome cases stress the connectivity as a one condition for progress for sustainability, whereby the actors are able to tune their activities within social rhizomes for increased and shared economic, environmental and sociocultural benefits. This does not mean that there would be no competition in terms of participation in sustainable development in various ways. However, competition for sustainability may be seen to combine the positive aspects of market economy and the promotion of shared benefits of economic, environmental and socio-cultural dimensions.

### 1.

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### **About the Author**

The author is a project researcher in the University of Helsinki, Ruralia Institute, and works in the food system research particularly from the social science perspective using environmental and economic sociology in the frame of discourse analysis.