Local and/or Organic: A balancing of values for producers and consumers

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Summary

The poster explores the meaning of organic and local food and how closely they are related in the mind of consumers and producers of organic food, drawing on focus group discussions and laddering interviews with 181 consumers and 33 producers. The results show that both groups associate organic food with local trade and see this as an important value. It is concluded that in the complex organic food networks both producers and consumer have to balance localness with other values and constraints when making decisions about where to buy or where to sell their organic products.

Key words: *organic food, values, market outlets, producer, consumer*

Introduction

Organic food and local food networks are both seen to represent alternatives to current conventional food networks. Organic farming is seen as the alternative to intensification and industrialisation of agriculture and it is feared that growth of the sector could diminish its potential to act as a real alternative. On the other hand, Smith and Marsden (2004 p. 355-356) have suggested that a slowing down in market growth development might place limits on the potential of organic farming to act as a "panacea for the problems of rural economic development". Also in the organic movement localness appears to be the new orthodoxy, in general terms it is seen as an antidote to globalisation and intensification (Kjeldsen et al., 2006). Also in the UK, not only organic farmers have placed their hope on localness. For example Farmers Weekly, a magazine of the UK farming industry has started a new campaign to cut food miles[1]. The question arises whether localness itself is a core value of organic agriculture and whether it should be strengthened by considering it in standards and regulations?

The UK is one of the leading markets for organic food in Europe and worldwide with an estimated value of £1.6 billion in 2005, an increase of 30% compared with the previous (Williamson et al., 2006). In previous years growth had been particularly strong in the area of direct sales from producers which are mainly but not exclusively dealing with local produce, but in 2005 these sales grew only by 11% compared with 31 in multiple retailers, which remain with 76 % clearly the most important place of purchase. This paper explores the values behind and the expectations of local food by producers and consumers of organic food in the UK.

Materials and methods

The paper draws on UK material from two European studies in which focus groups with both producers and consumers were held to explore concepts and values and their meaning to the participants, with consumers also in depth laddering interviews were used (Padel and Foster,

[1] Farmers Weekly, 23 June 2006, p 28

2005; Padel, 2005). I have contrasted the results from two different years, limiting the validity of the comparison, because the discussion of localness has intensified considerably over the last few years. However, all qualitative methods give importance to the individual voice and our analysis explores the range of values rather than their distribution.

The focus groups with between 4 and 15 participants lasted up to 120 minutes. All groups started with unprompted association with the term organic, followed by discussions exploring the meaning of organic and associated values. In discussions with consumers we also explored their knowledge about organic products and their attitudes to local/regional food. Producers were asked about their personal values and motives before discussing the values important to the organic sector. 12 focus groups with 96 consumers in 2002 in one urban and two more rural regions of the UK, 6 groups in Lancaster were related to the case study of a local organic vegetable box scheme. Participants were recruited to represent a range of social characteristics; about half of the participants classified themselves as regular consumers of organic food. The 3 groups with 33 organic producers were held in Wales and England during 2004 with established producers and those that had converted after 2000. Recruitment considered mainly full-time producers based on self-classification and a range of farm types typical for each region.

The in-depth interview technique of laddering aims to explore the underlying values of purchasing choices of consumers, and to follow the decision-making process in a hierarchical way, in the form of a ladder (Gutman, 1982; Zanoli, 2004). 85 laddering interviews with consumers were undertaken in 2002 in various locations throughout the UK, aiming for a spread between urban and rural areas, main places of purchase as well as social characteristics. The interviews covered motives and barriers to purchase, the preferred point of purchase, consumers knowledge and circumstances in which the consumers would be most likely to buy organic products. The analysis focuses on commonalities and differences in the meaning and underlying values of each term and tries to explore what the promises of localness are.

Results

The results show a strong association of organic farming with localism both for organic producers and for consumers. Preference for local food networks appears to be a natural progression from other organic values and appears important to both groups of stakeholders.

Associations and attributes of organic farming and food

The unprompted associations of producers with ‘organic’ reflect their professional involvement, covering a wide range of values including conservation, sustainability, closed production cycles, quality, and health, integrity, working in balance with nature, diversity, and independence. Local food was also mentioned unprompted and discussed intensively later on. However, many produce only a limited range of raw materials, such as cereals, meat, dairy etc. that would need further processing before they can be directly supplied to the consumer. In the mind of the consumer there is a strong association of organic food with vegetables and with ‘locally grown’ which is often confused and intertwined. They also associate organic with health, with freshness and taste, and with seasonality. Both occasional and regular consumers give an impression of being unclear about the definition of the term ‘organic’.

Building trust

Producers see providing opportunities for consumers to see where their products come from as very important and hope to build trust through direct interactions and communication, but recognise the need for some external verification. Consumers, on the other hand, refer to a balancing act between different ethical values. Some place their trust in organic labels:

> *"If […] I just see the word organic I think oh that's good- and I don't actually look to see where it is from."*

However, many don't know in detail what guarantees this provides them with. Others place their trust in local or British food. For many regular consumers the origin seems to be more important if the product is organic than otherwise. This preference appears to be related to mistrust of organic standards elsewhere, whether justified or not is not clear. A stronger preference for local non-organic products that some consumers express could represent direct competition for organic label products.

Choice of marketing channels and points of sale

For producers the choice of a marketing outlet is a commercial decision of being able to sell what they have produced and getting a good price for it. In supplying the supermarkets prices were seen as a problem, the multiple retailers were discussed as a 'necessary evil', which should be supplemented by other outlets. On the other hand, the need to supply a wide range of products for a local market was also seen as problematic.

For consumers the choice of marketing channels also appears to be a balancing act between different values, contrasting ethical or political values with the ease and convenience of shopping in the supermarket. Arguments supporting a preference for local food, ranged from the avoidance of food miles, to buying what is in season, supporting local farmers and growers, and greater freshness and better taste. Local shops, on the other hand, lead to a sense of belonging and specialist organic shops convey knowledge, personal relationships and trust in an otherwise complex food system where consumers are anxious to make the right choices.A critical attitude towards multiple retailers appears more widespread among more regular consumers of organic food and in rural areas. Differences between rural and urban interviewees reveal greater emphasis on support for community and personal relations, and understanding of links between retail channels and environmental values. As one respondent put it: *"by shopping at local shops, I feel I am doing my rural duty"*. The preference of some urban shoppers for specialist shops is associated more with trust and transparency in the food products, reflecting a greater need for reassurance in this respect. However, even those with critical attitudes to supermarkets and commitment to other outlets appear willing to trade-off their values against the convenience and choice offered by supermarkets, so that attitudes do not necessarily translate into regular purchases on other outlets. *" There aren't any places I wouldn't buy, just places I prefer to buy".*

Food miles and the origin of food

Both producers and consumers are concerned about the food miles, about the distances that food travels before it reaches the plate and about the negative environmental consequences and express the expectation that local food network could change this. However, producers see the limitations of regionalised trade which they recognise as opportunity for some but not an obligation for all. Organic producers are also worried about growing competition from increasing number of regional product labels from conventional agriculture. Many consumers admit to not paying much attention to the origin of products when they shop. Some consumers express that they would rather by something local, even if it is not organic.

Discussion

Proximity and local trade represent important values for many organic producers and consumers and both groups aspire to greater availability of local produce in their region, which stands in stark contrast to the strong growth of organic food experienced in multiple retailers in the UK in 2005 (Williamson et al., 2006). In the mind of producers and consumers regionalised trade is expected to have a number of benefits, in particular improved communication between these stakeholders, traceability freshness and authenticity of products, fairer prices and better income for farmers, support for the local economy, and reduced energy use in the transport of food.

However, the research also shows that there are clear limitations in realising this concept for all organic food and that both producers and consumers on many occasions balance the value of local with other values and concerns. For many consumers the most important organic products are fresh vegetables and fruit, which they associate with a health lifestyle. If fresh fruit and vegetables are not available locally in sufficient quantity or quality, there will be demand for such products from elsewhere. Producers, on the other hand recognise the limits of further diversification in terms of workload and economies of scale which would be necessary to produce a full range of product for the local market.

Both producers and consumers express a critical attitude to multiple retailers and their long distance trading structure but accept their convenience or necessity and are seeking to develop and support alternatives. However, consumers admit to not paying attention to product origin when shopping, whereas producers first and foremost want to find a good market for their products, even if this is further a field. For most consumers the preferred place of shopping remains the supermarket and civic factors (such as localness) are less important then product or practical factors such as healthiness or freshness (Weatherell et al., 2003).

Both producers and consumer have to balance different concerns when making decisions about where to sell and where to buy their organic products. In the complex organic food networks from production to plate product quality, price, availability and convenience are all equally important. It appears therefore not desirable to further restrict their choices through stricter regulation for localness in organic standards. However, producers and consumers of organic food should continuously to aim for greater sustainability of the organic food networks in relation to transport and energy use, even if this is not a requirement of the standards.

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