



## University of Dundee

### Esnetik

Ajates Gonzalez, Raquel

*Published in:*  
Everyday Experts

*Publication date:*  
2017

*Document Version*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in Discovery Research Portal](#)

#### *Citation for published version (APA):*

Ajates Gonzalez, R. (2017). Esnetik: Ethics, trust, transparency and the challenges of negotiating meaningful sustainability. In C. Anderson, C. Buchanan, M. Chang, J. Sanchez-Rodriguez, & T. Wakeford (Eds.), *Everyday Experts: How people's knowledge can transform the food system* (pp. 47-70). (Reclaiming citizenship and diversity series). Coventry: Coventry University.

#### **General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in Discovery Research Portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from Discovery Research Portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain.
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal.

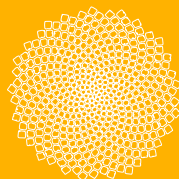
#### **Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



# Everyday Experts: How people's knowledge can transform the food system

The People's Knowledge Editorial Collective



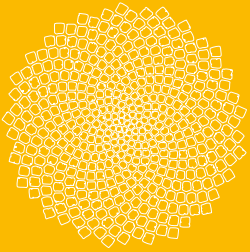
Reclaiming  
**Diversity &  
Citizenship**

*Everyday Experts* explains how knowledge built up through first-hand experience can help solve the crisis in the food system. It brings together fifty-seven activists, farmers, practitioners, researchers and community organisers from around the world to take a critical look at attempts to improve the dialogue between people whose knowledge has been marginalised in the past and others who are recognised as professional experts.

Using a combination of stories, poems, photos and videos, the contributors demonstrate how people's knowledge can transform the food system towards greater social and environmental justice. Many of the chapters also explore the challenges of using action and participatory approaches to research.

The chapters share new insights, analysis and stories that can expand our imagination of a future that encompasses:

- making dialogue among people with different ways of understanding the world central to all decision-making
- the re-affirmation of Indigenous, local, traditional and other knowledge systems
- a blurring of the divide between professional expertise and expertise that is derived from experience
- transformed relationships amongst ourselves and with the Earth to confront inequality and the environmental crisis



The *Reclaiming Diversity and Citizenship Series* seeks to encourage debate outside mainstream policy and conceptual frameworks on the future of food, farming, land use and human well-being. The opportunities and constraints to regenerating local food systems and economies based on social and ecological diversity, justice, human rights, inclusive democracy, and active forms of citizenship are explored in this Series. Contributors to the *Reclaiming Diversity and Citizenship Series* are encouraged to reflect deeply on their ways of working and outcomes of their research, highlighting implications for policy, knowledge, organisations, and practice.

The *Reclaiming Diversity and Citizenship Series* was published by the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) between 2006 and 2013. The Series is now published by the Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience, at Coventry University.

To read any of the 28 chapters in this book freely available to download, please visit:

[www.coventry.ac.uk/everyday-experts](http://www.coventry.ac.uk/everyday-experts)

ISBN: 978-1-84600-075-1



Everyday Experts:  
How people's knowledge  
can transform the  
food system

Cover photos:

(left): Field teaching by Farmer Research Team members about planting methods, Lobi area. Photo taken by C. Hickey, December 2014. Used with the permission of project participants.

(right): The Coventry Men's Shed participatory video project exploring "What's Eating Coventry" and unpacks social justice issues related to food in the city of Coventry. More information at [www.peoplesknowledge.org](http://www.peoplesknowledge.org)

# Everyday Experts: How people's knowledge can transform the food system

The People's Knowledge Editorial Collective\*:

Colin Anderson

Christabel Buchanan

Marina Chang

Javier Sanchez Rodriguez

Tom Wakeford

\*Contributors listed in alphabetical order. This book was a collective endeavour and work and responsibility was shared evenly amongst the editorial team. All chapters have been peer reviewed by a minimum of two reviewers and revised accordingly as a part of a non-blind open peer review process.

Everyday Experts: How people's knowledge can transform the food system

**Published by the Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience (CAWR) at Coventry University**

The Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience (CAWR) is driving innovative, transdisciplinary research on the understanding and development of socially just and resilient food and water systems internationally. Unique to this University Research Centre is the incorporation of citizen-generated knowledge - the participation of farmers, water users and other citizens in transdisciplinary research, using holistic approaches which cross many disciplinary boundaries among the humanities as well as the natural and social sciences.

The Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience (CAWR)  
Coventry University  
Ryton Gardens, Wolston Lane  
Coventry, CV8 3LG  
United Kingdom

E-mail: [CAWROffice@coventry.ac.uk](mailto:CAWROffice@coventry.ac.uk)

Tel: +44 (0) 2477 651 601

Web: <http://www.coventry.ac.uk/research/areas-of-research/agroecology-water-resilience/>

To cite this publication: People's Knowledge Editorial Collective (Eds). (2017). *Everyday Experts: How people's knowledge can transform the food system. Reclaiming Diversity and Citizenship Series*. Coventry: Coventry University. Available at: [www.coventry.ac.uk/everyday-experts](http://www.coventry.ac.uk/everyday-experts).

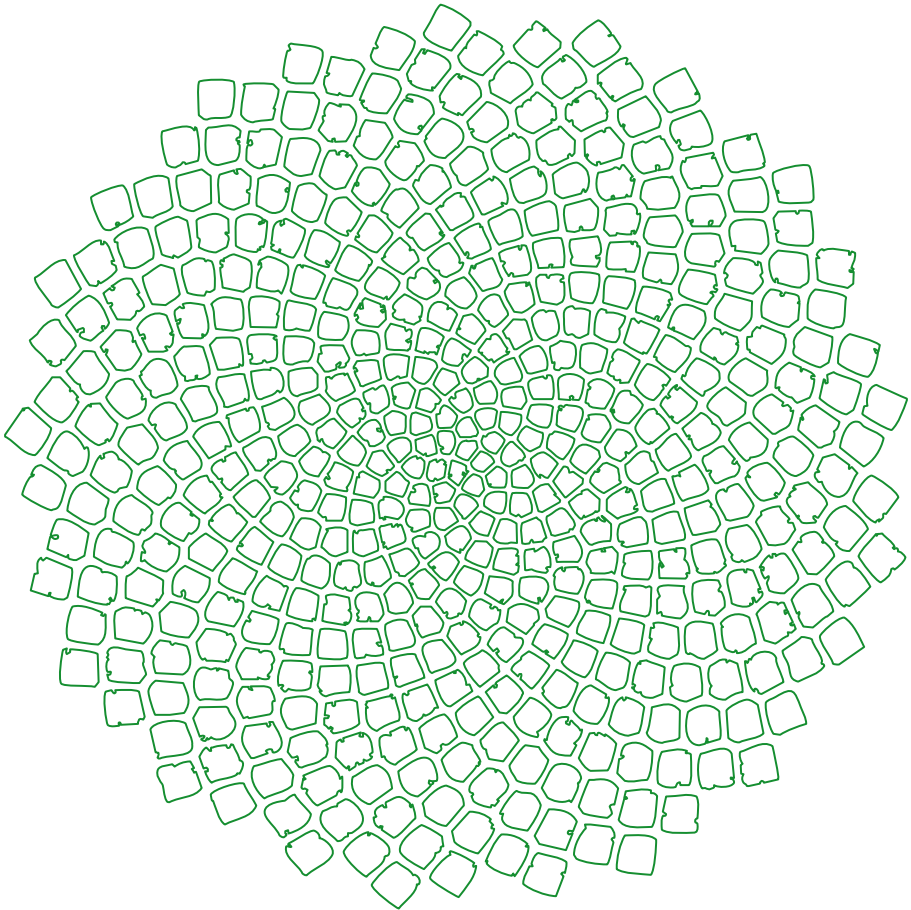
The *Reclaiming Diversity and Citizenship Series* seeks to encourage debate outside mainstream policy and conceptual frameworks on the future of food, farming, land use and human well-being. The opportunities and constraints to regenerating local food systems and economies based on social and ecological diversity, justice, human rights, inclusive democracy, and active forms of citizenship are explored in this Series. Contributors to the *Reclaiming Diversity and Citizenship Series* are encouraged to reflect deeply on their ways of working and outcomes of their research, highlighting implications for policy, knowledge, organisations, and practice.

The *Reclaiming Diversity and Citizenship Series* was published by the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) between 2006 and 2013. The Series is now published by the Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience, at Coventry University.

Professor Michel Pimbert is the coordinator and editor in chief of the *Reclaiming Diversity and Citizenship Series*.

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this volume are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience, its partners and donors.

# 27





# Esnetik: Ethics, trust, transparency and the challenges of negotiating meaningful sustainability

## Raquel Ajates Gonzalez

**Geographical location:** Spain, Europe

**Chapter highlights:** This chapter describes the research process and learning of a Basque multi-stakeholder cooperative as well as some reflections on the following three topics: sustainability, knowledge and transformation of the food system.

Esnetik members' sense of urgency and awareness that they must become allies of consumers and the environment has shaped what could be termed an 'autonomous interdependence' model of interrelations and dependencies amongst producers, workers and consumers.

The chapter includes an invitation to reflect about how willing academia is to give up control of knowledge production processes and to accept and value other ways of knowing and their holders without incorporating them into predetermined and constrained categories that hinder positive transformations in food systems.

**Keywords:** multi-stakeholder cooperative, 'prosumers', autonomy, sustainable food systems.

## 27.1 Learning from Esnetik

Esnetik is a not-for-profit multi-stakeholder cooperative based in the Basque Country. It formed as a response to the marginalisation of local traditional shepherds who were being dropped by larger milk-collecting companies or dairy cooperatives, either because they were not on a main route or because they focused primarily on milk

quality rather than quantity. Esnetik started selling sheep-milk products in May 2012 and at the time of writing, employed three full time workers and a part-time driver for deliveries and collections. Esnetik likes to represent itself as a cheese composed of the following slices: its diverse membership, its philosophy and traditional food preparation methods. The cooperative has a membership of around 200 including shepherds, consumers, workers and collaborating organisations (a combination of non-governmental organisations, local authorities and rural development organisations that were approached with the aim of bringing closer together the urban and the rural dimensions of food production and consumption).

When this research took place, Esnetik counted with five shepherds in its membership. The multi-stakeholder cooperative buys 100% of their production at a fixed, fair price agreed with the shepherds. They all receive the same price regardless of volume produced or location. This is in contrast to their previous situation, when they were offered very low prices if they were off the collection route, and in some cases, were told they could not even have their milk collected. Some of the producers milk by hand, and in general have a traditional way of production that does not fit the industrial model that values high volumes which lower transport and processing costs.



*Esnetik logo*

Esnetik sells as much of its produce (in the shape of cheese and yoghurt) as possible to its consumer members comprising individuals and consumer groups. The rest is sold to a milk parlour, with Esnetik covering the difference between the price agreed with the producers and the price the milk parlour is willing to pay. The objective is to grow the cooperative's network of consumer members so that demand is enough to process more milk within Esnetik and reduce the amount of milk sold to the parlour.

This chapter discusses the research process and findings from this case study as well as some reflections on the following three topics: sustainability, knowledge and transformation of the food system.

## **27.2 The politics of defining food sustainability**

This work was part of a wider research project to study the evolution of the agricultural cooperative sector in Spain and the UK in the context of the European food policy

framework and to analyse how different types of members of farming cooperatives define food sustainability. Agricultural cooperatives account for 40-60% of agricultural trade in the EU, making them key actors in the food system with a big impact on sustainability. However, some authors have argued that many European agricultural cooperatives are promoting unfair global trade relations (e.g. by requesting trade protection for EU farmers while asking for support to enter markets abroad) (Berthelot 2012) as well as unsustainable monocultures (Soberania Alimentaria 2013). This chapter discusses Esnetik's struggle to remain true to food sovereignty principles and their own vision of sustainability, both environmental and financial.

Definitions of sustainability are normally top-down, ignoring the values and conceptions held by producers who are actually reproducing the food system in active and immediate ways through their everyday practice. Some reproduce existing destructive dynamics of industrial agriculture while others such as Esnetik members, reproduce pockets of resistance with the intention of creating wider transformation. The work of farmers has a much more immediate effect on nature and the food system than that of academics and policy makers who often have to navigate long timescales to achieve any impact.

Based on this observation, rather than choosing a definition of sustainability from the literature and assessing what types of cooperatives were less or more sustainable based on a comparison of their practices to existing definitions, this research asked members of different types of cooperatives what their definition of a sustainable food system was and how that vision was being translated in their practices. It encouraged participants to reflect on and discuss their own views and conceptualisations of sustainable food systems, compare their own definitions to existing ones, and assess how their livelihoods are affected by dominant conceptions.

Much care was taken to ensure that participants were able to describe their reality in their own words, by sharing their own opinions and understanding of sustainability rather than using existing, often imposed, definitions or categories. The theoretical assumption was that all individuals are or can become active participants and shapers of food systems (as opposed to being passive consumers or passive farmers at the mercy of large, powerful players). Participants were seen not in individualistic isolation but as they interacting with and understanding the food system through constant transaction with their environments; this approach created a theoretical space to consider how different actors construct and reproduce their own meaning of sustainability and their own version of how sustainable food systems should look.

The methodological approach of this research was inspired and informed by the STEPS pathway multi-methods approach. STEPS is the Centre for Social, Technological and Environmental Pathways to Sustainability. Following the same interpretivist-constructivist line discussed above, the STEPS pathway approach recognises that "who you are shapes how you 'frame' – or understand – a system" (STEPS 2015). The following quote describes the need to open up theoretical spaces to acknowledge and

document those voices and initiatives that could be key to achieving more sustainable food systems but that for many reasons are ignored:

*“Too often the narratives of powerful actors and institutions become the motorways channelling policy, governance and interventions, overrunning the valuable pathways responding to poorer people’s own goals, knowledge and values. Our pathways approach pays attention to multiple pathways and, backed by a variety of practical methods, helps open up space for more plural and dynamic sustainabilities. It also aims to open up the political process of building pathways which are currently hidden, obscured or oppressed” (STEPS 2015).*

The STEPS approach is also expressed in the way interviewees were asked to define sustainability in their own terms, something that is normally considered to be the role of academia. In-depth interviews were carried out with three members of Esnetik during a visit to their office and processing plant. I also reviewed the cooperative’s constitution and the content of their website. In addition, this chapter includes multimedia materials (photographs and videos) created by Esnetik which represent the cooperative in its own terms. Esnetik was happy to share this multimedia material for this project.

Esnetik’s approach and understanding of sustainability is closely linked with knowledge production and conservation: by protecting knowledge of traditional and small production units, it is also sustaining more environmentally-friendly production as well as livelihoods. All producer members are required to have small herds and a local breed of sheep called latxa. Latxa sheep are adapted to the local geography and climate. They are linked with a traditional local method of production. Another requirement is the use of non-GM feed and recycling jars for yoghurts.



Approach based on ethics, trust and transparency

Aspirations of autonomy are intrinsic to Esnetik's understanding and practices of sustainability. Sustainability and autonomy are linked in the way Esnetik members understand organic agriculture and in their direct relationships with groups of consumers. For Esnetik, organic production is a synonym of autonomy, a key dimension of the strong Basque cultural identity. Esnetik farmers oppose organic production methods that rely heavily on external inputs, as this type of organic agriculture is considered a trap that does not change the dependency of producers on agri-inputs industries. At the other end of the supply chain, Esnetik also rejects the type of organic production that relies on large supermarkets for routes to markets, developing instead a network of trusted buyers (either consumer groups or small like-minded retailers). This approach offers independence from large distributors as this quote reflects:

*"The biggest learning that organic livestock has given me is the capacity for autonomy it granted me. If we don't understand that organic farming, that agroecology, are means, tools for the autonomy of farmers, to produce at lower cost of production, then I think we are getting it wrong. [...] That is the problem, that a new organic agriculture is being made, [...] just as dependent as the other [conventional agriculture]" (Esnetik member).*

Redefining sustainability is another interesting part of Esnetik's vision, which is linked with its attempts to provide consumers with a serious alternative to supermarkets by aiming to offer more products to consumer members. When asking one member what sustainability meant to them, they said:

*"There is a lot of debate, to me [sustainability] is whatever it allows the producer in this moment in time to live with the maximum degree of autonomy on the one hand, and to perpetuate in time the continuity of the farm. I prefer not to enter into details, for example, around local produce, zero-km products, sterile debates from my point of view, that at the end of the day, large retailers take advantage of, because they are able to absorb them quickly and in fact they are already absorbing them and local products are part of large retailers marketing. And for that reason I say, myself who am in that fight, that we need to create a complete distribution that becomes an alternative way of consuming for people who want to participate in this process" (Esnetik member).*

The above two quotes reflect participants' awareness of the risk of co-option associated with narrow definitions of sustainability and organic farming based on simplistic metrics. Some members of Esnetik are starting a separate new cooperative to offer more products to consumers (such as oranges and olive oil from the south of Spain) from like-minded producers. These conceptual tensions might bring differences with members who have more purist views of sustainability based on localism, which is especially complicated in a country such as Spain where the seasons, the regions and the crops are so varied. These tensions reflect how definitions are constantly evolving, benchmarks changing, and consensus is hard to maintain.

## 27.3 Autonomous-interdependency: knowledge transfer and sustainability

Esnetik is very aware of the increasing privatisation of all types of knowledge in the food system. Through its work and practices, it is trying to reclaim informal processes of knowledge production and exchange and share these with producers at different levels. The main strategy is to empower producers to regain control over product price negotiations which prioritise the producers' views and knowledge of their production costs, linking the price back to them and their local realities rather than depending on the global price fluctuations which are a key issue in the global dairy sector.

Secondly, by requiring producer members to use the local *latxa* breed of sheep, Esnetik reinforces the relevance of producers' knowledge of their region, their traditional breeds and the production methods associated with both. It allows producers to become active holders of knowledge around quality and production methods, two aspects of the food system that have been increasingly appropriated through the long process of industrialisation of agriculture (McMichael 2000). More 'productive' but less flavoursome varieties and processing methods might be of interest to the processor and the retailer, but not to the consumer (Goodman and DuPuis 2002).

Esnetik's politico-economic conception of organic production weaves together the process of knowledge transfer with sustainability:

*"The problem is that being an organic farmer is much more complex and demands much more training than a conventional grower. Why? Because a long trajectory is needed, a lot of experience, whereas in the other agriculture, you are given everything done. When you have a pest problem, you go to the nearest all-too-typical 'pharmacy' [pesticide outlet] and they give you the product. Here, the people who have the experience are the ones who are going to transfer how to act against pests, how to treat the soil" (Esnetik member).*

Organic agriculture as a result becomes a political act of autonomy both as a production approach but also with regards to knowledge acquisition. These horizontal knowledge exchanges can be seen to serve three roles:

- 1) they require farmers to be proactive, shaking them off the spoon-fed dependency spread by industrial farming;
- 2) the processes of knowledge transfer strengthen farmer networks and interaction as well as increasing collective knowledge in the cooperative;
- 3) by fostering informal processes rather than standards-based approaches for certifications or labels, Esnetik reduces the risk of 'conventionalisation' through depoliticised versions of the organic and fair trade movements that have been absorbed by large processors and retailers in the food system and used as just another selling point (Goodman *et al.* 2012).

In this sense, Esnetik's efforts to create a new fair trade certification in the region might be opening up a contradictory path for the cooperative. Even if this initiative is promoted for all the best reasons, it is a step towards standards-based rather than processed-based production, which may unintentionally undermine the cooperative's uniqueness and principles. This move could be seen as clashing with the aim to remain 'unconventionalised'. However, in the light of Esnetik's vision of creating close alliances between small producers and urban consumers, fair trade certification becomes a powerful tool to connect with more distant buyers. If the certified products are traded only via like-minded small shops and kept away from large retailers, the cooperative could retain the power to resist co-option even when adopting certification. A fair trade label for foods produced in Europe would also highlight how the issue of unfair prices for producers does not only affect developing countries.

An additional strategy used by the cooperative is to exchange knowledge with other networks. Esnetik is closely linked to EHNE (a farmers' union) and the food sovereignty movement. All Esnetik members I spoke to told me about the importance given by this union not only to technical education, but political education of members.



*Holding a Social and Solidarity Economy banner at one of their markets*

Finally, in terms of barriers and opportunities, the following quote describes an example of knowledge exchange processes taking place in the cooperative. The quote reflects the challenges facing alternative food systems in this area and the need for socialising cooperative-generated knowledge (Ajates Gonzalez 2017):



*“There is a message around technology and knowledge, that is all privatised at the moment, and we need to share the message with people that it is impossible to buy both technology and knowledge. It is impossible. If we do not approach it collectively, it's pointless. It's in our hands. Look, an example, making a version of Camembert cheese we have produced. The first shepherd here developed it and it cost him 10,000 euros. Of course, when they sent him the bill his face went ... but he passed on the knowledge for free [to Esnetik]. So why don't we do it collectively? Why don't we develop alternative products to stand up to industry?” (Esnetik member)*

The above points highlight the dual relationship between knowledge and autonomy that is core to Esnetik's vision and practice. When Esnetik members talk about autonomy, they refer primarily to autonomy from agri-inputs companies, an aspect closely linked to sustainability and their desire to share knowledge in order to achieve the vision of closed-loop production systems and collective consumption networks. The second aspect of autonomy discussed by members is with regard to large retailers; in this sense, they have developed their knowledge of local networks and potential allies to protect their autonomy in terms of market access and logistics to reach consumer members.

Being part of RIPPES (Solidarity Economy European Network) and Via Campesina, there is a sense of interdependency with other weaker groups of actors in the food system (e.g. the individual consumer) but also with other sectors of the (solidarity) economy. An Esnetik worker stated that “another economy is possible, a feminist, solidary and sustainable economy” (Esnetik member). For Esnetik, reaching out to non-governmental organisations and local authorities is a way of increasing impact, and not a sign of weakness. For Esnetik producers, to be organic means to be autonomous. Autonomy is not understood as unconnected independence; the members' sense of urgency and real awareness that they must become allies of consumers and the environment has shaped what could be termed an ‘autonomous interdependence’ model of interrelations and dependencies amongst producers, workers and consumers. Their approach to co-production of knowledge has helped them see and situate themselves as an element of a complex autonomous local system of production and consumption that exists within a bigger system of national and international partners and struggles. This awareness of being a piece of a bigger jigsaw puzzle is intrinsic to Esnetik's efforts to transform food systems and scale up solidarity economies.

## 27.4 Transforming the food system

Esnetik is a good example of a “think global, eat local” approach (Pimbert *et al.* 2015) to transforming the food system. The transformational elements of its practices and governance have effects at multiple levels and concern different actors and stages in the food chain:



- a) Incentivising producers through price to use, reproduce and sustain local breeds and traditional methods.
- b) Focusing on specialised products that industry cannot copy due to the complexity involved in industrially appropriating and copying the breed, method, recipe and social elements that are key ingredients of Esnetik's products as this quote reflects:

*"We have to do an analysis and direct our food-making of diversified products towards those varieties of products for which industry encounters complexity, or more complexity, difficulty, to develop" (Esnetik member).*

- c) Engaging other actors in the cooperative as equals, including consumers, local authorities, rural development organisations, unions and civil society organisations. The management board is made up of 50% producers and 50% consumers, including a social movement group representative. Currently, a workers' union is on the board, while other social movements and local authorities are also supporters and members of the cooperative. When I asked if engaging external partners from social movement groups was a way to have external people providing objective advice to the board, I got the following response:

*"No, it's because we need to join efforts also from social movements that have to move from cooperation to development of local projects too that can foster the transformative development of society and food sovereignty" (Esnetik member)*

By engaging non-governmental organisations in the board and decision-making, Esnetik has identified both a barrier to transformation and a way to overcome it:

*"That is it, in one word, that is it, get them to roll up their sleeves. This is hard, you know? It is hard because they are very theoretical in their foundations, even in the area of consumption, it is hard because consumption has been much more theorised than the production" (Esnetik member).*

The underlying logic is that these organisations are operating in urban areas, and their engagement is something that Esnetik considers key for reducing the rural/urban divide and building a bridge to creating partnerships with consumers. Each supporting organisation pays 1,000 euros to join and offers Esnetik different levels of support according to their remit. Furthermore, while not being a requirement, members (or in some cases new consumer groups) from these organisations buy products from Esnetik too.

- d) Organising 'ethical markets' which inform people of the challenges facing the sector and try to raise awareness and change consumer habits.
- e) Raising standards in general by proving to large retailers and larger buyers that another way of doing business is possible.

- f) Maintaining close links with two movements that also inform the cooperative's practice and operations: the food sovereignty movement and REAS (the *Red de Economía Solidaria y Alternativa*, in English the Network for Alternative and Solidarity Economy). It would have been easy to assume that cooperative principles would be core to Esnetik. However, rather than make this assumption, participants were asked to express what movements and principles they identified with more. It was interesting to learn that REAS has six principles, including feminist and food sovereignty principles, that are more central and core to Esnetik's *raison d'être* than cooperative principles in themselves.
- g) Fostering diversification instead of specialisation and supporting new people into agriculture. Esnetik has noticed that a key barrier to entering the livestock sector is the large amount of money that new entries have to invest. By not pushing shepherds to increase quantity but instead fostering diversification and production of a range of crops for self-consumption, Esnetik promotes an agroecological model that can help new producers make a living in a sustainable way.
- h) Appreciating small transformative actions from members to encourage wider transformation. The multi-stakeholder aspect of Esnetik means that members often have at least two identities in the cooperative: producer and consumer, worker and consumer, or consumer and volunteer. One of the workers I spoke to felt that being able to participate in an agrarian initiative while still maintaining his identity as a consumer was the best part of being a member. Esnetik founders were key in also founding Via Campesina and this is tangible in their model and way of approaching decisions and partnerships with consumers. In an attempt to engage as many people as possible, Esnetik represents a practical way of resisting the dominant industrial food system by offering many different levels of participation and allowing consumers with different concerns or ideologies (some of which include keeping rural areas alive, supporting the peasantry, health, defending the land and local varieties and traditional production practices, etc.) to channel their energies in a practical way through volunteering, selling, delivering, campaigning, learning, and so on. Esnetik is aware of and values the transformative power of those members who simply buy its products, without further involvement in the cooperative:

*"Asking a person who wants to consume, who says 'I trust you' and asking in them on top of that to be activists, you need to give them a lot of food to attract them ... but they've already started doing something that needs to be valued, you know? That is to carry out the act of consuming, which has a huge transformational capacity. We don't acknowledge that enough, and in that sense, we are quite thick. I often say that the first political act of the day is in your breakfast, you decide what you are going to have for breakfast, from whom and why, freely. Let's become aware of that individual act that has a huge collective capacity" (Esnetik member)*

- i) Additionally, fostering collective rather than individual consumption, and supporting the creation of new consumer groups in the area, which can have a significant impact on transforming consumption habits. Furthermore, Esnetik is one of the stops on the First Food Sovereignty Tour in the Basque Country, and a destination for visitors from other regions of Spain curious to learn how to replicate the model.

However, since ideas about how to best transform the food system are embedded into people's belief systems and cosmovisions (STEPS 2015), this is an area around which tensions often arise. For example, the topic of free labour and volunteering was discussed with other participants in other cooperatives. Some believed that volunteer labour is needed to make these initiatives happen because they are up against such a calculated and faceless system that without volunteers, alternatives would never get started. Others believed relying on volunteers is not sustainable and obscures the number of workers needed to create a fair and sustainable food system and associated livelihoods. The issue of volunteering also links with the problem of relying on a very committed group of people to keep the initiative running, which in turn reflects the tensions between keeping prices affordable for consumers but also fair for producers. This aspect highlights the financial dimensions of sustainability and the challenges facing those producers who internalise the negative environmental externalities often not accounted for in cheap food.

Different views on how to transform the food system have led some Esnetik members to set up a parallel linked project called Lurretik that aims to stock more products and offer a more complete alternative to consumers. The idea for this project came from the realisation that having to compete with other retailers on choice and variety is also an issue when striving for wider transformation as opposed to just remaining a niche producer covering a very limited range of products for a very limited group of already committed and conscientious consumers:

*“There are more products but less quantity of each, that's it, there is more diversification, because in the network what we sell is a bit of everything. And in a market you sell a lot of cheese and the rest of the products don't sell. If we want to promote the network and link with consumer groups, we have to go for diversification and not making 20,000 kilos of cheese if we know that the network will only absorb 4,000” (Esnetik member)*

Esnetik's most interesting strategy for transformation is probably its use of a double label that specifies how much money is paid to producers and how much goes to the cooperative for processing, marketing and retailing. In this way, Esnetik converts a label into a tool for competing against large retailers that will never be able to copy or appropriate this strategy as it would uncover the pressures they exert on producers. The label fulfils two functions: informing consumers and ensuring inward and outward transparency. However, for consumers who are not familiar with the average percentage of the price that supermarkets pay to farmers, it might be pointless

or confusing. Nevertheless, the label can help educate consumers and make other farmers aware of what options are available, reminding them of what a sustainable price for their produce should and could be.



Cheese and double label with the cooperative's and the associated trade union's logos

This sharing of knowledge and data for transformation contrasts with the way that large processors and retailers treat their own data: with confidentiality and as a way of competing in the race to lower prices rather than as a strategy to provide fair livelihoods for producers.

However, there are barriers to transforming the long-established practices of the dominant productionist paradigm:

*“We have a problem to resolve alongside producers and that is that we have opposing interests, because they want to produce kilos of fodder and we say to them you have to produce kilos of quality; if they produce kilos of quality, they are going to reduce the total weight, a lot, and currently they don't want to enter a pricing formula based on quality” (Esnetik member).*

These interesting reflections on internal discussions on potential pricing based on quality were shared thanks to offering participants space to discuss their own worries and concerns rather than asking how they are dealing with challenges identified in the literature. This approach opens up new debates, enriching our knowledge of challenges facing initiatives such as Esnetik in its efforts to transform food systems.

## 27.5 A final note: how enabling the experience of multiple food identities and collective consumption can foster positive transformation

This research aimed to give a space for producers' views, as their voices are often unheard, silenced by market economies in which consumers rule. It sought the participation of citizens wearing different hats. Esnetik members are farmers, workers, activists, volunteers and consumers; most individual Esnetik members fall into two or three of these categories at once. Type-casting participants in research projects is very common, and the process of this research served as an important reminder of the richness that is lost when there is an oversimplification of the multiple identities of food system actors (Ajates Gonzalez 2017). Closely knitted to this aspect of multi-identity is the realisation of the collective transformative capacity inherent in individuals when they are perceived as being at the nexus of broader movements (e.g. feminism, food sovereignty, solidarity economy, fair trade, agroecology, etc.). Knowledge, resources, strategies and visions are increasingly shared across these movements as they grow aware of how the challenges facing them are the same: concentration of both power and resources in a few hands. Action research can aim to foster bridges and knowledge across movements.

The knowledge mobilised by this research focused on collating a series of strategies conceived by groups of citizens who aim not only to reinvent their food systems, but to do so in a way that cannot be co-opted. Esnetik was one of several case studies in a larger research project and the results will be presented and discussed in a paper that will be shared with participants.

The findings raise a question for researchers to reflect on: how willing is academia to relinquish control of knowledge production processes and to accept and value other knowledges and their holders without incorporating them into predetermined and constrained categories that hinder positive transformations in food systems?

## 27.6 References

Ajates Gonzalez, R (2017) Going back to go forwards? From multi-stakeholder cooperatives to Open Cooperatives in food and farming. *Journal of Rural Studies*. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2017.02.018>.

Berthelot, J (2012) The European agricultural cooperatives, promoters of the unequal globalization. *Solidarité*. Available at: <http://solidarite.asso.fr/Papers-2012>.

Goodman, D and DuPuis, E M (2002) Knowing food and growing food: Beyond the production-consumption debate in the sociology of agriculture. *Sociologia Ruralis*, 42(1) 5-22.

Goodman, D, DuPuis, E M and Goodman, M K (2012) *Alternative food networks: Knowledge, practice, and politics*. Routledge, Oxon.

McMichael, P (2000) The power of food. *Agriculture and human values* 17(1): 21-33.

Pimbert, M, Shindelar, R and Schösler, H (eds) (2015) *Think Global, Eat Local: Exploring Foodways*. RCC Perspectives 2015, no. 1.

Soberania Alimentaria (2013) Reflexiones sobre el Cooperativismo Agrario. *Soberania Alimentaria, Biodiversidad y Culturas*, December, 15.

STEPS (2015) Pathway methods. Social, Technological and Environmental Pathways to Sustainability. Available at: <http://steps-centre.org/methods/pathways-methods/>.

## 27.7 Further reading

Esnetik website, videos: [http://www.esnetik.com/?page\\_id=340](http://www.esnetik.com/?page_id=340) and photos: [http://www.esnetik.com/?page\\_id=345](http://www.esnetik.com/?page_id=345)

Gray, T W (2014) Historical tensions, institutionalization, and the need for multistakeholder cooperatives. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development* 4(3): 23–28.

Lund, M (2012) Multi-stakeholder Co-operatives: Engines of Innovation for Building a Healthier Local Food System and a Healthier Economy. *Journal of Co-operative Studies* 45(1): 32-45.

Everyday Experts: How people's knowledge can transform the food system