

Organic in the local vs global antinomy

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Abstract

Increasing attention is paid by European citizens to food chain character, power relations and impacts. Distance travelled by food, its authenticity and identity, fairness in the value chain and information robustness on quality specifications tend to assume a growing relevance in both public perception and business organisation. A triennial multidisciplinary and multicriteria study, funded under the EU 7th Framework Research Programme, aims to assess the performance of local and global food chains against economic, environment, social, health and ethical dimensions. The present paper presents some results of the first part of the project, examining how organic foods and method of production fits in the local/global discourse, as emerging from an Italian literature review.

Introduction

Food is by definition ubiquitous as long as it accompanies the human being in his territorial colonization. Yet, its sourcing can largely vary depending on market structures and social, economic, environmental and political contexts and values. Food origins, both in geographic and value chain terms, can thus be hidden, mystified or glorified responding to peculiar interests and market pressures.

In modern societies purchasing habits give rise to an heterogeneous food basket with a miscellanea of (more) local and (more) global foods and ingredients (Bonanno and Constance, 2001; Coff et al, 2008; Holloway et al., 2007; Maye et al., 2007; Colombo and Onorati, 2013). Traditional agricultural societies, too, in their resilience strategies, have sometimes tilled crops in remote areas far away from villages (Diamond, 2012). Hence, the geolocalized food identity risks to become a spurious issue.

Every agricultural product is embedded in its farming system, but the whole value chain is at present questioned when meals reach the tables, as globalization is increasing awareness and concerns about anonymity of goods (Klein, 1999), including those who nourish the people. These aspects are highly debated in Italy where food cultures are notoriously loaded and verbally fed. The environmental and climatic "foodprint" adds additional topics in current narratives, as well as food affordability. The food industry and supermarket chains are thus beginning to operate new strategies, "relocalizing" foods, as these strategies also offer public relations opportunities.

The food business re-localization trajectory parallels a current of food-systems research holding that local food systems are preferable to systems at larger scales. This emerging narrative, termed by some authors as *the local trap* (Purcell and Brown, 2005; Born and Purcell, 2006), is countered by those arguing that scale is socially produced and that more attention should be paid to efforts aimed at pursuing the goal of social and environmental justice with a specific and more targeted agenda.

In this context, investigating the interaction between localness and models of production shows a particular interest.

As local is becoming not merely fashionable, but an effective market option for an increasing number of farmers and food businesses, the European Commission is eyeing at comparative impacts and efficiencies of local and global food system configurations⁴, whose performance needs to be assessed against several criteria. The Glamur (*Global and Local food chain Assessment: a Multidimensional performance-based approach*) 3-year research project, ran by a Consortium of 15 partners of 10 European countries, addresses these issues with the aim to provide some evidence-based policy options and recommendations, based on comparative assessments of different food chain patterns in European and non-European countries.

Preliminary project results focus on perceptions in the public, scientific, market and policy arenas of local Vs global foods. To achieve some preliminary conclusion, several attributes, coding for emerging issues, expectations and key features around food systems, are identified in scientific and grey literature in association to each other.

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The present paper focuses on the attribute “organic”, highlighting frequencies of its occurrence, its interaction with other attributes and the related coalitions and dilemmas with the endeavor to explore how the “organic” character of food is addressed and framed in the Italian debate, within a local Vs global food chain perspective. Moreover, the paper aims at analyzing the relations as well as possible conflicts or contradictions that the organic “attribute” establishes with other relevant food chain features.

Material and methods

This study highlights how organic agriculture takes place in local/global narratives. An ample Italian literature review analyzes how the performance of food chains is perceived, defined and communicated in the public, scientific, market and policy spheres across a range of areas of impact, defined in the present study as dimensions (economic, social, environmental, health and ethical).

A desk-based analysis mapped 86 different suitable sources on the issues at stake, including media and potential stakeholders’ house organs, each source being allocated to one sphere according to its prevailing profile. The public sphere mainly relates to mass media and web communication, the scientific focuses on peer reviewed articles on Italian food chains, the market sphere collects companies’ and product cartels’ statements, while the policy sphere gathers institutional communication or civil society organizations’ declarations and reports.

Sources were selected to ensure no worthless position duplications. Pertinent literature was analyzed through the screening of papers, documents and press releases to filter those focusing or addressing local and/or global food chains and issues. A total of 272 documents were examined and 50 attributes, organic being one of them, were finally retained and categorized.

Each attribute is classified within one of the five impact areas (the economic, social, environmental, health and ethical dimensions) and connotes characteristics relevant in terms of how global and local food chains performance is perceived. Attributes will be eventually translated into indicators with which the food chain performance can be assessed. At this stage of research, the whole set of attributes has been mapped enabling an in-depth analysis of each of them and their mutual relationship. In the present paper, the organic attribute is extracted and analyzed, highlighting frequencies of its occurrence, its interaction and coalition with other attributes, to determine how it fits in the Italian local Vs global food chains debate.

Results

The survey reveals a number of features arising from the local/global food chain comparison.

Frequency of the organic attribute

50 different attributes were mapped. Overall, they have been recorded 738 times across the five dimensions, as detailed in table 1.

Table 1: Frequency of attributes for each dimension

Dimension	Environmental	Ethical	Health	Economic	Social	TOTAL
Attributes frequency	180	172	137	130	119	738

A certain homogeneity in the distribution of the recorded attributes emerges among the various dimensions. The “environmental” dimension, where “organic” is positioned, prevails. The specific attribute “organic” has been recorded 27 times, accounting for 15% within the environmental dimension and for 3,7% in the overall set of attributes. “Organic” represents the third most recurrent attribute in the environmental dimension (following “GHG emissions” and “pollution”, and preceding “landscape preservation”). It is the eleventh most present the whole set of 50 attributes.

Interactions with other attributes and their dimensions

The interaction of “organic” with other attributes was further examined. There is a wide range of attributes to which “organic” has been related in the consulted literature. Yet, there is no frequent or constant combination among any of them: no strong pairs or twin attributes arise in the examination. The most frequent interaction “organic” shows with other attributes belongs to the environmental dimension, though this apparently

contradicts existing literature on Italian consumers rationale in buying organic, more traditionally associated to health grounds (Bellini, 2011).

A map of interactions among attributes is given below, having "organic" as the core feature: attributes in the inner circle show stronger interface with "organic", as it emerges from the scrutinised documents.

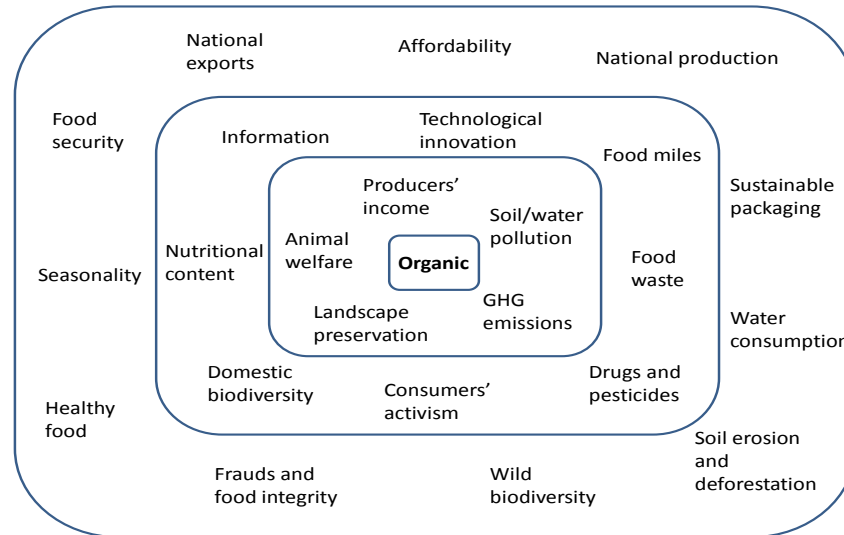


Figure 1. Map of interactions

Discourse analysis

A range of coalitions, dilemmas and contradictions with regard to the "local Vs global" food chain comparison arises from the textual analysis.

The "organic" attribute is highly associated to the local food chain configuration and the correlation always appears in a mutually reinforcing alliance. In the analyzed literature, local food chains are perceived as a synergic condition and a complementary option for marketing organic products. In this respect, local virtually always means short circuits, food activism and a thorough awareness among consumers, sometimes paralleled by farmers' consciousness and proactive involvement. Similarly, organic seems to ensure a further legitimacy to local foods and local food chains.

Various articles present or frame direct selling initiatives or similar short chain articulations associated to the organic production. They are regarded as the expression of a rich culture that cares about the environmental sustainability of food production and consumption systems, while ensuring affordability of organic foods (though the explicit association only emerges once). Overall, the duo local and organic comes forward as a strong alliance in the search of more socially just and environmentally friendly food chains. The increasing awareness of climate change impact and responsibilities provides additional relevance to this alliance, as shown by the liaison between "organic" and "GHG emissions" attributes, which often coexist in the same narratives. Their relationship is reinforced by considerations devoted to air freight and food miles concerns.

Environmental sustainability of the organic model of production is further highlighted by associations of the "organic" attribute with environmental, soil and water pollution alleviation or biodiversity protection. It is also assumed that consumers with stronger preferences for organic produce tend to reduce food waste in consideration of the higher overall value ascribed to organic products. The consulted literature, nevertheless, does not strictly associate these considerations to any local or global food chain configuration.

Local organic food chains are also seen as a viable economic alternative for farmers whose income is better secured in this sector than elsewhere, in a usually hostile market context.

The contexts in which organic production is discussed in relation to the global chains is maybe more complex and a weaker link between organic and global is found in the scrutinised Italian literature. Though limited, a liaison is observed when opportunities for organic Southern producers to earn a more decent living through a better remunerative export market are underlined. According to this perspective the increased attention paid in affluent countries to health and environmental sustainability issues could pave the way for developing countries and food chain actors to increase their exports.

Some scrutinised literature emphasizes consumers contradictory expectations. Naturality and typicality are incoherently looked for in conjunction with low prices, year-round availability and a-seasonality. In this sense, global chains and organic production can be seen as either conflicting or complementary features, when they

meet demands by different consumers, or different demands by the same consumer groups. In a more hazardous dissertation, the organic method of production and GMOs are deemed as converging in scope and mutually supportive, though this is seen as a legitimizing trajectory for transgenic foods. In this very case, the narrative beyond this assumption can be described as technocratic when organic model of production is presented as suitable for sustainability, but unable to feed the world.

Health issues are regarded as highly important, though occurrences are relatively few. Exclusion of chemicals in the production method, no pesticide residues in the final product, higher nutritional value (though not necessarily substantiated with scientific references) and a generally improved attention to overall dietary patterns by organic consumers, ensure a positive trajectory to "organic" in literature. Yet, communicated health virtues of organic foods do not strictly suggest any specific link to local and global food chain differences in ensuring nutritional quality and safety. An exception is due to frauds occurring in the organic sector, potentially harmful for consumers, that are linked to longer and cross border value chains relying on (increasing) imports and weak certification rigour.

Ethical and social concerns seem to be well addressed by "organic", as shown by the positive correlation with animal welfare and food security, but no specific interaction is found with local or global patterns. A different consideration has to be made when the right to know and food activism are considered: overall, issues related to certification credentials and trust among producers and consumers of local organic foods arise in the consulted literature.

Discussion

A strong coalition is found between organic, as a whole concept, and local/short food chains, often presented as binomial. Methods of production – and the organic sector as a development model, in particular – are reserved a place in the local Vs global antinomy, though not representing a dominant narrative.

The diverse length and complexity of food chains, their different and sometimes conflicting capacity to respond to public interests, or the dissimilar scale of their social and environmental impact, as perceived by media and stakeholders, are emerging discourses in Italy, with an increasing interest in the local-global food chain debate. At the same time organic, as a standalone topic, maintains its significant public and market trajectory, while also revealing an indicative positive correlation with the "local" narrative.

As the idea of "local foods" and/or "local food chains" have triggered mounting public interest, responding to various societal demands and anxieties, these aspects are only sometimes entwined with production techniques and processes worth and goals. Neglecting the socio-environmental link when it comes to choosing food and designing policies, the localized approach, *per se*, risks to be inconsistent with a genuinely sustainable and more socially-just agricultural model. Organic is thus sometimes seen as a potentially useful response to these contradictions.

Recalling the expression elaborated by the Italian politician Aldo Moro, the two distinct local and organic plots appear to be *converging parallels*.

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NOTE: the scrutinized literature is available at www.firab.it