



Values-based food chains – Recoupling man and soil?

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Abstract – A market driven sustainable development of organic agriculture depends on the abilities of the organic food chains to mediate qualities (values) from place of production to place of consumption. A Pirsig's based relational analysis reveals the importance of the abilities of all actors of the food chain to relate to and to include these qualities in their strategy. Transparency along the whole chain all way back to place and mode of production seem important.

INTRODUCTION

A sustainable agriculture is dependent on how we care for and cultivate soil. Not only in terms of producing food of good quality, but also in terms of maintaining the quality of the soil to feed future generations, nature of the farm land, of the surrounding landscape, and not least the quality of rural livelihood.

In a neoliberal perspective the market is seen as driver of a sustainable development, depending on political consumers. This is self-contradictory because in a neoliberal food regime the only relation consumers have to how the soil is cultivated is through decoupled global food chains, and most people only know little about the actual agriculture and what is going on with the soil. However, emerging food-chains are trying to re-establish "values-based" couplings between man and soil, emphasizing a broad range of values, promising for another kind of market based sustainable development.

THE AIM

The aim of this paper is to analyse to what extent different values-based food-chains offer quality couplings between production and consumption, and thereby support a more sustainable food production.

A RELATIONAL APPROACH

The analysis is based on studies of 18 organic values-based food chains from the HealthyGrowth project, which are distinguished by a broad range of values. We ask: What kind of value relations are these chains able to support? What role do the different actors of the chains play in this? To what extent do these chains facilitate sustainability in agricultural production?

The analytical perspective applied is developed in Noe & Alrøe (2011), and builds on Robert M Pirsig's understanding of quality. In this framework quality is understood as a relation, in the meaning that quality is something which holds value for someone or something, in other words quality is a value-relation. This definition of qualities encompasses not only physical attributes of products like taste, appearance, health, nutrition, but also qualities such as animal welfare, nature quality, handicraft, history, care, etc. as all of these involves value relations. In this analytical perspective our focus is on how each link in the food chain relates to the food mediated, both in relation to other links in the chain as well as how it is treated and processed by each link.

A WIDE RANGE OF VALUES

A wide range of value relations are mediated in the studied cases. In all cases additional qualities than the ones embedded in the principles of organic farming were mediated. The cases exhibit a wide variation with regards to value relations; e.g. in the case of Bio vom Berg in Austria the qualities of cheeses include the place of production, based on local fodder, the history and culture of mountain farming, and the artisanal craft of production. While in other cases, only a few aspects of the origin of production are emphasized. The production of organic shiitake in northern Finland, where mainly one aspect, 'purity', is emphasized, is one of the examples.

ALL ACTORS ARE IMPORTANT

Looking across these food chains, it is evident that each link of the chain plays an important role in

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the mediation of value relations. One link in the chain is enough to decouple the value relation like in the case of Bio Sunder, where the handpicked wild mountain herbs from Turkey are repacked and relabelled by a North American wholesaler and sold under their brand of quality products. The result is that the link to the specific ecology distinguishing the Turkish mountain area, is severed.

Each actor of a values based food chain plays a crucial role for mediation of qualities and has to do investment in such strategy and the return of these investments are mutual depending on the other long term strategies of the actors of the chain. Mediation of qualities is therefore a long-term process and depends on the meta-organisation capabilities of the partners of the chain to establish forms of agreement and mutual trust supporting long-terms strategies.

PLACE OF PRODUCTION AND TRUST

We find that the place of production plays an important role in two respects. Firstly, with regards to trust and transparency, in many of the cases studied, the consumers are potentially able to trace the origin of the product not only to specific areas and group of producers, but also to individual farms. Secondly, place seems to be an important anchor and pivotal point for building long-term value relations like sustainable farming practices which go 'beyond organic', as well as specific artisanal products etc.

IMPACT ON SUSTAINABILITY

Successful mediation of value relations of the chain has a high impact on the sustainability of primary production and rural livelihoods. Many of the cases exhibit the ability to mediate qualities which support rural livelihoods, e.g. in mountain areas, which might not be possible through traditional industrial organic food chains. In the case of Gram Slot, Denmark, a strong emphasis on local-based development has had an impact on rural job creation, which exceeds standardised industrial organic production. The level of transparency exhibited by these cases, constitutes a strong incentive for the farmers to develop their production in a more sustainable way in relation to nature quality, animal welfare etc. because these efforts are mediated as qualities of the product.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, mediation of qualities cannot be reduced to the individual actors of the chain. It is highly dependent on long-term building of mutual arrangements and trust. In successful cases, such chains can contribute not only to enhancing the sustainability of organic farming but also to enhanced product quality for consumers.

REFERENCES

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