



Analysis

The Governance Features of Social Enterprise and Social Network Activities of Collective Food Buying Groups



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ABSTRACT

Collective food buying groups, such as community supported agriculture or self-organised citizen groups for delivery of food baskets, have emerged throughout the world as an important niche innovation for promoting more sustainable agri-food systems. These initiatives seek to bring about societal change. They do so, however, not through protest or interest-based lobbying, but by organising a protected space for learning and experimentation with lifestyle changes for sustainable food consumption and production practices. In particular, they aim to promote social learning on a broad set of sustainability values, beyond a focus on “fresh and healthy food” only, which characterizes many of the individual consumer oriented local food chain initiatives. This paper analyses the governance features of such local food buying groups by comparing 104 groups in five cities in Belgium. We find that the social networking activities of these groups, as compared to the social enterprise activities, have led to establish specific governance mechanisms. Whereas the main focus of the social enterprise activities is the organisation of the food provisioning logistics, the focus of the social network activities is the sharing of resources with other sustainable food initiatives, dissemination of information and broader discussion on sustainability issues.

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1. Citizen-based Learning in Transitions Towards Sustainable Agri-food Systems

Together, the provision of agricultural inputs, and the production, packaging, processing, transport, and distribution of food, represent 19–29% of greenhouse gas emissions worldwide (Vermeulen et al., 2012); and they exert an important pressure on natural resources, water, nitrogen and phosphate, and arable land in particular. Reforming food systems towards greater sustainability is therefore essential for a transition towards a low-carbon and resource-efficient society (De Schutter, 2014). Increasingly broad segments of society demand such a switch, and appear to search for alternatives. As a result, the consensus on increased production as the key objective of agri-food policies, which emerged after the Second World War, has lost much of its appeal and is partly replaced by a variety of new approaches and value orientations. Economic efficiency and technological rationalisation remain important, but new concerns are emerging about nutritional quality, food

safety, environmental impacts, resource efficiency and social equity. These concerns now appear as equally important organising principles around which product innovation and new consumption practices evolve (Mathijs et al., 2006; Spaargaren et al., 2012).

The involvement of citizens and consumers in sustainable local and regional food networks has emerged over the last decades as one of the tools for promoting civic learning on change in production and consumption practices. The contribution of local food networks to bringing about a shift to more sustainable agri-food systems is however a matter of intense debate. Indeed, trade-offs may be involved in such initiatives between the various sustainability features. For instance, a large-scale study by scientific experts, regional stakeholders and practitioners of local food networks within five metropolitan areas in Europe shows that, whereas short and regional food chains generally perform better than the conventional global long food chains as regards environmental sustainability, this is not necessarily true for all type of short and regional food chains: rather than rewarding producers with the most sustainable agronomic practices and thus providing benefits to the society as a whole, some short and regional food chains in fact respond to the preferences of individual consumers for “fresh and healthy” food linked to local food cultures (Foodmetres, 2014).

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Within the wealth of the citizen-led initiatives on transitions to more sustainable agri-food systems, collective food buying groups occupy a very specific space. Collective food buying groups are based on partnerships between consumer groups that build a direct partnership with one or a set of farmers for the delivery of food baskets on a regular basis. Early initiatives of Collective Food Buying groups already developed in Japan, Germany and Switzerland in the 1960s (Schlicht et al., 2012), with women taking the lead in Japan to found Teikeis, one of the first forms of family-farmer partnerships (David-Leroy and Girou, 2009; Schwartz, 2011). After the emergence of these early social innovations, consumer groups/producers partnerships for sustainable agri-food production have developed also in other countries. By January 2017, more than 700 community-supported agriculture schemes (so-called “CSAs”) are registered on the directory of the US Department of Agriculture (USDA, 2017). In France, currently, over 1500 farm-consumer associations have been set up by consumers and citizens for the support to peasant agriculture in France (AMAP: Association pour le Maintien d'une Agriculture Paysanne) (Schlicht et al., 2012).

These collective food buying groups share some features with other, more individual consumer oriented, initiatives for reforming the food systems. Examples of such individual consumer oriented initiatives are the introduction of local food stalls in major supermarket chains or online ordering systems of food baskets with a network of deposit hubs. In a similar vein as the collective food buying groups, these initiatives aim at building a more direct consumer-producer logistic chains based on the local food economy. However, the collective food buying groups clearly aim to go beyond merely broadening the range of choices for the responsible individual consumer around the theme of “fresh and healthy foods” (cf. also, Forno et al., 2015). Indeed, these groups also invest time and resources in implementing social experimentation broader social and ecological sustainability values, such as solidarity with small-holder farmers, less production of packaging waste and the decrease of food miles for sustainable farm products.

In spite of this diverse landscape, and the scientific uncertainty with regards to the best available development path for ecologically and socially sustainable agri-food systems, the collective food buying groups provide a social innovation that has proven to be attractive to a growing number of consumers. However, although such small niche initiatives do not have the economic weight nor the power to bring about the needed transformation of the agri-food systems, they still play an important role through at least two channels. First, though they may not have the potential of bringing about system-wide transformation in and of themselves, such niche innovations can add pressure on mainstream regime players to change. The literature on transition management suggests that coalitions between niche innovations pushing for more radical lifestyle changes and large-scale regime players that are willing to make modest but real changes are needed to reach the necessary threshold for system transformation (Rotmans and Horsten, 2012; Loorbach et al., 2016). Second, these niche innovations promote a more active involvement of citizens in learning on potential options for agri-food transitions. Such an active involvement can contribute in turn to broadening the critical debate and the social construction of common meanings around the possible pathways for transition amongst diverse social groups.

To contribute to a better understanding of these features, this paper focuses on a sample of collective food buying groups in Belgium which is representative of the broad variety of organisational types of these groups (such as farm-consumer cooperatives, consumer associations, internet based social enterprises). Our hypothesis is that the successful promotion of civic learning on new modes of food provisioning and consumption in these groups relies on a combination of two main types of activities: first, the organisation of a set of economic service activities, based on both voluntary and paid labour, around direct food provisioning from small-holder farmers and, second, the decentralized networking with other sustainability transition initiatives – especially through the sharing of resources with other food buying groups and the

dissemination of information on activities and broader discussion on sustainability issues with other food transition organisations. By testing this hypothesis for this specific niche innovation, our goal is to contribute to the scholarly literature on the role of the governance of niche initiatives in sustainability transitions.

The paper is structured as follows. The second section discusses the social movement features of the food buying groups and their role in civic learning on sustainability transitions. The third section elaborates on the two main challenges for these collective food buying groups, which is the organisation of the food provisioning logistics through citizen involvement in an economically sustainable manner and the governance of the decentralized social networks in support of the social movement features. The fourth and fifth sections present the analysis of the semi-structured questionnaire and discuss the results from the comparative analysis of a representative set of 104 collective food buying groups in Belgium. The sixth section provides an overall discussion and highlights some governance recommendations that result from the analysis.

2. The Contribution of Collective Food Buying Groups to Learning on Lifestyle Changes

While awareness about the global sustainability crisis is growing, there remains a considerable gap between that awareness and individual lifestyle choices (UNEP, 2011). There also remains a troubling disconnect between the emerging transition initiatives, which broaden the range of alternatives individuals may choose from, and the lifestyle choices of the majority of the population.

To identify the key areas where consumers' choice can have the highest impact on agri-food transitions, researchers conducted a life cycle analysis of the key ingredients of typical food portions in Finland (Virtanen et al., 2011). The results indicate that rewarding certain agronomic choices linked to sustainable agriculture production methods and reducing meat consumption have the highest impact. The choice of agricultural production method has a major impact on the reduction of greenhouse gases responsible for climate change. This holds even for imported products, as this impact outweighs by far the role of international transport. Choosing products that are grown with a low use of external inputs has therefore a key role to play in reducing the ecological footprint of food consumption, whether the foods are locally sourced or have travelled long distances. Similarly, the increase of the share of vegetables in the diet, as compared to meat, especially of vegetables that grow well in the local climate, can significantly reduce the ecological footprint of food consumption (see also D'Silva and Webster, 2010; Lymbery and Oakeshott, 2014).

Some scholars have analysed the role of collective food buying groups in the change in farmers' modes of production and in the dietary habits of consumers. For instance, field work on collective food buying groups has shown that these groups play a key role in supporting local producers to move from conventional high-input production systems to low-input and/or organic farming systems. Further, Bougherara et al. (2009) analyse responses of a sample of 264 French households about their participation to Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) projects and find out that environmental considerations play a major role in explaining CSA participation. As regards change in dietary habits, case studies show that participation in community gardens and school gardens has a clear positive effect on greater fruit and vegetable intake (Alaimo, 2008; Litt et al., 2011; Allen et al., 2016). Moreover, sourcing food locally increases the freshness of the food consumed and improves its nutritional content.

As can be seen from the studies collective food buying groups, the benefits expected from consumer-producer partnerships however are not purely environmental or nutritional. While the impacts vary strongly from one type of initiative to another, other societal benefits that play a role are increased transparency of decisions within the food chain,

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