



Shortening food supply chains: A means for maintaining agriculture close to urban areas? The case of the French metropolitan area of Paris [☆]



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 8 April 2011

Received in revised form 13 February 2013

Accepted 11 April 2013

Available online 25 May 2013

Keywords:

Short supply chains

Urban agriculture

Parisian region

Proximity approach

On-farm study

Alternative food chains

ABSTRACT

The development of short supply food chains (SSFCs) is a noteworthy phenomenon in Europe. This paper questions whether these SSFC contribute or not to the preservation and/or development of urban agriculture in the Ile-de-France Region (Paris and surrounding areas), where agriculture still represents a major land use activity (more than 50%). Based on documentary and empirical research the analysis shows that a quarter of farms are involved in SSFC in this region. Taking different forms, these SSFC initiatives are for the majority very recent, they often develop in the frame of hybrid forms of farming. Even though the contribution of SSFC in the total food supply of the Parisian region is poorly informed, and probably very small, the recent interest of consumers, inhabitants, and territorial stakeholders in organic and/or local food is real and has encouraged various types of incentives and commitments. The development of SSFC in the Paris region nevertheless faces numerous obstacles such as the scarcity of land and labour and the environmental impacts that still remain controversial. Promoting the role of SSFCs in the preservation of a sustainable urban agriculture requires access to more statistical and comparative data, which are currently unavailable.

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Introduction

During the 20th century, the countryside around Paris and its neighbouring towns virtually ceased to supply these urban areas with food. Whereas until then they had been the main source of the city's food (Fleury, 1996; Fleury and Moustier, 1999), the development of transport, the rapid growth of globalized agri-food systems via the internationalization of markets, and the development of mass retailing (Morgan et al., 2006) all but disconnected the city from its surrounding agriculture. At the same time, the vegetable green belts that had formerly supplied most of the fresh products needs of cities were partially urbanized (Poulot-Moreau and Rouyres, 2000), pushing agriculture further away. Yet the food function of this urban agriculture has not entirely disappeared, at least not in Europe. In cities like Paris, the persistence and success of farmers' markets has been perpetuated at least as a cultural phenomenon. Moreover, since the food safety crises of the late 20th century, mistrust in the globalized agri-food system has resulted in the development of so called "alternative food chains" providing peo-

ple with local quality products, mainly through short supply food chains (Renting et al., 2003; Sonnino and Marsden, 2006). The development of these alternative food chains (CSA's schemes, box schemes, direct selling, producers' shops, etc.) re-creates forms of proximity relations between producers and consumers through a niche market expected to be more profitable (in comparison to standard long supply chains). As such it opens new opportunities to local urban agriculture that is severely threatened by global competition and urban sprawl.

Supplying cities via short supply food chains (SSFCs) may be a way of maintaining or even of developing local agricultures, particularly specialized activities such as market gardening and fruit farming. The question is whether this is actually feasible and, if so, under what conditions. In Western Europe in particular, a tension exists between, on the one hand, the ongoing urbanization of agricultural land and, on the other, diverse public and private attempts to protect this land, often for its newly-rediscovered food function (Overbeek et al., 2006; Bontje, 2001; Tötzer, 2008; Vejre, 2008). Evidence of this includes the development and use of industrial land by certain cities in the US (i.e. Pittsburgh and Detroit), and the growth and diversification of food SSFCs even though their urban forms are still not well known (Marsden et al., 2000; Aubry and Chiffolleau, 2009).

The objective of the paper is to investigate the role of SSFCs in a potential revival of the food supply function of agriculture located close to cities. The challenge is then to analyse whether SSFCs con-

[☆] The material presented in this paper by Leïla Kebir is drawn from the research she conducted at UMR-SADAPT under the fellowship program of the Swiss National Science Foundation.

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tribute to the development of urban agriculture, that is, an “agriculture located within a city or on its periphery, the products of which are at least partly destined for the city, and for which alternative agricultural and non-agricultural uses of resources are possible” (Moustier and Mbaye, 1999, 8). This paper is based on a conceptual framework grounded on proximity relation analysis (Torre and Rallet, 2005; Boschma, 2005) and on the combined analysis of the different stakeholders involved in SSFC initiatives. The former is used to analyse the great variety of SSFCs, the latter to understand the main constraints and opportunities of their development. The paper draws on the analysis of the case of the metropolitan area of Paris (the city of Paris and its outskirts), which constitutes the NUTS 2 Region of Ile-de-France.

After presenting key concepts on SSFC and a typology of SSFCs based on the type of proximity relations they induce (Part 1), Part 2 explains the methods used for the case study. Part 3 presents the development of SSFCs in the Ile-de-France Region (Section 3.1), the forms of involvement of consumers and inhabitants in the process (Section 3.2) and the role of local authorities in the promotion of SSFCs (Section 3.3). Finally, the paper concludes on a critical discussion and a synthesis of the obstacles and opportunities for the future development of SSFCs in this region.

Key concepts about (SSFCs)

Short supply food chains have been central to a wide range of research on the recent emergence of alternative forms of agriculture and food supply in countries of the global North and West (Goodman, 2003). They have often been linked with the so-called quality turn in food as they are associated, among others, to more traditional, locally embedded and sustainable farming practices (Ilbery and Maye, 2005a; Goodman, 2003). Some authors (Watts et al., 2005) have nevertheless shown that this link is not automatic, as the “local” alone is not a guarantee of “a strong turn to quality based production” (Winter, 2003, see also Ilbery et al., 2004).

In relation to these alternative food chains or networks (Renting et al., 2003), SSFCs induce forms of food relocation through the shortening of supply chains. Parker (2005) characterizes these chains by the very small number (or even the absence of) intermediaries between producers and consumers, and/or by the short geographical distance between the two (they ideally fulfil both conditions). In other words, SSFCs are about the rebuilding of proximity between producers and consumers. SSFCs have very different forms: direct selling in farmers’ shops or on farmers’ markets, box schemes, Internet selling etc. Various typologies of SSFCs have been provided to analyse this diversity. Marsden et al. (2000) and Renting et al. (2003) distinguished “face to face”, “proximate” and “spatially extended” SSFCs, as they focused on the mechanisms which enable these relations between producers and consumers to be extended in time and space. Other authors have provided typologies based on the number of intermediaries (direct selling on farms, indirect selling in supermarkets for example) and the individual/collective character of the chain (Chaffotte and Chiffolleau, 2007), as they are more interested in the nature of social relations between the two.

These typologies emphasize the centrality of proximity relations in SSFCs, be they geographical or social. The revival of the food supply function of agriculture will thus depend on the reinforcement of these proximity relations. The next section presents a typology enabling us to understand more fully the proximity relations involved in SSFCs.

Proximity analysis towards a proximity-based typology of SSFCs

According to the proximity approach (Torre and Rallet, 2005; Boschma, 2005), proximity can be either geographical or organized. Organized proximity (Torre, 2010) relates to the way in which ac-

tors can be close, irrespective of the geographical distance. This proximity is based on two fundamental logics: membership (the feeling of belonging to the same network or club, e.g. member of an AMAP¹) and similitude (the fact of recognizing oneself in a common project, mentally adhering to common categories, sharing values, sharing a certain idea of quality of life and agricultural products). Thus, participating in an AMAP, ordering online a specific wine that one bought on holiday at a producer’s wine cellar, buying food at the farmers’ market from the same producers that one has known for years, and so on, are all based on this type of proximity and on the implicit sharing of values and objectives. As such, Renting et al. (2003) see organized proximity as a necessary condition for fundamental “value laden information” held by the food sold through alternative food chains; that is, information (about origin, specific quality, etc.) that connects/relates the consumer to the place of production (Ilbery et al., 2004; Ilbery and Kneafsey, 1998). As Ilbery et al. (2004) put it, this information has a “strong territorial focus”. Generating closer relations between producers, consumers and institutions is therefore a fundamental aspect of the potential endogenous (rural) development dynamics of alternative food chains.

Geographic proximity relates to the distance between actors. However, as Torre (2010) explains, although measurable, this proximity is relative to the morphological characteristics of the territory and to available means of transport. Therefore, it is not experienced in the same way, depending on whether the journey is on a comfortable main road, on small mountain roads, or through city traffic jams.

The limits of what is geographically close or not vary with the actor’s perceptions. In the case of SSFCs, this limit varies according to, for example, the context (urban/rural) and the type of actors (producers/consumers) (Selfa and Qazi, 2005). In France some see 200 km as the right distance for SSFCs (Locavore Guide: Novel, 2010). In 2009, the French Ministry of Agriculture adopted an official national definition of SSFCs: a supply chain is said to be short when it has at the most one intermediary between the agricultural producer and the consumer (Aubry and Chiffolleau, 2009; Ministère de l’Agriculture et de la pêche, 2009). Nothing is said here about distance. The Ministry thus emphasized the organizational dimension of the supply chain rather than geographic proximity.

The following typology (Fig. 1.) distinguishes SSFCs according to the forms of proximity between producers and consumers.

Four types of supply chain can be distinguished: supply chains with loose relations, with indirect relations, with distance relations, and with direct relations. The latter three are SSFCs.

The first case, *supply chains with loose relations*, corresponds to classical long supply chains. Here the relationship between producers and consumers is very loose or has even disappeared, so that the trade is anonymous. Even though products are always traceable (this is mandatory, by law), their origin is often coded and barely comprehensible to the consumer. In cases where traceability enhances the product value (e.g. AOC and “farm” products), the relationship is based above all on knowledge mediated by labels and other marks of confidence (experts, newspapers, etc.). Note that in all cases the producer has an anonymous and partial knowledge of the demand for which he/she is catering.

The second case, *supply chains with an indirect relationship*, is the first type of SSFC. This is a local supply (geographical proximity) yet without a direct relationship between producers and consumers. An intermediary (producer’s shop, restaurant, supermarket, etc.) mediates the relationship and guarantees it. Often it provides information on the producer (photos, farm’s address, etc.). The fact of belonging

¹ Association pour le Maintien d’une Agriculture Paysanne: non-profit organization to safeguard small-scale farming (French version of the US community supported agriculture CSA). Consumers and farmers enter into a contractual relationship where the former participate in choosing the crops to be planted and in helping on the farm, in exchange for some of the produce.

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