



Does scale matter? Investigating the growth of a local organic box scheme in Austria[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Scaling up local organic food systems may be one way to render the overall food system more environmentally friendly and socially just. This paper focuses on an Austrian organic box scheme, specifically on how its relationship with local farmers is experienced in a process of growth. For data collection, we carried out semi-structured interviews with 19 supplying farmers and conducted a focus group discussion with 11 members of the management staff of the box scheme company. We explore the question: how did the growth of the box scheme influence relationships between supplying farmers and the box scheme in this local organic food system – from the farmers' perspective as well as from the perspective of the box scheme company itself? A major challenge for the box scheme was reconciling its values (e.g. supporting many local organic farms) with practical issues such as logistics and coordination. The box scheme managed its growth by strengthening cooperation with two larger vegetable farms/wholesalers. But its support for diverse local organic farms suffered in this process, and the box scheme was still searching for solutions to efficiently interact with such a high number of suppliers. Having a high number of local producers was central to the box scheme's identity; therefore, internal governance structures needed refinement and reflection. The tension between specific qualities such as procurement from a multitude of local farmers on the one hand, and practical economical and logistical considerations on the other lies at the heart of the experience of scaling up local organic food systems.

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1. Introduction

Two major development paths have characterized recent decades in marketing organic products. One direction is to embrace

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the global economy and seek its “greening”, thus engaging conventional food chains, selling products in supermarkets, and exposing a large number of consumers to organic products. A major part of the expansion of the organic food sector since the beginning of the 1990s can be attributed to this development (Richter and Padel, 2005), which has facilitated economies of scale in logistics and distribution (Smith and Marsden, 2004). The other route has a regional focus, selling products locally through close consumer–producer relationships. In its origins, the organic movement was locally oriented, encompassing environmental, philosophical, and political values (Goldberger, 2011). As organics have become more mainstream and the critique of “industrial” organics and the conventionalization debate (Darnhofer et al., 2010) have evolved, locally grown foods (organic or otherwise) and the development of local food systems have emerged as an alternative pathway for achieving a more sustainable and more just food system (Bean and Sharp, 2011).

The growing interest in organics – from large-scale retailers as

well as locally oriented food processors and wholesalers – has resulted in the growth (in volumes, in turnover) of retail-led as well as locally oriented organic food networks (e.g. Smith and Marsden, 2004; Seyfang, 2006, 2008; Furtschegger and Schermer, 2015). Ways that local organic food networks have been scaled up include box schemes that deliver organic products from different organic farms to consumers (Seyfang, 2006; Clarke et al., 2008; Bosona et al., 2011), farmers' cooperatives aiming to market their products to a wider range of customers (Marsden et al., 2000) or consumer cooperatives that buy collectively from farmers for distribution among members of consumer cooperatives (Jaklin et al., 2015). In academia, the study of local food systems' growth and up-scaling is an emerging field that asks pertinent questions about value and quality (Tovey, 2009; Mount, 2012), logistics and value chains (Bosona et al., 2011; Beckie et al., 2012; Clark and Inwood, 2015), and internal governance (Mount, 2012; Haedicke, 2012) and places the growth of local food systems into the wider context of pursuing a more sustainable and more just food system (Friedmann, 2007; Maye, 2013).

While there is some research on how farmers are influenced by being integrated into long organic food value chains (e.g. Guthman, 2004; Smith and Marsden, 2004; Best, 2008; Darnhofer et al., 2010), and on the reasons why farmers take part in local food systems such as farmers' markets or consumer cooperatives (Griffin and Frongillo, 2003; Åsebø et al., 2007; Jaklin et al., 2015), there has been less exploration as to how farmers experience the growth of locally oriented organic food systems. There is a potential tension between the wish to grow and the aim to hold on to values attributed to local food systems in which farmers may be caught up. An interesting case in point is organic box schemes. They range from small Community Supported Agriculture farms (e.g. Feagan and Henderson, 2009; Nost, 2014) to enterprises catering thousands of consumers (Clarke et al., 2008; Ostrom and Stevenson, 2013; Furtschegger and Schermer, 2015). Many of these box schemes have grown large during the last 10 years and potentially possess useful experiences on growth processes in locally oriented organic food systems. This is valid for the box scheme itself, as well as for the farmers supplying it.

This paper focuses on an organic box scheme and its relationship with supplying local farmers in a process of growth. The organic farm and box scheme company *Adamah Biohof* delivers about 5700 organic vegetable boxes per week in the Vienna metropolitan area (Austria). The boxes are filled with produce both from the *Adamah* farm as well as with products from organic farms in the region. We explore the question: how did the growth of this box scheme influence relationships between supplying farmers and the box scheme in this local organic food system – from the farmers' perspective as well as from the perspective of the box scheme company itself?

We start the paper by reviewing the literature pertinent to local organic food systems and how they grow, and then go on to detail the methods of our study. In the results section, we report how farmers supplying *Adamah* and *Adamah* itself experienced relationships in a process of growth, and the implications of scaling up the box scheme. Finally, we discuss the implications of these results for growing local organic food systems.

2. Literature background: growth of local organic food systems

Most academic papers that deal with local organic food take the perspective of the consumer (e.g. Zepeda and Nie, 2012; Meas et al., 2015; Hempel and Hamm, 2016) and often discuss local and organic

as two distinct values where consumers are expected to choose either or. However, we are interested in the perspective of farmers and the situation where local and organic come together as two values, possibly complementing and strengthening each other (see also Seyfang, 2006, 2007).

Organic agriculture is an alternative to conventional farming that emerged as a grassroots movement among farmers and consumers in the last century, and has since then been institutionalised and codified into e.g. the European Union regulation 834/2007. A key challenge identified by Seyfang (2008) is for organic producers to create systems of provision to bypass supermarket supply chains and to organise in a way as to wield sufficient power in the market place. *Local* food emphasises the spatial dimension of the food value chain (Feagan, 2007; Nousiainen et al., 2009; Dimitri, 2011) but is also related to the reconnection of consumers and producers. This reconnection occurs through direct exchange between consumers and producers, and through the idea that actors in these systems share values and goals (Mount, 2012). Mount (2012) argues that this represents a potential of local food systems rather than their realities. However, this potential for interaction may be enough to deliver added value in the direct exchange between producers and consumers (Milestad et al., 2010). In other words, the direct exchange does not have to materialise in order to be considered a quality by the actors. It is also necessary to distinguish between different kinds of local value chains, as in Renting et al. (2003) differentiation of face-to-face, spatially proximate, and spatially extended value chains.

Organic products are not *per se* local products, although consumers may and do expect that organic food reduces food miles and is produced and distributed locally (Vogl et al., 2005; Clarke et al., 2008; Nousiainen et al., 2009). But regulations on organic agriculture (such as the EU regulation) generally do not regulate provision or distribution (Seyfang, 2006). Similarly, the fact that a product is produced or consumed locally does not give information about the production method. In this sense, organic production can act as a boundary object for local food systems, i.e. a binder element around which actors involved collaborate in order to develop common visions, languages and goals and organize their activities, providing a fundamental point of identity and a strong cohesive element (Favilli et al., 2015).

Arguments for local organic food have a basis in environmental concerns as well as in concerns regarding the globalization of the food system. The scale issue is central and is consequently problematized when local organic systems grow and potentially take on traits of the conventional systems (Fraser et al., 2016). According to Fraser et al. (2016) there is still not enough knowledge as to the possibility of scaling up local organic systems, and these authors identify a tension between organic as a production system with a number of approved management techniques, and organic with ideals related to social justice with a focus on family-farm-centric food systems. This tension is central to growing local organic food systems. Scaling up local organic food systems entails increasing the intended social, economic, and environmental impacts of the food system, apart from economic efficiency (Clark and Inwood, 2015). But this is not a matter of simply increasing volume or increasing the size of participating farms, because the growth of local food projects can affect the social forms and relations of production (Tovey, 2009). A change in the scale of production or the size of the food system itself may alter how farmers interact with each other and with other actors and thus alter the generation of what Mount (2012) calls *intangible qualities*. Generated by the direct exchange between farmers, intermediaries, and consumers, intangible qualities are critical to the success of a local (organic)

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