



The challenges emerging from the new modes of governance around food

Francesca Galli, Adanella Rossi¹

Abstract – Health and sustainability concerns related to food production and consumption involve a multiplicity of actors and responsibilities. New models of interaction and decision making are increasingly experimented to fine-tune context-based solutions. These new forms of food governance develop along three types of relationships: civil society and the food chain; the public sector and the food chain; policy makers and civil society. The 7thFP Foodlinks project aimed at exploring new modalities of science-policy-civil society interaction in the domain of sustainable food production and consumption. Looking at the experience across twelve European countries, the project deepened the specific innovative pathways undertaken along each of the three governance axes, by experimenting with Communities of Practice (CoP) as a dedicated space for interaction. Here we summarize the challenges emerging from the interface between civil society and the food chain (the “Short Supply Chain CoP”). What changes do the new societal demands require to producers and production systems? What contribution from public policies and what institutional innovation could be useful to meet the new claims? Based on the case studies within the project, we discuss implications emerging about specific issues.

Keywords – short food chains, public procurement, urban food strategies, CoP, food governance

INTRODUCTION

Health and sustainability concerns related to food production and consumption have come to the fore in the public opinion and in the scientific and political agendas. They involve a multiplicity of actors, fields of action and responsibilities and need the definition of new models of interaction and decision making in order to be tackled. As a potential response, in an increasing number of cases a “new food governance” is locally experimented, in which actors, other than public bodies and powerful corporations, have voice and innovative, context-based solutions, are finetuned to meet the new societal demands. These new forms of food governance develop along three types of relationships (Wiskerke, 2009): i) civil society and the chain of food provision (i.e. shorter food supply chains - SFSCs); ii) the public sector and the chain of food provision (i.e. public procurement - PP); iii) policy makers, especially at local level, and civil society (i.e. urban food strategies - UFS). In this context, civil society in particular is proving to play an active, significant role in promoting innovation. This rise of community action has been reassessed through the lens of grassroots innovation initiatives (Seyfang and Smith, 2007).

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consumption. Looking at the experience across 12 European countries, the project deepened the specific innovative pathways undertaken along each of the three governance axes. To that end, the model of Community of Practice (Wenger, 2000) was adopted (CoP). The present article aims at pointing out the challenges emerging from the “Short food supply chain” CoP, focusing on the role of members and organizations of the civil society and on the related demands. What changes do the new societal demands require to producers and production systems? What role and contribution is required to public policies? What kind of institutional innovation could be useful to meet the new claims?

Based on the case-study analyses within the CoP, we discuss implications and instances emerging about specific issues. Results show how food is an integrative concept, which requires an innovative, reflexive approach at operational as well as policy level. In particular, it emerges the key role played by interaction and how challenging its support is.

METHODOLOGY

The Communities of Practice concept has gained wide influence both inside the academia and in the public and private sectors. CoPs are instrumental to encouraging social learning and supporting knowledge brokerage (KB) amongst researchers, policy makers and civil society organizations by facilitating their collaboration as a community. KB was conceptualised in Foodlinks as an interactive process of knowledge exchange, co-production and social learning between the different societal groups, that were so considered to be both knowledge producers and knowledge consumers. The process of KB, focused around the three mentioned themes, pursued a twofold aim: firstly, knowledge exchange and collaboration between the three categories of stakeholders and, secondly, a reflection on the effectiveness of the CoP as a space of interaction. The interaction within the CoPs was left to the initiative of participants, supported by facilitators, while two common tools were used by all CoPs: online platforms for virtual communication, useful for the internal interaction among members, but also for the enrolment of new members at European level; collaboration in writing a document aimed at representing the tangible output of the joint action.

RESULTS

Here we summarize the main questions and key issues raised by the participants in the SFSC CoP, and the main challenges encountered by producers and policy makers in relation to these questions. These challenges emerged as priorities identified by the different societal groups involved in the CoP and illustrated by a set of nineteen case studies across the twelve European countries involved (Galli and Brunori, 2013).

¹ Francesca Galli and Adanella Rossi are from the University of Pisa, Italy, Department of Agriculture, Food and Environment (francesca.galli@for.unipi.it, adanella.rossi@unipi.it).



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1. *What is "short"?* The first question, from which the others follow, poses a radical challenge for producers to reflect on their own identity and the evolution of their role in market and society. Developing communication skills and engaging in networking activities re-define farmers' identity and activity. At the policy level, learning about existing practices on territory, successes and failures, may increase awareness on the importance of the phenomena.

2. *What is the sustainability performance of short chains?* The sustainability assessment of short chains is complicated by the lack of a shared definition of "short", beyond geographical scale, and the absence of a shared methodology for the assessment. Environmental performance represents an exception but Life Cycle Assessments (LCAs) are often too costly for small scale producers. Investing in effective ways of monitoring and communicating the wider sustainability dimensions of products and processes (health, social and ethic) represents a challenge for short chains producers, taking into account scale and prevalence of relationships based on trust. On the policy side, building recognition of short chains into multiple policy areas (health, environment, rural development and agriculture) represents an opportunity to enhance the sustainability profile of short chains.

3. *What role for regulation as a driver/barrier to short chains?* The third question poses a challenge for policy in removing unnecessary hindrances, such as over-burdensome interpretations of hygiene regulations. This process may be facilitated whereas producers engage with public authorities and public-private partnerships are built.

4. *What space for growth and how to manage up-scaling?* Short chains develop as an alternative strategy or as diversification to complement a conventional marketing strategy. Therefore the challenge is to decide on the optimal organizational structure according to the different goals, stages of development and contexts. In some cases up-scaling is deliberately avoided, in order to maintain the specificity as short chains. On the other hand, often up-scaling strategies are sought through allies and agreements to maintain economic and social viability. The importance of aggregating supply is relevant when it comes to facilitating public procurement at local level, by linking local food systems and educational programs.

5. *How relevant are short chains in relation to public procurement and urban food strategies?* The recognition of the complex nature of food and food-related practices and of the multiplicity of pathways developing around them requires to increase knowledge on best practices and tailoring tools for

sustainability assessment and monitoring to local conditions. Within the CoP, "short" has multiple and diversified meanings and "sustainable" much overlaps with "green". Placing local food on the policy agenda, especially at the urban level, is an important but demanding challenge, which requires to work on assuring the expression of the different interests and on building shared knowledge and goals.

CONCLUSIONS

The experiment conducted within the three CoPs emphasizes the importance of the new arenas of food governance as a space for implementing socially demanded farming and, more in general, food provisioning. At the same time it also highlights the need for an adequate management of these spaces for discussion and co-decision. In the specific case of the selected CoP, the empirical material has allowed to explore the key priorities identified: short chain concept, sustainability assessment, regulatory issues and trade-off between growing and maintaining the innovative character. Interaction among farmers and between farmers and other actors of the food system enables a constructive handling of these priorities, so reacting to the new societal demands.

Knowledge brokerage and facilitation, tailored to context specific needs, are crucial to that end. However, the emerged different positions, interests and perspectives of the actors involved, together with the variety of situations existing at local level, show the complexity of these processes and consequently how the related facilitation and negotiation practices are, although needed, not easy nor readily effective.

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