

THE ROLE OF ALTERNATIVE PRODUCER-CONSUMER PRACTICES FOR TRANSITION(S) TOWARDS A SUSTAINABLE  
FOOD SYSTEM

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The current economical and financial crisis constitutes an important opportunity to trigger structural changes within and of the system. This applies to socio-ecological systems as well as to current modes of food production and consumption which impact upon them. This food sector has already been under heavy pressure from the food safety crisis to the latest food shortages or with regard to the environmental depletion resulting from various agro-industrial practices. This area now also undergoes structural pressures related to the foreseen end of cheap oil which will heavily impact on the fundamental characteristics of current patterns of production and consumption: fertilizers, transports, ‘cold chain’, distribution system, products diversity, household purchase patterns, etc. are highly dependent on the current form of cheap energy supply and will undoubtedly transform drastically. At long term, the current modes of provisions will irremediably have to adapt or collapse.

In this paper, we briefly present intermediary results of *Consensus*, a two years multi-partner research project financed by the Belgian Science Policy department ([http://www.belspo.be/belspo/ssd/science/pr\\_transversal\\_fr.stm](http://www.belspo.be/belspo/ssd/science/pr_transversal_fr.stm)). This project aims at ‘foreseeing’ and understanding today the mechanisms of change that the adaptation of our food system will require in the future. Therefore, according to the transition theory, we focus on one of the source of systemic change, i.e. current innovative practices, or ‘niches’, and the ways they could up scale in order to be better prepared for the upcoming necessary social and technical transition(s). As case study, we have chosen to work on Local Food Systems (LFS). In this research, we study how the niches are externally ‘governed’ (e.g. which rules and external measures are surrounding CSA initiatives, on the supply and demand sides). Our objective is to explore the issues related to the governance of transitions and system innovations, and, starting from this specific literature, to enrich it with insights on their application to the relatively unexplored (Shove and Walker 2007) governance of sustainable consumption patterns. The final aim is then to highlight ‘best practices’ to be promoted or supported by public actors and in particular the renewed governance practices necessary to do so. Already note that, while the *Consensus* project focuses on LFS, it is important to keep in mind that in System Innovation and Transition theories, niches are only but one aspect of transition governance, and moreover, that the focus of public authorities cannot be only on the development of one potential pathway towards more sustainable food consumption; the priority in terms of public policy must be to develop a portfolio of potentially promising niches.

**1. Transition, niche and governance**

A niche can be described as an ‘incubation room’ where “*novelties are created, tested and diffused*”, where learning processes occur and social networks are built to support an innovation (Loorbach, 2007, p.20). Comprehending the emergence, generalisation, decay... of niches in the realm of sustainable consumption is thus participating to our understanding of impulsing alternative, sustainable consumption behaviour. As a consequence, the second phase of *Consensus* focuses on the study of the mechanisms – organisational, personal, institutional... - of selected niches and the way they relate to the ‘regime’. To do so, we have chosen to focus our empirical study on a specific consumption niche, i.e. ‘Local Food Systems’ (LFS) i.e. “*systems which allow a direct contact between consumers and producers, and/or in*

which consumers and producers enter into a long-term contractual relation with one another. The distance between the different actors should remain limited (geographically as well as for the number of links in the chain)” (Mathijs et al, 2006, p.7)<sup>1</sup>. Some authors also speak about Short Food Supply Chains (SFSC), which is quite close (Goodman, 2008). Without presuming of other benefits and inevitable limits of such systems, LFS do respond to objectives of sustainable consumption (r)evolutions in terms of re-localisation and re-socialisation, notably via the re-connection of the linkages between producers and consumers as well as among consumers themselves. Further, we have chosen to focus on the local dimension of food for two concrete reasons: First, the results of the first part of the research on the transition pathways towards sustainable food has resulted in three normative scenarios which all were emphasising the local dimension of food production and consumption (Paredis et al, 2009); Second, the current development of CSA-like initiatives in Belgium does provide us with a civil-society based type of niche and with three different types or stages of niche development (across the Belgian Regions), allowing to study different pathways and different potential governance mixes.

Following Le Galès (1995), governance can be defined as the whole set of formal and informal relations between public and private interests and of arrangements along which decisions are taken and implemented. Governance is not a synonym of government, but this concept helps better understanding the new forms of public action which include actors beyond traditional public institutions and which do not anymore rely on legitimate violence and domination, but on negotiation, partnership and ethical and moral principles (Jouve, et al, 1999). Regarding LFS, the governance approach among others implies an analysis of the interactions between LFS and public authorities, as well as market actors, professional sectoral cooperatives, etc. and the inclusion of such analysis when conceiving potential support measures for LFS.

### ***Current consumption governance***

Currently, particularly at the EU level, a new agenda is rising and taking a place “aside” SD strategies, i.e. sustainable consumption and production (SCP) plans and policies. In the context of the EU SCP plan, a “retail forum” has been organized within which the food industry took the initiative of a roundtable (now entitled the ‘European Food SCP Roundtable’), in order to discuss and propose ‘sustainable’ solutions. However, most ideas developed within these forums and plans so far are focusing on production-oriented instruments and informational instruments, e.g. eco-design, energy efficiency, or LCA-type of tools.

Indeed, as concluded by the European FP6 project SCOPE<sup>2</sup> (‘Sustainable Consumption Policies Effectiveness’) which has reviewed current policies: “*Most instruments focus on production and products. [and c]onsumption processes are only addressed by voluntary and information instruments*” (Tukker et al, 2008).<sup>2</sup>

With regard to food, policy innovation seems to concentrate on labeling, which is the single most developed informational instrument so far with the emblematic examples of organic food and fair trade. However, current measures do not address real alternative option as Local Food Systems.

## **2. Local Food Systems as a social innovation: which pathway between niche and regime**

The results of the literature review on transition approaches and their application to LFS niches can be summarized in 3 messages : (1) the way TM and SI conceive the niches, as illustrated through approaches such as Strategic Niche Management, is not adapted to innovations which are not technological; (2) as other niches like organic food or fair trade product, we can observe a fragmentation within the LFS type of initiatives between a service-oriented approach acting within the market and potentially aiming at marginally influence the current system and so-to-say politically-oriented initiatives aiming at generating alternative to the current market mechanisms and potentially leading to transformative changes; (3) there are few *ad hoc* theoretical frameworks which can handle such ambivalent research objects as the

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<sup>1</sup> LFS include a huge diversity of initiatives, from organic box schemes to Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA), through farm shops.

<sup>2</sup> Tukker, Arnold et al, Sustainable Consumption Policies Effectiveness (SCOPE<sup>2</sup>). Final report-Draft, EU Sixth Framework Programme, 7 october 2008, 122p.

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governance of consumption niches, and among those the quite young model of Malo et al (2009), aiming at conceptualizing the institutionalization process of social innovation, appears most promising.

**a) Strategic Niche Management (SNM): the issue of compatibility**

Our first research focus has been on the TM-related niches management approaches, in particular the Strategic Niche Management (SNM) approach. As the whole strand of TM and SI, SNM is not totally adapted to non technology-oriented niches which aim at developing organizational and cultural innovations. One of the shortcomings of SNM is linked to the very way these approaches conceive a potentially successful innovation. Indeed, a central question to assess the potential of transfer of a socio-technical practice from a green niche to the mainstream situation is based on the necessity of *compatibility* of the niche with the incumbent regime (Weber et al, 1999 in Smith, 2006, p.442).

Stating ‘compatibility’ as a factor of success implies that the SNM approach does not opt for a conception of niches as leading to radical transformations, but rather for incremental change. However, alternative initiatives as LFS are precisely focusing on alternative set of e.g. quality criteria which, we can assume, are in an important extent not compatible with current food regime criteria for viable and efficient projects (socialization processes with the producers and among consumers, proximity with nature, information on the product and process VS. the current mainstream criteria “quick, cheap and easy”).

**b) Incremental vs. transformative type of change**

Further we have observed with LFS the same type of fragmentation phenomenon than with other cases related to Alternative Food Networks (AFN), like organic food, fair trade, etc. There is a fragmentation of the niche according to two perspectives: enhancing the regime with elements from the niches leading to incremental change vs. actors who wants to stick to the original, more radical perspective, including the generation of “*continued pressure from a renewed niche alternative.* » (Smith, 2006, p.455).

On the one hand niches are influencing the current system through the transfer of compatible elements as illustrated by an analysis of sustainable consumption through the cultural perspective stating that some sustainable initiatives, like organic food, gather elements from the three ‘cultures’ (hierarchist, egalitarian, individualist), but that only aspects compatible with the dominant culture (i.e. individualist) were supported by current sustainable consumption policies: “*the mainstream has superficially adopted the niche consumption market for organic food, but has done so in a way which keeps the technical point (not using pesticides or fertilisers in growing) but discards the essence of the project – namely to promote a different relationship between people and food and land.*” (Seyfang, 2003, p. 21).

On the other hand, certain niches propose a radical alternative, and therefore have a low compatibility with the current system and low potential of transfer. However, they could also influence the system as alternative model to be promoted with regard to their exemplary and critique function. In the light of the work of Sophie Dubuisson-Quellier (2009), LFS initiatives can be studied as (social) movements, which have a demonstrative role as alternative to market, i.e. showing that “it is possible to act differently”. Similarly, Seyfang (2003) concludes that alternative/marginalised cultures and institutions (i.e. niches) should be empowered and protected to maintain the social critique and the demonstration that other lifestyles and consumption patterns are possible/available.

Therefore, we argue that a transition process needs at the same time (1) supporting radical niches aiming at potential radical transformations of the current regime, or at least which endorse an exemplary role and (2) at picking ‘fragments’ of niche which are compatible with the regime. So far, we assume policies mainly support the transfer of some technologies which do not cause too much disruption in the mainstream socio-technical context and have a low transfer cost. This, at first sight, does not seem compatible with LFS which propose alternative modes of provision unlikely to fit with the current regime configuration.

**c) The institutionalization of social innovation**

Based on the literature review and using the model of Malo and Vezina (2009) theorizing the institutionalization process of social innovations, we found some hints that certified labelling contributes only to one type of institutionalization, one type of development pathway for the niche out of three ideal-typical pathways.

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In brief, according to the model of institutionalization of social innovations, in order to diffuse beyond the network/community of origin, the innovation will necessarily go through an institutionalization process with growing pressure towards **standardization** (crystallization of *legal/juridical frame*, a *hierarchical/organizational structure*, specific roles and tasks and *specialization* at a central level, *normalization* of the products, *certification* procedures, etc.). Beyond unavoidable standardization, this process can lead to three types of institutionalization: **banalisation** at the expense of the original principles and values of the innovation and towards the adaptation to the dominant institutional frames; **focalisation** in reaction to banalisation, with a re-focus on the original ideas and differentiation from the mainstream frames; and finally **hybridation** which is an intermediary stance aiming at constantly *reinventing* the activity, the practices, the arrangements in order to maintain the alternative character of the practices w/r to the mainstream actors. This model is quite similar to other innovation models, including TM and SI; however it does discuss the missing ‘social dimension’, which gives a heuristic to understand the development of such socio-cultural niches as LFS.

In the historical evolution of fair trade (Malo et al, 2009) and organic food (Smith, 2006), and as can also be observed for LFS-type of initiatives, at some point of development of the social innovation there is a fragmentation between a standardization/banalisation strand and a focalization strand, i.e. between incremental vs. radical strategies of transition. On the one hand, some niche actors measure the success and development of the niche in terms of the diffusion of provisioned quantities or in terms of consumers having integrated the niche. As a consequence, they strive at integrating the markets and public rules to compete with conventional actors. On the other hand, other niche actors conceive the success and development of the niche as the diffusion of the core ideas and values embedded in the original innovation addressing people as citizens rather than as consumers. As a consequence, they distrust mainstream market and public norms and prefer e.g. the multiplication of small-scaled initiatives where concrete involvement in organization and reflection is still an important requirement to the “members”.

The examples of labelling and subsidies - as the most conventional public policy instruments - have been widely debated among Fair trade, organic or LFS movements. Opposition emerges notably between pros and contras around the effects of such instruments on the autonomy of the niche with regard to initial priorities of the niche (relational trust against official standards). In the case of certification, we see that certified labelling is an important step in the necessary standardization process of the niche, contributing to homogenisation of standards, rules, specialisation of roles and finally leading to increase attention and recognition and thus in an increase in market share. However, certification also has counter-productive effects when standards are kept lower than expected by niche actors. Difficult bargaining processes with powerful regime actors, combined to low production capacity of the niche actors to fulfil a fast growing demand, generate the opportunity for mainstream market actors to overtake the niche, finally leading to banalization. Such examples of niche governance show that the potential instruments to support LFS can be different according to the conception of the type of development awaited from such niche. Building coherent and effective policies requires understanding what obstacles and opportunities actually are perceived by niche actors and by public actors.

More generally, LFS-type of initiatives usually do not fit with existing legislation (with the recurrent example of sanitarian rules) as norms are conceived for (and with) the dominant actors, namely the agro-food and retailing industry. The institutional adaptiveness is thus a key dimension in the study of transition processes towards a more sustainable food system.

### 3. Case Study: Measures and actors network around Belgian Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) initiatives

The field work is now ongoing. We have narrowed the focus of the research on the Belgian Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) systems (Voedselteams in Flanders, GAC in Wallonia and GASAP in Brussels). We mainly deal with the interactions between CSA initiatives and the regimes actors, namely the public authorities, the market actors and the professional associations of the agro-food sector. The final objective is to end with a set of potential measures to support the development of CSA systems.

Therefore the first task has been to identify existing measures and actors which have an influence on CSA systems and assess them as obstacles or opportunities for the development of the CSA systems. This network of actors network

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surrounding Belgian CSA gathers an important numbers of individual people or organisations; for example, at the public level: municipalities, regional, federal and European cabinets, civil services, agencies and councils in the field of agriculture and food security; or at the private level: consumers, individual producers, professional organisations, federations and trade unions of farmers, organic certifiers and actors of the agro-food industry (transformers and retailers).

Based on the first sketches of the LFS network in Belgium, we are interviewing the different types of actors in order to identify more clearly the constraints and drivers of LFS, and particularly CSA development. In order to synthesize these interview outputs, we use a matrix instruments-effects to classify existing and potential measures:

- according to policy instruments categories : legislative and regulative, economic and fiscal, informational, norms and standards, direct supply, laissez-faire; and
- according to their influence, as obstacle or opportunity, on the development (‘up-scaling’) of LFS.

The first empirical results<sup>3</sup> show that CSA initiatives are actually surrounded by a large amount of institutions, usually in the larger context of short circuit initiatives (direct sale at the farm, farm shops, farmer markets, etc.). ‘Short-circuit’ is indeed an increasing trend already promoted by several existing measures, lead e.g. by regional civil services or farmer’s trade unions. For example, the CAP pillar addressing rural development does include short circuit in the supported portfolio of activities. CSA initiatives are technically included in such measures, however they don’t appear to be the most promoted initiatives in the realm of short circuit and European responsible don’t seem to be aware of this form of short circuit initiatives<sup>4</sup>.

Furthermore, a lot of French and Belgian CSA groups want to preserve their autonomy and the self-organisation characteristics of Local Food Systems: most internal discussions around grants or organic certification show reluctance with regard to such traditional policy instruments. The fear of being “hijacked” from their initiatives by politicians or by market logics is very pronounced among CSA members and promoters. Similarly, their vision of development is quite moderated in terms of number of CSA, even if the demand is very strong.

For this reason, we can presume that efforts could be focused on policy instruments and measures addressing the factors influencing a favourable context for the development of short circuit and CSA in particular, rather than creation or organisation of CSA by state actors. As the main obstacles seem to be linked to the supply side (access to ground, administrative and financial burden linked to sanitarian rules, and so on), measures facilitating the creation of small farms could be positively considered.

Those very preliminary results encourage us to further draw the network of actors who, consciously or not, are influencing the development of CSA initiatives. This will allow us to identify the most important node of interactions and develop potential innovative measures to support CSA in collaboration with the relevant actors.

At this stage of the research, first observations, to be confirmed, shows that: The Belgian landscape of CSA-like initiatives does present three different types or stages of niche development: 1) the Walloon CSA’s used to be rather isolated autonomous rural producers-led initiatives, following the traditional logic of cooperatives, even if they are now on the way towards stronger network building (through organisations linked to trade unions and other non-profit making organisations); whereas Brussels and Flemish CSA’s are more urban consumers-led initiatives initially meant to support local farming. However the Brussels and Flemish case differentiate with regard to their relation to power and w/r to the level of institutionalization: 2) the Flemish ‘Food-teams’, even if concretely made of hundreds (120) of small quite autonomous groups (10 to 20 persons) are strongly embedded into a structured network with clear roles and rules and with an accepted objective of up-scaling in order to provide a robust pool of demand for local farmers. 3) Whereas Brussels ‘*Groupes d’achats solidaire*’ (solidar buying groups) are currently less structured and more reluctant w/r to State-related help, as well as w/r to the up-scaling objective.

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<sup>3</sup> Document review, 12 face to face and phone interviews with federal, regional and municipal actors, as well as assistance to multiple CSA meetings.

<sup>4</sup> Interview at DG Agri (February 2010) ; results to be confirmed.

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We hypothesize that transition towards more sustainable agro-food systems will require at the same time the actions of focalized niches carrying a strong alternative message, with an example role; as well as more standardized niches touching more people but with a weaker alternative message. The second hypothesis is that each of these types of niches could require specific mixes of governance instruments, including the no-action option; i.e. some initiatives will be better off if authorities just go on ignoring them.

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