

How to measure and regulate localness?

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Abstract - There are two main forces that work against the local, globalisation and functional differentiation. Localness as such is not a basic principle of organic agriculture, but the concerns for localness are connected to two ethical concerns, functional integrity and ecological justice, which are expressed in the organic principles. The problem of delocalisation is not simply a question of spatial distance but of associated consequences such as externalities, commodification, unfair trade, lack of transparency and breakdown of local food systems. Therefore, it is not easy to measure and regulate localness. Simple distance measures do not directly address these consequences, and more sophisticated measures are difficult to implement. One way to regulate is to add a "localness label" on the products and leave the choice, and the responsibility, with the consumers. Another way to regulate localness is to address the consequences associated with distance in the organic standards, where complex and varied issues can be handled, but then precautionary concerns need to be addressed.¹

INTRODUCTION

Free trade with organic produce is a goal in WTO and EU, and the increasing regional and global trade contributes to the growth of organic agriculture. However, some think that this growth happens to the disregard of the organic principles, and will result in "Organic Lite". Furthermore, some organic consumers and producers prefer local conventional products to non-local organic products (Padel, 2005: 86ff). In this paper we will focus on forces that work against the local and underlying reasons for localness, and give proposals for how to measure and eventually regulate localness.

TWO FORCES AGAINST THE LOCAL:

GLOBALISATION AND FUNCTIONAL DIFFERENTIATION

The debate about nearness and localness in organic circles has many aspects. There is no doubt that strong forces work against the local in organic as well as in mainstream food systems. The two main driving forces against the local are *globalisation*, the erosion of the barriers of time and space that constrain human activity across the earth, and *functional differentiation*, the splitting into specialised units and systems. While the latter does not directly work against the local, it enables spatial differentiation and thereby reinforces globalisation. The two

forces are not necessarily negative. Globalisation not only works for markets, but also for ideas and contacts between people, and thereby enables the spreading of organic ideas and values. Specialisation and consequent increased efficiency can promote the growth of organic agriculture by increasing the competitiveness of organic products, both in terms of quality and price.

REASONS FOR LOCALNESS:

FUNCTIONAL INTEGRITY AND ECOLOGICAL JUSTICE

The two driving forces are, however, problematic in relation to basic organic values. Not because localness as such is a basic principle of organic agriculture, but because it is connected with two more fundamental ethical concerns, which are also expressed in the newly rewritten Principles of Organic Agriculture (IFOAM, 2005). Firstly, organic agriculture aims at sustainability in the sense of *functional integrity* (Alrøe et al., 2006: 83-84). It is based primarily on ecological systems and cycles, which are always localized in some sense, and not on technological remedies to counteract depletions and malfunctions of these systems. From this perspective, agriculture and food systems are vulnerable socio-ecological systems with crucial elements, such as soil, crops, livestock, ecosystems, values and institutions that must be reproduced over time. The development of modern food systems and markets, by contrast, is based on functional differentiation where inputs and foods are produced wherever it is most profitable, and this leads to distancing and disembedding of food networks in time and space (see also Kjeldsen and Alrøe, 2006).

Functional integrity concerns the workings of the system as a whole, whereas the second problematic aspect, *ecological justice*, concerns fairness for individuals and local communities with regard to their common environments (Alrøe et al., 2006: 84ff). From this perspective the problematics of the non-local is not simply a question of spatial distance, but of the consequences that are often associated with increased distances, such as external costs from transport, commodification of commons such as soil, water, grazing land and nature areas, and lack of transparency, awareness and participation in the decisions and development of the food system. Furthermore, increased distances as an effect of globalisation and functional differentiation is closely connected to specialisation and intensification. All of these are boosted by the enrollment of organic production into the global market system, and they will, in general, be problematic for the functional integrity of organic food and farming systems.

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PROBLEMS FOR CERTIFIED AND NON-CERTIFIED OA

The two driving forces can give different problems for different kinds of organic agriculture. "*Certified organic agriculture*", which is the norm in industrialised countries, is part of the market system and therefore subject to the same market forces as mainstream agriculture. The certification guarantees high standards on many aspects of production, processing and packaging, and the integration of certified organics into the mainstream market is a successful way of promoting organic principles and producing public goods. However, aspects of the organic food networks that are not secured through the certification system, such as trade, transport and power relations, will be under pressure. Moreover, increasing distance and complexity entails new risks of error and fraud.

"*Non-certified organic agriculture*" (such as small traditional farmers that follow agro-ecological principles and produce for subsistence and local markets based on close relations), on the other hand, is not subject to the same market pressures. But when globalisation opens up such local markets to the global market, the local food systems come under pressure from industrialised agriculture and subsidised agricultural exports. However, the beneficial nature of "non-certified organics" rests on the valuable traditions or, alternatively, on local awareness of agricultural problems and solutions.

HOW LOCAL IS LOCAL? IS REGULATION POSSIBLE?

The problem of localness is not distance in itself, but the connected consequences for ecology, animals and people, in form of external costs of transport and distribution, commodification, unfair trade, lack of transparency and participation, loss of food sovereignty, etc. Hence, it is difficult to establish a measure of localness and how local it should be.

The simplest measures of localness are the *distance of trade* (between production and consumption place) and *transport* (the actual transport path). However, these are not very simple measures in modern organic food systems, which are complex networks of subproduction, processing and distribution systems. And such measures work best for substitutable foods - bananas don't grow well in the UK. Besides, distance measures do not directly address the problematic consequences that are more or less connected with distance. Still, it can be argued that a distance limit, even a quite arbitrary one, may counteract the connected consequences in the same way that the ban on synthetic nitrogen fertilizers forces organic farms to rely on their own resources and ecological processes and thus counteracts a range of problematic consequences of high-input farming. A limit on the distance of trade will entail some form of protection of local or regional food systems. This may be beneficial for e.g. small farmers in developing countries and mountain farms in the Alps, but it is also in direct conflict with the goals of free trade in WTO and in the EU internal market.

Still, the option of protecting local food systems should not be rejected without consideration.

The inadequacy of distance measures may be remedied by *more sophisticated measures* that address regional differences in production context and the problematic consequences of increased distances more directly. For example "food miles" include local transport and "life cycle analysis" may include the form of transport, subproductions, number of elements in the chains, etc. However, such measures may be quite difficult to implement. Furthermore, there are limits to what can be known and measured and *precaution* is an important principle to consider in increasingly complex food systems. The question of how to measure localness can therefore not be determined independently of the question of how to regulate it.

One way to regulate localness is to require that the chosen measure be *labelled on the product*, assisted by pictograms if possible, in addition to the organic label. This gives consumers the option to choose (this aspect of) localness based on their preferences and to act precautionary with regard to distance and complexity. Hereby, they will also contribute positively to environment, animals and people. But if they do not choose localness, because their preferences are otherwise, or because they are not able to live up to the responsibility of acting as "ethical consumers", labelling will not avoid the problematic consequences of distanciation. Another option is to *include rules on localness in the organic certification standards*, and thereby fixing issues of localness into the "package" of organics. Regulations can handle more complex and varied issues than consumers buying their daily food. For example, the problematic consequences connected to localness may be addressed more directly and rules may be contextualised to address differences in regional production contexts and between crops. But if the precautionary concerns that consumers show in their choice of localness, are to be honoured, precautionary measures that address the risks of distanciation and complexity, need to be incorporated into the regulations and practices of organic food systems.

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