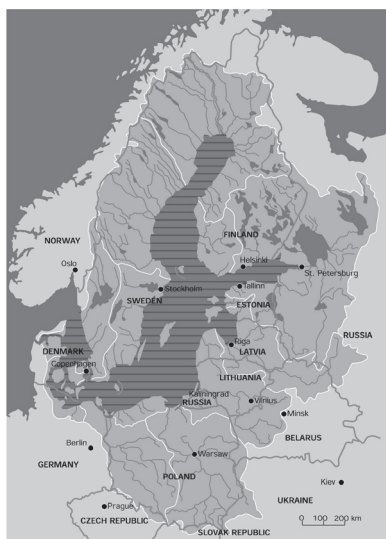




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APPROACHES TO SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY IN ALTERNATIVE FOOD SYSTEMS

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INTRODUCTION

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This volume consists of two papers approaching the question of social sustainability in the context of alternative food systems (AFS). Both papers originate from the Beras project, and consequently have their empirical base on case studies conducted within the Baltic Sea region. In the first paper by Markus Larsson and co-writers, the case is from Järna village in Sweden, and in the second paper by Marko Nousiainen and co-writers the case is from Juva municipality in Finland. The rationale in focussing on a single case is similar in both papers, namely to illuminate and analyse how the issues of social sustainability can be recognized and assessed at the level of practical relations and experiences of the actors involved in AFS. In addition, the description of these real cases serves as demonstration of the possibility of well functioning AFS.

Although both of the papers introduce qualitative studies on social sustainability, there are differences in the approaches employed. Larsson et al. frame their study by a wide systems perspective, emphasising the importance of maintaining resilience and diversity at various levels of ecological and social systems. They view social sustainability in terms of social capital that is maintained and generated in horizontal networks built on trust and reciprocity. At empirical level they use accounts given by interviewees concerning their own participation and the nature of relations between actors in a local AFS network. Nousiainen et al. start with a discussion on structural aspect of AFS by making a distinction between *organic* as a mode of production and *local* as a mode of distribution. They approach social sustainability in terms of equity and community viability, and focus on a detailed analysis of argumentation generated in interviews in which the issues of social sustainability and differences between conventional and alternative food systems were introduced as potentially controversial matters.

In spite of differences in approach – or rather because of them – we find it useful and interesting to set these two papers side by side. Theoretically, they complement each other. At the level of empirical results, the image of the Järna case appears more neat and “ideal” in terms of social sustainability while in Juva case certain voices of reservation were heard, pointing out to apparent bottlenecks and threats of discord. To interpret these differences is an intriguing task. Should they be attributed, for example, to the nature of shared values of actors, which in the Järna case were provided more by antroposophic ideas and in the Juva case by local identity, or to the differences in distance to wide markets? Or,

could they be something brought out by differences in methods? There are also other interesting differences, i.e. the emphasis on local food production seems to be much more salient in Juva case than it is in Järna case.

In both of these papers it is possible to find evidence supporting the view that AFS can and do contribute to socially sustainable development. At the same time, they point out problems and challenges. One example of a particular problem is the strict regulations for organic products and, as another, high consumer prices. One example of a challenge is the need to increase influence of own actions as well as the need for policies for green entrepreneurship. Finally, it may be concluded that the papers in this volume provide an excellent comparison for further case studies that are under preparation in the Beras project concerning the issue of social sustainability