

# From catering organisations to environmental and health related public catering systems

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**Abstract** - Based on the political legitimacy for healthy food and environment by the citizens, the traditional public catering is suggested to be conceptualised as a public catering system. This Luhmann inspired systems notion conveys the boundary between the catering system and its environments, stressing the environmental communication and adaptation by catering systems. However, environmental communication needs more developed and particular environmental constructions to be implemented on the level of particular catering systems. Organisational and communication research on the shop floor is needed in order to solve particular tensions. The systems approach to catering discloses how profound a change is at hand when actors simply try to connect the aspects of health and environment to public catering.<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

The traditional task of catering services has been to meet the adequate nutritional and food safety needs of customers, within a particular food culture. This basic task has been challenged in new ways during the recent decade.

First, the increasing number of major nutrition related diseases affect adversely on the health of people in industrialised countries (Diet, Nutrition and the Prevention of Chronic Diseases, 2005). In the US, the 'fat epidemic', as the phrase goes, is expanding. In the EU, health is deemed a human right and is considered to contribute in productivity, labour participation and economic growth (Commission, 2005). The prevention of illnesses and promotion of health in order to avoid diseases related to life-style in general and nutrition in particular have gained attention on political level and strategies are developed to 'turn the tide' (Commission, 2005; Mikkelsen et al., 2005).

Second, the environmental impacts of intensive agriculture have highlighted the benefits of extensive and more environmentally friendly agriculture (European Commission 2005). As an alternative farming system, the organic agriculture and the phenomenon of local food have gained interest as promising ways to introduce environmentally and socially sustainable developments into the food systems (Atkins and Bowler, 2001). However, Fuentes and Carlsson-Kanyamaa (2006) have found environmental impacts of food supply chains to exhibit extensive variation. More sustainable agriculture has gained broad political agreement within EU, both on the conventional and organic sector (European Commission, 2005).

The environmental as well as nutritional and life-style approach to catering adopted by several public catering organ-

isations has been relying often on organic and local food (Morgan and Sonnino, 2005; Christensen 2006). The emerging profound change calls for more coherent understanding and systematic examination.

This paper explores in which ways a Luhmann inspired systems approach informs research in environmental and health related public catering as a sustainability agent.

## SOCIAL SYSTEMS THEORETICAL CONCEPTS

What does it mean for a social entity to be a social system in the sense of Luhmann (1990)? A system is separated from its environment by a boundary; there is no direct connection with the environment. The system is both supported and disturbed by the environment. The 'constructed character' of information concerning environmental change gives the system degrees of freedom; it may succeed in interpretation and choose to adapt to its environment, ensuring its sustainability. By misinterpretation or maladaptation, the system may endanger itself. The system needs to evaluate its ability to perceive, describe and operate in accordance with environmental communication.

What does it mean for a society to engage in ecological communication? In Luhmann's (1990) view the society consists of differentiated, internally active subsystems, 'disturbed' by external communication. The main subsystems defined by him as economy, law, science, politics and religion, focus on their central task and its implementation. The subsystems use their internal language; therefore, in dynamic systems resonance between the subsystems and the environment is continuously underway. If successful, subsystems may resonate properly and subsume tasks from other subsystems.

The society, according to Luhmann, has boundary towards two environments: one is the natural environment and the other is composed of individuals. The dual character of individuals is in a relevant way stated in the Richman-Budson theory of health, which recognizes the individual's health status qua organism and qua person (Richman 2005). Both categories of health refer to ample applications in relation to environmental communication.

## PUBLIC CATERING AS CATERING SYSTEM

In what ways can catering organisations be identified as catering systems, applying Luhmann inspired social systems views? The public catering organisations are suggested to act as particular, operational systems, legitimated essentially by the political subsystem. The public catering system has its boundaries within municipal structures, and its core nutritional tasks have been extended to resonate with new aspects of health of customers and environment. Hereby

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the catering system also confesses its societal dependency of environment and individuals. Because these two environments are separate from the catering system, it needs more functional conceptualisations of these environments in order to adapt and continue its activities (Bergström et al., 2005). Examples of new conditions in these environments are e.g. polluted groundwater and obese patients.

So far, the catering system has been able to translate several different environmental tasks communicated by other subsystems into its activities. For example, the public procurement directive reflects market economy. However, the environmental public procurement guidelines allow the use of scientific specifications of environmental properties of products. Often these are crystallized as criteria for various legitimated environmental and social justice labels. Similarly, the nutritional recommendations, food legislation and in-house control (HACCP) can be seen to stem from the subsystems of science, law and politics. Even the subsystem of religion is evident in particular food choices. Clearly, the political-operational core structure of the catering system is able to communicate with other societal subsystems and implement their concepts into its practices. Hereby the character of the catering system becomes more mixed, but it still follows its basic code of nutrition-malnutrition, supported and intertwined by other subsystems' tasks.

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR CATERING SYSTEMS

In principle, there should be possibilities for catering systems to absorb new knowledge about their environments and develop their operations through their organisational structures. The constructs of e.g. global climate change, loss of biodiversity, eutrophication, obesity and other health problems are powerful conceptualisations which translate into claims for action by catering systems. Consequently, it is understood that energy efficiency, decrease in the volumes and harmfulness of chemicals used, more environmentally friendly agriculture and customers' needs as organisms and persons are issues for the catering systems. This profound understanding and its implementation calls for applicable and particular knowledge about impacts of food supply chains, catering operations themselves and the health status of the customers. The basic question is how the environmental and human health are constructed within the catering system, how this information can be retrieved and how it is used in the decision making and implementation of operations. The communication forms obviously no self evident and progressive path, but needs increasingly support on several organisational levels.

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH

The social systems view puts the public catering as a system in the centre of activity. Moreover, the systems view focuses on the communication with other subsystems and the environments by the catering system. This approach highlights its role as a sustainability agent. The examination of this communication as organisational and structured processes, particular policies and operational guidelines is needed. It seems that the environment and the individuals could have more particular expressions in the 'texts' of the public catering systems.

The theoretical frame assumes constructionist approach, which can be seen as 'enabling' in the way that it allows

both natural and social scientific work to proceed in interaction and to participate the catering organisations.

The problem of this theoretical view may lie in its generality; it does extend into particularities of social life but lacks more specific 'meso-theoretical' guidelines about how to proceed on the 'shop floor' research. Obviously more detailed organisational theories are needed for complementation. The social systems theoretical insights disclose, how profound a change is at hand when catering organisations simply try to connect aspects of health and environment in catering services.

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