

OBSTACLES AND SOLUTIONS IN USE OF LOCAL AND ORGANIC FOOD

Salla Kakriainen & Hans von Essen (ed.)



Baltic Ecological Recycling Agriculture and Society (BERAS) Nr. 4



Centrum för uthålligt lantbruk



Ekologiskt lantbruk – 44

Obstacles and Solutions in Use of Local and Organic Food

Centrum för uthålligt lantbruk

SLU

Box 7047

750 07 Uppsala

Ecological Agriculture – 44

Obstacles and Solutions in Use of Local and Organic Food

Centre for Sustainable Agriculture

Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences

S-750 07 Uppsala

Authors are responsible for the factual contents of the report.

ISSN 1102-6758

ISRN SLU-EKBL-EL--29--SE

ISBN: 91-576-6858-2

Antal sidor: 95

Ämnesord/Key words: Organic farming, Organic food, Local food, Sustainability, Resource management, Food systems, Rural development

DO CARROTS REALLY HAVE TO TRAVEL 700 KILOMETRES?

Salla Kakriainen

Introduction

The transport question was a starting point for local food activities in Kauhajoki. Questioning this led to further activities in the area. The whole process really started in the mid 1990's when a matron who did not want to take the present system for granted started to critically examine her own working environment. This led to an active search for alternatives and the initiation of local food activities.

Asking questions and finding answers - what and why?

Kauhajoki is located in western Finland (see map on page 4) and has about 14 600 inhabitants scattered over a large area (11 inhabitants/km²). The town cooperates closely with four other municipalities in the region. This makes it possible to organise and share tasks that would otherwise be too difficult for one municipality to carry out on its own (e.g. some educational activities and product promotion). Together this region is known as Suupohja.

As is often the case, one strong individual played an important role in starting this local food activity. The matron, who worked in the Kauhajoki seniors' residence and health centre kitchen at the time, was originally a home economics teacher. She started questioning the system when she realised that carrots from the field next door travelled 700 km before ending up in their kitchen. She also had a powerful personality, had a vision and, most importantly, took action. This happened during mid 1990's. (Mylläri, 2005.) By presenting her ideas to others she contributed to forming a working group that was interested in finding ways to bring about change.

The basic idea behind this initiative was to purchase locally produced food directly from the producers. It began as an organised activity in 1997 with a survey about vegetables used in institutional kitchens. This provided information about how much of what kind of vegetables were used in the region and made it possible to plan the next step. Kitchens were first included in activities a year later when pilot activities to promote collaboration between kitchen personnel and farmers were established. In the beginning efforts were directed at influencing public purchasing and informing about different possibilities. (Kankaanpää-Anttila, 2005.)

Facing obstacles and finding solutions

Institutional kitchens have fairly regulated ways for purchasing. Information about options was needed in the beginning. Few people with the time and interest and a general lack of knowledge were serious limitations. In the Suupohja area this was solved by active people

searching for the necessary information and then accessing resources to start different projects that have been used as a tool for initiating an activity. The five municipalities worked together and this helped to alleviate the shortage of time, money and interested people. In small municipalities both financial resources and the number of interested people are limited.

In the Suupohja region there has been a whole series of projects to develop ordering systems, marketing, etc. All have had a common goal of promoting the use of local food. These projects have mainly been co-financed by the EU. Learning by doing and experiencing both mistakes and success has been important. The Kauhajoki seniors' residence and health centre kitchen actively participated in the projects. It was both interesting and useful for kitchen staff to be actively included in finding and developing ways for using more local food – interesting because they were able to use their professional skills and learn more; useful because the achievements of the projects help their everyday work.

One important step was developing the collaboration between the kitchen personnel and interested farmers through projects. This required an understanding of both needs and expectations from both sides. The kitchen personnel and the farmers need to understand each other's context. The farmers must understand why the kitchen has certain requirements and the kitchen must understand the farmer's reality.

The cooperation between kitchen personnel and farmer-suppliers has been fruitful and some kitchens have even developed special recipes for some of the local products. This illustrates that the benefits from local marketing cannot always be measured in terms of money; advantages can, for example, also be the development of new recipes. Still, over and over again there has been one main constraint – kitchens need raw materials in a form that suits their processes and farmers can not necessarily supply the products in this desired form.

What can we learn? - Good practises live on

During the past two years the use of local food has not been supported by a specific project in the region. The kitchens are not being instructed to use local food which is often more expensive than bulk buying. Despite this kitchens continue to use it. This local food activity was initiated because of environmental and economic reasons as well as just common sense, but at the practical level in the daily running of kitchens it has also been shown to have many other positive aspects. Why do kitchens still use local food products? Maire Mylläri (2005) is working as a matron in the kitchen and supports the idea of local food. She appreciates the efforts of her predecessor for making the necessary connections and contacts. She and the other staff have now learned to use local food and find it positive for many reasons. They want to use local food first because of its good quality and second to do away with unnecessary transport. They also want to support the local production.

Fresh products are more tasty than frozen ones and therefore added extracts (e.g. stock cubes) are not needed. This is good because more and more people are allergic to these added ingredients. Kitchens need to cater to people on many different diets. Safe raw materials that do not require extracts help to ensure good quality of these various dishes. In the end, the difference in the price is not very high. In addition buying locally is also a guarantee for domestic production. Kitchens have good cooperation with the suppliers and this enables them to have a say in product development. This guarantees that suitable products will also be available in the future. Kauhajoki seniors' residence and health centre kitchen has also had cooperation with grain producers and a mill and they have developed recipes for these products.

These are all things that ensure an interesting and positive working environment. Kitchen staff are able to use the professional skills they have and farmers' customers, both patients and employees, are happy. The Municipality has not taken a stance on local food, but Mylläri (2005) thinks that they see the connection to the economic and social wellbeing of the region and do not want to interfere as long as the kitchens are able to hold their budgets even if they sometimes use more expensive products.

One of the constraints in using local food has been the lack of knowledge about where to get it. Projects have been a great help in solving this kind of problem and at the moment there are relatively steady delivery arrangements. Some suppliers deliver regularly, others only occasionally which is also due to the seasonal nature of their products. Although projects have been a great help in developing these initiatives, they also have limitations. Projects only work for a short term and on specific activities. Therefore their possibilities to support holistic and long-term development are limited. Initially there was also lack of knowledge and many things have been learned on the way. Such learning takes time.

There are also ideas about how local products can be processed to meet the needs of kitchens. At the time of writing, plans for establishing a local food processing and distribution centre for vegetables, which would serve the whole Suupohja region, have been made. These plans and calculations have been ready for some time, but no entrepreneur has been interested in it. It is not clear to what extent the present arrangements affect the enthusiasm for establishing this new unit. There are some entrepreneurs who are already processing vegetables on a small scale. One question is, how a new, big unit for processing will affect them.

Summary

This example illustrates how a whole series of positive developments can start with one person questioning the present system. She started speaking boldly about her ideas and also searched for different ways to make things happen. More people who were convinced about her

genuine message joined her. This group started activities that resulted in the use of local food some years later.

Taking a closer look at what happened it seems that it all started from a question that was asked out loud. After that it was important to get together a critical mass of people so that the idea could be carried on. This bigger group included people with different capabilities and knowledge giving the needed synergy and support. Then it has basically been a question of tackling each problem as it arose and finding possibilities and ways to solve them one by one. Some of the proposed solutions have not been taken into use (e.g. ordering systems) but others have (e.g. cooperation). There seem to be many reasons for this. Some of them are as simple as the desire to see the customer and/or to have social contacts outside the farm. Using an ordering system eliminates the need for personal communication. Take for example the case where the kitchen developed recipes for a farmer. It is much more likely that such an idea can come up in a face-to-face discussion and not through an ordering system.

Projects have played a significant role in making it possible for individuals to carry out their own ideas. And because the ideas and the activity are carried on by local people, ending the projects has not affected the use of local food. Rather the process has continued and new ideas in different fields have continued to emerge in response to new situations and opportunities.

Possibly this example will encourage actors in other places to continue to use local food even without external help. Local food systems often work with a different logic than centralised purchasing systems, but it is possible to learn to use the best from both. Also, when the use of local food has reached a sustainable level and has found its place within the local supply and demand, it no longer needs external support from projects.

References

Personal communications

Kankaanpää-Anttila, Barbara, 7.2.2005.

Mylläri, Maire, matron 7.2.2005.