

Transition to Organic Food in Danish Public Procurement: Can a top-down approach capture the practice?

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Implications

This paper is addressing the attention towards organic transition processes which takes place in a Danish political context at the moment. With departure in the explicit propositions in an organic vision 2020 launched by the Danish government the practice in public kitchens is presented and discussed. The main findings in several recent studies address the lack of relations between key actors in the field and the challenges in embedding the change into a resilient practice. Especially the relation between kitchen staff and the public administrations seems to be lacking. The political aim is translated into an economic support program dedicated only the teaching of kitchen staff, but does not see the relational character of the transition. Concluding remarks underlines the complexity of a transition approach and problematizes the narrow focus on educational activities as the primary initiative to make farmers and public kitchens convert their production to organic.

Background and objectives

Organic transition has got a renewed focus in a Danish political context This is shown by e.g. the newly formulated political initiatives and visions trying to encourage farmers to convert to organic farming through stimulating demand for organic products by subscribing the public kitchens as main drivers for this demand.

In this paper we will explore the political initiatives as they are stated in the organic vision 2020 paper launched earlier this year (Ministry for Food, Agriculture and Fisheries, 2012), and discuss this vision in relation to two empirical studies in Danish public kitchens. The main purpose is to see how political goals are translated into implementation by the daily work practice of the canteen staff. Focus will partly also be discussing the economic instruments used to push a transition further.

In the analysis of the study Clarke (2005) mapping methodology has been used to keep the analytical focus on actors, objects and discourses and their relations and power structures. The purpose of the paper is thus twofold. The first purpose is to discuss the implementation of a top-down policy instrument and which implications this seems to have on the practice, and the second purpose is to discuss the methodological approach of situational analysis with departure in the case. The first topic is described by the 'zooming in-zooming out' metaphor used by Nicolini (2009) in the sense that it operates on different levels of understanding a transitions in public kitchens as the complex phenomenon it is. Three level are addressed; the meta-level as described by analysis of the political goals, the organizational arrangements of these goals and the practice level, which is necessary to understand the actual implementation of the political goals. All three levels are considered important in order to capture the rationale and the challenges of the real-life actions. The focus on the situation and on the equal attention to objects, actors and discourses as put forward by Clarke (2005) enable the analysis to reflect a change project on the different levels.

Key results and discussion

The empirical evidence in this study of the implementation of political goals show that complex processes can be understood and overcome through a systematic and complex approach, by thinking thorough the whole system in a transitional manner. The top-down approach seems to have difficulties addressing the practice level in the sense that the economic support program translating the political goal only focuses on the direct educational activities in the kitchens and thereby miss the relational aspects of the transition process in their networks. One important object to deal with in more systematical depth will be procurement agreements and their consequences in the daily

practices in kitchens. Teachers of vocational learning courses confirm a lack of attention to this aspect of the relational character of the actor-network in public food production. The agency of the objects such as the procurement agreements and the political/financial support programs emphasizes the direct impact on the actual practice in the kitchens and thereby the relevance of using a methodology and analysis that takes physical objects, actors and discourses into consideration.

How work was carried out?

The complexity of food systems is illustrated by the many different approaches towards grasping the performed realities of them. Until now not much attention has been given in the Science, Technology and Society (STS) research regarding food. In this paper we argue for the relevance of contributing to the STS area within food studies. by working with Adele Clarke's (2005) Situational Analysis. This methodological/theoretical approach has a substantial explanation force with regards to food enactments. Inspired by many theoretically important contributions from e.g. Strauss' social world theory (2004), Haraway's notion of situated knowledge, and focus on materiality (1988), and also Foucauldian power concepts and symmetry from ANT, Clarke has developed a mapping methodology, which includes actors, objects and discourses and their relations, positions and social worlds/arenas. From a food network approach the understanding presented by Clarke (2005) fits well with the understanding of food as 'matter' or objects; food as symbol or discourses and food as constructed and negotiated by actors in networks and social arenas. The focus on the complexity in situations and on the performance of realities rather than seeking the essence of one truth opens for an approach that enables the researcher to discuss the many different influences by actors, objects and discourses in actor-network dynamics of e.g. policy development and implementation versus practice. The different maps have been used in the analysis of the empirical data in order to open for reflections on the complexity. Two main studies is used here as the empirical basis. Both studies are focusing on mainly individual interviews and three focus groups. Observations have been done when possible in relation to the interviews.

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