

# OBSTACLES AND SOLUTIONS IN USE OF LOCAL AND ORGANIC FOOD

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# DISCUSSION

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## **Obstacles and solutions**

In line with the goals for this part of the BERAS project, this report presents case studies of local initiatives that have overcome obstacles and successfully promoted local food.

To start an initiative that is ecologically, economically and socially sustainable and combines organic food production with recycling and society may sound like a complicated task. Although we may have a clear goal with regard to local and organic food, food systems are complex and many people in different positions are involved. In such a situation it is not always easy to see how the kind of change needed to achieve a sustainable society can be initiated.

Entry points to initiating such changes have been very different in the different cases presented in this report. Farmers and NGOs have constructed a bicycle path and eco museums in Poland. In Finland, administrators have set up an electronic ordering system and farmers and shopkeepers have introduced a label for local products. Farmers in Sweden have set up a cooperative to help with marketing and processing. All these examples stress the importance of cooperation among actors within the local food chain. A school program in Sweden illustrates how the education sector can be included and the benefits from this. In one Finnish municipality, the town administration saw how supporting the local organic food sector would also support the development of opportunities for entrepreneurs in other sectors as well. In Sweden associations with an ideological base have been founded. These cases illustrate the need for people to take action on a practical level in their work as well as the need for policy makers and others who can influence the system on a more general level, e.g. policy and legislation, to create a foundation and a positive atmosphere for the cause.

It is encouraging to see from these examples that people in different positions have been successful in bringing about a positive change. As Ewa Hajduk and Maria Staniszevska write, in Poland environmental awareness is not high, and a local organic market is almost non-existent. They have dealt with this by increasing awareness and creating learning situations – such as information tags along a bicycle path and in eco museums. In this way they have combined leisure time activities and education about the environment. Because people often are more open for new ideas during their leisure time than in a stressful work situation the positive effect is even greater. New markets are set up to respond to new needs. Offering organic food baskets to the consumers is one example of this. According to Angelija Bučiėne and Marija Eidukeviėiėne the organic food sector in Lithuania is not well developed and interaction among actors in the food chain is weak. Low purchasing capacity of consumers, lack of organic food processing facilities and lack of awareness about the demand and supply possibilities slow down

the development of the organic market. Organic marketing channels would make it easier for supply and demand to meet. To meet these challenges they have established an "Eco information –centre".

In Finland and Sweden local food systems are trying to find ways to better compete with conventional systems. Hanna-Riikka Tuhkanen describes how an electronic ordering system and a middleman are helping municipal kitchens, one big potential customer group for local and organic food, to make purchases. The kitchen staff rarely have time to search for local products and they also want one main supplier if possible, rather than receiving small amounts from various suppliers. The middleman is a link between kitchens, farmers and producers. He is a messenger and mediates the needs of both sides as well as taking care of the deliveries. This system improves information exchange and solves logistical problems by combining deliveries from different farmers and producers. Leif Holmberg and Hans-Petter Sveen present one example of the cooperation among farmers in Sweden. Competition on the local market was not sustainable and growing vegetables also has a low system flexibility. For example, tomatoes cannot be stored for long periods. The farmers formed a cooperative association in order to better organise their production and share the costs of investments. Their latest idea is to invest in tomato processing equipment. This approach is comparable to the solution in Poland. Because organic markets are far from farmers – products are chosen and processed so that they can be transported easily.

Hans von Essen presents a larger-scale action under the brand "Farmer's own". Farmers do not want to give away the positive reputation that comes with this brand name to the big, faceless food industry. They are striving to strengthen the link between consumers and producers through marketing campaigns and by organizing farmers' market that are also an enjoyable experience for consumers. Other texts from von Essen describe initiatives to increase the awareness about food. A bag of groceries in the classroom challenges students in the 12th grade to follow the route these groceries have travelled and teaches them how complex the food system is. The highlight of the course is spending a few days on a farm.

Salla Kakriainen describes a case where a Finnish rural municipality has made the development and use of local organic food part of a larger development strategy for the whole municipality, including the processing sector. Kauhajoki serves as an example where problems like where to get local food and who has the time to organise and develop the local food system have been answered by networks, contacts and several years of project funding. If the activity is financed through short-term projects, it is important to ensure that the main goal is kept in sight at all times. If it is lost, then changes occur here and there without the system as a whole changing. In Juva, a local label for products from their own municipality was how farmers and shopkeepers showed consumers that a variety of local products are available.

It seems that in every country local food chains and food systems need to develop further. They are not yet strong enough to compete with conventional systems which are becoming increasingly centralised and international. These changes will require continuous adaptations as well.

The examples show that simple and down-to-earth ideas speak to the heart and make the initiative powerful. This simplicity also makes it easier for others to join in and support the effort which is very important. If the costs for joining an effort become too high, it might be easier to change strategy and start over from the beginning. On the other hand, a new initiative needs to be protected and nurtured in the beginning. When the initiative is strong and has enough supporters it can face the rules set up by society and even contribute to modifying them for the benefit of everyone. But facing such obstacles too early can kill the initiative before it takes wing. For example the bag of groceries needs support also from actors in the food chain to be successful. Without information from the actors it is impossible to do the task.

One of the big challenges for alternative food systems is how to compete with the mainstream large-scale food industry. They cannot compete with the same products but local specialised products can find markets of their own. The concepts of large-scale food industry and local food systems are in many ways incompatible. The very idea of the food industry is to mechanize the production and gain large-scale advantages. Such an industry requires raw products of uniform quality and trucks that deliver full loads regularly. It is easiest for large farms with highly specialized monoculture production to fulfil these needs. In contrast, the basic principles for organic agriculture and local food systems is diversity, reliance on ecosystem functions and sustainability. The high degree of biodiversity creates an ecosystem that carries itself. Social responsibility means local employment opportunities rather than highest possible mechanization. These farms have difficulties to produce the amounts that the food industry requires at the prices they are willing to pay. John Higson (2005), the initiator of the "Farmer's Own" project, has compared the efforts of the organic movement to have the food industry help them with their deeper ambition of changing the food system with trying to squeeze a round object into a square hole. It is better to accept that these two systems are incompatible. Higson's (2005) solution is to work side by side and to accept that there will be two systems competing with each other on the market for a long time to come. (See also Söderberg, 2005.)

Local organic food systems (alternative systems that include consumers and have their own specific food chain) develop unconventional ways of working. As the cases "initiative locally grown" and "bag of groceries" show, new ideas need a certain degree of freedom and space to be able to grow. An idea has to be nurtured and grow stronger before it can face the 'real' world. This can be done both by testing it in practice and improving it as well as by sharing the idea and

convincing others, including the concerned authorities, the judiciary and consumers, of its value. This is a lot of work, especially when it is done side by side with developing the initiative.

The initiatives described in this paper are survivors that have found the balance between the openness that is needed for the initiative to gain support and grow stronger and the protection needed to avoid being take over. From these cases two major conclusions can be drawn. For actors: Learn the art of balance between protection and openness! For policy makers: Allow necessary protection – especially for local and organic food systems!

### **Learning from others**

Another important lesson from these cases is the importance of taking action. Often one or two persons with an idea can be found in the background. Taking in new information is one thing, turning it into action is another. And they both need time. Once an idea is born and matures, it then usually spreads to other interested people. In a study on cooperation among farmers it was found that it is important to have time to let new developments settle down and find routines before additional changes are made. The study also found that cooperation is essential. (Kallioniemi 1998.) It provides a possibility to have a peer group and social contacts as well as a place where ideas and contacts can be exchanged.

Although it is important to let new developments become stable and the farmers and processors have a routines that work, change is also needed. The Swedish examples of the farmers' cooperation and the "Initiative locally grown" illustrate the need to redirect activities little by little. Without such adaptations the activities will not correspond to needs which are also always changing. For example, as consumer habits change there is a growing demand for new and more processed products. The association also changed its form to avoid competing unnecessarily with other actors working for the same goals.

Also apparent from these cases is the importance of communication among actors. Once communication channels have been put in place, the situation and needs of others can be better understood and taken into consideration so that both the supplier and the customer can be satisfied. When both are willing to be a little bit flexible, then local food initiatives really start to work. But without such open-minded discussions, it is difficult for initiatives to develop.

Cooperation is a prerequisite for creating local food systems. A British project run by the Soil Association has listed the lessons they have learned while working with local and ecological food. The goal they had was to increase the share of local and organic food in schools. Although it is about schools, the main points in the ten-point checklist are similar to the lessons learned from the cases presented in this report.

1. Establish *mutual objectives* in the beginning. Ensure all partners can devote to the objectives so they feel they have ownership of the

project and its outcomes.

2. Catering managers will prefer to deal with only one individual to *coordinate supply*. They rarely have time to deal with many different people individually.
3. *Educational support* is crucial to supply this market.
4. The public procurement market is not an easy market to access. *Don't be put off by the difficulties*, however, as there is plenty of support available. Don't underestimate the time this process needs.
5. When approaching any school, hospital or county caterer, *find out how their catering system works and what facilities they have*.
6. It is crucial to have the *support from producers, procurers, distributors, parents, governors and pupils*. It is necessary for the whole chain to want to change the existing supply chain.
7. *Producer co-operation* is the key to success in setting up an efficient supply chain.
8. It is helpful, although not essential, to have an impartial *co-ordinator who must not seek to gain financially more than others from the process*.
9. It is important to *link with other markets* and not rely on this market alone.
10. *Local processing facilities are crucial* to the set up of the supply chain. Ensure that someone can provide support with certification requirements.
11. *Affordability of organic produce* is a limiting issue. In-season local organic produce can often be more competitive. Clustering schools so that volumes are greater is also a helpful way to manage costs. (Soil Association, 2004.)

Despite overwhelming difficulties, some individuals continue to make great efforts and are successful in overcoming many obstacles. Why such enthusiasm? The reasons they give vary, as do the cases. One main reason is that local and organic food is good for the environment, for example through recycling agriculture and by avoiding unnecessary transportation. Another is that it supports the local economy and production and has a positive effect on local development. A third important reason is the good quality of local products. Their flavour and freshness are valued by both individual and institutional consumers. Also standardised processed products are sold over large areas whereas local food helps to sustain local food cultures and diversified tastes as well as local knowledge about ways to use raw materials to make local specialities.

Other BERAS reports provide additional information about the ecological and economic benefits of local organic food.