

XXIII ESRS Congress Vaasa, Finland
17-21 August 2009
Theme 5.4 What is Culturally Sustainable Development?

**Cultural sustainability of
Finnish food system:
Young consumers' approach**

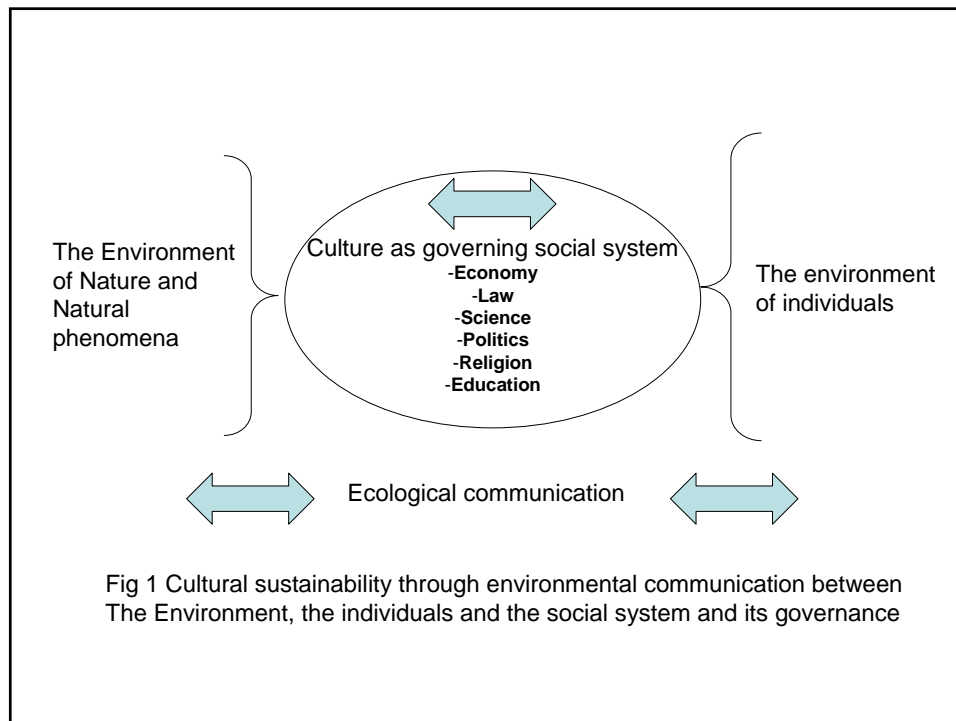
*Minna Mikkola
University of Helsinki
Ruralia Institute*

What is cultural sustainability?

- The topic of this research is the ability for change within food system for sustainability by young people
- As exemplified by the views on use of organic food in school meals
- Theoretical framing by Luhmann's understanding about ecological communication within modern society
- Practices of modern societies are organized and governed by subsystems of economy, law, science, politics, religion and education, together forming the (core) culture
- Sustainability is understood as continuity of population as it is developed and governed by the culture of the population
- Depending on ecological communication by society as resonance between subsystems, culture of a society must be ultimately able to mediate between two environments: the environment of nature and the one of individuals
- Here focus on food system and its societal connections

Methodological frame

- Discourse analysis of (interview) texts
- Texts understood to represent reality for speakers and to promote their causes
- Analyst's position between antirealist and critical realist
- Analyst culturally competent in educational contexts
- DA based on 'straight text' and interpretation about its upgraded meaning
- Validation by other interviews and ethnographic observation



Finnish food system and young consumers

- Internal primary production + import + processing - export = available food
- Basically self-sufficient country
- Food system operates through supply chains, which increasingly market oriented
- Young consumers are important as future actors, currently partly autonomous, on today's food market
- Functioning of food systems are increasingly connected with other industrial systems (sectors) in national economy

Research question

- Do young consumers express change potential within Finnish food system in terms of sustainability – by communicating about organic food?
- Communication is studied as meanings and activity (as discursive practices) for eating and purchasing food
- Change potential is interpreted as meanings given to organic food in terms of subsystemic resonance

Data

- Data are part of more extensive iPOPY project (innovative Public Organic food Procurement for Youth)
- Data from focus group from one primary school (8-11 y), one secondary general school (16-18 y) and one secondary vocational school (18-25 y), altogether 6, 6 and 5 young people respectively
- Focus group sessions took about one lesson (45 min), were recorded and transcribed verbatim
- Preliminary analysis presented here of one focus group of each educational level, 40 pages of text

Results 1/primary school 8-11 y

- Economy as **critical consideration as to the amount of organic food in relation to other acquisitions – it will be expensive, (re)using, recycling, saving resources and money for investments, work for money**
- Law present as rules for behavior in terms of how to source separate (checked by teachers!), how many meatballs, how much biowaste allowed
- Science as understanding about nature, poisons, additives, pesticides, endangered species, environmental protection, animal well-being, organic food

Results 2/primary school 8-11 y

- Politics as participation in 'Green Pupils' Union' to make decisions about acquisitions and excursions, political awards such as environmental certificates and diplomas
- Religion as 'other regarding behaviour', knowledge about obligation to protect nature and responsibility of one's own and others' health, 'you have work for money' and 'good grades'
- Education as practices and concepts for SD, appreciation of school meals, and use of organic food, including positive taste perceptions

Results 1/secondary general school 16-17 y

- Economy as every-day activities, saving natural resources through efficiency, matching supply and demand in sustainable way according to global and country specific renewal, lowering of standard of living, consuming less (food, clothing, energy, water, paper) insane consumption bound economy, ecological benefits of recession, while staying competitive (difficult), expensive family investments but common benefit, competition between food and fuels, increased profit for eco-products – somebody's benefit, other's loss, impossible for developing countries, organic food expensive because inefficient with extra transport, what's the added value, school meals downgraded already
- Law present as labelling knowledge, international environmental agreements best way, joined by all (Kioto)

Results 2/secondary general school 16-17 y

- Science as CC, ecological backpack/foot print, eutrophication connected with fertilizers, organic food without fertilizers, pesticides and additives, both positive and negative facts, not enough knowledge about them, long-term statistics missing, mixed messages, lacking vitamin D in organic milk
- Politics as agreements/decisions between/within states about how to decrease the use of natural resources, against/aligning with other countries/citizens' preferences (Kyoto, China, USA), public transportation, vitamin D addition
- Religion as concern for others as well concern for one self, against 'I want it all, I want it now', responsibility for consumption and source separation, fair is fair not necessary ecological
- Education as projects, lectures, SD and organic food presented in many ways, yimby, local ecology, shopping organic food, Al Gore's film, young people's new knowledge versus old people, source separation not clear

Results 1/Secondary vocational school 19-25 y

- Economy as feasible/innovative solutions expected, simple/concrete practical solutions observed/wanted/performed, 'money turns the world'
- Law present as organic labelling – actively remembered
- Science as eutrophication, chemicalization, healthier food, animal well-being, 'saving the nature', for which organic farming a solution
- Suspicion of organic farming as solution on the population level in terms of resource efficiency and food quality in terms of health and appearance
- Politics as expectations for the society to organize sustainable practices e.g. organic food in school (depending on resources) and public traffic, cynicism about environmental 'action' groups

Results 2/Secondary vocational school 19-25 y

- Religion as call for 'good things', moral duties, denial of selfishness and demand for using resources cleanly (primary production) while thinking of future generations, represented by individual 'system aligned' practices as personal commitment (labour, time spent), feeling terrible if not source separating, negative evaluation if practices not aligned, as expectations for the 'rich' to buy organic food or equipment for SD
- Denial/dispute/feeling of injustice/feeling of 'class' when moral demands are proposed for buying organic food for those who are less well-off
- Basic education (biology) gave SD a 'sweep', but vocational education somewhat more about organic food too, SD present in recycling

Discussion

- Tropes used (jargon known: 'future generation', 'save the nature', 'improve SD'), food, water, energy and human everyday behavior strongly present
- Economy as efficient use of natural resources, 'saving', competitiveness
- Law as known symbols expected to regard all people
- Science and modernity as need for evidence heavily present, goes always with critical stance
- Politics as disputes and uncertainty about and need for 'right' decisions, dependence on science
- Religion as moral sphere contrasting 'large population' and 'limited means' with well-off people, justified sharing of SD efforts, public decisions emphasized, moderate way of living, expectations of fairness instead of eco-bluff
- Primary education more practice based, secondary general more theoretic and vocational sector specific, clear conceptual representation of SD and organic food in several ways

Conclusions

- Discourse represented competent SD jargon
- Critical stance visible towards SD and organic food
- Economic reason connected as ruling entity with law, science, politics, moral and education
- Only economically feasible and innovative solutions accepted
- Evidence based political decisions and public organization of activities such as organic school food expected
- Alignment with reasonable individual practical effort
- Moral demand for SD and organic food addressed to wealthier people and given up by less well-off people
- Cynicism visible in the situation of perceived sustainability threat and disbelief in individuals' effort, 'fairness', lack of caring for one self and others

Conclusions

- Young peoples' discourse indicated their high level education, intellectual and moral quality, in age conformity
- Focus on every-day practices seemed virtuous as commitment to improvement of 'basic needs' – paper, electricity, public traffic, even food
- Some difficulties with practices reported (recycling, snacks)
- Leads easily to virtues and vices and strength of will
- Interestingly, context dependent organic food use reported (in summer cottage) and structural change as vitamin D addition into organic milk suggested
- Three things disturb this positive image: the lack things of higher personal interest, additional examples of personal commitment and suggestions for structural changes
- Tendency to emphasis on political decisions based on scientific evidence and fair sharing of costs/labour
- How much more can we expect of them in terms of cultural sustainability compared with what we expect of ourselves?