On Places Lost and Places Regained: Reflections on the Alternative Food Geography and Sustainable Regional Development

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ABSTRACT This paper departs from the observation that the industrialization and globalization of the agri-food supply chain has disconnected food from its socio-cultural and physical territorial context. In recent years there is growing recognition of the multitude of problems associated with the prevailing food regime, such as consumers’ mistrust in agro-industrial food, environmental pollution and rising prevalence of obesity and malnutrition. This paper outlines and illustrates the emergence of an alternative paradigm as a response the problems associated with the agro-industrial logic. It shows how a more integrated and territorial agri-food approach can support sustainable regional development.

On Places Lost

In September 2006 I met one of the directors of the then recently founded North Limburg Care Group. He gave an account of the effects of upscaling in health services on the food economy of North Limburg, i.e. the northern part of the Dutch province Limburg. A few years earlier, the North Limburg Care Group was formed through a merger of 28 care homes and nursing homes, most of which had hitherto cooked for their residents in their own kitchens, and had relied on local food suppliers: the baker, the butcher, the greengrocer etc. When the North Limburg Care Group was set up, it was decided in the interests of cost effectiveness to close the kitchens of the various houses and to establish ‘satellite kitchens’ to cater for the 2200 residents as well as for many of the 44,000 home care clients. The North Limburg Care Group buys more than €4,000,000’s worth of food per year in order to cater for all its clients and is therefore subjected to the European tender legislation.
This has put paid to the relationships between local food suppliers and the care institutions. The amounts of meat and bread required by the satellite kitchens far exceed the capacity of an individual butcher or baker. Only if they had clubbed together to submit a joint tender, would they have had any chance of succeeding. However, at the time when the question of European sourcing came up, there was hardly any sign of joint action by food SMEs in North Limburg. And so the satellite kitchens of North Limburg Care Group were supplied from the start by food catering companies that operate at national and international level and who are very well-acquainted with European tender regulations.

For the many locally operating food suppliers, this meant the loss of the care and nursing homes as customers. Consequently this resulted in a drop in turnover to the tune of millions of Euros for the regional economy and in the accompanying loss of jobs. But this loss of added value and possible accompanying loss of jobs in the region is not the only negative effect of upscaling in the care sector. It also has an emotional effect on the quality of life in the care and nursing homes. The mainly elderly residents of these institutions are used to a particular butcher’s sausages or a particular baker’s pies. When ingredients for the meals are sourced elsewhere, the residents are suddenly confronted with meals that taste different, and which some of them find less tasty. This can have a negative impact on their psychosocial and physical wellbeing. Indeed, if the residents enjoy their food less, they may be inclined to leave it on their plates. Eating too little, or too selectively, is known to make people — and especially old people — more vulnerable to various illnesses and complaints, and to cause them to take longer to recover from illnesses (Blom, 2004). This could lead to any savings made by changing the catering system being cancelled out by higher health care costs.

This example of the North Limburg Care Group is illustrative for the dominant development trend of the past few decades in systems of food provision and consumption, a trend that is characterized by three mutually reinforcing processes:

1. **Disconnecting.** Upscaling supply chains in the interests of cost effectiveness has loosened the links and increased the distance between producers and suppliers of goods and services on the one hand and the consumers and customers on the other hand (Oosterveer, 2007). For many products it is already the case that relations between producers and consumers are characterized by anonymity (Philips, 2006). And this creeping anonymity in relationships is accompanied by an increasing level of formalization in relationships through detailed production regulations and quality control systems to compensate for the lack of direct contact and personal trust. However, the proliferation of production regulations, quality control systems and trademarks means that consumers can no longer see the wood for the trees (Vuylsteke *et al.*, 2004).

2. **Disembedding.** The place of production and supply has gradually lost its influence over the quality and nature of many products (Roep & Wiskerke, 2006), meaning that the local or regional character of products has largely disappeared. Through this kind of loss of uniqueness and identity, consumers can also lose any sense of belonging and identification. Increasingly, this is compensated for by constructing a new identity or image around goods or services (Castells, 2004), in order to keep up the appearance of individuality and loyalty and to continue to give consumers the feeling that they are getting a special experience.
3. Disentwining. Upscaling and increased specialization in the supply chains have disconnected the producers and suppliers of different goods and services from each other, and created separate spheres of activity. Whereas food, care, education and leisure form an indivisible whole for the individual, whose use is linked to place and time, the opposite is now the case for the supply of these goods and services, which takes place through separate and specialized supply and provision chains.

The effect of these three interconnected processes is that goods and services are increasingly exchangeable, and places are increasingly interchangeable. Competition is based on general economic criteria, and as a result clusters of economic activities are increasingly concentrated in certain places (the ‘hot spots’), while others are marginalized or threatened with marginalization (the ‘cold spots’) (Marsden, 2006: 2009). Given that the regional economy is one of the important indicators among the many social activities that contribute to the welfare and wellbeing of citizens and thereby safeguard their quality of life, a decline in economic development can have a negative impact on the quality of life (Murdoch, 2006; Lowe & Ward, 2007). The converse is not always true, as in certain economic growth regions in the world economic development has actually increased the region’s social and ecological vulnerability (Marsden, 2006).

These three processes — disconnecting, disembedding and disentwining — are all driven by the principle of cost-effective production and the economies of scale it can generate. It is typical of the development of a number of industries, such as the steel, textile and car industries, as well as developments in the public sector, such as education and health care. The agriculture and food sector, too, has been subjected to the principle of cost-effective production and its accompanying economies of scale, generally conceptualized as the agri-industrial modernization project (Marsden, 2003; Van der Ploeg, 2003).

This project has been very successful in terms of its initial objective, i.e. food security at low prices for consumers. But it has also generated discontent, disastrous ‘side effects’ and resistance (Van der Ploeg, 2008). This paper first discusses the main negative effects of the processes of disconnecting, disembedding and disentwining. Next the coming into being of an alternative food geography based on an integrated and territorial mode of food governance is outlined and illustrated with several examples from different European countries to show the different logics these alternatives adopt. The integrated territorial agri-food geography is attracting increasing scholarly attention. Until now most scientific research in this field has focused on alternative food networks (AFNs). I argue in this article that for a comprehensive understanding of the alternative food geography two other dimensions have to be added: 1) public food procurement, and 2) urban food strategies. After the outline and empirical illustration of the three dimensions of the alternative food geography, I discuss its underlying processes and the interaction with sustainable regional development. The paper ends with a few concluding remarks.

The Downside of the Modern Conventional Agri-Food System

As mentioned above, the post-war modernization of Europe’s agri-food system has been very successful, but this success has come at a cost. In recent years it is increasingly the downside of the dominant post-war agrarian development model that is influencing the political and scientific agri-food debate. The problems associated with the contemporary modern globalized food system are multidimensional. In addition to the budgetary
problems associated with the EU’s market and price policy and trade distortions resulting from surplus production at EU-level (Anonymous, 2008), the following problems are very relevant to understand contemporary agri-food dynamics:

1. **Downward pressure on farm family incomes.** In the last decades the mainstream system of food provision has changed from a supply to a demand driven chain. Concomitantly a shift in power has occurred within the food supply chain from primary production to the retail sector, which has become the main outlet for processed as well as fresh food products. With concentration processes in the food processing industry and retail sector, price competition between and within food supply chains has become vigorous (Kirwan *et al.*, forthcoming). The impact of these dynamics on farm family incomes can be illustrated by two aspects. First, the *cost prize squeeze on agriculture*: a stagnating or even declining Gross Value of Production (GVP) combined with increasing costs for primary production (Van der Ploeg *et al.*, 2000). Second the *subordinate economic position* of primary producers in the food supply chain, illustrated by the uneven distribution of value added in the food supply chain (Kirwan *et al.*, forthcoming). One of the most dramatic expressions of this is the Dutch pork supply chain. Per euro market value of fresh pork in the supermarket, the supply sector (such as animal feed) has a share of 30%, the pig farmer retains 6% and the slaughterhouse, de-boner, pre-packer and retailer have a respective share of 4%, 8%, 20% and 24% in the sales price (Hoste *et al.*, 2004). These two aspects, embedded in the overall process of primary agriculture being integrated in an agri-industrial complex (Goodman & Redclift, 1990), have accumulated into a ‘treadmill effect’ (Morgan & Murdoch, 2000), i.e. farmers feeling compelled to continue along the path of increasing production levels and enlarging the scale of operation in order to reduce the costs of production per unit of product and/or per unit of labour.

2. **Environmental pollution and ecological degradation.** The intensive nature of food production has taken place (and still does) at the expense of contributing to environmental pollution, such as emission of nitrate to groundwater, of ammonia to the air, phosphate saturation of soils and emission of pesticide residues to the air and to ground and surface water (Van Eerdt & Fong, 1998; Goodlass *et al.*, 2003). Intensification of production has also resulted in a dramatic reduction in agro-biodiversity:

Modern agricultural practices, stemming from the rise of a modern breeding industry and from the Green Revolution, have caused massive genetic erosion, the disappearance of many diverse populations of crops maintained by farmers and adapted to local circumstances. (Visser, 1998: 2)

In addition, agricultural modernization has resulted in the loss of non-agricultural biodiversity due to the destruction of natural habitats and historico-cultural landscapes (Wiskerke, 2004). Furthermore low transport costs enable food processors and retailers to source food products and food ingredients globally (Philips, 2006; Oosterveer, 2007). This implies that the food miles associated with the average urban meal have increased significantly over the years. Finally cities are increasingly facing environmental problems linked to the provision, purchasing and consumption of food. According to Pothukuchi & Kaufman (1999) household and individual trips to food outlets constitute a significant portion of the urban transportation volume. Furthermore, the same authors state that
food waste (including food packaging) makes up to one third of the urban household, commercial, and institutional wastebasket.

3. Loss of organoleptic quality and diversity. The focus on high productive plant varieties and animal breeds combined with the standardization of food production and processing techniques have also resulted in a dramatic loss of organoleptic quality and diversity of fresh produce (Nosi & Zanni, 2004; Cayot, 2007). Simultaneously the introduction of strict food hygiene rules and regulations combined with upscaling in the food processing industry (and concomitantly the disappearance of small scale processing units and artisanal processing techniques) have further contributed to the loss of specific organoleptic qualities (Kirwan et al., forthcoming). Organoleptic diversity is increasingly becoming an end-of-chain issue, created by the food processing industry by adding colorants and (artificial) flavours to a standardized primary product.

4. Consumers’ uncertainty about and distrust in food. Vuylsteke et al. (2004) conclude that the majority of consumers have a low understanding of the conditions and methods of food production, partially due to the growing gap between producers and consumers. This leads to uncertainty, which, in turn, also results in many cases from the recurring food scares in Europe (Berg, 2004), in almost all of which the large-scale food sector was implicated. The BSE and FMD crises have cast a dark shadow not just over the meat industry, but are seen as the prime examples of where the modern food system has gone badly wrong. One way of reducing uncertainty is to find credibility in the claims of labels and hallmarks. However, this is becoming increasingly difficult due to growing confusion among consumers about the meaning and credibility of the ever increasing amount of labels and certification systems (Vuylsteke et al., 2004).

5. Health problems. According to the World Health Organization ‘the growing obesity epidemic is one of the most worrying emerging health concerns in many European countries’ (WHO, 2005:5). In particular the rapidly rising prevalence of overweight among children is alarming (Lobstein et al., 2005). Obesity costs society tens to hundreds of Euros per person per year (Van Baal et al., 2006) and is responsible for approximately 25% of the annual increase in medical spending (Thorpe et al., 2004). Changing dietary patterns are a main cause of obesity. Simultaneously malnutrition is also a growing health concern. In the 1990s in the US up to 80% of elderly people in homes were suffering from malnutrition (Pothukuchi & Kaufman, 1999). In the UK 40% of people aged over 65 admitted to a NHS hospital are malnourished, while an additional 20% may develop malnutrition during their hospital stay (Age Concern, 2006). Nurses and geriatric helpers that do not have enough time to assist people who have problems eating on their own are one of the causes of malnutrition in hospitals and elderly and nursing homes. Another cause are the limited budgets for food in the healthcare sector, generally resulting in meals that are not nutritious and tasty. The title and introduction of an article in the Observer Food Monthly is very telling in that respect: ‘Hospital food — it’s enough to make you sick. Thick, salty soup with the texture of wallpaper paste; a pie crust, hiding a serving of mechanically recovered ‘meat’ and dry mash. Is this the best patients can hope for?’ (Rayner, 2006). Another expression of malnutrition is the increase in so-called ‘food deserts’ (Wrigley et al., 2002; Cummins & Macintyre, 2006), i.e. impoverished urban neighbourhoods that lack supermarkets and grocery stores, but boast dozens of fast food and snack shops. With supermarkets and grocery stores moving to the outskirts of cities for logistical reasons, ownership of a car becomes more or less a prerequisite.
to have access to fresh food for home consumption (Pothukuchi & Kaufman, 1999), thus depriving disadvantaged people of (easy) access to nutritious foodstuffs.

Competing paradigms and differentiated food geographies

Given the multidimensionality of food-related sustainability and health problems, the question is how these negative consequences can be overcome or avoided: in other words, how the agri-food system can become healthier and more sustainable in social, economic and ecological terms? There are fundamental differences of opinion on this in practice, policy and theory. Roughly speaking two different paradigms, leading to two different food geographies (see also Table 1), can be detected in the various problem analyses and proposed answers to this question:

1. The agri-industrial paradigm (the hypermodern food geography). This paradigm is to be understood as an acceleration of the agri-food modernization process that has been dominant in the past decades. Advocates of this paradigm share a firm belief in the technological solutions for the multitude of problems outlined above, such as a) upscaling of primary production through labour-saving technologies to reduce the cost prize of primary production, b) food production in agri-industrial parks consisting of meat production in zero-emission livestock housing systems, aquaculture and fruit and vegetable production in energy-delivering greenhouses (Veldkamp et al., 2009), & c) the creation of healthy (i.e. low-fat, low-calorie, vitamin-enriched) food stuffs (i.e. functional food) by the food processing industry (Scrini, 2007). Characteristic for the hypermodern food geography is the ongoing industrialization and globalization of the agri-food production chain and standardization of food production and processing through globally applied production, processing and distribution regulations and quality assurance schemes (Marsden, 2003). Concomitant the hypermodern food geography is increasingly becoming placeless (Sonnino & Marsden, 2006).

2. The integrated and territorial agri-food paradigm (the alternative food geography): Typical for this paradigm is that food production is firmly embedded in and based upon the specific qualities and distinctive features of the region and very often integrated with other regional rural entrepreneurial activities, such as nature conservation, landscape maintenance, agritourism, care and education (Wiskerke et al., forthcoming). The integrated and territorial agri-food paradigm is built around a highly differentiated definition of food quality, which reflects differences in farming systems, organizational networks, cultural traditions consumer preferences, institutional frameworks and policy support (Renting et al., 2003: 394; Sonnino & Marsden, 2006: 186). Shorter geographical distances between production and consumption, the creation of nutrient cycles at regional level and the use of plant varieties and animal breeds adapted to local conditions are considered to be strategies for improving the environmental sustainability of the food economy (Nosi & Zanni, 2004). Basing food production on local physical conditions as well as socio-cultural traditions is also seen as a means to create quality and improve consumers’ trust (Wiskerke et al., forthcoming). And finally, this paradigm differs significantly in its approach to food-related health problems by advocating the consumption of more fresh and less processed food products in combination with a healthy diet, such as the traditional Mediterranean diet (Trichopoulou & Vasilopoulou, 2000), and more physical activity (Sato, 2000).
The two paradigms and associated food geographies outlined above resemble oppositional Weberian ideal types. Although expressions of both paradigms can be found in practice, a significant part of the contemporary food system can best be understood as a hybrid food geography, combining elements of both paradigms (Sonnino & Marsden, 2006). Or, to phrase Storper, today’s food economy can ‘be conceived as a complex organizational puzzle, consisting of multiple and partially overlapping worlds in which reflexive collective action unfolds’ (1997:255).

The Alternative Food Geography

Alongside the well established though contested hypermodern food geography an alternative (or collection of alternatives) is arising, grounded in a different logic and incorporating other than economic values only. The characteristics of the alternative food geography (Table 1) can be found in a steadily maturing body of socio-spatial food theories under the umbrella of ‘alternative food networks (AFNs)’ (Renting et al., 2003; Watts et al., 2005). However, AFNs are only one dimension of the emerging alternative food geography. AFNs represent spatially bound relations between consumers (predominantly urban dwellers) and the food market; they are considered to be the outcome of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problem/issue addressed</th>
<th>Agri-industrial paradigm (hypermodern food geography)</th>
<th>Integrated territorial agri-food paradigm (alternative food geography)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Economic position of primary producers</td>
<td>Intensive production ‘lock-in’; economies of scale approach; cost price reduction;</td>
<td>Economies of scope approach; increase producers’ share in consumers’ food spending</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental sustainability</td>
<td>Technical solutions for environmental problems: agrindustrial parks, pest and disease resistant GMO crops, low/zero emission livestock housing systems; eco-efficient systems for mass distribution of food products</td>
<td>Localized/regionalized food networks; nutrient cycles at regional level; traditional plant varieties and animal breeds adapted to local conditions; organic or low external input production; seasonal products</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organoleptic quality and diversity</td>
<td>End-of-chain diversification; Created by the food processing industry based on standardized primary product</td>
<td>Created by farmers and/or artisanal food processors; quality linked to region (terroir)/tradition/nature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumers’ trust</td>
<td>Quality and safety assurance schemes; industry and retail labels and hallmarks; tracking and tracing</td>
<td>Personal trust based relations; denomination of origin labels; transparent food supply chains</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>Nutritionism: nutritionally engineered functional food (food as a carrier of vitamins, calories, proteins, nutrients, etc.)</td>
<td>Focus on lifestyle, dietary pattern and eating habits: more fresh food and less convenience &amp; processed products, more physical exercise; organic products</td>
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Source: Marsden (2003); Lang & Heasman (2004); Nosi & Zanni (2004); Sonnino & Marsden (2006); Scrinis (2007).
the deliberate intention to create alterity (or otherness) in the food system and to produce change in the ‘modes of connectivity’ between the production and consumption of food, generally through reconnecting food to the social, cultural and environmental context of its production. (Kirwan, 2004:395)

Another dimension is the rising relation between the public sector and the regional food market. By relocalizing, greening and moralizing public sector food procurement the government and (semi-) public bodies such as hospitals, schools and prisons have the capacity to deliver health and sustainability objectives: nutritious meals for patients and school children, enhance regional employment in the food sector, reduce food miles and CO₂ emission, etc (Morgan, 2006; Morgan & Sonnino, 2008). The third dimension of the alternative food geography I discern are urban food strategies, i.e. the active role of cities and metropolitan regions as food policy makers. For decades food policy was considered to be the responsibility of the state (or even the supranational state if we consider the EU’s Common Agricultural Policy as a form of food policy), implying that cities are new actors with regard to food policy design and implementation. Although urban food strategies differ from city to city, the common denominator is the intention to connect and create synergies between different public domains, such as public health, education, social cohesion, environmental protection, employment and quality of life.

The alternative food geography is thus — through its constituting emergent fields of AFNs, relocalized public food procurement and urban food strategies — characterized by new relations between the state/public sector, the market and civil society (i.e. the governance triangle, see Figure 1) with key roles for new actors and actor constellations (e.g. urban consumer groups, new producers’ collectives, city and regional governments,

![Figure 1](image-url). The integrated and territorial mode of food governance.
public institutions and civil society platforms). In other words, the emerging alternative food geography also entails and results from the rise of an integrated and territorial mode of food governance. This mode of food governance differs fundamentally from the one associated with the hypermodern food geography, that is based on neo-liberal market fundamentalism advocating deregulation, privatization and withdrawal of the state holding that ‘the social good will be maximized by maximizing the reach and frequency of market transitions’ and seeking ‘to bring all human action into the domain of the market’ (Harvey, 2005:3).

I have labelled the mode of food governance associated with the alternative food geography as an integrated and territorial one. It is integrated as it connects and creates synergies (or has the potential to do so) between a wide variety of issues, sustainability objectives and public domains that are directly or indirectly related to food. It is territorial in a two-fold way. It builds on and contributes to a regionalization of the food economy through spatially bound producer-consumer relations (in the private as well as the public sector). And it is a mode of food governance that is based on and outcome of regional specificities. These regional specificities may include social norms, cultural traditions, the food-related problems encountered, the agrarian structure of the rural hinterland, etc.

**Alternative Food Networks**

Although ‘we cannot assume . . . that the agri-industrial system will simply wane despite its crisis-ridden tendencies’ (Sonnino & Marsden, 2006: 195), there is growing evidence that AFNs are steadily gaining ground (Murdoch *et al*., 2000; Watts *et al*., 2005; Sonnino & Marsden, 2006; Morgan *et al*., 2007). Good examples of this are the Rhöngut meat products of the German supermarket chain Tegut and its subsidiary company Kurhessische Fleischwaren GmbH (Schaer *et al*., 2006). Tegut is a family firm which currently has 300 branches in the German federal states of Hessen, Thüringen, Bayeren and Niedersachsen, and has an annual turnover of more than €1 billion.¹ In contrast to the many supermarket chains that have sought to increase their market share through mergers and price wars, Tegut opted right from the start for a strategy of distinctive, high quality products, both in terms of ethics and of taste. For example, Tegut helped to create the organic brand Alnatura, which has since grown into an independent organic supermarket chain, and Herzberger, now the largest organic bakery in Europe. The most recent example of Tegut’s quality approach is the development of the Rhöngut brand and the related construction of a new processing unit where high quality meat products are made for this brand. Rhöngut links an organic production method to an innovative and distinctive processing method, namely air-dried hams and sausages, and to a region of origin (the Rhone area) where both meat production and processing take place. The slogan ‘Rhöngut — Naturgereift in Rhöner Höhenluft’ (naturally ripened in the mountain air of the Rhone region) encapsulates the regional identity, the natural production method and the healthy production environment. This initiative from Tegut has had a number of positive effects for sustainable regional development. The building of a processing unit has created employment and a regional market for the increasing number of organic meat farmers in the region. This in turn has a positive effect on preserving biodiversity and on the visual and ecological quality of the landscape. Indeed, without animal husbandry, the extensive pasture lands — the traditional cultural landscape of the region — would
disappear. And it is precisely this traditional cultural landscape that makes this an attractive region for tourists.

Another telling story is that of Fuchsia Brands in the West Cork region of Ireland (O’Reilly, 2001; Sage, 2003). By developing this Brand the West Cork LEADER Co-op Society LTD hoped to further develop and do justice to the region’s strong points in order to solve some of the problems posed by its weaker points. This strategy has brought many benefits to the region: increased consumer involvement, the development of new food and craft products, services and enterprises, synergy between economic sectors and increased turnovers and employment opportunities. According to O’Reilly et al. (2006) the total value of the Fuchsia Brands’ goods and services in 2005 was €107 million, of which €69 million stayed within the region. As a result of multiplier effects, this generated €89 million for the regional economy and maintained 1131 fulltime jobs.

As mentioned earlier, most of the scholarly endeavour with regard to the emerging alternative food geography focused on the dimension of AFNs (Renting et al., 2003; Watts et al., 2005). Many case studies have been published about spatially bound food supply chains such as farm shops (Ventura & Milone, 2000; Ilbery & May, 2005), farmers’ markets (Kirwan, 2004), box schemes (Seyfang, 2006) and community supported agriculture (Hinrichs, 2000). But also the more spatially extended food supply chains with regionally specific food products such as those protected by PDO and PGI regulations (De Roest & Menghi, 2000; Barham, 2003) as well as alternative modes of food production (and processing) such as organics and ‘quality’ foods are usually considered to be expressions of AFNs (Renting et al., 2003). Building on the distinction made by Watts et al. (2005) between weak alternative food networks (e.g. PDO, PGI, organics, ‘quality’ foods) and strong alternative food networks (i.e. predominantly spatially bound networks of production, processing, distribution and consumption) it are particularly the alternative networks that are part and parcel of the alternative food geography, yet it are very often also alternative foods that are produced, processed, distributed and consumed in many of these alternative networks. Due to the burgeoning literature on AFNs a rich database of AFN cases has been built (see Watts et al. (2005) for an excellent literature overview) concomitant with a lively theoretical debate about network dynamics, conventions, producer-consumer linkages, power relations and paradigmatic change (see e.g. Goodman, 2004; Morgan et al., 2006).

Re-localization of Public Food Procurement

Whereas the dimension of AFNs predominantly refers to new spatially bound relationships between producers and consumers in the private sector, re-localization of public food procurement (Morgan & Sonnino, 2008) entails new spatially bound relationships between the public sector and food suppliers.

An illustrative example of this is the Cornwall Food Programme (CFP) (Kirwan & Foster, 2006; Russel, 2007). The CFP started in 1999, on the initiative of the catering manager of The Royal Cornwall Hospital, who raised questions about the way the catering was organized in hospitals in Cornwall: products came from outside the region and their nutritional quality left a lot to be desired. This catering manager was convinced of the good quality of regional food products and saw potential for reversing the trend towards the economic marginalization of Cornwall by embedding hospital catering in the region.
He also believed that hospitals are an integral part of the local community and therefore have a moral obligation to make a contribution to the sustainable development of the local community and economy. His vision matched the wishes of the management of the Royal Cornish Hospital Trust to improve the logistics of food supplies, as well as the persistent protest from patients about the fact that sandwiches in the hospital came from the north of England and not from Cornwall. As a consequence, a new contract for the supply of sandwiches was granted to a regional supplier. This was followed by a feasibility study of the potential for regionalizing the entire food supply of the hospital and for widening this concept to all the National Health Service hospitals in Cornwall. This study showed that this was possible on condition that a central food production unit (CFPU) was set up in Cornwall to which food producers could deliver their products for processing, and from which hospitals could be supplied with food. The construction of the CFPU was completed in 2008 and the unit currently employs 28 people. During the run-up to the construction, the hospitals started to increase the proportion of regional produce — partly organic and partly conventional — in the hospital meals. The CFP encompasses not only the regionalization of food supplies, but also the improvement of the nutritional and sensory quality of hospital meals and the education of patients and staff about healthy eating (Kirwan & Foster, 2006). According to Russel (2007:8) the achievements of the CFP so far are impressive and promising for improving its sustainability performance in the forthcoming years.

The CFP is not the only successful example of relocalizing the public plate. The London Hospital Food Project3 and the Rome School Food Revolution (Sonnino, 2009) as well as school food programmes in other countries (Morgan & Sonnino, 2008) show that the public sector is emerging as a powerful actor in the food chain . . . . [P]rocurement policies . . . are designing an ‘economy of quality’ that has the potential to deliver the environmental, economic, and social benefits of sustainable development — in and beyond the food system. (Sonnino, 2009:426)

Particularly because the public sector represents a significant part of any national food economy, its potential in delivering healthy and sustainable communities is large. However, as the example of the North Limburg Care Group showed, many public sector organizations tend to opt for rather narrow cost-based contracting procedures instead of a broader and more integrated approach that includes aspects of health, social justice, regional employment and environmental sustainability. Relocalizing public food procurement is, as Morgan (2006:1239) rightfully states, still largely ‘a story of untapped potential’.

### Urban Food Strategies

The third dimension of the alternative food geography is shaped by the new phenomenon of urban food strategies. Although many cities, metropolitan regions and states in North America (Lang & Rayner, 2007) and Australia (Schiff, 2007) have developed their own food strategy in the past two decades, or even set up a food policy council to coordinate and implement the urban food strategy, it is only very recently that European cities and metropolitan regions have begun to develop and implement their own food strategies. Characteristic for urban food policies is (the attempt to achieve) integration of different
policy domains and objectives that are (in)directly linked to food, such as improving human health, youth education, environmental quality, quality of life, employment and social justice and cohesion (Lang et al., 2005; Friedmann, 2007; Lang & Rayner, 2007).

In the Netherlands several cities have begun to develop their own food strategy or are on the verge of developing one. Very interesting is the diversity in approaches and in the drivers behind these food strategies. I will illustrate this diversity with a brief account of the food strategies of Utrecht and Amsterdam.

Utrecht’s food strategy started in 2005 with a series of meetings, organized by two environmental NGOs and attended by food producers, shopkeepers, cooks, retailers, consumers’ organizations, consultants and different NGOs. Aim of these meetings was to assess the support among different stakeholders for developing a regional food economy and the goals to be achieved by regionalizing the food economy. The following goals were formulated:

- To maintain agriculture in the region and with it employment and the landscape;
- To minimize the physical and social distance between producers and buyers of food;
- To create and strengthen a home market and outlets for Utrecht’s food producers;
- To reduce food imports and stimulate product innovation;
- To enhance regional trade;
- To encourage sustainable food production and food quality;
- To provide regional food for all cultures and classes of society, from the elite to the homeless.

The next step was to discuss strategies that could contribute to the realization of these goals. This resulted in the decision to commence with a public awareness campaign named Lekker Utregs (Delicious Utrecht). The first step in this campaign was the organization of a contest for developing a logo for the campaign name Lekker Utregs. The launch of the winning logo at a public event in August 2006 was followed by the organization of ‘harvesting’ festivities in fall 2006 and ‘sowing and planting’ festivities in Spring 2007. These festivities were held in the city centre and were primarily an event at which urban consumers and regional producers could meet, discuss and exchange ideas and of course buy, sell and taste regional products. In March 2007 the Lekker Utregs campaign team organized a meeting for regional food entrepreneurs (farmers, food processors, cooks, retailers, et cetera) to inform them about the potentials of regionalizing the food system (by presenting several successful examples) and to examine if they were interested to actively contribute to Lekker Utregs by producing, processing, selling or serving regional products. Many entrepreneurs indicated their willingness to participate, implying that alongside a public awareness campaign new commercial relations between farmers, food processors, shopkeepers and cooks began to emerge. Meanwhile, a new event was launched in 2007 aimed at connecting citizens and farmers, the Boer-zoekt-burger dagen (Farmer-seeking-citizen days). City dwellers were given the opportunity to spend one day on a farm, helping out with whatever activities had to be done, but also getting a guided tour on the farm. The success of the different activities aimed at connecting producers and consumers convinced the initiators of Lekker Utregs that it was time to take the next step. In April 2008 the Regio aan tafel (Region at the table) event took place; a four course diner made from regional products and prepared by the chef of the prestigious restaurant Karel V. The ‘VIPs’ at this dinner were the deputy
mayor of the Utrecht municipality, the deputy chairman of the Utrecht city region board and the member of the provincial executive board responsible for rural development and regional planning. Aim of the diner was to inform these policymakers about Lekker Utregs and to obtain their support for its objectives. This resulted on 14 November 2008 in a declaration of intent, signed by the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature & Food Quality, the executive board of the province of Utrecht, the Utrecht city region board and the Utrecht municipality. These four levels of government declared that:

... they acknowledge the societal benefits of Lekker Utregs and are intending to contribute to the realization of the goals of Lekker Utregs in collaboration with other public bodies, entrepreneurs and NGOs. They will make an effort to align and integrate existing and new policies, initiatives and activities related to regionalizing and greening the food chain and to improving healthy lifestyles.\(^8\)

On the same day the declaration of intent was signed, the Lekker Utregs Green Participation Society was founded; a collaboration between 43 stakeholders (individuals as well as collectives) such as farmers, shopkeepers, restaurants, consultants and NGOs that actively want to contribute to the regionalization of Utrecht’s food economy. These stakeholders intend to continue with successful activities such as farmers’ markets, food tasting events, farmer-seeking-citizen days but also develop new activities such as a food and drinks section in a local newspaper and Lekker Utregs meals for different ethnic groups in the disadvantaged neighbourhoods of Utrecht.

The Amsterdam food strategy entitled Proeftuin Amsterdam\(^9\) started as a covenant signed in June 2007 by the municipalities of Amsterdam and Zaanstad, the administration of the province of North-Holland (the province in which Amsterdam is located) and the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality.\(^10\) Unlike Lekker Utregs Amsterdam’s food strategy is first and foremost a political initiative of the deputy mayor of Amsterdam who was inspired by the London food strategy\(^11\). Proeftuin Amsterdam combines policies, initiatives and activities which serve the following objectives in Amsterdam and the surrounding region (Vermeulen, 2007):

- Provide naturally-grown and preferably local food for everybody while minimizing environmental impacts;
- Promote healthy eating habits;
- Achieve a balance between the demands of urban consumers and the supply of food products from the surrounding countryside;
- Preserve the surrounding agricultural landscapes of Amsterdam.

In order to achieve these objectives Proeftuin Amsterdam seeks to act as lubricant for existing and emerging initiatives, as a facilitator for new alliances between public and private parties and as an initiator of new initiatives. Some of the initiatives (whether existing, emerging or new) are similar to the ones launched as part of the Lekker Utregs campaign such as farmers’ markets and symbolic food festivities. Some examples of the targets of Proeftuin Amsterdam are (Vermeulen, 2007):

- The availability of naturally produced and preferably local food in all school, hospital and municipal canteens and in local day markets.
- Preserving agriculture in the immediate surroundings of the city for the long term;
- Kitchen amenities in new schools;
- Every primary school to have access to a nearby school working garden;
- Simpler regulations for retail and day markets for natural and local food;
- Reduction of food miles, lower emissions as a result of cleaner transport;
- School curricula to include life style and eating habits.

Urban food strategies such as those of Utrecht and Amsterdam are considered to testify to:

... the good sense of connecting environmental and health aspects of food systems with the preservation of the peri-urban area. ...Such regional food strategies can be instrumental in meeting the challenges Europe will have to face with respect to changing global food markets and demographic developments.¹²

On Places Regained

The examples presented in the previous sections are clearly a reaction to the processes of disconnecting, disembedding and disentwining. Together with the countless initiatives that have emerged all over Europe and beyond in the past decade (see e.g. Van der Ploeg et al., 2002; Roep & Wiskerke, 2006; Van Veenhuizen, 2006; Morgan & Sonnino, 2008), one can no longer deny or ignore the rise and growth of the alternative food geography and its integrated and territorial mode of food governance. All the examples reveal to a larger or lesser extent that food is much more than a commodity or a carrier of calories, nutrients, vitamins, proteins, etc. Food is an integrative concept linking different public domains and policy objectives. And the examples also show that an integrated and territorial approach to food has the (potential) capacity to contribute to sustainable regional development: increased Net Value Added in the regional economy, more employment in the urban and/or the regional food economy, preservation of the city’s rural hinterland, reduction of food miles and CO₂ emission, enhanced trust/faiti in the food system, increased bridging social capital, etc (Roep & Wiskerke, 2006).

Being a countermovement to the processes of disconnecting, disembedding and disentwining, the alternative food geography can be understood as being shaped by three mutually reinforcing processes:

1. Connecting (or reconnecting) various players and stakeholders — both public and private — that steer and design the process. This leads to the formation of close regional networks — small or larger, intra- or inter-sectoral — which link up with each other and give the whole process its momentum (Wallner et al., 1996). The examples of Fuchsia Brands, the Cornwall Food Programme, Lekker Utrengs and Proeftuin Amsterdam clearly illustrate the importance of new connections between the public and private sector and between entrepreneurs active in different economic domains (e.g. agriculture, food service, tourism, handicrafts). Such networks are the region’s social capital and as such, a driving force in the regional economy (Hudson, 1999).

2. Embedding good and services in the region. This may be driven by a municipality’s desire to shorten the geographical distance between food production and consumption.
But it can also have a broader connotation, i.e. firmly anchoring a public sector organization in the regional economy. Increasing the share of local produce on the public plate is a means for a public sector organization to become an integral part of the regional community and economy. And finally, many alternative food networks are based upon valorizing the region’s own special character, whether this is found in socio-cultural, cultural-historical, landscape-related or other features. As such the region provides the basis for the production of distinctive and unique products, creating the possibility for retaining more net value added in the region by exploiting the region’s endogenous development potential (Roep & Wiskerke, 2006).

3. Intertwining the various economic and non-economic activities and roles in a region. This not only strengthens those activities and roles but also creates coherence and synergy (Brunori & Rossi, 2000) at regional level (Courtney et al. 2006). Creating synergies between different economic and non-economic (or private and public) activities in the region is typical for the different expressions of urban food strategies that are being developed and implemented in the Netherlands: reducing health problems, greening the city, education the youth, stimulating the regional food economy and enhancing urban-rural interrelations. Ultimately this should lead to a higher standard of living and quality of life in the region.

Concluding Remarks

Through the processes (connecting, embedding and intertwining) constituting the emerging alternative food geography places are thus regaining relevance and importance as the focal and starting point for sustainable development. My hypothesis is that this contributes to bringing about more resilient and robust regions, i.e. places that are less vulnerable to stresses and shocks (Stirling, 2008). Important is to emphasize that places can follow different routes towards becoming more resilient and robust, and that the socio-material configuration of resilient and robust regions will take a range of forms, varying with time and place (Murdoch, 2006; Lowe & Ward, 2007). In other words, there is no blueprint for a resilient and robust region, nor for how to achieve it.

However, this does not mean that there will be no differences between different development trajectories in terms of effectiveness and sustainability impact: e.g. is Utrecht’s bottom-up approach initiated by civil society organizations in the long run more effective and sustainable than Amsterdam’s political and somewhat more top-down approach or are both trajectories capable of bringing about more resilient and robust regions? The fact that until now little is known about the impact of urban food policies and about the most effective ways of organizing and implementing urban food strategies calls for comparative research on these strategies, addressing questions about the impact on public health, on the creation of employment opportunities, on reducing social exclusion, on greening the city, etc. Another aspect of urban food policies that is in urgent need of comparison is how the interactions between different levels of government are organized as well as the interactions between the city or regional government, market parties and civil society organizations (Derkzen & Wiskerke, 2009).

A better understanding of urban and regional food dynamics is indispensible if scholars want to contribute to the development and design of more sustainable urban and regional foodscapes. This requires first and foremost including food as an issue in urban and
regional planning. As Pothukuchi & Kaufman (2000) rightfully notice, the food system has remained a blind spot in planning research, practice and education. Starting from the notion of food planning and building upon food mapping research (Pothukuchi, 2004), a whole range of action research and design activities can be devised. This can include the development of logistic solutions to food supply and access problems such as food hubs (Morley et al., 2008), the design, implementation and evaluation of criteria and methods for assessing and monitoring the sustainability performance of the urban and regional food system and the development of instruments for municipal and regional governments to enhance more sustainable food systems. But it may also encompass the design and actual construction of new residential areas in which urban agriculture is spatially and socially integrated. This may lead to a potentially fruitful combination of new urbanism (Katz, 1994) and community food planning (Pothukuchi, 2004).

Notes

4. I have been involved and still am involved as researcher, supervisor or consultant in the food strategies (or its precursors) of Amsterdam, Utrecht and Tilburg as well as in urban agriculture projects in Rotterdam and The Hague. The examples introduced and discussed in more detail (e.g. Utrecht and Amsterdam) are to a large extent based on personal experience.
6. ‘Lekker’ means delicious and ‘Utreg’ is slang for ‘Utrecht’.
7. The city region comprises the municipality of the city Utrecht and eight surrounding municipalities.
9. The word proeftuin has several meanings: test garden, taste garden, or field of experiment. All three are applicable in the case of Amsterdam’s food strategy.

References


