

Chapter 4

Fostering Organic Farming Sustainability Throughout Alternative Food Networks (AFNs)

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents the preliminary results of an ongoing research that empirically investigates the role of alternative food networks (AFNs) in supporting the development of the organic farming sector; moreover, it contributes in fostering sustainability approaches by small farmers. Specifically, the authors focus on how AFNs can boost sustainability in food consumption models and create an integrated way to support long-term competitiveness of organic farmers and, at the same time, satisfy consumers' expectations. By adopting a mixed case-based methodology, the authors propose an analysis of the sustainability dimensions of organic farming and the sustainability characteristics of AFNs as agro-food systems alternatives to the conventional supply chains of modern distribution. Moreover, the authors identify customers' perceptions on organic products and sustainability as well as their purchasing rationale and motivation into a wide range of innovative AFN, such as "food assembly."

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Sustainability in food production chains and systems is becoming an increasing key practice, in response to biodiversity, climate change, water, soil and air quality and producers' and consumers' well-being issues (Rockström et al., 2009; FAO, 2013; Schader et al., 2014; Forssell and Lankoski, 2015). Despite the modern globalized and conventional food system has contributed to enhance productivity and increase food security and safety, it has also created negative environmental and social impacts as well as economic uncertainties (Godfray et al., 2010; Freibauer et al., 2011; Spaargaren et al., 2012; Doernberg et al., 2016).

The need for more sustainable practices in the global food supply-chain, particularly in the small farming system, is becoming paramount. It has been argued (Alrøe et al., 2017) that a “sustainability revolution” is underway in the form of a broad, long-term shift in governance paradigms, however, this transformation is still fragmented and localised. While Europe is facing major systemic risks in term of security, supply and quality of the food, there is already an urgent need to develop more resilient food systems and value chains (Beck et al., 2014). In fact, although the European food law regulations and politics are more and more strict, Europe continues to be hit from a wide range of food safety scandals, such as the recent one that caused millions of potentially contaminated eggs. These scandals are the ultimate consequence of intensive food production based on industrial paradigms focusing on quantity rather than quality, treating food as a commodity and not as an integral and important element for human health or the environment, with serious impacts for whole ecosystems and for the dignity of small farmers.

Given this scenario, environment-friendly production methods, such as organic farming, are considered more sustainable than conventional ones (Lampkin et al., 2011; Padel et al., 2013; Torquati et al., 2016) and represent a way to meet society's needs for low-impact agriculture as well as consumers' specific preferences.

According to the EU Council Regulation 834/2007 organic farming system

[. . .] is an overall system of farm management and food production that combines best environmental practices, a high level of biodiversity, the preservation of natural resources, the application of high animal welfare standards and a production method in line with the preference of certain consumers for products produced using natural substances and processes. The organic production method thus plays a dual societal role, where it on the one hand provides for a specific market responding to a consumer demand for organic products, and on the other hand delivers public goods contributing to the protection of the environment and animal welfare, as well as to rural development (European Commission, 2007).

Although organic farming represents only 1% of worldwide agriculture, it is one of the fastest growing sectors in agro-food systems. The largest organic shares of the total available farming lands are in Oceania (5.4%) and in Europe (2.5%). Organic food is the most successful product category within the growing ethical and sustainable products market (Gruère, 2015), with a global market share for organic food and drinks that expanded by almost four-fold between 2000 and 2015 (Figure 1), with more than 90% of consumers' demand concentrated in Europe and North America. Looking forward, positive growth is expected to continue in the coming years (Willer and Lernoud, 2017). According to the SINAB (Italian Information System on Organic Agriculture) study, the farms adopting organic methods in Italy increased by 20% in 2016 with more than 300.000 hectares converted to organic farming and raise of related operators by 20.3%. The Italian agro-food model is regarded as one of the most sustainable in

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