

CONSUMER-INITIATED ALTERNATIVE FOOD NETWORKS - SPEISELOKAL! An Austrian Case Study

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Abstract: During the last years, several consumer-initiated Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) have emerged within Austria. Besides providing affordable local organic food of high quality, these initiatives aim to set up a close relationship between consumers and producers. Furthermore, they support small scale, local, organic farming as well as new forms of civil engagement.

This paper provides a brief overview of Austrian consumer-initiated AFNs, mainly focusing on an initiative called 'SpeiseLokal!' that emerged recently in Lower Austria. SpeiseLokal is driven by the idea that local organic food supply can only be sustainable if embedded in new alternative ways of social and economic cooperation. Thus, apart from selling local organic food, SpeiseLokal! is engaged in alternative socio-economic network building, the re-localization and empowerment of people on a broader level. This paper reflects - from a sustainability perspective - upon SpeiseLokal's effects on the socio-ecological system that it is part of.

The Problem: Our Current Food System

It has often been stated that our food system is unsustainable - ecologically, economically and socially (see for example Ericksen 2008, Exner 2011, Gruber 2010, Roberts 2008). Agriculture in the global North causes about 40% of all CO₂ emissions, it consumes more energy than it provides, it is highly dependent on fossil energy and it reduces soil fertility and bio-diversity. Our transport system, the processing, packaging and distribution of food also consumes a high amount of (fossil) energy further increasing CO₂ emissions. To add to this, our food system is based on social inequality, causing hunger in the global South (East) which has become highly dependent on food supplied by the global North (see Fritz 2011, Weingartner & Trentmann 2011). The prices for agricultural raw products – and with this, agricultural wages – are low and determined by the dynamics of the global market (Choplin 2011). Food has become a commodity. This implies that food production, as well as food supply chains, are dominated by big retailers, while farmers and consumers have widely lost control of it. On top of all this, the industrialised production of food has made food increasingly unhealthy, causing diseases and both overweight and malnourished people.

Organic agriculture has long been - and still is - regarded as the way out of our (coming) food crises - using less energy, caring about long lasting soil fertility and providing better income for small farmers (Löwenstein 2011). However, most recently it has been stated

that the process quality of organic agriculture does not differ from conventional agriculture any more (Kratochwil, Lindenthal & Vogl 2005, Bartel-Kratochvil, Darnhofer, Lindenthal, 2009, Groier & Schermer 2005). This is to say that organic agriculture has become part of the world wide agro-industry and that especially the processing and distribution system of organic food hardly differs from that of conventional food industry. In short: Retailers dominate much of the organic food sector and so adapt it according to their entire needs.

These developments caused (at least within Austria and Germany) a powerful debate that shows the contradiction between the farmers scope of action and their desire to create high quality food from small, family run farms, which is highly demanded by consumers. What became once more obvious is that new forms of social and economic organisations are needed in order to enable a less energy-intensive, socially as well as economically attractive (from a small scale farmer's and a consumer's point of view) farming and food system. The idea is to build more solidarity based food networks in which producers (farmers), consumers and retailers cooperate (Schäfer, Kröger & Wirz 2010).

The Solution: Civic Food Networks?

One way to achieve more sustainability and sovereignty for (small scale) farmers within the European food system is to build grass-roots cooperatives (Karner 2010, Schermer, Renting & Oostindie 2010). These cooperatives can be very simple, such as for example, one farmer takes the products of other farmers to the market and sells them without any surcharge. The idea in this case is that the farmer's products become more attractive by selling a wider range of high quality products. Another way could be a shared label, which makes it easier for consumers to recognize quality standards. Often, such labels share logistics and supply chains to reduce marketing costs for all farmers involved.

You will find various forms of farmers' cooperation within Austria, usually focusing on marketing processes, rather than common production processes. Probably due to cultural aspects and the dominance of big agricultural institutions (Schermer, Hirschbichler & Gleirscher 2006), grass roots farmers' cooperatives, producing together, are still rare within Austria. Further, regional marketing faces in Austria a number of challenges, like consumers' expectations, scarce resources and legal obstacles (Bartel-Kratochwil & Schermer 2008).

Another strategy for getting closer to a food system that serves and is shaped by civil society is the so called civic food networks. Usually they are initiated by consumers, trying to set up a close relationship between consumers and producers. There are different types of such initiatives, some of them form Food Coops or solidarity purchasing groups, collectively purchasing directly from the farmers. Other concepts, such as Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) are characterised by a strong relationship between consumers and producers, lasting over a certain period of time. Especially in urban areas, you will find community gardening or guerrilla gardening as

well as Veggie Box Schemes. In the case of urban Veggie Box Schemes it becomes obvious (at least in Austria) that there seem to be limits of growth with regard to local food supply. This is to say that big Veggie Box Schemes, for example around Vienna, do not solely sell local organic food, but also food from other European and Non-European countries. Does this mean that several small Veggie Box schemes would be needed in order to ensure local food supply, rather than a localised food supply, that simply traces the roots of food (Schermer, M 2010). And can the big Veggie Box Schemes still be called civic food networks? Who shapes them?

Compared to other European countries, the number of civic food networks in Austria is rather low. To give some examples: In Italy you will find about 700 solidarity purchasing groups (Fonte 2011), while there are only about 10 Food Coops within Austria. Further, there is only one CSA in Austria, while you will find about 100 so called AMAPS in France and a similar number in Great Britain (see Pilley 2001).

Austrian civic food networks concentrate in the eastern part of Austria. This is due to the fact that the two main cities are situated in the East of Austria and people who join civic food networks are, at least in Austria, mainly 'urban people' with a rather high level of education. This does not necessarily mean that these people live in cities, it rather means that they have been socialised in an urban surrounding. The persistent popularity of kitchen gardens in rural areas might also support the trend that 'urban people' rather than 'rural people' get involved in civic food networks.

The Case Study: SpeiseLokal!

SpeiseLokal! is one of Austrians civic food networks that emerged only recently. It is situated in Maria Anzbach, a rural community 30 km west of Vienna and 20 km east of St. Pölten, the capital of the province of Lower Austria. Maria Anzbach as well as its surrounding communities (Eichgraben and Neulengbach) has good public transport connections to Vienna and St. Pölten. The communities are characterised by a high rate of incoming migration and – at least Maria Anzbach and Eichgraben – by a high number of 'green voters' (around 15%). One specific characteristic of the area is the high number of civic initiatives, such as parent-organised kindergartens and schools or the various alternative cultural and educational offerings. An important driving force in these initiatives is the people with an urban background.

Though Maria Anzbach is a rural area with active (organic) farmers, it required, until recently a lot of time and effort to buy local organic food, grown in the area around Maria Anzbach. There was no single shopping location with a wide organic, local product range.

Given all these conditions, SpeiseLokal started as a consumer-driven initiative in cooperation with a female organic farmer. Inspired by the Scottish consumer-network 'The Five Diet', SpeiseLokal was originally thought of as becoming a platform that connects people, interested in local food, providing information on local and global food systems and on the various aspects of food, nutrition or gardening. Very soon the idea

arose of setting up the possibility to purchase local organic food. From the beginning onward the people involved were families who were already active in various other civic initiatives (e.g. parent-organised kindergarten and school). Thus, the idea of setting up a Food Coop in its classical sense, including a rather high amount of voluntary work, neither seemed attractive nor realistic. Also the idea of setting up a CSA seemed to incorporate too much voluntary work. Furthermore the initiative did not want to stay exclusive, only attracting a small group of people already interested in a local, organic diet. The question was: How can we provide local, organic food for everyone?

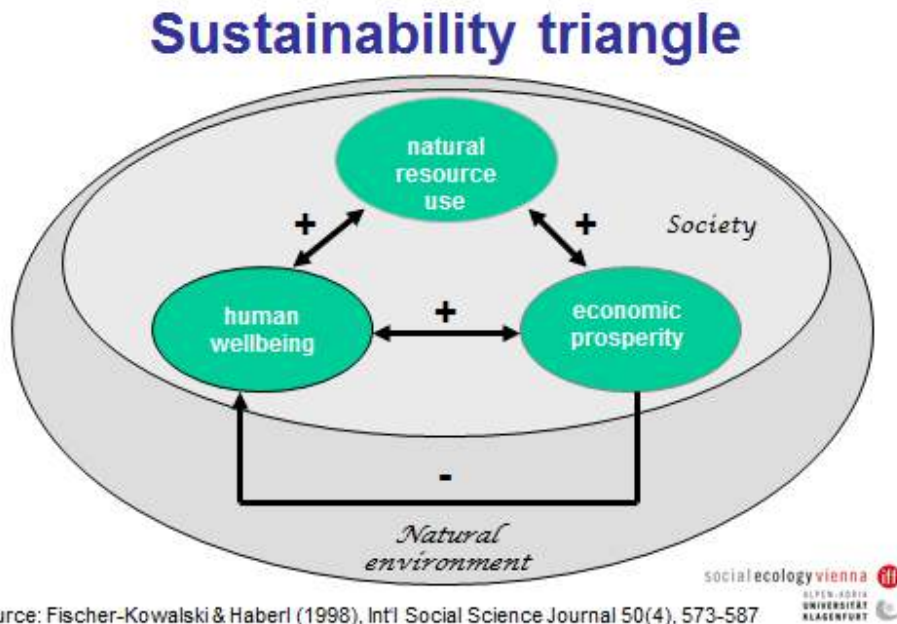
Inspired and encouraged by other Austrian civic food networks, three women continued to work on this question. They visited about 40 farmers, between 6 and 80 km away from Maria Anzbach, asking whether they would be prepared to deliver them their products once a week. This was done in cooperation with two women who started a similar civic food network in nearby St. Pölten. The idea was to set up a solidarity based small enterprise that sells organic food from the farmers nearby. Solidarity based means: fair prices as well as fair and close relationships between consumers, producers and retailers. As most of the farmers agreed to deliver their products, SpeiseLokal! soon started to sell once a week. Consumers order between Friday noon and Tuesday morning via a web shop. The farmers get the orders by Tuesday afternoon and deliver on Thursday or Friday morning. On Friday consumers pick up their orders at the farmers store, rented on a farm by SpeiseLokal!.

In order to establish close relationships between farmers, consumers and retailers, SpeiseLokal! still serves as a platform that connects people and initiatives. Every month it organises excursions to the farmers who deliver. It organises, coordinates and promotes cookery workshops, lectures, seminars, feasts and other events somehow related to food issues. It provides information on (sustainable) food production, distribution and consumption and helps people share their ideas, recipes, initiatives.

The Question: Local food Systems as Drivers for Sustainable Development?

Sustainable development, it is argued by means of the sustainability triangle, concerns basically three dimensions of societies: the economic, the social and the ecological dimension. These three dimensions can be translated into economic prosperity, natural resource use and human wellbeing (Fischer-Kowalski and Haberl 1998). All three dimensions are highly interdependent. Our dominant economic system – the capitalist market economy – is characterised by the fact that the three dimensions are positively related to each other: An increase in quality of life requires increasing economic prosperity (i.e. economic growth), which requires an increasing resource use.

Figure 1: The Sustainability Triangle



From the perspective of sustainable development, it is necessary to question and where appropriate to interrupt the dynamic inherent in this triangle. This is to say that it is highly questionable whether economic growth leads to a higher quality of life, especially seen from a global perspective. Further, sustainability cannot be achieved if economic prosperity leads to a higher and more intensive resources use.

This paper inquires how the main actors involved in SpeiseLokal, producers (farms) and consumer-households are affected by SpeiseLokal's activities from a sustainability perspective. Did their engagement with SpeiseLokal change their economic performance, their quality of life or their way of using natural resources? And how are changes of the economic performance related to changes of quality of life and resource use? How do/could initiatives such as SpeiseLokal affect resource use and the socio economic performance of communities?

We formulated different Indicators to capture the three sustainability-dimensions.

- A) Indicators for capturing changes of a producer's or a consumer-household's economic performance are: (a) changes in the way money is spend or gained (b) an increase or decrease of income and expenditure.
- B) Indicators for capturing changes of a producer's or a consumer-household's quality of life are: (a) changes in time-use (quantitatively and qualitatively) for purchasing, cooking, growing, selling, transporting food and for social relations related to food production and consumption (b) changes in diet and the personal

perception of health (c) changes in decision-making processes concerning time-use and the production and consumption of food. (d) changes in the quality of social relations.

- C) Indicators for capturing changes of a producer's or a consumer-household's resource use are: (a) changes in the mode of production, consumption, packaging and transport¹ and the related changes in land use, energy and material flows, which themselves influence soil fertility, biodiversity, CO₂ emissions etc.

First Results: SpeiseLokal! and Sustainable Development

Our approach is qualitative and transdisciplinary (Ukowitz 2012): Research questions and design were formulated and shaped in cooperation with SpeiseLokal and the people related to it. Data were collected by means of qualitative interviews (Froschauer und Lueger 2003) with producers and consumers and by participant observation (DeWalt et al. 1998).

A) Changes of a producer's or a consumer-household's economic performance

For all producers, SpeiseLokal offers an additional income. For some producers (vegetables, dairy products and meat) this additional income might become essential if SpeiseLokal's demand grows. Especially producers who do predominantly direct selling themselves and/or who deliver mainly to small retailers, appreciate the additional income that comes without extra expenditure or workload. For those producers who predominantly sell raw products to wholesale traders, delivering to SpeiseLokal implies that a high workload is spent in processing and packaging small amounts of food. As working power on farms is rare and expensive, delivering SpeiseLokal is done for ideological reasons rather than for economic reasons.

For those producers who sell *raw products* (e.g. cereals, fruits) to supermarkets and wholesale traders as well as to small retailers, delivering SpeiseLokal usually implies neither a significantly higher workload nor a significant rise in income. Also this group of producers cooperate with SpeiseLokal mainly for ideological reasons as they wish to support local food supply and food diversity. Still, there are further reasons why farmers cooperate with SpeiseLokal: In general producers do get higher prices from initiatives such as SpeiseLokal than they would get from supermarkets and wholesale traders. Further, the producers decide in cooperation with SpeiseLokal what to sell, when, how much and to what price, that is, decisions are not dominated by 'the market' or by big retailers.

Those consumers who do their main food-shopping at SpeiseLokal and other local food suppliers, experience that they spend roughly as much money on food as they did

¹ Farmers might grow different products or change their way of soil management, consumers might eat less meat and more locally grown organic food, shorter transport routes.

before, or even less (though they had assumed that they would spend more money). This is related to the fact, they argue, that they only buy things they really need. Further, the need to order in advance forces them to plan their weekly diet. The more you get used to this planning process, the more you know what you really need, helping you to calculate and document your food needs and the related expenditures.

Some consumers who still do their main food-shopping at supermarkets and buy some 'extras' at SpeiseLokal usually experience that they spend more money on food than they did before. This effect depends a lot on the type of produce consumers purchase at SpeiseLokal. Meat and dairy products tend to be more expensive. Those consumers who buy mainly seasonal veggies and grain do not notice a rise in food expenditure. The same applies to consumers who buy around 50% of their food at SpeiseLokal.

There is no clear evidence that spending more money on food causes a shift in the sense that consumers spend more money on food than on other things or activities (holidays, clothes etc.). Still, as families with a low family budget *and* families with a high family budget buy their basic food stuff at SpeiseLokal, it is most likely that it is not only the overall economic situation of families that dominates their purchasing behaviour, but rather the question of how important food issues are for a family. .

B) Changes of a producer's or a consumer-household's quality of life

Farmers in general face a high work load. As mentioned above, especially for those farmers who process raw products, delivering to SpeiseLokal or to other civic food networks means extra work (mainly for packaging and transport) for a low return as they do not deliver large amounts of produce. To reduce the time spent in transport, many of the farmers cooperate, helping each other in transporting their products to SpeiseLokal. The cooperation between the farmers themselves is experienced as a gain in the farmer's quality of life.

For some of the farmers the cooperation with SpeiseLokal offers the possibility to spend time on producing and selling products they did not produce so far, though they would have liked to. This is to say that to a certain degree producers gained sovereignty in their decision-making processes as it is them who decide what to produce (in cooperation with consumers and retailers), rather than 'the market'.

Farmers also gain pleasure by experiencing their products of hard labour being cherished and they appreciate the flexibility of SpeiseLokal! customers. Farmers and consumers appreciate SpeiseLokal's networking affords. Information about the producers transported via the shop and the website makes producers more approachable by consumers. Producers gain publicity, connections and other purchase opportunities.

Those consumers who purchase their basic food stuff at SpeiseLokal experience that they spend less time on purchasing food than before. Further, purchasing food at SpeiseLokal is not experienced as 'shopping', it is more about picking up the stuff you

need and getting in touch with people. So, for those consumers who hardly go to supermarkets anymore or do not like shopping in supermarkets, the time spent for buying food has changed - qualitatively and quantitatively. Still, the way of shopping at SpeiseLokal! (pre-planning, ordering in advance, keeping deadlines and organising the collection) challenges many consumers to change their routines around food shopping. Not every motivated consumer manages the change.

Further, people often change their diet and with this their habits of preparing food. Cooking, they say, becomes a challenge, a 'creative processes' as you are encouraged to use fresh and seasonal ingredients available at a certain period of time. People increasingly avoid fast food, making, for example, their own dough or even buying new cooking facilities to mill poppy seed or cereals themselves. Preparing fresh food is experienced as 'a gift to oneself and one's family'. Eating local implies for most consumers an increase in food diversity as they eat things they had not known before. Due to a socialisation with convenience food and daily availability of a wide range of food, many consumers struggle with cooking and storage. It is a process to adapt to a new lifestyle that needs support.

A number of people do spend more time on growing food: A group of people, for example, started community gardening. Others have been encouraged to keep chickens.

As people experience 'food scarcity' in the sense that certain kinds of vegetables, fruits or cheese are not available throughout the whole year, food is more valued and thus not wasted anymore. Some consumers even started to process and preserve food for 'times of scarcity'. It is now, they argue, nature that dominates their food consumption and not 'the market' or the supermarkets.

An important factor for consumers is also trust. Many are confused due to a surfeit of information and misinformation about food, nutrition, economy and environmental issues. Organic as a quality standard is in question. Shopping at SpeiseLokal! offers the security to do the right thing without having to engage with the details.

C) Changes of a producer's or a consumer-household's resource use

Resource use is shaped by a number of variables, capturing for example actual changes in soil fertility, Co2 emissions, biodiversity, energy, resource and land use. Thus, it would require quantitative analysis such as a material and energy flow analysis or a life cycle analysis of various products (Theuerl 2008) - a challenge that goes beyond the scope of this paper.

Still, what is obvious is the fact that resource use linked to SpeiseLokal remains low due to the fact that farmers only provide the amount of food that is actually needed (i.e. ordered) and consumers eat what they bought. Thus, hardly any food is wasted. Further, transport routes are generally short (between 0 and 100 km) and farmers as well as consumers cooperate as regards to transport. Packaging is low and food is grown

organically on small scaled farms (closed substance cycle) and none of the products is processed industrially. Especially the use of milk bottles and the absence of packaging for fruit, vegetables or eggs makes most consumers experience a significant drop in household waste.

What can also be stated is that producers partly changed or widened the range of products they have been producing, but there were no radical changes in a farms mode of production or land-use. SpeiseLokal caused changes in consumption patterns as some consumers clearly modified their diet and manner of cooking and of purchasing food. .

Summary

How do changes of a producer's or consumer's economic performance - caused by the cooperation with SpeiseLokal - affect changes in quality of life and vice versa. How is recourse and energy use related to these changes?

For the farmers, cooperating with SpeiseLokal means that they get an additional income. This additional income would increase quality of life if it covered the costs related to extra work that it induces. This is usually not the case and thus a rise in income does by itself not necessarily increase a farm's quality of life as it implies a disproportionate rise of the farm's workload. This higher workload is accepted as other factors seem to be improving quality of life, like the close cooperation with other farmers and consumers, the fair cooperation with SpeiseLokal and the relatively high degree of self-determination. Finally, the ideological commitment to local, organic food supply is the basis for most cooperation between farmers and SpeiseLokal.

Consumers involved in SpeiseLokal hardly changed their economic performance, but they experience a rather strong change in quality of life, especially those who do their main shopping at SpeiseLokal: They enjoy high quality food, the fact that they can avoid supermarkets and the close relationship to farmers, retailers and other consumers as well as being encouraged to grow, cook and process food themselves. Households who purchase regularly at SpeiseLokal have different economic backgrounds with low and high income rates. Thus, it seems that also in this regard a high quality of life is not necessarily related to a high income.

Still: Given the current socio-economic conditions, local organic food supply can only be a niche for highly motivated people. Simply selling the food that grows next to where it is sold is usually not enough. High amounts of produce would have to be sold in order to survive economically. Small scale selling requires a high ideological motivation and a close cooperation between consumers and producers to encourage both groups involved. Only this cooperation and network building combined with the joy in producing and consuming high quality food make producers and consumers experience a higher quality of life related to food consumption and production. Large-scale local food supply would at least require a basic income for producers and consumers and/or higher prices for food and lower additional labour costs. Combined with hygiene regulations that serve

the needs of small farms, local food supply would allow for small scale farming and retailing. Would it also allow for reducing energy and resource use?

Local, organic food supply as performed by SpeiseLokal seems to reduce resource and energy use in many respects (e.g. avoiding food waste, overproduction or energy intensive food processing). Does this mean that local, organic food supply could decouple the increase of quality of life and economic prosperity from an increase of resource and energy use? How would local organic food supply have to be structured – from production to consumption – in order to enable such a decoupling? This is a question that we wish to be answered in the nearest future.

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