Local contract farming: sustainable production and consumption?

Local contract farming initiatives rely on a food system based on proximity and incorporating sustainability, solidarity and participation objectives. They offer consumers a supply in the form of a subscription to a lot of local agricultural products, the price, quantity and quality of which are predefined. This project aims to gain a better understanding of how these networks work and their actual impact on the practices of consumers and producers.

RESEARCH TOPIC

The research topic concerns a specific form of “alternative agro-food system” that has developed in Switzerland within the last 30 years: “agriculture contractuelle de proximité” (ACP) – local contract farming. Pioneer initiatives of consumer-producer partnerships developed in Switzerland since the 1980’s. During the 2000’s more than thirty networks were created, the growth being however faster and more intense in the western part of the country.

A variety of organisational forms (associations, cooperatives, individual enterprise), of size (one ore many farmers), of production techniques (organic or conventional), of localisation and trajectory distinguish the different initiatives.

The specificity of ACPs is that they gather producers and consumers within a same structure and usually without intermediaries – with the aim to create a food supply chain based on principles of proximity (both social and geographical proximity), sustainability, healthy nutrition and economic solidarity.

What characterizes ACPs is therefore that they are both an agro-food supply chain and a social movement, claiming specific ethical principles.

AIMS

Contract-based agriculture of proximity (ACP) in Switzerland as a case study to explore the potential of innovative forms of agro-food systems.

To analyse the organisation of ACP systems and their potential to:

- Promote and integrate both sustainable food habits and sustainable food production and delivery.
- Redefine and optimize the food system by establishing a dialog relation between producers and consumers.

To analyse changes and effects of ACPs:

- On consumer’s common food choices and habits and on the (practical) knowledge gained on the sustainable dimensions of food products.
- On agricultural practices in terms of production choices, supplying organization and environmental impact.

The project will be articulated around three main research directions with the aim of understanding the ACP system in its organisation and its implications for the main concerned actors groups.

Axis 1: Creation and organization of an ACP initiative

First, we propose to examine the creation and organization of an initiative in order to understand how its members propose, create and manage it.

- Initiative’s biography and composition
- Initiatives’ management
- Mediations and interactions

Axis 2: The integration of sustainable food habits: consumers’ perspective

Secondly, we will analyze the impacts of the subscription and participation in an alternative food network on the consumer’s food habits and practices.

- Consumers’ profiles
- Consumers’ trajectories and food habits

Axis 3: Sustainable agro food supply chain: producers’ perspective

Thirdly, we will look more specifically at the producers’ perspective and the consequences of the ACP system in terms of its sustainability (environmental, economical and social aspects) and participation to the food production.

- Producers’ profiles and trajectories
- Agricultural and supply practices
- Food supply chain’s sustainability

METHODS

- Three case studies of ACP initiatives in francophone Switzerland (fieldwork)
- Ethnographic, comparative, and longitudinal perspective
- Integration of quantitative measures for better contextualisation
- Mixed data collection’s methods following the three research axes

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- To provide knowledge to policy-makers on the favourable conditions required for the development of innovative and integrative food network.
- To identify the specific dimensions and types of ACPs which reinforce sustainable alimentary habits and food production on the long term.
- To to identify some of the factors conducive to a change in food habits and to creative appropriations of the imperative of sustainability.