



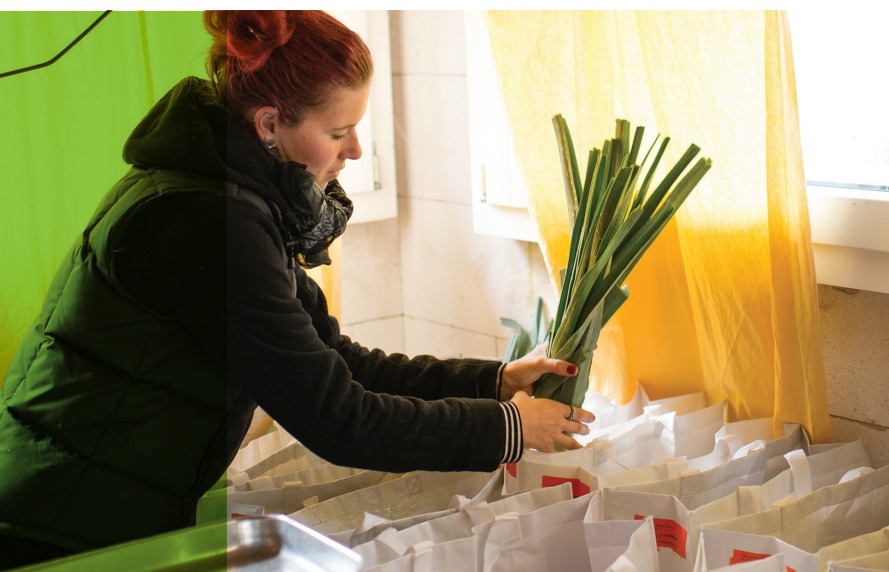
Reinventing the relationship between producers and consumers

Alternative food networks such as city gardens and farmers' markets are flourishing worldwide. These include local contract farming (LCF), where consumers enter into a direct partnership with farmers and are supplied with regional produce on subscription. As part of NRP 69, researchers at the University of Neuchâtel have shown that LCF initiatives strengthen the autonomy of farmers and encourage consumers to adopt healthy and sustainable eating habits. They recommend that the authorities recognise such initiatives and promote their development.

Market liberalisation, food scandals and environmental crises – there are plenty of reasons why consumers are seeking alternative food networks. These movements differ from wholesale distributors and globalised food systems due to their regional roots and adherence to principles such as sustainability, solidarity and participative management. Local contract farming (LCF) is based on a direct partnership between farmers and consumers, with the latter being supplied with regional produce on a subscription basis. Over the last thirty years, this movement has experienced a remarkable boom in Switzerland. Researchers at the University of Neuchâtel investigated the extent to which Swiss LCF initiatives contribute to a healthy and sustainable food system. They analysed their impact on the work of farmers and their effect on consumers' eating habits.

The researchers observed the development and operation of LCF initiatives with reference to three case studies in Western Switzerland – “Rage de Vert” (Neuchâtel), “Les Jardins d'Ouchy” (Lausanne) and “Notre Panier Bio” (Fribourg). They ascertained the special features of these movements via interviews with the stakeholders of these projects, documentary analyses and on-site observations over a three-year period. The researchers established that, since the 1980s, LCF initiatives have become increasingly numerous, more visible and more credible, and have developed from being a niche phenomenon into being more structured systems. However, these alternatives to conventional networks are having trouble gaining the acceptance of broad sections of the public. 80% of the members questioned had a high level of education and belonged to the middle or upper classes. At an organisational level, LCF initiatives differ in that they are food chains that observe the principles of cost-effectiveness, while being structured as associations with ethical and political aspirations. Members can play the role of volunteers, spokespersons or activists. Typical LCF subscriptions, which take the form of an annual contract, reinforce this commitment.

For producers, local contract farming means more security and more economic independence. Due to the subscription system and the prices, which are deemed fair, they have a more secure



An employee of the distribution centre of “Notre Panier Bio” shares out products between different baskets.



Members help to harvest vegetables grown by the “Rage de Vert” association.

basis for planning and are able to share their risks with consumers if, for example, their harvests are low due to bad weather. The farmers also feel that, thanks to their partnership with consumers, their work is better understood and more highly valued. However, participating in an LCF initiative does involve new obligations such as direct negotiations and various management tasks. The initiatives examined were also heavily dependent on voluntary work, which could jeopardise their structural stability. The majority of farmers retain links with the conventional food

system. In most cases, LCF initiatives serve to diversify their activities and make their work more economically and socially sustainable.

Consumers, on the other hand, have to tailor their eating habits to food baskets whose composition, size, delivery and pricing conditions are predetermined. Accepting a limited choice is seen as something positive by the people who take part in LCF initiatives, as it is consistent with their ethical principles. However, the constraints linked to this type of supply could prevent other people from subscribing. Interviews, surveys and budget monitoring also showed that households gained a better understanding of seasonality, production methods, storage and preparation techniques by participating in LCF initiatives. What’s more, vegetables often played a more important role in their diet. The researchers noted that LCF initiatives did not fundamentally alter eating habits, rather they led to changes that reinforced healthy and sustainable behaviour.

Further information:
www.nrp69.ch

Recommendations

Supporting the development of LCF initiatives

The results of the project show that local contract farming helps to diversify supply, while supporting healthy and sustainable behaviours. The researchers therefore recommend supporting the development of LCF structures in three ways.

1. The scientists recommend that the services which LCFs provide for the general public and the protection of the environment be more fully recognised. They suggest that agricultural policy be expanded accordingly and also that existing partnerships between LCF initiatives and community/cantonal authorities be registered. They also recommend that public and state-controlled institutions (such as schools, retirement and care homes, and crèches) enter into LCF-based partnerships with local producers.
2. They suggest that the authorities remove certain obstacles to the development of LCF initiatives. Provisions in real estate law, for example,

or recognition as an agricultural enterprise can have a detrimental effect. Furthermore, certain LCF structures lack the opportunity and financial means to acquire land. Financing, leasing and credit solutions should be investigated. Moreover, spatial planning should consider areas for urban farming; easier access to government-owned agricultural land for LCFs could be considered.

3. The researchers recommend including agricultural operating methods that are organised in the form of associations or cooperatives in basic agricultural training and specialist training. The researchers advise farmers’ associations and other organisations to establish structures and organise local events, thereby promoting an exchange of best practices between conventional farmers and producers operating within LCF initiatives.