

Regional and seasonal -Adding value to "organic"

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Introduction

Among the many innovations and inspirations from the organic movement is of special importance its input for the development of local and regional markets. Yet we have to realise that the definition of "regional" is quite flexible. Usually one identifies with "region" homeland (or motherland?) countryside or even neighbourhood. Such feelings certainly have also the people in Texas, which is many times bigger than let's say Germany. What in Texas still qualifies as a regional product may very well be transported a comparable distance from Spain to Sweden!.

Specially in the organic movement I have frequently encountered that there is no distinction made between nation and region. I remember very well a speech for organic shop owners in Berlin shortly after the collapse of communism in Poland. The first question in the discussion expressed the great concern that now very soon a flood of "cheap organic" from Poland will invade the organic market in Berlin. I had to point out that the border from Poland is not even 100 kilometres away and that potatoes from West Poland are in Berlin probably unrivaled in terms of regional quality. Organic products from Poland have by the way still not entered in significant volumes the German market. It's rather the other way round: Organic (and specially processed) products are found quite frequently in the organic shops in Poland, Hungary and Czech Republic.

We should not get trapped to define regions by national borders. For example is a cheese from the Alsace region in France on a table in Frankfurt far more regional than a Bavarian organic cheese on a consumer table in Hamburg. But in the context of the rapidly growing globalisation of our markets it should be not a major problem to come to a common but also flexible understanding of local and regional and to develop organic farming further as alternative to the globalisation madness.

Regional markets instead of "long distance feeding"

Organic farming as such does not automatically offer an alternative to "long distance feeding". We find increasingly organic products that have travelled around the world and/or supply the convenient and even fast food sector. What has been called formerly colonial products (coffee, tea, cacao or bananas) are travelling always long distances to the markets in the Northern hemisphere. These products became very much part of our daily life (even up to the point of adiction e. g. with coffee) and I do favour to have them available in organic and also in fair trade quality.

Another challenge in the organic market is for example wheat that travels from Australia to Europe. I came lately across of organic potato chips from Sweden in England. Can't they grow organic potatoes in England or don't they know the art of making potato chips there? How "fundamental" do we consumers and the organic movement have to discuss the transport of food? How do we deal with our contradictions in the shelves?

Without wanting to be dogmatic, this examples show that there is a lot to discuss and reflect about in the organic movement. It is notable that organic guidelines show no reference to local/regional marketing (food miles) or to "seasonal correctness" of our food supply.

A fundamental problem with the development of local and regional markets is our rapidly growing urbanisation and the maga polisation. More and more people are dicoupled from the land and the surrounding countryside is often not able to provide the needed food for our urbanised societies. In

my home state Saarland for example is only 20 % of the consumed beef produced within the state. And this in a region, where farm income is predominantly from dairy farming.

Any pound of food travels an average of 2000 kilometres in the United States. A study in Germany has shown that all the components of a yoghurt (including the packaging material) travels a total of 8000 kilometres. This driving around of food has directly an impact on air pollution and CO2 emission. For the transport of the fresh vegetable supply in Germany we use annually 170 million litres of gasoline (diesel). This produces every year 500.000 tons of CO2 emission. In other words we use three times more energy to transport these vegetables than we need to produce it (including green house production). The fact that one kilogram of asparagus from South Africa needs during its 10.000 kilometres long air travel 4.3 litres cerosin is in this context just a last drop in the "overflowing gasoline barrel".

A close look at the organic vegetable and fruit supply in our shops and supermarkets shows us that these products travel often very long distances. We find for example in Europe, the flown in organic "jet set" tomato next to apples from maybe Argentina and kiwis from New Zealand.

The organic movement on it's own will not be able to bring about a significant change in this way of shipping food around the globe. Sure, there is always the possibility of the consumers not to buy long distance food, but we need everywhere a much higher taxation of energy and gasoline. In the future it should not be awarded (by cheap transport costs) to produce traffic but punished with high taxes on oil.

Seasonal food - or: Everything has its right time

When we discuss seasonal aspects for our food supply we likely point to the example of "strawberries from Costa Rica in a supermarket in Germany in January". On the other side we find already starting in March and April organic strawberries from Italy or Spain on our shelves. Yet, it remains a fact that in North of the Alpes the strawberry season is in June and July. The perversion of the conventional food supply is seen by the fact that in the "strawberry months" July and August one million kilograms of strawberries are imported from California to the United Kingdom - via air plane.

Seasonality cannot be discussed only around strawberries. Even for most of the organic consumers has for example the apple become an all year round fruit. And frozen vegetables and fruits have done their share, that we loose our senses and feelings for "saison".

Is raising these aspects also dogmatic? I believe very much in people's right to chose. But having a choice needs information and this brings us the challenge whether we are raising the right questions.

More of – "adding value"

In the last decade we have seen a lot of "value" taking from farming. In Germany alone have in the last 9 years 550.000 people lost their job in agriculture. The average age of the farmers in my region is 56 years. 80 % of these farmers have answered in a survey that they have no successor. These alarming facts make clear that we cannot talk anymore about a structure "change" in agriculture. We are about to loose family farming at all. As a matter of fact it looks like farmers have to be put on the red list of extinct "species".

In the fifties has every farmer in Germany received 80 Cents from each Dollar spent on food. Nowadays he receives only 20 %, whereas 80 % go to the "input" supplying industry and with the biggest share to the processing and trade sector.

If you take a bread roll as an example, the calculation will show that with a price of 30 Cents the farmers receives only one Cent for the cereal. The crown tap of a beer bottle costs as much as a farmer receives for the barley used to brew the beer in the bottle. Consumers seem to have no problem to pay for a litre of oil for the car 10 Dollars while they are not prepared to pay more than 2 Dollars for salad oil. We accept to pay for an hour of repair work in the garage 50 Dollars whereas many of our family farms are happy if they earn 5 Dollars per hour.

When we discuss the aspect of value adding we have to ask first if we still have our values straight? To quote in this context the chairperson of the agricultural committee of the European Parliament Graefe zu Baringdorf (by the way an organic farmer!): "If butter is cheaper than shoe polish creme and milk cheaper than mineral water, we have a serious problem of value and priority setting in our society".

But what about subventions? Aren't they making the farmers rich? First of all it has to be stressed that the vast majority of subsidies in the EU do not go to the farmers but fund a huge processing and storage industry. It is anyway actually not that much, which every consumer pays per month in the EU to subsidise (not farming but) the food industry: It is about 12 US Dollars per month. Remarkable or better lamentable is the fact that only about 4 Cents of this monthly subsidy sum is spent to support organic agriculture.

What "organic" solutions can we offer?

The rapidly growing interest and demand for organic food is meanwhile accompanied by a great interest in regional and typical quality of food. Food scandals like the mad cow disease have not created this interest, but certainly intensified it. The organic market should fully realise the potential of synergistic effects in offering a combination of organic, regional and typical food quality.

Selling organic products in supermarkets seems to lead the way into the future. But this should not stop us to develop and intensify further our marketing alternatives. Farm gate sales, farmer weekly markets, box and delivery schemes and organic shops have to remain a challenge to the supermarket logic and logistic, which in itself is a big obstacle for local/regional food supply.

Consumers have a central role and a lot of power for change if they look for the least processed food and they usually can save lots of money if they get their food with the fewest market chain links involved. In any case the consumers have to understand and accept that food needs fair prices.

Organic quality offers a lot of value adding. Many organic farmers survive only because they process their primary products further into dairy products like yoghurt or cheese, by milling or bread baking or by delivering directly to consumers. Agrotourism on organic farms is also an interesting aspect of value adding.

As the organic movement develops from organic food supply to an organic lifestyle movement grows the demand for high priced products like herbs, flowers, timber and cotton, besides its contribution to biodiversity, this offers also a lot of value adding opportunities to farmers.

We have to change the devastating development that money is nowadays made primarily on (the

back of) farmers but not on farms. What we need is a paradigm and a reality shift in our consumption patterns to make sure that we can keep our farmers in farming and therefore always have access to healthy food.