

“Overcoming Leviathan”

Setting up alternative agro-food systems in Eastern Europe: network theory perspective

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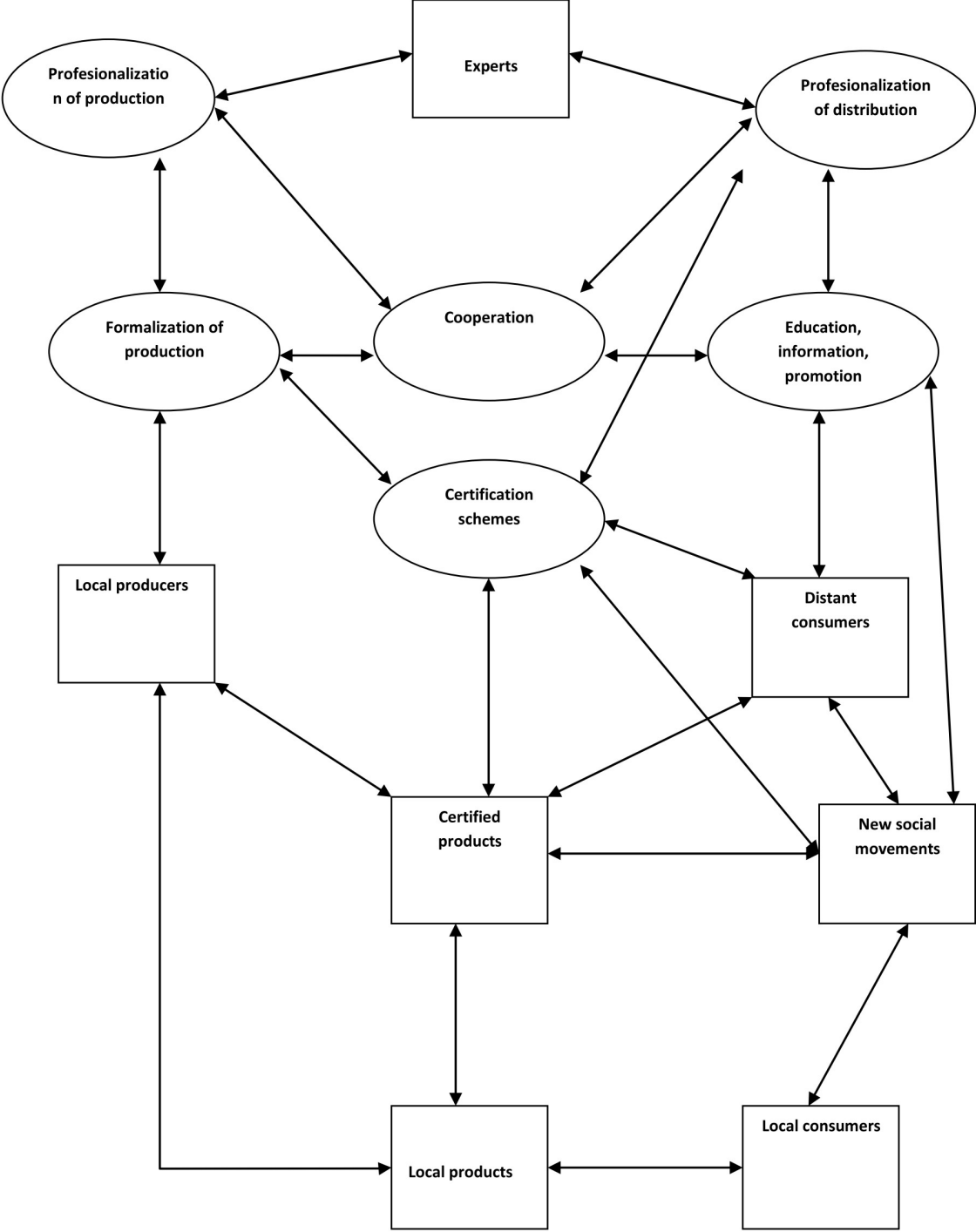
During the last few years there has been a noticeable increase, within the field of sociology of rural areas, in the study of the agriculture's role in the cultural and social landscape of the countryside. The question whether food production systems or, in a wider sense, forms of agriculture are compatible with the concept of sustainable development of rural areas has recently fueled an on-going debate (Rastoin 2009: 12). On the one hand, it is difficult not to observe certain attempts which aim at embedding of non-economic concepts of agricultural development. On the other hand, specification, intensification, spatial homogenization and pressure for modernization all indicate rather a stable character of agricultural production in a global scale (Buttel 2006: 217). Modern, sustainable local food systems are build on base of social networks which linked different actors in a coherent, horizontal web. Producers, processors, consumers are bonded by the common vision, and values which go far beyond simple market production. Agriculture in this case, cannot be brought into the commodity production, it is rather constellation of bonds, tangencies, different types of knowledge and socio-technological governance structures which build complex network's matrix (Ventura et al 2008: 151). Importance of rural network theory perspective, strongly influenced by the Marxist studies on commodity systems of production and famous papers of Bruno Latour goes far beyond it's descriptive potential. This approach tends to perceive networks as a power relations across macro structures and within socio-technological links (Murdoch 2000: 409). Notion of power and communication changes direction in the agricultural studies from the quantity and efficiency of production to the quality and sustainability. Very special place in this debate is occupied by the two opposite chains of food networks: farmers and consumers. Weakness of industrial agriculture: environmental and social degradation, price squeeze, decreasing number of farmers and traditional rural culture twilight facilitate search of innovation in this area. It leads to recognition of farmers – consumers cooperation as a solution which can result in new vision of social, cultural and economical reconnection of agriculture and society (Hendrickson, Heffernan 2002: 360). Horizontal integration of agriculture both with the pressure induce by the powerful notion of sustainability create in Europe new place for alternative agro-food networks which redefine connections between different clusters of rural web (Goodman 2002). For the sake of this article, AAFN are defined

as networks connecting farmers, manufacturers, non-profit organizations, sellers and consumers, joined through the process of production, food processing, distribution and consumption of food. The networks must have the following characteristics:

- **Regional embeddedness:** production connected with a geographically coherent area.
- **Cultural embeddedness:** production connected with tradition, culture or region uniqueness.
- **Social embeddedness:** a network clearly connects all stakeholders; producers, manufacturers and consumers. Products are no longer perceived as food only, but as tools for identity construction and improving the social coherence of the stakeholders.
- **High quality:** Production is focused on the process of increasing the value through improving product quality, not quantity.
- **Distribution through short food chains:** direct sales, specialist shops or chains of shops, green markets, contracting, regional baskets, etc. Sales should not go beyond the region.
- **Non-economic motivations:** a network is not for profit only. Part of work consists in promoting values of non-economic character, such as a healthy lifestyle, protecting agricultural tradition and integrating local communities.

To sum up, AAFN do not only come down to networks of distribution or high quality. Such networks must connect both rural residents and consumers. Such a network should reinforce, or at least, make use of the region's culture, as well as be based on a geographically coherent area. Moreover, how Maria Fonte point out, AAFN fasten different levels and types of knowledge (Fonte 2007: 232). Complexity and broad range of actors involved in alternatives forms of food production are in the same time the greatest advantage and threats of this new model of agricultural social organization. Alternative Agro-Food Networks seems to has got enormous potential in reinforcement of sustainable development at rural areas by bonding ideas of civic cooperation, development democratization with agriculture. However, informal character and different types of network makes AAFN vulnerable on power abuse. Complexity of glocal, sustainable food systems presents example below:

Figure 1 Glocal system of food production and consumption.



Source: (Fonte 2007: 232), modified

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Ephemeral, ethereal nature of sustainable agro-food systems raise the question how socio-cultural uniqueness of the Eastern European countryside determines the chances and directions of alternative Agro-Food Networks. During last 50 years agriculture and rural areas in this part of Europe faced significant change. Historically, deep-rooted traditions of peasantry and self-sufficient of villages overlaps with the social, economical and political backwardness. Significant scars was left by the unique character of socialist industrialization. For generations, development policy was dominated by the top-down approach. Rural communities was deprived of literally whole power potential. As a result, deep distrust to every attempt of political change and in inability of cooperation occur. Another feature of post-transition rural society was deep unification of culture and society. Regional traditions and distinctions almost completely disappear; chains of traditional knowledge were tearing down. Post transition rural areas suffer from lack of social and cultural cohesion. Carnivore state left no place on oppositional, local identities of rural folk. However very strong, positive valorization of tradition, backwardness rent and new developments tool seems to open space for specific types of sustainable food networks. Every attempt to answer the question that was posed at the beginning of this article confirms that the AAFN theory should be equipped with an additional model that takes into account the uniqueness of Eastern Europe. Despite certain similarities, the social, cultural and institutional character of rural areas in this part of Europe is unique to such an extent that it requires different solutions concerning the development of Alternative Agro-Food Networks. The idea of alternative production, which puts the emphasis on the quality and safety of production, as well as fair trade also takes into consideration such factors as social aspects, localization of agriculture, bottom-up management of rural environment. Owing to that fact, it becomes particularly significant to conceptualize the model, which would suit the character of the rural areas after structural transformation. In the described case, it is necessary to emphasize the support of local communities and their abilities to act. It is even more difficult, but equally important, to work out informal and non-institutionalized standards of co-operation in production, food processing and sales. One should also bear in mind the importance of creating and sustaining the connections between rural communities and consumers. Sustainable food systems linked different groups in the process of the development of rural areas. Making an attempt to work out the model of co-operation within legal, social, environmental and cultural frames of production is the key to success. Doing so, would help to minimize the danger stemming from the unsustainable character of the social background in which AAFN happen to function in Eastern Europe.

Notes

1. This article presents the results of research conducted within the Facilitating Alternative Agro-Food Networks: Stakeholder Perspective project that was carried out as part of the Seventh Framework Programme of the European Community (no. 217820)

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