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Local and/or organic: A balancing of values for producers and consumers

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Introduction

Organic and local food networks are seen as representing alternatives: localness as an antidote to globalisation; organic farming as an alternative to intensification and industrialisation of agriculture. However, in the UK as one of the leading markets for organic food (£1.6 billion estimate in 2005) 76 % of all organic sales take place in multiple retailers. The role as an alternative could be threatened by growth of the organic sector, but reduced growth would diminish the potential to provide a real alternative in rural economic development. This research explores the attitudes to local and organic by producers and consumers of organic food in the UK, whether 'localness' represents a core organic value and should be considered in standards.

Methods

The research used the qualitative methods of focus groups and laddering interviews to explore the range of values held among the participants. The analysis focused on commonalities and differences in the meaning and underlying values of each term and explored the expectations associated with 'localness'.

The focus groups lasting up to 120 minutes covered unprompted association with the term organic, followed by the meaning of organic and associated values including the participants' attitudes to local/regional food. 12 groups were run with 96 consumers, recruited to represent a range of social characteristics; about half classified themselves as regular consumers of organic food. In a further 3 groups 33 organic full-time producers from a range of farm types participated; the majority of them were established organic producers with the reminder having converted after the introduction of conversion aid payments.

The in-depth laddering interviews with 85 consumers in several urban and rural regions of the UK aimed to follow the decision-making process in a hierarchical way. The interviews covered motives and barriers, preferred points of purchase, and consumers' knowledge about organic.

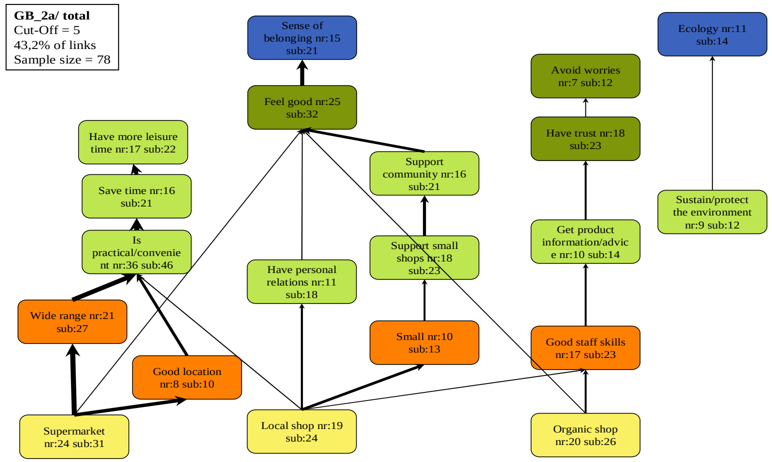
Results

The results show a strong association of organic farming with 'localism' both among the producers and consumers of organic food. In the mind of the consumer, organic food is associated with vegetables (greens) and with 'locally grown' which is often intertwined and confused. Both occasional and regular consumers give an impression of being unclear about the definition of the term 'organic'. The unprompted associations of producers covered many values including conservation, sustainability, closed production cycles, quality, and health, integrity, working with nature, diversity, independence and local food. The preference for local food networks appears important to both groups and seems to be a natural progression from other organic values.

Some consumers trust 'organic', others trust 'local' or British food. Several refer to a balancing act between different ethical values. Producers want to build trust by providing consumers with opportunities to see where their food comes from and through direct interactions as well as certification.

Results Continued

For producers the choice of a marketing channel is a commercial decision of being able to sell all their products at a good price. They see a need to balance supplying supermarkets resulting in lower farm gate prices but greater volumes with the demands for a wide range of products in supplying local markets. Consumers are anxious to make the 'right' choice of a marketing channel, balancing ethical or political values (avoidance of food miles, support for local economy, buying what is in season) with the ease and convenience of shopping in the supermarket. Local shops lead to a sense of belonging, specialist organic shops convey knowledge and trust in an otherwise complex food system, but most consumers buy most of their food (including organic) in supermarkets. A critical attitude towards multiple retailers appears more widespread among regular consumers of organic food and in rural areas.



Conclusion

Both producers and consumer have to balance different concerns when making decisions about where to sell and where to buy their organic products, even if both aim to increase the importance of local outlets. In the complex organic food networks from production to plate product quality, price, availability and convenience are all equally important. It appears therefore not desirable to further restrict choices through stricter regulation for 'localness' in organic standards.

References

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