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THE ROLE OF LOCAL FOOD SYSTEMS IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

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The aim of the research is to study the role of local food in local economy of rural communities particularly emphasizing support measures for local food producers. The research is based on the literature review and empirical data from three online focus group discussions with representatives of local municipalities, local food producers and their organizations, tourism information centres and researchers. Local food networks diversify rural economy, promote greater economic independence and local potential, improve the area's image, reduce impact on local environment. Also, consumers become more aware of origin and quality of the products they consume, therefore often choose local products. Local food system involves a number of mutually interacting human and non-human actors. The most important human actors in the local food system are producers, local governments (policy level of the county), state institutions (responsible for normative regulations, control and support schemes at national level), and associations formed by the food producers themselves, which mainly unite producers of specific products or territorial producers close to the territory. Support schemes, legislation, and technological solutions such as websites and cooperation platforms can be considered as non-human actors. Analysis of the focus group results revealed that in part of rural municipalities (rural communities) there are strong support measures and schemes for local food producers whereas in a number of counties cooperation with policy makers and actors from local food systems should be improved. One of the most important missing element in the food system is cooperation and exchange of information.

Keywords: artisan food, rural community, local food systems, rural development

INTRODUCTION

Local food systems (LFS) have become an important part of the scientific debate due to new policy initiatives and discussions on the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on the well-being of people in different parts of the world and also within countries. The concept of local food is usually associated with foods that are produced and processed in a defined geographical area, relatively close to where they are marketed and consumed (Kneafsey, 2013). This idea is also reflected in the objective of the Common Agricultural Policy of the EU aiming to ensure a stable supply of affordable food, to maintain the rural economy by promoting jobs in agriculture, the agri-food sector and related sectors, and to protect food and health quality (European Commission, 2020a). The EU's Farm to Fork Strategy (European Union, 2020) is at the heart of the European Green Deal (European Commission, 2019), which aims to make food systems fair, healthy and environmentally friendly, with the LFS playing a key role. Recent studies (e.g. CORDIS project..., 2016; Bite, Kruzmetra, 2021) show that there is a growing number of consumers who are aware of different types of impacts of the products they choose: where and how particular product was grown, produced and transported, what are impacts on their health, the environment and on animals. Local products play an important role in the daily diet of the population either they are purchased in small local markets, online or supermarkets; that is approved by several studies. One of the surveys has indicated that for about 64% of the Latvian population it is important to choose food what is produced in Latvia (MAXIMA, 2020). The majority of the respondents admitted the provision of support to local food producers as the main reason for purchasing food produced in Latvia, followed by quality advantages, freshness and a positive impact on health. About one third of the respondents choose local products because they taste good (MAXIMA, 2020). Another study has indicated that people particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic have started to pay more attention to their eating habits, healthy diet and consumption of locally produced food products (Bite, Kruzmetra, 2021). Recently the neo-endogenous model or networked development (Lowe et al., 2019) gained greater academic interest as it anticipates specific needs of

regions and local initiatives. Therefore, the aim of the study was to study the role of local food in local economy of rural communities particularly emphasizing support measures for local food producers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Local food networks diversify rural economy, promote greater economic independence and local potential, improve the area's image, reduce GHG emissions. The purchase of local food increases income of both the community and the local producers, as well as increases employment and related multiplier effects at the local level, for example, increased value of new production, import substitution, increased income, created additional jobs. In other words, by reducing the chain of intermediaries, the producer is provided with a larger share of the marketed value of the product, which can encourage the re-use of community revenues for investment. It has been estimated that for every million sold, local food supply chains create 13 full-time jobs in the agricultural sector (Dumont et al., 2017). The importance of artisan food and speciality producers is acknowledged in the EU research and innovation policy "Food 2030", it is in line with, and supports, the goals of the European Green Deal, Farm to Fork strategy and bioeconomy strategy. These businesses can have a significant impact on local rural economies showing positive growth prospects. Small local food producers are significant agents of LFS. In Latvia, there are more than 1600 artisan food producers (Kaufmane et al., 2021); however, their distribution varies by region. Part of the producers have established the association; some local cooperatives can be also identified. Due to disempowering social and economic effects of globalization, local food initiatives are promoted as opposition thus trying to revitalise rural communities and ensuring benefits for local farmers and environment (Fonte, 2008:203). Relocalization of the food chains is seen as a solution how to eliminate negative impacts of LFS on the environment, health, local economies and societies and to make them more sustainable. As the research states, "the 'local' has been increasingly associated [...] to sustainable and healthy production and consumption patterns" and "local products are sustained by consumers' "willingness to pay" a delta price" (CORDIS project..., 2016). From the perspective of a global food market, nationally produced food may be defined as local ('farm to fork' strategy). But also, within a country, food networks may be defined as local at the community or municipal level. LFS and especially artisanal food production is essentially about building relationships with consumers; they aim to create a value and significance around the product and its origin, as the farms involved in LFS carry out not only agricultural production but also other essential functions, for example, these are activities related to the protection of the environment and the maintenance of landscapes, which help to preserve both the typical rural landscapes and biodiversity (e.g. Brown, Schafft, 2011). The local food movements and LFS reduce environmental footprints of small and medium sized farms, promotes good nutrition among consumers, enable community supported agriculture, develop food and cultural tourism or culinary tourism emphasizing "unique foods and dishes from the culture of the host region" (Green, Phillips, 2013); however, there is very little research examining the effects of different programs for farmers and rural economic development. Schoolman states, that "social movement for local food to create new opportunities for small farmers and food businesses in rural communities" (Schoolman, 2020) has potential and LFSs could help to revitalize rural civil society because "local food farmers might [...] be motivated by both economic self-interest and emotional attachment to commit themselves to civic life" (Schoolman, 2020). Value chain collaboration, product branding, and public support were identified as the key aspects determining the capacity of small food businesses to link small farms to food systems (Hernández et al., 2021). In relation to communities' socio-economic context, local food producers provide a livelihood, prevent poverty and become a source of labour for other sectors of the economy, such as tourism. LFS preserves traditions, folk customs and other intangible, cultural and historical values. It also creates regional and traditional products; therefore, local food networks lead to synergy complementing different aspects of rural life and providing a multiplier effect.

For many communities, development of LFS is a popular strategy for sustainable and equitable economic growth and development through a range of projects such as farmers markets, community supported agriculture enterprises, urban farming/agriculture projects, food hubs, intermediated marketing channels like grocery stores. Farmers markets are social events that connect citizens as neighbours, consumers, producers, and community groups to the food system; they provide opportunities for people to learn about food, where it comes from, and how to prepare it (Warsaw et al., 2021). LFS may comprise elements of alternative and conventional food networks related to production, processing, marketing and consumption over a relatively short geographical distance, thus providing a number of economic benefits with a significant positive effect on the local economy. Local food networks diversify rural economy, promote greater economic independence and local potential, improve the area's image. Very important element of the LFS is artisan food producers characterised by great flexibility of business ideas, connection with local traditions and practices, care for product quality. Small-scale artisan food production faces difficulties in maintaining the economic sustainability of production, ensuring the advancement of their products in the food chain (local and international) and communicating with consumers outside the tourist groups at the production sites. Local food networks most often involve artisan food producers and small farms (also organic farms) that use environmentally friendly farming methods and give some benefit to society by offering food which reduces the risks associated with intensive and highly specialized production systems. Small and medium-sized farms, which are generally more diversified, innovative and highly flexible through the formation of producer groups and cooperatives, benefit the communities in which they are located, support rural economy. As it is acknowledged, LFSs are most often connected to land use, agricultural, and conservation planning, therefore local government planning is significant for activating a local food system that increases food equity, public health, sustainability, and economic vibrancy (Hogson, 2012). Currently, there are some municipalities and NGOs in Latvia that support artisan food producers, but this support is inconsistent and territorially and structurally uneven (Kaufmane et al., 2021). Municipalities that support artisan food production are often unable to name the expected benefits of the support to the local community.

A number of scientific articles and reports have been devoted to the transformation of the food systems. From production and distribution, the focus has moved to the challenges of sustainable development, emphasizing the importance of healthy diets, sustainable production, nature conservation and the reduction of food losses and residues. Opportunities to prevent externalities of food production and consumption come to the fore (Shenggen, 2021): how to ensure a healthy and stable food supply without creating problems for nature, which in turn is the only source of vital ecosystem services. Along with the aspects of nature protection, the preservation of traditions and rural lifestyle is also important. There are not many approaches in economics that offer in-depth analysis of such diverse aspects. The multiplier effect approach used in the project team's previous study, which is actually based on the Integrate Assessment approach, allowed to conceptualize successfully the complexity of LFS (Naglis et al., 2021). The current research allows to understand the elements of the model and the relations between them, at the same time, a significant problem is the lack of data, the cause of which cannot be reduced only to the shortcomings of data accounting. It is essential to find scientific tools for the monetisation of environmental and social externalities, which is important in the context of the internalisation of externalities (Alexander et al., 2017; Zhen et al., 2021). Interviews with representatives of the food system (producers, traders, policy makers, etc.) (Kaufmane et al. 2021) confirm that without a proper context and analysis of the role of artisan food producers, it is difficult to develop a sustainable LFS policy.

METHODOLOGY

Empirical data were obtained through qualitative research approach: three online focus group discussions were organized in July and August 2021 with representatives of local municipalities, local food producers and their organizations, tourism information centres and researchers. It is recommended to organize focus group discussions involving five to ten participants per session (Carey, Asbury, 2012, p. 45). For closer analysis, some territorial rural communities (counties) representing different regions of the country and with a different municipal involvement in LFS were selected: Jelgava county in Zemgale region (nine participants), Talsi county in Kurzeme region (seven participants), Ādaži and Carnikava counties in Pierīga region (six participants). Some difficulties were faced in the process of participant selection due to business of producers and municipalities. The length of every discussion was approximately two hours. The advantage of the focus group method is that group members can share their arguments and experience, discuss and react to the opinions of other participants, and thus together come to conclusions, which would not be derived during individual interviews (Wilkinson, 2004). This was observed in all three discussions. Due to Covid-19 pandemic, the focus groups were organized online via BigBlueButton platform, they were recorded and later transcribed; according to the focus group methodology (Wilkinson, 2004) moderator made some accompanying field notes during the sessions.

According to the research ethics, all participants were asked for a permission to record the discussion, which was received. Before the discussions, participants were informed about the research aim and the research questions. The following topics were covered during the focus group discussions: (1) the role of local food in the overall economy of the county in rural communities, maintenance of cultural values and traditions, strengthening of local identity; (2) actors of the LFS and their role in local food chains; (3) support measures for local food producers at county, regional and national level; (4) aspects of cooperation between food producers, traders and consumers; (5) food production, processing and environment (regulatory framework, compliance and control, competitiveness with imported products).

RESEARCH RESULTS

LFS can be considered as a system involving a number of mutually interacting actors. Analysis of the focus group results revealed two groups of actors in the LFS: human and non-human actors (Latour, 1996). Both groups are closely linked, their functions and influence must be emphasized in relation to local development processes within rural communities as they contribute to strengthening local sustainability, viability and resilience. Figure 1 represents the main actors forming LFS which were identified during the focus group discussions.

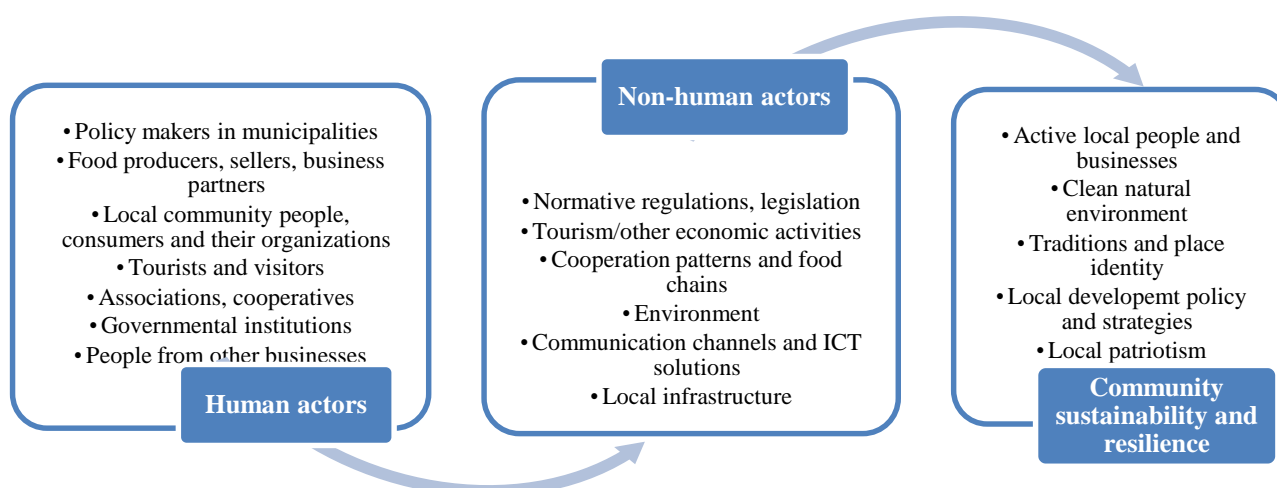


Figure 1. Human un non-human actors in a local food system.

Among human actors in the food system, interactions are made often forming also new management systems. The results of the discussions reveal that these actors affect people's performance and create safety net, because they provide practical solutions to support members of the LFS, promote competitiveness of food businesses. This was and still is particularly important during Covid-19 pandemic when direct food markets and communication with customers often becomes limited. The most important human actors in the LFS are local governments (policy level of the county), state institutions (responsible for normative regulations, control and support schemes at national level), and associations formed by the food producers themselves, which mainly unite producers of specific products or territorial producers close to the territory. The activity of local municipalities in the LFS was assessed differently by focus group participants. In some counties, artisan food producers were very positive about the support and incentives of local governments while in others food producers pointed out lack of communication and support. Positive experience was stressed, for example, in Jelgava county by the artisan food producer: *"Thanks to Jelgava county municipality, we became recognizable and we were able to go to Brussels to represent us as local producers, which was very important at that time. Of course, all these organizations, which include food producers, not only large ones but also small businesses, are of great importance, because information and advertising is very helpful, it is very helpful. This is done by the Zemgale Tourism Association, the partnership "Lielupe", local municipality and the Tourism Information Centers. And we feel sunlit on all sides and we are given a helping hand."*

Municipalities have their own business support schemes and specialists whose responsibilities include organizing support activities for local rural entrepreneurs, including food producers. If food producers dominate in the county among other local businesses, solutions for support are also being sought specifically for this target group in local rural communities. As the representative of Jelgava municipality pointed out, new business ideas are encouraged, already established production sites are improved or production expanded: *"The support we provide is varied, for example, we organize competitions for the best business ideas which are later supported. Someone who may just have an idea, who may have a hard time getting started or is not self-confident enough to run own business, is encouraged, we provide support to those people."* In municipalities with a high population density where food processing companies are not dominant, the interest in municipal support for a particular business is neutral. For example, in Pierīga region, even small food producers can easily find their customers without special external support in marketing. This is determined largely by the proximity of the capital city Rīga, purchasing power and income level of customers. In Ādaži municipality, entrepreneurs have established the association "Ādaži entrepreneurs", in which some local food producers are also members (one of those participated in the focus group discussion). The association cooperates with the municipality to address common issues that are relevant to any business including food companies.

Another aspect of municipal activities can be characterized by the example of Talsi county where large food production companies are independent (self-sufficient) in terms of their markets and cooperation partners, but artisan food producers would like to receive more specific support from the local government. As the artisan food producer from Talsi put it: *"Some kind of a system is needed, some kind of available information on what we have here at place. It is not like that always, but very often we hear or find out something by accident, we see something by accident [about local activities], but there is no database about artisan food producers. And we do not have here one specific person in municipality whom we can turn to for a help. This should most likely be done by a municipal employee who is a business specialist, consultant. With our help, of course."*

As the most important contribution of the state organizations in LFS, the focus group participants acknowledged an initiative "Novada garša" ("Taste of the counties", website providing information about local food producers in Latvia, their products, allocation, markets etc.) and National Quality scheme: green label "Qualitative product" ("Green Spoon"), and dark red label "Qualitative product" ("Produced in Latvia"). Schemes, legislation, and technological solutions such as websites and cooperation platforms can be considered as non-human actors in LFS. There are several studies (e.g. Melece, Krievina, 2015), however, research on the institutional aspects of artisan food production is still limited; the industry itself does not have specific normative regulations and policy. Until now, the artisan food producers are subject to the same quality requirements as other businesses in the food system. With the increase in the activity and number of artisan food producers, changes in the existing regulatory framework in the country regarding the production and sale of artisan food are currently visible. However, in the absence of a unified and deliberate policy aimed at the development of artisan food production, regulatory changes are not effective enough for the LFS to develop intensively at the local level.

Links between food production and other rural businesses were identified as crucial in local communities. One of the most important economic activity in rural areas is tourism which often is directly linked with special local brands and foods. One of the producers mentioned: *"When going to the particular place or farm, it is very important for a tourist to see, to taste. A taste of a product is important for them, they want to enjoy local food, but at the same time they need a contact with a producer, they want to hear a story behind."* The role of tourism in LFS was stressed in all focus groups. Local tourism information centers are actively involved. *"Our initiative "The Taste of Talsi county" has developed a route where you can travel from one farm to another,"* (Talsi Tourism Information Center). Representative from Jelgava Tourism Information Center shared her experience: *"Our local hosts are very attractive; visitors enjoy their offers and events at farms of production sites. It is important for a tourist that he/she comes to the place and, as I said, that he/she not only tastes the product, but can also somehow be actively involved."* Food is important for any target group in tourism. There are many nations in the world and each differs from the other with its own unique culture and national cuisine. The same happens within a country as the regions and even counties have their own traditions. Gastronomic tourism is promoted in rural areas, small businesses and local governments are particularly interested in its development, thinking about the economic development of their local areas. Very important actors in LFS are local traditions, cultural heritage, and place identity.

Representative of the tourism information center acknowledged: *“Indeed, local food promotes and encourages tourism. But I would also like to emphasize this role and the importance of cooperation and links with the cultural and historical heritage. We have very good examples in the county, where local producers cooperated with the manors, well, that it is both tourism and the promotion of this local product, and also the promotion and preservation of cultural and historical heritage, and attracting tourist.”* The EU has developed a legal register of the names of agricultural products and foodstuffs, wine, aromatised wine products and spirit drinks that are registered and protected across the EU (eAmbrosia; European Commission, 2020b). Five products from Latvia are listed in this register including Carnikava lamprey (Carnikavas nēģi). During the focus group discussion, representatives from Carnikava county shared their experience about cultural activities related to production of lamprey fish products and special celebration what normally is attended and visited by both local people and foreign tourists. In order to preserve cultural heritage and make it “live” for the next generations, the custodians of traditional culture are needed. The environment, both natural and anthropogenic, is also important, as the intangible cultural heritage is linked to a place or context. Some producers are very aware of impact their businesses have on natural environment: they use environmentally friendly production technologies and packaging, reduce energy consumption, visit farms to check the quality of raw materials and animal welfare etc. The participants of the focus groups are proud of the opportunity to promote and strengthen local traditions of their counties and regions. *“We, entrepreneurs, created the route “Zemgale taste in the belt of centuries”, mentioned artisan food producer from Zemgale region. Local patriotism, place identity and sense of belongingness to one’s own county are also emphasized in the opinions and activities of local government representatives. Municipalities develop local trademarks and awards, honor local producers. During the Covid-19 pandemic, local products have become a real value, so by choosing them, the consumer also takes care of preserving the Latvian taste and traditions and passing them on to future generations. To sum up, participants of the discussions indicated directions of support measures for local food producers (Table 1).*

Table 1. Support policy directions and measures for ensuring the development of the LFS

Healthy and sustainable food consumption patterns	<i>Ecological and economic aspects: food diversity; high quality, traceable products; raising consumer awareness; development of food processing</i>
Viability and sustainability of local producers	<i>Economic aspects: strengthening/ setting up an information support mechanism; availability of credit/ investment for small homeowners; digitization to create and strengthen sales channels; knowledge transfer support; promoting partnerships between small producers</i>
Coping with climate change	<i>Ecological aspects: sustainable, environmentally friendly management; energy and resource consumption; shorter food transportation route</i>
Resilience of rural territories	<i>Social and economic aspects: local patriotism and support for the local economy and rural population; preservation of rural lifestyle, traditions and culture; strategic approach towards involving local producers in food supply at regional level</i>

The most important missing element in the food system is cooperation and exchange of information. This was pointed out in all three discussions. Lack of coordinated cooperation between producers and sellers is at place in many counties. Cooperation would bring more opportunities for market and reaching out customers. Local producer from Talsi county emphasized: *“We are so few that we cannot meet the needs of our customers for the products we currently have. Therefore, we definitely need to cooperate.”* However, food producers are also aware that entrepreneurship cannot rely solely on the state or municipal support, and that forms of cooperation and initiatives must come from the producers themselves. Various digitization opportunities have been identified as the most popular, which have also had the support of the public sector, but which still need to be improved. As the producer from Pierīga region described: *“Something has already been tried in Latvia, for example, “Taste of the Counties”; due to the Covid-19 pandemic, for the open-air museum the annual market was organized in digital form (e-market). The “Taste of the Counties” works, but the digital market does not. When creating any platform, you have to work on it. It needs to be advertised, promoted.”*

Speaking about the impact of local food production on rural communities, some positive benefits related to rural landscape and livelihood were mentioned by the participants of the discussions. Traditional rural landscape in great part of Latvia is formed by separate farmsteads that would otherwise have been abandoned if families did not decide to run small family business and did not choose rural lifestyle. As one of the producers mentioned: *“And people are satisfied; they may not sell a lot of products and may not turn it into big money, but to their family budget that income from food production is quite a noticeable contribution. They can afford schooling of their children and running a small farm.”*

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

Activities of food businesses, especially artisan food producers, can be assessed as innovative and attractive not only to Latvian travelers, but also to tourists from other countries. Schoolman (2020) proposed that LFS has a potential of helping in revitalization of rural society; similar ideas were revealed during the focus group discussions: local economy, place identity, and local branding is empowered through tourism activities and awareness of local people about the multiplier effect of LFS on local community. Food producers and businesses are supported in the promotion of their products by both municipalities and producer associations, which show organized cooperation with the aim to improve competitiveness. Food producers acknowledged that some policy measures of supporting LFS in Latvia are at place; support structure includes activities of the public sector (the state institutions, local municipalities, research and education institutions) and the non-governmental sector. According to the focus group discussions, the implementation of local food support policy is more clearly visible at the local level, where emphasis is placed on both specific businesses (e.g. home

production, production of organic products) and areas for their potential development. Emphasis on the uniqueness of local food in relation to other regions directly benefits the development of Latvia's economy; small and medium-sized businesses are developed, which especially promotes the socio-economic viability and environmental sustainability of rural communities through innovation and creativity. This is in line with the EU's Green Deal and sustainability measures. Food systems are complex involving a number of actors therefore cooperation and mutual interaction is crucial to meet all sustainable development targets set by policies and researchers.

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