

New Emerging Roles for Public Institutions and Civil Society in the Promotion of Sustainable Local Agro-Food Systems

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Abstract: *In recent years a growing engagement of local public institutions in the promotion of sustainable food production, consumption and distribution systems can be witnessed. On the one hand, the procurement of sustainable (local, organic, fair, etc.) food to institutional marketing channels such as schools, hospitals and company canteens has strongly gained importance. On the other hand, several cities and metropolitan regions have started addressing sustainable food as an integral policy issue, as is expressed in 'urban food strategies' and 'food charters' of cities like London, Amsterdam, Malmö, Rennes, Vancouver or New York. The emergence of urban food policies represents an important rupture with the past, when the governance of agro-food systems was principally seen as a matter of private market forces, in which local public institutions outside the agricultural and rural sector and civic movements had little role to play. Put in this perspective, these developments raise important questions on how to conceptually address and assess the relevance and (potential) impact of new urban and regional strategies in enhancing the transition to sustainable agro-food systems. Also important questions arise as to what are the most appropriate roles of state agencies, markets and civil society in the governance of sustainable agro-food systems at local and territorial level. This paper explores and aims to conceptually frame the fairly new, but rapidly spreading, phenomena of sustainable food procurement and urban food strategies.*

Keywords: *food systems, governance, urban food strategies, public procurement*

Changing agri-food paradigms & geographies

In recent years important changes have occurred in approaches to the development of food systems, both in terms of the models and paradigms considered appropriate to guide their transition towards social, economic and environmental sustainability and of concrete practices of food system development associated with these. Roughly speaking two different agri-food paradigms and associated food geographies can be distinguished (Wiskerke, 2010): 1) the agro-industrial paradigm, and 2) the integrated territorial paradigm

The first paradigm is characterized by unfolding agri-food practices building on the principles of the agricultural modernization project which has guided the development of European agro-food systems in the last 30-40 years (Marsden, 2003; Van der Ploeg, 2004), contributing to the realization of a *hypermodern food geography*. The agri-food modernization project, and the prevailing dynamics in food production and consumption patterns it has generated in the past decades, was characterized by three mutually reinforcing processes: 1. the modernization and industrialization of food provisioning systems (production, processing, distribution, sales); 2. the standardization of food production and processing practices and procedures; and 3. the globalization of food markets (Murdoch et al., 2000). These processes were strongly supported by the EU's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and the World Trade Organization's Agreement on Agriculture (Kirwan et al., forthcoming; Van der Ploeg, 2004).

The agro-industrial paradigm for sustainable food systems, which is currently appearing, envisages an acceleration of the agri-food modernization process of past decades. Advocates share a firm belief in technological solutions for the problems of contemporary food systems, and claim that these may also contribute to an 'ecological modernization' of food production processes. Examples include: a) upscaling primary production through labour-saving technologies to reduce cost prices, b) food production in agro-industrial parks, e.g. meat production in zero-emission livestock housing systems, aquaculture and fruit & vegetable production in energy-delivering greenhouses (Veldkamp et al.,

2009), and c) the creation of healthy (defined as low-fat, low-calorie, vitamin-enriched, etc.) food stuffs (i.e. functional food) by processing industries (Scrinis, 2007). The hypermodern food geography is characterized by the ongoing industrialization and globalization of food production chains and standardization of food production and processing through globally applied regulations and quality assurance schemes (Marsden, 2003). Concomitant the hypermodern food geography is increasingly becoming footloose or placeless (Holl, 2004).

The *integrated territorial* paradigm, which is emerging in recent years, supposes a rupture with the principles and policies of the modernization project. While the modernization project envisaged the reordering and standardisation of agri-food systems into a generalised model with universally claimed validity (Renting et al., 2008), the integrated territorial paradigm aims to reinforce the capacity of food systems to valorise specific territorial resources and social relations of proximity. In many respects territorial embeddedness is a common denominator for the emerging practices of the alternative, local food geography (Watts et al., 2005), i.e. agri-food systems are increasingly embedded in and based upon the distinctive features of the territory, and integrated with other activities such as nature & landscape conservation, tourism, care and education (Renting et al., 2008; Wiskerke et al., forthcoming). In line with this, the integrated, territorial paradigm is built around highly differentiated food quality definitions - reflecting differences in farming systems, networks, cultural traditions, consumer preferences, etc. – this in contrast with the standardized and ‘placeless’ quality characteristic for the agro-industrial approach (Renting et al., 2003: 394; Sonnino & Marsden, 2006: 186).

Moreover, shorter distances between production and consumption, the closing of regional nutrient cycles and the use of varieties and breeds adapted to local conditions are considered strategic for improving environmental sustainability (Nosi & Zanni, 2004). Basing food production on local physical conditions as well as socio-cultural traditions is also seen as a means to improve consumer trust, by using mechanisms of (geographical or cultural) proximity and reinforced social embeddedness (Renting et al., 2003). Finally, this paradigm differs in its approach to food-related health problems by rather advocating changes in diet composition (fresh and less processed food, reduced meat consumption, etc.) combined with more physical activity (Trichopoulou & Vasilopoulou, 2000).

The two outlined paradigms and associated food geographies resemble oppositional Weberian ideal types, i.e. *“one-sided accentuations of one or more points of view according to which concrete individual phenomena ... are arranged into a unified analytical construct”* (Slee & Kirwan, forthcoming). Although expressions of both paradigms can be found in practice, a significant part of contemporary food systems are best understood as a *hybrid food geography*, combining elements of both paradigms and part of ongoing, incomplete transition processes (Slee & Kirwan, forthcoming; Sonnino & Marsden, 2006). Or, to phrase Storper (1997: 255), today’s food economy can *“be conceived as a complex organisational puzzle, consisting of multiple and partially overlapping worlds in which reflexive collective action unfolds”*. Nevertheless, based on insights from comparative EU-wide research projects (IMPACT, SUS-CHAIN, COFAMI) in which sustainability performances and potentials of different sustainable food supply chain strategies were assessed, we believe that the integrated, territorial approach holds the most promising answers for the current challenges of European agri-food systems.

However, an important limitation for the integrated, territorial model to play a leading role in transitions to sustainable food systems is that existing initiatives remain relatively small and localized and that viable dissemination models (either by upscaling or ‘multiplication’) are unclear. An interesting option to transgress promising initiatives ‘beyond their niche’ is to explore hybrid organizational forms that preserve key elements of localized initiatives and incorporate strong elements from long supply chains (e.g. ‘food hubs’ to serve a range of marketing channels; see Morley et al., 2008). Another bottleneck is that the role for different (public, private, civic) support strategies in the further unfolding of an alternative and/or local food geography is still largely unexplored. Existing initiatives have frequently developed outside (or even in opposition to) existing policy frameworks, but also required support mechanisms at odds with existing governance conceptions. Against this background this paper analyses changes in agri-food governance

mechanisms in past decades and explores those that currently emerge in line with the integrated, territorial agri-food paradigm, and that may potentially enable a more fundamental transition to sustainable food systems

Changes in agri-food governance mechanisms: redefining the role of the state, market and civil society

Different paradigms for sustainable food systems, so we contend in this paper, are not only characterized by different types of food qualities, social relations and/or linkages with their territorial contexts, but also presuppose the putting into place of different governance mechanisms. This statement may not seem world-shocking, and is in line with observations of many case studies of local food initiatives that these emerged in the margin of existing policy frameworks and require new types of support measures. However, we think that we currently lack an adequate conceptual framework to thoroughly think through the implications of newly emerging food systems for governance issues and fundamentally need to rethink the role of key governance mechanisms in the development and functioning of food systems. This will help us to better understand changes that are (sometimes unexpectedly) occurring in the political and institutional environment of food systems. On the other hand, it will enable us to better identify viable support strategies for the transition to sustainable food systems.

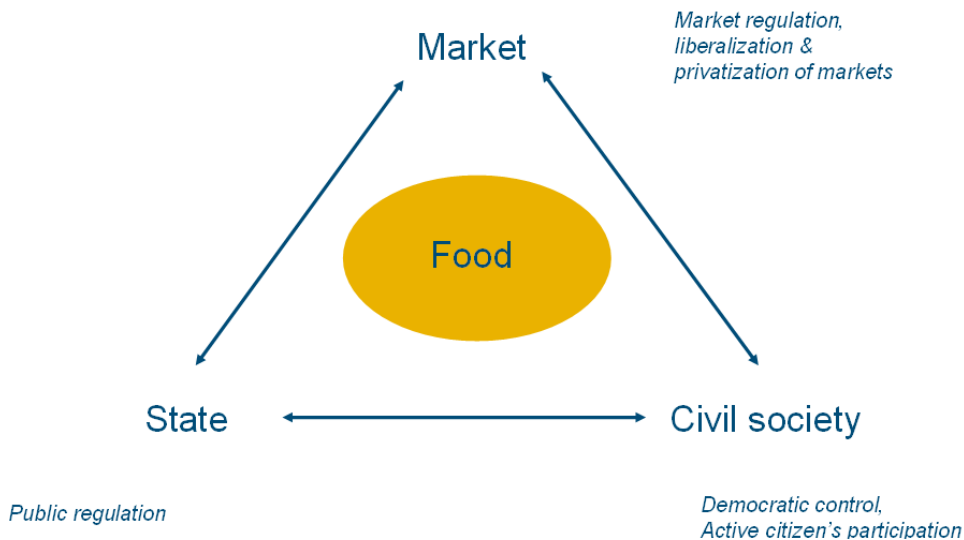


Figure 1. Key mechanisms of agri-food governance.

Figure 1 visualizes the main governance mechanisms that are relevant to take into account in analyzing agri-food governance issues, applying the basic 'governance triangle' composed of the state, market and civil society used in social sciences as key institutional mechanisms that may give 'structure' to collective human behaviour within society (Rhodes, 1997).

One look at figure 1 makes clear that both academic and public debates on governance of agri-food systems have been very partial and biased since these mainly focused on relations between market and state intervention, while much less attention has gone to the other axes of the governance triangle. This reflects that agriculture and food production for long were mainly considered an economic activity and food a tradable commodity, not much different from other products and sectors for which - perhaps with the exception of emergencies and acute shortages - price mechanisms should play a central role in structuring markets. On the other hand, agricultural and rural development were among the first policy fields for which state intervention was relatively early an accepted phenomenon, if not regarding markets than certainly for improving farm structures and technical efficiency or food safety control. Also international public regulation has a long tradition, keeping in mind that the regulation of agricultural markets was a main reason for founding the European Union (then Community) in 1957 and since then the CAP has remained one of the main EU

policy areas.

While market and public regulation thus were considered as key governance mechanisms, this was not the case for civil society. Indirect control by general representative democratic institutions was considered a sufficient level of citizens' involvement and only for professional organizations and interest groups (farmers' unions, and exceptionally consumer groups) a stronger involvement in policy-making was foreseen. As for involvement in markets, the role of civil society was generally reduced to that of (individual) consumer of food products.

It is clear that many of these 'traditional' conceptions of the role of the state, market and civil society do not any longer correspond to the current situation, and that actually in the past few decades important changes have occurred in the role and importance of different governance mechanisms and their interrelations. The governance triangle enables us to analyze these changes within their historical context and understand their driving forces and implications. First, figure 2 below visualizes the role and importance of different governance mechanisms at the heydays of the agri-food modernization project (ca. 1960-1985), when the original design of the CAP was fully put in to practice.

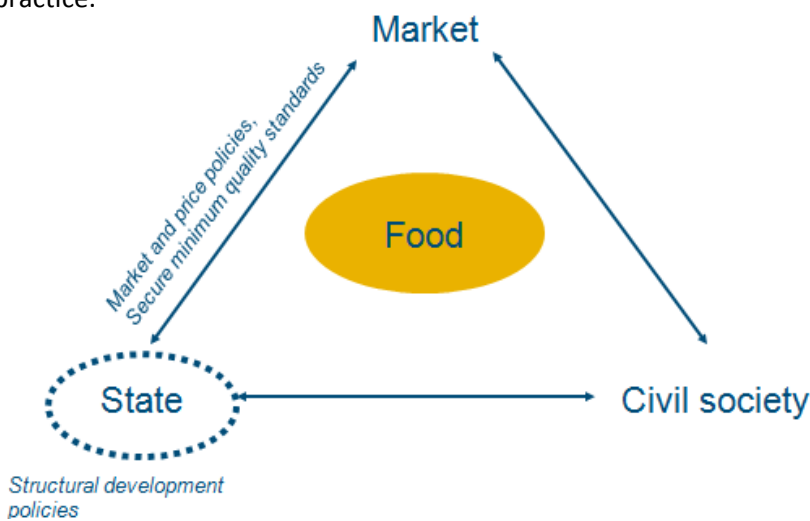


Figure 2. EU agri-food governance in the modernization era (ca. 1960-85).

As is well known, the CAP's original aim was to guarantee for basic food self-sufficiency in response to post-war shortages, and indirectly enable a diversification of the economy by providing cheap food for growing urban populations working in industries and services. The CAP was therefore principally intended as a food policy, albeit with a focus on boosting and restructuring production and supporting agro-industry. This resulted in a policy approach combining market and price policies, on the one hand, and structural development policies, on the other, both with the aim to modernize and increase the productivity of EU agriculture. In terms of governance mechanisms, in the modernization era public regulation played a dominant role. The agri-food modernization project clearly was a policy driven project, and the state not only attempted to shape infrastructural conditions and improve farm structures or management practices, but also intervened in commodity markets by providing subsidies and setting price levels to make the production economically attractive to farmers. State involvement in other aspects was limited and mainly aimed at securing minimum food quality and safety standards and promoting sufficient and balanced nutrient intake.

Looking backwards, we can say that the original CAP has been very successful in meeting its objectives of raising productivity and realizing self-sufficiency. However, by the late 1980s it had become a victim of its own success and increasingly different negative side-effects of the agro-industrial food systems it had promoted appeared, including: 1. Environmental degradation due to nutrient emissions and pesticide use; 2. Loss of biodiversity, valuable landscapes, and traditional and artisanal products; 3. Increasing budgetary pressures due to surplus production in various sectors and growing criticism on the dedicated budget share; 4. Growing pressure to reduce policy support

to agriculture, especially for price support and direct market intervention, from international fora for trade negotiations trade (then the GATT as precursor of the World Trade Organization).

This multi-dimensional crisis of the CAP, and the agri-food modernization project it was associated to, called for a reorientation of public policies and a redefinition of the role and importance of different key governance mechanisms (see Figure 3). On the one hand, a new balance was to be established between public and market regulation, resulting in a gradual but continuous withdrawal of the state from the governance of commodity markets. Market intervention and price support measures were increasingly abolished and partially compensated by direct income support complying with international requirements to avoid trade distortion of the GATT/ WTO. More generally, increasingly a market liberalization discourse was adopted and price-setting as well as coordination of food commodity supply and demand were considered as a matter to be subjected to market forces.

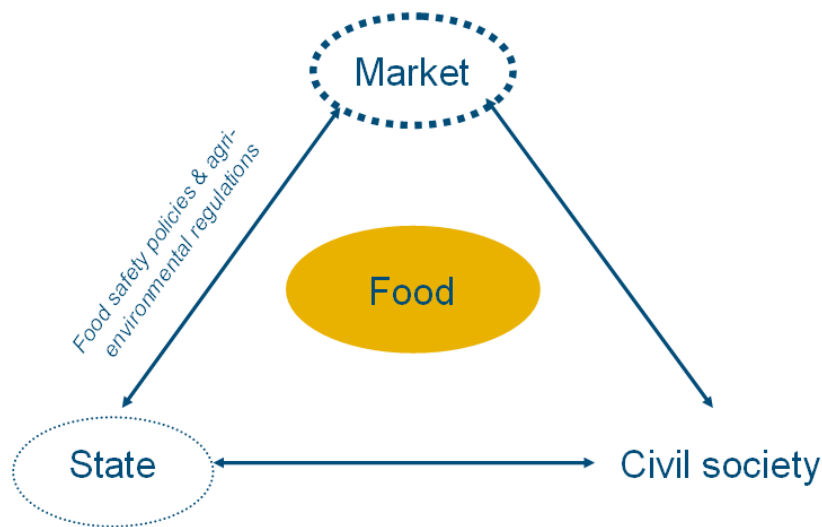


Figure 3. EU agri-food governance after the successive CAP reforms (ca. 1990-2000).

However, the CAP reforms were more than just a stepwise state withdrawal from agri-food governance. While after successive CAP reforms, contrary to the era of productivism, the market had clearly overruled public regulation as dominant governance mechanism, the CAP reforms also pretended a redefinition of the role of public policy in agri-food governance. Indirectly, this may be considered a response to the growing criticism on mainstream agri-food systems, exemplified by a dramatic deterioration of the public image of agriculture and a growing involvement of consumer and environmental NGOs with food-related issues. The criticism on agri-food systems initially mainly focused on the ecological crisis (and to some extent effects of the CAP for countries in the South), but was reinforced by food and health scares and large scale outbreaks of animal diseases in the 1990s such as BSE, Foot and Mouth Disease, classical Swine Fever and Avian Influenza.

The CAP reforms intended to counteract the growing discontent with mainstream agriculture, on the one hand, by introducing several complementary policies and regulations principally to improve its performance in terms of environment and food quality. Examples include agri-environment measures, support for the conversion to organic farming, and food quality policies to protect artisanal and origin labelled food products introduced as part of the 1992 CAP reform and afterwards integrated in the second, rural development pillar of the CAP. Other examples are food safety measures in response to food scares throughout the 1990s, resulting in a growing importance of health and consumer protection policies within agri-food governance. With these measures state agencies attempted to reinstall the confidence of wider population sections in mainstream agri-food systems, however without involving civil society groups (e.g. environmental and consumer NGOs) more directly and explicitly in public policy development at regional and national level.

Does this revised agri-food governance mode after successive CAP reforms mean that we now have an agri-food and rural development policy that is suitable to deal with contemporary challenges? And

is the constellation of governance mechanisms sufficiently flexible to accommodate various societal interests and demands? While it is too early to fully state that we again have entered a new stage of changing relations between market, state, and civil society, we think that there are important indications to suggest that the contours of a new agri-food governance mode is emerging (see Figure 4). This new governance mode, which corresponds to the integrative and territorial agri-food paradigm outlined in section 1, will be explored in the next section.

Supply and demand

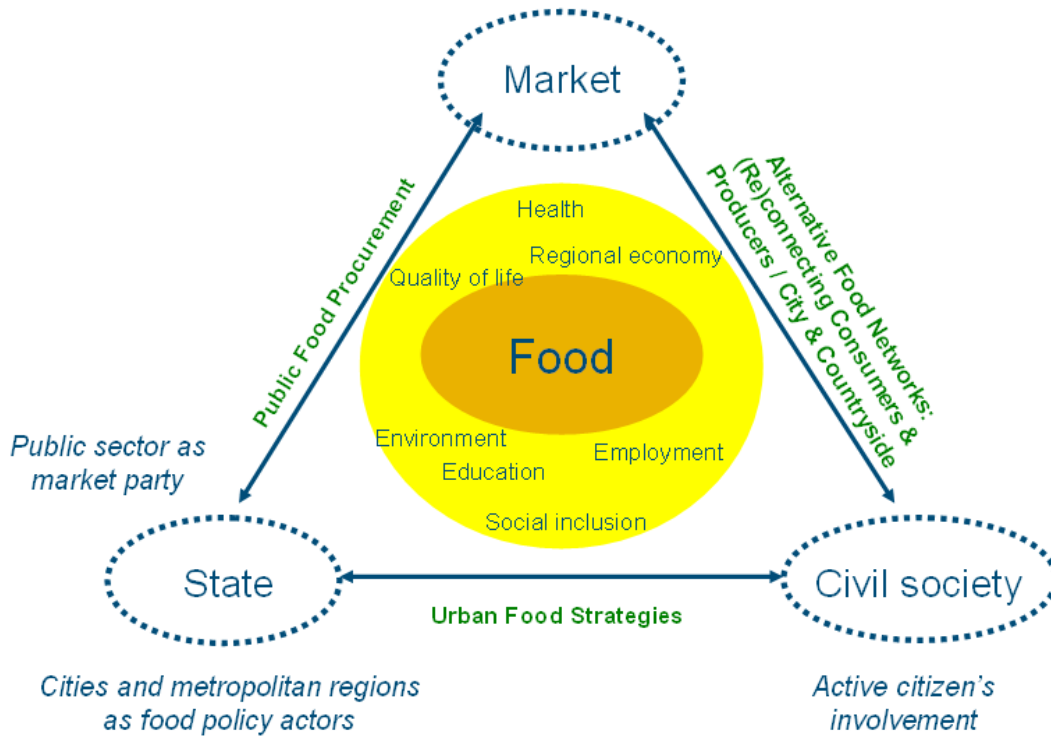


Figure 4. Contours of an integrative and territorial mode of agri-food governance.

Contours of an integrative, territorial mode of agri-food governance

The new governance mode that is currently emerging in several important ways is different from previous modes of agri-food governance. First, in the integrative, territorial governance mode, contrary to previous governance models, none of the main governance mechanisms plays a dominant role. Rather, it envisages the search for an effective balance between governance mechanisms in different spheres and a redefinition of the roles of state agencies, market parties and civil society groups in function of this. Public-private partnerships, territorial bottom-up approaches and active citizen’s involvement play an important role in the emerging model, and new governance forms may as well find their roots in policy developments as in market-driven trends or civil society initiatives.

Secondly, the integrated, territorial governance mode is characterized by a growing diversity of involved institutional and societal partners. As for public institutions, policies are no longer principally driven by EU and national state agencies, but regional and local governments increasingly claim a role in the development and implementation of new agri-food policies. Moreover, involved policy actors are no longer limited to state agencies which traditionally dominated agri-food policies (e.g departments of agriculture, rural development, or economic development), but increasingly also representatives from other policy fields with a less strong producer-focus (e.g. public health, climate change, education, sustainable development) and with a non-rural background (cities, metropolitan regions) take up an active role in agri-food related policies. Examples are ‘urban food strategies’ and ‘food charters’ to enhance the availability and use of healthy and sustainable foods established by cities and metropolitan regions like London, Amsterdam, Vancouver and New York (Vermeulen, 2007; Reynolds, 2010) or the ‘Food & Climate’ initiative of the city of Malmö to reduce food-related

GHG emissions with 40% by promoting organic foods and changes in food habits. A similar diversification of involved actors can be noted for involved civil society partners. This growing heterogeneity of actors has contributed to the development of new, innovative approaches, but also results in specific new governance challenges to which we will return later.

The growing diversity of involved institutional and societal actors can be seen as a reflection of the changing nature of contemporary agri-food related problems. The expanded central circle of figure 4 expresses that in recent years there has been a proliferation of societal and policy objectives related to food that go decisively beyond traditional concerns of farm incomes and rural development, and consequently 'food' has developed into a thematic integrative meeting point for various policy concerns. These include amongst others:

1. *Environmental pollution and ecological degradation.* Agro-food systems continue to be a main contributor to environmental pollution and loss of agro-biodiversity, natural habitats and valuable landscapes. Beyond this, food production uses most of the world's fresh water, with e.g. 65% of water consumed in the UK being embedded in food (Lang et al, 2009). Low transport costs enable food industries to source products and ingredients globally, implying that the 'food miles' and GHG emissions associated with the average meal have increased strongly. More generally, food represents 31% of all EU consumption-related GHGs (Tukker et al., 2005). Finally, cities increasingly face environmental problems linked to food purchasing and consumption, with trips to food outlets constituting a significant part of urban transport, and food waste (incl. packaging) making up one third of urban waste (Pothukuchi & Kaufman, 1999).
2. *Health problems.* European obesity rates range from 10% to 38% of the population, and in particular the rise of overweight among children is alarming (Lobstein et al., 2005). Simultaneously, malnutrition is also a growing health concern which, like obesity, is more prevalent among socially and economically disadvantaged population sections (Pothukuchi & Kaufman, 1999). This is expressed in the growth of 'food deserts' (Cummins & Macintyre, 2006), i.e. impoverished urban neighbourhoods, that lack grocery stores and supermarkets but boast of fast food and snack shops due to retail outlets moving to city outskirts for logistic reasons, and making car ownership and/or public transport facilities a precondition for access to healthy and nutritious food (Pothukuchi & Kaufman, 1999). Also prices of fresh food and a lack of transmission of cooking traditions contribute to a deterioration of diets and eating habits.
3. *Loss of food quality and diversity.* The loss of agro-biodiversity combined with the standardization of production and processing techniques have resulted in a strong loss of organoleptic food quality and diversity. The introduction of strict food hygiene regulations combined with upscaling in the food processing industry (and thereby the disappearance of small-scale, artisanal processing units) have further contributed to this loss of food qualities and associated knowledge and skills. In response to this, there is a growing interest in preserving and regenerating gastronomic and quality food traditions, as e.g. expressed by the 'slow food' movement (Nosi & Zanni, 2004).
4. *Downward pressures on farm and regional incomes.* Ongoing concentration and competition in food supply chains have seriously affected farm and regional agricultural incomes. Underlying factors are the subordinate position of primary producers in the food supply chain, resulting in a decreasing share of value added accrued to farmers, and the 'squeeze' on farm level margins due to stagnating or declining product prices combined with increased production costs (Van der Ploeg et al., 2000). Such pressures are increasingly undermining the viability of conventional agricultural activity at regional scale and, as was witnessed during the recent dairy sector crisis, resulting in consumer solidarity and initiatives for fair pricing.

This overview shows that food-related problems increasingly have a clear urban and consumption focus, although most of them also still are related to production and rural development issues. In response to these multi-dimensional food-related health and sustainability concerns in recent years a variety of initiatives from civil society organisations, (local and regional) governments and sometimes also market partners has emerged. Together these new food practices compose a new alternative

and local food geography which is grounded in a different logic and incorporating different values than the industrial global food geography. Central to the alternative, local food geography is a sustainability conception that no longer accepts the externalization of environmental, social and economic costs (Morgan, 2008). Driven as it is by new concerns about food quality and safety, nutrition, food security and carbon food prints, the emerging new food geography is developing along three partly interrelated and mutually reinforcing societal axis (see figure 4):

1. Short producer to consumer food chains – new relations between civil society and the chain of food provisioning (the civil society – market axis).
2. Re-valuing public food procurement – new relations between the public sector (as buyer and consumer of food) and the chain of food provisioning (the market – state axis).
3. Urban food strategies – the rise of municipalities and city-regions as food policy makers, pointing to new relations between the (local/regional) government and civil society (the state – civil society axis).

The development of short food supply chains (SFSCs) or alternative food networks (AFNs) (Renting et al., 2003) is generally considered to be the first sign of the emerging new food geography (Watts et al., 2005). AFNs represent spatially bound relations between consumers and the food supply chain and in general more direct links between producers and consumers. Mostly AFNs also produce and exchange food with distinctive (e.g. organic, local, artisanal) qualities, which can be grounded on external, generic certification systems or quality agreements that are constructed in direct exchanges between producer and consumers. While AFNs are sometimes driven by producers in search of additional income sources and premium prices, in recent years several initiatives - generally following the Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) concept (e.g. Lamine, 2005) - have emerged that are principally driven by consumer groups in an attempt to construct a 'social economy' that responds to ethical values and motivations in stead of mere market and price considerations.

Another dimension of the new food geography is the rising awareness of the power of the (semi-) public sector to enhance sustainable food production and consumption patterns by changing its food procurement strategies. By relocalizing, greening and moralizing public sector food procurement the government and (semi-) public bodies such as hospitals, schools and prisons have the capacity to deliver health and sustainability objectives: nutritious meals for patients and school children, enhance regional employment in the food sector, reduce food miles and GHG emissions, etc. (Morgan & Sonnino, 2008). The third dimension of the new food geography regards urban food strategies, i.e. the active role of cities and metropolitan regions as food policy makers (see examples before), which principally aims to re-establish linkages between the state and civil society around food issues at local and regional level. Although urban food strategies differ from city to city, the common denominator is the intention to connect and create synergies between different public domains that are in one way or the other related to food, including the construction of markets for sustainable, local and/or organic foods, public food procurement, educational activities, reinforcing (peri-) urban agriculture, etc. (Wiskerke, 2010). Also facilitating civil society initiatives can be a part of urban food strategies, as is e.g. of the case for the promotion of CSA initiatives, collective shops and marketing infrastructures (food hubs) by the metropolitan region of Rennes in France.

By way of conclusion

The new food geography thus not only reflects a territorial (as opposed to global) approach to food production and consumption, but also an integrated conceptualization of food. In the new food geography, food is more than a commodity or a substance containing calories, vitamins, nutrients, etc that needs to be eaten to survive; it is a product and a process that links environmental pollution (e.g. food miles), environmental quality (e.g. productive green spaces in cities), social (in)equality (e.g. differences in access to food), public health (e.g. obesity and malnutrition), employment (e.g. food stores, restaurants, urban farmers), education (e.g. food lessons at primary schools, farmer-to-school initiatives), etc. The new food geography can thus be characterized as an integrated territorial

geography. This also has considerable implications for policymaking. If the sectorial approach to food (i.e. food production = agriculture, food processing = industry, food distribution = transport, and food selling = retail) is making way for an integrated approach to food (i.e. food = environment + public health + social justice + employment + education + quality of life), scientific research and policymaking have to change accordingly.

In other words, while food policy was previously considered more or less synonymous to agricultural and rural policy and largely producer-centred, food issues have now become an item on policy agendas for public health (eating habits, obesity, food poverty, etc.), environment (climate change, 'food miles', etc.) and food quality and safety (local and authentic food, etc.). These policy fields cross the boundaries of 'traditional' agricultural and rural policies and institutions that were in charge of these, and have resulted in the involvement of a range of new public government institutions in food policy issues. These government agencies generally set other priorities and often their policies aim at realizing a 'double dividend' (Pearce, 1991), i.e. they aim to combine objectives of economic development and viability with non-traditional policy aims in the fields of public health or environmental sustainability. Integration of policy domains is, however, still a major challenge in policy making as a sectorial approach has dominated for decades.

The emerging integrated and territorial food geography also points to, and requires, a shift in agri-food governance, both vertically and horizontally (Van Kersbergen & Van Waarden, 2004). In general the role and importance of the nation state as policy-maker and legislator is weakened. Policy aims and legal frameworks for European agriculture, rural development and food are largely formulated in Brussels. Particularly regarding agriculture and rural development the actual implementation and specification of these European aims and frameworks is increasingly delegated to the regions. Although the emergence of urban food policies is not a result of decentralized food policies, it does show the growing importance of lower administrative levels in policymaking and implementation.

Besides this vertical shift in management tasks and responsibilities, we also observe a horizontal shift. For instance, food quality and safety is increasingly seen as a joint responsibility of government and private enterprise (Kirwan *et al.*, forthcoming). In addition, regarding the alternative food geography the role of civil society, to a certain extent organized through social movements, seems to be crucial and centres around notions as food democracy and food sovereignty (Hassanein, 2008).

Finally, the rise of the integrated and territorial food geography also requires a reconsideration of the role of the state in food policy (Lang, 2010). During the neo-liberal era the government largely withdrew from food policymaking, in particular regarding the regulation of markets and prices. However, a sustainable food economy requires an active role of the government (at different administrative levels), in particular to fully exploit the potential of relocalizing public food procurement (Morgan, 2008).

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