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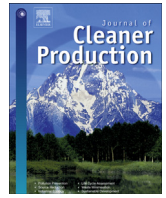
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Retailing local food through supermarkets: Cases from Belgium and the Netherlands



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ABSTRACT

The (re)localization of food systems is often presented as an alternative to the 'globalized' food system and its presumed unsustainabilities. Studies on sustainability transitions and food systems (re)localization predominantly address the role of Alternative Food Networks whereas the role that conventional supermarket based retail can play has not been as thoroughly studied. Supermarkets, however, take a central position as a main access point for food. Conventional retailing practices are increasingly guided by corporate sustainability principles and therein also increasingly offering locally sourced foods. Supermarkets thus cannot be ignored in discussions on food systems (re)localization and agro-food sustainability transitions. In this paper we assess how food system (re)localization is translated within conventional globalized supermarket-based food retailing in Belgium and the Netherlands taking a practice theory informed approach. First, we discuss the tensions and reinforcing mechanisms between local and conventional food retailing. We demonstrate that to overcome tensions between local and conventional retailing there is a need for increased flexibility (i) in deviating from conventional retailing practices for individual stores; and (ii) within the definition of locality – the definition of 'local' determines what local practices look like. Second, we assess how local retailing relates to corporate sustainability. Conventional and local retailing practices are motivated by corporate sustainability strategies. Local retailing is predominantly motivated by social-economic sustainability considerations, whereas the environmental sustainability of local food is implicitly assumed. However, our results suggest that local food retailing may be ineffective and even counterproductive to corporate environmental sustainability objectives. Finally, we address how regional policies pushing food system localization influence local food retailing within supermarkets. Regional policies may drive supermarkets to retail local foods. Nevertheless, in the absence of a centralized strategy, store managers may find themselves stuck between their regional context and their corporate retailing practices.

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1. Introduction

Developments after the Second World War have allowed our food system to become increasingly industrialized, globalized, and concentrated. Although these developments have led to unprecedented levels of abundance, a consensus now seems to exist that they have had negative sustainability repercussions for society and the environment and that systemic changes towards sustainability are needed (Spaargaren et al., 2012). The (re)localization of food systems is often presented as an alternative to the 'globalized' food

system and its presumed unsustainabilities (Blake et al., 2010; Forsell and Lankoski, 2015). City authorities across the globe are therefore putting food system (re)localization pressingly on their agendas (FAO - RUAF 2017).

Studies on sustainable food system transitions and (re)localization predominantly address the role of Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) and grassroots initiatives, such as farmers' markets and Community Supported Agriculture. Transnational agro-food firms are 'often seen as part of the problem rather than as an important actor in the solution' (El Bilali, 2019, p. 361). The role that conventional supermarket-based retail can play in agro-food sustainability transitions and food system (re)localization has therefore not been as thoroughly studied as that of AFNs (Dunne et al.,

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2011; El Bilali, 2019).

This is unjust for two reasons. First, supermarkets, especially Transnational Retail Corporations, take a central position within the current global agro-food system (Fuchs et al., 2009). In Western societies, supermarkets are the main access point of food (Oosterveer, 2012). In most European Member States, the market share of supermarkets has rapidly increased and a continuing trend towards retailer concentration can be observed (European Commission, 2014). Also in the Global South shares of food bought in supermarkets are rapidly rising (Timmer, 2017). Second, conventional retailing practices are increasingly guided by Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) strategies through a diversity of approaches ranging from waste reduction to fair and sustainable sourcing, increasing the efficiency in transport and energy usage and from animal welfare to healthy living (Chkanikova and Mont, 2015; Tjærnemo and Södahl, 2015). As a part of these sustainability strategies supermarket chains (such as Carrefour, Tesco, and Wal-Mart) increasingly offer local products (Bloom and Hinrichs, 2016; Dunne et al., 2011).

However, for centrally organized retail corporations it is deemed difficult to incorporate local products in their stores. A tension is suggested to exist between conventional supermarket-based retail and local food suppliers, because of the larger scale and efficiency oriented centralized distribution structures of supermarkets. Supermarkets demand a consistent and regular supply of products (Oosterveer et al., 2014) and require suppliers to move large volumes efficiently from primary producers to the retail-outlets (Bloom and Hinrichs, 2016; Clark and Inwood, 2015; Kassa and Peterson, 2011). Their practices are driven by rationalization, efficiency and profit-making. Developments in cooling technologies, transportation methods and infrastructures have caused an increasing centralization, consolidation and vertical integration of the retail sector. This has put supermarkets in a position from which they are able to influence agricultural and food practices globally, for example, through standard-setting in food production and processing (Burch et al., 2012; Chkanikova and Mont, 2015; Oosterveer, 2012). The term 'local food' is generally used to refer to food sourced from within certain geographical boundaries, such as the distance between producers and consumers or political or ecosystem boundaries. Because of shorter travel distances, local food is often considered to be more environmentally friendly than globally sourced products. Besides geographic proximity, local food is also associated with small-scale traditional or organic production and shorter supply chains in which relationships between producers and consumers are stronger and more direct than in the globalized food system. Yet, the link between local food and sustainability is not clear-cut and no inherent sustainability impacts can be attributed to 'local' food practices (Born and Purcell, 2006; Brunori et al., 2016).

In short, the role that supermarkets can play in transitions towards sustainability and the (re)localization of food systems should be studied more in-depth. Though local food retailing through conventional retail channels is motivated by corporate sustainability principles, the tension between local and conventional retailing practices suggests that these practices are different, and relate in different ways to the concept of sustainability. More nuanced understandings of local food retailing practices within the 'conventional' supermarket-based system are therefore needed. This paper takes a closer look at practices of retailing local food by supermarkets in Belgium and the Netherlands. We aim to assess how the growing trend towards food system (re)localization takes shape within 'mainstream' retailing, with a specific focus on the connection between local and conventional retailing practices and the relation between local retailing and corporate sustainability. We also aim to assess how a changing societal context – such as

city or regional policies pushing for food system localization – influences the uptake and development of local food retailing within globalized supermarket-based retailing.

2. A social practices approach to local food retailing

We take a social practices approach to obtain a nuanced understanding of how processes of localization are translated in food retailing practices within the 'conventional' supermarket-based system. Social practice theories (SPT) refer to a family of theories that see social phenomena – such as organizations and societies – as established through the routinized performance of practices situated in time and space (Schatzki, 2005, 2012). SPT take practices as their central unit of analysis, neither prioritizing structure, nor individual agency (Shove et al., 2012; Spaargaren et al., 2016). Although predominantly applied in consumption studies, SPT are increasingly adopted as a new paradigm in domains like management and organizational studies (Nicolini and Monteiro, 2017), since it allows for nuanced understandings on how human behavior shapes and is shaped by structures.

We apply SPT for three reasons. Firstly, to understand what constitutes local food retailing practices within a retail organization, how they are shaped and how sustainability is at play within these practices. Social practices consist of different elements, such as the competences (skills, knowledge) that are needed for performing the practice, the materials (infrastructures, objects), and the meanings (norms, beliefs, attitudes) attached to a practice (Shove et al., 2012).

Secondly, we apply SPT to identify how practices of retailing local food fit within the wider set of activities of a retail organization. Practices generally are part of bundles of practices in which they co-exist, facilitate or compete with each other (Schatzki, 2005). Retailing local food is embedded in bundles of conventional retailing practices. Studying how local retailing practices are embedded in bundles of conventional retailing practices allows to appreciate how connections and tensions between local and conventional retailing practices may facilitate or prevent the uptake of local foods. Furthermore, the bundle of practices that constitutes retailers' CSR strategies strongly influences how both local and conventional retailing practices are shaped and change over time. Studying how local and conventional retailing practices relate to CSR strategies, allows to assess the different ways in which the meaning of sustainability is incorporated within these practices.

Thirdly, retailing practices bundle with practices that i.a. constitute political institutions or the daily lives of consumers (Oosterveer et al., 2014). Hence, the concept of bundles of practices permits to assess how a changing context influences local food retailing.

3. Methodology

Taking practices as a central unit of analysis has some implications in terms of methodology. Practice theorists make a distinction between practices-as-performances and practices-as-entities. Practices-as-entities come into existence, are reproduced and changed through the recurrent performance of practices. Unlike the performances of practices, practices-as-entities cannot be studied directly (Schatzki, 2005; 2012). We therefore first "zoom in" on situated performances of practices. After this, a second movement of "zooming out" allows to assess how situated performances form entities of practices, and connect in larger bundles of practices (Nicolini, 2009). In obtaining a detailed understanding of what constitutes the practice of retailing local food, we specifically zoom in on the sourcing and on the marketing of local food. We assess to what extent these are bundled with conventional sourcing and

marketing practices, by studying both the performed activities as well as uncovering the understandings and meanings related to sustainability.

To study the sourcing and marketing of local food, this study is based on case-studies in Belgium and the Netherlands. Like in most Western-European countries, supermarket retailing in Belgium and the Netherlands is characterized by the concentration and centralization described in the introduction of this paper. In Belgium, in 2015 the three biggest retailers together accounted for an estimated market share of 70% (Gondola, 2016). In the Netherlands, the three largest retailers together account for an estimated market share of 65% (Distrifood, 2017). Both countries thus provide a relevant context to study local food retailing practices within large-scale retail.

In both cases, we aimed to understand how local food retailing was shaped within conventional supermarket chains, from a corporate and individual store perspective. In Belgium, we focused on local food retailing practices as initiated by the headquarters as part of the CSR strategies. In the Netherlands, we focused on individual supermarket-chain stores operational in a municipality pushing a city-region food system orientation. In both countries, we observed practices-as-performances through field visits. We also conducted semi-structured interviews with practitioners to obtain accounts of how these practices were performed.

In Belgium we studied two of the three largest supermarket chains in the country – also referred to as ‘retailers’ or ‘retail chains’ - that centrally initiated the retailing of local goods since 2012. This allowed to assess (i) how practices of sourcing and marketing local food emerged in a context where the retailing organization pushed for it, and (ii) the embedding of these practices within the retail organization. We conducted 28 in-depth, semi-structured interviews from October 2016 until August 2017, with practitioners responsible for formulating the CSR strategies and conventional retailing practices and store employees responsible for shaping the local retailing practices on the ground to understand the relationships between local and conventional retailing and sustainability related practices. Interviewees were recruited based on a snowball method. We first identified an interviewee at the headquarters of the retailer, who put us in contact with further interviewees. To preserve anonymity, we refer to the retailers as R1 and R2, and to the interviewees with function and identification code. In the interviews, we first zoomed in on accounts of situated practices to later zoom out and gain an understanding of how local food retailing was embedded in the bundle of mainstream retailing practices (Nicolini, 2009). The interviews focused on how the local retailing practices had come into existence and how both retailers shaped these practices. We also asked questions concerning the definition of ‘local’, and how this influenced the local practices. Furthermore, we enquired about differences between ‘local’ and ‘conventional’ practices, and the way in which the idea of sustainability was incorporated in both ‘types’ of practices. Lastly, we focused on how local food retailing related to the total set of activities of the retailers. We triangulated the interviews with store checks, specifically to verify how local products were marketed in-store.

In the Netherlands, we studied the local retailing practices of individual stores belonging to five different retail chains in Almere, located in the province of Flevoland. The municipality has expressed the ambition to increase the regional orientation of its urban food system to reduce carbon emissions in transportation and reconnect its citizens with food production. Almere targets to realize that 20% of the food consumed within the city is sourced from the local provincial agricultural production area. Supermarkets account for over 70% of the total foods consumed within Almere (ten Brug et al., 2018). It thus provides a relevant context to

assess the practices and room for manoeuvre of individual retail stores of centralized supermarket chains in adjusting their operations to local conditions and policy ambitions (Wertheim-Heck et al., 2018). We conducted five interviews in 2017 with store-managers of two international, one national and two regional (North-West Netherlands) retail chains to obtain more in-depth understandings on the opportunities and challenges related to local food retailing. The interviews were complemented with store checks to validate the information obtained through the interviews.

Following the rationale of a practices approach, we did not pre-define the categories of analysis. The boundary of a practice is an empirical rather than a theoretical question. Practitioners are suitable to help define the boundaries of the practice as they “customarily name and examine practice in objectified terms” (Nicolini and Monteiro, 2017, p. 12). We therefore based the analysis on the careful reading and coding of the transcripts of the interviews, to look for patterns on situated practices and storylines of how local food retailing practices were shaped and connected to other practice bundles (Fuentes, 2015).

4. Results

In this section, we unpack how conventional – centrally organized - retailers sourced and marketed local food, despite the tension between conventional and local retailing practices. We illustrate that in both Belgian cases, and in the stores in Almere, local and conventional food retailing were regarded as distinct practices. We first discuss findings from the Belgian corporate cases to assess (1) how local food retailing practices came into existence, (2) what constituted the practices of retailing local food, and (3) how local food retailing practices developed over time. Next, we discuss (4) the contextual dynamics that drove the emergent practices of retailing local food through supermarkets, based on our findings from the Netherlands.

4.1. How local food retailing practices came into existence

In both Belgian cases, local retailing practices were initiated by the CSR department at the central level. The main focus of both retailers’ CSR strategies was on increasing the environmental sustainability of the supply chains of (inter)national products e.g. by decreasing waste and CO₂ emissions related to transportation and cooling. Local food retailing was considered more environmentally friendly and thus was argued to fit within these strategies. However, local retailing practices were mainly driven by social-economic considerations, such as strengthening the local economy, supporting local producers’ livelihoods, establishing direct connections between producers and consumers, and contributing to local identities:

“The goal is that the producer receives a fair reward for his work. If it would be about pushing down his price, we would go back into what is happening with multi-nationals (...) Here, that is not the goal” (Regional coordinator local products, R1-9).

“I find it important to do business in a fair and sustainable way. We will not discuss about prices with those people” (Store manager, R2-3).

Thus, conventional and local retailing practices were in both cases motivated by the retailers’ CSR strategies, but served a distinct purpose. CSR policies towards global supply chains were motivated by global environmental objectives, whereas environmental oriented sustainability objectives were not the main drivers for entering into local food retailing practices:

“Problems in the conventional retail circuit have to be resolved within that circuit. (...) we don’t want to use local producers as an answer to negative environmental consequences [of globalized retail practices]” (Sustainability officer, R1-1).

“What we do locally is only a small part [of our total business], (...) [increasing the sustainability of conventional supply chains] (...) has a far bigger impact on sustainability” (Buyer fruits and vegetables, R2-5).

‘Local food’ was defined by a set of geographical and quality identifiers at the corporate level. R1 organized exploratory meetings between employees from its headquarters and local producers. Based on these meetings, a charter was developed in which a local product was defined as an artisanal product, produced without additives within a radius of 40 km around the store by an entity with less than 10 full-time employees. These criteria were strictly adhered to when sourcing local products. For R2, employees from different departments at the central facilities developed the definition of a local product. A local product was defined as a product from Belgian origin – of which two thirds of the added value should be made in Belgium – and sourced from a small-scale family business. Less specific though important, the product had to be authentic in the sense that it was connected to the local identity.

Early on, tensions were acknowledged between local and conventional retailing practices that complicated and potentially hampered the retailing of local products. Both retailers developed distinct practices to enable local retailing. Hence, although initiated at the corporate level, sourcing local food was essentially a local (store) to local (supplier) practice. Adjustments to conventional retail practices were made to varying degrees in which R1 made more far-reaching adjustments than R2. R1 also granted a higher level of autonomy and individual initiative to the individual stores and their employees in shaping local retailing than R2. How local retailing developed was in both cases highly dependent on the individuals performing the practices:

“A lot depends on the store manager, or the chef, or the assistant of the store manager. Somewhere, there needs to be a certain passion for local products” (Store manager, R2-3).

“The success of the project depends on the store manager. When he is behind it, it is a success” (Store manager, R1-3).

Both R1 and R2, however, acknowledged that increased store autonomy involved a risk of too much variation in how the local food retailing strategies devised at the corporate level were implemented across the stores. Hence, both retailers struggled to keep a balance between allowing space for maneuver at the store level and keeping a certain level of uniformity across the stores. Both retailers devised ‘checks and balances’ that would assure a certain level of uniformity in the corporate positioning, and would mitigate the risk of corporate reputation damage based on individual store initiative.

“We have to put a certain level of “control” to be sure that this new organization will be correctly put in place” (Sustainability officer, R1-1).

“[W]hat is scary is that it will be very difficult to manage, they want to do it in a way that they can really control it” (Manager local food strategy, R2-1).

Hence, the boundaries for balancing corporate consistency and local space of manoeuvre were set at the corporate level. Below we

illustrate how maintaining this balance worked out in the practices of sourcing and marketing local food of R1 and R2.

4.2. What constitutes the practice of retailing local food

In this section, we zoom in on local sourcing and marketing practices at the store level. We describe how practices of sourcing and marketing local food were performed and to what extent they were divergent to, or bundled with, conventional retailing practices.

4.2.1. Sourcing practices

Sourcing local food was about making it work between local suppliers and store operations. Conventional practices required specified procedures and conditions, such as cooled chain logistics and contractual requirements concerning packaging and barcodes. These requirements excluded local producers who did not have the necessary skills or resources to comply with them. Our study uncovered two distinct strategies to overcome these hurdles.

The first strategy was to adjust conventional retailing practices at the store level to fit with local producer capabilities, including establishing direct relationships between suppliers and stores, simplifying regulations and adapting ordering and delivery processes. Concrete examples are: (i) allowing for ordering processes via email/telephone instead of the automated systems used with standard suppliers, (ii) allowing for direct deliveries by local suppliers at the store, (iii) allowing more flexible delivery times, and (iv) simplifying contracts by reducing document length and allowing a short period of notice. The second strategy was to support local producers to meet the requirements that could not be adjusted to accommodate local producers, e.g. food safety, packaging and barcodes.

The way in which both retailers practiced these strategies influenced to what extent local suppliers were able to sell their products through the stores of both chains. From the start, R1 took an inclusive approach in developing local retail practices. Exploratory meetings were organized between local producers and employees at the headquarters to create an understanding of the differences between local and conventional – by the retailers considered ‘normal’ – practices. R1 also made an effort to connect local store employees with local producers for increasing mutual understanding and exploring possibilities for local sourcing. Consequently, a distinct ‘local sourcing practice’ was developed that was characterized by direct relationships between local producers and individual stores, simplification of procedures, and increased flexibility towards producers:

“We employ 200 people, our supplier five. (...) We have to be understanding and allow them more flexibility” (Store manager local products, local store, R1-7).

“Contracts were designed with the needs of the local producers in mind. The contract for local producers is six pages long, while a standard contract contains 256 pages. Also, local producers are allowed to stop delivering at any moment” (Store manager local products, R1-10).

The central buying departments of R1 were not involved in the sourcing of local products. Hence, local store management became involved in sourcing activities that were previously the exclusive domain of corporate management.

“The direct relation between local suppliers and the store was new. (...) Previously, the store operations team didn’t have the authority to source products (...) This is a new responsibility and our local

store management needed to be authorized for this” (Sustainability officer, R1-1).

“Sourcing from local suppliers is different from sourcing goods in general. Normally, the goods go through our centralized sourcing and distribution system (...) For local products, we may now order directly with the supplier, who directly delivers to our store. (...) [A] whole system needed to be put in place, which is completely different from life in large-scale retail” (Store manager local products, R1-10).

Moreover, the regional coordinators of R1 supported the local suppliers to meet the obligatory corporate requirements. For example, by providing barcodes to small-scale producers for lower prices via a simplified method in collaboration with the national institution for barcodes.

Employees at the headquarters of R2 also recognized the differences between the practices of local producers and their corporate sourcing practices. R2 also allowed for more simplified procedures and increased flexibility, for example by allowing direct orders and deliveries between stores and local producers. However, the local practices were embedded as much as possible in the centralized bundle of retailing practices, and no separate structures were developed (e.g. for placing orders or for contracting and invoicing). Producers were expected to comply with similar procedures as other suppliers, and no further support was provided. This, in some cases, formed a barrier for local producers to enter the system. For instance, adapting packaging and incorporating barcodes required additional investments and specific expertise. Hence, the inclusion of local suppliers was limited to those able to comply with the corporate requirements of R2.

“It is complicated. Some [producers] are a bit bigger and supply more often to [R2] but the very small ones don’t know what to do” (Manager local producers group).

“You have to comply with all these parameters. (...) We directly did that but there are a lot of producers that only have one or two products that do not want to make that effort, they drop out” (Producer local goods).

In summary, the sourcing of local products was dependent on the level of acceptance of deviation from corporate conventional practices, the level of autonomy allowed to individual stores and the efforts made to capacitate local suppliers.

4.2.2. Marketing practices

The distinctions in local sourcing practices between R1 and R2 were also reflected in the marketing practices, particularly in the acceptance of assortment inconsistencies, e.g. fluctuating availability, quality and price. Both R1 and R2 upheld local food assortment policies that were divergent from the standardized offer that characterize conventional retailing practices. However, in the case of R2 the corporate retail policy required a higher degree of assortment consistency. Local suppliers were expected to deliver relatively consistently to multiple stores, although more flexibility in terms of delivery moments and volumes was granted.

“Sometimes suppliers are a bit naive, because they’ll say, “I will supply your store”, but entering [our store] also means entering [the stores around]” (Store manager, R2-2).

R1 accepted inconsistencies and even the risk of empty shelves.

“When the local producer is unable to deliver, we put an advertising for the customer: “this is a local product, you will find it back at this time”. And our customer understands” (Sustainability officer R1-1).

Also, the way in which R1 and R2 introduced new local products and suppliers reflected the differences in responsibility delegation from the headquarters to the individual stores between R1 and R2. In the case of R1, a regional coordinator was appointed to search for new local products and suppliers. A local supplier database was developed – managed by an external company – to enable entering local products into the digital system of R1 relatively easily and quickly.

In the case of R2, an employee at the central level of the retailer was appointed to find local suppliers and products at the start of the strategy. Over time, local suppliers and store employees also started to request new products to be introduced into the system. Yet, employees at the headquarters of the retailer made the final decision to allow these products, which made the process of introducing new producers and products relatively complicated and lengthy.

Moreover, in both cases conventional rationales appeared important in the marketing of local food. Both retailers considered answering consumer demand a main benefit of including local products in the assortment:

“People are asking for products from close by, without having to go to the producer. (...) It’s that one has the product coming from one’s ‘neighbor’, but at the same time having all these other things, and during hours different from those of the local producer” (Store manager, R2-7).

“Customers are asking to buy products like this, because otherwise they have to go to a farm shop but they don’t have time. So, here they do their groceries twice a month but they can take everything at once and they are able to buy local products” (Regional coordinator, R1-3).

Local products were regarded an important assortment differentiator from competitors. Reaping the benefits of the ‘first mover’s advantage’ in a competitive retail market, local products increasingly became a must-have with competition also starting to offer local products:

“From the economic view it’s getting more important for [R1], because every supermarket in Belgium is having a very hard time, because the competition is very hard. So for that aspect the local project is growing in strength [...] and that’s why our competitors are copying the project” (Regional coordinator local products, R1-3).

“In the beginning it was very small, something to look into, we had to do it. But now, it has become an area in which we can differentiate ourselves. So it’s top priority now” (Manager local food strategy, R2-1).

“I think this was a train that a company like ours could not miss. It had to be a strategic move. I don’t think [a retailer] could go without it anymore” (Store manager, R2-3).

In this sense, the marketing of local products was strongly embedded in and had a supporting and enabling role for conventional retailing practices for both retailers.

In short, the marketing of local products was dependent on the level of accepted deviation from conventional practices, the level of

autonomy allowed to individual stores and importantly driven by conventional marketing rationales.

4.3. Shifting practices of retailing local food

The different levels of flexibility, and the extent to which local food retailing bundled with conventional retailing practices co-defined how local retailing developed over time. This is reflected in the shift in the local food assortment. Both R1 and R2 started their local food retailing practices with processed products with a long shelf-life that did not require specific material conditions (e.g. cooling) or skills (e.g. produce handling). Fresh fruits and vegetables were in both cases sourced centrally, preferably from within national boundaries.

However, R1 increasingly included local fresh produce and store managers were allowed to directly source primary products, driven by an increasing consumer demand for local fresh products like strawberries, potatoes, salads and in some cases meats. Consequently, the material conditions – e.g. specific cooling for local products – and competences – e.g. ordering the right amount of products – that in the standardized procedures were managed at the headquarters, now needed to be developed at store level. This created a tension between the practices of corporate staff (e.g. buyers at the central level) and the producers of products that were labelled as ‘of Belgian Origin’, and the practices of retailing local products in the stores.

“There is a debate about the vocabulary. We have national brand producers, who say: “but we are also local producers”” (Sustainability officer, R1-1).

R1’s strict definition of a local product was used to make the boundaries between local and centralized retailing clear to national producers and buyers at the headquarters of the retailer. Hence, local retailing practices could exist next to practices of retailing products from Belgian origin.

The central buying department of R2, in contrast, did not allow the stores to directly source fresh produce:

“The problem often is that those companies don’t have the food safety requirements (...) and can’t guarantee the cool chain. Our efficient central distribution system is not only the best for the product, but is also more environmentally friendly in transport and produces less waste” (Buyer fruits and vegetables, R2-5).

For R2, fresh primary produce was sourced centrally and promoted as ‘from Belgium’ or ‘local’. Hence, the definition of ‘local food’ broadened to the national level.

“We always put the focus on local. Local means Belgium. (...) consumers’ see Belgium as local. Do they also see local as behind the corner? Yes, but (...) for us, local is Belgium” (Buyer fruits and vegetables, R2-5).

In both cases, a tension thus existed between different ideas of ‘local’. Especially in the case of fresh primary products, the definition of ‘local food’ was flexible and was also used to indicate products sourced from the national level.

Besides, in both cases, the corporate definition of local food did not include criteria like origin and quality of inputs and production methods. This allowed for more flexible interpretations on the range of local products that could be sourced and marketed as ‘local’. Gradually, products like coffee, beers, olives and chocolate were entered in the local assortment. Although these products

were marketed as local foods, their supply chains were global.

For both retailers, the most important considerations for admitting a local product into the store were whether the product had added marketing value to the store and whether the store had sufficient shelf-space. Available shelf-space appeared an important constraining condition for the expansion of local food retailing. Both retailers prioritized the corporate standard offer, with local products regularly losing the battle for shelf-space allocation to conventional products. The smaller stores were more limited in shelf-space. For this reason, R1 started its local strategy in its hypermarkets: *“The sky is not the limit. The limit is the shelves”* (Sustainability officer, R1-1).

In short, the way in which local retailing practices were embedded in and connected to conventional retailing strongly determined how local retailing practices developed over time. Moreover, both the conventional and the local retailing practices were motivated by CSR considerations. Both retailers implicitly assumed the environmental sustainability of local products. Yet, neither were very reflexive on whether this was actually the case and corporate sustainability criteria like reductions of emissions and waste were initially not at play in sourcing local food. In fact, R2 showed that local retailing was potentially counterproductive to environmental sustainability objectives. R2 therefore aimed to improve the environmental sustainability of its conventional practices in order to move towards environmental corporate sustainability objectives.

4.4. Contextual dynamics and local food retailing in supermarkets

Local food retailing in Almere was neither top-down initiated, nor facilitated by the headquarters of any of the retail chains. The availability of foods produced within the province of Flevoland in supermarkets was therefore limited. Based on self-reporting by store management and store checks, the average availability of local foods was less than 1%. Some local products were available for two reasons. First, some foods offered in stores across the Netherlands originated from the province of Flevoland, e.g. certain Flevoland branded fruit juices. Nevertheless, these products were routed through distribution centers outside the province and thus could not be considered local from a logistics point of view according to the provincial definition of local. Second, some local products were available due to individual efforts of local store managers.

The interviewees were interested in sourcing local foods and making direct connections with producers. Yet, several issues hampered them in doing so. First, the process of requesting permission for allowing locally produced foods in individual stores was lengthy – up to two years – and complicated. Second, especially smaller food producers had difficulties complying with strict food quality standards and procedures. Third, in order to maintain retail format consistency, supermarket franchisers had limited freedom in sourcing and marketing local foods – up to 8% of the total assortment. Fourth, and more specific for Flevoland is the fact that most of the agro-food producers in Flevoland are global players oriented on export markets and lacking infrastructures for supplying neighboring cities.

The study of Almere also uncovered how the absence of a recognizable local food culture and cuisine inhibits the sourcing and marketing of local foods. Flevoland is a new province, which was recovered from the sea around 1960. As such, the province does not have a distinct provincial food culture and consumers in Almere do not request specific ‘Flevo foods’. Store managers indicated that this was different in other provinces. For instance, in the province of Groningen, typical local products, such as ‘Groninger sausage’, are must-haves in the assortment. In the absence of local Flevoland cuisine, consumer demand for local foods is not

straightforward.

Nonetheless, the development of a more regional oriented urban food system was increasingly driving change. Store managers pointed out that they depended on their headquarters and on these contextual dynamics. The increasing drive for a regional oriented urban food system was difficult to reconcile with centralized sourcing and marketing strategies. However, store managers from smaller retail corporations in Almere anticipated that if the major Dutch retailers would change their strategies, they would likely follow.

5. Discussion & conclusion

In this paragraph, we reflect on our findings in the light of the tensions and reinforcing mechanisms between practice-bundles of retailing local foods, conventional retailing and CSR practices. Also, we discuss how changing contexts may influence local food retailing.

First, our study addressed how local food retailing practices came into existence and developed over time. We demonstrated the tension between centralized corporate and local retailing practices. Our Belgian cases illustrate that to enable local retailing within centralized retailing, a distinct set of practices needed to be developed and the headquarters needed to define to what extent deviations from conventional retail practices were allowed.

In our study, it was instrumental to distinguish between sourcing and marketing practices. For the local food sourcing practices, conventional practices potentially restricted the collaborations with local suppliers that were unable to comply with centralized retailing procedures. Our cases highlighted two ways to overcome this tension. One way was for the headquarters of the retailers to allow a deviation from conventional sourcing practices by allowing a move away from centralized sourcing and greater flexibility of local store-management in shaping local sourcing practices. This required a different way of sourcing at the store-level with employees developing new skillsets. Personal motivations and skills of store managers and employees appeared influential in how local sourcing practices developed (Dunne et al., 2011; Lehner, 2015). Retailing local food thus did not only demand the flexibility of local suppliers (Bloom and Hinrichs, 2016). Instead, our cases uncover that by allowing decentralized sourcing practices within a centralized corporation, local sourcing became dependent on the flexibility and adaptive capacity of supermarket employees. Consequently, decentralized sourcing posed a potential threat to corporate uniformity making local food sourcing a balancing act between corporate uniformity and allowing flexibility and responsiveness to individual stores and employees.

Another way to overcome the tension between corporate and local practices was to allow for a more flexible interpretation of 'local' to increase the compatibility between local and conventional retailing, i.a. by expanding the distance that 'local' products could travel or restricting 'local' to specialty products with a long shelf-life that did not require separate logistical structures. Moreover, the interpretation of the term 'local' did not only differ between retailers, but potentially also between employees within the same retailing organization. This diversity and flexibility in the interpretation of the term 'local' has also been addressed by other authors (Blake et al., 2010; Dunne et al., 2011). Taking a practices approach illustrated how the balance between the flexibility of local store-management and the definition of 'local' was crucial in how local sourcing practices were shaped and developed over time.

Local marketing practices were shown to support conventional retailing, since the marketing of local foods was tied to 'conventional' rationales, such as strengthening corporate image, satisfying consumer demand and retaining competitive advantage over their

competitors. In all our cases, the retailing of local food only made up a small percentage of overall food sales. However, the local product strategies were considered crucial by the Belgian retailers in the marketing and financial sense. This counters Kassa and Peterson (2011) who emphasize the limited financial potential of local food retailing within retail chains in the US. Our cases demonstrated that consumer demand, marketing possibilities and market position were crucial drivers for retailers to become engaged in local retailing practices. In Almere, the absence of a strong regional identity was shown to negatively impact consumer demand for local products. The need to increase the flexibility of local sourcing practices was therefore seen as less crucial, which inhibited the sourcing of local produce. With regard to marketing local food, 'conventional' and 'alternative' meanings were thus not mutually exclusive. Rather, an increased deviation was allowed for retailing local food based on the marketing value of local food. Besides, this illustrates that retailers do not simply determine what becomes available to consumers and what choices consumers make in-store, but also that consumer demand can drive organizational change. The importance of consumer demand in driving change in large-scale, centralized retail has also been highlighted in the US (see e.g. Burch et al., 2012; Dunne et al., 2011) and Sweden (Chkanikova and Mont, 2015; Lehner, 2015).

Second, our study uncovered how local retailing practices related to corporate sustainability. Both conventional and local retailing practices were motivated by corporate sustainability considerations. Taking a social practices approach illustrated that the *meaning* of these considerations differed considerably. CSR policies towards global supply chains were motivated by global environmental objectives (Chkanikova and Mont, 2015), whereas local food retailing practices were mainly driven by social-economic considerations, which replicates findings from the US (Dunne et al., 2011). Environmental oriented sustainability objectives were not the main drivers for entering into local food retailing practices, although the environmental sustainability of local products was implicitly assumed. Yet, neither of the retailers were very reflexive on whether this was actually the case and corporate sustainability criteria like reductions of emissions and waste were initially not at play in sourcing local food. This is demonstrated by the lack of guidelines for inputs, production methods, logistics or locations of processing plants in the local practices. Yet, these elements are important for determining the environmental sustainability of a product or a supply chain (Brunori et al., 2016). In fact, although we did not measure the environmental sustainability impacts of local versus conventional retail practices, our results suggest that, given their more inefficient logistics, local food retailing practices may be ineffective and even counterproductive to corporate environmental sustainability objectives, such as chain efficiency and the reduction of waste and CO₂ emissions related to logistics and cooling. These are issues that have been more often related to local food provisioning (Clark and Inwood, 2015). Improving the sustainability and efficiency of mainstream practices was argued to be ecologically more effective than the localization of food systems through small-scale networks and short supply chains. In our cases, therefore, to combine the 'local' with the 'environmentally sustainable' the definition of 'local' expanded to national boundaries, which enabled local foods to be efficiently routed through the centralized distribution system. Hence, our findings urge for reflexivity on the contribution of local food retailing, and the way in which 'the local' is defined, in creating more (environmentally) sustainable food systems. Here it should be noted that our cases were drawn from relatively small countries, Belgium and the Netherlands, in which the small scale could argue for a 'local is national' approach to allow for integrating efficient centralized structures and increased 'local' seasonal consumption.

Finally, our study provided insights on how a changing context influenced local food retailing within supermarket-based food retailing. Our case-study in Almere suggests that the development of a more regional oriented urban food system may drive change. Nevertheless, in the absence of a centralized local strategy, store managers may find themselves needing to maneuver between a context pushing for the regionalization of food systems and the organization of centralized retailing practices. The trend of cities adopting food system re-localization strategies, may therefore challenge centralized retailing strategies in favor of more flexible retailing practices. Our study highlights the need to take this into account when designing policies aimed at fostering the (re)localization or regionalization of food systems. The Belgian cases suggest that local contextual dynamics might grow citizen consumer awareness and consequently consumer demand and hence further drive the development of local retailing practices. Also, based on the Belgian cases, a trickle-down effect may be expected when major retailers adopt policies that allow for increasing the local food base. Cities or regions aiming to move towards more localized food systems thus need to be aware of and work with the centralized organization of retailers on the one hand, and take into account local dynamics on the other.

In conclusion, our findings illustrate how local food retailing can be translated within the 'conventional' supermarket-based system which itself is increasingly guided by principles of corporate sustainability. By applying a social practices approach we have illustrated the importance of taking into account the realities, both within the organization as well as contextual factors, in which large-scale retailers operate and how these influence how local food retailing is shaped and develops over time. Our cases have highlighted several ways in which supermarket-based retailing may incorporate the retailing of local food and the ways in which this may relate to corporate sustainability. Our study highlights the importance of looking at local and conventional global food retailing, when striving to bring about food system transformations to sustainably meet the needs for the future. Supermarkets are the most important access point for food in Western societies and service all layers of society, they therefore play an important role in creating equitable access to local and sustainable food.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Tjitske Anna Zwart: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – original draft. **Sigrid C.O. Wertheim-Heck:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – original draft.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors of the paper "Retailing Local Food: Cases from Belgium and the Netherlands" declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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