

Transformative capacity of local food initiatives

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There is growing activism among citizens, farmers and NGO's to transform the food system. The number and diversity of initiatives reconnecting farmers with their local and regional community and environment is increasing. It has been hypothesized that such initiatives which bypass the dominant global food system have great transformative potential and can change farmers' and citizens' practices and boosting social, environmental, and economic benefits. In more localized, community-oriented agriculture, farmers are no longer anonymous producers and citizens not only behave as consumers. Social, ecological and community values become important factors for food consumption. The main research question is which, how and under which conditions farmer-citizen interaction leads to transformative change.

We used food citizenship, diverse economies and three-folded embeddedness as theoretical concepts. We used questionnaires and interviews and performed a literature study to develop a typology for local and regional food initiatives based on a degree of embeddedness, ambition and type of initiator and participation of different types of citizens. Questionnaires and interviews provided more in depth information about the characteristics of initiatives, their strategies and transformative power and the preferred values of participating citizens.

We found that direct interaction between farmers and citizens often leads to healthier consumption patterns and in some cases to more environmental friendly farming practices. Differences in citizen involvement (from classical consumer role to investing, food production and risk taking); in type and degree of embeddedness (value chain, socio-cultural and natural resources), performance and transformative capacity were interrelated. Performance and perceived challenges are related to the type of initiative. In most studies, these differences are overlooked leading to inconsistent outcomes of short food chain initiatives studies. Diversity should be taken into account for agricultural and food policies supporting short food chains, sustainable production and healthy food environments to be more effective.