



Structured approach to alternative food initiatives: the case of local food movement in Lithuania

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Abstract – This paper aims to identify whether alternative food initiatives (AFIs) are part of a broader local food movement (LFM) in Lithuania. It presents an attempt to use new social movement (NSM) theory as an analytic framework for a more structured analysis of AFIs development.

INTRODUCTION

In response to recent disclosure and discontent of conventional food system, AFIs have been building momentum, challenging the corporate-led industrial food system by developing viable local solutions. Due to its spread and innovation, AFIs have captured an interest of a number of academic disciplines. On the other hand, scientific literature concerning alternative food systems is abundant with low theoretical and conceptual framework. Most existing research considers individual AFIs operating independently on specific projects with modest consideration of the broad collaborations among these initiatives through networks (Levkoe, 2014). Reforms and innovations in food systems are usually treated as a self-standing shift, and the role of consumers in these developments is still understated.

We argue that NSM theory provides a lacking theoretical framework for a more structured explanation of the development of AFIs. A. Starr (2010) was one of the first authors to analyze whether and how local food is a social movement. A. Murtagh (2010), A. Giovanangeli (2013), and Ch. Levkoe (2014) analyzed the development of local food institutions from a SMs perspective in Irish, French and Canadian cases respectively.

This paper presents a first attempt to analyse the development of Lithuanian AFIs as a NSM. All forms of widespread AFIs are found in Lithuania: farmers' markets, community supported agriculture (CSA), box schemes, farmers' shops, in-store farmers' markets, internet delivery systems, farm-to school or kindergarten, even an innovative online network for bilateral co-operation of producers and consumers. Moreover, a recent research revealed that approximately 79 percent of Lithuanian urban residents were local food buyers, i.e. buying local food more than once a week (Eicate, Dabkiene, 2015). Such multiplicity and success of AFIs, oriented

towards creating a local food system, raises question, whether they are part of a broader LFM in Lithuania? Or is it more of a short-term range of individual initiatives?

THEORETICAL GROUND

A list of main features defining a NSM and differentiating it from other cognate phenomena was adopted for the research. M. D. Della Porta and M. Diani (2006) suggest that a NSM consists of organizations and individuals linked by dense informal networks, engaged in conflictual interactions with opponents, and having a shared collective identity. For social phenomena to qualify as movement, network links must be more than cursory, and should involve shared engagement in collective action (Saunders, 2007). By conflict, an oppositional relationship between NSM and other actors seeking control of the same stake is meant. According to M. Wiewiorka (2005), NSMs are involved in conflicts with impersonal, distant or undefined adversaries. Finally, shared identity implies a sense of common purpose and shared commitment to a cause which transcends boundaries of any specific event (Della Porta, Diani, 2006).

METHODS AND FINDINGS

The presence of the LFM in Lithuania was evaluated using different methods, customary in ethnography, i.e. participant observation, discourse analysis, with a particular attention to the analysis of each initiative's external narrative.

Networking. The establishment of "Viva Sol" association in 2006 marked an inception of LFM in Lithuania which was based on networking from the very beginning. "Viva Sol" launched weekly tasting meetings of producers and consumers, called 'Farm coming to town', as well as open-door weekends when 'town' was coming to 'farm' to take part in the food production process. The association also initiated

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the establishment of the first regular farmers' market in Vilnius in 2007 and first CSA in 2009. Soon after that urban consumers supported the rise of flash farmers' markets in the largest cities. In 2007 "Viva Sol" initiated cheese making classes which turned into one of the activities of cheese producers' organisation founded by members of the association three years later.

On the other hand, some early AFIs, for example young farmers' market, some cases of CSA, inspired by shared experiences through networking, did not complete the pre-developmental phase because of the lack of committed consumers.

Currently, networking in Lithuanian LFM is further supported by direct links among many AFIs sharing same members, as local producers simultaneously take part in different initiatives. Restaurants with a menu based on local seasonal cuisine co-operate with local producers through farmers' markets. Finally, networking is evident via participation of AFIs' members in joint events, such as discussions, annual exhibitions, food conferences and festivals.

Conflict. Impersonal and usually undefined opposition of AFIs gained its face with foundation of the Institute of "Healthy child" in 2009. It started as a catalogue of harmful food additives and developed into public campaigns. The Institute not only defines what healthy food is, but also indicates the source of unhealthy, noxious food products, i.e. it indicates the adversary of the movement which is anonymous food industry. More recently the Institute launched an autonomous AFI by organizing regular group sales of local organic production. While bringing local producers and consumers closer through its value system, the "Healthy child" makes both groups engage in a personal and clearly defined conflict.

Shared identity. Common purpose and shared commitment, characterising Lithuanian LFM, was considered as a congruence of goals, declared by AFIs and consumers organisations (Viva Sol, Healthy child, Tymo farmers' market association). Despite different motives, all organisations promote provision of safe, quality food and closer ties between producers and consumers, based on solidarity and mutual trust. Shared identity is complemented by collection of individual consumers' values and motives: social conscience and health concern are the most important drivers of purchasing local food among Lithuanian consumers (Eičaitė, Dabkienė, 2015).

Identity is sustained and constantly re-produced through personal contacts between consumers and producers, food blogging, chefs' creative engagement, educational events, and media.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

The evidence of all applied NSM features suggests that LFM is present in Lithuanian case. Failure of some AFIs, on the other hand, characterizes the movement as fledgling. It is largely the confluence of different

movements and coalitions, such as environmental, organic, healthy lifestyle, localism, etc., that has recently provided a significant impetus for the LFM development in Lithuania.

If a LFM is present, AFIs can be better understood as integral part of it: NSM approach accounts for driving forces of AFIs, motivations and values of its participants, as well as its impact on rural development in general. Therefore, the significance of NSM approach to local food and AFIs studies is in its potential to provide structured and systematic knowledge on the development of AFIs.

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