

Co-operative Research on Alternative Agro-Food Networks in the Context of Sustainable Agriculture

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Presentation abstract

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To enable agriculture to cope with a range of complex and interlinked challenges, such as rapidly increasing globalisation, climate change and scarcity of natural resources, it is essential to define better policies – both at the European and national level – to build a medium to long-term research agenda for European agriculture to face these multiple challenges. Some of the local and regional initiatives are reflecting people's needs through more sustainable agricultural alternatives. These efforts appropriate local, traditional and new knowledge in promoting alternative forms of agriculture. Buttel (2006¹) underlined that there is no straightforward road to a more sustainable agriculture, and that there will always be new ways that agro-systems should consider for enforcing more ecologically sound, economically viable and more socially just initiatives.

In line with these paths are the alternative agro-food networks (AAFNs) which are territorially based systems characterized by the active involvement of a range of actors like farmers, food processors, local distributors, local civil society organisations, restaurants, consumers, local and regional authorities, who mostly interact through informal contracts (Roep, 2002²; Renting et al, 2003³). All these relevant actors are essential for promoting, on the one hand sustainable farming and food, and on the other hand sustainable consumption, and moreover the networks these actors belong are important carriers for creating new linkages between agriculture and society, producers and consumers. The emergence of AAFNs is widely conceptualized as a "quality turn"⁴ by both producers and consumers way from the global agro-food complex. Renting et al. (2003) stress in this context the social dimension, arguing that quality conventions involve more than simply the language of production regulation. A possible vision of sustainable agricultural production for the future should be defined not only by including different knowledge dimensions (the environment, the economy, technology, the environment, society, policy and values) but also by taking into account viewpoints of different actors from society.

The presentation will give an input on the design, arrangements and methodology of the co-operative research process on AAFNs within the FAAN project⁵, Facilitating Alternative Agro-Food Networks: Stakeholder Perspectives on Research Needs (2008-2010). The main aim of the project is to research AAFNs within a co-operative research process by carrying out participatory research and to contribute to further research agenda setting by identifying further research needs.

¹ Buttel, F. H. (2006) Sustaining the unsustainable: agro-food systems and environment in the modern world. In: Cloke, P. Marsden, T. Mooney, P.H. Eds. Handbook of Rural Studies. London: Sage: 213-229.

² Roep D. (2002): The added value of quality and region: The Waddengroup Foundation. In: van der Ploeg D., Banks J., Long A. Eds.: Living Countryside. Rural Development Process in Europe: The State of the Art. Dordrecht: Elsevier: 88-98.

³ Renting H., Marsden T.K., Banks J. (2003): Understanding alternative food networks: exploring the role of short food supply chains in rural development. Environment and Planning 35: 393-411.

⁴ Goodman D. (2003): The Quality 'Turn' and Alternative Food Practices: Reflections and Agenda. Journal of Rural Studies, 19 (1): 1-7

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