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## New initiatives for sustainable food: A case study of an organic producer cooperative

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**NEW INITIATIVES FOR SUSTAINABLE FOOD:  
A CASE STUDY OF AN ORGANIC PRODUCER  
COOPERATIVE**

**By**

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A Case Study of an Organic Producer Cooperative**

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## **Abstract**

Sustainable consumption is gaining currency as a new environmental policy objective. This paper applies 'new economics' theory to evaluate a local organic food initiative as a tool for 'alternative' sustainable consumption, which is here understood to mean redefining social infrastructure and systems of provision to enable a reduction in consumption levels and hence a reduced ecological footprint. The rationales for localised organic food systems is: increasing local self-reliance, farmers' response to vulnerability to negative impacts of globalisation, avoiding pesticides, cutting food miles and associated energy use, and re-embedding food provisioning within local communities. A case study local organic producer cooperative is found to be successfully achieving its aims of providing a fair, ecological, cooperative food system. It overcomes the limitations of mainstream strategies for sustainable consumption, and goes further in developing new social and economic institutions. It uses food as a mechanism for community-building and social cohesion, while delivering sustainable rural livelihoods and a channel for the expression of alternative values about society, environment and the economy. Internal and external barriers to the growth of this initiative include the need to widen appeal and recruit more producers and public procurement policy and current pricing regimes. Government action is needed to support the growth of such 'alternative' sustainable consumption initiatives and policy recommendations are made.

**Keywords:** governance, sustainability, agri-food networks, organic food, local food, cooperatives

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Integrating sustainable consumption and production principles into everyday patterns of behaviour is a major policy challenge for governments seeking long term sustainability. At the same time, demands from the agricultural sector for support in building viable livelihoods can sometimes appear to contradict environmental priorities in rural areas within current policy frameworks. There has been a rapid growth in interest in (re)-localised food supply chains from academics, policymakers, community activists and government (see for example Holloway and Kneafsey (2000), Winter (2003); Weatherell et al (2003), Saltmarsh (2004b); Norberg-Hodge et al (2000), Stagl (2002)), and analysis points to gaps between stated policy aims and implementation, and to the need for exemplars of sustainable consumption within the context of sustainable rural development. Some analysts claim that current policy objectives and social infrastructure is incapable of making the widespread changes in consumption patterns required for sustainable development (Douthwaite, 1996; Norberg-Hodge et al, 2000; Porritt, 2003). If this is the case, there is a need for new tools and institutional arrangements for sustainable consumption to combine rural sustainability with changing behaviour, and for strong academic research to inform policy. Yet this is an under-researched area. This paper addresses that need. It assesses the effectiveness of an initiative for sustainable consumption: namely award-winning organic food producer cooperative Eostre Organics in East Anglia. Eostre aims to provide 'a fair, ecological and cooperative food system' which addresses local farmers' needs for sustainable livelihoods in rural areas as well as sustainable consumption for consumers. These claims will be interrogated and its effectiveness appraised.

## **2. SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION**

Sustainable consumption has entered the international policy agenda in recent years as a means to align economic development with environmental policy, and the OECD have set the standard definition adopted in international policy arenas:

sustainable consumption is the use of goods and related products which respond to basic needs and bring a better quality of life, while minimising the use of natural resources and toxic materials as well as the emissions of waste and pollutants over the life cycle, so as not to jeopardise the needs of future generations (Norwegian Ministry of Environment, 1994, cited in OECD (2002:9).

In 2003 the UK government published its strategy for sustainable consumption and production (DEFRA, 2003b). This policy strategy proposes that continued economic growth is compatible with environmental protection, and echoes the statements of organisations such as the OECD and the seminal Brundtland Report before it which popularised the term 'sustainable development' (WCED, 1987). This approach to environmental governance is known as 'ecological modernisation' – a process whereby existing social economic and political structures are assumed to be capable of delivering sustainable development (Hajer, 1995). The core argument of this position is that continual economic growth is non-negotiable – held to be necessary to improve quality of life for all - but that it can be shifted onto a 'green' or 'clean growth' trajectory to reduce environmental costs. The market is claimed to be the most efficient means of effecting the changes required for sustainable development, and so market instruments are the favoured tools for supplying information to consumers, and encouraging producers to clean up their act and improve efficiency, eg eco-taxes, voluntary instruments, eco-labelling, etc. This process is known as 'market transformation' and individual consumers exercising their consumer sovereignty and making informed

choices about consumption are the primary drivers of this change. They do this through their individual consumption decisions - for example choosing fair-trade coffee, or low-energy lightbulbs, and so sending market signals back to producers – and a growing ‘green’ or ‘sustainable’ consumer market has grown up around this premise, to advise individuals how use their purchasing decisions to best effect (Elkington and Hales, 1988; see also [www.ethicalconsumer.org](http://www.ethicalconsumer.org)).

The social implications of such an approach are rooted in neo-liberal economics and are resonant with current prevailing economic and social policies in western economies. By holding on to the necessity of economic growth, it assumes that growth and consumption are both possible and desirable prerequisites for continued prosperity. It assumes that economic growth will allow technological solutions to be found for future environmental problems and resource shortages. By letting the market decide, and abstaining from direct government intervention, it is a politically cautious approach which highlights the business benefits of responding to consumer demand for more sustainable products and does not restrict behaviour – either the public’s, or that of corporations (Holliday and Pepper, 2001). For example, the Ethical Trading Initiative is a government-supported endeavour which encourages firms to *want to be seen as being socially responsible* and adopt labour standards for their workforces, but is entirely voluntary ([www.eti.org.uk](http://www.eti.org.uk)). In other words, consumer are not being asked to significantly modify their behaviour, merely to switch to ‘greener’ alternatives. As far as sustainable food is concerned, this might manifest through the availability of organic food in supermarkets – in other words offering the option of a ‘greener’ version of the same product, sold through the same supply chains.

This definition of sustainable consumption and the assumptions it is based upon, are the subject of much criticism from proponents of a more radical conception of the changes required in consumer behaviour to deliver sustainability. Not least of these is the government’s own Sustainable Development Commission’s assertion that linking sustainable consumption with economic growth is mistaken because it ties it to the framework responsible for *unsustainable* consumption (Porritt, 2003). These critics adopt an alternative position on growth, arguing that economic growth and rising income does not necessarily make us happier, and that government should realign its development policies to promote sustainable well-being rather than consumption. For instance, community involvement, strong friendships and fulfilling work have been shown to be more significant factors in influencing happiness than rising income, so sustainable development would involve maximising these factors rather than consumption – a scenario which may be compatible with reduced economic growth and material throughput of the economy (Shah and Marks, 2004).

The Commission is joined by a number of commentators, academics, practitioners and policymakers in arguing for significant changes to the lifestyles of developed countries in the interest of equitable, sustainable livelihoods, and for policies to support these goals (Jackson and Michaelis, 2003; Reeves, 2003; Levett et al, 2003). The major criticisms of the mainstream policy approach to sustainable consumption from the new economics perspective are fivefold. First, that it relies upon a market which externalises environmental and social costs, and so sends the wrong price signals. Second, it ignores the range of psychological and sociological motivations and other factors influencing consumption behaviour such as affordability, availability, convenience, aspiration, empowerment, self-esteem, need for belongingness and identity, etc. Third, it pits individual atomistic consumers against global corporations and political structures, in a bid to solve global environmental problems, when collective effort would be more appropriate. Fourth, it is only applicable in relation to consumer goods, rendering the vast quantity of institutional consumption – both of governments and of infrastructure – out of the reach of consumer pressure. And fifth, it is inherently consumerist in nature (assuming more consumption is desirable), and so cannot encompass action to reduce consumption and seek alternative channels of provision such as

informal exchange networks by consumers eager to create institutions representative of their values (Seyfang, 2004a,c). Taking these five factors as critical failures of mainstream policy for sustainable consumption, the ability to overcome these problems can become indicators of success - an alternative initiative will be measured according to its ability to provide solutions to these five issues.

The critics of this mainstream version of sustainable consumption propose quite a different model, based upon a different set of assumptions and beliefs about the nature of the environment and society. This alternative conception of sustainable consumption entails reducing the consumption of consumers in developed nations, and redefining 'wealth' 'prosperity' and 'progress' in order to construct new social and economic institutions for governance which value the social and environmental aspects of wellbeing alongside the economic. The theoretical basis of this position is known variously as 'new', 'humanistic', or 'green economics' (Boyle, 1993; Ekins, 1986; Ekins and Max-Neef, 1993; Douthwaite, 1992; Robertson, 1990).

This paper is concerned with exploring the practical social implications of this normative theory. Given that the ideas and values this theory promotes are based upon different foundations than conventional economic principles, and the theorists are critical of the social arrangements which promote mainstream development, it is reasonable to assume that new economics requires an alternative set of institutions and tools in order to manifest. What, for instance, would government policy look like if it promoted well-being rather than its economic proxy, consumption? How would food-chains be organised if social and environmental factors were fully included in pricing and decision-making rather than externalised? How would decisions be made within public institutions if sustainability was the objective rather than economic efficiency?

A manifestation of these values is that of the 'ecological footprint' (Wackernagel and Rees, 1996), which dramatically shows how the ecological space (comprising resources used and pollution absorptive capacity) taken up by consumers in the west is vastly larger than that of people in developing countries. The implications of such an analysis are that 'ecological space' is finite, inequities in its use should be addressed, and consumption levels in developed countries must shrink, to allow developing countries to progress without undermining the environmental basis of life on earth and minimise the inequitable impacts of ecological footprints upon other people. Dobson (2003) describes this position as 'ecological citizenship', and emphasises the need to develop tools and instruments, but more importantly a meaningful social context, for expressing these values in daily life – in the supermarket, the classroom, the household and the workplace.

This forms the basis of what is termed here an 'alternative' perspective on sustainable consumption, placed in opposition to the mainstream policy approach outlined above, and which demands new institutional arrangements and lifestyle patterns to be realised in order to allow ecological citizenship to be practiced (Seyfang, 2004c). One example of a new type of initiative which aims to fulfil these requirements is that of community-supported agriculture, and in particular, the supply of local organic food. This paper presents new empirical research findings from the first case study investigation of an organic food producer cooperative in the UK. Combining customer surveys with staff interviews and document analysis, it examines Eostre Organics' aims and objectives, and seeks to increase understanding of how initiatives for sustainable consumption and production which embody the 'new economics' ideas can act to change behaviour, how they can promote ecological citizenship, and how they relate to wider policy frameworks and social values. The paper unpicks the motivations and values of the consumers of this initiative, and relates these to mainstream and alternative conceptions of sustainable consumption and the environment. It then assesses the extent to which Eostre has been successful at meeting its objectives of providing sustainable food for all, sustainable livelihoods for its producers, and being better

for the environment. The analysis then appraises how successful Eostre has been at overcoming the limitations of the conventional approach to sustainable consumption and creating new institutions for sustainable consumption, and discusses the broader policy implications of these findings.

### **3. THEORISING LOCAL ORGANIC FOOD: FOR HEALTH, WEALTH, COUNTRYSIDE AND COMMUNITY**

Locally-sourced organically-produced food has been suggested as a practical means to promote sustainable consumption for a range of economic, social and environmental reasons including food safety, cutting 'food miles', keeping money in the local economy, and growing a stronger connection with local environments (Pretty, 2001; Jones, 2001; Norberg-Hodge et al, 2000; La Trobe, 2002; Saltmarsh, 2004b; Stagl, 2002). These multiple rationales will be discussed below, locating them within, and elaborating on the alternative theory of sustainable consumption described above.

Organic production refers to agriculture which does not use artificial chemical fertilisers and pesticides, and animals reared in more natural conditions, without the routine use of drugs, antibiotics and wormers common in intensive livestock farming. In this sense, 'organic' is merely a production technique, and does not necessarily entail any change in structures of provision. The first sustainable consumption rationale for organic food is that it is a production method more in harmony with the environment and local ecosystems: by working with nature rather than against it, farmers can produce crops that have not resulted in large scale industrial chemical inputs, with attendant pollution of waterways and land degradation; a second urge is to protect individual's health by avoiding ingestion of chemical pesticides. The most commonly cited reasons for consuming organic food are: food safety, the environment, animal welfare, and taste (Soil Association, 2003).

The area of land within the UK certified (or in conversion) for organic production has risen dramatically in recent years: in 1998 there were under 100,000 hectares and by 2003 this had risen to 741,000 hectares (DEFRA, 2003a), and a new government scheme to encourage wildlife on farms has increased the subsidy to farmers to £60 per hectare for organic land, compared to just £30 for non-organic (Soil Association, 2004). However, while this rapid expansion signifies a growing demand for less environmentally-damaging food production, Smith and Marsden (in press) point out that the sector may be evolving towards a 'farm-gate price squeeze' common within conventional agriculture, which will limit future growth and potential for rural development. Farmers keen to diversify into organic production as a means of securing more sustainable livelihoods in the face of declining incomes within the conventional sector are confronted with an increasingly efficient supermarket-driven supply chain which increasingly sources its organic produce from overseas. Currently 65% of organic produce eaten in the UK is imported, and 82% is sold through supermarkets (Soil Association, 2002). A key challenge for small organic producers is to create new distribution channels to bypass the supermarket supply chain, and organise in such a way as to wield sufficient power in the marketplace. Eostre addresses these needs, as we shall see below.

Organics has until recently been a fringe environmental interest, expressing a desire to bypass intensive agriculture and return to small-scale production, and grow a new sense of connection with the land, through a concern for the authenticity and provenance of the food we eat. As such, it has been representative of a movement towards localisation of food supply chains, and explicitly challenges the industrial farming and global food transport model embodied in conventional food consumption channelled through supermarkets. Localisation of food supply chains means simply that food should be consumed as close to the point of origin as possible. In practice, this will vary from produce to product, and

consumers generally understand 'local' to mean within a radius of 30 miles or from the same county (IGD, 2003). A recent poll found that 52% of respondents with a preference want to purchase locally-grown food, and another 46% would prefer it grown in the UK (NEF, 2003), and the explosion of farmers markets, direct marketing and other innovative initiatives has supported this desire for 'authentic' local food.

The principal environmental rationale for localisation of food supply chains as a tool for sustainable consumption is that it is a way of reducing 'food miles' – the distance food travels between being produced and being consumed –and so cutting the energy and pollution associated with transporting food around the world. Much transportation of food around the globe is only economically rational due to environmental and social externalities being excluded from fuel pricing (Jones, 2001). This results in the sale of vegetables and fruit from across the globe, undercutting or replacing seasonal produce in the UK. Pretty (2001) calculates the cost of environmental subsidies to the food industry, and compares the 'real cost' of local organic food with globally imported conventionally produced food. He finds that environmental externalities add 3.0% to the cost of local-organic food, and 16.3% to the cost of conventional-global food.

However, social and economic rationales also speak to the need to re-localise food supply chains within a framework of sustainable consumption. In direct contrast to the globalised food system which divorces economic transactions from social and environmental contexts, the 'new economics' favours 'socially embedded' economies of place. This means developing connections between consumers and growers, boosting ethical capital and social capital around food supply chains, educating consumers about the source of their food and the impacts of different production methods, creating feedback mechanisms which are absent when food comes from distant origins, and strengthening local economies and markets against disruptive external forces of globalisation (Norberg-Hodge et al, 2000). This is demonstrated in a study of food supply chains in Norfolk which found that the motivations for many growers to sell locally included "taking more control of their market and [becoming] less dependent on large customers and open to the risk of sudden loss of business" (Saltmarsh, 2004b: ch3). Many of these growers faced constant insecurity over sales, the likelihood of being dropped in favour of cheaper imported produce, were forced to put up with late payments, were unable to sell gluts, and saw high volumes of wastage due to appearance standards unrelated to the quality of the produce etc. For these farmers, turning towards the local market was a means of stabilising incomes and self-protection. In addition to insulating farmers, localisation also builds up the local economy by increasing the circulation of money locally (the economic multiplier). In a study of the economic impact of localised food supply chains, Ward and Lewis (2002) found that £10 spent with a local grower circulated two and a half times locally and was worth £25 in the local economy. This compares to £10 spent in a supermarket which leaves the area quite quickly, resulting in a multiplier of just 1.4, meaning it was worth £14 to the local economy.

So it is clear that the sustainable consumption rationales for local organic food are plural and multi-dimensional, encompassing environmental, social and economic priorities within a context of minimising ecological footprints through reducing consumption levels and reconceptualising 'wealth' and 'progress'. How are they put into practice? Local food initiatives take a variety of forms and express a range of values from environmental activism through to defensive localism (Winter, 2003), from farmers markets (Holloway and Kneafsey (2000), through local marketing initiatives for regional producers through supermarkets and other local businesses (Tastes of Anglia, 2003) through to community-supported agriculture where consumers pay a weekly subscription direct to farmers to receive a box of mixed seasonal produce (Soil Association, 2001). The following section describes a local food initiative in detail.

#### **4. DEVELOPING ORGANIC FOOD SUPPLY CHAINS IN EAST ANGLIA**

In order to investigate the activities and effectiveness of a local food initiative for sustainable consumption, case study research was carried out with an organic producer cooperative in East Anglia. This organisation, named Eostre Organics (pronounced 'easter', and named after the Anglo-Saxon goddess of regeneration). Eostre was chosen for this case study investigation for three reasons. First, it is a local food initiative which claims to meet the sustainability objectives outlined above, it's stated aims are to build a 'fair, ecological and cooperative' food system, and these claims will be investigated. Second, within these terms, it is an initiative which is perceived as successful - Eostre won the Local Food Initiative of the Year award in the Soil Association's Organic Food Awards in 2003, given to the business or venture considered to have shown most "innovation and commitment in making good food locally available" (Eostre Organics, 2004a), and its effectiveness will be examined. Third, it combines many aspects of the sustainable food movement – localisation, organics, cooperatives, direct selling, public procurement, as well as selling to local businesses and through market stalls. In this way, it is possible to 'take the temperature' of a wide range of sustainable food activities within one successful organisation, and assess how they measure up to the sustainability criteria discussed above.

The research was carried out during the spring of 2004, and consisted of site visits to Eostre's headquarters and market stall, interviews with organisers and staff, documentary analysis of their web site and newsletters to ascertain the scope and nature of activities, objectives and values. This was complemented by two self-completed customer surveys: the first survey of market stall customers achieved 65 responses out of 110 distributed over a 2-week period (59.1%); the second surveyed the 252 customers of three weekly box schemes supplied by Eostre (79 responded, giving a response rate of 31.3%) whose geographical spread is shown in Figure 1. The surveys asked about motivations for, and experiences with consuming local organic food, and are considered together here (overall response rate 39.2%) unless specified otherwise. There were a mixture of closed- and open-ended questions in order to elicit the respondent's own interpretations and meanings of their actions and the discourses they used to explain them. Qualitative analysis was used to code and analyse these responses, alongside quantitative analysis of other data.

##### **4.1 Eostre Organics: Origins and Values**

Eostre's organisational origins lie within Farmer's Link, a Norfolk-based NGO which was inspired by the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 to improve the sustainability of farming in developed countries, and making solidarity links with UK farmers. In 1997 it set up East Anglia Food Link (EAFL) to promote conversion to organic production in the region. EAFL's vision is one of localism – building direct links between farmers and consumers to create more sustainable food supply chains and benefit local economies and communities (EAFL, 2004). EAFL developed links with European organic growers and was inspired by the strength and growth of producer cooperatives, and persuaded local organic growers who were already intertrading informally, to adopt a formal cooperative structure to develop new markets and help grow the member businesses. Eostre was established in 2003 with a DEFRA Rural Enterprise Scheme grant, with 9 members, 7 associate or prospective members including one overseas member: the El Tamiso organic producer cooperative in Padua, Italy, which itself comprises over 50 businesses.

Eostre Organics is a food business with a mission: its charter states:

Eostre is an organic producer co-operative supplying fresh and processed organic food direct from our members in the East of England and partner producers and co-operatives from the UK and Europe.

Eostre believes that a fair, ecological and co-operative food system is vital for the future of farming, the environment and a healthy society. Direct, open relationships between producers and consumers build bridges between communities in towns, rural areas and other countries, *creating a global network of communities, not a globalised food system of isolated individuals* (Eostre Organics, 2004b, emphasis added).

Its specific aims include: to supply consumers of all incomes high quality seasonal produce; to encourage co-operative working among its members and between the co-op and consumers; transparency about food supply chains; to source all produce from UK and European regions from socially responsible producers and co-ops promoting direct local marketing, and from fair trade producers outside Europe; to favour local seasonal produce and supplement (not replace) with imports; to minimise packaging, waste and food transport; to offer educational farm visits to raise awareness of the environmental and social aspects of local organic production (ibid).

From these objectives, it is clear the Eostre is strongly supportive of the alternative conception of sustainable consumption, which favours re-localisation, reducing environmental impacts and ecological footprints. In sum, Eostre's aims can be grouped into three areas: sustainable production and livelihoods for growers; sustainable consumption by providing accessible organic food for all; and environmental benefits through organics and localisation. These will be examined in turn to assess how successful they have been in achieving their aims.

Figure 1: Map of East Anglia showing Eostre Organics members farms and area covered by surveyed box schemes

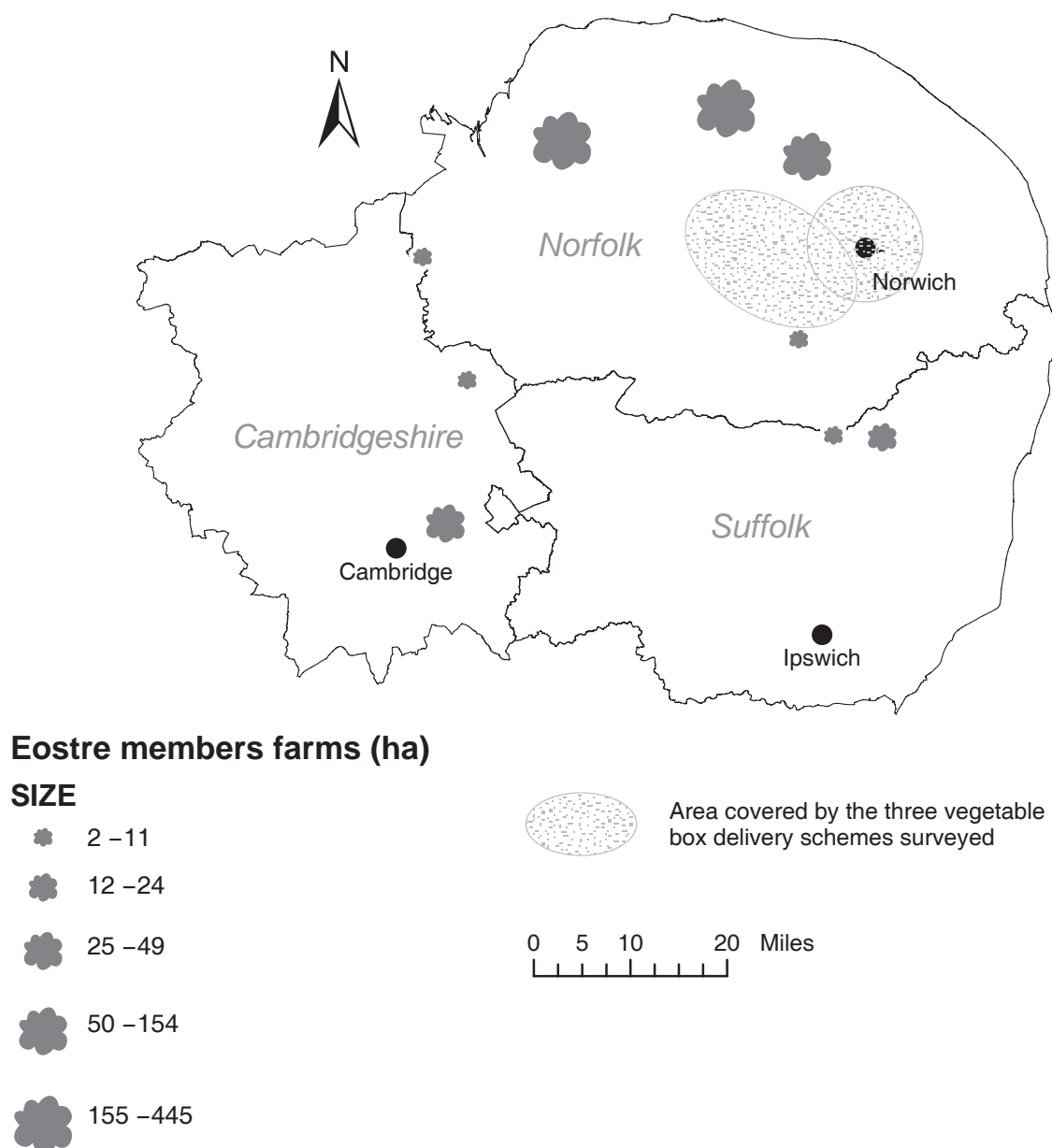


Figure 1: Map of East Anglia showing Eostre Organics members farms and area covered by surveyed box schemes

## **4.2 Sustainable Livelihoods for Growers**

The principal objective behind Eostre's formation was to provide a source of sustainable livelihoods and business viability for small local organic producers, as a response to a decline in rural farm employment and competition from overseas in international markets. Figure 1 illustrates the size and distribution of Eostre's members farms across the eastern counties. Between the nine local members, Eostre accounts for 1055.8 ha of diverse farmland, including 1.6 ha (with a quarter of this under glass) to 48.6 ha of farmland on rich fenland peat, to 445.2 ha of arable farmland and grazing pasture. The average farm size of Eostre members is 117.3 ha, though most are much smaller than this: three are less than 5 ha, and the median is 24.3 ha. In comparison with the agricultural sector in the region where the average holding is 73.9 ha, most of Eostre's farms are very small (DEFRA, 2004). Normally, this is a problem for growers seeking to supply local markets, as stability of supply cannot be guaranteed. However, through collective organisation, Eostre's members can achieve the scale required to penetrate such markets, for example by supplying market stalls and box schemes.

In the Eastern region of the UK, farm employment has fallen from 66,305 in 1990 to 49,409 in 2003, a drop of 25% (DEFRA, 2004), and Eostre aims to tackle this decline in rural employment by supporting small growers. The cooperative structure has helped to achieve this objective, as it allows very small producers to access larger markets as part of a wider whole. For example, one smallholding of under 1 hectare has been supported in developing new markets through collective box schemes and market stalls, and another farmer, who was struggling as a conventional fenland farmer, now has greater livelihood security as an organic producer within Eostre (Saltmarsh, 2004a). This incentive to convert to organic production is significant, as just 0.8% of agricultural land in the Eastern region of England is organic or in-conversion, compared to 2.8% for England and 4.3% for the UK as a whole (DEFRA, 2003a). Dot Bane, Eostre's development manager explains that the demand for local organic produce has grown rapidly, meaning that while there would not have been enough organic growers to form a cooperative in the region just twenty years ago, there is now scope for existing farmers to expand and new growers to join the cooperative.

Many of the cooperative members had previous bad experiences of selling organic produce to supermarket chains, and were keen to develop alternative marketing channels. The farmers complained of a fall in sales and prices during the 1990s recession, plus continual late payments, insecure sales, high wastage of produce and continual downward pressure on prices which resulted from dependency upon a single buyer. These farmers sought greater control over their businesses by developing direct marketing routes such as box schemes, farm shops, farmers markets etc, and serving local markets, and Eostre was a means of furthering those aims, and a grassroots response to vulnerability caused by a global food market. Eostre claims to be in a better position than supermarkets to meet the demand for local produce, because it works with a number of small scale, dissipated growers, and can get food to point of sale within 24-48 hours.

Customers strongly support this ethos, and many reported that they specifically wanted to support local producers, especially those with an environmental or ethical rationale. For example, one customer explained "this is shopping as it used to be – supporting local growers, friendly and personal service, food that tastes so good, proving that the modern obsession with supermarkets is not the only way", and another commented "It helps keep traditional varieties available and helps keep jobs in the local economy", while another stated "I like to put my money into products that support businesses that are ethically sound and do not have a deleterious effect on the environment, people or animals."

Indeed, the businesses of members have grown over the year or so that Eostre has been operational, with an increase in sales of 70% over 12 months. The cooperative now supplies produce to 13 box schemes, 15 market stalls (including the UK's only full-time organic

market stall on the general provisions market in Norwich city centre which has recently doubled in size, and weekly stalls in several market towns around Norfolk, plus monthly farmers markets), 9 cafes, pubs or restaurants and 12 shops. Inroads have been made into public sector catering, through local schools, hospitals and prisons. This evidence indicates that there appears to be scope in this organisational structure and growth of direct marketing to avoid the limits to growth experienced by other parts of the developing organic sector identified by Smith and Marsden (in press).

#### **4.3 Sustainable Consumption for All**

Eostre aims to provide affordable fresh organic produce for all, via its market stalls, box schemes, and other outlets. How successful have they been in this? First, the motivations of Eostre's consumers will be briefly discussed. Survey respondents were invited to answer, in their own words, why they chose to purchase local organic food. The answers fell into three main categories. The most popular response (given by 75.0% of respondents) was because organic food was considered safer, more nutritious, tastier or otherwise better to eat than conventional produce. The second most common motivation was environmental protection (70.5% responded this way), which covers avoidance of intensive chemical-dependent agriculture, through to reducing food miles and packaging waste. Finally, 65.2% cited a desire to support and strengthen the local economy and community, including favouring greater self-reliance, growing connections with where food has come from, and independence from global corporations and supermarkets. The following quotations from respondents show that for many, the various motivations are overlapping and interrelated categories.

"I care about what I eat and am keen to avoid taking in chemicals where possible. I would like to see a return to seasonal fruit/veg which we can only hope for if we support the smaller/local farmers. The general standard of local and organic produce far exceeds the tasteless, unripe supermarket produce."

"Organic food has much greater energy for the body, instead of just being a stomach-filler. Organic food helps bring back small community living instead of alienated individuals feeling unconnected."

"It feels good. It feels like a healthier way to lead one's life. And that also means not being so dependent on the supermarkets. Plus it means not exploiting the environment by bringing food from overseas etc. There's an holistic quality to buying food from a local supplier."

"It cuts out the environmentally destructive chain of transport from one end of the world to the other."

Clearly, this range of objectives is strongly in line with the goals of the organisation itself, which suggests that customers share the principles of Eostre in seeking to develop sustainable food supplies through localised channels.

**Table 1: Demographic Analysis of Eostre's Customers**

<b>Household Incomes</b>	<b>Eostre customers (n=133)</b>	<b>Eastern Region population</b>
Under £100	5.3	8
£100-£149	8.3	7
£150-£249	12	14
£250-£349	14.3	11
£350-£449	15	10
£450-£599	15	15
£600-£749	13.5	12
£750 and over	16.5	23
<b>Age</b>	<b>Eostre customers (n=137)</b>	<b>Eastern Region population</b>
Under 16	0	19.9
16-24	5.1	10.3
25-44	55.5	28.4
45-59	29.2	19.8
60 and over	10.2	21.6

Source: author's survey of Eostre customers; National Statistics (2004)

Who are Eostre's customers? Table 1 presents a demographic analysis of survey respondents. Over three quarters of the customers are women (77.7%), and that the customer base is skewed towards the younger-middle aged: while 55.5% of respondents fell into the 25-44 age bracket, only 28.4% of the Eastern England population do so, and this bias continues in the 45-59 age group. There is a corresponding under-representation of both younger and older age groups, for example, only 10.2% of the customers are aged 60 or over, compared to 21.6% of the population.

One might assume that as organic food is more expensive than conventional produce, that Eostre would attract an exclusively affluent market, but this is not the case. The household incomes of Eostre customers are fairly representative of the local region, with a slight bias towards middle income groups, and under-representation of both the lowest and highest income brackets: while 8.0% of the Eastern population have a household income of under £100 a week, just 5.3% of Eostre customers fall into this category; at the top of the scale, for weekly household incomes of £750 and above, the figures are 23% and 16.5% respectively. However, while it may appear that Eostre attracts a fairly broad cross section of society in terms of incomes, the political preferences of Eostre customers are strikingly different to the norm: three out of five Eostre customers supported the Green Party (60.0%), while a fifth (20.0%) expressed support for the Labour Party, and almost as many for the Liberal Democrats (17.8%). Just 4.4% were Conservatives, and 1.5% backed the UK Independence Party.

It cannot be said, therefore, that Eostre serves all sections of the community: rather it attracts a niche market of customers with strong environmental and social attachments to localism and ecological citizenship – key concerns of the Greens – albeit with a wide spread of incomes. This congregation of values is enhanced by the manner in which customers find out about and begin to purchase from Eostre: 56.6% of box scheme customers, and 48.3% of stall customers who responded to the survey heard about it through word of mouth, resulting

in a large self-selecting customer base linked through common interests and personal contacts.

How satisfied with Eostre's customers? Given the two very different type of service surveyed, it makes sense to disaggregate the data into two groups: customers using the market stall and those receiving weekly box deliveries. The survey found that overall, customers were quite well satisfied with the service they received, though there was some room for improvement, particularly in relation to high prices (only 60.3% of box customers and 62.5% of stall customers were satisfied with price levels), though as several acknowledged, this was largely outside Eostre's control, and as one remarked "I would much rather buy slightly more expensive goods and feel happy in the knowledge that I am supporting a more environmentally friendly and socially considerate enterprise".

The range of produce available was particularly welcomed, and 78.1% of stall customers and 64.1% of box customers were satisfied by what was available, despite it being limited by seasonality. "Food is in season and not forced – and actually tastes and smells better" reported one customer, and another remarked "[I like] having a variety of vegetables, some of which I might not otherwise try, so its always exciting to unpack the box", and another explained "The vegetables taste and look as they should and make flavoursome food. Often the seasonal selection makes you try new and interesting things". Box scheme customers reported that they would prefer a little more choice about what they received each week, and sometimes found repetition in the selection difficult to deal with, and both types of customers suggested that more information about produce origins, varieties and recipes would help them adjust to consuming mainly seasonal produce.

The system of weekly box deliveries was enjoyed by almost all box customers (98.7% were satisfied with convenience), and 76.6% of stall customers were happy with the convenience of the market. Box customers reported "doorstep deliveries save a lot of time", "I like not having to go out shopping all the time", and stall shoppers said "I can select and buy at my convenience, I like the 'min-market' layout", "It's organic! It's on the market and convenient!". Those who found the market stall inconvenient were probably comparing it to out-of-town supermarket shopping, as they mentioned the relatively limited opening hours which make it hard to access during working hours (9am-5pm, 6 days a week), and the effort in making a separate shopping trip to the city for fresh produce and carrying heavy bags home.

Both groups of customers reported occasional lapses in quality of the produce, with limp lettuces, past-their-best vegetables, and mouldy fruit being the main problems; only 59.5% of box customers were satisfied with the quality of fruit and vegetables received (compared to 73.0% of stall customers). The Norwich market stall has an inviting 'walk-in' self-service layout which contrasts with neighbouring stalls, but displays are frequently depleted and tired-looking, and pricing signs are faded and scruffy, which detracts from the desired image of attractive wholesome fresh produce. Specific suggestions for improvement included: ensuring the market stall is restocked first thing each morning, refrigerating salad vegetables, checking box contents more carefully.

#### **4.4 Environmental Benefits**

Eostre's commitment to the environment is demonstrated by two aspects of the food they sell: it is all organically produced, and as much as possible is locally sourced from members farms. The environmental benefits of this are cited by many as key attractions of Eostre, as the following comments demonstrate: "this is important for me and my partner because we believe in sustainability regarding our environment, we are committed to reducing our 'eco-footprint' in any areas we can", "I believe passionately that humanity must reduce its impact on the world. Using local organic food is just one way, but for many it is the most visible and accessible way", and "to me, it represents a more harmonious balance between what we

produce, consume and waste". The ability to cut down on packaging waste, reduce food miles and avoid the use of pesticides in the soil were frequently mentioned by customers.

Taking as given that organic production is better for the environment than chemical-intensive agriculture, it is instructive to examine the place of local food supply chains in Eostre's activities. These two objectives – organic and local - are sometimes in competition with each other, and customers vary about which they prioritise.

Dot Bane explains that localising food supply chains is absolutely central to Eostre's operations, and to their customers environmental motivations: "People are becoming very eco-aware, and one of the biggest issues in any ecological awareness has got to be food miles". This accurately reflects the concerns of Eostre's customers, as cutting food miles is a key motivation, and as Dot explains, the benefits of localisation are more than transport-related, they include building connections between communities and farmers:

"We are a producer co-op, all our members are growers – this means we're able to offer a very local selection of foods, obviously we're going to source from our own suppliers and producers and members before we go anywhere else to source produce, and it means that we're able to put faces and information in front of our customers about the people who are growing the food that they're eating. That's very important. It gives us a confirmation that what we're doing is right, when we get the feedback from consumers, and it's building that link between farmer and eater."

Dot explains why people choose to buy local organic produce from Eostre rather than from a supermarket in terms of the local supplies, and notes that in the UK carrot season, baby organic carrots from Zambia are for sale in major supermarkets. She claims that "whatever benefits people gain from it being organic, they lose from the food miles it takes to get it here", which is a sentiment shared by many customers. Yet the same argument can be made about some of Eostre's produce, as much is imported (from the Italian cooperative, and from other organic and fair trade suppliers around the world) in order to guarantee a wide range of produce all year round. For example, in May 2004 the market stall was selling organic broccoli from France, onions from Argentina and carrots from Italy, while conventionally-grown local produce was available on neighbouring market stalls at considerable lower prices. There is a considerable trade-off to be made between organic and local produce. Some customers felt that they would prefer to see less imported produce, especially that which could be grown locally, and one stated "sometimes there seems to be a lack of local produce, and I still think Eostre runs up quite a few food miles... what about stocking e.g. Norfolk asparagus or strawberries?", while another stated "buying organic isn't worth the food miles". This could be addressed by expanding the membership of local organic suppliers to provide a wider range of produce and so reducing reliance upon imported food.

## **4.5 Problems Identified**

In spite of the great success Eostre has achieved over the last year, there are a number of obstacles which prevent it from realizing its full potential as a channel for sustainable consumption, and these can be divided into two groups: limitations within Eostre itself, and those outside the organisation. These will be discussed in turn, together with potential solutions.

### ***4.5.1 Internal barriers to overcome***

Internally, there are three main barriers to success which Eostre must overcome. The first of these relates to financial and time constraints on developing the business and growing the cooperative – the same as any new business would face. These have been eased somewhat

by the DEFRA marketing grant, but the Eostre staff nevertheless work very long hours for little financial reward, and Dot explains that personal commitment is a strong driving force: “if we were hard-nosed businessmen, we wouldn’t be doing what we’re doing, but we’re not - we care about what we’re doing”. In this situation, time is a very real constraint upon activity, and in fact there is currently untapped capacity in the member farms which can be called upon when needed. Additional financial support would help the business to grow and develop further new markets, and recruit more members. It is important for Eostre to attract more producer members and increase the range of local produce available, as some customers are primarily motivated by the idea of localisation, and are disgruntled at the amount of imported produce Eostre sells.

The second internal problem picked up by customers is the occasionally poor standard of presentation of the produce and the company, as discussed above. The current customer base is ethically and environmentally motivated, and willing to put up with occasional drawbacks. But in order to grow and attract a wider cross-section of people, Eostre must present itself well to shoppers who have more mainstream expectations. It must avoid anything which might deter potential customers or make them feel ‘othered’, or else it risks losing these potential customers to supermarkets who can provide organic food in a conventional shopping context (Weatherall et al, 2003). Overcoming the barriers identified so far should be a priority – namely by improving flexibility about box contents, providing more information on produce, ensuring stall displays are always well-stocked and at their best, and extending stall opening hours.

The third internal barrier is somewhat related to these concerns with marginalisation versus integrating with the mainstream, and the power of a brand. As with the previous point about presentation, it is important that consumers feel that organic local produce is something for them, and is not off-putting in any way. The name ‘Eostre’ is problematic for some customers, and could conceivably be a deterrent to others - it’s difficult to know how to pronounce it, or spell it, and some people feel unconfident and therefore uncomfortable using the name. Others have commented that its strangeness feels somewhat exclusive and appealing to a niche of ‘alternative’ greens, rather than reaching out to a wide audience. It may be that a more user-friendly name (or even changing it to ‘Easter’) would help Eostre to integrate with mainstream food provisioning more easily and be more acceptable to people who would not normally consider ‘alternative’ suppliers.

#### *4.5.2 External barriers to overcome*

In addition to these three internal obstacles, there are a further three barriers external to the organisation which prevent Eostre achieving its potential. The first of these is the economic pricing regime for fuel and transport, and the system of subsidies for conventional agriculture, which currently combine to make local organic produce more expensive than imported chemical-intensive food. Until the full environmental and social costs of production and energy use are internalised into prices, organic and local growers face an enormous uphill struggle to market their produce on a steeply-sloping playing field! Eostre’s consumers identify price as being the single most significant reason why they do not purchase more local/organic/fair trade produce (58% gave this reason). Government should introduce full environmental taxes on fuel, for instance, to send the correct signals through the market to producers and consumers alike. A second measure should be to reform the Common Agricultural Policy which has to date been responsible for incentivising much environmental degradation. Government support for organic growers in the UK is gaining ground, however, and while until recently there has been no support at all, there are now organic conversion subsidies (the Organic Entry Level Scheme subsidy is £60/hectare).

The second major external barrier which prevents Eostre achieving its aims is the policy infrastructure around public procurement, which currently inhibits efforts to introduce local organic produce to schools or hospitals catering. Eostre spent several months developing the public procurement aspect of their work, and have made small inroads, but decided it was not going to be viable business within current policy regimes, so turned attention to other priorities. The government currently advises schools to consider alternative suppliers, but organic local food will not get into schools on any large scale until there are government directives instructing that schools must use organic local produce. Eostre felt that the existing supply chains have been in place for so long, there was no incentive to change them, and there was resistance in public sector organisations to new approaches to food. In particular, they felt that organics were still seen as 'alternative' to many people in positions of power, and that a pro-active push from government would be needed in order to achieve significant changes in these institutions. Introducing localised food supply chains into this institution would require changes in the infrastructure within these institutions. A concrete example of this is found within the Norfolk and Norwich University Hospital, the largest in the county, which serves Eostre's fresh produce in its visitor and staff canteen, but has no kitchen to prepare fresh food for the 2,250 meals a day it serves to its patients (NNUH, 2004). Public sector catering could be an enormous market for local organic produce, but only if public policy began to reflect these priorities and insist on building them into its infrastructure (Morgan and Morley, 2002). Provision (or not) of a kitchen to feed patients is a decision made at the planning stages of a building project, and has implications for patients health and wellbeing, as well as for the options available for managers to implement alternative arrangements (Sustainable Development Commission, 2004).

Lastly, Eostre felt that their success depended upon a social climate of environmental concern with food safety and conservation, and so government could indirectly support businesses with social and environmental objectives by funding and supporting community and environmental groups to generally raise public awareness and promote sustainable behaviour. It is certainly true that government places the onus for making sustainable consumption choices upon individual consumers, relying upon their motivation to transform the market, and so efforts for sustainable consumption are indeed reliant upon continually motivated consumers. However, the justice of this approach is unclear, and it would be more equitable for government to take responsibility for making sustainable consumption choices and legislate directly to support sustainable consumption initiatives such as Eostre, for example through ensuring public procurement sources local organic produce etc.

## **5. DISCUSSION: EVALUATING EOSTRE AS A TOOL FOR SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION**

The previous section described Eostre Organics' activities, and used new empirical evidence to evaluate its performance according to its core objectives. Eostre was found to be successfully growing as a business, and meeting its goals, but doing so within quite tight societal constraints. Attention now turns to a broader discussion of the extent to which an alternative initiative like Eostre can overcome the problems with mainstream sustainable consumption practice identified at the start of this paper, and provide a means for ecological citizens to put into practice their principles. To recap, these obstacles are: misleading price signals; assuming only economic motivations for consumption and neglecting constraints upon behaviour; individualism; ignoring institutional consumption; and being limited to changes in current markets. These will be addressed in turn, though they overlap considerably.

### **5.1 Internalising Social and Environmental Costs**

The current pricing system externalises social and environmental costs and benefits, and this, together with current subsidy systems for intensive pesticide-dependent agriculture,

results in local organic produce costing more than conventionally-grown imported food. Working against this market disincentive, Eostre and their consumers believe that were the full costs and benefits to be accounted for, then conventional food would be much more expensive. Without the option of revaluing the entire market, *they internalise these costs and benefits on a personal level*, and conclude that the current price differential is an illusory incentive. One respondent stated “I can’t bear to think of the people who are often exploited in developing countries to provide cheap food for supermarkets. I like to pay the ‘real cost’ for my food”, and another commented “It seems that the most important ecological concerns are ignored for the sake of money, and for this reason I try not to always think of price first”. This sentiment is shared by customers from all income levels, representing a strong commitment to environmental and social sustainability, even among those who can least afford it: one respondent said “it is difficult to get used to the higher price, but you get to accept it, and we cut down in other areas, i.e. charity shops, etc.”

## **5.2 Embedding Consumption within Community**

Whereas mainstream sustainable consumption strategies assume that price and environmental information will result in behaviour changes, the alternative approach views economic behaviour as being intimately embedded within social relations, bringing complex issues to bear on efforts to change behaviour. From this perspective, sustainable consumption requires changes not simply from individuals, but from communities and their enmeshed personal and social relationships. How effective is Eostre at this?

The case study research found that for consumers, purchasing food from Eostre represents an intertwined set of objectives about rebuilding local economies, supporting ethical and environmentally-motivated businesses, community-building, developing trust and local relationships, as well as delivering tasty, nutritious and safe food. The quotations used earlier demonstrate this, and further comments include: “[I like] the sense of communal participation, starting from the feeling that we all know – or potentially know – each other, and continuing on through to wider issues, both social and environmental”, “I feel that the ‘connectedness’ is important and that modern industrial food provision has led to a further ‘rationalisation’ of nature in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and into the 21<sup>st</sup>”, and “I think that supermarkets are distancing people from the origins of food, and harming local economies”. In particular, the localism and associated sense of connection between growers and consumers that this affords was important for many. This connection was facilitated through the personal contact provided by retail staff and the information they provided about the sources of food. For example, one customer explained “[the] source of food is more likely to be trustworthy and produced to a high standard. I like the traceability and accountability, as opposed to most supermarkets which are primarily accountable to their shareholders”, and another wrote “I like to know what I am eating and can trust the supplier that the food is fresh, local and natural” while another said “they are like-minded people”.

Issues of affordability and accessibility which are neglected in mainstream strategies for sustainable consumption, are also raised here. Eostre’s food is not at all the preserve of the wealthy, and many customers are on low incomes, as we have seen, though it is doubtless harder for these groups to afford organic food. In an effort to overcome this, one box scheme supplied by Eostre has agreed to accept part-payment for produce in local community currency (Local Exchange Trading Schemes or LETS). Community currencies like exist alongside conventional money as an alternative means of exchange, to enable people to exchange goods and services without using cash. They are small scale, but effective tools for overcoming social exclusion, building community networks and personal development, and are often seen as pioneering an economic space based on a different set of values to the mainstream economy, making them particularly suitable for environmental, social, and sustainable consumption activities (Seyfang, 2001, 2003, 2004d). In this case, linking with a LETS enables people to earn credit providing useful services for others, and spend them on

food, thus making the box scheme more affordable and at the same time utilising an exchange system that promotes social cohesion rather than competition.

### **5.3 Collective Action**

Mainstream sustainable consumption strategies pit the individual against the corporation, in a mismatched battle for sovereignty. The alternative approach argues that powerful coordinated global businesses must be tackled by coordinated, global networks of consumers rather than isolated individuals. Eostre originated as a collective response to rural farmers' vulnerability in the face of globalised food supply chains, and it is specifically constituted as a co-operative. It aims to play a part in building supportive and ethical business networks across Europe and further afield to strengthen the hand of small growers to supply locally, and so provide an alternative to mainstream supply channels by working collectively for sustainability and stable rural livelihoods through developing local markets and avoiding supermarkets. In this way, Eostre is clearly shaping a coordinated response to global unsustainability through a network of small producers and individual consumers bound together by ethical and environmental principles, and its customers identify strongly with these aims. One commented "I like the knock-on effect of supporting local cooperative and organic farmers", and another stated "I object to [supermarkets'] attitude to suppliers (ie squeeze them to keep the prices low)".

### **5.4 Addressing Institutional Consumption**

Institutional consumption makes up a large part of societal consumption, but is not normally within the range of individual consumers to influence, and is overlooked by mainstream sustainable consumption strategies. As the previous section has discussed, Eostre aims to supply public sector catering through schools and hospitals, in order to address this hidden sector. If the obstacles identified could be overcome and public sector infrastructure put in place to enable this type of change, there is a huge potential for initiatives such as this to transform local markets, particularly with regards to local organic food supply chains, as well as provide strong leadership from government about desirable consumption patterns.

### **5.5 Building Alternative Systems of Provision**

The implications of what has been discussed so far is that Eostre and their customers are seeking to build an alternative to mainstream global food supply chains. This embodies an alternative set of values: namely localism, community-building, environmental stewardship and fair trade. The structure of the business, the mechanisms and supply channels used also differ from the norm, being based upon fair trade, cooperative principles, and inspiring loyalty among customers who share those principles. This can be seen as an initiative to create alternative social infrastructure and provisioning systems which redefine wealth, progress and authenticity, and embed them in real-life practice. For example, in a localised organic food economy, seasonality of fruit and vegetables is recognised as a valuable aspect, rather than a hindrance, and some of the customers made these points in the discussion earlier. Others identified strongly with these efforts: "it links me with a part of the community which operates in a far healthier and more ethical way than the wider economic community", reported one customer, and another stated "I generally find supermarkets unappealing and feel [it is valuable to do] anything I can to prevent the homogenisation of food ... i.e. shopping at organic / fair trade stalls and shops." Embodying this whole system approach, another survey respondent wrote "the basics of life must be made and grown locally. If I can't make or grow for myself, I should at least enable others to do so in the area. I do not want to support large companies, air freight, or water and land misuse. Buying local organic helps me not to", and another wanted to support "a farming system that works within environmental/resource limits." These remarks display a motivation which goes beyond accessing good food, to encompass redefining the infrastructural systems of food provision and socially embedding economic relationships around localised food supply chains.

## **6. CONCLUSIONS: TOWARDS DIVERSITY IN SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION**

“at a time when our capacity to imagine an array of ways to build a just and ecologically resilient future must expand, it is in fact narrowing. At a moment when we should be vigorously exploring multiple paths to sustainability, we are in fact obsessing over the cobblestones of but one path” (Maniates, 2002: 51).

Sustainable consumption is gaining in currency as a new environmental policy objective, comprising motivated consumers and market transformation, but this mainstream approach has serious limitations. This paper has applied ‘new economics’ theory to evaluate a local organic food initiative as a tool for ‘alternative’ sustainable consumption, which is here understood to mean redefining social infrastructure and systems of provision to enable a reduction in consumption levels and hence a reduced ecological footprint.

It finds that the case study initiative, Eostre Organics, is successfully achieving its aims of providing a fair, ecological, cooperative food system. It overcomes the limitations identified with mainstream strategies for sustainable consumption, and goes further in developing new social and economic institutions for sustainable consumption. The alternative model of sustainable consumption demands localisation and re-embedding the economy within social networks, and Eostre is a good example of how this might work in practice. It uses food as a mechanism for community-building and social cohesion, while delivering sustainable rural livelihoods and a channel for the expression of alternative values about society, environment and the economy.

Eostre faces a number of internal barriers to growth in terms of developing and marketing the business, as well as external limitations from public procurement policies through to market pricing. To increase its success and impact, Eostre needs to widen its appeal to a broader cross-section of the population, and recruit more local growers to boost the amount of local produce sold as opposed to imports. Government action is needed to support the growth of such ‘new economy’ or ‘alternative’ sustainable consumption initiatives. A number of policy changes are proposed to promote these endeavours. First, correcting market prices to internalise social and economic costs and benefits, to send correct price signals all along existing and potential food chains, must be a priority. This includes removing subsidies for intensive large-scale agriculture and creating a truly level playing-field for small scale organics. Second, funding the development of producer cooperatives will strengthen the position of the small grower in the face of monopsonistic markets and so build more sustainable rural livelihoods. Third, legislating for public sector procurement to source food through local organic suppliers would instantly create a huge new market for local growers, offering stability and security, as well as sending a clear message through all levels of government that localising food supply chains is important for rural sustainability and that local organic food is the healthiest option.

Taking a wider perspective, the lessons from this research into an alternative sustainable consumption initiative are clear. There is a need – and desire – for diversity in social innovation and infrastructure in order for societies to develop resilience and adaptability to change – whether that be economic, social or environmental change. The innovation studied here is a specific grassroots response to the impacts of economic globalisation, but it addresses environmental and social vulnerability too. These responses are multi-dimensional, and create space for the expression of different sets of values, objectives and motivations than is possible within the conventional economy. As such, they are valuable experimental niches, and they are the repository of some of the more radical transformative impulses for sustainable consumption.

However, there is a danger that the prevalent mainstream approach to sustainable consumption and economics will systematically squeeze out such innovations by denying

them the space to thrive (Seyfang, 2004b). Current pricing regimes and public policy arrangements limit the accessibility and scope of these initiatives. Policymakers should recognise the substantial contribution these bottom-up initiatives can make to sustainable consumption, in demonstrating and practising alternative systems of provision, and create the policy space to allow them flourish and develop. In this way, alternative mechanisms for sustainable consumption could emerge as an effective method for reducing ecological footprints and redirecting society towards sustainability.

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