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**SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION, THE NEW
ECONOMICS AND LOCAL ORGANIC FOOD**

by

Gill Seyfang

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Abstract:

Sustainable consumption is increasingly on the policy menu, and local organic food provision has been widely advocated as a practical means of making the desired changes to conventional production and consumption systems. This paper presents the first empirical evaluation of a local organic food network as a tool for sustainable consumption. It thereby makes a timely and original contribution to the debate on environmental governance by discussing the role and potential of local organic food networks to develop new institutions which enable individuals and groups to change their consumption patterns. A new multi-criteria qualitative evaluation tool is developed, from the New Economics theory, to assess the effectiveness of initiatives at achieving sustainable consumption. The key indicators of sustainable consumption are: localisation, reducing ecological footprints, community-building, collective action, and creating new socio-economic institutions. This evaluation framework is applied to a case study organic producer cooperative in Norfolk, UK, which is found to be effective at achieving sustainable consumption, but which nevertheless faces a number of barriers. Finally, the possible ways forward for community-based sustainable consumption are discussed, together with appropriate policy recommendations.

Keywords: sustainable consumption, institutions, organics, localism, new economics

1. INTRODUCTION

Sustainable consumption is rising up the environmental policy menu, as a strategy to achieve more sustainable development which requires widespread changes in behaviour at all levels of society to reduce the environmental impacts of consumption (DEFRA, 2003b). While new international environmental governance institutions are growing upwards from state to global scale to tackle system-wide environmental issues, there is an increasing focus upon smaller-scale governance and citizen action at various sub-national levels, from local government to grassroots community groups and individuals (DEFRA, 2005; HM Government, 2005; Seyfang, 2003a). New tools are needed to develop and enact these agendas within communities; this paper examines one such initiative, namely a local organic food system, and assesses its potential role in promoting sustainable consumption.

There is a growing policy emphasis on the role of motivated individuals to exercise consumer sovereignty and transform markets through the minutiae of daily purchasing decisions. However a sociological analysis of consumption suggests that the scope of individuals and groups to change their behaviour is limited by existing social infrastructure and institutions – systems of provision – which ‘lock in’ consumers into particular patterns of consumption (Levett et al, 2003; Maniates, 2003; Sanne, 2002). ‘Systems of provision’ are vertical commodity chains (comprising production, marketing, distribution, retail and consumption in social and cultural context) which mediate between and link ‘a particular pattern of production with a particular pattern of consumption’ (Fine and Leopold, 1993:4). Within the ‘New Economics’ literature, sustainable consumption is understood to require fundamental changes in lifestyles, economic and social systems to seek increases in quality of life rather than material consumption (Jackson, 2004). It therefore demands a deeper understanding of the systems of provision which mediate consumption patterns, in order to transform these elements of social infrastructure at a fundamental level (Van Vliet et al, 2005; Southerton et al, 2004).

Local organic food provision has been widely advocated as a practical means of making the desired changes to conventional production and consumption systems (see for example Norberg-Hodge et al, 2000; Jones, 2001; Douthwaite, 1996). Previous research has studied the economic and social impacts of re-localised and alternative food networks (Renting et al, 2003; Holloway and Kneafsey, 2000; Winter, 2003; Saltmarsh, 2004b; DuPuis and Goodman, 2005; Murdoch et al, 2000), and the environmental implications of local versus imported food, and organic versus conventionally-produced food (eg Pretty, 2001), but to date there has been no systematic appraisal of local organic food as a strategy for sustainable consumption, and no suitable evaluation frameworks have yet been developed. This paper therefore addresses that gap in the literature by presenting the first empirical evaluation of a local organic food network as a tool for sustainable consumption. It thereby makes a timely and original contribution to the debate on environmental governance by discussing the role and potential of local organic food networks to develop new institutions which enable individuals and groups to change their consumption patterns.

It achieves this by first setting out the rationale for the New Economics model of sustainable consumption, and the role within that for local organic food systems. A new multi-criteria qualitative evaluation tool is developed, from the New Economics theory, to assess the effectiveness of initiatives at achieving sustainable consumption. This is applied to a case study organic producer cooperative in Norfolk, UK, and these new research findings are presented here. Finally, the possible ways forward for community-based sustainable consumption are discussed, together with appropriate policy recommendations.

2. MAINSTREAM AND ALTERNATIVE VISIONS OF SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION

Responsibility for environmental decision-making in its widest sense is shifting from central government to new sets of actors and institutions, at a range of scales (Jasanoff and Martello, 2004). Over the last 15 years, 'sustainable consumption' has become a core issue on the international environmental agenda (UNCED, 1992; OECD, 2002), and in 2003, the UK Government announced its strategy for sustainable consumption and production – which it defines as “continuous economic and social progress that respects the limits of the Earth's ecosystems, and meets the needs and aspirations of everyone for a better quality of life, now and for future generations to come” (DEFRA, 2003b:10). In practice, this emphasises decoupling economic growth from environmental degradation, to be achieved through a range of market-based measures, and calling on informed and motivated citizens to use their consumer sovereignty to transform markets by demanding improved environmental and social aspects of production and product design (ibid).

This mainstream policy approach to sustainable consumption has been criticised – not least by the government's own Sustainable Development Commission - on the basis of a number of significant factors which critics claim limit the effectiveness and scope of such a strategy (Porritt, 2003). These are: that it relies upon market signalling, which in turn is based upon pricing regimes which systematically externalise social and environmental costs and benefits; that it fails to consolidate (in policy) improvements made over time, leaving them vulnerable to changes in consumer attention and concern; that it makes only consumer markets available to transformation, while significant consumption from producer industries, and institutional consumption through the public sector are immune to sustainable consumerism; that it neglects the social meanings and context of consumption which compete for influence with environmental motivation; that it affords the right to influence the market solely on those able and willing to participate in that market; that it 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; that it pits individuals against globally powerful corporations in an inequitable struggle; and most significantly, that it fails to see the social infrastructure and institutions which constrain choice to that available within current systems of provision. The critics therefore conclude that the mainstream approach is limited in scope, flawed in design, and unjust in its objectives. (Maniates, 2003; Sanne, 2002; Seyfang, 2004, 2005; Southerton et al, 2004; Levett et al, 2003; Holdsworth, 2003; Burgess et al, 2003).

If current systems of provision prevent significant changes in consumption patterns, what can be done to overcome this limitation? Alternative systems of provision, with associated social and economic institutions and infrastructure, require a foundation in alternative values, development goals, motivations and definitions of wealth (Leyshon et al, 2004). Advocates of an alternative approach draw out the political economy of, and richer sociological meanings attached to consumption and point to collective institutions as the source of potential change (Maniates, 2003; Fine and Leopold, 1993). Such an alternative theoretical approach to environmental governance and sustainable consumption is proposed by a broad body of thought known collectively as the 'New Economics' (Ekins, 1986; Henderson, 1995; Daly and Cobb, 1990; Boyle, 1993). This paper is concerned with exploring the practical social implications of this normative theory.

3. A NEW ECONOMICS EVALUATION FRAMEWORK FOR SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION

The New Economics is an environmental philosophical and political movement founded on a belief that economics cannot be divorced from its foundations in environmental and social contexts (Lutz, 1999). It emerged from the environmental movement and built upon the work of green writers such as E. F. Schumacher (1993) and Robertson (1999) to develop a body

of theory about how a 'green' economics concerned with justice and social wellbeing could be envisioned and practised. The UK's New Economics Foundation (a self-styled 'think-and-do-tank') was founded in 1986 to promote these ideas in research and policy (Ekins, 1986), and is now the leading think tank concerned with developing practical knowledge and skills in this area, and feeding these ideas into policy. At the same time, theorists such as Jackson (2004), Ekins (1986), Douthwaite (1992), and O'Riordan (2001) are pursuing these ideas within the academic world, for instance by developing new measures of wellbeing, seeking to understand consumer motivations in social context, and debating how an 'alternative' sustainable economy and society might operate. Nevertheless, despite a growing number of practical applications of this model, there is a paucity of robust empirical research to test the ideas of this New Economics approach, and there has been no systematic means of evaluating activities to assess their contribution to sustainable consumption. To meet that need, therefore, this paper presents a new qualitative evaluation framework which is designed to incorporate the key elements of the New Economics vision of sustainable consumption. The five key points are briefly described below.

The first of these is *localisation*. New Economics stresses the benefits of decentralised social and economic organisation and local self-reliance in order to protect local environments and economies from external shocks and the negative impacts of globalisation (Jacobs, 1984; Schumacher, 1993), proposing an 'evolution from today's international economy to an ecologically sustainable, decentralizing, multi-level one-world economic system' (Robertson, 1999:6) or what is known today as the 'new localism' (Filkin et. al., 2000). However, localisation need not imply autarky: rather, that products should be produced as close to the place of consumption as is reasonably possible, and that meeting needs locally should be given greater prominence in economic development. Building stronger localised economies is therefore a priority, and can occur through increasing the economic multiplier (the number of times money changes hands before leaving an area), which in turn occurs as a by-product of import-substitution or local provisioning (Douthwaite, 1996).

Secondly, sustainable consumption demands an equitable distribution of environmental goods and services, which requires developed countries to *reduce their ecological footprints*. Taking an equity-based understanding of environmental governance and global interdependence, the New Economics draws on 'ecological footprinting' methodology to understand and interpret the impacts of one group of global citizens on others. This defines and visualises environmental injustice in terms of the inequitable distribution of 'ecological space' (the footprint of resources and pollution-absorbing capacity) taken up by individuals, cities and countries (Wackernagel and Rees, 1996). For instance, it is estimated that for the whole world's population to achieve a UK lifestyle would require a total of 3.1 Earths, and that on April 16th, UK citizens had used up their fair share of resources for the calendar year, and had begun living off the resources of others (Simms et al, 2006). Redressing this inequitable distribution requires a reduction in the scale of material consumption among the affluent advanced economies, through recycling, reducing demand, sharing facilities and resources, etc. This would be accompanied by a reorientation of economic development goals away from production and consumption measures (eg Gross Domestic Product) and towards measures such as wellbeing – which is increasingly being found to not correlate with material consumption above a certain income level (Layard, 2006; Jackson, 2004).

The third factor is that of *community-building*. This approach calls for a new 'ecological citizenship' of humanity as a whole, a community which expands across borders (as does environmental change) and which recognises the political implications of private decisions and so defines everyday activities of consumption as potentially citizenly work (Dobson, 2003). At the same time, it is concerned with the need for resilient, inclusive, diverse local communities of place and interest to provide sustainable places to live and work (Barton, 2000). Overcoming social exclusion, nurturing social capital, and developing active citizenship within participative communities are key aspects of this (O'Riordan, 2001).

Fourth, and emerging from a basis in sustainable communities, the New Economics approach places a significant emphasis on the potential for *collective action* to overcome the powerlessness and individualisation of responsibility inherent in the mainstream model (Maniates, 2003). This includes the possibility of acting collectively to influence decisions and deliver services through political decision-making processes, and it also addresses questions of institutional consumption through the public sector, for example (Seyfang and Smith, 2006).

Finally, and following on from this last point, perhaps the most important outcome of collective action is the potential to create *new socio-economic institutions* – alternative systems of provision - which are based upon different conceptions value. A central aspect of the New Economics is the redefinition of ‘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 (Jackson, 2004). Given that current systems of provision limit the effective choices available to individuals, constructing new social infrastructure according to alternative values allows people to behave as ecological citizens (Seyfang, 2005, 2006).

This set of indicators form the basis of a multi-criteria evaluation tool for sustainable consumption. Depending on the case to which the framework is applied, there may be a greater or lesser degree of overlap between some of the indicators – notably the last three listed. However, this will not always be the case and it is worthwhile maintaining these as separate indicators because of the distinct aspects of consumption which they each capture. This new evaluation tool is applied in this paper to a local organic food cooperative, a system of food provisioning put forward by proponents of the New Economics which is claimed to promote sustainable consumption. Before considering the initiative to be evaluated, the New Economics rationale for local organic food will first be reviewed.

4. THE RATIONALE FOR LOCAL AND ORGANIC FOOD NETWORKS

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. 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, and replenishing the soil with organic material, rather than denuding it and relying upon artificial fertilisers, proponents claim that soil quality and hence food quality will be improved (with attendant impacts on consumer health and food safety), biodiversity will be enhanced, and farmers can produce crops that have not resulted in large scale industrial chemical inputs, with attendant pollution of waterways and land degradation (Reed, 2001). 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). However, while this rapid expansion signifies a growing demand for less environmentally-damaging food production, Smith and Marsden (2004) 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 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 therefore 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.

One way to achieve this is through the promotion of specifically *local* organic food, to nurture a new sense of connection with the land, through a concern for the authenticity and provenance of the food we eat – in other words, adopting a social as much as a technological innovation (Smith, 2006). This movement towards the (re)localisation or shortening of food supply chains explicitly challenges the industrial farming and global food transport model embodied in conventional food consumption channelled through supermarkets (Reed, 2001), and the explosion of farmers markets, direct marketing, regional marketing and other initiatives has supported this turn towards ‘quality’ and ‘authentic’ ‘relocalised’ local food (Holloway and Kneafsey, 2000; Murdoch et al, 2000; Ricketts Hein et al, 2006). The principal environmental rationale for localising food supply chains is to reduce the social and environmental impacts of ‘food miles’ – the distance food travels between being produced and being consumed. Much transportation of food around the globe – and its attendant carbon dioxide emissions - 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. A report commissioned by the UK government to investigate the utility of the ‘food miles’ concept for sustainable production and consumption finds that the direct environmental, social and economic costs of food transport are over £9 billion each year, of which over £5 billion are attributed to traffic congestion (Smith et al, 2005).

However, social and economic rationales also call for re-localised 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, developing connections between consumers and growers, and strengthening local economies and markets against disruptive external forces of globalisation (Norberg-Hodge et al, 2000). Indeed, rather than being eroded by the demands of globalisation, these diverse embedded food networks are now flourishing as a rational alternative to the logic of the global food economy (Whatmore and Thorne, 1997), and making a significant contribution to rural development, mitigating the crisis of conventional intensive agriculture, and mobilising new forms of association which might resist the conventional price-squeeze mentioned above (Renting et al, 2003). 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, 2004: ch3). Many of these growers faced constant insecurity over sales, and 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 local multiplier (Ward and Lewis, 2002).

Localism is not uncritically embraced, however, within the New Economics. Localisation can be a reactionary and defensive stance against a perceived external threat from globalisation and different ‘others’ (Hinrichs, 2003; Winter, 2003), and the local can be a site of inequality and hegemonic domination, not at all conducive to the environmental and social sustainability often automatically attributed to processes of localisation by activists. It also raises questions of ‘sustainability for who?’, as the nascent desire for locally produced food in developed countries inevitably impacts upon the economic and social destinies of food-exporting developing countries. New Economists argue for a globalised network of local activism which addresses the economic and social needs of developing countries reliant upon food exports, and which prioritises fair trade for products which cannot be produced locally, while simultaneously lobbying for trade justice at international levels. Hence a reflexive localism offers ecological citizens the opportunity to forge both local and global

alliances with progressive actors at the local level and consciously avoid the negative associations of defensive localism (DuPuis and Goodman, 2005).

Having reviewed the New Economics rationales for local organic food provisioning systems, attention now turns to an empirical case study of such an initiative. Using the five criteria for sustainable consumption outlined above, the activities of an organic producer cooperative, and the motivations of its organisers and customers are assessed to uncover the extent to which it is an effective vehicle for sustainable consumption. The mixed-method study of a single initiative consisted of site visits, interviews with organisers and producers, document analysis, and self-completion questionnaires. These surveys asking customers about their attitudes to organic and local food were sent to 252 customers of 3 veggie-box schemes which are supplied by Eostre. Of these, 79 were returned, representing a response rate of 31%. In addition, all customers of the Norwich market stall were invited to take a survey; 110 did so, and of these 65 were returned (59% response rate). Market stall staff reported that while not every customer took a survey during the two week period when they were available, most of their regular customers had done so. In total the survey achieved a 39% response rate. This customer survey sought both quantitative and qualitative information on the consumption patterns, values and motivations of Eostre's customers, in order to elicit a wide range of views from customers, and to allow consumers to express in their own terms how they understand and respond to food consumption issues.

5. EVALUATING EOSTRE ORGANICS: A LOCAL FOOD COOPERATIVE

Eostre Organics is an organic producer cooperative based in Norfolk, in the East of England, which was established in 2003 with development funding from DEFRA's Rural Enterprise Scheme. Eostre comprises nine local organic growers – some with very small holdings - and a producer cooperative in Padua, Italy with over 50 members of its own. These farms produce a wide range of seasonal fruit and vegetables, and local supplies are supplemented (but not replaced) by imports from their Italian partners and other co-operative and fair trade producers. They sell their produce through a full-time market stall, plus weekly subscription box schemes, shops, farmers markets, and are supplying to local schools and a hospital. Eostre's charter states:

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, 2004, emphasis added).

It is clear that Eostre's organisers are motivated by ecological and social objectives, but how successful are they at achieving them? Taking each of the five criteria for sustainable consumption in turn, we now examine the practices and perceptions of producers and consumers in this alternative food system, to assess their effectiveness at achieving sustainable consumption.

5.1 Localisation

The principal aim of Eostre was to support the livelihoods of local organic producers within the region, by enabling them to serve local markets, and this aim has been achieved so far: Eostre saw a 70% increase in sales during the first year of operation, and has expanded its range of retail outlets. Indeed, an index of food localisation developed by Ricketts Hein et al (2006) finds that Norfolk ranks 9th among the 61 counties of England and Wales. Consumers also value local producers highly, and 84% of the survey respondents said they

chose Eostre because of a commitment to supporting local farmers. One consumer said: “I value the fact that some of it is grown in Norfolk by small businesses whose owner and workers obviously care about the land, their customers and their social surroundings”, and another stated “I would like to see a return to seasonal fruit and veg, which we can only hope for is we support the smaller / local farms”. Keeping money circulating in the local economy – by patronising locally-owned businesses - was a motivation for 65% of consumers who responded to the survey, for example “we like to support local growers and local industry”. The theme of self-reliance was also prominent, and one mentioned “I like the idea of England being more self-sufficient and using our own good land to feed us all simply”, and 36% of respondents wanted to preserve local traditions and heritage through supporting Eostre.

‘Food miles’ was a concept high in the minds of Eostre’s customers when thinking about the localisation impacts. Eostre’s marketing manager explains “People are becoming very eco-aware, and one of the biggest issues in any ecological awareness has got to be food miles”, and this is supported by the survey which found that 84% of survey respondents specifically aimed to reduce food miles through buying food from Eostre. Typical explanations included: “If good, tasty food is available locally, it seems pointless to buy potentially inferior goods from a supermarket which have often been imported from across the globe”, “It cuts out the environmentally-destructive chain of transport from one end of the world to another” and “It supports the local economy, reduces food miles, and enhances the local countryside”. However, at present consumers sometimes face a trade-off between local and organic attributes of their food, and must choose according to where their priorities lie, between conventionally-produced local food, and imported organic produce. One customer stated “I don’t believe [imported] organic is worth the food miles”. Eostre currently supplements its range with imported organic produce, where gaps exist, but an increase in local production capacity would help to fill many of those gaps.

5.2 Reducing Ecological Footprints

A commitment to sustainable farming and food is evident in Eostre’s mission statement above, and this is forcefully supported by their customers. Of the customers who responded to the survey, 94% stated that they bought from Eostre because they believed local and organic food was better for the environment. For example, one respondent replied “[buying local organic food] is important because we believe in sustainability regarding our environment, and we are committed to reducing our ‘eco-footprint’ in any areas we can”, and another stated “I feel I owe it to the Earth”, while another explained “I am very concerned about the effects of pesticides and pollution on us and the environment”, and another was motivated by the fact that “organic farming is better for wildlife”. As these and previous statements suggest, the environmental factors being considered are farm-related (pesticide and fertiliser use), transport-related (food miles), and packaging-related (85% of respondents chose Eostre in order to reduce unnecessary food packaging). Another customer explained “to me, it represents a more harmonious ecological balance between that which we produce, consume and waste”.

5.3 Community Building

In addition to strengthening the local economy and reducing environmental impacts, Eostre is also a community-building initiative. Local economic and community links are built up between farmers and consumers, and consumers gain a sense of connection to the land, through the personal relationships which develop. As one respondent explained, the appeal of Eostre was “the sense of communal participation, starting from the feeling that we all know – or potentially know – each other, and continuing on through wider issues, both social and environmental”, and another stated “I feel that ‘connectedness’ is important” while another reported that they liked Eostre because “it’s a cooperative; they are like-minded people”. These personal connections are developed in several ways: from face-to-face contact on the

market stalls or with box-deliverers, and secondly through newsletters which share stories, recipes and news about the farms, and invite customers on educational farm visits. Three quarters (76%) of those customers who completed the survey reported that they were motivated to purchase from Eostre because they liked to know where their food has come from, and a quarter (25%) specifically liked the face-to-face contact with growers. This sense of community is echoed by another respondent who favours local organic food because “purchasing it links me with a part of the community which operates in a far healthier and more ethical way than the wider economic community”, and another felt that “organic food helps bring back small community living instead of alienated individuals feeling unconnected”.

Local organic food networks are builders of community and shared vision, and the Eostre market stall in Norwich is a good example of how this works: it is a convenient city-centre meeting point and source of information, open to everyone. The stall is decorated with leaflets and posters advertising a range of sustainable food and other environmental initiatives, for example anti-GM meetings, Green Party posters, alternative healthcare practices, wildlife conservation campaigns etc. This correctly reflects the interests of customers: 60% of respondents identified the Greens as the political party which best represented their views. But how socially inclusive is this community? Organic food is often dismissed as the preserve of an elite, on grounds of price, and claimed to be inaccessible to lower-income groups. In fact many of Eostre’s customers are from lower income brackets, broadly representative of the local populace. Comparing Eostre customers who responded to the survey, 14% of customers had a gross weekly household income of less than £150 (£7,800 a year), compared to 15% of the local population, and higher-income households were under-represented: only 17% of Eostre customers had household incomes of over £750 a week (£39,000 a year), compared to 23% of the local population (ONS, 2003). Only 8% of customers felt that eating organic reflected ‘taste and refinement’, suggesting that in this case, organic is not ‘posh nosh’. With such a high proportion of low-income customers, Eostre is achieving its aim of making fresh organic produce available to all social groups.

5.4 Collective Action

There are two ways in which Eostre is an expression of collective action for sustainable consumption. The first is through its structure – as a cooperative. Many of the farmers in the cooperative had previously sold organic produce to supermarkets, and had suffered from a drop in sales and prices during the recession in the early 1990s, as well as having a negative experience of dependency upon a single, distant buyer. This led some growers to seek greater control over their businesses by moving into direct marketing, and an informal inter-trading arrangement developed between a handful of small local organic growers, which formed the core of the cooperative. Eostre therefore aims to provide sustainable and stable livelihoods to its member growers, as a grassroots response to economic recession and vulnerability caused by a global food market – a local adaptation to globalisation in the food sector. By organising collectively, Eostre’s members achieve the scale necessary to access markets which small growers cannot manage alone, for example being able to supply market stalls all year round. The cooperative values were supported by customers: 70% of respondents said they chose to buy from Eostre in order to support a cooperative, and one stated “I like that local organic farmers work together rather than competing against each other for profit”.

The second collective action impact is through Eostre’s inroads into public sector catering through small-scale initiatives such as providing food for a primary school kitchen, and supplying the local hospital visitor’s canteen. These were important first steps, albeit an uphill struggle against the ingrained habits and beliefs among public sector catering managers, and institutional barriers such as the lack of a kitchen to feed patients in hospitals (cook-chill food being the norm). However, the changing public agenda on school meals as a result of Jamie

Oliver's 'School Dinners' TV programme has thrust local organic food provision into the limelight, and Eostre and parent NGO East Anglia Food Links have been identified as pioneers with important lessons to share, and currently heads of catering from seven of the ten East of England Local Education Authorities have agreed to work together with EAFL, on a programme of work to increase the use of sustainable and local food in their school meals (EAFL, 2005).

5.5 New Institutions

The successes which Eostre has achieved in the previous four categories add up to more than the sum of their parts: together they comprise the seeds of a new system of food provision, based upon cooperative and sustainability values (such as fair trade), and bypassing supermarkets in order to create new infrastructures of provision through direct marketing. Furthermore, their consumers actively support this activity, and many commented on how they enjoyed the opportunity to avoid supermarket systems of provision, for example: "I think that supermarkets are distancing people from the origins of food and harming local economies; I try to use supermarkets as little as possible", "[Eostre is] an alternative to a system which rips off producers, the planet etc", "I believe in a local food economy" and "I don't want supermarket world domination, extra food miles, packaging, and middle people making money!".

The consumer values expressed in these new institutions are quite different to those in mainstream systems of provision. For example, customers appear to be internalising calculations about social and environmental costs of conventional food production and transport, in order to respond to more sophisticated and inclusive price incentives than those in the marketplace. One stated "I like to pay the 'real cost' for my food" and another commented "While not always as cheap as supermarket produce, I am more comfortable knowing that a greater proportion of my money goes to the primary producers". A second difference is the embracing of seasonality and acceptance that certain foodstuffs will not be available for several months of each year. In addition, subscribers to the box schemes do not even have a free choice over what food they will receive, instead being given a box of mixed seasonal fruit and vegetables each week – one likened the inherent surprises to "having a Christmas present every week! I never know what the box will contain, it's a challenge to my cooking skills!", and others echoed the pleasure in adapting to seasonal availability. While a temporal lack of produce variety might be seen as a major failing in mainstream systems of food provision (the vision of empty supermarket shelves inducing panic!), within this infrastructure it is welcomed as an indicator of connection with the seasons and locality. One customer remarked "I reject the ethos of the supermarket that all products should be available all year round. I enjoy the seasonal appearance of purple sprouting broccoli, asparagus, etc", and many comments referred to creating new sustainable food systems, confirming the notion that Eostre is beginning to create new provisioning institutions.

6. CONCLUSIONS: GROWING SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION COMMUNITIES

Community action for sustainable development is a growing area of political and practical interest, but there is a dearth of empirical research to systematically evaluate its effectiveness, and understand the processes through which it takes place. To address this need, the paper began with the objective of developing a new evaluation framework for sustainable consumption based on the New Economics theories of sustainable development, and applying it to a case study of a local organic food cooperative. It found that the initiative was successful at achieving its aims of enabling and promoting sustainable consumption, as measured by the key indicators of localisation, reducing ecological footprints, building communities, acting collectively, and building new institutions. Furthermore, its consumers strongly supported these values and goals. These research findings indicate that local

organic food networks, of the type discussed here, provide an outlet for consumers to enact their non-mainstream – or ecological citizenship - values, and to join forces with like-minded people in building an alternative to globalised, mainstream food supply chains.

However, despite this success, there is enormous potential for this type of initiative to develop further if it could overcome the obstacles it currently faces. The first of these is financial. Eostre benefited from a DEFRA development grant to establish as a cooperative and begin marketing itself strategically, while developing wider links in Europe. Pioneering initiatives of this type inevitably face steeper learning curves than those who follow, and funding to support such socio-economic innovations is essential. The second obstacle relates to pricing, and the relatively high cost of local organic produce compared to imported supermarket fare. While a niche of committed environmentalists are prepared to internalise the social and environmental costs of regular food systems of provision, the same cannot be expected for wider markets of customers. Efforts to provide information on the food miles accumulated by particular products are one way forward, but ultimately, the full costs of transport and production methods must be incorporated into market prices, to reflect the true relative costs. Rising oil prices may achieve this indirectly. Third, public sector catering is a major opportunity for the supply of local organic food, and the quality of food served in schools, hospitals and prisons is becoming increasingly recognised as a factor in the health of children, patients and prisoners respectively. However, changes in infrastructure are required to allow this possibility to flourish – institutions reliant upon pre-prepared meals need to be encouraged and enabled to operate kitchens and source locally. Finally, raising the general public's awareness of environmental issues around food, through education and media campaigns, as well as increasing funding for activist groups, is seen as an important step to allow these initiatives to thrive and grow.

Given a conducive policy framework and appropriate funding to develop, local organic food initiatives could deliver substantial changes in behaviour and environmental impact on an everyday level, while constructing new social infrastructure and systems of food provisioning according to sustainability values. It is time to recognise the innovative potential of grassroots, community-based action for sustainable consumption.

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