Alternative food systems using space, time, integration and rules as narratives for sustainability transitions

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Abstract

Alternative food systems (AFSs) are seen as starting points for sustainability transitions in the wider agro-food arena. They include a wide array of food systems that are different from the ‘conventional’ ones. However, the literature often lumps the term ‘AFS’ without further differentiation. This review proposes a novel categorization of AFSs along four systemic attributes: space, time, integration and rules. The space attribute refers to the fact that AFSs tend to be more small-scaled, localized and horizontally integrated (e.g. community-supported agriculture, farmers’ markets, box schemes). A second attribute is time; emerging AFSs have put an emphasis on giving food enough time to grow, to be prepared with care and to be enjoyed in a social experience (e.g. the Slow Food Movement). A third attribute is integration; a broad family of AFSs (e.g. organic and biodynamic agriculture), inspired by the science of agroecology, attempt to integrate the increase of agroecosystem elements. A fourth defining attribute of AFSs is the attempt to change the rules and institutions that govern the interaction of value chain actors (e.g. Fairtrade, food sovereignty movement, food cooperatives). We propose that by developing intuitive categories to describe AFSs, we can create more powerful narratives to support AFSs with transformative potential. The proposed narratives should be tested in a multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary setting.

Introduction

The term ‘alternative food system’ is widely used to refer to food systems that are different from the ‘conventional’ and ‘industrial’ ones that are supposed to be more sustainable. Typically, alternative food systems (AFSs) have attempted to go into opposition against the vertically integrated, highly organized industrial food system. AFS initiatives to a large extent have also been triggered by the many problems associated with ‘industrial’ food systems. FSA (2007) defined AFSs as “…food supply that, in part or in full, consists or opposes the dominance of the conventional food networks…” Janssen (2008) proposed a set of characteristics that may have come in common: short distances between producers and consumers; smaller farming scale or a holistic approach to food production; alternative institutions such as food cooperatives, farmers’ markets, and Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) and local food-to-school linkages. Beyond gains of socio-economic fairness and ecologically oriented production, AFS also promised access to fresh, tasty food from a trusted source (Freidberg & Goldstein, 2011). Based on these characteristics, we structure our review of AFSs along the following attributes: space (local vs. global), time (just-in-time vs. the-time-it-takes), integration and holism (systemic vs. specialized), and rules (cooperation vs. exchange).

Space attribute: local food systems

Local food systems (LFS) aim to reduce the distance between producer and consumer, relying on fewer intermediaries and using direct marketing strategies. Examples of LFS include CSA, farmers’ markets, farm food outlets, box schemes and farm to school programs. The main characteristic of LFS is the face-to-face contact between food system actors, which potentially increases trust and accountability. LFS can thus create socio-economic benefits as they recreate a sense of connectedness in communities and may stabilize local economies by supporting local businesses and smaller scale farms. LFS can also reduce the environmental footprint of food systems by reducing food miles. Typical expressions of LFS are farmers’ markets. Group purchasing associations similar to the Japanese sokai (‘putting the producer face on the product’) exist nowadays in several European countries. Another type of LSF are CSA schemes that are now mostly started by farmers who seek to stabilize their livelihoods. Public procurement initiatives can also be considered LFS as most of these initiatives promote the sourcing of local agro-food products as a means to support the local rural economy. Finally, urban food systems as well as initiatives to reduce food losses and waste (e.g. food banks) are increasingly gaining attention and being put high on the policy agenda.

Integration attribute: agroecology and organic agriculture

The principles of agroecology inspired a broad family of ecologically minded systems that include organic agriculture as well as biodynamic agriculture, permaculture, and sustainable agriculture. Organic agriculture (OA) has been recognized to the sustainability of food systems. It is a holistic view of farming that attempts to create integrated socially, environmentally and economically viable agroecosystems. Beyond the farm, OA is considered a step towards an alternative food system and has been expanding rapidly in the last years. While organic farming, as well as other agro-ecological forms of agriculture, can be practiced independently from governance mechanisms and markets, certification is a necessary means to transmit attribute information to the consumer.

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Conclusions and Outlook

Referring to space, time, integration and rules, offers the opportunity to create simple, compelling narratives for promoting change in food systems. Such narratives are needed to guide strategic support for initiatives with genuine transformative potential. An ideal sustainable food system should have all space, speed, integration and rules dimensions. We propose to test the proposed categorisation in different settings in order to unlock the potential of AFSs in fostering sustainability transitions in the wide agro-food arena.

References
