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NEW DISTRIBUTION MODELS: THE ORGANIC FARMERS WAY TO FOOD SOVEREIGNTY

“Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems”. The organic movement developed and led by farmers who wanted to change the relation between consumer/citizen and producers, with an explicit critique to the distribution model that was affirming at that time and dominant today. The complete distance between consumers and producers had strongly weakened, if not eliminated, the role of producers in food consumption. The producer is substituted by a product without any local reference, coming from the “world market”. In this sense the meeting between organic and food sovereignty movements is natural, as both movements fight for consumer and producer rights to access to high quality, cultural

adequate and sustainable food. The main idea common to organic farming and food sovereignty movements is the right to choose the model of production by both farmers and consumers, that cannot be imposed by multinational companies of agrochemicals

and great food retailers through initiative of “green washing”.

The need of getting back peoples’ rights as the centre of the organic model, determines also the need for a new food distribution model, as food not be considered just a commodity. This paper is organised in 3 different sections: starting from analysing experiences of new distribution models in Italy led by farmers (individuals and organised), in section 1, the/ paper will propose public policies to support those experiences. Finally, an action plan for new models of distribution at European level will be proposed.

1. Experiences of short chain models of marketing in Italy led by farmers (individuals and organised)

During the last 10 years in Italy many farmers both individually and in groups found different solutions for supplying consumers directly via short supply chains. In this sense, it is important to learn about all these single experiences, developed for individual necessity of selling organic products with a right price, to understand how they work and how it is possible to create synergies among different experiences at national and regional level. I will briefly presents some of the more representative experiences in Italy:

Organized group of demand and supply (GOD/S): The idea is to create a group of both producers and consumers, associated to AIAB, that promote a responsible consumption based on local territory, seasons and direct exchange. The organized groups assure a fair price for both consumers and producers, considering them part of the same system. The group main activity is the collective purchase of local organic products but also guided taste events, cultural activities, technical trainings on organic farming, through which

the group participants share common objectives and find new way of collaboration.
(www.aiabumbria.com/it/godo)

Cilento Bio-District: The Italian national park of Cilento and Vallo di Diano is the territorial reference for the Cilento bio-district. The park is made up of 350 farms, using organic farming methods and 95 municipalities and three places of cultural interest (Paestum, Elea-Velia and Padula). Through the Cilento bio-district, public administrators, in partnership with AIAB, have played a key role in improving the quality of the territorial offer (tourist, farm product, ecc) in their region by producing relevant, informative, educational and promotional materials. The principal aim of the Bio-district is to concentrate the existing offers in the region through a unique and common brand. As many small products as possible are grouped together to create a diverse “basket of produce” that is available throughout the year. Promoting these products to potential market is an important role of the Bio-district.
(www.biodistretto.it)

The social co-operative Aretè: The social co-operative Aretè was founded in 1987 by voluntary movement involved in rehabilitation of prisoners in Bergamo. The cooperative produces organic food and activated a network of distribution of organic products together with local farmers. Products are sold both in the co-operative shop and in other local channels, e.g. public canteens, with the direct involvement of prisoners, that base their rehabilitation path on this project developing important skills for future integration in the society. (www.aretcoop.it)

Organic school canteens in small municipalities : A law to promote organic/GMO free food in schools exists in Italy since 2000. The small scale experiences, where organic food for public canteens in schools, hospitals and restaurants is directly sourced from local farmers, represents an interesting practice of sustainable development. This model promotes healthy nutrition and local agriculture at the same time, while respecting environment and health, seasonal and local markets and the relationship between organic producers and consumers. Agriculture, local cooking and taste are discovered by all kind of citizens by this experience. Educational and training paths on environment, food and importance of local markets are developed in the canteens for cooks and families.

City of Alternative Economies (CAE). The main objective of this project was to return the space of a former, long abandoned, slaughterhouse to the people of Rome. It is the first space in Europe to be dedicated to economic practices that are characterized by the use of low environmental impact processes. It also guarantees and equal redistribution of value to producers, since it operates not on the economic profit, but on the economics of solidarity with people and the environment. CAE wants to bring about change, disseminate information and educate, so that this alternative economy can become the basis of an alternative society. Organic is part of a major project where fair trade, free software, alternative energy, recycling, sustainable tourism, ethical finance are at the same time in the same place. The organic shop managed directly by the farmers, with organic products directly coming from local organic producers is one of the main important activities in the CAE (Spazio Bio). (www.cittadellaltraeconomia.org)

“Bio Sotto Casa” Commercial Platform. The “Bio sotto casa” is a three years promotional programme (2009-2012) promoted by the EU and the Italian government with the objective of increase the knowledge and the promotion of organic production, through several different activities involving individual consumers, consumers groups, producers etc. in Italy, France and Germany. main responsible partners for the project are AIAB, Coldiretti and AMAB. The project created three commercial platforms for

organic Italian production (north, centre and south), coming straight from producers. The platform works with France and Germany for a direct promotion on Italian organic farmers products in the EU market. Such experience may be an interesting approach to international marketing of organic products.

These are just some examples of a number of experiences that organic farmers are developing at different scale in Europe. These experiences put the aspirations and needs of those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies, rather than the demands of markets and corporations.

2. Which policies to support those experiences?

Working to increase peasants' empowerment in food production, distribution and consumption, experiences, like the ones described above are the base of a policy development to promote environmental, social and economic sustainability.

Based on individual or group action and necessities, they represent important best practices. Specific policies are needed to support these experiences and promote them as starting point for a new model of distribution in organic farming. The majority of organic farmers are still selling their products to large retailers which just some times are specialized in organic. The price increase for every step between producers and citizen and the farmers' income is not proportional to their contribution to reach sustainable development goals. Starting from existing experiences in Italy and Europe I will present important policies opportunities that can be developed and spread to promote new distribution models for organic agriculture.

The main role in Europe is played by CAP (Common Agricultural Policy) which could, with the rural development pillar, give an important support to local initiative based on rural economies. Specific actions should be included to promote local market and local economies.

Fiscal and sanitary aspects are often an obstacle for new distribution models. Specific regional laws can help for a simplification of procedures, necessary in case of direct contact between farmers and consumers. Many experiences of ethical purchasing groups in Italy have already developed some interesting practical proposals of procedures (www.retegas.org). Another important opportunity is Green public procurement (GPP)¹ based on the idea of bringing environmental concerns into the public authorities tendering process for goods and services. The GPP is a powerful instrument that public authority can use to promote local distribution through the consumption of local organic food in public canteens (schools, hospitals, public offices etc).

At political level access to public land is an important point to promote young and social cooperatives to develop their projects (es. Aretè). Even if sometimes they have no experience in farming, social cooperatives and young people have a fundamental role in communicating organic product values and principles to consumers due to their social background. Those elements, combined with production and farming training, are the base for successful local distribution experiences. An interesting example in Italy is the initiative to give access to social cooperatives to estates confiscated from the Mafia. A

¹ http://ec.europa.eu/environment/gpp/index_en.htm

specific law exists and several cooperatives in Sicily and other part of southern Italy are already working to produce organic food on these lands. They represent a successful niche market experience at national level (www.liberaterra.it).

The Bio-district experiences (four in Italy at the moment) represent the identification of organic agriculture as a model of rural development by local public authorities, generating a virtuous process for sustainability. A Bio-district European network should

be recognized as a local development tool by the EU.

The role of research in developing new policies is central. For this reason in the 8th framework programme on European Research it is important to ask for a specific theme of research that, starting from the study of existing experience and directly involving them, can sustain new distribution models that contribute to local development. In this sense also promotional programmes have a significant role in increasing organic consumption and informing consumers about organic principles. A common understanding of such principles is the base of the collaboration among producers and consumers in new distribution models.

A very relevant issue for distribution models based on direct contact between producers and consumers is certification. Appropriate certification models, alternative to classical third part certification, should create a flexible choice for single contexts (e.g. group certification and Participatory Guarantee Systems PGS). The possibility of choosing the certification model can allow the simplification of procedures for local distribution activities.

3. New Distribution models at regional, national and European level

All over the world, groups, organizations and collectives are struggling to take back control of their lives. As financial, environmental and democratic crises become increasingly

severe, our food and agricultural systems are increasingly becoming a battleground for these struggles. It is time for the organic farming movement to come to the forefront and build a new way of organizing our food systems. The promotion of the proposed policies should start from the creation of a European Network of new distribution models. Across Europe people are organizing from the grassroots to take back control of their food and agricultural systems. Starting from the regional level it will be crucial to build a database with the existing experiences at European level. The promotion of local form of aggregation for organic farmers (e.g. Professional Organization) could results from this networking and promotion process. The networking process is starting from sharing experiences, that are developed by individual initiatives and an EU project on adult learning (life long learning) . The idea of travelling to visit other organic farmers is at the base of innovation in the organic sector.

The organization of exchange visit is the existing starting point to build the network and the database. The existence of these two main elements will be at the base of a new political framework for food distribution, based on the described policies. The landmark meeting

in this sense has been the European Food Sovereignty Forum

“Nyeleni” (Krems, Austria, August 2011). The Forum has been developed by participating organizations, individuals and initiatives from all over Europe in an inclusive bottom up process. Environmental, social justice, trade and development organizations also joined the call for Food Sovereignty in Europe and worldwide. The organic farming movement is contributing to promote transparent trade that guarantees just incomes to all peoples as well as the rights of consumers to control their food and nutrition.

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