

The local food movement in Belgium: from prefigurative activism to social innovations

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Abstract

This article provides an analysis of the action logics and challenges that underline the evolution of the local food sector in Belgium and the challenges that these actors face in a new stage of the movement for local, organic and fair food.

Since 2000, disparate local movements have spread all over Belgium, in the wave of the alter-globalization movements, critical consumerism and prefigurative and concrete actions against neoliberalism.

Regional networks of those groups have progressively emerged, and have become socio-political actors. While prefigurative activism and the original critical stances towards markets and mainstream economics remain present in many groups, a rising part of the local food activists now draw on a confluence of critical consumption, ecological transition, the social economy and solidarity and local development.

Local food in Belgium: from activists' micro-local initiatives to institutional alliances

Since the early 2000s, alternative food networks have become increasingly popular in Belgium. Under different modalities, they put “consumers-citizens” directly in touch with local producers from which they purchase vegetables, fruits and other food.

The network of “neighbourhoods for local food”, “Voedselteams”, counts 171 purchasing groups in Flanders, totalling over 4,000 households who buy their vegetables and fruits from a hundred small and medium farmers, a third of which are certified organic, and all from the Flemish Region. 94 “groups for solidarity purchase and for peasant agriculture” (mostly known by the French acronym GASAP) are active in Brussels. In French-speaking Wallonia, over 150 “collective purchasing groups” (in French “Groupe d’Achat Commun” or GAC) are active¹. Some of them, like that of the “Beau-Mur” neighbourhood in Liège (a town of 250,000 inhabitants) provide over 80 households with local foods.

The revival of local food initiatives in the early 2000s in Belgium was closely connected with the alter-globalization movement, and in particular with a culture of activism that focuses on prefigurative actions, where activists consider that changing the world starts with concrete actions in everyday life. By then, the local food movement was composed of dozens of small local groups

¹ <http://www.asblrcr.be/carto>

that wanted to preserve their autonomy, inter-personal relationships and local roots and were thus very reluctant to associate with institutional, political and economic actors. The first part of the article will focus on this culture of activism and its dilemma.

While this local and prefigurative approach remains present in most local food networks, the sector has considerably evolved in the last 10 years, as the second part of the text shows.

A set of factors and actors such as the creation of regional coordination networks, NGOs' campaigns and support by public administrations have contributed to a fast expansion of the local food sector. This expansion and the new actors inevitably change the stances and dynamic of the sector, notably through a rather classic institutionalization process, as the second part of the text will show. Original stances, concepts of social and the criticism of the consumerist society remain present in some initiatives, but are now combined with less contentious and more entrepreneurial approaches. Such combinations inevitably revive some structural dilemmas of the local food movement. At the same time, they may also open new opportunities for social innovations.

Local food movements in French-speaking Belgium (Brussels and the Walloon Region, approximately 5.5 million inhabitants) constitute an interesting case study to understand two cultures of activism that are at the core of many local food movements, and their encounter. The first one is grounded in prefigurative activism and claims to change the world by maintaining strong local roots. Promoters of the second logic of action insist on the need to cooperate with institutions and upscale the movements to enlarge its social and political impact. The article shows that the two logics are constitutive of the movement. While the early steps of the movement were grounded in the more activist logic and the second one becomes dominant as the movement institutionalize, both are articulated at each step of the evolution of the movement.

The analysis draws on two kinds of data. Interviews and observations in local food networks and initiatives have been conducted during three periods: 2003-2004, 2008 and 2014-2015. After classic semi-directed interviews, the dialogue with the actors of food movements or networks gave space to particularly insightful "reflexive dialogues" on the result hypothesis and analyses. The article also draws on a wide range of articles by French-speaking Belgian researchers and an abundant grey literature and actors' "self-analyses". A wide range of local researchers have produced a scholarly literature in various disciplines, including sociology (e.g. de Bouver, 2009; Verhaegen, 2011), agronomy (Stassart, Baret et al, 2012), philosophy (Luyckx, 2014), social economy (e.g. Mertens, 2014) and transdisciplinary research (Dedeuwaerdere, 2013; Popa, Guillermin & Dedeuwaerdere T. 2015; CATL, 2015), as well as a wide set of reports and analyses by local civil society organizations (e.g. Barricade, 2012-2015; Oxfam reports 2015; Capocci, 2014; Baguette, 2015).

A new impetus for the Local Food Movement

A new wave of local food networks

Local food networks are far from new. Such networks were actually widespread in Belgium and in some parts of France in the 19th century (Zimmer, 2011). Some kept working or re-appeared throughout the 20th century, such as the “Collective purchase group” (GAC in the French acronym) of the Seraing, an industrial suburb of Liège, which has been active since 1973.

The current renewal of local food networks in Western Europe, and notably in France (Zimmer, 2011), Italy (Toscano, 2011) and French-speaking Belgium finds its roots in the alter-globalization movement in the early 2000. In France, the new local food network setting, AMAP², was launched in 2001 by small peasants and a local section of the alter-globalization network ATTAC and was directly inspired by the US groups for “Community Supported Agriculture”.

In Liège, two social and cultural centres particularly active in the local alter-globalization movement were also among the first ones to start direct purchase groups for local food. The “Beau Mur” hosts both the local section of ATTAC and one of the larger group of local food consumers in town. It gathers over 80 families every Tuesday. A frontrunner of the local alter-globalization movement and the heart of the “Social Forum in Liège” in mid-2000s, the autonomous social and cultural centre “Barricade³” launched its “GAC” as early as 1999. It organizes a dozen talks a year about food, denouncing the hold of transnational corporation over food and pointing to concrete alternatives. In 2013, Barricade was again the main initiator of a new model of local food network: the “Liège Food-Earth Belt” (“Ceinture Aliment-Terre Liégeoise”, see below). It involves dozens of actors from different sectors and promotes the production and local food consumption.

As I have showed elsewhere (Pleyers, 2010: 35-105) Barricade and most of the local food initiatives emerged in a specific part of the alter-globalization movement, bathed in a culture of activism⁴ that focuses on prefigurative activism, personal subjectivity and a concept of change rooted in everyday life.

Critical consumption

As Claire Lamine (2008:40-52) has shown, individuals and families join collective purchasing groups for diverse motivations: an easy and trustful access

² “Association for the support of Peasant Agriculture”, in French “Association pour le Maintien de l’Agriculture Paysanne” (AMAP).

³ For a short descriptive and analytical overview of the cultural centre Barricade in English, see Pleyers, 2010, in particular pages 68-73. On Barricade’s local food network, see Louviaux, 2011 (in French). www.barricade.be/

⁴ I understand “culture of activism” as a consistent set of normative orientations, concepts of the world, of social change and of the movement’s role and internal organization that produces a specific logic of action.

to organic products, friendly relations with neighbours and fellow local participants, the will to support small farmers and the local economy.

Most activists I interviewed in the early 2000s insisted on another argument: it provides a possibility of “implementing a concrete action” against the excesses of industrial agriculture and its environmental consequences and to support a concrete alternative, to show that “another world is possible” and that it starts here and now, by acts in daily life. When setting up or joining a local food networks, they claim to “regain control” of their choices as consumers, to feel themselves as “consum’actors” rather than passive consumers, and to directly engage with a range of concerns that are both personal, collective and global, from health to climate change.

In the literature, “responsible consumption” has been defined as “the deliberate and conscious attention to consumer decisions to translate political positions related to legal concepts and global responsibilities” (Sassatelli, 2006: 220). To this “responsible” dimension of alternative consumption practices, part of the interviewees and most of those who initiated a local food network add a resolute criticism to the consumption society, over-consumption and global markets.

I would rather refer to their practices as “*critical consumption*” (Pleyers, 2011), as these actors inscribe “responsible consumption” acts in a critical stance towards the consumerist society and the “domination of markets” and consider it as part of a broad movement towards a deep transformation of society and its cultural orientations. Their aim is not only to consume better, but to consume less and to promote a different society, based on “voluntary simplicity” (de Bouver, 2009), de-growth and a different idea of happiness.

Critical consumption thus refers to a social and cultural movement (in the sense of A. Touraine (1978) and Melucci (1989)): a historical actor that challenges some of the core normative orientations of our society. As with any social movement, it should not be directly identified with a concrete social actor but rather refers to a particular meaning, a dimension of action that is embodied in a series of practices and at different level by a range of groups and individuals. Critical consumption is not confined to the food sector. It is embodied in a range of practices that have widespread all over Belgium. In Wallonia and in Brussels, over 120 local exchange systems⁵ (exchange of products, services, knowledge and assets) are active in Wallonia and Brussels and “gift fairs” (“donneries”) are established or regularly held in 52 towns.

Prefigurative activism and the resistance of subjectivities

This “critical consumption movement” is anchored in a culture of activism that conceives social change as rooted in prefigurative actions, daily life, local social relations, lived experience and the local level. Rather than political rhetoric and arguments over macro-economics, they withstand the global markets by their

⁵ <http://sel-lets.be>

everyday life, local “conviviality” and a sense of personal responsibility. The consistency between one’s actions and values is at the core of their commitment, which is thus both prefigurative and performative. The “other world” starts here and now, in concrete alternatives that includes consuming less and opting for local and seasonal food. The local consumers’ groups are antechambers that allow citizens to prefigure practices of a different, fairer and more sustainable world. They provide a space to experiment alternative practices and become “spaces of experience”, understood *“as places sufficiently autonomous and distanced from capitalist society and power relations which permit actors to live according to their own principles, to knit different social relations and to express their subjectivity”* (Pleyers, 2010).

Resistance is transcribed and lived in the acts of everyday life and life itself is at the heart of alternatives, to the point that some “critical consumers” are reluctant to consider themselves as militant: “For me, it's not activism. It's just a change in our way of life” (a student, Louvain-la-Neuve, interview, 2012).

Activists and “ordinary citizens” who follow this path protest against the manipulation of needs and information by the consumerist society. They oppose the rules of “society of consumerism, competition and comparison” (Christophe, interview, Louvain-la-Neuve, 2013):

“It is a struggle to de-alienate oneself. Once you become more aware of your needs, you simply become happier” (David, Brussels, 2012).

They present themselves as “objectors to growth and speed” and refuse “the monopoly of economists in the determination of what well-being means only on the basis of economic growth and GDP”. This logic of experience and prefigurative practices and this aspiration to recuperate autonomy are also embodied by a growing number of activists to become “prosumers” by growing vegetables or producing their own jams or honey.

The meanings and aims of their practices don’t find their roots in the utopia of a rapid global change but in a sense of personal responsibility and the personal requirement of a greater consistency between ones practices and values. Self-transformation, reflexivity and the relationship to oneself is at the core of their commitment:

“I think that changing oneself is central. For me, it is clear that in my way of being committed, the most important thing is to maintain my integrity and that my practices are consistent with the values I advocate” (Sofie, Brussels, 2012).

“It is first and foremost a way of refusing to play a game I do not agree with. At least with the vegetables, I do not play the game, I do not provide more grist to the mill.” (Jerome, participant in an AMAP in Paris, Focus Group, 2012).

The relation to the other is another core dimension of these “convivial” movements. To the anonymity of relations of the (super-)markets, they oppose the authenticity and usability of local ties. Faced with a society “that individualizes” and “subjects all our relationships to money”, they place the quality of social relationships at the heart of their lifestyle and alternative practices, being the use of bicycles as transportation, carpooling or the weekly meetings of the local food groups (Hubaux, 2011). Behind this wide range of local and micro initiatives there is actually a project of societal transformation that aims at “moving from productivity to conviviality, to replace technical values by ethical values” (Illich, 1973: 28). These movements aim at “recreating social ties”. The gift is honoured in the initiatives of “incredible edibles” in which those who grow a vegetable share a part of their harvest with neighbours dropping it on the squares of villages or neighbourhoods. As stated in their slogan “Less goods, more links”, “voluntary simplifiers” maintain that the reduction of material consumption is valuable because it limits one’s environmental impact but also because it gives time to develop friendly social relations (de Bouver 2009). Collective gardens have also spread in Belgian cities and towns. They provide places of conviviality and encounters beyond the usual social and cultural barriers. Some of these gardens combine with social reinsertion projects. Some aim to participate in the integration of vulnerable layers of the population (Winne, 2009).

From local groups to global change

A distinct approach of the movement’s organization flows from this concept of social change. For these groups, conviviality and friendly relationship among the local group members as well as horizontality and active participation are not only bysides of an alternative food supply. They are a full part of the process and the performative movement as they prefigure a different world.

Many collective purchase groups thus do not want to grow beyond a certain number:

“After twenty [families taking part in the local food group], it is better to create a second group, because once this limit is overtaken, different problems arise and it becomes difficult to maintain the same relations among members.” (an activist from Barricade in Louviaux, 2003 : 48).

These activists believe a global change will arise from the multiplication of diverse, autonomous spaces of experience. Thus, when someone becomes interested in Barricade’s Collective Purchasing Group, activists respond:

“Rather than join us, better go and see what is happening in your neighbourhood. If there is no collective purchasing group in your neighbourhood, build it.” (an activist of Barricade, interview, 2003).

Rather than enlarging its various groups, many groups thus opt for “emulation” (Tarde, 2001) and “swarming” rather than a growing organization (Pleyers, 2010: 93):

“We don’t seek to build a big organization but many, many small organizations, each maintaining its specificities.”

By doing so, they hope to maintain convivial and participatory group dynamics and to counter the trend towards institutionalization that usually characterizes civil society organizations and solidarity economy projects. When a group grows, the interpersonal dimension progressively gets lost and the separation between the project entrepreneurs and the more passive “consumers” widens.

These actors lead us to reconsider the importance of local level in a globalized world. Local movements usually receive little consideration from social movement scholars, who consider that their focus on the local level results from either a limitation to the selfish defence of local and particular interests of NIMBY movements, or the inability to successfully bring their demands at the national scale (McAdam, Tarrow, Tilly, 2001). A comprehensive understanding of their culture of activism shows instead that these movements remain local because the “local” scale and territories have provided spaces where actors and alternative projects arise, other forms of democracy are experimented and concrete practices of emancipation in the 21st century are implemented. Any confusion between the territorial scale of a movement and the level of its societal meaning must thus be avoided.

By focusing their activities on the local level, some movements seek to improve the living conditions of their members but also, for many of them, to lay up the foundations for societal transformation. For these activists, social change is not limited to the local scale, but they resolutely conceive it in a bottom-up approach. Often condemned for being tiny, those experiences assert the idea that the fulfilment of democracy requires its values to enter the economic arena and practices (Laville, 2010:26; Hart, Laville, Catani, 2010). The core of critical consumerism lies precisely in this will to combine the implementation of concrete practices at the local scale with a critical challenge of the place of consumption and the economy in our society.

While critical consumers and (ecological) transition activists (Hopkins, 2009) proudly claim that they go beyond political rhetoric and implement concrete alternative practices, this concept of social change however also faces some challenges and limitations. The sustainability of the project requires to ensure economic viability for consumers and producers and to tackle institutional and political dimensions of local food issues. The spread from self-transformation or change in a limited local group to larger scale transformations often remains a blind-spot in the overarching quest for society change. Is it possible to change the world "bite after bite" as proposed by food movement activist Ellix Katz (2009)? Will prefigurative movements at local level translate in systemic

change? Or is it just about multiplying islands of alternative practices in an ocean of consumerism? One may recall that the rise of critical and responsible consumption and of the public awareness of global warming are concomitant with an historic expansion of consumption society and one of the fastest increases in car sales in history⁶.

A new stage: New actors and institutionalization

Expansion and transformations

After a first stage marked by the multiplication of small size local groups (“Groupes d’Achat Commun”, GACs), local food networks are now settled in the social, political and urban landscape of Belgium. They mobilize thousands of citizens and dozens of producers every week. The movement has also gained visibility and access to some resources, including public paid jobs for its coordination.

In Flanders, the “neighbours’ food network” “Voedselteams” has strengthened their regional coordination which now counts six subsidized jobs. Its efficient coordination allowed the “Voedselteams” to gain visibility and initiate collaborations with the regional state institutions and government. Regional coordination bodies have also emerged in Wallonia and Brussels: the “Responsible Consumer Network” and the “Brussels Actors Network for Sustainable Food” (RABAD). The latter was established in 2008 at the initiative of the a local institution (IBGE) and with the support of the Research Centre of Consumers (CRIOC) to foster collaborations and exchange of information among the 42 member organizations and to raise awareness on local food among the population. These two coordination bodies quickly gained access to public funding, which is far more accessible in Belgium than in most other countries (Faniel, Gobin & Paternotte, 2017). Their professional staffs are now able to provide support to the creation of new local food groups and have contributed to the visibility of local food in the media and institutional arenas.

The access to professional jobs and resources has definitively empowered the local food sector. It has also led local associations to amend some of their original stances and practices:

"Inside, there has been some change in our organization mode. It is still collective, but is much more structured than before "(an employee of “Barricade”, interview, 2014).

Activists and organizations of the local food movement are confronted with the classic “dilemma of institutionalization” (Jasper 2014; Pleyers 2012): it enables

⁶ In spite of the growing awareness of global warming, car sales are increasing at a historic pace. 69,464,432 were sold in 2016 following the International Organization of Motor Vehicle Manufacturers, setting a new sales record. <http://www.oica.net/wp-content/uploads//pc-sales-2016.pdf>

access to resources and allow the movement structure to be more efficient and to reach more consumers and producers but also changes the operating mode and away some initiatives of the radical critique of consumerism that was the origin of the movement for local food.

The local food sector in French speaking Belgium has undergone a partial institutionalization process. Such a process entails internal and external dimensions. Internally, most movement organizations evolve from loose structures to professionalized, hierarchical organizations (Tilly 1986, Kriesi 1993). Externally, some movements are progressively integrated into institutional politics (Tarrow 1998) or become *self-help networks*, whose main purpose is to provide services to their members (Kriesi 1996).

While institutionalization is a classic path of evolution for most social movement, the dilemmas it raises are particularly challenging for a movement that was rooted in the culture of activism in which the renewal of local food in Belgium was rooted. While most leading actors of the local food movements in the 2000s shared strong autonomous, anti-institutional and de-commodification stances, today's most visible and dynamic "entrepreneurs" (McCarthy & Zald, 1977) of the local food movement in Belgium collaborate with public institutions and some even promote regional development projects and policies.

After a period dominated by the networks of "local food consumers groups", a new model of confluence has spread in the local food movement in French speaking Belgium.

While the local food sector mostly relied on local purchase groups formed by a limited number of families and small local producers, the new dynamic pole are the "City Food-Earth Belt" (in French: Ceinture Aliment-Terre) that gather a wide range of social, economic and institutional actors concerned with local food issues.

The first "City Food-Earth Belt" was launched in Liège in 2013. Once more, the small activist cultural center "Barricade" has played a major role in the preparation, the launch and the development of this "Liège Food-Earth Belt" (Ceinture Aliment-Terre Liégeoise, "CATL"). The project is inspired by both the Transition Initiatives and the solidarity economy sector (Capocci, 2014). It gathers local food consumers' groups, other forms of "citizens-consumers" groups and initiatives, local producers, local branches of NGOs, representatives of local governments and administrations, and actors from the solidarity economy sector.

Some dimensions of critical consumption and prefigurative activism remain salient in the new project. However, in the CATL as in other "Local Transition Initiatives" (Hopkins, 2009), the most conflictual and contentious stances of critical consumption have been downsized in favour of a more collaborative approach with actors of civil society, the economic world and local institutions. Discourses on "economic de-growth" have thus been combined with (and sometimes transformed into) projects of "regional economic development

projects”.

As Mary Kaldor (2003:83) recalls, the institutionalization process entails a “taming process” and “taming is not just about access [to resources and to institutional politics arena]. It is about adaptation of both sides. When authorities accept part of the agenda of protest, the movements modify their goals and become respectable”. In the terms of Alain Touraine (1973: 354), “The more movements become interest groups, the more they risk losing their historicity⁷”.

Extension to other civil society actors

The diffusion of the local food issues to social, political and economic actors beyond the original activist circles constitutes both a success and a challenge for the local food movement⁸ as it is obliged to transform itself.

In recent years, Belgian NGOs have shown a rising interest in food related topics. The campaigns conducted by environmental organizations and development NGOs — including Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, WWF, Oxfam, the coalition of development NGOs CNCD — have contributed to increase public awareness beyond activists’ circles and to frame food as a social, political and citizens’ issue. Most NGOs presented local food as a major and easily accessible alternative and responsible practice that contribute to tackle climate and environmental issues. These campaigns have been successful in extending the visibility of local food initiatives in progressive and even mainstream media, bringing more people to implement more responsible choices as consumers, and so reduce the particularly high of the Belgians (WWF, 2014: 37). Such campaigns however reduce the local food movement to its environmental and health impact, while they undermine other dimensions of the original project, including the horizontal and active participation of engaged consumers in local groups and criticism of the hyper-consumption society.

Local authorities

The development of the local food movements in Belgium also illustrates the need to go beyond the strict separation between civil society and political actors. Local authorities are often considered as targets of local movements activists, for example in their campaigns to promote school food. In some cases, local authorities and institutions should also be considered as full actors of the local food movement. Various cities and local governments have become efficient

⁷Touraine defines historicity as the actor’s capacity to challenge society’s major normative orientations.

⁸Trans-sectoral connections have been eased by the small size of French-speaking Belgium and dense interconnections among its activists. Some actors who aimed at connecting different strands of the population and sectors of civil society were among the first ones to launch local food consumers’ groups, as was the case for “Barricade” in Liège.

brokers between food activists and the population. They are able to reach out to a much broader population and to raise awareness of food issues beyond the progressive middle class that forms the main share of local food activists and consumers.

The Belgian branch of the “Max Havelaar” NGO has launched the "Fair Trade Towns" campaign⁹ to encourage municipalities to change consumption practices in their local administration and schools, and to set up "consum'actors workshops" and campaigns to raise awareness on food issues (both targeting local food and fair trade) among their citizens and local restaurants. The involvement of the city of Ghent in the promotion and implementation of "veggie Thursday" shows the interest of such collaboration. For example, every Thursday, all of the restaurants in the city don't offer meat. The initial concerns about losing customers were quickly proven false and “veggie Thursday” is now used as a tourism argument on the city website. The local public institution “Brussels Environment” has funded various programs to promote more sustainable consumption, from "sustainable school food" to new collective gardens. It also provides training in schools and financial aid to schools that develop projects focusing on sustainable food.

In 2016, the regional government of Brussels has launched its “Good Food strategy”: a five-year policy program with ambitious objectives, including a 30% local production for fruits and vegetables consumed in the Brussels Region by 2035. The program strongly draws on existing citizens' initiatives, including the local consumption groups, and actively seeks to federate these initiatives and to increase their visibility. This strategy is representative of the growing role of local authorities in the local food movement, not only as institutional ally but as proper actor of the movement, with a protagonist role to promote it in the public space and public policies but also to structure it and contribute to its internal evolution.

Olivier De Schutter (2014), former UN rapporteur on the Right to Food and leading scholar and activists of the food movement in Belgium, and Rob Hopkins (2009), the founder of the “Transition Movement” that has inspired various food movement activists in Wallonia, strongly promote collaborations between local transition initiatives and cities, municipalities and regions. Analyses of local initiatives for ecological transition in France (Frémeaux, Kalinowsky, Lalucq, 2014) and case studies in countries of the North and South of the planet recounted by activist M.M. Robin (2014) show that support of local institutions or the state play a major role in supporting local food initiatives (whether on consumers or producers side) at the critical stage when they need to ensure their sustainability on medium and long terms.

Cities, municipalities and regions play a major role in developing local food supply chains by ensuring sustainable outlets. In England, many municipalities

⁹This campaign is partly funded by the Belgian Development Cooperation and the Walloon Region, which illustrates the close connection between public institutions and civil society in the Belgian regions.

provide food from local producers for school canteens, local government or penitentiary centers (Seyfang, 2008). In France (Jaud & Mulberry, 2011) and the USA (Poppendieck, 2010), local food movement organizations have campaigned for school food programs based on local produce and quality. While still rare, similar initiatives have started to spread in Belgium too, mostly thanks to direct connections between producers and local authorities or the head of institutions. For instance, on the initiative of Thierry Wimmer, the young mayor of a rural municipality and president of the hospital committee, the main hospital in East Belgium now purchases its milk directly to the local small farmers cooperative “Fair-Bel”.

Local food as a contribution to a regional development project?

In Flanders, the neighbours’ local food network “Voedselteams” has developed a dialogue with the regional government and has largely inspired its strategic development plan for short food supply chains (Verhaegen, 2012; Van Gameren, Ruwet et al., 2012).

Just a few years ago, most of the groups and initiatives around local food in Wallonia were reluctant to any collaboration with public institutions and large scale projects. Today, a growing number of activists within the local food movement in the region bet on convergences between critical consumption, ecological transition, the social economy and local development projects.

So far, regional authorities’ interest in the local food initiatives has not been raised by ecological concerns, but by local economy and jobs. A 2014 report (Verdonck et al., 2014) suggests that the local food sector accounted for 2,500 jobs in Brussels, and that this number could be doubled thanks to public incentives and the development of local food sector, including new distributions channels and in urban agriculture. The regional authorities immediately launched initiatives on that basis and included “sustainable food” as one of the four axes of the “Job-Environment Alliance” that gathers civil society actors, research centres, local public administrations and schools.

Likewise, leading actors of the Liège City Food Belt initiative insist on “the potential creation of hundreds of jobs that cannot be delocalized” thanks to a “food chain that is entirely local, from production to consumption”. They now define the CATL as “an open community to develop and support new initiatives both on the consumers and the production side”. It intends to become “an incubator of social entrepreneurs” and to “boost the local economy through the multiplication of projects related to local or fair trade food”. The idea of social entrepreneurship, very present in the social economy sector (Gendron, 2006; Nyssens, 2006), is at the heart of many initiatives bringing them closer to more classic (social) business projects.

The initiators of the Liège City Food Belt share the conviction that the promotion of local development entrepreneurs is a part of a project that seeks a deep transformation of society notably through a de-globalization process. The contribution to local and regional economic development assigned to the City

Food Belt projects seems however to not be entirely compatible with the de-growth perspective that was at the core of most local food movement initiatives a decade ago.

Local economy and more conventional food system

The renewed interest in local food initiated by activists has also expanded the demand for local food, providing a space for local economic initiatives and “short distribution circuits” set up by small and medium farmers. The network “Farm point” (“Point Ferme”) was founded in 2011 in a semi-rural area near Liège. It now distributes 400 vegetable baskets and a hundred “meat boxes” from 15 local farmers a week in 100 delivery points. The visibility of food issues and of organic and local food in the public space has also fostered a rising interest in agroecology among Belgian farmers (Stassart et al., 2012; Dumont, Vanloqueren, Stassart & Barret, 2016)

To grasp the importance, impacts, and challenges to this sector and small and medium size farms requires overpassing cleavages between “alternative” and “conventional” food systems (Verhaegen, 2011). As researchers, it also requires us to foster synergies between research on “consum'actors”, local economy, food producers and agronomy (Baret, 2014) that are usually split in different disciplines (sociology, economy, rural studies, agricultural engineers...) and subfields (social movement studies, solidarity economy, rural and urban studies...)

To serve as a spur for market players, including supermarket retailers, is an indirect but significant impact of the local food movement. Collective actors are key actors in fostering individual consumers' choices, giving them visibility and providing them with a specific meaning (Pleyers, 2017). Alternative practices outside of conventional circuits have made visible some consumers' selection criteria (such as the food production place) that were hitherto neglected by the market. As the movement growth and gain media attention, the demand for local food becomes visible to retailers, who try to respond to it. As Rao (2009) has shown, civil society mobilization, concrete local initiatives and the construction of a collective identity as a movement are critical factors for these “rebels markets”. Once incorporated to the main retailers concerns, the sales of local food reach a much bigger scale as in alternative food network.

Capitalist markets are particularly swift when it comes to partially integrating criticisms made by social and cultural movements (Boltanski, Chiappello, 1999). Local and organic food is no exception. Such products are now found on the shelves of major Belgian supermarket chains. The original criticism to the consumption society has largely been lost in the process. Does the extension of responsible food consumption inevitably lead to muzzling radical criticisms to consumption society?

On the other side, local or organic food may be considered as a “Trojan horse” for criticism of the excesses of the consumption society that reaches the lives of millions of citizens. Many activists of the critical consumption movement thus consider local food as a particularly effective tool to open a path to critical

stances towards the excesses of the mass-consumption society. The young initiator of the “Altérez-Vous” cooperative and local food restaurant testifies:

"At first our project was not working. And then, we realized that starting with the food, we manage to get people interested in our project and our cooperative. Food affects everyone directly and people are interested in what they eat. From there on, we got people interested in cooperatives, solidarity economics and other social projects." (Louvain-la-Neuve, focus group, 2013).

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