July, 2005
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Final Report to Ekhagastiftelsen **Project Number**: 2003-51

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Project Summary: Participatory Supply Chain Management for the Sustainable Development of Local Agrifood Networks

Background and objective

The premise underlying this research project is that the survival of the small- and medium-scale farms that currently operate near modern cities and towns, both in Sweden and other industrialized nations, is dependent upon their ability to establish long-term sustainable relationships with local markets. Furthermore, if substantial quantities of food are to be produced and sold locally, then weekend farmers markets and vegetable-box schemes will need to be scaled-up, and new methods of food distribution and marketing that create stronger and wider links between farmers and customers, will need to be established. The objective of this project was to uncover existing and future bottlenecks to the development of innovative agrifood networks in the Stockholm area, and to create and document a participatory SCM platform, or set of operating routines, where farmers and consumers would be able to collaborate, in a systematic way, on the coordination of the fresh food trade in their local region. Over the course of one year, this participatory action research project worked with two agrifood networks in the Stockholm area - one well-established and one in the start-up phase - that demonstrated the most promise of becoming a high-capacity local food systems, in order to carry-out the project's objectives.

Theory and Method

The project utilized an action research (AR) methodology that allowed the researcher to interact with the organizers and producers of the two chosen agrifood networks in a collaborative way: allowing for the generation of 'real-world' insights gained through experiential, participatory interaction with practitioners. To ensure empirical rigor, the AR methodology was backed-up with traditional semi-structured individual interviews and semi-structured group discussions that focused on understanding the current and anticipated bottlenecks limiting the expansion of the network from the perspective of the producers and organizers of each of the studied agrifood networks. In addition, a detailed producer survey was used to gather raw data on producers and processors participating in each network.

Primary results

The results generated by this research project are threefold: 1) knowledge about the bottlenecks limiting the development of the agrifood networks studied, which were categorized as follows: pre-existent bottlenecks, informational bottlenecks, communication bottlenecks, production capacity bottlenecks, cultural bottlenecks and logistical bottlenecks; 2) contributions to the practical development of each of the networks studied, including: database development and logistics design assistance; 3) new understanding about the role of food processing and distribution in the sustainable development of agrifood networks, generally. The results of the project have been documented in the form of publications to be submitted to scholarly journals.

Conclusion

Although fulfilling the project's initial objectives proved challenging, the author's work in the two projects was successful in both generating understanding about how these innovative networks function, the constraints they face, and how they can be moved closer to creating more participatory structures for the interaction of producers and consumers of locally grown food, as well as expanding to meet a growing market demand. Both of the networks studied have benefited and will continue to benefit from differentiating themselves in the marketplace by focusing on the fact that the food they sell comes from local sources. Additionally, the local aspect of their production implies "traceability", which is becoming more and more of a concern as of late, due to increasing concern of outbreaks of food-borne illness. Through the learning generated while conducting this research, the need for a more coherent theory of agrifood network structure and function has become apparent. Utilizing the knowledge gained thus far, the remaining work of the author's doctoral studies will be devoted to this task.

Existing and eventual publications from the project include:

Haden, A., and H. Helmfrid. 2004. Järna, Sweden - Community consciousness as the base for a learning local ecological food system. *in* L. Seppänen, editor. Local and Organic Food and Farming Around the Baltic Sea. Center for Sustainable Agriculture, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, Ultuna.

Helmfrid, H., Haden, H. & M. Ljung. (Manuscript). The role of Action Research (AR) in environmental research projects: learning from a project on local organic food and farming.

Haden, A., Geber, U. and Salomonsson, L. (Manuscript). Structural modularity and the resilience of agrifood networks.