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Abstract — Driven by food-related health and environmental concerns, governments, private actors and civil society are increasingly thinking about new ways to organize the food system. As a result, new networks are emerging that are characterized by a new type of governance and embeddedness. This paper discusses the need to consider the links between network characteristics, governance and embeddedness to gain a deeper understanding of interdependencies in food networks. Based on an exploratory analysis of nine local food networks in Flanders, Belgium a socio-spatial network approach is presented. This approach includes the diversity of actors and institutions involved in food networks and how they are interconnected.

Keywords — governance, embeddedness, food networks

Emerging food networks

The consensus on increasing rationalization, efficiency and intensification that guided food system organisation since WWII seems to have lost its ground (Renting et al., 2003; Spaargaren et al., 2012). A new logic has emerged that incorporates new values: alongside economic efficiency and rationalization, health- and environmental concerns are considered equally important (Spaargaren et al., 2012; Wiskerke & Viljoen, 2012). Driven by these concerns, new networks are emerging that aim to establish new relations between food system actors. These networks can also be referred to as alternative food networks, because they offer a social, spatial and/or economic alternative to standardised food supply networks (Watts et al., 2005; Roep and Wiskerke, 2010). Since they aim to establish new linkages, the focus in these networks is no longer merely on e.g. farmer organisations, food retailers and processing industries; but also previously excluded actors are actively included in the development of new food networks (Wilson, 2001). For example farm shops are a way to reconnect producers and consumers, to regain consumer trust and to establish new institutions that guarantee food quality, food safety and a fair price for everyone involved. This example illustrates that besides changes in food production, processing and consumption, these emerging networks are accompanied by new values and institutions (Renting et al., 2003; Spaargaren et al., 2012).

These new types of governance are characterized by their embeddedness. Roep and Wiskerke (2010) distinguish four types that are relevant to food networks: societal (e.g. cultural or political background), network (i.e. network structure and actors’ places in it), territorial (i.e. localization of the network) and socio-material embeddedness (i.e. agro-ecological setting of food production) (Hess, 2004; Roep and Wiskerke, 2010). Combined, these multiple dimensions of embeddedness are key to establish shared values and rules in the food network, to involve the local community and society and to reground food in its particular agro-ecological setting. Hence they are key to the governance of food networks (Roep and Wiskerke, 2010). Because of the link between the development of food networks, governance and embeddedness, this paper proposes a socio-spatial network approach that provides an integrated perspective.

Methodology

This paper draws upon qualitative research that was done as part of a case-selection process. The aim of this selection process was to select two food networks that promote themselves as ‘local’. Another important criteria was that the food networks had to involve diverse types of actors. This was necessary to eliminate highly centralized star networks (e.g. direct sales networks) and decentralized networks (e.g. linear food supply chains) in order to study more complex processes of regulation and governance. Next, exploratory interviews were conducted with the representatives of nine initiatives in Flanders, Belgium about the actors that are involved, the (in)formal rules in the network, the functional roles of the actors, the embeddedness of the network, etc. The following section discusses the results of this analysis.

New food networks in Flanders, Belgium

Building on the differentiation Watts et al. (2005) make between weak alternative food networks and strong alternative food networks, two types of food networks can be distinguished within the nine initiatives that were studied. A first group consists of networks that promote regional food and production as a means to generate regional development, to stimulate local economies and/or to address a miss-match between the rural and the urban. This is in line with what Watts et al. (2005) define as weaker alternative food networks: the emphasis is put on the food that is circulated in the network, and less on the network itself. In our sample, these networks were initiated by public actors building on policy regulations. As a result, actors have to work under set institutions. Furthermore, these networks rely on subsidies, what implies that there are requirements associated that cannot be influenced by involved actors (Héritier, 2001). Nevertheless, there is no legal bond tying the actors to the network, so they can leave if they do not agree with them. An issue that stems from the leading role of public actors, is that it can be hard to find actors that are willing to take over that leadership role when the policy program ends. In order to deal with this, actors are being connected through meetings and in the collective making of agreements regarding the production, processing and distribution of the food products. The leading public actors determine the boundaries and stimulate others to shape the network according to their view within the set boundaries. This also stimulates the creation of an informal network, what would be beneficial to the provision of new ideas and impulses into the governance process (Loorbach, 2010). This type of governance where public and private actors cooperate, can be called co-governance (Héritier, 2001). In our sample, it seems that because of the central role of public actors, weaker food networks are characterized by a weaker societal and network embeddedness. However, within the networks, measures are taken to increase these types of embeddedness.

The second group are networks that have originated from grassroots initiative in response to concerns regarding food quality and/or safety. The emphasis is placed on the networks the food products are circulating in rather than on the products themselves, referred to as stronger alternative food networks by Watts et al. (2005). An important aim of these networks in our sample is community building, which they achieve through contacts during delivery/pick-up of the
food products and through the organisation of meetings and events. They strive to connect the members of their network – both within types of actors (e.g. amongst farmers) as well as between (e.g. consumers-producers) – through face-to-face contact. This helps to establish an informal network that supports the formal one (societal embeddedness), and stimulates trust between actors involved. These informal networks are beneficial for governance because they help actors to create new institutions that are representative to their values (Héritier, 2001). As for the weaker food networks in our sample, also the stronger ones are not bound by legalities. Because the network is regulated solely by private actors, this is called self-governance (Héritier, 2001). The stronger food networks in our sample are regulated through self-governance since only private actors are involved in the regulation. Further, the societal and network embeddedness seems higher because the network emerged from society itself and was often initiated by actors that already knew each other. Maintaining and nurturing the embeddedness is an important goal.

Although these two types of networks have different emphases and different ways to establish network embeddedness, the territorial embeddedness is constituted in a similar way. For the nine food networks that were studied, spatial delineation is in all cases based on administrative boundaries of the public actors involved, regardless if this involvement is active (e.g. participating in the network) or passive (e.g. through legislation in an area). Specifically, the localization of the network is limited by territorial boundaries. This can be hindering if networks want to expand beyond those boundaries, but can also be beneficial because the network can use territorial policy and characteristics to promote the food products they are circulating.

A SOCIO-SPATIAL NETWORK APPROACH

The results of the exploratory research discussed above illustrate a link between embeddedness, governance and network structure. This paper proposes a socio-spatial network approach that takes this link into account and allows to understand interdependencies between actors, institutions and territorialities, and the development of a food networks’ social and spatial structure. As a first step, a descriptive analysis of the food network reviews its social, spatial, institutional characteristics to gain a general understanding of how the network is organized and of its (political, cultural, historical) background. Further, this allows to identify the main social actors and institutions that are involved in the network. Second, a systemic approach based on social network theory is taken to analyse the food network. Through in-depth interviews with the main actors involved, the analysis focuses on the characteristics and trajectories of actors and institutions involved, their interdependencies and the modes of coordination that are used. This is operationalized with a qualitative method of social network analysis that looks at both social and spatial relations.

REFERENCES