



Bringing young and old together: The Landhof public community garden in Basel. Bastiaan Frich is one of the scheme's co-founders.

For a new urban-rural food geography

Our food system, from production to consumption, needs to become more sustainable. Urban areas play an important and as yet underestimated role in this respect. The EU Foodlinks Project looks at how short distribution channels and new producer-consumer networks may be promoted.

More and more people live in urban areas and have lost any direct connection with food production. At the same time, agricultural production continues to intensify while processing and trade are becoming ever more rationalized and centralized. These processes result in longer transport routes and mounting energy needs.

Citizens and consumers increasingly criticize this form of industrialized food production and call for more sustainable alternatives. Numerous towns have taken a range of actions with a view to making the provision of food for their citizens more sustainable. In Basel, for example, the Urban AgriCulture Netz association has established a public community garden with the support of the city administration. The “Landhof” greenspace is centrally situated in the city and is surrounded by multi-family residential housing. Since 2011, the local residents have communally grown vegetables,

fruit, berries and flowers on the site. Urban gardening has become a popular trend in many European cities.

Urban gardening builds awareness

“Initiatives of this kind have a great potential to make the system of food production and supply more sustainable,” notes Heidrun Moschitz, agrosociologist at FiBL. This is not so much about self-sufficiency. The focus is on raising the participants’ awareness of food production. Many urban dwellers have realized that the way the food supply is organized is a key component of sustainable urban development. In Europe the city of Malmö and the town of Andernach, the “Edible Town”, have set important precedents. In Bristol and London the city administrations support diverse activities in relation to sustainable urban food systems.

The EU Foodlinks Project examines such initiatives throughout Europe. One of the project's focal areas is to analyse the relationships between stakeholders, as the food system encompasses the entire value chain from production or importation to processing, distribution, consumption and recycling of raw materials.

So far this system has largely been controlled from the production side. In the alternative systems the interaction of citizens, consumers, the market, politics and administration plays a significant role. "Basel for example has a very lively urban food movement which is being supported by the authorities. But the responsibilities are spread out amongst several individual authorities. Moreover, food aspects were not included in the cities' sustainability strategy," says Heidrun Moschitz. She would like to gain an improved understanding of the lines of reasoning resulting from the different perspectives in civil society, politics and administration, so as to allow all involved to find common pathways and approach the issue productively.

Closer relationships, shorter paths

In another part of the project, FiBL researcher Otto Schmid investigates forms of collaboration aiming for the shortest possible pathways between consumption and production. Such forms of collaboration often result from a redefinition and active cultivation of relationships between consumers and producers, for example in the context of cooperative structures or in Community Supported Agriculture systems. Inspired by pioneering initiatives such as the Agrico cooperative near Basel or Les Jardins de Cocagne near Geneva, new networks have been springing up in many towns and cities, for example the regional horticultural cooperative ortoloco in the Zurich area. Other examples of short distribution routes include new farmers' markets, farm shops in cities, farms engaged in direct marketing that specifically involve consumers, or regional marketing platforms such as the RegioFair initiative by organic producers and processors in Central Switzerland. "These examples are characterized by new forms of communication and self-governance which also makes them attractive to younger people," says Otto Schmid.

The Foodlinks project aims at demonstrating to policy-makers the conditions needed that will allow those initiatives to grow which contribute to more sustainable food systems. For FiBL the project will provide the baseline information needed to establish, in the medium term, a centre of excellence addressing socio-political and social issues of sustainable food systems in urban areas. *dh*

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Further information: www.foodlinkscommunity.net, www.solinsa.net

SOLINSA: Towards a new knowledge network

SOLINSA is another project with participation by FiBL that addresses the issue of knowledge exchange in the farming sector. While Foodlinks focuses on the socio-political dimension, SOLINSA is concerned with the knowledge systems and training and education methods in the farming sector.

"In their orientation, agricultural colleges and advisory services have for decades been predisposed towards the post-war paradigm of continuous yield increases. However, we need new perspectives to meet the challenges of the 21st century. Regional economies, tourism, food production as well as landscape conservation and environmental protection need to become more closely meshed," says Project Manager Heidrun Moschitz. SOLINSA investigates methods which may support such innovations inside and outside of established structures.



Researching the urban food movement: Heidrun Moschitz (centre) in conversation with Tilla Künzli and Bastiaan Frich of Basel's Urban AgriCulture network in the Landhof public community garden.